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Contribution of Israel to Christianity and Islam, 1927.

LECTURE OF
RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER,

GIVEN ON
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 1927,

AT
THE TEMPLE,
CLEVELAND, OHIO.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ISRAEL TO CHRISTIANITY
AND ISLAM.

RABBI SILVER: At our last lecture on the role of Israel in the ancient world we saw how Israel revamped the spiritual and the ethical standards of the ancient world. We saw how Israel banished idolatry, dealt a death blow to superstition and enthroned the one spiritual God and the one spiritual order of the universe. We saw how Israel merged ethics and religion, how it subordinated cult and ritual to faith and conduct; and how it set up for all time an exalted code of private and public morals, of national and international morals, whose guiding principles were justice and love and peace.

✓
By the middle of the 5th Century before
the common era these major ideals of our people
had already been completely developed and defined.
And from that time on, from the time of Ezra
and the restoration of the country following
the Babylonian exile, (from that time) the best
efforts of our people were devoted to two tasks.
(First, to save ~~the~~ the integrity of the people
of the race which had almost been destroyed
completely by the Babylonian exile and which
was still being threatened by enemies within
and by enemies around Palestine; to save ~~the~~
the integrity of the race and of the civiliza-
tion of the race, which a little later was
threatened with complete assimilation by the
civilization of Greece, of the Greek Hellenism,
which threatened to absorb completely the Hebra
civilization; and so,) the first (task of the
leaders of Jewish thought from the middle of the
5th century on) was to protect the people from
disintegration and absorption, a ~~terrifically~~
~~difficult task~~. And the second task was to
develop a technique which would enable a man in
his everyday life to realize these exalted ideals
which the prophets had set up for man to follow,
to define a definite program of ~~minute and~~

~~conduct~~
~~detailed habits~~ which would give these abstract
ideals of justice and love ~~and peace~~, and so
forth, a local habitation and a name (to express
them, as it were, to corpor~~alize~~ize them in con-
crete human institutions.) ~~So that~~ the best minds
in Israel set themselves to the task of organizing^{ation}.

The problems which they faced were practical
problems, problems of survival, ^{and} ~~problems~~ of
education. (The exalted note of prophecy we
miss in this age. In place of it we find the
keynote to be a meticulous observance of the
Torah, which had now come to occupy the ^{chief} position
of authority in Jewish life; and the interpre-
tation of the Torah and exposition of the Torah,
the application of the laws of the Torah had
become the chief concern of the leaders—of
the leaders in Israel.)

The prophetic enthusiasm ^{of the earlier centuries} is now somewhat
quenched. The heroic mood is gone. The age
of the giant ^{is} over. Sages and scribes and
rabbis are now the successors and spiritual
heirs of the prophets. While the prophetic
age is ended, as the rabbi said, with the
Babylonian exile, the spirit of prophecy ceased
in Israel, and from that time on all that
Israel had was the the echo; it was

no longer the prophetic, creative spirit of the race. It was the echo. And yet the faith and the moral ideals of the race were conserved during these centuries following the return from the exile, conserved, nurtured, defended by a devout, unyielding, ^{and} supremely loyal people, which was ready to pour out its blood in the defense of these ideals as it was called upon to do ^{during the} that terrible Maccabean struggle in the 2nd Century before the common era.

~~So that when Israel appears on the threshold of the common era, the Christian era, it was by any means really is not a decadent race (which appears on the scene of history at that time), but rather a fearless, active, determined race; and the religion of Israel which entered the great Roman world at that time in the 1st Century of the common era is not a less profound religion than it was formerly. It was not an outlived faith, but rather a vital, ^{and challenging} aggressive, active faith, for during the one hundred years, ^{which} preceding the common era and one hundred years ^{which} following the beginning of the common era the Jews carried on an ^{active} aggressive missionary campaign throughout the Roman world and won thous-~~

ands of converts to Judaism even among the nobility of the Roman world.

