

*Religion, Nationalism, and Historiography:  
Yehezkel Kaufmann's Account of Jesus  
and Early Christianity*

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To open a volume by Yehezkel Kaufmann is to embark upon an intellectual adventure. A stimulating, polemical style draws us into the presence of a creative and probing mind that scrutinized the problems of the Jewish experience from the religious struggles of the biblical period to the Zionist controversies of the twentieth century. One does not read Kaufmann: one confronts him.

Though Kaufmann is best known for his monumental *Toledot Ha-Emunah HaYisre'elit (History of the Religion of Israel)*,<sup>1</sup> which presents a strikingly original, sweeping reevaluation of the biblical evidence for the faith of ancient Israel, his earlier *Golah VeNekhar (Exile and Alien Lands)*<sup>2</sup> examines the even larger canvas of Jewish history as a whole with the broad vision and penetrating brilliance that are the hallmark of his work. The ambitious subtitle, "A Historical-Sociological Study of the Question of Jewish Destiny from Antiquity to the Present," is almost understated: *Golah*

1. 8 vols. Tel Aviv, 1937-56. See also Moshe Greenberg's abridged translation, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago, 1960).

2. Tel Aviv, 1929 (hereafter cited as *Golah*). All references are to vol. 1 unless otherwise indicated.

*VeNekhar* is probably the only serious effort to construct a detailed philosophy of Jewish history in this century.

Shortly after the publication of the book, Yitzhak Baer expressed puzzlement at the surprisingly lengthy treatment devoted to the rise of Christianity, and he attempted to account for it as an expression of Kaufmann's emphasis on the power of a handful of abstract ideas.<sup>3</sup> There can be little doubt, however, that at least two additional motives were at work. First, although Kaufmann made rather promiscuous use of the phrase "of unparalleled interest" in characterizing historical phenomena, the reader cannot avoid the impression that when he described "the formation of a gentile religion out of a Jewish nationalist movement" as "a development full of unparalleled historical interest,"<sup>4</sup> he really meant it. One reason for Kaufmann's lengthy discussion is simply that the subject fascinated him. More important, these chapters are in fact central not only to the major themes of *Golah VeNekhar* but to Kaufmann's entire life's work. The mission and destiny of the Jewish people, as Kaufmann understood them, were illuminated by an understanding of the rise of Christianity—indeed, they could not be comprehended without it. Consequently, an examination of his discussion of Jesus and early Christianity will afford us insight not only into one of the major developments in human history but also into one of the most ambitious and perceptive works in modern Jewish historiography.

If Kaufmann was a complex thinker, the rise of Christianity is an even more complex phenomenon, and the work before us demands analysis within an unusually multifaceted context: the history of Jewish attitudes toward Jesus and Christianity, the perceptions of Jesus in nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship, the impact of Jewish nationalism on the historiography of the Jews, and Kaufmann's own original and challenging *oeuvre*. Thus, we shall have to embark upon a lengthy, somewhat superficial, but unavoidable and, I hope, not uninteresting detour before returning to *Golah VeNekhar*.



To most medieval Jews, Jesus was a sorcerer justly executed for enticing his compatriots away from the purity of their ancestral faith, while the religion that he founded was idolatry pure and simple. Even in the Middle Ages, however, a variety of factors impelled some Jews to a more nuanced examination of these perceptions. With respect to Jesus himself, a careful reading of

3. *Qiryat Sefer* 8 (1931/32): 313.

4. *Golah*, p. 336.

the Gospels revealed an anti-Christian argument far more effective than the hurling of insults against "the hanged one": it appeared that the very figure whom Christians worshipped had rejected the mantle of divinity and demanded observance of the Torah (e.g., Luke 18:18-19 and Matthew 5:17-18). Medieval Jews who utilized this argument were careful not to depict Jesus in glowing terms, but several of them insisted upon his essential loyalty to both Jewish theology and Jewish law. It was only the tragic distortion of Jesus' original teaching—perhaps by Paul, perhaps by later Christians—that had caused the fateful abyss that now separates the two faiths.<sup>5</sup>

