



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

Reel
148

Box
52

Folder
165

Plain Tales from the Hills of Judea, 1923.

"PLAIN TALES FROM THE HILLS OF JUDEA."

RABBI ABBA H. SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

OCTOBER 28, 1923, CLEVELAND.

We are accustomed to think of the Bible as the great store house of religious truth. The Bible is precious in our eyes for the great ethical ideals which it contains, for its high spiritual exaltation. Right through the ages men have turned to it in all their fretted moods, to find in it solace, strength, guidance. Even the unreligious, the agnostics, found in the Bible great moral principles to serve and guide the human race. The agnostic Huxley spoke of the Bible as the great Magna Charta of the poor and the oppressed.

But there is yet another way of looking at the Bible, and that is as literature. Objectively as the artistic, the literary creation of the race during the period of a thousand years, for there is much more in the Bible than law and ritual and theology and moral dicta. Every type and thought of literature is represented in the Bible. In it you will find the charming narrative and the exalted hymn and the classic drama, and the sermon, the preachment and the prophecy. Epic poetry, lyric poetry, the narrative, the hortatory, the historical, the dramatic all are represented in these thirty-nine books which compose the sacred writ.

And it is their profoundness of theme, and their artistry in diction and in style, the genuineness of idea, apart from the high religious content and value, that puts much of the literature of the Bible in the first rank of the world's greatest literature.

As far as literature is concerned, and from that point of view, the Old Testament is of greater value than the New Testament. Professor Barnes, writing in the Outline of Literature--a book which, by the way, I would recommend for your library--says that as far as literature is concerned the New Testament is far inferior to the Old Testament. The Old Testament is the literature of a people; the New Testament is the literature of a movement. The writings of the New Testament are great religious propaganda; they have a definite motif and a definite tendance. There is a purpose and an object, and everything is focused to serve that goal, that theology, that gospel.

But the literature of the Old Testament, covering a period of a thousand years, almost the spontaneous creation of a rich and abundant and overflowing genius of a people, is not a monotone; it is rich and variagated and colorful and comprehensive. Nearly every phase of human life, of human doubts and of human struggles, and all problems of human relationships, all moods and all emotions are, somehow, found in one or the other of these books of the Old Testament.

The problem of evil,-- Why do the righteous suffer? Why does sorrow come to dwell in the habitations of the good? Why do the wicked prosper? - you will find discussed as it has never been discussed since in the literature of the human race in the Book of Job. Cynicism, stoicism, pessimism you will find expressed as it has never

been expressed before or since in a book like the Book of Ecclesiastes. Romance in its highest and in its purity, romance bathed in sunshine, graceful and charming, you will find in a book like the Book of Ruth. Love in all its passion, in all its intensity, you will find in a book like the Song of Solomon. Religious deification, meditation, mysticism, the yearning of the soul for the dwelling place of God, you will find nowhere in the whole sphere of the literary creations of humanity as you will find in the Book of Psalms.

Prophecy, the cry for justice, social justice, individual responsibility, international responsibility, the ideal of peace--where will you find these more fervidly, more powerfully expressed than you will in the writings of Amos, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Hosea, and Malachi?

And even history. You will find some of the best writings in biography and in history in the Bible--a veritable store house. And it is a pity, a great pity, that men read little of it. Of all the narratives of the Old Testament, of all the historical writings of the Old Testament, the most interesting of all is the Book of Genesis. I speak now as literature, apart from the religious significance of those narratives.

The subject matter of the Book of Genesis is taken from the earliest period of Jewish history and before. The Book of Genesis is not one book but a compilation of many books. The Book of Genesis is anonymous. No writer's

name is appended to it. In fact, no single great man nor no group of great men is responsible for part of Genesis or for the whole of it. The narratives of the Book of Genesis are what we call volk-sage--- folk tales. They are the creation of a whole people; they are fashioned by the invisible hands of hundreds of generations; they are those stories which for ages are handed down by word of mouth in a nomad tent or around a fire, or on those long, endless marches through the desert, told by father to son, and so fashioned, altered and molded through the ages, until long afterwards some man or some group of men, for the sake of preserving these tales, or for some didactic purpose, will write these tales down for future ages.

So that if you wish to know the life of Israel, if you wish to know just how our ancestors lived, and how they felt, or what they thought, we must go back to these folk tales--simple, artistic in their guilelessness, in their naivete, in their simplicity, but profound in their theme.

These writers who, centuries later, wrote down these folk tales which we now have in the Book of Genesis,

were marvelously gifted men. Fraser, who perhaps has done much more in the sphere of folk lore than any man, says of them: "They are historians who bequeathed to distant ages the scenes of a remote past, embalmed forever in the amber of a pellucid style."

