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The Concept of Virginity in Judaism

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THE CONCEPT OF VIRGINITY IN JUDAISM

To delimit precisely the subject of our discussion it will be useful to specify the terms of the assigned title, "The Concept of Virginity in Judaism."

By the expression "the concept of virginity," in contradistinction to simply "virginity," we shall understand not the notion of physical virginity, but rather that of the spirit of virginity; not a *de facto* physical integrity, but a mind-set variously manifested which itself manifests one thing: total dedication to God.

For if we regard virginity in the religious context of the Catholicism which is ours, we see at once that the physical fact is but a sign of an interior attitude. In other contexts, of course, other motives may be operative; with these, or with mere physical immaturity, we are not concerned. Our interest is in the attitude of mind which deliberately chooses virginity over a perfectly legitimate married state for a religious motive. This motive, however nuanced it may be in different persons or however shaded in its presentation by spiritual writers, is simply one of consecration, of dedication to God. Few will quarrel with the words of Pius XII:

This then is the primary purpose, this the central idea of Christian virginity: to aim only at the divine, to turn thereto the whole mind and soul; to want to please God in everything, to think of Him continually, to consecrate body and soul completely to Him.¹

Now the basic attitude thus enunciated will manifest itself in terms of the culture in which it occurs, and will break out of the accepted forms of that culture only under extraordinary circumstances.

¹ *De sacra virginitate*, in *AAS* 46 (1954) 165.

When we read the Old Testament, for example, we read it, if we are mindful of right reason and the directives of the Holy See,² with the background and intention of its human authors in view. Our understanding of biblical inspiration, whether we favor the individualistic or the social character of that charism, requires that we allow the sacred author to write as a man of his time. Similarly, we must allow people devoted to God and His service to manifest that devotion according to the forms to which they are accustomed. This does not preclude a change in such forms, but it seeks recognition that such change will be gradual, short of the introduction of a radically modifying factor.

We wish to study this concept of virginity, this spirit of total dedication to God, in Judaism. What is Judaism? We may accept the common understanding of the term as formulated by George Foot Moore: "The name Judaism is now generally appropriated to the religion of this period [Persian, Greek and Roman periods of Jewish history] and what came after it, in distinction from that of the preceding centuries down to the fall of the kingdom of Judah (586 B.C.), which is called the religion of Israel."³

Ioudaïsmos occurs three times in the Old Testament, all in 2 *Mc.* (2:21; 8:1; 14:38), and twice in the New Testament (*Gal.* 1:13, 14). It seems to have been an expression originating in the Diaspora, meaning either the objective totality of Jewish life (2 *Mc.* 2:21; *Gal.* 1:14) or the subjective condition of being a Jew and of acting and thinking as one (2 *Mc.* 14:38).⁴

Judaism, of course, should not be thought of as terminating with the Old Testament. Indeed, only the late books of the

² *Divino afflante Spiritu*, in *EB* 556-559. NCWC edition of English translation (Washington, 1943) nn. 33-37.

³ G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1927) 3, note 1.

⁴ Cf. W. Gutbrot, *Ioudaïsmos*, in *TWNT* 3 (Stuttgart, 1938) 385.

Old Testament (and several even of these are excluded from the Hebrew canon) were written during the period under discussion. If we agree with Jewish tradition and the findings of modern criticism, we shall place the beginnings of Judaism, properly so called, in the post-exilic period when Ezra brought the Book of the Law of Moses from Babylonia to Judaea, with authority to promulgate and enforce that law (*Esd.* 7:14, 25-26) about the year 428 B.C.⁵

After many vicissitudes the definitive stage of development of Judaism was reached around the turn of the second Christian century into the third with the completion, promulgation and acceptance of the body of traditional law called the Mishnah.⁶ Accordingly, during the very years when the New Testament was being composed and the Christian church was developing into the organism we know, normative Judaism was achieving the form which was to dominate in the wide Jewish world to the Enlightenment and beyond, indeed in Orthodox circles to our own day.

What is it, we may ask, that requires us to distinguish Judaism from the religion of Israel? Is it merely the historical break provided by the destruction of Jerusalem and the period of the Exile? Or, from a different point of view, is it a change of deities, so that pre-exilic Israel worshiped Yahweh, whereas post-exilic Judaism shifted its allegiance elsewhere? Of course, neither of these is correct, although the Exile did provide the conditions which were to give rise to the dramatic shift of emphasis which distinguishes the religion of Israel from Judaism.

