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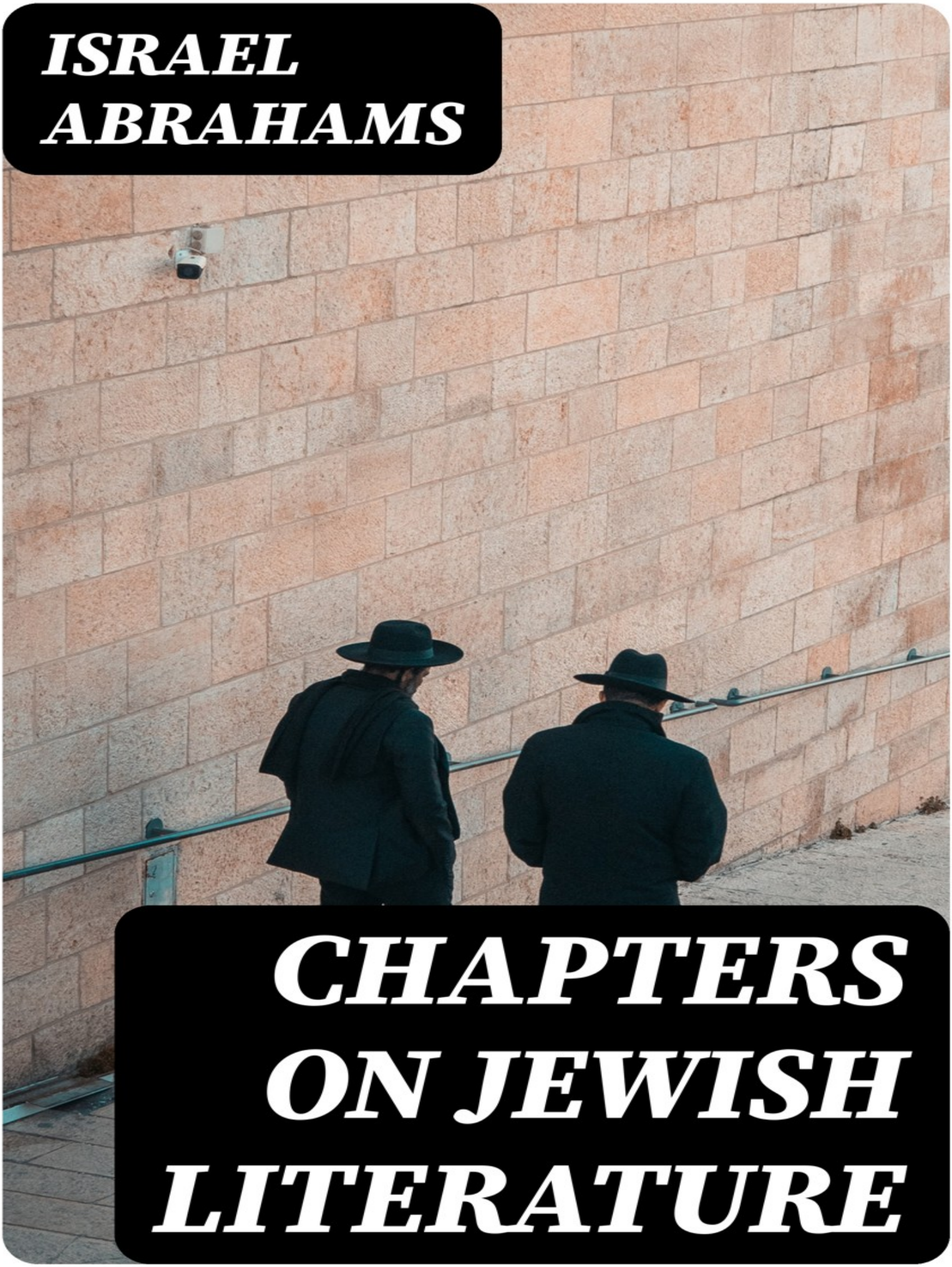

CHAPTERS ON JEWISH LITERATURE

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Chapters on Jewish Literature

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PREFACE

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ToC

These twenty-five short chapters on Jewish Literature open with the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 of the current era, and end with the death of Moses Mendelssohn in 1786. Thus the period covered extends over more than seventeen centuries. Yet, long as this period is, it is too brief. To do justice to the literature of Judaism even in outline, it is clearly necessary to include the Bible, the Apocrypha, and the writings of Alexandrian Jews, such as Philo. Only by such an inclusion can the genius of the Hebrew people be traced from its early manifestations through its inspired prime to its brilliant after-glow in the centuries with which this little volume deals.

