

## CHAPTER 2

### THE SETTING

When Hillel gave the summary definition of Judaism with which this survey opened, he added at once: 'The rest is commentary; go and learn.' The addition is all-important. Judaism is a life to be lived and a culture to be enjoyed as well as a theology and a moral doctrine; and from the far-off days of Abraham it has passed through many vicissitudes and many phases of which those mentioned (the Biblical, the Hellenistic, the Rabbinic, the philosophical) are only the most easily named. And they are named too easily. They have a certain convenience in exposition, and their apparent temporal sequence gives a pleasing appearance of history. But they are phases only (if indeed they are even that), not stages in one definite development in time each one summing up the preceding and leading to its successor. The succession is illusory. The phases co-exist; and the one exception is almost a demonstration in itself of the dangers of a chronological approach.

This exception is the Hellenistic period in so far as it centred in Alexandria and is represented by the writings of the philosopher-theologian Philo (c. 20 B.C.—c. A.D. 45). It sits neatly between the Biblical and the Rabbinic, beginning approximately when the former supposedly ends and ending when the latter supposedly begins. Historians have depicted it vividly, and its religious content has been the subject of many volumes. It is said to have had a considerable influence on the development of Christian theology, even (according to its most recent

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and learned expositor) on the general course of European thought. But it had little influence on Judaism. It provides interesting sidelights; offers significant analogies; gives examples of problems and solutions similar to those met elsewhere. But so far as one can see, the main course of Judaism would have been unaltered if Alexandrian Jewry had not existed. In the highway of Judaism Philo is a byway. Not that he was forgotten completely. Scholars are beginning to trace possible connections between his thinking and that of the Neo-Platonic Jewish philosophers and mystics of the middle ages. But by and large, even after the sixteenth century, when he was re-discovered by a Hebrew writer of the later Italian Renaissance, Philo's impact on Judaism was so slight as to be of no significance.

If the Hellenistic phase was a momentary appearance which vanished almost entirely, its chronological predecessor, the Biblical, was on the contrary an ever-present and ever-creative living influence throughout. But it was the Bible not of the modern philologist or anthropologist or student of comparative religion but as understood by a selective tradition. An example or two will make this essential point clear.

The Biblical scholar of today has considerable difficulty in defining what the Hebrew Bible means by God. His first thought would probably be that there is in fact no one doctrine: on the contrary, he would say, there are many; and they are spread over many centuries and stages of development, and derive from many diverse sources. For a religion which takes the Bible as its ultimate basis this attitude is clearly unsatisfactory. The plain man wants to know what he is to think on this greatest of issues. Guidance therefore has to be given.

Now it happens that in the Talmud we find the following:

'Rabbi Jochanan [a third-century teacher] said, In every passage where thou findest the greatness of God mentioned, there thou findest also his humility. This is written in the Law, repeated in the Prophets, and a third time stated in the Writings.

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‘It is written in the Law, For the Lord your God, he is God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and revered God, who regardeth not persons, nor taketh a bribe. And it is written afterwards, He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment.

‘It is repeated in the Prophets, as it is written, For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, and whose name is holy, I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

‘It is a third time stated in the Writings, Sing unto God, sing praises to his name: extol ye him that rideth upon the heavens by his name Jah, and rejoice before him. And it is written afterwards, A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation.’

This is clearly a homily, and like most homilies open to critical objection. There are quite certainly Biblical passages in which the ‘greatness’ of God is mentioned *without* his ‘humility’; and we should have liked the author to have defined his terms and explained the meaning of ‘greatness’ or ‘humility’ as applied to God. But all this is not to the point. Rabbi Jochanan had noticed a remarkable feature in some of the statements of Scripture about the nature of God, and he brought it out vividly by a selection of texts. It is the putting of these particular texts side by side in a bare and abrupt fashion which brings out their meaning. But the question forces itself upon the mind: is it *their* meaning or Rabbi Jochanan’s?

For our generation the natural contrast is not between ‘greatness’ and ‘humility’ but between transcendence (the ‘other’-ness of God) and immanence (his ‘in’ness). God for Judaism, as Jeremiah proclaimed long ago, is a God who is both far and near. He is in the heaven of heavens and also, as the Talmud puts it by a punning reference to the ‘hair-raising’ wind from which God answered Job, in the very hair of a man’s head. But in whatever language we incline now to interpret the thought, Rabbi Jochanan’s select verses serve to remind us that the God

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of Judaism, for all his transcendence (the 'high and lofty one who inhabiteth eternity', 'that rideth upon the heavens'), is yet emphatically ('it is written in the Law, repeated in the Prophets, and a third time stated in the Writings') the helper of the helpless, and is to be found not with the self-satisfied and the arrogant but with the victims of oppression and in the hearts of the humble.

