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# *The 'Jewish Contribution' to Christianity*

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FROM the late nineteenth until the middle of the twentieth century, Jews and their sympathizers devoted considerable research, energy, and ingenuity to the documentation of signal Jewish contributions to Western civilization. Whatever objections critics might have raised regarding the extent of the Jewish role, the positive assessment of the discipline, field, or ideal to which Jews had allegedly contributed was not usually a matter of controversy, so that the authors of this literature generally take the intrinsic value of the 'contribution' for granted.

In 1921 an American Christian recounting what 'the Jew has done for the world' listed patriotism, the prophet Samuel's 'argument that battered down the enslaving doctrine of Divine Right of kings', involvement in the discovery of America, science, mathematics, medicine, politics, poetry, philology, and law-abiding behaviour.<sup>1</sup> Four years later another book of this genre provided chapters on Jewish contributions to education, folklore, literature, philosophy, the law, scientific research, medicine, chemistry, infant welfare, art, music, drama, athletics, Eastern exploration, and citizenship. Still, even such lists, read at a later time, reveal unsuspected layers of complexity. Thus, a heading that I have skipped, 'Jewish Pioneers of British Dominion', was of course seen by the author as unequivocally positive; in our age, with its deep reservations about imperialism, that chapter inadvertently alerts us to the value judgements that underlie and potentially bedevil aspects of this enterprise, a point already evident if we contemplate how a seventeenth-century European would have reacted to the assertion that the Jewish Bible undermines the divine right of kings.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, since the Bible is the primary source

<sup>1</sup> Madison C. Peters, *Justice to the Jew: The Story of What He Has Done for the World* (New York, 1921), 23.

<sup>2</sup> H. Newman (ed.), *The Real Jew: Some Aspects of the Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (London, 1925). Needless to say, this is not the only assumption in such a book that can render a contemporary reader uneasy. Here is a description of Jewish athletic aptitude: 'The highly emotional and excitable temperament characteristic of the Jew is singularly adapted to enable the possessor to excel. . . . The alert Jewish mind is well suited to boxing and sprinting. Moreover, the Jewish mentality, the morbid anticipation that precedes competition, the almost

of the doctrine *affirming* the divine right of kings, the tendentiousness of the argument that a single speech in the book of Samuel establishes Jewish responsibility for undermining that doctrine is particularly striking. As late as 1951 we find a shorter but similar list pointing to Jewish contributions to achievements understood as self-evidently meritorious: democracy, science, medicine, exploration, and the military.<sup>3</sup>

So far, with the exception of the reference to Samuel, we have looked at headings that are relentlessly secular, and even the apparent exception congratulates Jews for a political contribution that liberated its beneficiaries from the shackles of a religious conception. But a discussion of Jewish contributions omitting the religious dimension is a quintessential example of the Hebrew adage *Ha'ikar haser min basefer* ('The main element is missing from the book'). As soon as we turn our attention to that dimension, the valuation assigned to both the Jewish characteristic and its purported consequence becomes anything but self-evident, and we are propelled into a fascinating arena of warring values and competing perceptions.

Nonetheless, even on the religious front, we find efforts to produce lists of Jewish influences on Christianity intended to sound soothing and uncontroversial, describing religions whose essential approaches are the very quintessence of harmony. A Christian writer, in a chapter entitled 'The Fountainhead of Western Religion', asserted that 'much that came to be called Christian was, in fact, the lengthening shadows of Hebraic ideas and influences'. His bill of particulars includes a sense of destiny and the unification of morals and religion, even the identity of Judaism's and medieval Catholicism's list of cardinal sins, to wit, 'the shedding of blood, sexual impurity, and apostasy'.<sup>4</sup> That 'apostasy' for Jews included the embrace of medieval Catholicism goes unmentioned.

Cecil Roth's *Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (1940), a classic work on our theme by a prominent historian, concentrates on the secular areas typical of this genre, but the introductory chapter underlines Jewish

uncanny knack of seizing opportunities are admirable. The certainty the Jew has of rising to the occasion . . . his overwhelming self-appreciation and confidence—what qualities can be more calculated to enable a man to achieve high athletic distinction? The Jew born of Jewish parents possesses physical qualities and mental qualities well suited to athletic success' (Harold M. Abrahams, 'The Jew and Athletics', in Newman (ed.), *The Real Jew*, 248–9). On the other hand, Charles and Dorothea Singer, in one of the best books of the 'Jewish contribution' genre, assert—albeit with some hesitation—that there is no Jewish race. See their 'The Jewish Factor in Medieval Thought', in Edwyn R. Bevan and Charles Singer (eds), *The Legacy of Israel* (Oxford, 1927), 180.

<sup>3</sup> Dagobert Runes (ed.), *The Hebrew Impact on Western Civilization*, abr. edn (New York, 1951).

<sup>4</sup> Vergilius Fern, 'The Fountainhead of Western Religion', in Runes (ed.), *The Hebrew Impact on Western Civilization*.

contributions to Christianity itself, and through it, to the world at large: monotheism, the value of human life, the sanctity of the home, the dignity of the marital relationship, equality of all before the one God, the messianic vision, prayer, even Christian ceremonial (baptism, Communion (from the Passover *seder*), lectionaries, and the liturgical use of Psalms).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the lengthiest list of this sort was compiled by Joseph Jacobs in 1919, and despite its general tone of apodictic certainty, it includes occasional qualifications that, once again, provide some hint of the problematics of this enterprise. In the realm of practice: prayer (especially the Psalter), the Mass or Communion, baptism, bishops (from the synagogue position of *gabai*), charity boxes, ordination of priests, religious schools, the missionary character of early Christianity (borrowed from the missionary spirit of the Judaism of the time), aspects of canon law. In the realm of theology: the kingdom of heaven, original sin ('though it must be allowed that it has received much more elaborate development in Church doctrine', while Judaism mitigated its harshness with 'original virtue', to wit, the merit of the fathers), special grace to God's favourites, the Fatherhood of God (and even, to some degree, 'the analogous conception of the Son of God'), the chosen people, resurrection, hell (though Christianity laid greater emphasis on this), repentance, confession of sin, the Messiah, the Golden Rule (though this is more practical in its negative, Jewish form), the dicta of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer, and the importance of the Law to Jesus.<sup>6</sup> Jacobs does add that while the only difference between primitive Christianity and developed Judaism is the vague one of Jesus's personality, three major distinctions eventually emerged: the Law, image worship, and the doctrine of a Man-God.