One special reason has induced me to limit this book to the scope indicated above. The Bible has been treated in England and America in a variety of excellent text-books written by and for Jews and Jewesses. It seemed to me very doubtful whether the time is, or ever will be, ripe for dealing with the Scriptures from the purely literary stand-point in teaching young students. But this is the stand-point of this volume. Thus I have refrained from including the Bible, because, on the one hand, I felt that I could not deal with it as I have tried to deal with the rest of Hebrew literature, and because, on the other hand, there was no necessity for me

to attempt to add to the books already in use. The sections to which I have restricted myself are only rarely taught to young students in a consecutive manner, except in so far as they fall within the range of lessons on Jewish History. It was strongly urged on me by a friend of great experience and knowledge, that a small text-book on later Jewish Literature was likely to be found useful both for home and school use. Such a book might encourage the elementary study of Jewish literature in a wider circle than has hitherto been reached. Hence this book has been compiled with the definite aim of providing an elementary manual. It will be seen that both in the inclusions and exclusions the author has followed a line of his own, but he lays no claim to originality. The book is simply designed as a manual for those who may wish to master some of the leading characteristics of the subject, without burdening themselves with too many details and dates.

This consideration has in part determined also the method of the book. In presenting an outline of Jewish literature three plans are possible. One can divide the subject according to *Periods*. Starting with the Rabbinic Age and closing with the activity of the earlier Gaonim, or Persian Rabbis, the First Period would carry us to the eighth or the ninth century. A well-marked Second Period is that of the Arabic-Spanish writers, a period which would extend from the ninth to the fifteenth century. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century forms a Third Period with distinct characteristics. Finally, the career of Mendelssohn marks the definite beginning of the Modern Period. Such a grouping of the facts presents many advantages, but it somewhat

obscures the varying conditions prevalent at one and the same time in different countries where the Jews were settled. Hence some writers have preferred to arrange the material under the different *Countries*. It is quite possible to draw a map of the world's civilization by merely marking the successive places in which Jewish literature has fixed its head-quarters. But, on the other hand, such a method of classification has the disadvantage that it leads to much overlapping. For long intervals together, it is impossible to separate Italy from Spain, France from Germany, Persia from Egypt, Constantinople from Amsterdam. This has induced other writers to propose a third method and to trace *Influences*, to indicate that, whereas Rabbinism may be termed the native product of the Jewish genius, the scientific, poetical, and philosophical tendencies of Jewish writers in the Middle Ages were due to the interaction of external and internal forces. Further, in this arrangement, the Ghetto period would have a place assigned to it as such, for it would again mark the almost complete sway of purely Jewish forces in Jewish literature. Adopting this classification, we should have a wave of Jewish impulse, swollen by the accretion of foreign waters, once more breaking on a Jewish strand, with its contents in something like the same condition in which they left the original spring. All these three methods are true, and this has impelled me to refuse to follow any one of them to the exclusion of the other two. I have tried to trace *influences*, to observe *periods*, to distinguish *countries*. I have also tried to derive color and vividness by selecting prominent personalities round which to group whole cycles of facts. Thus, some of the chapters

bear the names of famous men, others are entitled from periods, others from countries, and yet others are named from the general currents of European thought. In all this my aim has been very modest. I have done little in the way of literary criticism, but I felt that a dry collection of names and dates was the very thing I had to avoid. I need not say that I have done my best to ensure accuracy in my statements by referring to the best authorities known to me on each division of the subject. To name the works to which I am indebted would need a list of many of the best-known products of recent Continental and American scholarship. At the end of every chapter I have, however, given references to some English works and essays. Graetz is cited in the English translation published by the Jewish Publication Society of America. The figures in brackets refer to the edition published in London. The American and the English editions of S. Schechter's "Studies in Judaism" are similarly referred to.

Of one thing I am confident. No presentation of the facts, however bald and inadequate it be, can obscure the truth that this little book deals with a great and an inspiring literature. It is possible to question whether the books of great Jews always belonged to the great books of the world. There may have been, and there were, greater legalists than Rashi, greater poets than Jehuda Halevi, greater philosophers than Maimonides, greater moralists than Bachya. But there has been no greater literature than that which these and numerous other Jews represent.

