

Rabbinical Stories

THE preceding article furnishes some of the more serious investigations to be found in the Talmud. Its levities may amuse. I leave untouched the gross obscenities and immoral decisions. The Talmud contains a vast collection of stories, apologues, and jests; many display a vein of pleasantry, and at times have a wildness of invention which sufficiently mark the features of an eastern parent. Many extravagantly puerile were designed merely to recreate their young students. When a rabbin was asked the reason of so much nonsense, he replied that the ancients had a custom of introducing music in their lectures, which accompaniment made them more agreeable; but that not having musical instruments in the schools, the rabbins invented these strange stories to arouse attention. This was ingeniously said; but they make miserable work when they pretend to give mystical interpretations to pure nonsense.

These rabbinical stories, and the LEGENDS of the Catholics, though they will be despised, and are too often despicable, yet, as the great Lord Bacon said of some of these inventions, they would “serve for winter talk by the fireside;” and a happy collection from these stories is much wanted.

In 1711, a German professor of the Oriental languages, Dr. Eisenmenger, published in two large volumes quarto his “Judaism discovered,” a ponderous labour, of which the scope was to ridicule the Jewish traditions.

I shall give a dangerous adventure into which King David was drawn by the devil. The king one day hunting, Satan appeared before him in the likeness of a roe. David discharged an arrow at him, but missed his aim. He pursued the feigned roe into the land of the Philistines. Ishbi, the brother of Goliath, instantly recognised the king as him who had slain that giant. He bound him, and bending him neck and heels, laid him under a wine-press in order to press him to death. A miracle saves David. The earth beneath him became soft, and Ishbi could not press wine out of him. That evening in the Jewish congregation a dove, whose wings were covered with silver, appeared in great perplexity; and evidently signified the King of Israel was in trouble. Abishai, one of the king’s counsellors, inquiring for the king, and finding him absent, is at a loss to proceed, for according to the Mishna, no one may ride on the king’s horse, nor sit upon his throne, nor use

his sceptre. The school of the rabbins however allowed these things in time of danger. On this Abishai vaults on David's horse, and (with an Oriental metaphor) the land of the Philistines leaped to him instantly! Arrived at Ishbi's house, he beholds his mother Orpa spinning. Perceiving the Israelite, she snatched up her spinning-wheel and threw it at him, to kill him; but not hitting him, she desired him to bring the spinning-wheel to her. He did not do this exactly, but returned it to her in such a way that she never asked any more for her spinning-wheel. When Ishbi saw this, and recollecting that David, though tied up neck and heels, was still under the wine-press, he cried out, "There are now two who will destroy me!" So he threw David high up into the air, and stuck his spear into the ground, imagining that David would fall upon it and perish. But Abishai pronounced the magical name, which the Talmudists frequently make use of, and it caused David to hover between earth and heaven, so that he fell not down! Both at length unite against Ishbi, and observing that two young lions should kill one lion, find no difficulty in getting rid of the brother of Goliath.

Of Solomon, another favourite hero of the Talmudists, a fine Arabian story is told. This king was an adept in necromancy, and a male and a female devil

were always in waiting for any emergency. It is observable, that the Arabians, who have many stories concerning Solomon, always describe him as a magician. His adventures with Aschmedai, the prince of devils, are numerous; and they both (the king and the devil) served one another many a slippery trick. One of the most remarkable is when Aschmedai, who was prisoner to Solomon, the king having contrived to possess himself of the devil's seal-ring, and chained him, one day offered to answer an unholy question put to him by Solomon, provided he returned him his seal-ring and loosened his chain. The impertinent curiosity of Solomon induced him to commit this folly. Instantly Aschmedai swallowed the monarch, and stretching out his wings up to the firmament of heaven, one of his feet remaining on the earth, he spit out Solomon four hundred leagues from him. This was done so privately that no one knew anything of the matter. Aschmedai then assumed the likeness of Solomon, and sat on his throne. From that hour did Solomon say, "*This* then is the reward of all my labour," according to Ecclesiasticus, i.3.; which *this*, means, one rabbin says, his walking-staff; and another insists was his ragged coat. For Solomon went a begging from door to door; and wherever he came he uttered these words: "I, the preacher,