Similar ambiguities are evident in the medieval Jewish evaluation of Christianity. On a theoretical level, there was a need to explain the role of the Christian faith in the divine economy, and a number of Jews—most notably Maimonides—regarded both Christianity and Islam as means of spreading knowledge of Torah in preparation for the messianic age.<sup>6</sup> Although Maimonides considered anyone who accepted Christianity an idolater, he apparently saw no impediment to the belief that God would utilize (even initiate?) an idolatrous faith for a holy purpose. While this position is not paradoxical in any technical sense, the positive role assigned to Christianity could not coexist comfortably with the assessment that Christians were idolaters, and this tension may have contributed somewhat to a more charitable evaluation of Christian faith by later Jews. The medieval Jew most famous for such a reevaluation, Rabbi Menahem HaMeiri of Perpignan (1249-1316), appears to have been motivated largely by moral considerations. Concerned about talmudic passages that discriminated against gentiles, he argued that they referred only to the barbaric heathens of ancient times; Christians, who adhere to the limits imposed by the mores of civilized faiths, must be treated in accordance with the most rigorous ethical standards. HaMeiri also declared that Christians were not idolaters. These declarations, however, are innocent of any theological analysis and appear secondary to the ethical criteria that he established.<sup>7</sup>

5. The most important and effective expression of this argument is Profiat Duran's *Kelimat HaGoyim*. See Frank Talmage, *Kitvei Pulmus LiProfiat Duran* (Jerusalem, 1981).

6. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Melakhim* 11:4, in the uncensored version. See the discussion in Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, "The Reformation in Contemporary Jewish Eyes," *Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Proceedings* 4, no. 12 (1970): 240-242 = "HaYehudim Mul Ha-Reformazia," *Divrei HaAqademia HaLeumit HaYisre'elit LeMadda'im* 4, no. 5 (1970): 62-64.

7. On HaMeiri's attitude toward Christians, see Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 114-128; E. E. Urbach, "Shi'at haSovlanut shel R. Menahem HaMeiri—

The most influential formulation exculpating Christians from the sin of idolatry resulted from economic pressures and had to be thoroughly misinterpreted before yielding its ecumenical meaning. In order to permit certain commercial ventures with Christians, medieval Jewish authorities would sometimes argue that contemporary Christians were not truly attached to idolatry or that they merely followed the customs of their forefathers. In one such discussion, a ruling was issued permitting the acceptance of an oath from a Christian despite the fact that the oath would contain a Christian formula. One element of this ruling is of genuine theological interest. A leading tosafist conceded that Christians might have Jesus in mind when they take an oath in the name of God; nonetheless, he said, Jews need not be concerned about engendering this oath as long as Jesus was not mentioned by name, particularly since the intention of the Christian was "to the Creator of heaven and earth." Thus, while the worship of Jesus presumably remains idolatrous, the God Christians worship is ultimately the true Creator. The sharpest way to formulate this position is through an oxymoron: to at least one tosafist, Christianity is idolatrous monotheism or monotheistic idolatry. This striking perception doubtless resulted from considerations having little to do with a careful analysis of Christian theology, and no medieval Jew expressed it so clearly; nonetheless, I think that it is a fair extrapolation from the text before us.<sup>8</sup>

This section of the ruling, however, had less resonance for later Jews than the following passage, which was the one subjected to a highly significant misinterpretation. Non-Jews, we are told, "were not commanded regarding *shittuf*" ("partnership" or "association"). Properly understood, the phrase almost surely meant that when Christians take an oath, they may associate the name of God with that of the saints (who are not divinities even in Christianity),<sup>9</sup> but some early modern Jews took it to absolve gentiles from

Meqorah U-Migbeloteha," in *Peraqim BeToledot HaHevrah HaYehudit Bimei HaBeinayim U-Vaet HaHadashah—Muqdashim LiProfessor Y. Katz* (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 34-40; J. Katz, "Od al Sovlanuto HaDatit shel R. Menaḥem HaMeiri," *Zion* 46 (1981): 243-246; Yaakov Blidstein, "Yahasו shel R. Menaḥem HaMeiri LaNokhri—Bein Apologetiqah LeHafnamah," *Zion* 51 (1986): 153-166.

