

## THE CONCEPT OF THE CHOSEN PEOPLE AND PAGAN THOUGHT

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The philological school of Jewish biblical exegesis evolved only in the medieval period. It developed in the ninth and tenth centuries, when the disputation began between the Karaites and Rabbinites concerning the validity of *halakha* as seen through the oral law incorporated in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds. Both sides felt obliged to prove their arguments from the biblical text, which encouraged the evolution of *peshat*, the search for the text's simple meaning, as an exegetical goal. This school of exegesis was encouraged and influenced by the contemporary Arabic philologists of Moslem Spain. However, the polemic against Christianity and paganism as found in the midrashim and Talmudim which predate the late fifth century, has a very different character to it; here philological factors are not primary. Rabbinic exegesis is creative and free rather than analytic. In a sense, it is a continuation of the process which, under different historical circumstances, gave birth to the Bible. Our interest in these midrashim is not in what they extract from the text, but in what they read into it. In this type of exegesis, formal hermeneutic principles were applied to tie the creative thoughts to the text, thus creating an historical, religious and cultural continuity with the Bible.

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Since the New Testament writers and the Church fathers used scriptural proof to back their claims, the polemic against Christianity was textually oriented. The polemic against pagan writers was different; the pagans rarely had any first-hand acquaintance with the Hebrew Bible or other Jewish sources, and their arguments were often based on popular anti-semitic conceptions of Judaism. The polemic focused on doctrine rather than scripture. This will be illustrated by the caustic pagan treatise—*Against the Galilaeans* written by Julian the Apostate just before his death in 363 while warring against the Persians.

Julian is well-known as a symbol of the pagan reaction which tried to undo the decision of Emperor Constantine to adopt Christianity as the official state religion of Rome. *Against the Galilaeans* is a strong anti-Christian polemic. It was partially preserved thanks to Bishop Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444 C.E.), who quoted extensively from the work to polemicize against it. The translation used here is by W. C. Wright and is based on the Greek text which he reconstructed.<sup>1</sup>

Julian is unique among pagan writers in his extensive knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the writings of the Church fathers, works he studied as part of his traditional Christian education. In his polemic he mocks Christianity for setting aside the great cultures of the Greeks and Romans in favour of a religion which was never followed by a group larger than a tribe or small nation. In his eyes, the Christians are worse than the Jews, since Christianity only accepted its Jewish heritage in a fragmentary fashion.

First we will cite several passages from Julian's work, then we will systematize and summarize his main arguments. Finally, we will quote several midrashim which combat these claims. It is impossible to prove that the Jewish scholars knew Julian's treatise. It is probable that Julian's arguments are representative of the trend of contemporary pagan thought. Rabbinic statements are aimed against this trend, if not specifically against Julian. However, the formulation of rabbinic statements are occasionally very close to Julian's formulation. These anti-pagan Jewish statements are not part of an attempt to formulate a dogmatic Jewish theology; they are sporadic expressions and reactions of individuals with

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1. Wilmer Cave Wright, trans., *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, III, The Loeb Classical Library (London and N.Y.: William Heinemann and G. P. Putnam's sons, 1923). See, David Rokeah, "The Emperor Julian and the Pagan Reaction," in *The Great Man and His Age* (Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel, 1963), pp. 79-92 (Hebrew).

no dogmatic importance. In fact, as scholars have noted, alternate Rabbinic viewpoints exist.<sup>2</sup>

In *Against the Galilaeans*, Julian polemicizes against the Jewish concept of the Chosen People, a concept adopted by the Christians in a different form. He says, "Moses says that the Creator of the Universe chose out the Hebrew nation, that to that nation alone did He pay heed and cared for it, and He gives him charge of it alone. But how and by what sort of gods the other nations are governed he has said not a word... Now I will only point out that Moses himself and the prophets who came after him and Jesus the Nazarene, yes and Paul also... assert that He is the God of Israel alone and of Judaea, and that the Jews are His Chosen People."<sup>3</sup> He accuses Paul of hypocrisy, since Paul in one place claimed that only the Jews were God's inheritance but elsewhere claims that God is also the God of the nations. Julian continues, "Therefore it is fair to ask of Paul why God, if he was not the God of the Jews only but also of the Gentiles, sent the blessed gift of prophecy to the Jews in abundance and gave them Moses and the oil of anointing, and the prophets and the law... but unto us no prophet, no oil of anointing, no teacher, no herald to announce his love for man which should one day, though late, reach even unto us also. Nay, he even looked on for myriads, or if you prefer, for thousands of years, while men in extreme ignorance served idols, as you call them, from where the sun rises to where it sets, yes and from North to South, save only that little tribe which less than two thousand years before had settled in one part of Palestine. For if he is the God of all of us alike, the creator of all, why did he neglect us? Wherefore it is natural to think that the God of the Hebrews was not the begetter of the whole universe with lordship over the whole, but rather, as I said before, that he is confined within limits, and that since his empire has bounds we must conceive of him as only one of the crowd of other gods."<sup>4</sup>

