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What has the Jew Given to Christianity?, 1921.

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LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,  
ON "WHAT HAS THE JEW GIVEN TO CHRISTIANITY?"  
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,  
DECEMBER 18, 1921, CLEVELAND.

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WRHS



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In these days when the contributions of the Jew to civilization are being disparaged; in these days when race fictions are being broadly entertained and loosely entertained by people; when people have begun to identify Orientalism with decadence, it might be well to take stock of exactly what the Oriental mind, the Semetic mind, and the Jewish mind have given to the culture and the civilization of Europe; it might be well to try to discover exactly how far the whole social structure of European society is saturated by Hebraic ideals.

At some future time I shall discuss what the Jew has given to European civilization. This morning I wish to discuss what the Jew has given to Christianity--the religion of the peoples of Europe. It is really perfectly astounding, when one stops to think, what a tremendous influence this little country of Palestine, a hundred miles wide and a hundred and fifty miles long--this little state of Judea, never more than two or three millions,--what a tremendous influence they exerted upon the thought, the institution, the organization of literature, the art, the music of European society.

Of course, it is not so astounding when one stops to think that the greatness of a cause does not depend upon size but upon innate potency. The radiations and the strength of radium do not at all depend upon the

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volume and the substance; and the influence of a people does not at all depend upon its greatness, upon its numbers, but upon the potency and the strength and the creative potentialities of its genius. Greece is a little country, and Holland is a little country, and Belgium is a little country, and yet these three little lands played tremendous roles in the history of human society.

But greater by far than all these lands did little Judea influence human conduct and human thought. One walks down the streets and avenues of our great cities and sees beautiful churches and cathedrals; one stops to read their names: Calvary Church, Zion Church, Bethlehem--all names that bring one's mind back to these little villages and hamlets and cities and hills of Palestine. One reads other names: the Cathedral of St. John, and Peter, and Paul, and James, that at once one recognizes as Jewish names. One enters these edifices and listens to the service, and one at once recognizes the songs and the psalms of some old Jewish poet or scribe or singer; the liturgy and the litany and the whole service redounds with the Hebraic phrase and the Hebraic idea.

And one goes out into the street and listens to the speech of men, to their idiom; one catches phrases such as these: and the sweat of thy brow; the twinkling of an eye; the stranger in a strange land; the salt of the

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a man after his own heart; a labor of love; the signs of the times; a house divided against itself; casting pearls before the swine; let's eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. And a thousand and one other phrases borrowed outright from the sacred literature of the Jew.

One reads his Shakespeare, or his Milton, or his Ruskin, or his Macauley, or his Browning, and one sees at once how much their style was molded by the Hebrew scriptures. One sees great paintings of the Renaissance, and one at once recognizes the theme and the inspiration of the artist as being some character or incident out of the sacred writings of the Jew. And so with music.

It is one of the ironies of life that the non-Jew is eager to introduce the Bible, the writings of the Jew into the public schools, while the Jew is trying to keep his own writings out of the public schools; and justly so. But it shows how right through the whole structure of modern society sings the spirit, the genius of the Jew. And when you go a little deeper and stop to think about the ritual of the church, you see how much more the Jewish influence is there. The very institution of the church is nothing but a copy of the synagogue. The service of the church--the prayers, the songs, the sermon--is an exact copy of the service of the synagogue; in fact, the early church was a synagogue; the early

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church was a synagogue of law abiding, pious Jews, who differed only from the other Jews in this respect: that they looked upon Jesus as the Messiah; but in all other respects they were of the people and belonged to the people. Jesus, of course, never meant to found a new church or a new community--certainly not a new religion.

The church, then, in its organization, in its purpose, is Jewish in origin. And so is the Sabbath day of the Christians Jewish in origin. It is the Jew that first gave the day of rest unto laboring mankind; it was the Jew who first realized that if mankind is to make any progress at all it must set aside a day a week for refreshment of mind and soul and body, in order that it may be able to devote them to the higher, to the more spiritual things of life; and for hundreds of years Christians observed the Sabbath on the seventh day. The Eastern Church, up to the fifth century, observed the Sabbath on the seventh day, and there are Christian sects today that observe the Sabbath on the seventh day. It was only by the edict of Constantine in 321 that Sunday was declared to be the official day of rest of Christendom, and in the course of time Sunday took the place of the Jewish Sabbath.