The monarchy, which at the beginning of the last pre-Christian millennium succeeded the tribal league of Israel,

⁵ For a defense of this date and a balanced exposition of the other chief theories in this very controversial question of the date of Ezra's mission and its relationship to that of Nehemiah, see now John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia, 1959) 356-386, esp. 375-386.

⁶ Cf. Moore, *op. cit.*, 3-4.

continued the earlier emphasis on the covenant between Yahweh and His people, to such a degree that covenant law was state law. Indeed, the repeated clashes between prophet and king had their genesis precisely in the failure of the latter to maintain the ethical standards and the purity of worship demanded by the covenant relationship. With the destruction of the Temple in 587 B.C., the termination of political autonomy under the Davidic house, and the scattering of important elements of the people, that entity which was called Israel ceased to exist. The Israel which was to rise eventually from the ashes of the hopes of the past was constituted on a new basis and is designated by a new name, Judaism.

The old Israel "had remained a definable entity with geographical boundaries and national institutions: 'Israel' was the visible community of citizens who gave allegiance to the national god, participated in his cult, and hoped in his promises."⁷ The returned exiles floundered about trying to pick up the loose ends of a shattered system until, as mentioned, Ezra, a scribe and priest, returned from Babylonia a century after the Edict of Cyrus ending the Exile, bringing with him the Book of the Law of Moses. This law, backed by the Persian court, he imposed on the Jewish community in solemn covenant (*Neh.* 8-10). It was this imposition and acceptance of the law which marked the great turning point. "Israel would no longer be a national entity, nor one coterminous with the Israelite tribes or the inhabitants of the old national territory, nor even a community of those who in some way acknowledged Yahweh as God and offered Him worship. From now on, Israel would be viewed (as in the theology of the Chronicler) as that remnant of Judah which had rallied around the law.

⁷ Bright, *op. cit.*, 414. For an enlightening treatment of this whole matter, see M. Noth, *Die Gesetze im Pentateuch* (Halle [Saale], 1940; now most easily available in *id.*, *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* [Munich, 1957] 9-141). Bright's own excellent presentation, *op. cit.*, 413-445, profits much from Noth.

He would be a member of Israel (i.e., a Jew) who assumed the burden of that law."⁸

Here we have the dramatic shift of emphasis we have been seeking which distinguishes the religion of Israel from Judaism. And once we are clear on what is central in Judaism, we are in a position to take up the consideration of that self-dedication in it which is the spirit of virginity. There is little need, we may be sure, to stress that this new emphasis on the law does not represent a break with Israel's ancient faith. But it does put the law in a position of primacy which it had not occupied before. Cult, morality, hope for the future, and the new Israel itself sprang from and were regulated by the law. Yahweh was still God of Israel, but the supreme manifestation of His will and the surest sign of devotion to Him was the exact observance of His law.

The sources which are available for our study of the spirit of virginity in Judaism are many and varied. A first and easy division of these sources is into canonical and non-canonical writings. The canonical include: *Is.* 24-27, 56-66; *Ag.*; *Za.*; *Mal.*; *Abd.*; *1 & 2 Par.*; *Jl.*; *Jon.*; *Eccl.*; *Est.*; *Prov.*; late *Pss.*; *Dn.*; *Tb.*; *Sir.*; *Jdt.*; *1 & 2 Mc.* From the non-canonical writings we may cite: *Jubilees*; *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*; *1 Enoch*; *Pss. of Solomon*, leaving to interested parties the complete listing of what are called the Old Testament Apocrypha (Pseudepigrapha).⁹ We have, besides, Josephus,¹⁰ Philo Judaeus,¹¹ the Qumran material,¹² and, of

⁸ Bright, *op. cit.*, 416.

⁹ For a listing, introduction, translation and commentary on these, see R. H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 2 (Oxford, 1913).

¹⁰ *Complete Works of Josephus*, 4 vols. (New York, n.d.).

¹¹ F. H. Colson, ed. and trans., *Philo*, in *Loeb Classical Library* 9 (Cambridge, Mass., 1941).