Julian then discusses the differences between the various nations and how the laws legislated by a particular nation suit its nature. He continues, "And yet among mankind the difference between the customs and the political constitutions of the nations is in every way greater than the difference in their language. What Hellene, for instance, ever tells us that a man ought to marry his sister or the daughter of his mother?"

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2. See E.E. Urbach, "*Halakhah and Prophecy*," *Tarbiz*, 18 (1947), pp. 1-27 (Hebrew).

3. *Julian*, p. 341, §§ 99E, 100A.

4. *Ibid*, pp. 343-345, §§ 106C, D, 100C, 106D.

Yet in Persia this is accounted virtuous. But why need I go over their several characteristics, or describe the love of liberty and lack of discipline of the Germans, the docility and tameness of the Syrians, the Persians, the Parthians, and in short of all the barbarians in the East and the South, and of all nations who possess and are contented with a somewhat despotic form of government? Now if these differences that are greater and more important come about without the aid of a greater and more divine providence, why do we vainly trouble ourselves about and worship one who takes no thought of us.”<sup>5</sup>

Later in his work, Julian states, “Therefore, as I said, unless for every nation separately some presiding national god (and under him an angel, a demon, a hero, and a peculiar order of spirits which obey and work for the higher powers) established the differences in our laws and characters, you must demonstrate to me how these differences arose by some other agency. Moreover, it is not sufficient to say, ‘God spake and it was so.’ For the natures of things that are created ought to harmonise with the commands of God...”<sup>6</sup>

With extreme clarity, Julian discusses the connection between nature and the divine commandments, “...the race of men is doomed to death and perishable. Therefore, men’s works are also naturally perishable and mutable and subject to every kind of alteration. But since God is eternal, it follows that of such sort are His ordinances also. And since they are such, they are either the nature of things or are accordant with the nature of things. For how could nature be at variance with the ordinance of God? How could it fall out of harmony therewith? ... So too should it be with the political constitutions of the nations, then it was not by a special, isolated decree that He gave these constitutions their essential characteristics, or moulded us also to match this lack of agreement.”<sup>7</sup>

Julian’s position includes these points:

1. Israel’s Torah is narrow and unacceptable because it assumes that God only concerned himself with one little nation which settled long ago in a section of Palestine. God gave the Torah, the prophets, and the messiah to them only, ignoring the earth’s other inhabitants.

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5. *Ibid*, p. 353, § 138 A-C.

6. *Ibid*, p. 355, § 143 A, B.

7. *Ibid*, p. 357, § 143 C, D.

2. The Torah's position is illogical, since it does not explain the differences between various nations and their customs unless we assume that the God of the Hebrews is a local god only, and not the creator of heaven and earth, as Jewish tradition claims.

3. As he clearly states later in this work, Julian believes that the nations were fashioned by gods who were appointed as their patrons, and these gods established laws consistent with the personality of each nation. The multiplicity of laws and the inconsistencies between different legal systems can only be explained through the existence of patron-gods and not through the Jewish doctrine of one God.

Julian, the mouthpiece of the pagan world, accuses Judaism of being particularistic; he notes that monotheism negates the possibility of patron gods for the individual nations.

Midrashic literature contains polemics against the pagan views represented by Julian, particularly against the pagan claims that Israel was not chosen and that Judaism is unfairly particularistic. This statement, in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai is brought in Exodus Rabbah to the verse in the decalogue, "I am the LORD your God": "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: 'I am God over *all* earth's creatures, yet I have associated My name only with *you*; for I am not called "the god of idolators" but "the God of *Israel*.'"'"<sup>8</sup> This midrash clearly states that the concept of Israel's election in no way contradicts the universal concern of God. Such statements were made to argue both against young Christianity, which claimed that God now associated His name with them and not with the Israel of the flesh, as well as against the polytheists who denied the entire concept of chosenness.

Julian argue against Judaism's particularism, and claimed that their God gave the nations neither prophecy, Torah, nor a Messiah. The rabbis counter-argue that Balaam was a prophet to the Gentiles, and through him, God revealed His will to the Gentiles.<sup>9</sup> In fact, several midrashim even elevate the status of the Gentile Balaam above that of Moses, the greatest of all prophets! So an anonymous tradition in

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8. S. M. Lehrman, trans. *Midrash Rabbah, Exodus* (London: Soncino Press, 1939), p. 339.