But be that as it may, the Sabbath as an institution, as a day of rest and prayer, is Jewish in origin. And so is Easter. Easter is the Jewish Passover,

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and for hundreds of years Easter was celebrated exactly on the day when the Passover was celebrated. And so is the Lord's Supper a Jewish institution in its origin. It is nothing but a copy of the Passover feast--the eating of the paschal lamb which was enjoined upon our forefathers. And so is the great sacrament of Baptism Jewish in its origin. When a man applied for proselytism, when a man wished to be converted to Judaism, one of the ceremonies he passed through was the ceremony of Baptism--submersion in water as a physical act of cleansing, symbolic of his spiritual act of cleansing and initiation.

So the most fundamental rites and practices and sacraments of the church were given to the church by the Jew. But even deeper than that and more profound than that, the ethics of the church, the basic ethical ideals of Christendom are Jewish in origin. There are elements in Christianity which are not Jewish, but their mystical elements, their Christological elements, the dogmatic elements, the elements which have to do with the divinity of Jesus, and with salvation by belief in Jesus, and with belief in a new dispensation, and with the dogma of the Trinity,--these are elements which came into Christianity from the Roman world, from the Greco-Oriental civilization of the Mediterranean; for remember that Christianity, like all religions, is a synthesis, a combination of many ideas, of many doctrines borrowed from many sources.

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These mystical elements to which I have referred are not Jewish, but the ethical elements of Christianity, the doctrines that concern man and his relations to God and man, and his relations to his fellowmen.--these ideas are intrinsically and basically Jewish. There used to be the practice among Christian scholars to try to draw a sharp line of demarcation between the Jewish conception of God and the Christian conception of God; between Jewish ethics and Christian ethics. But that has collapsed. An impartial and critical study of sources has revealed that there is nothing in the conception of God preached by the Master of Christianity that is not found in the Old Testament or in the teachings of the rabbis who were contemporaneous with Jesus.

There used to be the common opinion that the God of the Jews was a God of justice, and that the God of the Christians was a God of love; that the Jew insisted upon the observance of the law, and the Christian insisted more upon faith and a mode of conduct; that one was harsh, rigid, priest-ridden, law-ridden, a religion of legalism; the other was a religion of freedom. I say, that has collapsed. Professor Jackson, one of the greatest of Christian scholars, in his last book on "The Beginnings of Christianity," says this: "There was nothing in the teaching of Jesus concerning the nature of good that was

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new to the ear of the Jew. Everything he taught may be paralleled in Old Testament literature. The God of Jesus was the God of the Jew. Professor Friedlander, 20 years and years ago, in his great book on "Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount," has shown conclusively that all the exalted teachings of the Sermon on the Mount have their duplicate and their origin, their inspiration, in Old Testament teachings.

Jesus knew what the Jew of his day believed in; he knew that the religion of the Jew of his day was not oppressive and was not harsh and was not exacting, and the Jew did not fret under it, for Jesus was taught by Jewish teachers--the Jewish rabbis; and he himself was a pious Galileean Jew; he knew justice. Much as our rabbis emphasized the idea that God is a God of justice, so did they emphasize the idea that God is a God of love. They emphasized the fatherhood of God. No one who reads the Psalms can fail to feel this superb intimacy that always existed between the pious Jew and his Father in Heaven. "You are children unto the Lord." And the relation of God to man was the relation of a father to a child.

The rabbis tell the beautiful story of the king who had very delicately wrought goblets, and he found that he could pour no hot water in the goblets because they would break, and he could pour no cold water in the goblets because they would shrink; and so he mixed the hot

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and the cold water and poured it in, and the goblets did not break. And so the rabbis said: "God found that He could not build the world with the attribute of mercy alone because sin would multiply; and He could not build it with the attribute of justice alone because no man could endure it, and so he mixed the qualities of mercy and the qualities of justice and built His world accordingly. Every Jew who lived in those days knew, just as every Jew who lives today knows, that God, the God of Israel, was not a revengeful being, who punished the sinner in vindictiveness and anger; that He was a God who waited for the sinner to turn unto Him and to repent. "For Thou dost not desire the death of the sinner," but that he should return unto Thee and live."

And the rabbis said: "Repentance is like unto the great sea; just as the sea, the everlasting sea, is open on all sides, so is repentance open wide unto all the children of man to come to Him. And they went further and said that in the place where the repentant sinner stands the perfectly righteous man cannot stand, that the repentant sinner, in a sense, is higher in the estimation of religion than the man who had never sinned at all. And there is a world of truth in it; for sometimes men do not sin because they were never tempted, not because of any tremendous soul effort, but because they were so secluded and so isolated and so sheltered

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from the sins and the temptations of life that they need not sin. But he who passed through the deep waters of sin and temptation and degradation, who stumbled and fell, and whose feet were gashed, whose hands were torn by the briars and the thistles of life, by the hard, cruel experiences of life, and then through an effort of will, through an inner determination, through a tremendous struggle, rose from the depths of degradation to the higher level and the purer air,--that man has merited the name of the truly righteous son of God.

