

PIRKĒ DE RABBI ELIEZER

(THE CHAPTERS OF RABBI ELIEZER THE GREAT)
ACCORDING TO THE TEXT OF THE MANUSCRIPT
BELONGING TO ABRAHAM EPSTEIN OF VIENNA

Name of God.

*Creation Spiritually
& Plan of Redemption
before Creation*

TRANSLATED AND ANNOTATED
WITH INTRODUCTION AND INDICES

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created, from one end of the world || to the other, as it is said, "One generation to another shall laud thy works" (*ibid.* cxlv. 4).¹

Before the world was created, the Holy One, blessed be He, with His Name² alone existed, and the thought arose in Him to create the world. He began to trace (the foundations of)³ the world before Himself, but it would not stand. They⁴ told a parable, To what is the matter like? To a king who wishes to build a palace⁵ for himself. If he had not traced in the earth its foundations, its exits and its entrances,⁶ he does not begin to build.⁷ Likewise the Holy One, blessed be He, was tracing (the plans of) the world before Himself, but it did not remain standing until He created repentance.⁸ *Plan of Redemption*

Seven things⁹ were created before the world was created.

¹ Our text has been used by Jalkut, Psalms, § 864. Here ends the first paragraph in MS.

² On the Tetragrammaton see Nestle, *Z.D.M.G.* xxxii.; Fürst, *ibid.* xxxiii.; and Nager, *ibid.* xxxv. The printed editions read here: "The Holy One, blessed be He, and His great Name." On "God and His Name" see D. H. Joël's *die Religionsphilosophie des Sohar*, p. 235.

³ The words in brackets are based on B.M. MS., which reads: "He traced its foundations, its exits and entrances, on the earth, but it did not stand firm until He created repentance, because seven (things) were created before the world."

⁴ i.e. the Rabbis.

⁵ *Palatin* = *παλάτιον*, *palatium*, palace.

⁶ The phraseology is based on Ezek. xliii. 11. The printed editions reverse the order and read: "its entrances and its exits."

⁷ The architect's plans must be prepared prior to the erection of the building. What holds good for our earthly experience is assumed to have its counterpart in the experience of the Creator. Philo (*de Mundi opific.* 4. i. M. 4. C.W. i. p. 4, § 19) offers a good parallel to the idea of preparing plans prior to the Creation; see also Gen. Rab. i. i. and my *Rabbinic Philosophy and Ethics*, p. 4.

⁸ Repentance is the sole condition whereby harmony, divine and human, can obtain, cf. Wisdom xii. 10, 19. On the subject of Repentance see *J.E.* x. 376 ff. Lazarus, *Ethik*, i. pp. 44 f., and Schechter, *Aspects*, see index, s.v. "Repentance" and "Penitence," and cf. my *Grace of God*, pp. 30 ff. The second paragraph in the MS. ends here.

⁹ This passage is borrowed from T.B. Pesachim, 54a, or T.B. Nedarim, 39b, the order being varied by Repentance coming after the Torah. See also Jalkut on Jeremiah, § 298, and cf. Gen. Rab. i. 4 (Theodor, p. 6 note, *in loc.*) and Tanna de bē Elijahu Rab. xxxi. p. 160, where only six subjects are enumerated. Friedmann (note 33, *in loc.*) points out that by comparing the various readings in Talmud and Midrash we find that there were nine premundane things, cf. Zohar, Lev. 34b. It is important to bear in mind, in reading Gen. Rab. i. 4, that of the six premundane things some were actually created and some were only ideally present in the mind of the Creator. The Torah and the Throne of Glory were created, but the patriarchs, Israel, the Temple,

They are: The Torah, Gehinnom, the Garden of Eden,¹ the Throne of Glory, the Temple, Repentance, and the Name of the Messiah.

CREATED before world was created

Whence do we know that this applies to the Torah? Because it is said, "The Lord possessed me² in the beginning of his way, before his works of old" (Prov. viii. 22). "Of old"³ means before the world was created.⁴ Whence do we know this with regard to the Garden of Eden? Because it is said, "And the Lord God planted a garden of old"⁵ (Gen. ii. 8). "Of old," whilst as yet the world had not been created. Whence do we know this with reference to the Throne of Glory?⁶ Because it is said, "Thy throne is established of old" (Ps. xciii. 2). "Of old," whilst as yet the world had not been created. Whence do we know

and the Name of the Messiah were only in the thought of God. In the Book of Enoch (Ethiopic) xlviii. 3, the Messiah is said to have had his name named before the sun and the signs were created; see my *Hellenism and Christianity*, pp. 15 ff., on the question of the pre-existence of the Messiah, and cf. Assumption of Moses i. 14.

¹ The "Garden of Eden" is usually rendered by the term Paradise. The fact that Gehenna is in juxtaposition to "Gan Eden" would lead one to infer that Paradise was referred to in this context. Our author is probably opposing the view that the Garden of Eden was created on the "third day"; see Jubilees ii. 7.

² The verse might be rendered: "The Lord formed me as the beginning of his way." The reference is to Wisdom, which is here personified; see *Hellenism and Christianity*, pp. 64 ff. Christianity under the influence of Alexandrian Jewish thought identified Wisdom with its Messiah, whilst Palestinian Judaism identified Wisdom with the Torah.

³ The 1st ed. and later editions derive the inference from the word "before."