Christianity appeared, ~~as we shall see~~
~~in a moment~~ at this time not because Judaism
had outlived itself, but ~~really~~ because Judaism
was very much alive, ^{and} ~~because~~ it was still able
to influence ~~and determine~~ other civilizations
and other faiths whom it came in contact with, ^{then},
because it was still able to act like a potent
chemical to effect new spiritual prestige when
it joined other faiths and other civilizations.

Christianity at its outset ~~was a hundred~~
percent Jewish movement, both as regards the
traditions in which it grounded itself and as
regards the leaders who guided the movement.
~~It~~ was an exclusively, ~~thoroughly~~ Jewish move-
ment. It was not a revolt against Judaism.
~~It was not a revolt against Jewish authority,~~
~~against the Torah or the temple or the priest-~~
~~hood or the leaders, the rabbis.~~ It was not
a religious ^{at all} revolt. It was not a political
revolt. It was not an economic revolt. Nor
was it a new prophetic movement in Judaism.

The founders of Christianity did not claim
to bring any new conception of God or any new
ethical code, ~~of human life.~~ Christianity in

its inception was a Jewish Messianic movement which came when it did come because the people were expecting the millennium, the advent of the thousand years of peace and righteousness which was to precede the end of the world ^{which men} ~~in~~ ^{in the world} ~~in the world~~ ^{expected} belief common among the Jews in those days was that just as the world was created in six days and enjoyed a Sabbath on the seventh day so this Mundane world would exist six thousand years, for a thousand years in the sight of God are as a day--this world would exist six thousand years only and then return to chaos for a thousand years, then to be rebuilt anew.

Now, the last one thousand years, the years from 5000 to 6000 were to be the years of the millennium, the one thousand years when absolute righteousness and justice and good will would be established, when the wicked would be destroyed and the reign of God, the kingdom of God would be established upon the earth.

Now, the chronology of the day, the calendar of the day at that time, in the beginning of the 1st century of the common era, led the people of Judea to believe that they were on the threshold of the year 5000 and that the millennium was about to begin.

Now, the millennium was to be announced and ushered in by one who had been anointed of the Lord, the Messiah, the Christ, who would announce the coming of the millennium, and whose mission would be not to bring the millennium about--for that comes about automatically through the creation of God; that was preordained in the scheme of existence--but whose ^{His} chief task would be to warn the people of its coming so that they ^{could} ~~may~~ prepare themselves ^{through repentance} ~~so that they~~ ~~may repent~~, so that they may cleanse themselves of their sin, ^{and be worthy to enter the new Kingdom} ~~so as not to be caught in that~~ ^{of the Millennium} retribution, that winnowing which would antedate the coming of the millennium. For the millennium was to be preceded by what is known as the birth throes of the Messianic day, when cleansing of sins and retribution would take place, for only the righteous would be privileged to enter the kingdom and enjoy the presence of the millennium. So that around this time, toward the middle of the 1st century of the common era there suddenly appears in Israel a whole host of Messiahs who announced the approach of the millennium and who called people to repentance.

(John was one of them and the cry of John, the message of John was, "Prepare ye, for the

kingdom of Heaven is at hand.") Jesus, the Galilean ^{was} ~~is~~ similarly persuaded about the ^{of the world} proximity of the approach of the end and he ^{to} ~~top~~, takes up the message of John and goes ^{went} through the ^{city} ~~city~~ of Galilee proclaiming ~~this~~ as his message, "Prepare ye, for the kingdom of ^{God} ~~Heaven~~ is at hand."

(He was not a prophet. He had no new ethical cult. He had no new conception of divinity to give to the world. He was one who was overwhelmed by this conviction that this order of things was coming to an end swiftly like a whirlwind, and that human beings ought to in these desperate hours prepare themselves by purging themselves of their sins and all iniquities, prepare themselves for admission into the kingdom.)

(This movement, this Messianic movement, was at first exclusively Jewish and Palestinian.)

When Jesus died and his disciples realized that the millennium had not yet come and that his mission had not yet been fulfilled, the belief grew up among them that Jesus had been resurrected and was about to come a second time to complete his work.