The rabbis tell a beautiful story of the famous rabbi Eliezer ben . Rabbi Eliezer--he was Eliezer then; he was called a rabbi when he died--there was none like unto him for depravity and sin, the sin of unchastity; he was a by-word, was Eliezer, throughout the land. And one day, so say the rabbis in their poetic way, he went out into the great open fields and called upon the mountains and the hills to intercede for him. "Ye mountains and ye hills cry for me," said he. And the mountains and the hills said: "We cannot; we must intercede for ourselves, for we, too, are sinful in the sight of God." And then he called upon the heavens, and the sun, and the moon, and the planets: "Intercede for me before our Heavenly Father so that my sins may be gone." And the heavens and the sun and the moon and the planets said: "We cannot, for we, too, stand in awe before our Heavenly

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Father." And so Eliezer sat down, and placing his head between his knees he sobbed--a broken, crushed and tortured soul; and he sobbed so that his soul went up to heaven; and then a voice from heaven announced: "Rabbi Eliezer, thy lot will be with those who share eternal life."

And the rabbis went on to say: "Some men must work a lifetime to gain eternal life, and some gain it in one brief hour." Repentance and mercy--they were Jewish. Much has been said about the law. Paul especially popularized the idea that the law was a shackle upon the hands of the people. And yet the Jew always spoke of his law. "It is a tree of life to those that lay hold of it, and the supporters thereof are happy." The law for the Jew was a glory and not a burden. He spoke of "the joy of obeying the law."

There is a beautiful legend told about Rabbi Akiba. He was one of the men who were martyred by the Romans--one of the greatest of the rabbis. On the day of his martyrdom he was bound, and Antonius Rufus, who was assigned to torture Rabbi Akiba, approached him and ordered that the martyrdom of Akiba begin. As Rabbi Akiba felt his strength leaving him, he began to recite the Shema, and as he recited the Shemoneh 'Esreh a smile illumined his countenance, and he laughed happily to himself; and Antonius Rufus turned to him and said: "Oh, man, thou must be a sorcerer! Thou mockest at suffering!"

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And Akiba said to him: "Oh, no, I am not a sorcerer, and I do not mock at suffering; but all my life I have waited for this moment. Every day of my life I repeated the law, <sup>love</sup> 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy mind and with all thy soul.'" I have always obeyed the law in that I loved the Lord my God with all my heart and with all my mind, but I have never been able to combine the three and to love Him with all my soul, with my very life; and now hast come the sacred moment when I can worship Him in all three, and when I can fulfill the law completely, why then should I not be happy."

It was the very joy and the zest of the life of the Jew. This awful law enjoined the Jew to be charitable and loving and kindly and compassionate. You heard what was read this morning: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." That is somehow seldom quoted by Christians. They always quote "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," as though that summed up the whole of the Old Testament. And yet it does not sum it up at all; it is merely a relic of the oldest code of laws that we find in the Bible, superseded very early in Jewish history by kindly legislation. "Love thy neighbor as thyself, for I am the Lord. Thou shalt not hate thy neighbor in thy heart; not only not do him a physical wrong, but thou shalt not entertain hatred for him in

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thy heart."

And the father of the Golden Rule is not Jesus but Hillel. "What is hateful unto thee do not do unto thy neighbor." "Love mankind," say our rabbis, "and bring him near unto the Lord." Love them in real compassion. Why, Christians speak of charity, and we today speak of charity, but it was these humble rabbis of two thousand years ago who understood the real implications of charity infinitely better than we. Hillel said: "Give your substance to man; give him what he needs, even when he needs a horse to ride on and a servant to run before him." If a man was a nobleman and became impoverished, real charity toward him is not to give him a pittance of bread to keep him alive, but to restore him as far as possible to his former dignity and manhood and self-respect. And one day when Hillel carried out his injunction and found an impoverished man of noble family, and gave him a horse to ride on, and there was no servant to run before him to serve him, Hillel himself ran a pace before the man and served him.

That is the law of harsh justice of the Jew of the time of Jesus. And they were told to obey the law not for the sake of expecting a reward. "Be good not in order that you may enter the kingdom of heaven; be good not in order that you may inherit a portion in the world to come; be good not that your men and your neighbors may

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think well of you, but be good for its own sake."