Rabbinism was a sequel to the Bible, and if like all sequels it was unequal to its original, it nevertheless shared

its greatness. The works of all Jews up to the modern period were the sequel to this sequel. Through them all may be detected the unifying principle that literature in its truest sense includes life itself; that intellect is the handmaid to conscience; and that the best books are those which best teach men how to live. This underlying unity gave more harmony to Jewish literature than is possessed by many literatures more distinctively national. The maxim, "Righteousness delivers from death," applies to books as well as to men. A literature whose consistent theme is Righteousness is immortal. On the very day on which Jerusalem fell, this theory of the interconnection between literature and life became the fixed principle of Jewish thought, and it ceased to hold undisputed sway only in the age of Mendelssohn. It was in the "Vineyard" of Jamnia that the theory received its firm foundation. A starting-point for this volume will therefore be sought in the meeting-place in which the Rabbis, exiled from the Holy City, found a new fatherland in the Book of books.

CHAPTERS ON JEWISH LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

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ToC

THE "VINEYARD" AT JAMNIA

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Schools at Jamnia, Lydda, Usha, and Sepphoris.—The Tannaim compile the Mishnah.—Jochanan, Akiba, Meir, Judah.—Aquila.

The story of Jewish literature, after the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem in the year 70 of the Christian era, centres round the city of Jamnia. Jamnia, or Jabneh, lay near the sea, beautifully situated on the slopes of a gentle hill in the lowlands, about twenty-eight miles from the capital. When Vespasian was advancing to the siege of Jerusalem, he occupied Jamnia, and thither the Jewish Synhedrion, or Great Council, transferred itself when Jerusalem fell. A college existed there already, but Jamnia then became the head-quarters of Jewish learning, and retained that position till the year 135. At that date the learned circle moved further north, to Galilee, and, besides the famous school at Lydda in Judea, others were founded in Tiberias, Usha, and Sepphoris.

The real founder of the College at Jamnia was Jochanan, the son of Zakkai, called "the father of wisdom." Like the Greek philosophers who taught their pupils in the gardens of the "Academy" at Athens, the Rabbis may have lectured to

their students in a "Vineyard" at Jamnia. Possibly the term "Vineyard" was only a metaphor applied to the meeting-place of the Wise at Jamnia, but, at all events, the result of these pleasant intellectual gatherings was the Rabbinical literature. Jochanan himself was a typical Rabbi. For a great part of his life he followed a mercantile pursuit, and earned his bread by manual labor. His originality as a teacher lay in his perception that Judaism could survive the loss of its national centre. He felt that "charity and the love of men may replace the sacrifices." He would have preferred his brethren to submit to Rome, and his political foresight was justified when the war of independence closed in disaster. As Graetz has well said, like Jeremiah Jochanan wept over the desolation of Zion, but like Zerubbabel he created a new sanctuary. Jochanan's new sanctuary was the school.

In the "Vineyard" at Jamnia, the Jewish tradition was the subject of much animated inquiry. The religious, ethical, and practical literature of the past was sifted and treasured, and fresh additions were made. But not much was written, for until the close of the second century the new literature of the Jews was *oral*. The Bible was written down, and read from scrolls, but the Rabbinical literature was committed to memory piecemeal, and handed down from teacher to pupil. Notes were perhaps taken in writing, but even when the Oral Literature was collected, and arranged as a book, it is believed by many authorities that the book so compiled remained for a considerable period an oral and not a written book.

This book was called the *Mishnah* (from the verb *shana*, "to repeat" or "to learn"). The Mishnah was not the work of

one man or of one age. So long was it in growing, that its birth dates from long before the destruction of the Temple. But the men most closely associated with the compilation of the Mishnah were the Tannaim (from the root *tana*, which has the same meaning as *shana*). There were about one hundred and twenty of these Tannaim between the years 70 and 200 C.E., and they may be conveniently arranged in four generations. From each generation one typical representative will here be selected.

The Tannaim

First Generation, 70 to 100 C.E.
Jochanan, the son of Zakkai

Second Generation, 100 to 130 C.E.
Akiba

Third Generation, 130 to 160 C.E.
Meir

Fourth Generation, 160 to 200 C.E.
Judah The Prince

The Tannaim were the possessors of what was perhaps the greatest principle that dominated a literature until the close of the eighteenth century. They maintained that *literature* and *life* were co-extensive. It was said of Jochanan, the son of Zakkai, that he never walked a single step without thinking of God. Learning the Torah, that is, the Law, the authorized Word of God, and its Prophetical and

Rabbinical developments, was man's supreme duty. "If thou hast learned much Torah, ascribe not any merit to thyself, for therefor wast thou created." Man was created to learn; literature was the aim of life. We have already seen what kind of literature. Jochanan once said to his five favorite disciples: "Go forth and consider which is the good way to which a man should cleave." He received various answers, but he most approved of this response: "A good heart is the way." Literature is life if it be a heart-literature—this may be regarded as the final justification of the union effected in the Mishnah between learning and righteousness.