One suspects that Jacobs was well aware that some items on his list of contributions bore a more mixed message than he acknowledged. Thus, Jewish apologists generally denied the existence of any serious concept of original sin in Judaism, pointing *inter alia* to a Jewish prayer beginning, 'My God, the soul that you have given me is pure,' and minimizing the lasting effect of the sin of Adam and Eve on the spiritual nature of their descendants. Like Roth, he does not inform us that Jews through the ages, like the early Calvinists, perceived the Catholic Mass as an idolatrous ceremony, whatever its original connection to the Passover *seder*, and he does not acknowledge what Jews saw as the critical distinction between confessing one's sins to God and con-

<sup>5</sup> Cecil Roth, *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (Cincinnati, 1940), 4–13. Leon Roth, *Jewish Thought as a Factor in Civilization* (Paris, 1954), lists the messianic idea, the return to Hebrew Scriptures in Christian Reform movements, the Psalter, even the sense of sin and divine punishment.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Jacobs, *Jewish Contributions to Civilization: An Estimate* (Philadelphia, 1919), 91–100. Some of the last items should arguably have been classified as practice rather than theology. The unelaborated reference to the Sermon on the Mount relies, says Jacobs, on Gerald Friedlander's *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount* (New York, 1911).

fessing them to a human being.<sup>7</sup> He was surely not interested in noting the interesting irony that while Jews had decidedly 'contributed' the idea of the Messiah to Christianity, Reform Judaism, by abandoning belief in a personal Messiah, had recently moved away from a central element of that concept, which was precisely the one that Christians had placed at centre stage. Finally, I suspect that one of the items on his list was intended as a subtle critique of Christianity, though he deliberately left the implication unspoken. For a Jew to include 'the chosen people' in an accounting of Jewish contributions to Christianity is to underscore the argument that Christian stereotypes of narrow Jewish particularism versus Christian universalism obscure the reality that Christendom has identified itself as the new chosen people to the exclusion and perhaps damnation of the rest of humanity.<sup>8</sup>

The tendency of authors writing in this genre to avoid highlighting the Jewish clash with Christianity is sharply illustrated in Louis Finkelstein's classic, monumental *The Jews: Their History, Culture and Religion* (1949). His work is far more than an exemplar of the typical effort to establish a Jewish contribution to civilization, but this is surely a major component of its mission. In its four massive volumes, we look in vain for any serious discussion of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. The brief allusion to Christian ethics in Mordecai Kaplan's contribution affirms, as we shall see, complete commonality between the two faiths. And the editor's own, even briefer, comment on Jewish attitudes towards Christianity is quite remarkable: 'Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697–1771), one of the foremost teachers in the history of Judaism, summarized the general Jewish view regarding Christianity in the following words . . . "[Jesus] did a double kindness to the world by supporting the Torah for Jews and teaching Gentiles to abandon idolatry and observe the seven Noahide commandments".<sup>9</sup> And that is all. So does one of the most strikingly positive—and highly atypical—Jewish assessments of Christianity ever proffered by a traditional rabbi become 'the general Jewish view'.

It is worth noting that Jewish scholars and apologists during the period in question frequently affirmed that another atypical Jewish view of Christianity

<sup>7</sup> For a particularly sharp medieval example of this Jewish critique of Christianity, see my *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the 'Nizzabon Vetus' with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1979), 22–3 and n. 60, 223–4, 339.

<sup>8</sup> As we shall see more strikingly in our discussion of Leo Baeck, the assertion that Jews contributed the missionary spirit to Christianity is also noteworthy and by no means typical.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Finkelstein (ed.), *The Jews: Their History, Culture and Religion*, 4 vols (Philadelphia, 1949), iv. 1347. On the rarest of occasions, we find a Jewish scholar writing during the period under discussion who exaggerates Jewish hostility to Christianity. Thus, Samuel Krauss asserts that 'Jesus' illegitimate birth was always a firmly held dogma in Judaism' ('The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, OS 5 (1892), 143).

was in fact standard. Rabbi Menahem Hameiri of late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Perpignan had taken the position that Christianity is not to be seen as idolatry at all and that its adherents are entitled to full equality with Jews in matters of civil law because they are among the 'nations bound by the ways of religions'. Though elements of this position were shared by other medieval and early modern authorities, it is profoundly misleading to describe it as typical. Nonetheless, distinguished Jewish authors, for reasons that are not difficult to discern, often described it as such—sometimes, I suspect, in full sincerity.<sup>10</sup>

If the only dynamic in play were the assessment of the Jewish contribution to civilization, it might have been possible to sidestep the major tensions between the two faiths and affirm the Jewish contribution to Christianity by recording the bland commonalities that we have already noted—or by resorting to the silence and disingenuousness of Finkelstein's work. But during the period in which this enterprise was at its height, a period that I will delineate for the purposes of this chapter as roughly the 1890s to the middle of the twentieth century, a related dynamic was also at its height: the depiction by Christian scholars and theologians of a sharp contrast between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, and the consequent need for a Jewish response.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. my observations in 'Jacob Katz on Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages', in Jay M. Harris (ed.), *The Pride of Jacob: Essays on Jacob Katz and his Work* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 42–4. On Hameiri, see Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Rabbi Menachem Hameiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* (Heb.) (Jerusalem, 2000). An English translation of much of the relevant chapter appeared in the online *Edah Journal*, 1 (2000), <<http://www.edah.org/backend/JournalArticle/halbertal.pdf>>, accessed 11 Sept. 2006.