8. The best text of this discussion is in R. Yeruḥam ben Meshullam, *Sefer Toledot Adam VeHavvah* (Venice, 1553), 17:5, fol. 159b. See also *Tosafot Sanhedrin* 63b, s.v. *asur*, and cf. *Tosafot Bekhorot* 2b, s.v. *shemma*.

9. This point continues to be widely misunderstood by both historians and talmudists. For what I think is an essentially accurate understanding, see *Maḥazit HaSheqel* in the standard editions of *Shulhan Arukh Oraḥ Hayyim* 146:2, s.v. *yithayyev*. In at least one edition (currently

the prohibition of believing in a divine partnership. As time passed, this understanding was eagerly embraced by many Jews, not for the old economic reasons, but as a means of fostering improved relations in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance.

Although the Jewish folk attitude toward Jesus continued to be decidedly pejorative, more positive assessments made considerable headway among influential modern Jews. Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697–1776) made the striking assertion that Jesus and even Paul did not aim their message at Jews; rather, their intention was to convince gentiles to observe the laws that Judaism considers obligatory for “the descendants of Noah.” Moreover, the distortions of later Christianity should not obscure the fact that in the final analysis this mission was largely successful.<sup>10</sup> Moses Mendelssohn replied to a question by expressing his respect for the moral character of Jesus, though only with the understanding that the latter had made no claims of divinity for himself.<sup>11</sup> Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jews discovered that the assertion of Jesus’ Jewishness served two remarkably disparate purposes: it fulfilled the old polemical goal by appealing to the authority of Jesus to challenge the Christian rejection of Judaism, and by describing the founder of Christianity with sympathy and even enthusiasm, it could serve as a vehicle for alleviating interfaith tensions.

Ironically, the development of liberal religious trends in the nineteenth century actually served to exacerbate these tensions. Both Reform Jews and liberal Protestants emphasized the uniqueness of their own religion’s ethical message, but there was really no substantive difference between the ethical positions of the two groups. Hence, what was once an argument about content had now become an argument about turf. For many Christians who had abandoned fundamentalist beliefs, the need to denigrate Jewish ethics was especially compelling; such Christian scholars, who tacitly and even explicitly conceded the old arguments about dogmas and Christological verses to the Jews, needed to move the center of gravity to the question of ethics, where they could still award victory to Christianity.

printed by A. Friedman), the relevant paragraph in *Mahazti HaSheqel*, which asserts that trinitarianism is forbidden as idolatry even to gentiles, was deleted, no doubt because of Christian censorship or Jewish fear; in another edition (currently printed by M. P. Press), the word *lo* was mistakenly omitted from the phrase *ben (or benet) Noah lo niztavvu al zeh*.

10. See Blu Greenberg, “Rabbi Jacob Emden: The Views of an Enlightened Traditionalist on Christianity,” *Judaism* 27 (1978): 351–363.

11. See Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Philadelphia, 1973), pp. 204–205.

With specific reference to the image of Jesus, Christians who had serious doubts about his divinity were impelled to defend his unique role by portraying him as ethical innovator par excellence. To accomplish this, it was necessary to depict first-century Judaism in the darkest possible hues: arid, legalistic, hypocritical, and exclusivist. The superiority assigned to the ethics of Jesus in particular and of Christianity in general became so central in the consciousness of nineteenth-century Christians that it plays a crucial role not only in scholarly works but in the writings of missionaries like Alexander McCaul<sup>12</sup> and in the fulminations of overt anti-Semites. The self-centered Jew, obsessed with legal minutiae and insulated by a particularistic ethic, stood in sharp contrast to the Christian, who was liberated from the stultifying letter and concerned with universal salvation and a morality that taught undifferentiated love for all mankind.