Antigonus, the man of Soko, said: "Be not like servants who serve their master in order to receive a reward, but be like servants who serve their master not for the sake of receiving a reward." Doing things because you love to do them, and you wish to do them, because your whole heart and soul cry out to do them. "God wants the heart of the human being." That was the law of the day, and the men who taught this law were not professional men; they were not priests; they did not hold the key to Heaven; and men did not need to go to them in order to intercede for them. They were just of the mass of the people. Many of them were carpenters, cobblers, workingmen--poor men, who held sway over the mind and soul of the people because the people respected their piety, and their devotion, and their honesty, and their wisdom, and their learning. It was the aristocracy of learning, and piety, and character, and the people loved them and revered them.

Jesus knew all that, and so it is folly to think that Jesus came to destroy the law and to abrogate it. He himself says: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophet; I am not come to destroy but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you if heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law until all be fulfilled. Whosoever, therefore, shall break one

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of these least commandments and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; and whosoever shall do and teach the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus was just a little bit liberal in the interpretation of some laws, and a little more rigorous in the interpretation of other laws. On the question of the Sabbath, for example, he was more liberal; he thought that the spirit of the observance was much more important than the letter of the observance. But in the question of divorce, for example, he was much more rigid than the rabbis of his day, for Jesus prohibited divorce entirely where the rabbis of his day did not. You can go through all the exalted teachings of the Sermon of the Mount, and you will find how really in essence and the substance they are products of spirit, the genius, the life, the experience of the Jewish people; and insofar as these ethics are the informing ideas of modern Christianity, insofar as Christianity is indebted to the Jew for all it has.

There are some teachings of Jesus, some of his ethical ideals, that are not Jewish; and they are the very ones that Christianity cannot live by, much as it might admire them; and one of these ideals is non-resistance. Jesus was a pacifist; Jesus was a communist; Jesus did not believe in property as a help to a better life. Jesus was

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concerned with two things: first, to proclaim the immediate coming of the kingdom of heaven. The world was about to undergo a tremendous cataclysm, a revolution; it was to pass away in fire; it was to be purged and cleansed and purified, and then a new age, a new world will come to be the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God; one God alone would rule, and faith and righteousness would be established. And he believed that this kingdom was near at hand. He says: "There are some among you that will never taste death." It was such a tremendous, overpowering conviction with him that he believed this kingdom would come immediately in that very lifetime of some of his disciples. That was his first concern; that was his gospel; that was his message.

And his second message was: "Prepare yourself, for it is coming." And how? By observing the commandments; by selling all your possessions and by following him. That is why the early Christian church was communistic. They, too, expected this cataclysm, this passing of the world into fire, this complete destruction of the world, and this recreation of a new world which will be dominated by the spirit of good and of justice. And so Jesus preached non-resistance. "Resist not evil."

There are beautiful sayings of his: "Ye have heard that it was said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say unto you that ye resist not evil; but

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whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law and take away thy good, let him have thy cloak also. And whoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.

"Ye have heard that it hath been said that thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy (of course, that was never said; it was popularly understood, perhaps) but I say unto you love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you, that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven; for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sendeth rain unto the just and to the unjust. For if ye love them that love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans the same? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

It is a very exalted ideal of life, but a very impractical ideal for the majority of mankind. And Christianity during the past war has given perfect evidence that it does not abide by this teaching of its Master,-- "Love your enemies, and resist not evil." Evil must be resisted in order that it may be overcome. The sword must be knocked out of the hand of the evil-doer so that the good may not suffer. And with that must not go the spirit of vengeance, of vindictiveness; we must try to do good to

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the evil-doer, but first to remove him from the possibility of doing evil.

But, after all, this message of Jesus was to the select few. He never thought, and never for a moment entertained a thought that his ideal would be accepted by many. He said: "Many are called but few are chosen." Either in this world or the world to come. It was only the select few, the disciples, the unusual souls that could follow His teachings. And I suppose that is true.

To sum up what I have said about what has the Jew given to Christianity: he has given to Christianity all that is today standing the test of scientific criticism; for the orthodox theology of Christendom, the orthodox theology of Judaism, the orthodox theology of all religions, is being sadly undermined by the critical researches and the scientific knowledge of the day. But that of Christianity which endures, namely, its ethics, its code of moral conduct, the ideals which inspire men and women--the millions of them today--that which I take to be the essence of Christianity--that is Jewish in origin.

And Christianity is fast turning from the teachings of Paul, the missionary, and his Christology, and his mysticism, and his dogmatism, to the simple teachings of Jesus, the Jew of Galilee; and in this turning of Christendom from theology and dogmatism to the ethics of Judaism is another triumph for that little people

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of Israel, coming from that little corner of the world--  
Palestine, whose literature is today the sacred literature  
of half the world; and whose God is today the God of two-  
thirds of mankind, and of whose great prophetic spirit  
this pious Jew of Galilee was one.

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