<sup>11</sup> A substantial scholarly literature has developed around this confrontation, providing analysis of the earlier part of the 19th century as well as the period of direct concern to us. First and foremost is the brilliant work of Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1870–1914* (Ithaca, NY, 1975). Susannah Heschel addressed the content and impact of a seminal Jewish figure's perception of Jesus in *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago, 1998). Christian Wiese's important study *Wissenschaft des Judentums und protestantische Theologie in wilhelminischen Deutschland* (Tübingen, 1999) is highly relevant in its entirety; chapter 4, which deals with particularism versus universalism, ethics versus law, and love versus fear in the context of the debate surrounding Wilhelm Bousset's *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter* (Berlin, 1903), bears most directly on our concerns. (An English translation has now been published: Christian Wiese, *Challenging Colonial Discourse: Jewish Studies and Protestant Theology in Wilhelmine Germany*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Christian Wiese (Leiden, 2005).) Ismar Schorsch, *Jewish Reactions to German Anti-Semitism, 1870–1914* (New York, 1972), 169–77, provides a succinct summary of Jewish concerns from an institutional perspective. Overviews of modern Jewish assessments of Jesus and Christianity include Gosta Lindeskog, *Die Jesusfrage im neuzeitlichen Judentum. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Uppsala, 1938); Jacob Fleischmann, *The Problem of Christianity in Modern Jewish Thought (1770–1929)* (Heb.) (Jerusalem, 1964); Walter Jacob, *Christianity through Jewish Eyes: The Quest for Common Ground* (Cincinnati, 1974); Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1984).

During the course of the late nineteenth century, the maturation of both liberal Protestantism and biblical criticism produced a concerted attack on classical Judaism. Since many liberal Protestants no longer believed the standard dogmas of Christianity, they shifted their faith's centre of gravity to the arena of ethical teaching and an intense spiritual relationship to God. The trajectory of pre-Christian Israelite-Jewish religion came to be seen roughly as follows: The early Pentateuchal documents affirmed by adherents of the newly regnant critical hypothesis reflected a naive, rather primitive perception of a God who was accessible in an immediate, almost tangible sense and whose ethical character left much to be desired. With the rise of the literary prophets, both the moral and theological understanding of God reached unprecedented heights. At the same time, the transcendent theology expressed in what the critics identified as the Priestly document of the exilic period produced a remote Deity and came to be associated with overemphasis on ritual, legalism, and arid genealogies, while in the quintessential cases of Ezra and Esther, late biblical Judaism degenerated into extreme, chauvinistic exclusivism. It is these characteristics that persisted into what came to be described as Late Judaism, that is, the Judaism of Jesus's time. Jesus himself, and Christianity after him, not only restored the highest form of religion found in the Hebrew Bible but transcended it, combining ethical selflessness with a fresh, direct experience of God without sacrificing the essence of monotheism.

Needless to say, Jews could not allow this portrait to go unchallenged. Much has been written about the Jewish indictment of Christian scholars for distorting rabbinic Judaism out of both malice and ignorance, and I will not reiterate this aspect of the argument in detail. These Jewish reactions were not without their effect; nonetheless, the old critique of the rabbis persisted in some circles into the mid-twentieth century despite all the efforts of Jewish apologists and sympathetic Christian scholars. Thus, no less a theologian than Rudolf Bultmann, notwithstanding a few pro forma qualifications, produced a chapter entitled 'Jewish Legalism' in his *Primitive Christianity* that could have been written in the 1890s. He informs us that ritual in Judaism became more important than morality, 'with the result that men lost sight of their social and cultural responsibilities'. Precepts that had become meaningless 'still had to be obeyed unquestioningly. . . . Regulations went into detail to the point of absurdity . . . This ritualism . . . sanctified the life of the community, but that sanctity was an entirely negative affair.' And on and on.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, from the late nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth, Jews faced the delicate, challenging task of balancing a complex of

<sup>12</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'Jewish Legalism', in Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity* (New York, 1956). I was first alerted to this chapter in graduate school as a result of a passing remark by Gerson Cohen.

objectives that were often in tension with one another. They surely wanted to demonstrate that Judaism played a central role in the rise of Christianity. After all, no Jewish contribution to Western civilization could be clearer than this. At the same time, they did not want to erase the line between the religions. They did not want to offend Christians, but they did not want to absorb the indictment of Judaism supinely. They wanted to embrace Jesus as their own without accepting him as a Jewish authority or granting Jewish legitimacy to the religion that he founded (or, perhaps, did not found).

In this daunting enterprise, their religious and ethical perspectives came to be deeply engaged. One of the most intriguing aspects of this study is the light shone by the historical and apologetic works of these Jews on their own differing values. What some Jews considered quintessentially Christian, others saw as a Jewish influence; what some saw as an admirable Christian belief, others saw as an unfortunate deviation; what some saw as central to Judaism, others saw as problematic and dispensable. Nonetheless, there are also broad and deep commonalities marking the Jewish assessments of the relationship between the religions.

While the range of issues marking these controversies covers a broad spectrum, several stand out in bold relief. These include the Law, particularism and universalism, ethics, the experience and conception of God, and the view of redemption and redeemer. It is to these that we now turn our attention.

On one level, Jews had long argued—inconsistently to be sure—that Jesus himself did not reject the Law.<sup>13</sup> In the modern period, the perception of a ‘Jewish’ Jesus became dominant, to the point where the distinguished German Reform rabbi Leo Baeck eloquently, though no doubt tendentiously, produced an ‘original Gospel’ consisting entirely of Jewish elements.<sup>14</sup> Beyond this point, Jews needed to defend the role of law in rabbinic Judaism itself. Two of the most distinguished Jewish scholars in Britain turned their attention to this task: Israel Abrahams in his classic essay on Emil Schürer’s caricature of rabbinic law and Solomon Schechter in his encomium to the sabbath and, more briefly, to the donning of tefillin.<sup>15</sup> Wilhelm Bousset’s invidious characterization of Judaism generated several

<sup>13</sup> See my ‘On the Uses of History in Medieval Jewish Polemic against Christianity: The Search for the Historical Jesus’, in Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron, and David N. Myers (eds), *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi* (Hanover, NH, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Leo Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1960), 98–136. This volume, published shortly after Baeck’s death in 1956, contains English translations of works written several decades earlier.