¹² T. H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures in English Translation* (Garden City, N. Y., 1956). The amount of writing on the Qumran scrolls is already staggering. Time is now required for a careful scholarly analysis of the finds

course, the vast collection of rabbinica, a field into which we can scarcely do more than dip.¹⁸

Taking, as we have explained, the spirit of virginitv as meaning total dedication to God, we find such dedication in Judaism on two levels, that of the community and that of the individual. In both cases the dedication, while ultimately, of course, to God, was to Him through the medium of dedication to the expression of His will on earth, the law. It will be recalled that we pointed out at the beginning that this attitude of dedication to God manifested itself according to the forms of the culture in which it occurred. If there is one thing clear in the religion we call Judaism it is this, that God is to be served best and, for a Jew, only by the highest loyalty and adherence to the law. Who fails to understand this, fails to understand Judaism.

It is the fact that the law was constitutive of Judaism and the new Israel that made the latter a holy people, a people apart, separated from the nations and even from those of their own blood who did not submit to the law. A people wholly given over, completely dedicated to the law and to the author of that law had to remain separated from the nations, lest it be defiled by contact and weakened in its dedication. Those who themselves and of the multitude of theories and counter-theories which have been proposed. Gaster's book, which has its faults, is suggested more by reason of its ready availability than for any particular superiority.

¹⁸ We have depended on the following publications for our references to the rabbinic literature: J. Bonsirven, S.J., *Le judaïsme palestinien au temps de Jésus-Christ*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1934-1935); *id.*, *Judaïsme palestinien au temps de Jésus-Christ*, in *SDBI* 4 (Paris, 1949) 1143-1285; H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (London, 1933); D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1956); I. Epstein, *Judaism, A Historical Presentation* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex, 1959); E. Janssen, *Juda in der Exilszeit, ein Beitrag zur Frage der Entstehung des Judentums* (Göttingen, 1956); M.-J. Lagrange, O.P., *Le judaïsme avant Jésus-Christ* (Paris, 1931); G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era. The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1927); H. L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York-Philadelphia, 1959); [H. L. Strack-] P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 4 vols. (Munich, 1922-1928).

succumbed to the allurements of the circumambient Hellenistic culture and departed from the law of the Lord were the objects of scorn and even hatred on the part of the faithful. Mattathias, father of the Maccabees, in zealous rage killed an apostate he saw sacrificing on a pagan altar (*1 Mc.* 2:24). Ben Sira tells the ungodly men who have forsaken the law of the Most High God that they were born to a curse and when they die a curse and destruction shall be theirs (*Sir.* 41:8-10). The psalmist (*Ps.* 118 [119]: 53, 113, 136, 158) loathes the apostates from the law, and even the gentle Tobias counsels his son to deny them charity (*Tb.* 7:14). To marry one's son or daughter to a Gentile was a crime against the holiness of Israel which was simply intolerable. *The Book of Jubilees*, which is a rewriting from the standpoint of strictest Judaism of *Genesis* and part of *Exodus*, has this to say about intermarriage with Gentiles:

And if there is any man who wishes in Israel to give his daughter or his sister to any man who is of the seed of the Gentiles, he shall surely die, and they shall stone him with stones; for he hath wrought shame in Israel; and they shall burn the woman with fire, because she has dishonored the name of the house of her father, and she shall be rooted out of Israel. . . . For Israel is holy unto the Lord, and every man who has defiled (it) shall surely die: they shall stone him with stones. For thus it has been ordained and written in the heavenly tablets regarding all the seed of Israel: he who defileth (it) shall surely die, and he shall be stoned with stones. And to this law there is no limit of days, and no remission, nor any atonement: but the man who has defiled his daughter shall be rooted out in the midst of all Israel, because he has given of his seed to Moloch, and wrought impiously so as to defile it (*Jub.* 30:7-10).

The holiness of Israel was susceptible of increase by a generally heightened effort to observe the law. But to observe it, one had to know it. Since "the divine Torah," as the law

was frequently called, regulated all departments of life, its study and ever deeper penetration was the goal of every person sincerely devoted to the perfect service of God. The great teacher Hillel, a generation earlier than Our Lord, used to say that a person ignorant of the law could not be pious,¹⁴ an opinion echoed in the New Testament (*Jn.* 7:49). Some rabbis went so far as to maintain that a person should give over all his time to the study of the law, leaving to God thus served to see to the sustenance of his devotee, and Josephus boasts that ask what question about the law you will, the pious Jew will respond immediately, since he knows the law better than his own name.¹⁵ While there is doubtless some exaggeration here, these few examples serve to indicate the lengths of self-dedication to which the son of the law would go.

