

A Defense of Judaism Versus Proselytizing Christianity by Isaac Mayer Wise (1889)

Quotes

If you begin to think that religion certainly was not given to man for the benefit of God, for he is perfect and exalted above all influences rising from man, you will certainly admit that religion exists in human nature for the benefit of man. If so, it must also be admitted that any religion, any doctrine or institution of any religion, which brings misery, sorrow, affliction, destruction of life or happiness to a large number of human beings, is undoubtedly an erroneous, dangerous and unreasoning superstition, to oppose which is every good man's duty.¹

Says the Israelite: "I need not be a prophet nor the son of a prophet, nor even a lawyer or the cousin of one, to see clearly enough that your argument, opposed to ours — as far as historical argument goes — can not unsettle any Jew in his conviction that as certain as the Christian believes to know that the Evangelical story and the dogmas based on it are true, so morally certain the Israelite knows that they are not true, and can not be true as narrated in the Book and understood by the authors of the dogmas. Such is human nature. What appears to one indisputable knowledge in

consequence of impressions received when his mind was yet unable to reason on them, or he has heard often enough when his mind was otherwise occupied, and accepted them on the authority of others, appears to others without those impressions in his mind the most incredible absurdity.²

Those self-same Hebrews who gave the Bible to the world produced also another and much larger book called the Talmud, a book which in the main has that much in common with the New Testament that it bases chiefly upon the Old Testament, expounds and expands the principles and laws contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the said book we read of quite a number of men who wrought stupendous miracles. There you find the reports of Onias the Circle-digger and his two grandsons, Hilkiyah and Onias the Hidden, whose prayers for rain were always and instantly effective, which is certainly more miraculous than healing a man of palsy. There you read of Nakdimon ben Gorion, for whose special benefit the sun stood still several hours as once before Joshua. Then you find there the three heroes of miracles. Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, Rabbi Pinchas ben Ya'ir and Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, whose miracles were most stupendous. One of them was known as an infallible physician by prayer only and exclusively (*Berachoth* 34). Paul's snake miracle (*Acts* xxviii. 4) was enacted by the same

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rabbinical saint. (*Berachoth* 33.) The other commanded the waters of a river to be divided and let him pass through, and the irrational element obeyed hastily. (*Chulin* 7.) The third bid the demon Ben Thalmion to go to Rome from the ship at midsea and do there his bidding, and the poor devil tremblingly obeyed. Quite a number of miracle-workers are mentioned in the Talmud, too numerous to be repeated here. One of them, it is said, created a calf by the book of Jezirah, as large as a two-year-old animal; another revived his dead colleague whom he had slaughtered accidentally and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrean could do almost anything contrary to the laws of nature. (*Baba Mezia* 59.) Intercourse with the angels, with the Prophet Elijah and with the Almighty himself through the medium of the *Bath Kol*; wrestling with the angel of death, prevailing over that mighty potentate and going alive to Paradise, as did Rabbi Joshua ben Levi; ascending to heaven to ask God's opinion on important questions, like Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha, the cotemporary and counterpart of Paul, were matters of frequent occurrence with those men, as is plainly narrated in the Talmud. Whoever believes the miracles of the Gospels must no less believe the miracles of the Talmud. Whoever believes that miracles prove the agent by whom or for whom they were wrought a man of God, gifted with special power by the Almighty to domineer over nature's laws and forces, must believe the very same thing of the miraculous heroes of the Talmud. Whoever believes that the miracles prove the truth of the Gospel doctrine, must in fairness

and honestly admit that the doctrine of the Talmud, proved by the same sort of evidence, is no less true. All those miraculous heroes of the Talmud were no Christians, rejected the whole fabric of salvation, the entire system of Christology and dogmatic orthodoxy. Here is a dilemma, a labyrinth without exit; either you must admit, in spite of Aristotle, that a thing is true and also not true at the same time and place, or you must confess that miracles prove nothing; you do deny and absolutely reject the doctrine of those holy men of God who wrought those stupendous miracles, as recorded in the Talmud—we say to the conversionist—hence you do admit and confess that miracles prove nothing; how in the world could you expect that miracles should prove to us the truth of Christology? It is all one piece of inconsistency and self-contradiction.³

The conversionist might turn the same argument upon the Israelite and advance the proposition: If you believe the miracles of the Talmud or even if you believe the miracles of the Old Testament, must you not on-the same principle believe the miracles of the New Testament? But then we would tell him that he does not understand the tenor and essence of Judaism. Judaism acknowledges no dogma on the belief of which salvation depends. It does not believe any doctrine because it is supported by a miracle; on the contrary, it judges the alleged miracle by the