9. Cf. Ephraim E. Urbach, "Homilies of the Rabbis on the Prophets of the Nations and the Balaam stories," *Tarbiz*, 25 (1956-7), 272-289 (Hebrew with English condensation).

Sifre Deuteronomy to Deut. 34 : 10, “‘And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses.’ In Israel he has not arisen, but among the nations, he has arisen. And who is he? Balaam son of Beor. However, there was a distinction between the prophecy of Moses and the prophecy of Balaam. Moses did not know who was speaking to him, but Balaam knew who was speaking to him, as it says : (Num. 24 : 16) ‘the oracle of him who hears the words of God.’ Moses did not know when God would speak to him until He actually spoke, but Balaam knew when He would speak to him, as it says (ibid) : ‘who knows the mind of the Most High.’ God would only speak to Moses when he stood, as it says (Deut. 5 : 28, English 5 : 31) : ‘But you, stand here by me,’ but with Balaam he would speak when he was prostrate, as it says : (Num. 24 : 4), ‘who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down, but having his eyes uncovered.’ To what is this similar? To the king’s cook who knows exactly what goes out onto the king’s table.”<sup>10</sup>

The midrash also combats the particularistic claims of the Gentiles by presenting the view that the Torah was given in a public place, to present all of the nations an opportunity to claim the Torah as their own. The Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael to Ex. 19:2 notes, “They Encamped in the Wilderness. The Torah was given in public, openly in a free place. For had the Torah been given in the land of Israel, the Israelites could have said to the nations of the world : You have no share in it. But now that it was given in the wilderness publicly and openly in a place that is free for all, everyone wishing to accept it would come and accept it.”<sup>11</sup> To counter the claim that God did not tell the Gentiles about the Torah, R. Johanan said, “the Holy One, blessed be He, offered the Torah to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it, until He came to Israel who received it.”<sup>12</sup> In the early Ben Sirah chapter 24, the Torah tells of its pre-existential existence, how it wandered in the heavens and on the earth searching for its home until it found Jerusalem and Zion. This motif predates the second pre-Christian century. In Ben Sirah it is a cosmic motif, but with R. Johanan it is historicized — instead of the Torah wandering throughout the world, God brings it to every nation until finally bringing it to an eager Israel.

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10. *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, ed. Louis Finkelstein (N.Y.: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), p. 430 (§ 357).

11. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, trans. *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, II (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), p. 198.

12. BT, Avodah Zarah 2b, translation by A. Mishcon, *Avodah Zarah* (London: Soncino Press, 1935), p. 4. See an elaboration on this theme on pp. 6-7.

A second midrash from the Mekhilta's discussion of the decalogue seems to be aimed specifically against the particularistic complaint of the Gentiles against Israel. It states "And it was for the following reason that the nations of the world were asked to accept the Torah: In order that they should have no excuse for saying: Had we been asked we would have accepted it. For, behold, they were asked and they refused to accept it, for it is said: "And he said: 'The Lord came from Sinai,'" etc. (Deut. 33:2). He appeared to the children of Esau the wicked and said to them: Will you accept the Torah? They said to Him: What is written in it? He said to them: "Thou shalt not murder" (ibid. 5:17). They then said to Him: The very heritage which our father left us was: "And by thy sword shalt thou live" (Gen. 27:40). He then appeared to the children of Ammon and Moab. He said to them: Will you accept the Torah? They said to Him: What is written in it? He said to them: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Deut. 5:17). They, however, said to him that they were all of them children of adulterers, as it is said: "Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father" (Gen. 19:36). Then he appeared to the children of Ishmael. He said to them: Will you accept the Torah? They said to Him: What is written in it? He said to them: "Thou shalt not steal" (Deut. 5:17). They said to him: The very blessing that had been pronounced upon our father was: 'And he shall be as a wild ass of a man: his hand shall be upon everything" (Gen. 16:12). And it is written: "For indeed, I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews (ibid. 40:15). But when He came to the Israelites and: "At His right hand was a fiery law unto them" (Deut. 33:2), they all opened their mouths and said: "All that the Lord hath spoken will we do and obey" (Ex. 24:7)." <sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the relativistic position posited by Julian which claims that laws must fit the essence of each nation, the rabbis emphasized here that there is only one law for the entire world, namely that which God gave on Sinai. This law does not conform to the natural qualities of the nation to which it was given, rather it comes to correct the nature and to check the desires present in every nation, including Israel. This is a unique, divine law, valid for every nation according to a universal plan which is valid irrespective of place.