<sup>15</sup> Israel Abrahams, ‘Professor Schürer on Life under the Jewish Law’, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, OS 11 (1899), 626–42; Solomon Schechter, ‘The Law and Recent Criticism’, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, OS 3 (1891), 754–66.

Jewish reactions, most fully and notably by Felix Perles, who underscored the deep spirituality of the rabbinic concept of repentance, the joy attendant upon fulfilling the commandments (*simḥah shel mitzvah*), and the understanding of the Law as an expression of divine love.<sup>16</sup> The essential argument of these works was repeated decades later in a lesser-known essay by the Edinburgh rabbi Salis Daiches, who remarked that to those who know Judaism from within, depicting it as legalism standing in contrast to spirituality 'appears not only unfounded but also unintelligible'.<sup>17</sup>

In an ambitious, systematic response to Adolf Harnack's *The Essence of Christianity* (*Das Wesen des Christentums*, 1900), the Berlin rabbi Joseph Eschelbacher not only composed a paean of praise to the halakhah but also formulated a sharp riposte. Scholastic argument, he noted, developed Christian dogmatics through the ages. In our time, Julius Wellhausen has agreed that the basic teachings of Jesus can be found in Jewish sources but has insisted that they are submerged by a legal system in which everything is equal. Well, said Eschelbacher, did not Christian dogmatics do to the message of Jesus precisely what Wellhausen ascribes to the Jewish legal system?<sup>18</sup>

In a different mode, Moritz Güdemann argued in 1892 that the depiction of Jewish adherence to the letter rather than the spirit is itself an unfair caricature. Jewish contemporaries of Paul would not have quarrelled with the assertion that 'the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life' since the letter of various biblical laws from the *lex talionis* to the year of release were in effect set aside by rabbis in favour of the spirit. While Güdemann had no intention here of fully homogenizing Christian and Jewish attitudes towards the Law, this is a striking instance of taking a liberal understanding of the operation of rabbinic law, placing it into a conceptual framework that the rabbis themselves would not have endorsed—and thereby neutralizing a Christian objection to Jewish legalism.<sup>19</sup>

A disturbing problem for some Jews engaged in apologetics regarding the Law was generated by the fact that some of them adhered to Reform, or Liberal, Judaism, so that they rejected elements of the ceremonial law for reasons not very different from those proffered by Christian critics.<sup>20</sup> In

<sup>16</sup> See Felix Perles, *Boussets 'Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter kritisch untersucht'* (Berlin, 1903), and the discussion and references in Wiese, *Wissenschaft des Judentums und protestantische Theologie*, 161.

<sup>17</sup> Salis Daiches, 'Judaism as the Religion of the Law', in Newman (ed.), *The Real Jew*.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Eschelbacher, *Das Judentum und das Wesen des Christentums* (Berlin, 1908), 27–8.

<sup>19</sup> Moritz Güdemann, 'Spirit and Letter in Judaism and Christianity', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, OS 4 (1892), 352–3. Though this article appeared in an English journal, Güdemann resided in Vienna, where he pursued a distinguished rabbinic and scholarly career.

<sup>20</sup> I made this point in 'Religion, Nationalism, and Historiography: Yehezkel Kaufmann's Account of Jesus and Early Christianity', in Leo Landman (ed.), *Scholars and Scholarship: The*



1907 the Reform rabbi Israel Goldschmidt, in another of the book-length Jewish responses to Harnack, wrote an entire appendix to demonstrate that the differences between Orthodoxy and Reform do not undermine a proper analysis of the contrast between Judaism and Christianity. He provided an abstract, highly philosophical account of those differences, and that account enabled him to argue that the essence of Judaism is unaffected by the Orthodox–Reform divide. For him, the basic difference between the Jewish movements is not the Law per se but Orthodoxy’s assertion that the bond between God and Israel was formed in a supernatural fashion versus the Reform understanding that sees it in terms of historical evolution.<sup>21</sup>

This approach, however, by avoiding a direct confrontation with the question of the Law, left the issues raised by the Christian critique unresolved. The most striking example of a Liberal Jewish move in the direction of the Christian position on this issue appears in Claude G. Montefiore’s 1927 commentary to the Synoptic Gospels. Not surprisingly, the passage in question was noted both by Lou Silberman in his Prolegomenon to the 1968 Ktav reprint of Montefiore’s work and by Donald Hagner in his evangelically oriented analysis of Jewish approaches to Jesus, though neither of them quite captures its full radicalism.<sup>22</sup> The Gospel text in question is Mark 7: 15: ‘There is nothing outside a man, which entering into him can make him unclean, but the things which come out of a man, these are what make him unclean.’ Montefiore asserted that this is one of the two chief justifications for Liberal Judaism’s view of ‘the old ceremonial law’. First, the ‘old prophets’ said that ‘the true service of God is not ceremonial, but moral’. But they dealt with the ceremonial laws that were supposed to affect God. Jesus’s observation, on the other hand, deals with those ceremonial laws that were supposed to affect man. ‘Upon these two doctrines, the doctrine of Hosea . . . and the doctrine of Jesus . . . the new attitude of Liberal Judaism toward the ceremonial Law depends.’<sup>23</sup> Montefiore hastened to add that Liberal Judaism takes the further step of retaining the ceremonies that it values; nonetheless, we find here a remarkable citation of Jesus as an authority on a par with Hosea in undermining the binding character of sections of the Torah. While this is extraordinary and atypical, it underscores with ruthless candour a central dynamic in the Reform Jewish discourse on Christianity and the Law.

*Interaction between Judaism and Other Cultures* (New York, 1990), 154. See now Wiese, *Wissenschaft des Judentums und protestantische Theologie*, 162.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Goldschmidt, *Das Wesen des Judentums* (Frankfurt am Main, 1907), 218–19.