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soundness of the doctrine which is to be thus supported, and rejects every miracle if the doctrine connected with it is pernicious; its standard is reason and the Sinaic revelation. (Deut. xiii.) The Israelite might believe all miracles which are not contradictory to the postulate of reason and the Sinaic standard, but he is not obliged to believe them or be ostracised as an infidel and heretic. Judaism bases no dogma on any miracle. It does not maintain, for instance, that Elijah was more of a son of God than the Christian one, because the former rode to Heaven in a chariot of fire, drawn by steeds of fire, and the latter had to make the journey on foot. Nor does it maintain that Elishah was greater than Jesus because the latter could revive the dead while he himself was alive and the former performed the same feat after he was dead (2 Kings xiii. 20, 21) ; or that Jonah was the greatest of the two, because he was buried in the belly of the fish three days and three nights, and Jesus was buried but one day and a half and one night and a half. Judaism does not take the address of Balaam's ass or the beguiling speech of the serpent to Eve as the foundation of a dogma, as Christianity does base its entire fabric of salvation on that fable, which may be explained in many other ways. Nor does it attach any faith to Moses, because he wrought miracles; it does not acknowledge the evidence of miracles; it holds that miracles prove nothing, not even to him who believes them literally and firmly; it admits that miraculous feats may be performed by false prophets or any other kind of impostors. Opposite Judaism the argument basing upon

miracles is perfectly worthless, as the greatest of all expounders of Judaism have laid down as the postulate of religion.⁴

If the Church maintains that salvation depends on its particular belief and practice, of which nine-tenths of all human beings from Adam to our days never heard, never knew of its existence, it blasphemes the Creator of man by the flat denial of his justice and goodness. If those nine-tenths of humanity are damned in the estimation of the Church, then it must admit that its God is not only the most merciless tyrant and most furious despot but also the most unwise and unskilled workmaster, having made so many millions of human beings in vain, as they did not fulfill their destiny, did not attain the end and aim for which they were originally intended. If that be so, then the God of the Church owes a heavy debt to those uncounted millions of men whose order on happiness was not redeemed, whose sufferings and afflictions in mundane life were not recompensed. What kind of a God is he who is not even as good as that zealous conversionist who would go thousands of miles to save one soul; not as merciful as any ordinary mortal, who is willing and ready to save any human being from perdition, and alleviate the sufferings of even the most abject criminal; not as wise and provident as any common machinist, any ordinary watchmaker, who would not construct any wheel or any other part

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of a machine which would fail to fulfill its destiny? Before the judgment seat of common sense such a God is an idol of human fabrication. Hold on, says the conversion agent, the Evangelist, or rather Paul, did not mean that, although the stern dogmatic understands it so. For Mark says first; "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature;" hence the sense of the next passage must be, that only those who shall hear the Gospel and know it, and believe not, shall be damned. Yes, yes, it might be understood so, but it never was, especially not by him who wrote the Gospel according to Nicodemus, with the story of Christ's descending to hell, which has become a part of Christian belief.⁵

Then comes the last resort, the priest's dodge, telling you: "That is what your rabbis, what all unenlightened, obdurate and blind infidels say. You must be regenerated, born again, get religion, viz: that special kind of Christian religion; then you will understand Scriptures and prophecies in their true light by the aid of the Holy Ghost, and you will prima vista discover the Messiah and the Church on every page of the sacred volume." The argument in other words, is this: Whenever you will firmly believe the Christian story and have subjected your reason to this belief, you will approach the sacred volume with this prejudice dominating your soul, then you will find in it all points which you presupposed; or in other words,

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if you believe the Evangelical story, you will believe to see it predicted by the Hebrew prophets. That is the way true Christians read the Old Testament. It will do well for believers, but is very poor logic for other people. They will argue: Then it is God's fault that we cannot see your Christology in the Old Testament, as he dictated those predictions to the prophets in such a style that the Christians only can understand them and we cannot. We cannot imagine that the All-wise is such an unskilled and obscure writer that only those should be able to understand him whose mind is in a state contrary to reason; for what is it to get religion, to be regenerated, to become converted, if it is not a suspension of reason and a submission thereof to a faith contrary to reason? The question then arises: What is it in any particular case, is it not an emotional insanity, a fit of indigestion, an attack of hysterics, melancholia, or distemper, or any nervous disorder? None can tell. Thus much is sure, if it is not by reason, it is by imagination or disease. We cannot expect that one in such a state of mind knows and understands better than we do.⁶

Read online:

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