Jewish apologists responded along a broad front. Christians, they said, had distorted the character of rabbinic Judaism out of both ignorance and malice. There is nothing significant in Jesus' ethical pronouncements that cannot be found in rabbinic literature; indeed, the only real novelty in such texts as the Sermon on the Mount is the pushing of certain ethical doctrines *ad absurdum* so that no human being could realistically be expected to comply. Moreover, Christians show no understanding of the power of religious law to produce spiritual inspiration. One of the great ironies in this Jewish response is that Reform Jews, who had rejected many Jewish rituals for deficiencies not so different from those ascribed to them by Christians, now found themselves producing rhapsodic elegies to the spiritual beauties of talmudic law.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Jewish writers insisted that concern for universal salvation is a manifestation of Judaism far more than of Christianity. It is Judaism that teaches that righteous gentiles who observe the Noahide covenant attain salvation; the Christian impulse to convert the world arose precisely out of the intolerant conviction that all nonbelievers are condemned to the eternal torments of hell.

12. See McCaul's *The Old Paths* (London, 1837).

13. See, for example, Israel Abrahams, "Professor Schürer on Life under the Jewish Law," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, o.s. 11 (1899): 626-627. On the general debate, see the references in Ismar Schorsch, *Jewish Reactions to German Anti-Semitism, 1870-1914* (New York, 1972), p. 257, nn. 63-65. I have noted some of the points in these paragraphs in my "Jewish-Christian Polemics," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York, 1987), vol. 11, pp. 389-395.

14. R. H. Hiers and D. L. Hollard in the introduction to their English translation, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia, 1971), p. 2.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the image of Jesus as a figure whose *raison d'être* was ethical reform received a serious jolt from Christian historiography itself. In 1892, Johannes Weiss published his *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiches Gottes*, which "marks the turning point from nineteenth- to twentieth-century New Testament research."<sup>14</sup> Weiss's emphasis on the eschatological dimension of Jesus' thought and his expectation of a wholly new world<sup>15</sup> was reinforced by Albert Schweitzer's *Das Messianitäts- und Leidensgeheimnis: Eine Skizze des Lebens Jesu*<sup>16</sup> and further reinforced by the latter's enormously influential survey, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.<sup>17</sup> To Schweitzer, Jesus was convinced that a radically new order was upon us, and the extreme ethical demands that he made should be understood as an interim ethic to be observed for the briefest of periods until the world as we know it would be supplanted by the new order.

Some Christians, of course, were disturbed not only by the deemphasis of Jesus' ethics, but also by the assertion that his central obsession was a conviction that failed to materialize; nevertheless, the new stress on his proclamation of an apocalyptic kingdom inspired greater interest in his perception of the role that he would play in that kingdom. Thus, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were also marked by a renewed examination of the term "son of man" and its context in Daniel 7:13 and especially in the apocalyptic book of I Enoch; a growing number of scholars came to believe that Jesus' use of this term meant that he may have regarded himself as an angelic savior, the celestial son of man who would descend with the clouds of heaven to redeem the righteous and inaugurate the Kingdom of God. This conception does not sit well with the belief in a national Messiah from the house of David, but it was regarded by some as an embryonic manifestation of precisely the tensions that culminated in the divine Messiah of mature Christianity.

These developments in Christian historiography coincided with the rise of the modern Jewish historical consciousness, which was especially concerned with the nature of Jewish nationhood and religion and with the special character and mission of Israel. As early as the first half of the nineteenth century, Nahman Krochmal attempted to construct an overarching theory of Jewish history in which Jews would be subject to the normal processes of historical causation while retaining an almost metahistorical uniqueness.

15. See, for example, the English translation, p. 93.

16. Tübingen and Leipzig, 1901.

17. London, 1910. German original, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: eine Geschichte der lebens-Jesu-forschung* (Tübingen, 1906)

Nations, he said, grow, flourish, decline, and die; the Jewish people grows, flourishes, declines—and then begins to grow once more. Since it is ultimately spiritual force that sustains a people, and since the Jewish collective is sustained by unalloyed, “absolute” spirit, it can avoid the inevitable destruction that marks the end of the saga of all other nations.<sup>18</sup> Heinrich Graetz, the greatest Jewish historian of the nineteenth century, was less concerned with abstract philosophy of history, but in his major essay “The Structure of Jewish History,” he attempted to delineate the special character of Judaism as an amalgam of a unique religious idea and a political and social theory. In a later work, he spoke of the unfinished mission of spreading the ethical message of Judaism, and his writings are permeated by intense Jewish pride to the point where non-Jews attacked him for parochialism and the German Jewish *Gemeindebund* excluded him from its committee of scholars lest his approach offend the gentile world.<sup>19</sup>