<sup>22</sup> Claude G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels* (first pub. 1927; New York, 1968), Prolegomenon by Lou Silberman, 11–13; Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus*, 114–15.

<sup>23</sup> Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, 131–2.

A secondary but revealing point that emerges from this discussion is Montefiore's distinction between ceremonial laws that were supposed to affect God and those intended to affect man. The former category presumably refers to sacrifices, which are ostensibly subjected to criticism in several notable passages in the literary prophets. It is highly unlikely that any pre-modern Jew would have adopted this classification except in a kabbalistic context, where other commandments as well could affect the upper worlds. Sacrifices, whatever their precise purpose, were designed to affect human beings no less than God. For Montefiore, however, they are a reflection of a primitive religious mentality in which God's behaviour is directly changed by propitiatory offerings. The prophets took one step towards a more elevated religious sensibility by decrying this crude ceremonial practice; it was left for Jesus to discern the triviality and inappropriateness of ceremonies whose theological primitivism is less evident. Perhaps, then, one should say not that Jesus is on a par with Hosea but that he stands on a higher rung than the prophet on the ladder of spiritual development.

It is a matter of no small interest that Martin Buber, who did not have a high regard for the ceremonial law, nonetheless saw both biblical sacrifice and the prophetic criticism directed against it through a very different lens.

One of the two fundamental elements in biblical animal sacrifice is the sacralization of the natural life: he who slaughters an animal consecrates a part of it to God, and so doing hallows his eating of it. The second fundamental element is the sacramentalization of the complete surrender of life; to this element belong those types of sacrifice in which the person who offers the sacrifice puts his hands on the head of the animal in order to identify himself with it; in doing so he gives physical expression to the thought that he is bringing himself to be sacrificed in the person of the animal. He who performs these sacrifices without having this intention in his soul makes the cult meaningless, yes, absurd; it was against him that the prophets directed their fight against the sacrificial service which had been emptied of its core.<sup>24</sup>

With respect to the central issue before us, Buber's dismissive attitude towards the legal component of Judaism placed him in agreement with the liberal Protestant critique. He dealt with this, as Ekkehard Stegemann has pointed out in a perceptive analysis, by identifying Jesus as a perfectly good Jew who indeed recaptured the prophetic, ethically resonant dimension of Judaism, while describing Paul as one who transformed this message into 'the sweet poison of faith'. Thus, historic Judaism contains whatever is valuable in Christianity and justly rejects that which is distinctively

<sup>24</sup> Martin Buber, 'The Two Foci of the Jewish Soul', in Fritz A. Rothschild (ed.), *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity: Leo Baeck, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Will Herberg, and Abraham J. Heschel* (New York, 1990), 126.

Christian.<sup>25</sup> Through this approach, Buber, at least in his own mind, rendered unnecessary the defence of the ceremonial law that presented such a daunting challenge to Liberal Jewish apologists.

We have already noted Eschelbacher's structural analogy between the Law in Judaism and dogmatics in Christianity. Montefiore provided the more direct analogy between Jewish law and Christian *ritual*. Thus, John would have objected to the abolition of baptism and the Eucharist just as Philo objected to the abolition of Pentateuchal Law.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Yehezkel Kaufmann, whose brilliant and original oeuvre addressed not only biblical religion but the entire span of the Jewish experience, argued that Christianity could not have prevailed over Judaism because of its rejection of the Law since Christianity itself is replete with ritual.<sup>27</sup>

Leo Baeck, however, emphasized not the similarity but the disparity between Jewish law and Christian ritual. Paul left Judaism when he embraced *sola fide* and moved from there to dogma and sacrament. Sacrament is not law in the Jewish sense; it is mystery made tangible. What then is the Law to the Liberal rabbi? In one place it is exemplified by ethics. But at the end of the essay he moves to the sabbath. 'The Law, and quite especially the Sabbatical element in it—has educated that capacity in man which is born of the depth of life—the capacity to be different.' From here he returns to his earlier emphasis on Judaism as a special synthesis of mystery and commandment. 'This is the gift and possession of Judaism.'<sup>28</sup> This last sentence encapsulates perfectly the challenge at the heart of the discourse regarding 'the Jewish contribution' to Christianity and perhaps to civilization as a whole. Jews wanted to show that they have provided a gift—but that it is still their special possession. The sabbath is an ideal vehicle for the realization of Baeck's objectives. It is an embodiment of law, but it can be affirmed without all the details of the Law; it is a gift to the world, yet it remains uniquely Jewish.

While this aspect of Baeck's argument, for all the originality of his formulation, is consistent with the mainstream Jewish attitude towards Christianity, he also proffers a highly unusual approach to the relationship between Judaism and Christian antinomianism. A talmudic statement affirmed that the world would last 6,000 years: 2,000 desolation, 2,000 Torah, and 2,000 the messianic age. Since the late twelfth century, Christians had cited this statement to demonstrate that the Torah would be annulled in the

<sup>25</sup> See Stegemann's introduction to the selections from Buber in Rothschild (ed.), *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity*, 115–16.

<sup>26</sup> Claude G. Montefiore, 'Notes on the Religious Value of the Fourth Gospel', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, OS 7 (1895), 46.

<sup>27</sup> This is part of a larger analysis of the success of Christianity in Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Exile and Alien Lands* (Heb.) (Tel Aviv, 1929), i. 292–301.