But, again, is this the doctrine of Judaism or of Rabbi Jochanan or (at most) of the Talmud? A man must be a scholar to find it in its context in a Talmudic treatise, and the plain man is no scholar. Besides, he would not know what to look for. But the whole passage has been inserted in the traditional Prayer Book of the widest used rite in Judaism, for recitation at the outgoing of the weekly Sabbath. Thus the Prayer Book continues the selective process begun by Rabbi Jochanan. Rabbi Jochanan selects from the Bible, the compiler of the Talmud selects the selection as worthy of record. The Prayer Book then takes the Talmudic record, and, by making it a part of regular worship, turns an individual, and possibly a casual, observation into a set piece for public instruction. It ceases to be an isolated string of independent verses (each of which in its own context may mean something else altogether) or a sermon based on an arbitrary use of a concordance. It becomes an integral part of what Judaism has to say on the nature of God to the ordinary worshipper. It is indeed Scripture, but Scripture selected and re-selected for our instruction.

The remark of Pascal that the whole of human history is the story of one man learning, applies to all organic growth; and its corollary is that it is only in the light of later developments that we can see what was important in the earlier. The significant becomes visible only in retrospect. It is past; yet in a sense it is created by the future.

Thus the Bible as it stands is not a self-sufficient witness to the nature of Judaism, and the most careful and 'objective' study of the Bible will not elicit the nature of Judaism for us.

The paradox might even be advanced that the more objective the study, the less likely it is to elicit it. Judaism is not so much what the Bible says (even if agreement could be reached on that) as what it was understood to say or what it was accepted as saying. What matters is the Bible as used in teaching and worship, that is, in the practice of the school and the Synagogue. Whence the special importance of the Prayer Book. Its evidence will be adduced later (below, Chapter 14) in order to illumine some of the plainer facts of the life of Judaism. Here we may consider it in connexion with the place of the Bible as a source-book of our knowledge.

In the usage of the Synagogue the Five Books of Moses (the Pentateuch) are read in their entirety during the course of one year on successive Sabbaths. But they are not read alone. To the portion from the Pentateuch there are added select chapters from the Prophets; and these chapters sometimes illustrate or emphasize the Pentateuchal lesson, sometimes supplement it, sometimes introduce a further or even critical thought. All these possibilities are important. They mean a conscious further interpretation, not the bare and blind acceptance of the written text. When, for example, the weekly portion from Leviticus vi-viii giving the details of various laws of sacrifice is followed by the public reading from chapters vii-viii of Jeremiah beginning, 'I spake not unto your fathers concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices' and ending 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom or the mighty man in his might or the rich man in his riches but let him that glorieth glory in understanding and knowing Me that I am the Lord which exercise loving kindness, judgement and righteousness in the earth, for it is in these things that I delight, saith the Lord'—it is impossible not to believe that we have here an explicit and solemn warning against the temptation of forgetting, in the detail of an ancient cult, the nature and demand of religion. Or again, the Mishnah records that a leading Rabbi, a passionate nationalist, wished to forbid the public reading, as the lesson from the Prophets, of Ezekiel's diatribes on the sins of Jerusalem. But the ruling

is against him and such passages are in fact read, surely an indication that a narrow patriotism which refuses to see the mote in our own eye is not the prevailing tendency in Judaism.

From the use of the Pentateuch and the Prophets we may turn to the Psalms. As might have been expected, much use is made of them for purposes of devotion. But here again it is not so much the fact of their use which is important as the nature of the selection made and (when ascertainable) its reason.

Figures are deceptive, but it is of interest to note that the Index to the standard English Prayer Book (ed. Singer) lists seventy-four psalms (that is, just under half of the total of 150) as used in the daily prayers of the ordinary Jewish year. Of these, ten only appear as used on more than one occasion. Of these ten, four appear three times, one four times, one five times. The favoured psalms are xxiv ('The earth is the Lord's . . . Who will go up'); xxix ('Give unto the Lord'); xci ('He who dwelleth in the shadow of the Most High'); xciii ('The Lord reigneth'); cxxviii ('Happy is he who feareth the Lord'); and cxlv ('I will extol thee, my God'). Since some of the contexts themselves are, in this particular edition of the Prayer Book, repeated, the picture offered is not final nor completely accurate. Yet it is certainly suggestive. We may observe, for example, the type of psalm selected for regular use on more than one occasion. The last, cxlv, is especially noteworthy because we happen to know the ground for its repeated use. According to the Talmud, it is to be read at least three times a day, and for the reason that it proclaims God as the all-provider who opens his hands and satisfies the desire of every living being.

The Talmud adds that whoever reads this psalm three times a day is assured of a place in the world-to-come. This means presumably that from this psalm he receives proper guidance on the nature of God: that he is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great mercy; that he is good to all and that his tender mercies are over all his works:

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*The Lord upholdeth all that fall  
And raiseth up all those that be bowed down.  
The eyes of all wait upon thee,  
And thou givest them their meat in due season.  
Thou openest thy hand  
And satisfiest the desire of every living thing.  
The Lord is righteous in all His ways  
And gracious in all his works.  
The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him,  
To all that call upon him in truth.*

So again we have, through the emphatic choice of a particular text, an instance of conscious religious instruction which might almost be called official.

