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# MEDIEVAL JEWISH RESPONSES TO CATHOLIC PRIESTLY CELIBACY

*by Albert Ehrman*

The Catholic institution of priestly celibacy originates in Jesus' pronouncement in Matthew 19:12:

There are eunuchs born that way from their mother's womb, there are eunuchs made so by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves that way for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.

Paul elaborated on Jesus' justification of celibacy:

An unmarried man can devote himself to the Lord's affairs, all he need worry about is pleasing the Lord; but a married man has to bother about the world's affairs and devote himself to pleasing his wife; he is torn two ways. In the same way, an unmarried woman, like a young girl, can devote herself to the Lord's affairs; all she need worry about is being holy in body and spirit. The married woman, on the other hand, has to worry about the world's affairs and devote herself to pleasing her husband (1 Corinthians 7:32-34).

With the growth of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, these early ascetic strains within primitive Christianity became increasingly more prominent. But it was not until the Council of Elvira (300-306) that celibacy of the clergy became a matter of Canon Law:

It is decided that marriage be altogether prohibited to bishops, priests, and deacons, or to all clerics placed in the ministry, and that they keep away from their wives and not beget children; whoever does this, shall be deprived of the honor of the clerical office. (1)

Towards the end of the century, the energetic Pope Siricius (384-398), in his famous epistle on *The Celibacy of the Clergy*, strongly reaffirmed the decision of Elvira, and sternly warned the clergy against seeking any justification for priestly marriage by appealing to the authority of the "Old Law", i.e., the Torah. (2)

Though there was vigorous resistance by all sectors of both the higher

and lower clergy to enforced priestly celibacy, (3) the cumulative effect of the repeated councilar and papal decrees was that, by the thirteenth century, priestly celibacy had become universal in Western Europe.

Both biblical and talmudic Judaism unequivocally condemn celibacy as being destructive of God's purposes. Indeed, the very first commandment given to the whole human family is to :

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28).

The Prophet Isaiah adds that God

did not create it (the world) a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited (Isaiah 45:18).

And in the Talmud we read :

Any Jew who is without a wife is without joy, without blessing, without goodness... without Torah, without protection, without peace... Rabbi Elazar says: 'Any Jew who is without a wife is not a man! For it is written : "Male and female he created them... and named them Man "' (Genesis 5:2). (4)

Of all biblical figures, only Jeremiah is known to have been a celibate ; (5) and of the 2,800 recorded Tannaim and Amoraim, only the second century Tanna, Shimon ben Azzai, is known to have pursued the celibate life. (6)

It is not surprising, therefore, that Jewish polemical writers found in the institution of priestly celibacy a most tempting target for their polemical shafts. Their attacks centered on two cardinal objections — 1) celibacy's clear violation of both the letter and spirit of the Torah, and 2) its open invitation to sexual profligacy.

Perhaps the first Jewish writer to criticize the institution of priestly celibacy was the mysterious ninth century (?) Nestor the priest. Nestor, purportedly a Catholic priest who converted to Judaism, has this to say :

This matter (celibacy)... is completely contrary to the Torah of Moses and the custom of Israel. For the Holy One, Blessed be He, commanded our Fathers, Adam and Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all the Children of Israel to marry. (7)

In the twelfth century, the Spaniard, Joseph Kimḥi, derided priestly celibacy as being morally hypocritical :

It is well-known that your priests and Bishops who do not marry, commit adultery. (8)

In similar vein, the anonymous German author of the thirteenth century *Sefer Nitzaḥon Yashan Noshan* asks:

If the Catholic priest now stands in the place of the biblical Jewish priest, why, then, does he not marry and have children as did Aaron... the High Priest? The first commandment that Adam received was to be fruitful and multiply. You, however, have annulled (the commandment) to be fruitful and multiply, and have allowed whoring and drinking to capture your hearts! (9)

The real reason why the Catholic clergy insists so vigorously upon confession, the author suggests, is that:

Since (the Catholic priests) are exceedingly lecherous, but are forbidden by their law to take a wife, they have, therefore, come to an agreement among themselves that paramours should come to them and tell them of their adulterous affairs. Thus they learn who the adulterous wives are, and seek them out saying, 'I shall do the same!' And these wives are unable to refuse them since their lovers have already exposed them. (10)

But perhaps the most systematic attack on priestly celibacy was delivered by the fifteenth century Italian rabbi and scholar, Eliyahu Ḥayyim of Genazzano. In a debate with a Franciscan monk who gloried in the fact that "among us there are hundreds and thousands of saints who have died sinless and never drew near to a woman all their lives." 611) Rabbi Eliyahu retorts:

To separate oneself from a woman in order not to raise children is a criminal offense. The first commandment that Adam received was to be fruitful and multiply. According to our Torah, whoever abstains from being fruitful and multiplying has no portion in the World-to-Come. (12) Even from the viewpoint of Natural Law, whoever does not raise children is as if he murdered all the generations that could have been born from him until the end of the world... Behold, all the Prophets, and Moses too, who was Father to all who received the Holy Spirit, married and raised children. The High Priest too, was unable to officiate in his priesthood if he were not married, as it is written: 'And he shall take a wife in her virginity' (Leviticus 21:13). Because

of the fact that the Torah notes that woman is part of our very bones, no man who is not married can be called a complete man. (13)