Graetz’s most distinguished successor, Simon Dubnow, wrote during a period in which Zionism and other forms of Jewish nationalism moved to center stage on the Jewish agenda. In Dubnow’s ideology of autonomism, or diaspora nationalism, the affirmation of Jewish nationhood was essential, but a national homeland was not; indeed, the need for a land was symptomatic of a lower level of national identity. Although Dubnow was more of a materialist than Graetz, he argued that Jews had transcended the sort of nationality that is based on racial kinship or even the nation state and had attained the rarest and most exalted level—nationality rooted in spiritual-cultural identity.<sup>20</sup>

18. *Moreh Nevukhei HaZeman*, chaps. 7–8, in *Kitvei R. Naḥman Krochmal*, ed. Simon Rawidowicz, 2nd ed. (Waltham, Mass., 1961).

19. See Heinrich Graetz, *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, translated, edited, and introduced by Ismar Schorsch (New York, 1975), editor’s introduction, esp. pp. 39, 59. See also Schorsch, *Jewish Reactions to German Anti-Semitism*, p. 45.

20. On Dubnow’s views of Jewish history and his relationship to Graetz, see Robert M. Seltzer, “From Graetz to Dubnow: The Impact of the East European Milieu on the Writing of Jewish History,” in David Berger, ed., *The Legacy of Jewish Migration: 1881 and Its Impact* (New York, 1983), pp. 49–60. On levels of nationality, see Dubnow, *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism*, ed. Koppel S. Pinson, (Cleveland, 1958), pp. 86–95, and Oscar I. Janowsky, *The Jews and Minority Rights (1898–1919)* (New York, 1933), pp. 57–60. See also Reuven Michael, “Al Yiḥudan shel Toledot Yisrael Be’Einei Jost, Graetz, VeDubnov,” in *Temurot BaHistoriyyah haYehudit HaHaDashah* (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 501–526, which contains some additional references. On the views of Dubnow and Aḥad HaAm on national character and their relationship to Kaufmann, see the discussion in two very similar articles by Laurence J. Silberstein: “Religion, Ethnicity, and Jewish History: The Contribution of Yehezkel Kaufmann,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42 (1974): 516–531, and “Exile and Alienhood:



Though the religious overtones have been eliminated, there are echoes of Krochmal here: the Jewish spirit prevails where lesser nations could not survive. Within the secular context of Dubnow's thought, however, the critical role of religion in Jewish culture became particularly problematic. To a secular Jew who defined Jewish nationhood in largely cultural and historical terms, that defining culture had to be extricated, at least in significant measure, from its traditional religious matrix. Despite fundamental differences, a similar problematic faced cultural Zionists: the national cultural revival that would be facilitated by a Jewish center in the land of Israel would be profoundly different from the religious culture of the exile. In this case, however, the return to the land itself could be cited as both catalyst and justification for the elimination of religious practices whose function was perceived as the temporary preservation of a people in the unnatural state of dispersion.

The quest to define the nature of Jewish nationhood and religion and to identify the uniqueness of the Jewish mission remained at the center of Jewish historiography for much of the twentieth century. Yitzhak Baer began his classic *History of the Jews in Christian Spain* with a controversial introduction of doubtful relevance which set forth his position on the distinctive social message of the sages of the Mishnah as a leitmotif of Jewish history; later, he abandoned Spain with single-minded determination to concentrate on the earlier period, in which the wellsprings of the Jewish character and mission were to be found. Gershom Scholem expanded the historiographical parameters of the Jewish religion itself, arguing that the rationalist inclinations of nineteenth-century historians had created a hostility to mysticism which precluded a true understanding of its vital role in the Jewish experience. Joseph Klausner, whose *Yeshu HaNozri (Jesus of Nazareth)* was the first significant treatment of Jesus in modern Hebrew, would often judge historical figures by their loyalty to the Jewish national cause which he so fervently advocated. Nonetheless, Klausner regarded his work on early Christianity as a landmark of objectivity; his description of Jesus as "the ethical personality par excellence" was resented by many Jewish readers, but he laid equal stress on the Jewish sources of much of that ethical message as well as the drawbacks of Jesus' exaggerated formulations. In essence, Klausner the nationalist wanted to reclaim Jesus for the Jewish people without exempting him from the critical scrutiny that every Jewish instinct required. Though

