

Everyman's Talmud: The Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages by Abraham Cohen Quotes

Whether atheism, in the sense of the dogmatic denial of God's existence, was accepted by anybody in Biblical and Rabbinic times is doubtful; but both in Bible and Talmud the concern was with the practical atheist who conducted his life as though he would never be held to account for his deeds. In Biblical literature the statement 'There is no God' is made by the Nabal, i.e. the morally corrupt person who, while acknowledging the existence of a Creator, refused to believe that He was at all interested in the actions of His creatures. His counterpart in the Talmud is the Apikoros, or Epicurean, who likewise 'denies the fundamental principle of religion' (B.B. 16b) by his abominable conduct. The Rabbis defined the atheist as one who affirmed 'There is no judgment and no Judge' (Gen. R. XXVI. 6) in the Universe, irrespective of his disbelief in the existence of God.¹

Religious polemic also underlies this piece of commentary: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "I am the first" (Is. xlv. 6) for I have no father; "and I am the last" for I have no brother; "and beside me there is no God "for I have no son' (Exod. R. XXIX. 5).²

THE basis of Jewish social life is the family, and the Talmud is ever watchful to conserve its purity and stability. Recognizing the all-important place which woman occupies in the life of the family, it accords to her a most dignified position. Especially when her lot among the other contemporary peoples is taken into account, the honour which is paid to woman by the Talmud offers a striking contrast. In no way is she looked upon as a being inferior to man. Her sphere of activity is different from man's, but of no less significance to the welfare of the community.³

Early marriage is advocated. For a male the age of eighteen is recommended (Aboth v. 24). 'While your hand is still upon the neck of your sons—from sixteen to twenty-two, or according to another opinion, from eighteen to twenty-four—get them married' (Kid. 30a). It is said that 'up to the age of twenty the Holy One, blessed be He, watches for a man to marry, and curses him if he fails to do so by then' (ibid. 29b). An imprudent marriage is deprecated, viz. when a man is not in a position to maintain a wife. From Deut. xx. 5-7 the Talmud derives the lesson: 'The Torah teaches the

¹ 3 Kindle Ed.

² 6.

³ 158.

correct procedure: a man should first build a house, then plant a vineyard, and after that marry' (Sot. 44a).⁴

There is a teaching, 'The fire of Gehinnom will never be extinguished' (Tosifta Ber VI. 7), but it conflicts with the doctrine of the School of Hillel that Gehinnom will cease. It is also stated that Gehinnom is half fire and half hail' (Exod. R. LI. 7), while, according to another opinion, snow is likewise found there: 'The Holy One, blessed be He, judges the wicked in Gehinnom for twelve months. At first he afflicts them with itching; after that with fire, at which they cry out "O! O!" and then with snow, at which they cry out "Woe! Woe!"' (p. Sanh. 29b).⁵

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⁴ 161.

⁵ 381.