

THE RABBINIC CONCEPTION OF WORK.

BY JULIUS J. PRICE.

THE Jews¹ were the first people to proclaim to the world the dignity and holiness of labor. What Israel's law giver² recognized as man's highest duty four thousand years ago, the modern world has just begun to appreciate. In the very beginning the God of Israel was portrayed as a laborer. The creation of the world is the work of His hands. He differed by far from the Olympian gods of Greece, who were depicted as revelers,³ and from Buddha who tried to do nothing, or from Brahma, who was only thought.

In this glorified conception of labor Judaism was far superior to the civilization of all other ancient peoples.⁴ We laud and respect the culture of the Greeks, yet her greatest mind derided honest labor so far, as to exclaim: "The title of the citizen belongs only to those who need not work to live."⁵ Work to the Greek was servile and degrading, the lot of the slave and the contemptible poor.⁶ He only could aspire to Athenian honors whose days were free from the drudgery of toil.

Roman civilization offered no more dignified conception of labor. The workman was still regarded as a slave, a social nonentity. And these Roman traditions together with the Biblical view tended in great measure to mold a labor policy of the middle ages. Labor

¹ Comp. *Pesahim* 118 a, so also, *Genesis* ii. 15; iii. 19.

² *A. Z.* 3 a.

³ Comp. Lowes-Dickson, *The Greek View of Life*, passim.

⁴ *Polit* III. 3 and 2, p. 75.

⁵ Comp. the lives of Hillel, *Yoma*, 35b; *Gittin*, 67b; Isaac Napha, *Sabbath* 52a; Chanina; *Kethuboth* 112a; Judah Chaita, *B. B.* 164b; Yochanan Ha-Sandler, *Aboth*, IV. 14; Judah hanechtam, *B. B.* 132a; and Joseph, *Gittin* 67b.

⁶ See Plato, *De Repub.* III, p. 168. On the other hand we find a certain number of warlike communities in antiquity where in citizens were forbidden to follow a profession, Com. Xenoph., *Orcon.* c. 4 Par. 3, vol. 5; p. 22; Comp. aslo Aristotle, *Politik*, I, 2; 1252b, 7ff. (ed. Bekker).

was a necessity, as a consequence and penalty of sin and directly connected as a curse with the "Fall."⁷

In the middle ages, the clerics held a life of contemplation to be far superior to one of labor.⁸ Labor was regarded as a means for penance and ascetic purposes.⁹ Often it was employed for useful results and with beneficial efforts on useful arts. The purposes, however, was to ward off the vices of leisure.¹⁰ Labor for economic production was not appreciated by the church. It was even discouraged since disapproval of wealth and luxury was one of the controlling principles of the external assumption of the medieval Church. It is only in the more recent times that labor has been regarded as a blessing, or at worse, a necessity which has a great moral and social compensation.¹¹

The Bible praises the work of man's hands, for well do we find the whole national life of the Jew with all its ordinances connected with the earth and agriculture. This moreover argues the existence of an active working spirit amongst the Hebrews. Work was also regarded by the Bible as rendering "the sleep of man sweet" (Eccles. v. 12), so also "rejoicing the heart" (Eccles. ii. 10) by means of which "the hand of the diligent maketh rich while he becometh poor who dealeth with a slack hand" (Prov. x. 4), and so also Sirach, the son of Jesus, sings his need of praise as well when he says with regard to labor, "Hate not toilsome labor, nor husbandry which the Most High has created" (Sirach VII. 16). But the Rabbis are even more emphatic in their praise of labor, for while they readily recognize that "In the point of dignity and rank there might be a difference between trade and trade; yet to the lowest attaches no disgrace if it supplies a real human want and any calling is better than none."¹² For well do they realize that "great is labor, for

⁷ *Pesahim* 118a comp. also, Bonhoffer, *Die Ethik des Storkers, Epicktet*, p. 73. Comp. also *Pesahim* 118a, also I, *The*s III, 10; Pseudo Justin, *ad. Zenam* 17 (*Patrologia Graeca* VI. 1202); Ep. Barnabas. 17. "Thou shalt with thy hands as ransom for thy sins"; see also *Apost. Constit.* II. 63; Epiphanius., *Haer.* 80n. 5 and 6; 70n 2; Ramsay, *Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia*, II; 521.

⁸ The Rabbinic conception however was somewhat different from this view. Work the Rabbis conceived to be of equal importance with the Sabbath, Comp. *Aboth d'Rav Nathan*. II. (ed. Schechter,) p. 44, so also *passim*.

⁹ Compare in this connection the Mishnic phrase—"Love Work", *Aboth* I; 10.