They continued to preach this Messianic

^{Paul}
~~ideal~~ to people. There arose ~~then~~ one whose
name was Paul, who was not a Palestinian by
birth, who had never seen Jesus in life, whose
training was probably as much Greek ~~or Hellenic~~
as it was Jewish. Paul, who was also convinced
of the imminence of the end of the world and
who also felt that the chief mission of his life
was to warn people of the approaching cataclysm,
was also convinced that Jesus was the Messiah
and that he was to return soon ~~again~~ within
the very lifetime of the disciples to complete
the work which he had began.

And Paul made his belief in the Messiahship
of Jesus an article of faith for all those who
were willing to join this Messianic fellowship,
~~and~~ Paul was not content to preach that to the
Jews of Palestine, but he wanted to preach ~~that~~ ^{it}
to ~~the~~ Jews and to ~~the~~ Jewish converts outside
of Palestine and also to non-Jews, to pagans.

In order to preach his belief to the pagan
world Paul ^{realized that} found ^{it} would be much easier to
convince the pagan world of his belief and to
admit them into his fellowship if he would not
insist upon their observance of the entire legal
system of observances and ritualism which the
Jews in Palestine observed. And so Paul decided

to set aside these legal practices and observances which ~~the Palestine authority~~ and even the Palestine followers of Jesus believed to be essential, such as the dietary laws, and the Abrahamic right of circumcision and the strict observance of the Sabbath. He set these laws aside as far as ~~these converts to Judaism~~, that is, the pagan converts to his Messianic Judaism ^{faith} were concerned.

And it is as a result of this act of Paul and his followers, ~~this anti-legalism of his~~, as well as his anti-nationalism, that the rupture set in which ultimately led to a complete separation between this Messianic ^{Jewish} sect and Judaism.

There is much in Christianity, of course, which is not Jewish in origin. There is much in it which is Greek, which may be traced to the mystery religions of that period, ~~as for~~, ~~example~~, the doctrine of the Trinity is not Jewish. In fact, it is anti-Jewish. Jewish thought had rejected it a thousand years before, ~~this time~~. The doctrine of the sacrament is not Jewish. Nor is the doctrine of mediation, the need of a mediator between man and his God a Jewish doctrine. These ^{came} ~~have come~~ into Christianity from other sources or may have

been the original conception of the Christians themselves. But the heart of Christianity, ~~that part of it which is destined to survive,~~ that is Jewish completely and thoroughly ~~and it is~~ *Israel's contribution to the Western world.* Jesus was a Jew. And if his personality, transfigured by time, has been a force in the moulding ^{of Western} civilization, in influencing the lives of untold millions, then his life and his personality ^{is} are a gift of Israel to Christendom.

All the saints of early Christendom, Jesus and Mary and Paul and Peter and the other disciples were Jews, ~~physically, spiritually--~~ *WRHS ARCHIVES* their background was Jewish; their training was Jewish; ~~their intellect was Jewish; their insight~~ *why* ~~was Jewish; their racial attitude was Jewish;~~ ~~their blood was Jewish.~~

The Sacred literature of Christendom is Jewish. Christianity is inconceivable without the Bible, ~~inconceivable without the Bible.~~ *And every page* ~~thereof,~~ *where the* ~~of the old and of the new--the so-called~~ *Testament* ~~old and new Testament--are~~ *the* the work of Jews. ~~It~~ *and the Bible* was the genius of Israel which completed this immortal book and translated into almost every known language of the day, influencing today, thousands of years later, influencing ^{ad} the course of civilization.

The Psalms which are chanted in the churches of Christianity are Jewish psalms. The prayers which are recited in churches of Christianity are ^{by and large} Jewish prayers. ~~Lastly, the~~ ethics of Christianity are Jewish ethics. There is not an ethical doctrine ⁱⁿ ~~of~~ that remarkable ethical collection known as the Sermon on the Mount which does not find its counterpart and its original in the ~~so-called~~ Old Testament, ^{with the} ~~Pauline Epistles~~ ^{Pauline Epistles} ~~and the~~ ^{Pauline Epistles} There are two or three on the surface new ethical doctrines found in the New Testament that may not be called intrinsically Jewish, and it is those doctrines which Christendom finds it difficult to carry into practice today and which Christendom has practically rejected. One is pacifism. For Jesus was a pacifist. And the other is communism. For Jesus and his followers were communists. And the third is a certain asceticism. How do these doctrines rising from your Judaism come into the system of morals of the early people? Why, simply as a result of the original conviction of the people of that day that the world was fast coming to an end. Why resist evil if evil would of itself be overcome and God will appear

and chastise the evil doer and destroy all iniquities, and God himself miraculously through his own intervention and not through the lips of human beings would establish the absolute kingdom of justice and righteousness in the world? Why then waste our energies in resisting evil?