With these last remarks we have passed from the realm of the communal dedication to the law of the Lord into that of the individual dedication, and of this one can say, simply, that it was in intent total. The male child was, almost from the day of his birth, marked as the Lord's, so that all the days and actions of his life were consecrated to God. It was the famous Rabbi Aqiba who said that circumcision is a consecration of the human body to God,¹⁶ a consecration for which Jews gave their lives, for we read of fathers and mothers preferring death for themselves and their babies to the omission of this consecratory rite (*1 Mc.* 1:60-61).

Passing over the wearing of phylacteries and the like, which had as its purpose the literal fulfillment of the injunction of the law (*Dt.* 11:18-20) that the word of the Lord should be bound on hand and forehead, we may make mention of the Shema. The Shema (*Dt.* 6:4-9; 11:13-21; *Nm.* 15:37-41) was and is the confession of faith required to be

¹⁴ *Pirke Aboth* 2:6.

¹⁵ *Contra Apion* 2:19.

¹⁶ *Genesis rabba* 46:4.

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read morning and evening, and recited by the dying or by those gathered at their side. Rabbi Aqiba at the supreme moment of his martyrdom (135 A.D.) is reported to have pronounced the Shema and to have drawn out lovingly with his last breath the Hebrew word signifying "one": *shema' Yisra'el Yahweh 'elohenu Yahweh 'ehad*, the opening words of the Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."¹⁷

Every Sabbath and many feast days besides were sanctified and consecrated to the Lord. These times belonged ideally to God alone, and did not allow of anything that was calculated to result in personal profit. If the multiplication of blessings and prayers on numerous daily occasions such as rising and retiring, dressing and undressing, washing, eating, encountering a friend, and the like tended to become mechanical, we can understand how that could come about, while at the same time appreciating the intention of constantly re-consecrating one's whole life to God.

Major events in a person's lifetime were marked by reiterated consecrations: birth, circumcision, as already mentioned, the education of the child, especially in his religious obligations, his coming of age in the religious sense (Bar Mizvah, it is called today), his marriage, serious illness, death, burial—all these were so many occasions on which the devout son of the law renewed, or had renewed for him, his profession of dedication to God.

Flowing directly from this great desire to consecrate and sanctify all of life was a minute, tending to be scrupulous, avoidance of anything and everything which could cause a person to lose that consecration and so separate him from God. It was this care that motivated the establishment and observance of the laws of ritual purity and of the diet of which we read in such dull detail in the Book of *Leviticus*. We are familiar with Our Lord's castigation of the hollow performance

¹⁷ *Berakoth* 61b.

of various of these ritual cleansings (cf. *Mk.* 7:2-9), but we should not judge that all observance was open to the same charge.

In the matter of diet, for example, we have the well-known case of the aged Eleazar, who, though in his ninetieth year, spat out the swine's flesh that had been forced into his mouth. Being urged by the torturers to take some acceptable meat instead, while pretending that it was pork, and thus save his life, this noble old man in a stirring speech refused to accept even the pretense. He roundly declared that he would not by bad example lead the young astray, nor would he seek to escape for a brief time the punishment of men, only to fall forever under that of God (2 *Mc.* 6:18-31).

That such heroic integrity was not unique nor in vain is shown by the moving story of the mother and her seven sons who were being compelled by the Seleucid Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163 B.C.) to violate the law and eat pork. Whether or not our report of this encounter has been dressed up with a few legendary details is immaterial, since the point we are emphasizing is the total dedication to God and His law exhibited by the persons in question and proudly recounted by the sacred author.

We remember the story. Each of the six oldest sons was brought before the king in turn, and each, in spite of threats, blandishments, torture and death, persevered, the mother looking on the while and exhorting them to stand fast for the law. Finally, the youngest was brought forward, and when the promise of wealth and position had left him unshaken, the king urged the mother to advise the youth to save himself. Agreeing to speak to him on the matter, she delivered herself of the following counsel:

My son, have pity on me who carried you nine months in the womb, nursed you for three years, and raised you and brought you to your present age, and have taken care of you.