You will find, as you read the Book of

Genesis, distinct strands. The book is a compilation; it is an interwoven tapestry, with the individual strands clearly discernible and visible to the eye. You will find some of the narratives of the Book of Genesis the hand of one who wrote in Judea around the ninth century, and you will find in other accounts and stories the hand of an Ephraimitic author, a member of the kingdom of the North, who wrote his stories down in the eighth century, and you will find in other stories the traces of a priestly school which later edited and revised many of these stories of Genesis during the exile in the sixth century before the common era.

You will perhaps find two accounts of the same story, or three accounts of the same story. There are two accounts of creation, as you know, in the second chapter of Genesis; there are three accounts of the Flood story. That is clearly to be attributed to the fact that different hands at different times wrote down these stories, and that a later editor, the one who finally compiled the book, liked the one as the other, refused to reject one for the sake of the other, and incorporated both or all of them in the one book.

I wish I had the time this morning to dwell at length upon most or all of the stories, the volksagas, of the Book of Genesis. Many of them, of course, are well known to you from infancy. I wish I had time to bring into your consciousness, to bring to life some of the underlying ideas of these simple folk tales that are told by mother to child

throughout the world--the story of Creation, the story of Adam and Eve, the story of the Garden of Eden, the story of the first homicide of Cain and Abel, the story of the building of the tower of Babel, the story of the Flood, the marvelous epic of the patriarchs; Abraham--his call, his mission; the sacrifice of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and that marvelously and beautifully colorful story of Joseph and his brethren--that complete galaxy which constitutes the epic of the early life of Israel, which is today an integral part of the thought of the world.

But while we haven't that time, the most I can do this morning is to delineate some of the general ideas of these folk lores and to stress some of the things common to all of them. As for the rest, in the words of Hillel, "But a dream, but a study."

The stories of the Book of Genesis which I have just now mentioned are, of course, not peculiar to Israel; they are not unique to our people. Every primitive people has had a story of Creation. You will find it among the Babylonians and among the Egyptians and among the savages of the South Sea islands and among the Indians of North America and Mexico. Every people has its story of Creation, and it is an almost universal conception among primitive peoples that man was created out of the clay and out of the dust and that woman was created out of man.

You will find the story of the fall of man an almost universal story, just as you will find the story of

the Flood among almost every people the world over. The Greeks have the story of Deucalion, who built for himself an ark in order to save himself and his family from the universal flood; the Indians in India have the story of a Manu who built a similar ark; and in Babylonia there was discovered not so very long ago that marvelous Gilgamesh epic, which bears such striking resemblance to the story of the Flood in the Book of Genesis, and the conclusion is inevitable that the writer of the Book of Genesis had this epic of Gilgamesh as his model.

And so the subject matter is not uniquely Jewish, especially those which antedate the age of the patriarch. Many have jumped to the conclusion, many who read things superficially, that the Jew has copied, that the Jew has borrowed, that the Jew has imitated, but that he has contributed nothing of intrinsic and original value to these volksages of mankind. And many have based great conclusions on these things; they have based the thought that the Jew never creates anything, that he has talent but no genius, that he is an imitator, a gifted imitator but not of the rare creative minds of mankind.

The very stories found in the Book of Genesis and the distinctive handling of these folk tales by the writers of the Book of Genesis shows wherein the great genius of the Jew is to be found. The Jew never created anything out of nothing. In fact, in the whole realm of art there is no such thing as creatio ex nihilo - creating something out

nothing. That is not creation; that is a miracle which is in the hand of he who can work miracles

The great artist is the one who borrows the ideas and the conceptions of his age and his time, and the subject matter, the cold clay which life gives him, and then, by the marvelous genius of his own, remolds it, reshapes it, reinterprets it and gives it an individual stamp which is different from what has heretofore existed.

A man who chisels a statue borrows a marble that life gives him; nature gives him that, but he takes that solid, meaningless, amorphous block of marble and by the power of his genius molds it, fashions it, chisels it until he bodies forth something supremely great and supremely his own--unique. It is his. And the painter does the same thing. He borrows the canvas, paint and brush, and very often will borrow the subject matter from his environment, from the world about him. But what does he do with these things? Why, he adds to them the precious alchemy of his spirit, of his genius--his own way of handling color, his own way of combining and fusing color, his own way of expressing an idea, and behold, after he has labored, after his spirit has agonized and sweated over these things, he will present to mankind something which no one else has up to that time done; something which bears the indelible stamp and imprint of his personality and his genius.