¹⁰ According to our sages it is incumbent even upon women of unlimited means to spend part of the day in some sort of labor, *Kethuboth* 59b (*Mishna*); comp. also Franz Delitzsch, *Judisches Handwerkerleben zur Zeit Jesu*. P. 17.

¹¹ Hartmann, *d. rel. Bewustein*, Berlin 1882, p. 520.

¹² *Kiddushin*, 29a.

she honors her Master"¹³ and that "Man must work or people will talk about him."¹⁴ The following sums up their attitude on the question as follows:—"I am a creature of God, and so is my neighbor. He may prefer to work in the country, I in the city. I rise early to follow one calling, he to follow another. As he does not seek to supplant me, I shall do nothing to injure him; for I believe that when the ideal of duty is present before our minds, whether we accomplish much or accomplish little, the Almighty will reward us according to the worthiness of our intentions" (*Berachot* 17a). "For the man who does not love work, but shuns work, excluded himself from the covenant with Heaven; for just as the Holy Law is a sign of the covenant, so does work constitute a sign of the Covenant between God and man" (*Aboth d'Rav Nathan* XI). Many passages are cited from the Rabbinical literature in honor of productive labor and in disapproval of idleness. "Greater," says the Rabbis, "is he that maintains himself by his own labor than he that fears the Lord; for of the latter it is said (*Psalms* cxii. 1); "Blessed is the man that feareth the Lord; but of the former it is said (*Psalms* cxxiii. 2) "If thou shalt eat the labor of thine hands, happy shalt thou be in this world, and it shall be well with thee in the world to come."¹⁵ "Love secular work, say the Rabbis, and eschew the Rabbinical office and have no fellowship with the government authorities."¹⁶ According to the Rabbis, the study of the law must be sustained by secular work, for otherwise, "It must come to an end and involve in sin."¹⁷ "Rabbi Yehudah, when ever he went to the Acedemy, used to carry a leather bottle on his shoulders. Rabbi Simon used to carry a fruit-basket on his shoulders. Both used to say: "See what honor work confers": for they both had something to sit upon at the academy."¹⁸ The Rabbis also thought work was a cure of physical ailments, and Rav. Joseph, who suffered once from a malady, occasioned by a cold, turned a mil stone, and Rav Shaiseth carried heavy loads; for, said they, "physical exertion (work) heats the body."¹⁹ More than a hundred of those Rabbis named in the Talmut besides their Rabbinical functions followed trades. These were among others,

¹³ *Gittin*, 67a.

¹⁴ *Aboth d'Rav. Nathan* 2nd. version XXI: 22b.

¹⁵ *Ber.* 8a.

¹⁶ *Avoth* I. 10.

¹⁷ *Avoth* Ch. II.

¹⁸ *Nedarim*, 49b.

¹⁹ *Gittin*, 67b.

tailors, shoemakers, a baker, an architect, a grave digger, a fisher, a dyer and a carpenter.²⁰

Although it is a common custom to rise in the presence of disciples²¹ of the wise, no workmen who are paid for their work are allowed to do so.²² To quote the words of the Rabbis: "No workman who are paid for their time are allowed to whilst at work, to rise in the presence of disciple of the wise." But should matters of a heavenly kind call a disciple of the wise from his business, the public is bound to perform the work for him.²³ Yet we find that the Rabbis did not excuse a laborer even to take time from his work to recite the Shema.²⁴ In one instance however I have found where a laborer even considers himself on a par with a sage of Israel. Simon, a well digger in Jerusalem, once remarked to Rabbi Yochanan, "I am quite as great a man as thou art." "How so?" inquired the Rabbi. "For the reason," replied Simon, "that I, no less than thou, supply the wants of the community. If any man comes to thee and inquires for ceremonially clean water, dost thou not tell him "Drink from yonder fountain, for its waters are pure and cool" or if a woman inquire concerning a good bathing place, sayest thou not, "Bathe in this cistern, for its waters wash away uncleanness?"²⁵

Work, says the Rabbis, is one of the eight things which is injurious when immoderately indulged in, and beneficial when done in moderation.²⁶ In Egypt the life of the Jew "was made bitter with hard bondage."²⁷ Ray Samuel bar Nachmaine said: "They imposed men's tasks (work) upon women and women's tasks upon men."²⁸

Rabbi Meirs says: "A man should always teach his son an easy and cleanly trade, and pray for his prosperity to Him, to whom riches and substance belong"²⁹ or better still "to teach a child a trade or a

²⁰ *Kiddushin* 33a.

²¹ *Comp. Tosephta* in loc. *Comp.* also, *Berachoth* 16a.