<sup>28</sup> Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity*, 177, 175, 184.

messianic age, and since the thirteenth, Jews had struggled to show that this conclusion did not follow. Baeck adduced this rabbinic passage along with some other evidence to establish precisely what Christians had affirmed all along—that the messianic age is not an age of Torah. He proceeded to argue that since this was the standard Jewish view in antiquity, Paul's rejection of the Law was deeply Jewish. His only innovation was his conviction that the final age had already arrived. In other words, Paul's belief in Jesus's messiahship required him—on Jewish grounds—to affirm the abolition of the Law. Christian antinomianism is itself a Jewish contribution to the new faith.<sup>29</sup>

Adherence to the Law was often seen as a manifestation of Jewish particularism. Christians had criticized Jews for this presumed failing as early as the Middle Ages; in early modern times, the issue rose to greater prominence, and by our period it was almost ubiquitous. A central explanation—so it was said—of Christendom's victory over Jewry is that the former bore a universalistic message while the latter was concerned only with itself. Here again Jews and their supporters demurred, but in very different ways. One approach was to emphasize the particularism of Jesus himself, who did not want to cast his pearls before non-Jewish swine and who was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.<sup>30</sup> With respect to the broader arena, a Christian writing enthusiastically of the Jewish struggle against paganism in a book bearing a philosemitic message would only affirm that Judaism had the *potential* to become a world religion, but, he said, the rabbis robbed it of its vital force through a policy of isolation. Thus, 'the role which it might have filled was handed over to Christianity'.<sup>31</sup> Yehezkel Kaufmann agreed with the final sentence but strongly rejected the reason. Judaism, he argued, was thoroughly universalist, providing everyone the option to enter the Jewish people through conversion. It was not particularism or even Jewish ethnicity per se that caused Judaism to miss its opportunity. Rather, it was the historical accident of exile that transformed this ethnicity into an insuperable obstacle. Non-Jews would have joined the Jewish people, but not a defeated Jewish people. It was the Jewish message of universalist monotheism—and that message alone—that accounted for the sweeping triumph of Christianity and then of Islam. The tragedy of Jewish history is that this victory was achieved only by proxy.<sup>32</sup>

Some Jews went even further by arguing that Judaism is more universalist than Christianity. For Israel Goldschmidt, the concept of a church is

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 154, 161–4, 241–2.

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. Samuel S. Cohon, 'The Place of Jesus in the Religious Life of his Day', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 48 (1929), 89, citing also Joseph Klausner and Montefiore.

<sup>31</sup> George H. Box, 'How Judaism Fought Paganism', in Newman (ed.), *The Real Jew*, 34.

<sup>32</sup> See my discussion in 'Religion, Nationalism, and Historiography', 159–68.

particularistic in the extreme. Unlike Christianity, Judaism is a *Schule* or an *Orden*, a school of thought or an order, rather than a *Kirche*.<sup>33</sup> Montefiore, conceding Jewish particularism, dealt with it through his openness to religious development: 'Jewish particularism is very objectionable . . . but it was happily not part and parcel of the real Jewish creed. It could be, and has been, easily got rid of.' On the other hand, John's division of humanity into saved Christians and damned others is deeply embedded in the creed, and thus harder to exorcise. If the rabbis restricted the dictum 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' to Jews—at least to some degree—John restricts it to Christians. Is this really an improvement?<sup>34</sup> Similarly, but without any overt reference to Christianity, the British rabbi and scholar Abraham Cohen affirmed that the brotherhood of man, including the salvation of righteous Gentiles, is essential to Judaism, which does not 'stipulate the necessity of a uniform creed for all'.<sup>35</sup> Needless to say, this argument goes back at least to Moses Mendelssohn and served as the stock in trade of many Jewish apologists throughout modern times.

Montefiore himself took the denial of a relationship between faith and salvation to an extreme that can be explained only by his commitment to Liberal Judaism combined with his desire to maintain what was for him a crucial contrast between Judaism and Christianity:

To all Jews, presumably to all liberal Christians, the action of God on man is not determined by the accuracy of his belief about God. We do not believe that the relation of God to man is different in the case of a Jew and in the case of a Christian. We realize that varying religious beliefs may and do have varying effects upon character, but so far as God is concerned we do not believe that he has other laws of influence and judgment for those who believe concerning him more truly or less truly, or even for those who have failed to find him altogether. Least of all do we believe that these variations of belief affect the destiny of the soul beyond the grave. . . . But inconsistently, as we believe, with the justice of God and the universalism of his providence, the author of the Fourth Gospel did presumably believe that the result of true belief. . . is the prerogative of eternal life.<sup>36</sup>

'All Jews', then, in 1895, presumably including the traditionalist masses of eastern Europe and the Muslim world, as well as their rabbinic leaders, rejected Maimonides' assertion that denial of his principles deprived the non-believer of a portion in the world to come. It is hard to envision a more striking example of parochialism than Montefiore's blinkered vision of the Jewish world in which he lived. Moreover, even if his presentation of the

<sup>33</sup> Goldschmidt, *Das Wesen des Judentums*, pp. vi–vii, 214.

<sup>34</sup> Montefiore, 'Notes on the Religious Value of the Fourth Gospel', 41, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Abraham Cohen, 'Great Jewish Thoughts', in Newman (ed.), *The Real Jew*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Montefiore, 'Notes on the Religious Value of the Fourth Gospel', 32–3.

theology of his contemporary co-religionists had been accurate, there is a transparent element of unfairness in comparing the views of the Fourth Gospel on a point like this with the Judaism of the 1890s rather than that of the first and second century.

And then there was the argument for Jewish nationalism, which in some sense affirmed the value of parochialism. The paradigmatic exemplar of this approach in our context is Joseph Klausner, a fervent Zionist who regularly utilized his scholarship as a handmaiden of his ideological commitments. Klausner insisted that monotheism itself could be preserved only through Jewish adherence to a particular national identity. Abandonment of that identity would have caused Israel—and its unadulterated monotheism—to have been swallowed up by the far more numerous nations.<sup>37</sup>

The contrast between universalism and particularism is not unrelated to the evaluation of Jewish versus Christian ethics. I have already alluded to Mordecai Kaplan's avoidance of any contrast between the ethics of the two faiths in his contribution to Finkelstein's *The Jews*. 'The Christian Gospel . . . not only retained the confidence the Jews had had in their own way of life, as well as the original emphasis upon the primacy and divine character of the ethical, but it also possessed the irresistible vigor and impetus of a new revelation.' Thus, it saved 'the ethical emphasis of Judaism from being confined to the Jewish people'. Monotheism made Judaism's teachings acceptable to the sophisticated as well as the unlettered, and 'the same is true of Christianity'.<sup>38</sup>