And that is what the Jew has done right along. Take the story of Creation--the story which you will find

among the Babylonians, the story which you will find among the Egyptians, the story which you will find among the Romans very much the same way. What did the Jew do with it? Why, first of all, he gave you a conception of God; he created the world, a God spiritual, a God exalted. He creates the world merely by the word of his mouth. "And the Lord said 'Let there be light;' and there was light." And a God who created the world that the world should be good. "And the Lord said that it was good." "And it was evening and it was morning the first day, and the Lord said it was good. And it was evening and it was morning the second day." - the ethical motif informing the various successive stages of Creation.

And then what else did the Jew do? He organized Creation into seven distinct parts, so that the seventh day may become God's day of rest, so to speak. "Six days the Lord labored." In six days the Lord created the universe and all that there is, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.

What was in the mind of the writer who wrote the story of Creation? Not so much to tell you a story of Creation, not so much to intrigue your mind by an imaginary piece of writing; he was interested in impressing his readers with the holiness, the divinity of that marvelous institution known as the Sabbath--a day for the refreshment of soul, a day when a man ceases to be a beast of burden, when man can leave the mundane, the physical toil and the labor and rise to

higher levels, and think of his relation to God, of his higher possibilities, of his human life. And so he organized this story of Creation to lead up to the thought that God himself, the greatest Workman, the Master Creator, himself rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord hallowed the seventh day. Therefore He blessed it.

Now that distinctive note you will find nowhere in the folk lore of mankind. That is distinctively a Jewish contribution. Let me go a step further. Take the story of the fall of man. Originally the story was probably something like this--and you will find examples of it among all the folk tales of primitive peoples--God created man out of clay; God created woman out of the rib of man; God blessed both of them in the Garden of Eden, and God wanted to bestow the greatest boon on the children which He had created--the boon of immortality. And so He planted in the Garden of Eden two trees--the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death; and God sent the serpent to convey this message to Adam and Eve: "Do not eat of the Tree of Death but eat ye of the Tree of Life and you will live forever." But the serpent, who was the cleverest and the shrewdest of all the creatures of the earth, went to Adam and Eve and told them, "Eat ye of this tree, the Tree of Death, because if ye eat of this other tree you will surely die." And so Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of Death--which, by the way, was in the mind of the writer to account for the existence of death in the world. Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of Death and so they

became mortal. The serpent, on the other hand, ate of the Tree of Life and so became immortal; because it was a common belief among primitive peoples that the serpent never dies; he casts his skin and renews his life from year to year. That was the subject matter which forms the ground and basis of all these myths that you find among all peoples.

Now the Jew borrowed that. He had it; he shared it in common with all other peoples. What did he make of it? The writer was not writing stories to entertain; he was writing ethics and using stories to enforce his ethical teaching. Why should a trick of a serpent bring mortality, death, into the life of the human race? That did not appear just to his Hebraic sense of justice, and so he revamps the story, he reinterprets it. God placed the tree in the midst of the garden and God said unto Adam, "Thou shalt not eat of that tree, for on the day in which thou shalt eat of that tree thou shalt surely die." Adam was given for the first time an ethical choice. Up to that time he was just living and vegetating in the luxury and abundance of the Garden of Eden. There was no choice, no possibility of a struggle in his life, and where there is no struggle and no choice or alternatives, there can be no ethics and no morals. And so God plants a tree in the Garden of Eden and says to Adam, "Of everything else you may eat, but of that tree you may not eat."

There is a prohibition; there is a challenge to man's self-control; there is a challenge to man's sensible

being; there is a moral issue created. And man disobeys; man does not control himself, and because of the sin of disobedience, because man showed the lack of moral strength was he driven from the Garden of Eden and punished with mortality. There is the Hebraic note and there is the peculiar Jewish contribution to folk tales.

Take the story of the Flood. The Babylonians have a much more elaborate account of the Flood, even, than we have in the Bible. But as you read that account, what is your reaction? Why, you feel that here is a group of wilful, tyrannical, powerful, but impotent at times, deities who bring a flood upon the world out of spite because one god was hurt by another deity, or by the people of one city, and when the storm was let loose upon the world they themselves are powerless to control it, and when, after the storm has abated and a sacrifice is offered, the epic of Gilgamesh closes with "the goddess swarming around the sacrifice like flies." These are the words of the epic--that God swarmed around the sacrifice like flies. That was the theology of the book of the Gilgamesh epic.

What is the theology of the story of the Flood in the Book of Genesis? "For ten generations the Lord waited for the children of men to repent them of the evil of their ways, and finally, when there was but one left, a righteous man, a just one, did God determine out of the compelling sense of justice to destroy the human race." An ethical motif dominant in the story.