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I beseech you, child, to look upon the heavens and the earth and see everything that is in them and know that God made them out of nothing, and so too the human race came into existence. Do not fear this butcher here, but show yourself worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that by God's mercy I may get you back again with your brothers (2 Mc. 7:27-29).

In his reply, addressed first to the executioners and then directly to the king, the young man flatly refused to apostatize, explained the current suffering of the faithful Jews as a short and merciful punishment for their sins, and concluded:

I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our fathers, calling upon God soon to show mercy to our people, and to bring you to confess by trials and plagues that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to stay the wrath of the Almighty, which has justly fallen on our whole nation (2 Mc. 7:37-38).

If, as we have agreed, the spirit of virginity is the spirit of total dedication to God, then here we have the expression in Judaism of a very high measure of that spirit manifested by a mother and her seven sons.

Still another means of self-dedication in widespread use in Judaism was the practice of vowing to perform a particular action or to refrain from it. This practice, which could easily have the consecratory force leached out of it by excessive use, so that a vow would become a sort of more serious affirmation, was the object of lengthy discussions among the rabbis. The treatises of the Mishnah called *Nedarim* (Vows) and *Nazir* (The Nazirite-vow) concern themselves with this subject and make, for the non-specialist, at first fascinating, then utterly bewildering, and finally boring reading.¹⁸ We know, in fact, from the strictures of Our Lord that vows were abused (*Mk.* 7:11), so that some rabbis are known to have been

¹⁸ Cf. H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (London, 1933) 264-293.

opposed to the whole practice, although, taken by and large, it was considered salutary, if sufficiently safeguarded.¹⁹

But in all this external devotion and adherence to the law, what was the internal attitude? Was the spirit of consecration a forced thing, a burden borne from fear and not from love? Do we not get from the New Testament the decided impression that the law was more of a hindrance than a help, its practitioners more hypocritical than holy? Did not many fall short of the ideal of consecration to God which we have been pointing out in Judaism?

Certainly, in many cases there was a falling short, there was more hypocrisy than holiness. But we are speaking of the ideals of the religion and the aspirations of its faithful adherents. We who are so insistent that one of the notes of the true Church of Christ is holiness, in spite of our knowledge of history, should not go out of our way to deny the existence of a true and deep devotion to God in Judaism, just because we can point to some less edifying instances.

No, far from encouraging mere externalism in devotion to God and His law, the teachers of Judaism insisted that what God wants first of all is an obedient and penitent spirit:

Sacrifice or oblation you wished not,
but ears open to obedience you gave me.
Holocausts or sin-offerings you sought not;
then said I, "Behold I come;
in the written scroll it is prescribed for me,
To do your will, O my God, is my delight,
and your law is within my heart!" (Ps. 39 [40]:7-9).

Or again:

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

¹⁹ J. Bonsirven, S.J., *Judaïsme*, in *SDBI* 4 (Paris, 1949) 1217.

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For you are not pleased with sacrifices;
 should I offer a holocaust, you would not accept it.
 My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit;
 a heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn.
 (Ps. 50 [51]:17-19).

The sacrifices of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord (*Prov.* 15:8), and the doing of what is right and just is more acceptable than sacrifice (*Prov.* 21:3. See also *Ps.* 49 [50]:7-23; *Sir.* 7:8-9; 34:18-26).

The law was not a burden; rather was it a source of love and joy:

The law of the Lord is perfect,
 refreshing the soul;
 The decree of the Lord is trustworthy,
 giving wisdom to the simple.
 The precepts of the Lord are right,
 rejoicing the heart;
 The command of the Lord is clear,
 enlightening the eye;
 The fear of the Lord is pure,
 enduring forever;
 The ordinances of the Lord are true,
 all of them just;
 They are more precious than gold,
 than a heap of purest gold;
 Sweeter than syrup
 or honey from the comb. (*Ps.* 18 [19]:8-11).

See also *Ps.* 118 [119]:14-16; *Sir.* 1:9-11. The law is a source of light and guidance as well (*Ps.* 118 [119]:105), and the wisdom which is submission to it is extolled in *Sir.* 6:24-31.