was king over Israel in Jerusalem." At length coming before council, and still repeating these remarkable words, without addition or variation, the rabbins said, "This means something; for a fool is not constant in his tale!" They asked the chamberlain if the king frequently saw him? and he replied to them, No! Then they sent to the queens, to ask if the king came into their apartments? and they answered, Yes! The rabbins then sent them a message to take notice of his feet; for the feet of devils are like the feet of cocks. The queens acquainted them that his majesty always came in slippers, but forced them to embrace at times forbidden by the law. He had attempted to lie with his mother Bathsheba, whom he had almost torn to pieces. At this the rabbins assembled in great haste, and taking the beggar with them, they gave him the ring, and the chain in which the great magical name was engraven, and led him to the palace. Aschmedai was sitting on the throne as the real Solomon entered; but instantly he shrieked and flew away. Yet to his last day was Solomon afraid of the prince of devils, and had his bed guarded by the valiant men of Israel, as is written in Cant. iii. 7,8.

They frequently display much humour in their inventions, as in the following account of the manners and morals of in infamous town which mocked at all justice.

There were in Sodom four judges, who were liars, and deriders of justice. When any one had stuck his neighbour's wife and caused her to miscarry, these judges thus counselled the husband: "Give her to the offender, that he may get her with child for thee." When any one had cut off an ear of his neighbour's ass, they said to the owner,—“Let him have the ass till the ear is grown again, that it may be returned to thee as thou wishest.” When any one had wounded his neighbour, they told the wounded man to “give him a fee, for letting him blood.” A toll was exacted in passing a certain bridge; but if anyone chose to wade through the water, or walk round about to save it, he was condemned to a double toll. Eleasar, Abraham's servant, came thither, and they wounded him.—When before the judge he was ordered to pay his fee for having his blood let, Eleasar flung a stone at the judge and wounded him; on which the judge said to him, What meaneth this? Eleasar replied,—“Give him who wounded me the fee that is due to myself for wounding thee.” The people of this town had a bedstead on which they laid travellers who asked to rest. If anyone was too long for it, they cut off his legs; and if he was shorter than the bedstead, they strained him to its head and foot. When a beggar came to this town, every one gave him a penny, on which was

inscribed the donor's name; but they would sell him no bread, nor let him escape. When the beggar died from hunger, then they came about him, and each man took back his penny. These stories are curious inventions of keen mockery and malice, seasoned with humour. It is said some of the famous decisions of Sancho Panza are to be found in the Talmud.

Abraham is said to have been jealous of his wives, and built an enchanted city for them. He built an iron city and put them in.—The walls were so high and dark, the sun could not be seen in it. He gave them a bowl full of pearls and jewels, which sent forth a light in this dark city equal to the sun. Noah, it seems, when in the ark had no other light than jewels and pearls. Abraham in travelling to Egypt brought with him a chest. At the custom-house the officers exacted the duties. Abraham would have readily paid, but desired they would not open the chest. They first insisted on the duty for clothes, which Abraham consented to pay; but then they thought by his ready acquiescence that it might be gold.—Abraham consents to pay for gold. They now suspected it might be silk. Abraham was willing to pay for silk, or more costly pearls; and Abraham generously consented to pay as if the chest contained the most valuable of things. It was then they resolved to open and

examine the chest. And behold as soon as that chest was opened, that great lustre of human beauty broke out which made such a noise in the land of Egypt; it was Sarah herself! The jealous Abraham, to conceal her beauty, had locked her up in this chest.