This irenic, contrast-free presentation is, however, highly atypical. For both liberal Protestants and Liberal Jews, a key factor, perhaps *the* key factor, defining the quintessential character of their respective religions was ethics. Since Liberal Jews were no longer committed to traditional Jewish law, and liberal Christians, as I have already noted, were no longer committed to traditional Christian dogma, it followed that unless their ethical teachings

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul* (Heb.) (Tel Aviv, 1940), ii. 220–1. The full discussion fades, as best as I can see, into near incoherence, but I hope I have captured its recoverable essence. It is no accident that, in a quite different context, the argument from the need for national survival was invoked by the Zionist historian to defend acts that raise moral questions of the most serious sort. The Hasmonean expulsion of pagans and occasional acts of forcible conversion appear unjust, says Klausner, but a different policy would have led to the destruction of Judaea and the end of the Jewish people. Faced with such a prospect, 'the moral criterion *cannot help* but retreat, and in its place there comes another criterion: *the possibility of survival*'. See *History of the Second Temple*, 2nd edn, 5 vols (Jerusalem, 1951), iii. 65–6. I discuss this and other aspects of Klausner's Zionist historiography in 'Maccabees, Zealots, and Josephus: The Impact of Zionism on Joseph Klausner's *History of the Second Temple*', in Shaye J. D. Cohen and Joshua Schwartz (eds), *Studies in Josephus and the Varieties of Ancient Judaism: Louis H. Feldman Jubilee Volume* (Leiden, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Mordecai Kaplan, 'The Contribution of Judaism to World Ethics', in Finkelstein (ed.), *The Jews*, ii. 686–7.

could be distinguished from those of rival religions, their own faith's *raison d'être* was called into question.

That this dynamic operates even in the absence of any ill will towards the Other was brought home to me with particular force in a contemporary context quite different from that of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. The State of California was preparing a religion curriculum for its schools, and a still unfinished textbook in the history of religions prepared for this purpose had elicited criticism from Jewish organizations (and, not surprisingly, from other groups as well). The Jewish concerns centred on the depiction of Judaism in the time of Jesus. I was asked to comment on these criticisms and quickly realized that, *mutatis mutandis*, I had been transported back into the days of Schürer, Bousset, Harnack, Eschelbacher, Abrahams, Perles, et al. This time not a trace of antisemitism could reasonably be attributed to the authors, and yet they faced an intractable dilemma. How are the career and significance of Jesus of Nazareth to be presented in a school textbook? Separation of Church and State precludes the affirmation that he was the Messiah and Son of God who died for our sins. At the same time, the United States is a predominantly Christian country, so that Jesus cannot be presented simply as a charismatic preacher who taught more or less what his contemporaries taught but somehow so inspired his disciples that they succeeded in founding a religion centred upon him. What remains is precisely what remained for liberal Protestants in Europe a century earlier: a depiction of Jesus as the bearer of an ethical message distinct from that of his surroundings and markedly superior to it. While many of those liberal Protestants went well beyond what this structural dilemma had forced upon them, to a significant degree they had little choice.

Perhaps the most systematic—and one of the most combative—Jewish works arguing that whatever is admirable in Jesus's ethics is Jewish, while the rest is not particularly admirable, was Gerald Friedlander's *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount* (1911).<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting in this connection that scholars, both Christian and Jewish, of the early twentieth century were not unaware of a methodological issue that has attained particular prominence in our own generation, to wit, the problem of using rabbinic materials, which have come down to us in a literary form that does not pre-date the second century, to characterize first-century Judaism. Friedlander cites several Christians who made this point with respect to various concepts, most notably the Fatherhood of God, but he argues vigorously, in part by resort to New Testament criticism, that the evidence of rabbinic texts and liturgy can justly be used to argue for Jewish priority.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See n. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Friedlander, *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount*, 129–34.

Joseph Klausner also asserted that the key ethical categories of Judaism are equal or superior to those of Christianity. Thus, Paul's *agape* is simply Jewish love; indeed, he may have refrained from ascribing the principle of loving one's neighbour specifically to Jesus (Rom. 13: 8–10; Gal. 5: 13–14) precisely because he knew that this emphasis was already that of Hillel. At the same time, excessive emphasis on love can eclipse justice, so that Pauline love may be appropriate for the individual, but it cannot serve as the basis for social or national life. I think it is fair to maintain that Klausner and other Jews saw justice as a quintessential Jewish contribution to civilization but did not see it as mediated through Christianity except perhaps in the technical sense that Christians served as a conduit for the Hebrew Bible. I am tempted to say, in a reversal of the medieval Christian assertion, that Christians served as the book-bearers of the Jews.

Yehezkel Kaufmann, in his argument that Christian ethics did not provide the attraction that accounted for its victory over Judaism, made the particularly acute point that if Christians were so ethically sensitive they would have chosen Jewish civil and criminal law over the torture-ridden Roman *corpus iuris*.<sup>41</sup> But the most striking Jewish reversal of the argument from Christian ethical superiority was made by Leo Baeck. Christianity, he asserted, is the ultimate romantic religion, and the romantic stays away from law, from commandment, from the sphere of good and evil—and hence from ethical action as the highest ideal. Indeed, for Paul and Luther faith is counterposed to all works, not just the ceremonial. Paul made moral demands because he was rooted in Judaism, but ethics are merely an appendage to his religion as well as to that of later Christians. 'In the Church, ethics has basically always caused embarrassment. It was there—it had been introduced by the Old Testament which had been accepted as part of the Bible—but the faith lacked any organic relation to it.'<sup>42</sup>

Despite the centrality of the ethical moment, liberal Christians who had forsaken much of Christian dogma did not rest their case for Christianity on ethics alone. Harnack's famous account of the essence of Christianity spoke also of the kingdom of God, the Fatherhood of God, and the infinite value of the human soul, and especially emphasized the immediacy of Jesus's relationship with God. Eschelbacher's is the most detailed, systematic Jewish response to these assertions, appealing both to the biblical prophets and to rabbinic aggadah to establish the vibrancy of the Jewish encounter with the divine.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Kaufmann, *Exile and Alien Lands*, i. 405–6, noted in my 'Religion, Nationalism, and Historiography', 166.

