

The Ban of Solomon Ben Adret

1305

THE study of the philosophy and the natural sciences of the Greeks and the Arabs led many Jews in southern France and in Spain to examine critically the most sacred beliefs of Judaism. Some even denied the divine authority of the Bible. Philosophical and religious radicalism threatened the very foundations of the orthodoxy so zealously guarded by the rabbinic leaders.

As a result of this situation conflict arose between the liberals and the orthodox. For a time the battle centered around Maimonides' philosophical writings which many orthodox declared heretical. Bans and counter-bans were hurled. The orthodox were so convinced of the heretical nature of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* and his *Book of Knowledge* that in 1233-1234 they induced the Dominican monks to burn them.

This struggle between the forces of science and the forces of tradition, a struggle that had already begun with the first contacts of Jewish and Islamic culture, reached an acute stage in the late thirteenth and the early fourteenth centuries. The battle line extended from Spain to Palestine. Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret (1235-1310), the rabbi of Barcelona and a scholar of international repute, was finally led to issue a vigorous ban against those who studied religious philosophy and certain of the natural sciences before they were twenty-five years old, and against their teachers. It was felt that if a man "filled his belly" with Jewish lore till twenty-five he could safely study anything else after that.

Ibn Adret, who was by nature a traditionalist, believed that scientific and philosophic studies, unless carefully controlled, undermined religious beliefs. He realized, too, that pious, naive Christians resented Jewish skepticism. The ban he issued in 1305, although authoritative only for his community Barcelona, gradually found acceptance in other cities and lands. It was, however, the growing Christian intolerance, more than anything else, that led Jews to neglect all but rabbinic studies.

The introduction to this Hebrew ban of Ibn Adret is a composite of flowery Biblical phrases used metaphorically. It is not an unusual style for this type of pronouncement.

Woe to mankind because of the insult to the Torah!
For they have strayed far from it.
Its diadem have they taken away;
Its crown have they removed.

[It is an insult to the Torah to prefer the sciences to Jewish religious teachings.]

Every man with his censer in his hand offers incense
Before the Greeks and the Arabs.

[Many students are worshipping at the shrine of Greek and Arabic science and philosophy.]

Like Zimri they publicly consort with the Midianitess
And revel in their own filth!

[Even as Zimri of old consorted with the seductive Midianitess, Numbers 25, Jews now flirt with heresy.]

They do not prefer the older Jewish teachings
But surrender to the newer Greek learning the prerogatives due
their Jewish birthright.

They turn not back,

But act like strangers [to their own teachings],

And like satyrs, at the head of all the streets

They dance to these [foreign ideas],

And even teach them to their children.

Therefore, when we saw the fowler's snare even in the remote parts
of the earth,

And the dove [the Torah] compelled to make her nest in the sides
of the pit's mouth,

We trembled and said:

"The disease [heresy] is spreading!"

So now we have risen and made a covenant with the Lord and the
Torah of our God,

Which we and our fathers have accepted on Sinai,

Not to let anything strange come among us,

Nor let the nettle and the thistle [that is, heretical ideas] spring up
in our palaces.

Servants are we, servants of the Lord!

The Lord, He has made us.

His are we.

Therefore have we decreed and accepted for ourselves and our
children, and for all those joining us, that for the next fifty years,
under threat of the ban, no man in our community, unless he be

twenty-five years old, shall study, either in the original language or in translation, the books which the Greeks have written on religious philosophy and the natural sciences. [However, original Jewish works on philosophy and science, even those of Maimonides, may be read at any age. Mathematical works from the Greek were also probably permitted.]

It is also forbidden for any member of our community to teach any Jew under twenty-five years of age any of these sciences lest they drag him away from the law of Israel which is superior to all these teachings. How can a human being not be afraid to judge between the wisdom of man, who builds only on analogy, argument, and guess, and between the wisdom of the Superior Being, between whom and us there is hardly any comparison? Can a human being, who inhabits but a perishable body, think of sitting in judgment on God, who created him, by saying—God forbid—“This He can do, and this He cannot do”? This, certainly, would lead one to complete heresy and from this, indeed, may every student of the Torah be delivered!

We have, however, excluded from this our general prohibition the science of medicine, even though it is one of the natural sciences, because the Torah permits the physician to heal. [Medicine was then a common profession among Jews.]

Over the scroll of the Law and in the presence of the whole community, we have agreed, on the Sabbath of the portion, “These are the words,” in the year 5065, to ban these things. [This portion, Deuteronomy 1, was read on Saturday, July 31, 1305.]

*Solomon ben Abraham, of blessed memory, the son of Adret.
Etc.,
Etc.*

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