This divine law became Israel's possession only because they, and only they, chose to adopt it and to enthrone as their god, God the lawgiver. The cause for their special treatment is emphasized in midrashic thought

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13. *Mekhilta*, pp. 234-235. For an additional universalistic statement, see *Mekhilta* pp. 198-200, starting with "R. Jose says."

as God's enthronement by Israel both at Sinai and previously. "Even so did Moses say to the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Lord of the Universe, out of the seventy original nations, which Thou hast in Thy world, dost Thou command me concerning none but Israel, saying "Command the children of Israel" (Num. 28 : 2), "Say to the children of Israel" (Ex. 33 : 5)? "Say He to him: '[Quite so,] because they were the first to declare me king, at the Red Sea, saying of Me, The Lord shall reign for ever and ever (Ex. 15 : 18).'"<sup>14</sup> An almost identical midrash, whose tradent is R. Berekiah, ends with God saying, "[Quite so,] because at Sinai they accepted My Kingship, saying, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do, and obey" (Ex. 24 : 7).<sup>15</sup>

After enumerating the ten commandments, Julian states, "Now except for the command "Thou shalt not worship other gods," and "Remember the sabbath day," what nation is there, I ask in the name of the gods, which does not think that it ought to keep the commandments?"<sup>16</sup> The midrash "answers" — yes — indeed there are! In fact, basic to the existence of the "cultured" nations, such as Edom, Moab, Ammon and Ishmael is the transgression of one of the ten commandments. The tendency toward these transgressions is basic to man. Divine law is not determined by man's nature, but rather comes to educate men to overcome their "natural" urges in order to live in peaceful co-existence. This universal, non-particularistic aspect of the Torah or divine law is emphasized in many midrashim which seem to have a polemical character to them.

Julian pointed to the inferiority of the Jews by noting their historical experience. Even when they lived in their homeland, they were vassals to other nations, totally independent only for very short periods of time.<sup>17</sup> He recounts the enslavement of the Jews in the biblical period, and in more recent times, "first to the Assyrians, then to the Medes, later to the Persians, and now at last to ourselves."<sup>18</sup> The midrash addresses itself to such claims, which were popular in the mouths of Israel's enemies. "Who brought Thee Out of the Land of Egypt, Out of the House of Bondage. They were Slaves to kings. You interpret it to mean that they were servants of kings. Perhaps it is not so, but rather they

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14. J. Israelstam, trans. *Midrash Rabbah*, Leviticus (London: Soncino Press, 1939), p. 23. This midrash, cited on Lev. 12, is in the name of R. Abin.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Julian*, p. 361, § 152 D.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 375, § 201 E, p. 379, § 209 D.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 379, § 210 A.



were slaves of servants? When it says: "and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut. 7:8), it indicates that they were servants of kings and not servants of slaves."<sup>19</sup> This implies that true freedom is attained by enthroning God; anything else is enslavement under man. In fact, those who believe that they are free since their empire rules over the four corners of the world are the real slaves. However, Israel who enthroned God at Sinai is enslaved to no mortal, for they belong to God only. This midrashic idea is an internalization but not a spiritualization of the concept of freedom, since enthronement of heaven is expressed in an historical context.

In studying midrashic literature, particularly that produced early in the first millennium, we may not ignore the wider cultural milieu in which these midrashim were being created. This includes both the pagan and Christian world. Judaism had to confront both religions; they represented largely alien lifestyles and philosophies to which Judaism often reacted with hostility.<sup>20</sup> The important authoritative Christian sources of this period, the NT and writings of the early Church fathers, are extant and we can see how roughly contemporary Jewish sources reacted to them. Unfortunately, due to the ultimate demise of Mediterranean paganism, and to the destruction of anti-Christian literature by the Church most important early pagan literature was lost.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, we must suffice with the slightly later work of Emperor Julian. Many Jewish midrashic sources from the times when Jewish and pagan ideas were clashing early in the millennium have survived. It is in these midrashic sources that the threatening ideas of paganism were faced and forthrightly answered. Particularly important in this battle were midrashim which described the offering of the Torah to the many nations of the world. In the midrashim, the universal necessity of the divine law found in the Torah was defended. Judaism could not remain silent to the alien pagan claims, and its answers are often hidden away in the vital world of midrashic literature.

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19. *Mekhilta*, p. 237, on Ex. 20:2.

20. Particularly against pagan beliefs and practices, this reaction was not entirely hostile; cf. Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950).

21. E.g., the extensive polemic of Porphyry against Christianity.