<sup>42</sup> Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity*, 192–3, 249–51, 256. The standard approach of Jewish apologists in the exchange about ethics is exemplified by Moritz Lazarus, *Die Ethik des Judentums* (Frankfurt am Main, 1898, 1911).

<sup>43</sup> Eschelbacher, *Das Judentum und das Wesen des Christentums, passim*.



Buber made a major point of insisting on the reality of the Jew's immediate personal relationship with an imageless God.<sup>44</sup> And Montefiore insisted with vigour and eloquence that the doctrine of the Incarnation was not needed to bridge the gap between God and man. Jews 'from Isaiah to Jesus and from Jesus to Mendelssohn' did not feel what a Christian writer described as 'despair at the seemingly hopeless task of climbing the heavens and finding the unapproachable God'. Indeed, says Montefiore in a somewhat different context, the complete incarnation of the Logos at a particular time and place substitutes 'something mechanical, sensuous, spasmodic, magical' for the gradual unfolding of God's plan for the world.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, a word about eschatology. That Judaism 'contributed' to Christianity its concept of a redeemer hardly needs to be said.<sup>46</sup> Jews through the ages concentrated on stressing the differences between the Jewish criteria for identifying the Messiah and those of Christianity, not the obvious commonalities. Thus, *inter alia*, the Jewish Messiah is a human being, not a denizen of the heavens. But the genre we are examining can produce, as we have already seen, some surprising assertions of influence. In this case, Leo Baeck, while of course rejecting the conception of a fully divine redeemer, insisted that the concept of a supernatural Messiah was indeed borrowed from Judaism. Baeck was convinced that the figure 'like a [son of] man' in Daniel 7 who comes with the clouds of heaven is in fact the pre-existent Messiah. Thus, 'faith had long raised the figure of the Messiah beyond all human limitations into a supra-historical, supra-terrestrial sphere. He was endowed with the radiance of the heavens and transfigured above the earth.' Buber maintained that the son of man in Daniel is a 'still indefinite image', and even this is too strong a depiction of a figure who is almost certainly nothing more than a symbol. But Baeck sees him as a supernatural Messiah, so that the basic building block of the Christian messianic conception is not merely in extra-biblical apocalypses but in the Jewish Bible itself.<sup>47</sup> Baeck does, however, make a point of noting that the Greek word *soter*, or saviour, which is applied by Luke to Jesus, is a term whose Hebrew equivalent is used in the Jewish Bible about God alone.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (New York, 1951), 130-1. A Christian scholar writing in our genre also stressed that 'the Fatherhood of God' is a Jewish term, but could not refrain from adding a qualification about the fresh vitality infused into it by Jesus. See Francis C. Burkitt, 'The Debt of Christianity to Judaism', in Bevan and Singer (eds), *The Legacy of Israel*, 72.

<sup>45</sup> Montefiore, 'Notes on the Religious Value of the Fourth Gospel', 66-7, 40.

<sup>46</sup> Burkitt, 'The Debt of Christianity to Judaism', 95-6, makes the related observation that 'the reality and eternal significance of time', the awareness that reality is a grand drama to be played out but once, is a lesson learned from Judaism by all forms of Christianity.

<sup>47</sup> Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity*, 66, 148; Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, 112.

<sup>48</sup> I cannot resist noting a personal experience with the term *soter* in the context of Jewish-Christian relations. In 1995 the Open University in Israel distributed an eight-part

No less surprising is Baeck's identification of the Christian missionary spirit as a function of Jewish influence. The modern affirmation of Jewish universalism and tolerance, going back to Mendelssohn's emphasis on the portion of ethical non-Jews in the world to come, led Jews to characterize Christian mission as a function of a regrettably intolerant spirit. Not so Baeck. Romantic religion, he says, looks inward, possessing the promise as a gift. It was the Jewish element in Paul, with its 'confidence in the meaning of man's exertions', that gave Christianity its missionary impulse, which remains strongest in those Christian groups who are closest to Judaism and the Old Testament.<sup>49</sup>

The project of demonstrating the Jewish contribution to civilization was simultaneously easiest and most difficult when the object of Jewish beneficence was Christianity. Jews wanted to show that they had enriched the world through their daughter religion, but they did not want to render her as attractive as her parent. What is Jewish and what is not, what is Christian and what is not, what is legalistic and what is not, what is ethical and what is not, what is particularistic and what is not—these questions and more provide a window not only into the dynamics of Judaism's encounter with a dominant faith but into its struggle to define its own contours and to penetrate the depths of its soul.

video of discussions between Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Marcel Dubois about Judaism and Christianity that had taken place in 1992 (*In Two Octaves*). The conversations were held in Hebrew, and the video supplied English subtitles. I was asked to comment on two of the instalments when the series was shown on a cable TV channel in New York, and so I read the English carefully. Near the end of the second programme, Leibowitz tells Dubois that Paul did a terrible thing by denying halakhah and insisting that everything depends on the *soter*. The term recurs about five times at the end of that instalment and the beginning of the third. The translator, who knew Hebrew and English but had no understanding of theology or of Greek, recognized *soter* as a perfectly good Hebrew word, and repeatedly provided the incoherent translation 'refuter' or 'refutation'. When I noted this, I had to struggle to convince the moderator that the translation was incorrect.

<sup>49</sup> Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity*, 284–9. We recall that Joseph Jacobs had also included Christian missionizing in his lengthy list of Jewish influences on Christianity. See n. 6.

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THE JEWISH  
CONTRIBUTION TO  
CIVILIZATION



*Reassessing an Idea*



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