Indeed, it is difficult to see how it can be said with complete justice that the religion of the law in Judaism was merely an external thing. Were our topic the devotional piety of the true son of the law we could cite passages from both canonical

and extra-canonical literature which give ample evidence of internal devotion.²⁰ But since we wish to get on to the discussion of the possible practice of physical celibacy and virginitv in Judaism, we shall content ourselves with a short paraphrase of the conclusion of Bonsirven's section on the observance in Judaism:

The Jewish people come through as essentially religious, careful to inform their whole life with religious acts. They saw in God their Father and King, but also the Holy One, whose holiness they were obliged to imitate and reproduce. From this fact derive the two directions of their religious activity: the cult, by which they rendered homage to the Lord and sought His favors; and the "observances," which were meant to consecrate to God and to sanctify every human thing. But by no means should it be thought that an attachment to the liturgy and the multiplication of material observances obstructed a marked movement toward a more interior life.²¹

Up to this point we have been engaged in showing that beyond all doubt the spirit of virginitv in the sense of total dedication to God was present in Judaism, the *Sitz im Leben* of the beginnings of Christianity. It was into this atmosphere that every Palestinian Jew, at least, was born, and so it was into this atmosphere that Mary, daughter, according to the apocryphal *Protoevangelium Jacobi*, of Joachim and Anne, was born. It was an atmosphere of piety, of devotion to the law. And it was in this atmosphere, we know, that Mary remained a virgin. Why?

We hold as *de fide* that Our Lady was a virgin *ante partum*, *in partu et post partum*. Beyond that, in this respect, there is nothing which faith requires us to believe. My purpose here is not to concern myself with New Testament matters, except insofar as Judaism does or does not help us evaluate the theo-

²⁰ For a start, one may consult the references given by Bright, *op. cit.*, 426.

²¹ Bonsirven, *art. cit.*, 1217-1218.

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logical speculation on the virginity of Mary prior to her appearance in the New Testament.

We know that total dedication to God normally follows the pattern set by a given culture; and we know as well that in Judaism that pattern was the law. What, then, was the law's attitude toward virginity? It is very simply stated: the Jewish female was to come to the marriage bed a virgin; thereafter it was her duty and her glory to bear children. The Old Testament is too full of examples of the consuming desire for children to need proving here, beginning with Sara's handing over of Agar to Abraham (*Gn.* 16:2) and continuing through Rachel's anguished cry, "Give me children or I shall die" (*Gn.* 30:1), down to New Testament times (*Lk.* 1:25).

There can be no doubt that whatever were the various means the pious Jew used in order to manifest his dedication to God, the practice of celibacy or the retention of virginity was not commonly one of them. And why should it be? Was not the will of the Lord expressed in His law? And was not one of the first and weightiest commandments of the law "Increase and multiply"? (*Gn.* 1:28).²² How then could the God-fearing Jew in good conscience eschew marriage, particularly in Judaism, where observance of the law was *the way* of manifesting dedication to God and His service? So far as the writer knows, the prophet Jeremia was the only deliberate celibate in the entire Old Testament, and that by express command of God (*Jer.* 16:1-2), while the inspired author tells us that the daughter of Jephthe *mourned* her virginity for two months before her premature death (*Jgs.* 11:37-39).

And yet, in spite of all this, we have sure evidence that, just at the time with which we are concerned, celibacy, at least, *was* practised, and indeed in a super-fervent sect of

²² Perhaps this is the explanation of the curious fact that Judaism had nothing corresponding to the Vestal Virgins and similar dedicated persons in the pagan religions. Cf. G. Delling, *Parthenos*, in *TWNT* 5 (Stuttgart, 1954) 826-828.

Judaism, a sect that considered the Pharisees, and *a fortiori* the Sadducees, despicable laxists in the observance of the law. I speak, of course, of the Essenes, who in one branch at least, practised celibacy, as we read in Pliny the Elder,²³ in Josephus,²⁴ and in Philo Judaeus.²⁵ The further inference that it was practised at Qumran seems well grounded and is widely accepted.²⁶

From the sources mentioned we have considerable information about the Essenes,²⁷ nor can there be any doubt that Philo at least regarded them as ideal Jews.²⁸ How was it, then, that, hot for the law as they were, they practised celibacy? Josephus writes:

The Essenes profess a severer discipline: they are Jews by birth and are peculiarly attached to each other. They eschew pleasure-seeking as a vice and regard temperance and mastery of the passions as virtue. Scorning wedlock, they select other men's children while still pliable and teachable, and fashion them after their own pattern—not that they wish to do away with marriage as a means of continuing the race, but they are afraid of the promiscuity of women and convinced that none of the sex remains faithful to one man.²⁹

²³ *Historia Naturalis* 5.15.73. H. Rackham translates: ". . . the solitary tribe of the Essenes, which is remarkable beyond all the other tribes in the whole world, as it has no women and has renounced all sexual desire, has no money, and has only palm trees for company. . . . Thus through thousands of ages (incredible to relate) a race in which no one is born lives on forever." H. Rackham, ed. and trans., *Pliny: Natural History*, in *Loeb Classical Library*, 2 (Cambridge, Mass., 1942) 277.

