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### 01. Jacob's doubts regarding the Bible

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## Jacob's doubts regarding the Bible

*To Samson Libermann*

*This letter of Jacob Libermann is the first one that has been preserved. The postmark is 7 January, 1826 although the letter was written on the 6<sup>th</sup>. We quote it in full.*

*Jacob lived for 20 years in Saverne in the house of his father, the local Rabbi. He went to Metz in the autumn of 1822 and attended the Talmudic School to train to be a rabbi himself. For the first time in his life, in addition to his Talmudic studies, he quietly began to study French, German, Latin and Greek.*

*In March 1825, his brother, Doctor Samson Libermann<sup>1</sup>, with his wife Babette, were baptised into the Catholic Church, after receiving instruction from Canon Bruno Liebermann, the Vicar General of Strasbourg. The baptism, after first being kept secret, became public in June 1825 when Samson was elected mayor of Illkirch. This seems to have made a deep impression on Jacob who reproached Samson bitterly for this "apostasy", which, according to him, was bound to leave an indelible stain upon the whole family and bring it into the utmost contempt.<sup>2</sup>*

*At about the same time, in Metz, Jacob falls "into a sort of religious indifference". He reads Rousseau's Emile. He writes to his convert brother, Samson and tells him of the doubts he has regarding the Bible. As Samson puts it, "from being a superstitious Talmudist, he becomes a free thinker, something he'll deny until the Revelation".<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> See index

<sup>2</sup> Witness of his brother Dr Samson Libermann: ND I. p.51

<sup>3</sup> Cf the account by M.Gamon.

Metz, 6 January 1826

My dear brother,

Your letter of 24 November has really astonished me. It seems that you are not sure of my friendship any more since your change of religion. Be assured that even if I was the most fanatical member of the synagogue, nothing could make me lose the sincere attachment to my brothers, learnt at my mother's knee, which has always been my delight and my happiness.

I found reading Bossuet's book completely useless. If you had known my true feelings maybe you wouldn't have recommended it to me. Here is a rough idea of my present thinking on religion:

God gave us the power to think, not for the sake of letting it to lie dormant, but so that we might use it. If a man were to allow his mind to grow dull, if he had to surrender blindly to the chains of religion, how then would he differ from the animals? Religion would make him become like them! Why did I receive that heavenly gift if I was not meant to make use of it? So I have worked out my religion based on my own reason, and I don't think that I would be committing a crime even if I erred in some of my maxims, provided I didn't harm my neighbour. However, since I don't know the principles of philosophy and so am liable to go astray, I feel I should open my mind to an enlightened person who can correct my errors. You are my oldest and well-beloved brother so I shall explain my way of thinking to you and ask you to be a little indulgent with me.

We must regard the Bible as a foundation of all the religions that are predominant in Europe (and partially in Asia). Now a structure that has poor foundations crumbles of its own accord. Looking closely at the Bible, it is clear that it is false and the Bible itself proves this.

How foolish it is to believe all the fables that it contains! How can we be expected to believe that God showed his favours in a special way to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? What does God find so attractive about these men? Is it because they alone had the truth amongst an idolatrous people? Why didn't God take the same interest in the many philosophers of antiquity? What extraordinary virtue did God find in these patriarchs, who are described in such an exaggerated way, apart from their hospitality which was typical of all the peoples at that time? Suppose the patriarchs really did practice the highest virtues, isn't it going a bit far to assume that God would reward their descendents, even though filled with many vices, because of what their ancestors did? The same applies to the punishment of Adam whose story makes no sense whatsoever. Must I be so unjust as to believe that God avenged the crime of Adam on all his descendants? Is this not blasphemy to speak of a just God in this way, the same God who said "*Do not punish the children for the crimes of their fathers*"? There is an obvious contradiction here.

Would it not be unjust for God to select just one people on earth to be enlightened and to receive the revelation of the true principles of religion, while leaving all the others to wallow in ignorance and idolatry? Aren't all men his creation? Wouldn't all have accepted this sacred law if it had been presented to them, as well as to the Jews, with the same display of miracles? If all the miracles recounted in the Bible are not just made up, how was it that the Jews rebelled so frequently? Is it possible that forty days after seeing God descend from Mount Sinai and hearing him proclaim "*I am the Eternal One, your God: you will not adore idols*", that these same Jews would start adoring Apis, the bull, simply because Moses was late in getting back?

How could they mutiny once again and hatch a plot against Moses, after seeing Korachi and his followers miraculously

obliterated? On another day we see these chosen people shouting during one of their revolts: *"Let's pick a leader and go back to Egypt."* How could they have such little confidence in God, who had worked marvels for them, that they would chose to submit once more to the yoke of the Egyptians, rather than be led into the Promised Land? Moses says that *"it would have taken little for them to stone me"*; it is obvious Moses didn't get the respect in his own day that he gets now.

It's the same with all the prophets. We see Jeremiah imprisoned twenty times, and no wonder since he was a traitor, used by Nebuchadnezzar. I get the impression that they were just ordinary orators whom the people subsequently transformed into prophets once their discourses had been suitably adjusted! Today, there are no more prophets: are we not worthy enough to have an Elijah and Elisha while the idolatrous Jews were so favoured?

My conclusion from all this is that God only wants us to acknowledge him and to act in a just and human way, and that Moses was just a legislator like many others before and since. So it makes no difference if I'm a Jew or a Christian, provided I adore God, whether he is one person or three. I can assure you that I wouldn't be any better as a Christian than as a Jew. This is also why I excuse you for changing your religion, because I doubt if you believe in the prophecies of Isaiah.

My studies are progressing quite well. I began studying Latin fifteen months ago and I have made a lot of progress; I am now able to translate Caesar and Virgil. I have recently started Greek and I am now working on the verbs. Unfortunately, my teacher left me last week to take up a post in a school at Lunéville, But I will still continue my work in the same dogged way, even though it will take a long time, especially since I am now on my own.

I have been neglecting my study of Hebrew because I fear that I may have to leave Metz; I am not sure what our father will decide, because he has already hinted that he will not leave me long in this place. That is why I am concentrating entirely on Latin and Greek. If in a couple of years, I have to spend more time in Saverne, I will then be able to study Hebrew and Chaldean. In any case, when I have made sufficient progress in Latin and Greek, I will revert to the oriental languages.

With all good wishes,

Your brother,

*J. Libermann*