²² *Sabbath* 114a. *comp.* also *Sotah* 44b.

²³ *Gittin* 7a. *Comp.* also *Aboth d'Ray Nathan*, XI.

²⁴ *Deut.* vi. 4: "Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

²⁵ *Midrash Koheleth* 4; 17.

²⁶ *Exodus* I 14.

²⁷ *Sotah*, 11.

²⁸ *Kiddushin* 82a. In this connection, it might be well to compare the Greek concept, i.e., that it is degrading for young people to be taught trades, *comp. Xenoph, Oecon.* VIII; p. 245.

²⁹ *Sabbath*, 150a.

handcraft is to be considered as one of the "religious deeds" for which arrangements may be made even on the Sabbath."³⁰ So also "He who does not teach his son some special handicraft" is as though he had trained him to become a robber (Kiddushin 82b). While on the other hand "though famine may last seven years, it can never reach the door of the industrious mechanic" (Samhedrin 31a). For there is no trade, which is not represented by poor and rich people, though neither riches nor poverty are due to the trade, but to merit, or the want of it.³² Rabbi Simon (latter half of second century) said: Hast thou even seen a beast or fowl, engaging in trade? and yet they have no trouble in securing a livelihood. These exist only to serve me, whereas, I exist to serve my Creator. How much less trouble then, should I experience in obtaining a livelihood? But my deeds being evil, they interfere with my sustenance.³³

"A man should not change his trade, nor that of his father; for it is said (Kings vii. 13-14): "Hiram of Tyre was a widow's son of the tribe of Naphtali, and his father was a man of Tyre, a worker of brass."³⁴ Rabbi says: "No trade will ever pass away from the world; but happy is he whose parents belong to a respectable trade, and woe unto him whose parents engage in a derogatory trade. The world cannot exist without a perfumer and a tanner; but happy is he whose occupation is that of a perfumer, and woe unto a tanner. The world cannot exist without boys and girls; but happy is he whose children are boys, and woe unto him whose children are girls."³⁵

Those whose occupation bring them into frequent contact with women, may not be alone with any number of them.³⁶ A man may not teach his son a trade which belongs to a woman. "Rabbi Nehoradee said: 'I leave all trades in the world, and teach my son the Law only; for the interest thereof sustains a man in this world, and the capital is reserved for the world to come. Besides, no other

³⁰ *Ibid.* It might be well to compare here the saying of the Rabbis "flay a carcass in the market-place rather than be under painful necessity of applying for charity and say not. I am of noble origin. I am a descendant of Aaron, the high priest; how can I stoop to such an occupation? *Pesahim*, 113a.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Erachin*, 16b.

³⁴ *Kiddushin*, 82b.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 82a.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

trade will, like the study of the Law, keep a man in illness and old age.'"³⁷

Certain traders were taught to influence the characters of those employed at them, for the rabbis teach that "the majority of donkey drivers are wicked men; the camel drivers are mostly virtuous men, being humbled by the dangers they encounter in the desert. The majority of sailors are holy men, by reason of their exposure to still greater risks. The best of physicians is destined to hell, and the most virtuous of butchers is the companion of Amelek."³⁸

The Rabbis abhorred the usual doubtful methods of earning a livelihood, and have given vent to their feelings somewhat as follows: "Happy is the man who has been reared in an honorable calling; woe to the man who has selected a doubtful walk of life." (Kiddushin 82b).

We also find that those men who employed their time in the unproductive labors suffered civic disabilities, for "dice players, usurers, pigeon flyers and dealers in crops grown in the years of release provided," adds Rabbi Yehudah, "they have no other occupation"³⁹ (work), cannot be admitted as judges or witnesses."⁴⁰ Our rabbis have also taught that "Those whose occupation brings them into frequent contact with women, are morally depraved, such as goldsmiths, wool or flax carders, millstone borers, perfumers, weavers, hairdressers, washermen, phlebotomists, bathkeepers and tanners. These are never appointed to the office of king or high priest, not because they are personally incapable of filling it, but by reasons of their disreputable occupation."⁴¹ Work for the public benefit was even allowed in the case of a mourner.

In their home in Palestine the Hebrews were distinctly agricultural, "Rabbi Eliazer said: 'A man who does not own a piece of land is not included in the species Homo': for it is said (Psalms cxv. 16): 'The heavens even the heavens are the Lord's, but the earth hath He given to the children of men.'"⁴²

According to Rav Papa, there is a special blessing in working the fields. "Sow thy own corn for home consumption," said Rav Papa, "rather than buy it; for although there is no immediate saving in the outlay, a blessing rests on the former; it goes a great way."⁴³

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Sahedrin* 24b.