And indeed, why of the 150 psalms should it be just the xxivth and the xxixth and the xciiird and the cxxviiiith and in particular the cxlvth which are singled out for repeated devotional reading? They are clearly not the 'difficult' psalms. They are neither imprecatory nor metaphysical. They are all, both in matter and manner, simple and direct, attuned to the broadest human feeling. They all tell of the 'greatness' of God (his transcendence, his numinous character, his otherness); but with it they emphasize his goodness, his protective power, the type of life he asks man to live, and the happiness of walking in his ways: 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?—he that hath clean hands and a pure heart'; 'In his temple everything saith Glory'; 'He shall call upon me and I shall answer him'; 'Thou art from everlasting, thy testimonies are very sure'; 'When thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands, happy shalt thou be and it shall be well with thee'. The favourite of all, the cxlvth, is a universalistic hymn of praise which finds occasion to use the word 'all' thirteen times in the twelve verses leading up to the final triumphant cry: 'Let all flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever.'

The *use made of Scripture* (in contrast with the text of Scripture itself) may be called summarily the Tradition. The principal

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repository of the Tradition in Judaism is the Talmud, the collective name given to the third-century Mishnah and the fourth–sixth centuries Gemarah (below, pp. 72 f.). But the date of the completion of the Talmud is not the end of the Talmud any more than the date of the closing of the Biblical canon is the end of the Bible. The Talmud lived on in its own further study and development, and its real date is not the fifth or sixth century but every century since. The teaching of the Talmud in schools and academies became so much the regular course of education within Jewry that up to the nineteenth century Jewish life and Jewish men of note are not understandable without it. A once-famous chapter of the historian J. R. Green describes the influence of the King James's version of the Bible in shaping the lives of the men of Puritan England. The influence of the Talmud on Jewry, not only in its explicit teaching but in its ways of thought and methods of approach to life and its problems, was certainly no less, and it was exerted both in the shaping of the lives of Jews in their world-wide communities and in the moulding and preserving of the very forms of Judaism itself.

We shall see later (Chapter 5) some aspects of its approach; but it too is not yet Judaism. For, like the Bible, it contains diverse material. It records opinions, seldom chooses between them. We need therefore in addition an interpretative and systematizing element and for this we may turn to the philosophers.

The philosophers were in no sense a distinct and separate class of men. It was just the philosophers who were the great Bibli-cists and Talmudists, some of them the very greatest of all. What they contributed to Judaism was not new facts or (necessarily) new ideas but a new attitude and a new approach to the old. It is usual to think of them as a medieval phenomenon, but they appeared long before and long after the middle ages. Students have pointed out long since that there are philosophical (that is, general) ideas already in the Bible. Philo,



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as we have seen, was forgotten but some of the Talmudic Rabbis were in touch with later Greek thinkers; and the records of their disputes and discussions show both a quick understanding and a shrewd appreciation of philosophical ideas. The doctrines of the mystics have been claimed to represent an ancient and authentic Jewish philosophy; and if we are prepared to interpret the words 'Jewish' and 'philosophy' with a generosity which some will think excessive, the claim may be plausibly sustained. But aside from such contentious matters, the chain of classical philosophers of Judaism writing in Hebrew extends to at least the middle of the nineteenth century, and if we include more modern thinkers, some of them writing in European languages as well, it runs into the twentieth, indeed till this very day.

Yet the medieval Jewish philosophers, and in particular Maimonides, hold a unique importance for our guidance in the understanding of Judaism. Their grasp of the tradition they sought to give form to was authoritative; their hold on the life they were endeavouring to interpret, intimate. They were not outsiders, painfully acquiring information at second hand, using intuition where knowledge was lacking. They were creative scholars in their own right and many of them the recognized leaders of great communities deeply involved in the painful issues of life and death which filled their various ages and environments. Their systems as systems may be of dubious validity; but the very attempt to mould into one system the whole mass of the tradition as it was known and felt and thought from within, brought out elements which might otherwise have been neglected and produced far-reaching decisions on their comparative importance. In their hands Judaism was brought to understand itself. Some of their results were to the plain man shocking, and there is little doubt that the opponents of the philosophers were nearer ordinary opinion. But ordinary opinion, particularly of any one epoch, is not decisive; and it will be conceded in any case that the medieval philosophers of Judaism left a weighty trace on the whole structure. The

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greatest of them all, Maimonides, may be said indeed to have erected the structure and to be the architect of what is known now as Judaism.

But before we treat of the philosophic presentation of Judaism we must go back and begin to fill our first sketch out.