⁴ "Whence do we know this with reference to Gehinnom? Because it is said, 'For a Topheth is prepared of old' (Isa. xxx. 33). 'Of old' means whilst yet the world had not been created." This paragraph is omitted by the MS., but it occurs in the 1st ed. Topheth was a place in the Hinnom Valley (i.e. Ge-henna or Ge-Hinnom) where the hateful and cruel Moloch abominations had been perpetrated; see W. R. Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, p. 357. The Tanna de bé Elijahu Rab., *loc. cit.*, says: "Topheth is nought else but Gehinnom." See also Schwally, *Z.A.T.W.*, 1890, pp. 212 ff.

⁵ See R.V. *in loc.* Our Midrashic passage occurs as follows in the Pal. Targum of Gen. ii. 8: "And a garden from the Eden of the just was planted by the Word of the Lord God before the creation of the world." This Haggadah appears also in Jerome; see Diestel, *Geschichte des A.T. in der Christlichen Kirche*, p. 102, and Rahmer, *Die Hebräischen Traditionen in den Werken des Hieronymus*, p. 17. See also 4 Ezra iii. 6, which states: "And thou leddest him (Adam) into Paradise, which thy right hand did plant before ever the earth came forward." On Paradise see *J.E.* ix. pp. 516 f.

⁶ The Throne of Glory as premundane occurs in Slavonic Enoch xxv. 4, where God says, "And I made for myself a throne . . . and I said to the light," etc.; see LXX Prov. viii. 27.

a fiery serpent. Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, show unto Moses (a sign) with a fiery serpent,¹ and why did He not show it to him with something else? But just as the serpent bites and kills the sons of man, likewise Pharaoh and his people bit and slew the Israelites. Afterwards it became again like a dry stick. Thus He spake: Likewise Pharaoh and his people shall become like this dry stick,² as it is said, "And the Lord said unto Moses: Put forth thine hand,³ and take it by the tail" (Ex. iv. 4). He spake before Him: Sovereign of all worlds! Give me a wonder. He said to him: "Put now thine hand into thy bosom" (*ibid.* 6). And he put his hand into his bosom, and he brought it out leprous like snow. Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, show unto Moses (a sign) by means of an unclean thing, and (why) did He not show it by means of a clean thing? But just as the leper is unclean and causes uncleanliness, likewise Pharaoh and his people were unclean, and they caused Israel to be unclean.⁴ Afterwards (Moses) became clean again,⁵ and He spake to him: Likewise shall Israel become clean from the uncleanliness of the Egyptians, as it is said, "And he said, Put now thine hand into thy bosom" (*ibid.*).

Why did He show unto Moses the fire in the midst of the thorn-bush? || But the fire refers to Israel, who are compared to fire,⁶ as it is said, "And the house of Jacob shall be a fire" (Obad. 18). The thorn-bush refers to the nations of the world,⁷ who are compared to thorns and thistles. He said to him: Likewise shall Israel be in the midst of the nations. The fire of Israel shall not consume the nations, who are compared to thorns and thistles; but the nations of the world shall extinguish the flames of Israel—(these flames) are the words of the Torah. But in the future that is to come the fire of Israel will consume all the nations, who are

¹ The first editions read: "like a fiery serpent by (means of) the rod and (why) did He not show him something else?"

² The preceding part of this sentence occurs in the MS. only.

³ In the MS. the quotation ends here, in the first editions it is continued.

⁴ See *infra*, p. 382.

⁵ Luria adds: "as it is said: 'And He said, Restore thy hand.'" Cf. Ex. Rab. iii. 13. The MS. repeats the quotation (Ex. iv. 6).

⁶ Because the Shekhinah abides among them, and because they possess the Torah, the "Law of fire." Cf. Mekhilta de R. Simeon, p. 1 ff.

⁷ The Amsterdam and Prague editions read: "the idolaters"; later editions read "the wicked."

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compared to thorns and thistles,¹ as it is said, "And the peoples shall be as the burnings of lime" (Isa. xxxiii. 12).

Moses said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of all worlds! Make known to me Thy great and holy Name, that I may call on Thee by Thy Name,² and Thou wilt answer me, as it is said, "And God said unto Moses, I am that I am" (Ex. iii. 14). "And God further said³ (to Moses)" (*ibid.* 15).

The angels saw that the Holy One, blessed be He, had transmitted the secret of the Ineffable Name⁴ to Moses, and they rejoined: Blessed art thou, O Lord, who graciously bestoweth knowledge.⁵

¹ See the rest of the verse quoted from Isaiah.

² Cf. *supra*, pp. 129, 264. See Shocher Tob on Ps. xcii. 1, p. 198b, and 8, p. 200b; cf. Isa. lii. 6. The first editions add: "And He made it known to him."

³ The MS. ends the quotation here. The first editions continue the next two words in the Hebrew text. The verse continues: "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations."

⁴ See Othijoth de R. 'Akiba, letters 1, 7, 8; *B.H.M.* iii. pp. 12 ff.; and cf. Grünbaum, *Z.D.M.G.* xl. p. 245. The rod with the Ineffable Name was transmitted by Moses to his successor Joshua, who conquered the Canaanites by its aid.

⁵ This is the fourth benediction of the Shemoneh 'Esreh; see Singer, p. 46. Our Midrash attempts to associate Moses with its origin, see *supra*, p. 267.