When you enter into the realm of the distinctive Hebrew sages, beginning with Abraham, there you have this thought which I am endeavoring to convey to you this morning even more forcibly expressed. Take the epic of Abraham. It is not the story of a hero, of a people, of a warrior who conquers and subdues and rules. The very first notice we get of Abraham is when the Lord says unto him, "Abraham, get thee out of thy home, of thy land, of thy father's house unto the land that I will show thee, and become thou a blessing to the world." Mind you, this was written three thousand years ago. Abraham, the hero of ancient Israel, is summoned not to go forth and conquer but to go forth as an exile, as a pilgrim, so that he might become "a blessing to the world."

And the second incident we find connected with Abraham was with his shepherds and the shepherds of Lot, his nephew, engaged in strife because one wants this piece of fertile land and the other wants this piece of fertile land, and Abraham says unto Lot, his nephew, "Lot, let there be no strife among us, for we are men and brothers. If you will go towards the right, I will go towards the left, and if you will go towards the left I will go towards the right."

And the third time we meet Abraham we meet him in connection with the king of Sodom, who has been attacked by four kings, and his nephew Lot is taken captive, and a cry of help is sent to Abraham, and Abraham musters his tribe and his clan and goes to the assistance of the king of

Sodom and the day is won. And then the king of Sodom goes forth to meet Abraham and says to him, "Abraham, take all that thou desireth of possessions and beauty, for thou hast helped me this day." And Abraham says, "I have sworn by the Lord that I will not take a thread from you or a shoe lace. What I have done I have done in the service of a friend."

And the next time we meet with Abraham is in that story of his passionate appeal for the doomed city of Sodom, which I read this morning. Anti-Semites have pointed to this passage and said, "Behold the typical Jew! he bargains with the Lord!" "Perhaps there will be fifty, and if the Lord says 'If there be fifty I will not destroy the city for the sake of these fifty righteous.' And Abraham bargains for forty, forty, thirty, twenty, ten," - a racial instinct, they say.

Well, it may be a racial instinct, but for whose sake does Abraham bargain with the Lord? For himself? For his family? For his people? Ah, no. They are not to be destroyed. It is a city of Gentiles; a city of strangers. Sodom and Gemorrah have no contact and no blood relationship with Abraham and his people. They are doomed, and it is for the sake of these strangers and these Gentiles that Abraham, the Hebrew, stands praying, begging, yes, bargaining with the Lord of justice, hoping against hope that this city will find in it five righteous men who may save it.

And then you find him lastly in connection with the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. The story was written, first, to show that God does not desire human sacrifices; that the ram which Abraham finally sacrifices unto the Lord is just as acceptable in the eyes of God, and more so than human sacrifices. But the story has a much more profound meaning, and it is perhaps the most beautiful story in the Book of Genesis--beautiful for its style, beautiful for its symmetry, beautiful for its guileless artistry. It has fifteen verses which tell one of the great dramas of human experience.

And it is beautiful also for the light that it sheds upon the whole history of Israel from the earliest day. The idea of sacrifice as an integral part of religion, sacrifice as an essential part in human development, the test of faith, the trials and the tribulations of the righteous--these are the things that this simple volksage of Genesis emphasizes.

I shall conclude by reading this story. I should like to have you note the swiftness of the narrative, the human touches throughout; I should like to have you note this naive, innocent, beloved, long hoped for child of Abraham's, Isaac, not knowing his fate, walking side by side with his sorrow-bent, grief-stricken Abraham, who knows the burden that has been placed upon him, and knows just exactly whither this precious child is bound. Notice the reserve of the story, the marvelous restraint in the narrative, and

its implications.

"And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove to Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

And God said, Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and he cleaved the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up and went unto the place of which God had told him.

On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off.

And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass, and I and the lad will go yonder, and we will worship and come back to you.

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife, and they went both of them together.

And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father, and said Father: and Abraham said Here am I, my son. Isaac said Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?

And Abraham said, God will provide himself the

lamb, my son: so they went both of them together.

And they came to the place which God had told him of, and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said Here am I.

And he said Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thine son, thine only son from me.

And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns, and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

And Abraham called the name of that place Adoniram-jireh: as it is said to this day, in the mount where the Lord is seen.

And the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham the second time out of heaven,

And said, By myself have I sworn, because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thine son, thine only son:

That in blessing will I bless thee, and in multiplying will I multiply thy seed as the stars of the

heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;

And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast hearkened to my voice.

So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba.

--o--