Akiba, who may be taken to represent the second generation of Tannaim, differed in character from Jochanan. Jochanan had been a member of the peace party in the years 66 to 70; Akiba was a patriot, and took a personal part in the later struggle against Rome, which was organized by the heroic Bar Cochba in the years 131 to 135. Akiba set his face against frivolity, and pronounced silence a fence about wisdom. But his disposition was resolute rather than severe. Of him the most romantic of love stories is told. He was a herdsman, and fell in love with his master's daughter, who endured poverty as his devoted wife, and was glorified in her husband's fame. But whatever contrast there may have been in the two characters, Akiba, like Jochanan, believed that a literature was worthless unless it expressed itself in the life of the scholar. He and his school held in low esteem the man who, though learned, led an evil life, but they took as their ideal the man whose moral excellence was more conspicuous than his learning. As R. Eleazar, the son of Azariah, said: "He whose knowledge is in excess of his good

deeds is like a tree whose branches are many and its roots scanty; the wind comes, uproots, and overturns it. But he whose good deeds are more than his knowledge is like a tree with few branches but many roots, so that if all the winds in the world come and blow upon it, it remains firm in its place." Man, according to Akiba, is master of his own destiny; he needs God's grace to triumph over evil, yet the triumph depends on his own efforts: "Everything is seen, yet freedom of choice is given; the world is judged by grace, yet all is according to the work." The Torah, the literature of Israel, was to Akiba "a desirable instrument," a means to life.

Among the distinctions of Akiba's school must be named the first literal translation of the Bible into Greek. This work was done towards the close of the second century by Aquila, a proselyte, who was inspired by Akiba's teaching. Aquila's version was inferior to the Alexandrian Greek version, called the Septuagint, in graces of style, but was superior in accuracy. Aquila followed the Hebrew text word by word. This translator is identical with Onkelos, to whom in later centuries the Aramaic translation (*Targum* Onkelos) of the Pentateuch was ascribed. Aramaic versions of the Bible were made at a very early period, and the Targum Onkelos may contain ancient elements, but in its present form it is not earlier than the fifth century.

Meir, whom we take as representative of the third generation of Tannaim, was filled with the widest sympathies. In his conception of truth, everything that men can know belonged to the Torah. Not that the Torah superseded or absorbed all other knowledge, but that the

Torah needed, for its right study, all the aids which science and secular information could supply. In this way Jewish literature was to some extent saved from the danger of becoming a merely religious exercise, and in later centuries, when the mass of Jews were disposed to despise and even discourage scientific and philosophical culture, a minority was always prepared to resist this tendency and, on the ground of the views of some of the Tannaim like Meir, claimed the right to study what we should now term secular sciences. The width of Meir's sympathies may be seen in his tolerant conduct towards his friend Elisha, the son of Abuya. When the latter forsook Judaism, Meir remained true to Elisha. He devoted himself to the effort to win back his old friend, and, though he failed, he never ceased to love him. Again, Meir was famed for his knowledge of fables, in antiquity a branch of the wisdom of all the Eastern world. Meir's large-mindedness was matched by his large-heartedness, and in his wife Beruriah he possessed a companion whose tender sympathies and fine toleration matched his own.

The fourth generation of Tannaim is overshadowed by the fame of Judah the Prince, *Rabbi*, as he was simply called. He lived from 150 to 210, and with his name is associated the compilation of the Mishnah. A man of genial manners, strong intellectual grasp, he was the exemplar also of princely hospitality and of friendship with others than Jews. His intercourse with one of the Antonines was typical of his wide culture. Life was not, in Rabbi Judah's view, compounded of smaller and larger incidents, but all the affairs of life were parts of the great divine scheme. "Reflect

upon three things, and thou wilt not fall into the power of sin: Know what is above thee—a seeing eye and a hearing ear—and all thy deeds are written in a book."

The Mishnah, which deals with things great and small, with everything that concerns men, is the literary expression of this view of life. Its language is the new-Hebrew, a simple, nervous idiom suited to practical life, but lacking the power and poetry of the Biblical Hebrew. It is a more useful but less polished instrument than the older language. The subject-matter of the Mishnah includes both law and morality, the affairs of the body, of the soul, and of the mind. Business, religion, social duties, ritual, are all dealt with in one and the same code. The fault of this conception is, that by associating things of unequal importance, both the mind and the conscience may become incapable of discriminating the great from the small, the external from the spiritual. Another ill consequence was that, as literature corresponded so closely with life, literature could not correct the faults of life, when life became cramped or stagnant. The modern spirit differs from the ancient chiefly in that literature has now become an independent force, which may freshen and stimulate life. But the older ideal was nevertheless a great one. That man's life is a unity; that his conduct is in all its parts within the sphere of ethics and religion; that his mind and conscience are not independent, but two sides of the same thing; and that therefore his religious, ethical, æsthetic, and intellectual literature is one and indivisible,—this was a noble conception which, with all its weakness, had distinct points of superiority over the modern view.