Finally, in what may be considered a legitimate extension of Jewish anti-celibacy polemic, we consider the testimony of Felipe de Nájera. During the reign of the Portuguese and Spanish monarch Philip III (1598-1621), Felipe de Nájera, the scion of a distinguished New Christian (Marrano) family, was accused, among other misdeeds, of having glorified Turks and Moors. At his trial, Felipe declared that one served God much better through matrimony than through celibacy. (14) Furthermore, despite mass emigration of New Christians from Portugal, the size of the New Christian population within Portugal remained constant because the New Christians

never become monks or nuns, but on coming of age, even cousins marry one another and procreate like mice! (15)

One gets the feeling that Felipe, with tongue in cheek, was deliberately exacerbating Old Christian fears about what they considered to be an alarming rate of population growth among both the Marranos and the Moriscos.

With the rise of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, anticelibacy polemic takes on an entirely new dimension. Protestantism, as is well-known, was from its very inception uncompromisingly hostile to the institution of priestly celibacy. John Calvin succinctly summed up Protestant sentiment when he declared:

Celibacy holds the first place for insane boldness! (16)

Did Jewish anti-celibatarian polemic help shape Protestantism's attitude on this issue? There seem to be no outright borrowings from Jewish sources on the part of the Protestant leaders. Nor, on the other hand, is the popular American historian, Dr. Will Durant, amiss when he observes that the new Protestant ministers, accepting sex and marriage, resembled the rabbis rather than the Catholic priests. (17) Did Jewish writers living during the Reformation see in Protestantism's abolition of priestly celibacy a vindication of Judaism? Astonishingly, as late as 1969, Prof. Salo Wittmayer Baron could note that "no comprehensive study has thus far been published about the relationship between Protestantism and Judaism or about the former's impact upon Jewish history." (18) We can only look forward with eager anticipation to any new revelations touching this intriguing question.

## NOTES

- (1) Canon 33 of the Council of Illiberi (Elvira), in H. Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, tr. by R. J. Deferrari (Binghamton, New York, 1957), p. 25.
- (2) *The Celibacy of the Clergy*, in Denzinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.
- (3) See H. C. Lee, *The History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church* (New York, 1957 reprint), pp. 333, 341.
- (4) *Yevamot* 62b-63a.
- (5) Jeremiah 16:2.
- (6) *Yevamot* 63b. Those heterodox Jewish groups such as the Dead Sea Scroll Covenanters and the Essenes, among whom celibacy began to make significant headway, left no imprint on later Jewish life.
- (7) *Sefer Nestor ha-Komer*, in J. D. Eisenstein. *Otzar Vikkuḥim* (New York, 1928), p. 313.
- (8) J. Kimhi, *Vikkuaḥ Rabbi Yosef Kimḥi beyn ha-Ma'amin ve-ha-Min (Sefer ha-Berit)*, in Eisenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 68; and *idem*, *Sefer ha-Berit*, ed. by E. (F.) Talmage (Jerusalem, 1974), p. 28.
- (9) *Sefer Nitzahon Yashan Noshan*, in J. C. Wagenseil, *Tela Ignea Satanae* Altdorf, 1681), part 2, p. 241.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 250; and in E. Urbach, "Etudes sur la littérature polémique au moyen âge", *R. E. J.*, 100 (1935), pp. 70-71.
- (11) "Vikkuho shel Rabbi Eliyahu Ḥayyim mi-Genazzano im Nazir Frantziskani", in J. Rosenthal, *Mehkarim u-Mekorot*, Vol. I (Jerusalem, 1967), p. 452; and in Rosenthal's "Haganah ve-Hatkafah be-Sifrut ha-Vikkuaḥ shel Yemey ha-Beynayim", In *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, ed. by P. Peli, Vol. II (Jerusalem, 1972), p. 353.
- (12) Cf. *Yevamot* 63a.
- (13) "Vikkuho shel Rabbi Eliyahu...", *loc. cit.*; and "Haganah ve-Hatkafah...", *loc. cit.*
- (14) J. Caro Baroja, *Los Judios en la España Moderna y Contemporanea*, Vol. I (Madrid, 1962), p. 398; and S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2nd ed., Vol. XV (New York, London, and Philadelphia, 1973), p. 186.
- (15) Baroja, *loc. cit.*, n. 53; Baron, *loc. cit.*
- (16) J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. and ed. by J. T. McNeill and F. L. Battles, Vol. II (Philadelphia, 1960), p. 1257.
- (17) W. Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, Vol. VI (*The Reformation*) (New York, 1957), p. 726.
- (18) Baron, *op. cit.*, Vol. XIII (New York, London, and Philadelphia, 1969), p. 416, n. 4.