²⁴ *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.1.5; *The Jewish War* 2.8.2-13.

²⁵ *Hypothetica* 11.14-17.

²⁶ Cf. E. F. Sutcliffe, S.J., *The Monks of Qumram* (Westminster, Md., 1960) 97-100; J. T. Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea* (London, 1959) 92.

²⁷ For a concise summation and comparison between Philo and Josephus on this subject, see F. H. Colson, *ed. cit.*, 514-516.

²⁸ Cf. J. Daniélou, S.J., *Philon d'Alexandrie* (Paris, 1958) 42: ". . . quand Philon veut nous présenter le judaïsme idéal, c'est des Esséniens qu'il nous parle."

²⁹ *The Jewish War*, trans. by G. A. Williamson (Hammondsworth, Middlesex, 1959) 371.

"The Concept of Virginity in Judaism"

And even of the marrying Essenes he says:

There is a second order of Essenes, which agrees with the other in its way of life, customs, and rules, and differs only in its views on marriage. They think that the biggest thing in life—the continuance of the race—is forfeited by men who do not marry, and further, if everyone followed their example, mankind would rapidly disappear. However, they put their brides on probation for three years, and do not marry them till the regularity of their periods proves them capable of child-bearing. When conception has taken place, intercourse ceases—proof that the object of the marriage was not pleasure but the begetting of children.³⁰

Philo declares that the Essenes eschew marriage "because they clearly discern it to be the sole or principal danger to the maintenance of the communal life, as well as because they particularly practise continence."³¹ The same worthy tells us of "aged virgins, who have kept their chastity not under compulsion, like some of the Greek priestesses, but of their own free wills in their ardent yearning for wisdom. Eager to have her for their life mate they have spurned the pleasures of the body and desire no mortal offspring but those immortal children which only the soul that is dear to God can bring to birth unaided."³²

In view of all this, therefore, it would surely be captious to deny the possibility, at the very least, of Mary having heard of the practice of consecration to God by means of celibacy and virginity. The marrying Essenes were scattered throughout the small villages of southern Syria and Palestine, the celibates were to be found by the Dead Sea and drew their membership from all over, and the "aged virgins," spoken of by Philo, were in Egypt. Now to make the step from the pos-

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 375.

³¹ *Hypothetica* 11.14.

³² *The Contemplative Life* 68.

sibility of Mary's knowing of the celibate life to the assertion that she vowed virginity as a young maiden is more than biblical science can manage. On the other hand, it certainly cannot deny the possibility of such a vow.

We know that some authors wish to speak of the "ontological perfection" of the virginity of Mary.⁸³ On this, dogmatic theologians will have their own professional opinions. But speaking biblically and on the level of the psychological state of the Blessed Virgin, we may say that there are three chief positions tenable: (1) Mary was and, of course, remained, a *de facto* virgin because at the time of the Annunciation event she simply had not "known man." This is perhaps less pious, but it is possible, and, indeed, is the psychological obverse of the "ontological-perfection-of-virginity" coin. (2) Mary, a devout young Jewess, having heard of this new way of total consecration of self to God, resolved to retain her virginity and entered into an agreement with St. Joseph to that effect. She may have been moved by the grace of God in choosing this way of life, but her mind was not enlightened as to her future role. (3) A direct and unmistakable indication was divinely communicated to Mary that she should vow perpetual virginity.

All three of these, I say, are possible. For (3) there is, so far as I know, no scientific evidence. For (2) there is the fact of the non-marrying Essenes and the widespread use of vows. For (1) there is the statement of the New Testament that Mary was a betrothed virgin who knew not man.

For my part, I have developed in matters of this sort a certain fondness for Okham's razor.

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⁸³ Cf. J. Galot, S.J., *Vierge entre les vierges*, in *NRT* 79 (1957) 463-477.