That is why Jesus was not a political rebel. That is why Jesus said God himself will turn himself upon wrong and destroy it as he will destroy all the malefactors of society. We need not devote our energies to that colossal task. Why think of private property, why cling to it, when soon the absolute order of protection will come, when every man will live under his vine and under his fig tree. Why amass ourselves in the concerns of this life when this life is soon coming to an end?

And so out of the desperate emergencies of the day in which they felt they lived, this eschatological day, this day of the life of disaster and the new world, out of that day have come these doctrines of pacifism and communism and asceticism, which have come out and persisted in Christian thought.

~~But the~~ ^{events} ~~real~~ ethics of Christ^{dom}, justice, righteousness, love of our fellowmen, these are

^{has}
Jewish ideals which at ~~this~~ time were already long
established and part of the ^{reason the} ~~thinking and the feeling~~
of the race.

So that Israel's contribution to Christianity is vast, and rightfully may Christianity be called a daughter religion of Judaism. (It is individual and has its own life and its own personalities, its own history, and yet it is derived in the highest sense of the word from the mother religion which is Judaism. Step

Not long after the rise of Christianity the Jewish State was destroyed by Rome, the people was completely shattered and broken and scattered to the four corners of the earth. Millions were slain, millions of others were enslaved. Thousands were thrown to the lions in the arenas in the amphitheaters of the Roman world. The temple was made into ruins.

The second time a complete overwhelming disaster befell the people. And yet, miraculously enough that little people which a millennium and a half ago had come out from the unknown spaces of the desert, which had gone through this marvelous history, this people, now broken by the iron legions of Rome, beaten into the dust, did not perish--did not perish.

So strong was that simple faith, that strong

simple faith of theirs which had come out of the desert, that now, fifteen centuries later, it was still able to save the people, to save the people even when the temple was in burning ruins. The exiles founded their schools in these various places, sanctuaries for the spiritual life of the race. They no longer had a home, but they had builded for themselves a spiritual home which went with them into exile and went with them whithersoever they went, a spiritual home, a home which was the torah, a home which was their faith, a home which was this set of moral ideals which at once revolutionized the world, which was then working as a leveling force through Christianity to revolutionize the world, which was destined to carry on through the many cycles of time yet to come.

The genius of the race did not go to seed. It continued to be active and, in the fourth and fifth centuries following the destruction, when any other people would have been completely absorbed or completely destroyed, that little people--for they were never great in number; a little people, a handful in the Roman world--that little people which had resisted the legions of Rome during those four or five centuries following the destruction, that people

developed a new and a marvelous literature, a literature of law, a literature which guided human beings every moment of their lives and told them how to live lives of holiness and purity and goodness, a literature which told the people how to keep themselves a distance and a living people in a world which threatened to submerge them, a great literature of love and law, a great literature of life was created by these people during the century immediately following the terrible national disaster.

When we reach the seventh century that faith of the people was still so virile, so potent, that coming in contact with another civilization at this time, the Arab civilization, it was able to give direction and influence to that civilization, and was able to mold that religion which is today the other great religion of mankind, Mohammedanism.

On the influence of Israel on Mohammedanism I expected to speak this morning but time will not permit it. So that I shall speak of that next Sunday. I shall also speak next Sunday of the role of Israel in the middle ages, for we did much more in the middle ages than submit to persecution. We did much more than merely wear the yellow badge. We did much more. We were a

leveling force, an intellectual force during those
ages. We contributed, as we shall see, to the
renaissance and the reformation of the new world.
Of all these things we shall speak in our next
lecture.