³⁹ Maimonides, *Hilch, Adoth*, Sec. 10, *Halacha*, 4 ff.

⁴⁰ *Kiddushin* 82b.

⁴¹ *Yevamoth*, 63a.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Rabbi Eliazer once observed a field ploughed up latitudenally. "Plough it again" said he, 'longwise also'⁴⁴ and you will find commerce more profitable.'" Several other observations with regard to the cultivation of land as expressed by the Rabbis are "He who has no land to tile cannot be called a man for the Bible states: 'The Heaven, even the heavens are the Lord's; but the earth hath He given to the children of Men.'")

"Only when a man cultivates the soil with diligence can he expect to be satisfied with bread; if however he neglects the ploughing and watering thereof, he cannot expect to have his wants satisfied."⁴⁶

And even with regard to the status of the rich man the Rabbis say, "If a man has no other work to do, let him go and attend to the waste fields and dilapidated courtyards which belong to him."⁴⁷

In so great regard was Agriculture held by the Rabbis that they state "In the future all trades and occupations shall vanish from off the face of the earth, agriculture shall alone remain."⁴⁸ "If a man shall steal an ox or a sheep and kill it, or sell it, he shall restore five oxen, for an ox⁴⁹ and four sheep for a sheep."⁵⁰ Come and see the value attached to work: For the loss of an ox, which interfered with the owner's work, he is paid five oxen; but for the loss of a sheep which does not work he is only paid four.⁵¹

With regard to work on the Sabbath, the Rabbis say, he that performs any work on the eve of the Sabbath and annual festivals, from the time of the meat offerings (or prayer now offered as a substitute that is at 3:30 p. m.) never sees a token of blessing.⁵²

There are forty different works save one, which constitute the first category, and which, if performed inadvertently on the Sabbath, require a sin-offering for each; Sewing, ploughing, reaping, binding into sheaves, thrashing, winnowing, removing husks with the hands or with a sieve, kneading, baking, shearing, bleaching, carding wool, dyeing it, spinning, weaving, making two holes for the insertion of threads, twisting two threads, shortening two

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Sanhedrin*, 58b.

⁴⁶ *Aboth d'Rav. Nathan*, XI.

⁴⁷ *Jevamoth*, 63a.

⁴⁸ *B. K. XI.*, 79b.

⁴⁹ *Exodus* xxii. 1.

⁵⁰ *B. K.* 79b.

⁵¹ *Pesahim* 50b.

⁵² *Sabbaoth* 73a.

threads, knotting, solving, making two stitches, tearing away for the purpose of making two stitches, hunting a stag, slaying, flaying, salting, tanning, removing its hair, cutting it up, writing two letters, erasing for the purpose of writing two letters, building, pulling down, extinguishing, lighting a fire, hammering, removing from one plot to another.⁵³ All these works were carried on in the building and arranging of the Tabernacle, which had to be suspended on the Sabbath day.⁵⁴

Although guilds⁵⁵ were unknown in Europe prior to the thirteenth century, there is a record of Jewish guilds in the name of Rabbi Yehudah: Whoever has not seen the twofold gallery in Alexandria of Egypt, has not seen the glory of Israel. They say: It was something like a large colonade, with porches with porches, and accomodating sometimes double the number of those that had followed Moses out of Egypt. There were seventy-one chairs arranged in it, for the seventy-one members of the larger Sanhedrin, each chair of not less value than twenty-one myriad talents of gold. A dais was in the middle, upon which was stationed the public officer holding a napkin in his hand. At the end of each benediction pronounced by the reader, who could not be heard by such vast multitude, he waved a napkin, and they all answered Amen. The people were seated by guilds, goldsmiths, silversmiths, blacksmiths, embroiderers, and weavers. And when a poor man came in, he knew at once his fellow craftsman; he applied to them for work, and obtained his livelihood. All these, adds Abii were massacred by Alexander the Macedonian.⁵⁶ Rashi says, they were the descendants of the colony, led by Johnanan, the son of Sareah into Egypt, some of whom had survived the Babylonian invasion. (Jer. xliii).

Innumerable other instances could still be multiplied as to the Rabbinic conception of labor, but perhaps the above citations prove sufficient the great regard for labor held by the Sages of Israel.

⁵⁴ *Exodus* xxxv. 1-4ff.

⁵⁵ We have on record a number of associations which in our modern parlance might be called unions. See the various societies of workers as they are described in *Megilla* 26a; *Sukka*, 51b; a *Kings* xxvi. 16.

⁵⁶ *Sukka*, 51b.