The Mishnah is divided into six parts, or Orders (*Sedarim*); each Order into Tractates (*Massechtoth*); each Tractate into Chapters (*Perakim*); each Chapter into Paragraphs (each called a *Mishnah*). The six Orders are as follows:

Zeraim ("Seeds"). Deals with the laws connected with Agriculture, and opens with a Tractate on Prayer ("Blessings").

Moed ("Festival"). On Festivals.

Nashim ("Women"). On the laws relating to Marriage, etc.

Nezikin ("Damages"). On civil and criminal Law.

Kodashim ("Holy Things"). On Sacrifices, etc.

Teharoth ("Purifications"). On personal and ritual Purity.

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CHAPTER II

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FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS AND THE JEWISH SIBYL

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Great national crises usually produce an historical literature. This is more likely to happen with the nation that wins in a war than with the nation that loses. Thus, in the Maccabean period, historical works dealing with the glorious struggle and its triumphant termination were written by Jews both in Hebrew and in Greek. After the terrible misfortune which befell the Jews in the year 70, when Jerusalem sank before the Roman arms never to rise again, little heart was there for writing history. Jews sought solace in their existing literature rather than in new productions, and the Bible and the oral traditions that were to crystallize a century later into the Mishnah filled the national heart and mind. Yet more than one Jew felt an impulse to write the history of the dismal time. Thus the first complete books which appeared in Jewish literature after the loss of nationality were historical works written by two men, Justus and Josephus, both of whom bore an active part in the most recent of the wars which they recorded. Justus of Tiberias wrote in Greek a terse chronicle entitled, "History of the Jewish Kings," and also a more detailed narrative of the

"Jewish War" with Rome. Both these books are known to us only from quotations. The originals are entirely lost. A happier fate has preserved the works of another Jewish historian of the same period, Flavius Josephus (38 to 95 C.E.), the literary and political opponent of Justus. He wrote three histories: "Antiquities of the Jews"; an "Autobiography"; "The Wars of the Jews"; together with a reply to the attacks of an Alexandrian critic of Judaism, "Against Apion." The character of Josephus has been variously estimated. Some regard him as a patriot, who yielded to Rome only when convinced that Jewish destiny required such submission. But the most probable view of his career is as follows. Josephus was a man of taste and learning. He was a student of the Greek and Latin classics, which he much admired, and was also a devoted and loyal lover of Judaism. Unfortunately, circumstances thrust him into a political position from which he could extricate himself only by treachery and duplicity. As a young man he had visited Rome, and there acquired enthusiastic admiration for the Romans. When he returned to Palestine, he found his countrymen filled with fiery patriotism and about to hurl themselves against the legions of the Caesars. To his dismay Josephus saw himself drawn into the patriotic vortex. By a strange mishap an important command was entrusted to him. He betrayed his country, and saved himself by eager submission to the Romans. He became a personal friend of Vespasian and the constant companion of his son Titus.

Traitor though he was to the national cause, Josephus was a steadfast champion of the Jewish religion. All his

works are animated with a desire to present Judaism and the Jews in the best light. He was indignant that heathen historians wrote with scorn of the vanquished Jews, and resolved to describe the noble stand made by the Jewish armies against Rome. He was moved to wrath by the Egyptian Manetho's distortion of the ancient history of Israel, and he could not rest silent under the insults of Apion. The works of Josephus are therefore works written with a *tendency* to glorify his people and his religion. But they are in the main trustworthy, and are, indeed, one of the chief sources of information for the history of the Jews in post-Biblical times. His style is clear and attractive, and his power of grasping the events of long periods is comparable with that of Polybius. He was no mere chronicler; he possessed some faculty for explaining as well as recording facts and some real insight into the meaning of events passing under his own eyes.

He wrote for the most part in Greek, both because that language was familiar to many cultured Jews of his day, and because his histories thereby became accessible to the world of non-Jewish readers. Sometimes he used both Aramaic and Greek. For instance, he produced his "Jewish War" first in the one, subsequently in the other of these languages. The Aramaic version has been lost, but the Greek has survived. His style is often eloquent, especially in his book "Against Apion." This was an historical and philosophical justification of Judaism. At the close of this work Josephus says: "And so I make bold to say that we are become the teachers of other men in the greatest number of things, and those the most excellent." Josephus, like the