The whole creation in these rabbinical fancies is strangely gigantic and vast. The works of eastern nations are full of these descriptions; and Hesiod's Theogony, and Milton's battles of angels, are puny in comparison with these rabbinical heroes, or rabbinical things. Mountains are hurled with all their woods with great ease, and creatures start into existence too terrible for our conceptions. The winged monster in the "Arabian Nights," called the Roc, is evidently one of the creatures of rabbinical fancy; it would sometimes, when very hungry, seize and fly away with an elephant. Captain Cook found a bird's nest in an island near New Holland, built with sticks on the ground, six-and-twenty feet in circumference, and near three feet in height. But of the rabbinical birds, fish, and animals, it is not probable any circumnavigator will ever trace even the slightest vestige or resemblance.

One of their birds, when it spreads its wings, blots out the sun. An egg from another fell out of its nest, and the white thereof broke and glued about three hun-

dred cedar-trees, and overflowed a village. One of them stands up to the lower joint of the leg in a river, and some mariners, imagining the water was not deep, were hastening to bathe, when a voice from heaven said, "Step not in there, for seven years ago there a carpenter dropped his axe, and it hath not yet reached the bottom."

The following passage concerning fat geese is perfectly in the style of these rabbins. "A rabbin once saw in a desert a flock of geese so fat that their feathers fell off, and the rivers flowed in fat. Then said I to them, Shall we have part of you in the other world when the Messiah shall come? And one of them lifted up a wing, and another a leg, to signify these parts we should have. We should otherwise have had all parts of these geese; but we Israelites shall be called to an account touching these fat geese, because their sufferings are owing to us. It is our iniquities that have delayed the coming of the Messiah, and these geese suffer greatly by reason of their excessive fat, which daily and daily increases, and will increase till the Messiah comes!"

What the manna was which fell in the wilderness has often been disputed, and still is disputable: it was sufficient for the rabbins to have found in the Bible that the taste of it was "as a wafer made with honey,"

to have raised their fancy to its pitch. They declare it was "like oil to children, honey to old men, and cakes to middle age." It had every kind of taste except that of cucumbers, melons, garlic, and onions, and leeks, for these were those Egyptian roots which the Israelites so much regretted to have lost. This manna had, however, the quality to accommodate itself to the palate of those who did not murmur in the wilderness; and to these it became fish, flesh, or fowl.

The rabbins never advance an absurdity without quoting a text in scripture; and to substantiate this fact they quote Deut. ii. 7. where it is said, "Through this great wilderness, these forty years the Lord thy God hath been with thee, and *thou hast lacked nothing!*" St. Austin repeats this explanation of the rabbins that the faithful found in this manna the taste of their favourite food! However, the Israelites could not have found all these benefits as the rabbins tell us, for in Numbers xi. 6. they exclaim, "*There is nothing at all besides this manna before our eyes!*" They had just said that they remembered the melons, cucumbers, &c. which they had eaten of so freely in Egypt. One of the hyperboles of the rabbins is, that the manna fell in such mountains that the kings of the east and the west beheld them; which they found in a passage in the 23rd Psalm: "Thou preparest a ta-

ble before me in the presence of mine enemies!” These may serve as specimens of the forced interpretations on which their grotesque fables are founded.

Their detestation of Titus, their great conqueror, appears by the following wild invention.—After having narrated certain things too shameful to read, of a prince whom Josephus describes in far different colours, they tell us that on sea Titus tauntingly observed in a great storm that the God of the Jews was only powerful on the water, and that therefore he had succeeded in drowning Pharaoh and Sisera. “Had he been strong, he would have waged war with me in Jerusalem.” On uttering this blasphemy, a voice from heaven said, “Wicked man! I have a little creature in the world which shall wage war with thee!” When Titus landed, a gnat entered his nostrils, and for seven years together made holes in his brains. When his skull was opened, the gnat was found to be as large as a pigeon: the mouth of the gnat was of copper, and the claws of iron.

That, however, there are some beautiful inventions in the Talmud, I refer to the story of “Solomon and Sheba,” in the present collections.