Klausner himself did not entirely ignore the Middle Ages and was especially proud of his essay on the philosophy of Solomon ibn Gabirol, his concentration on the Second Temple and modern Hebrew literature is symptomatic of an approach that characterized many other Zionist theoreticians: the glories of Jewish history are to be found only in the sovereignty of the remote past and in today's heroic struggle toward a national renaissance.<sup>21</sup>



These themes—Jewish nationhood, religion, and mission—form the core of Yehezkel Kaufmann's work. National identity, he argued, is based essentially on racial kinship and a common language. At the same time, he insisted on the supreme historical importance of the power of ideas; in the case of the Jewish people, it was an extraordinary religious idea that served as the vital force in its formative period and as the key guarantor of survival amidst the stress and distress of exile. *Golah VeNekhar* and the later collection *BeHevlei HaZeman*<sup>22</sup> contain biting attacks on economic determinism and its denigration of the role of ideas in history. In a particularly striking passage, Kaufmann observes that Marxist materialism itself stems from the driving idea of social justice; ironically, he says, what emerged from this catalyzing force was a system that felt impelled to deny its own idealistic roots.<sup>23</sup>

Not only is the Jewish religious idea central to the history of Israel; it is unique and almost primeval. From the moment the Jewish people emerges on the stage of history, Kaufmann argued, it is driven by a faith unprecedented and unparalleled: there exists but one God, and that God transcends nature, is not subject to magical manipulation, and cannot be grasped in mythological terms. Monotheism is not merely a matter of numbers: the nature of the biblical God is at least as striking and significant as the fact that He is the sole divinity. The ordinary processes of pagan religious development might have produced one god, but only ancient Israel, by an intuitive leap whose etiology must elude historians, produced one God. Moreover, this faith was not the preserve of a small elite. On the contrary, its power and significance rest on the fact that it permeated the consciousness of the people as a whole. Biblical religion was the popular religion of Israel.

Though Kaufmann was far removed from any sort of fundamentalism,

21. Valuable insights into Klausner's ideology and self-perception can be gleaned from his autobiography, *Darki Liqrat HaTeHiyyah VeHaGeullah* (Tel Aviv, 1946; 2nd ed., Tel Aviv, 1955).

22. Tel Aviv, 1936.

23. *Golah*, pp. 51–55.

there are elements in his thesis that are congenial to traditionalist views,<sup>24</sup> and they are surely conducive to the nurturing of Jewish national pride. The essential core of this position is already present in *Golah VeNekhar*, but its classic expression came in Kaufmann's *Toledot HaEmunah HaYisre'elit*. In this work, he inveighed against standard biblical criticism for its blurring of the distinctions between Israelite monotheism and the pagan religions of the ancient Near East, and he argued that concentration on details (occasionally even nonexistent details magically called into being through textual emendation) had blinded scholars to the monumental evidence in the biblical record. It is often the absence of a fundamental idea that constitutes a monumental phenomenon, and Kaufmann was keenly sensitive to what he perceived as critical omissions: no magic, no true, deeply rooted mythology, no syncretism, a failure even to understand the theology of paganism and the consequent perception of polytheistic religion as fetishism and nothing more, the absence of charges of idolatry in biblical narratives covering the very periods in which the literary prophets appear to describe rampant polytheism.

Though biblical monotheism arose in a particular ethnic group with a strong sense of national identity, the monotheistic idea could not help but transcend narrow nationalism and assume a universal mission. By the time Christianity appeared upon the scene, Judaism had a long-standing commitment to a doctrine of religious conversion in which prior ethnic identity played virtually no role. Jews had long believed that the knowledge of the universal God could and should be spread throughout the world with no national impediment. Despite the significance of the physical people of Israel in Jewish lore, from a legal perspective the door to conversion was wide open, and many Jews in the Roman world were urging gentiles to enter it. Jewish universalism left nothing to be desired.<sup>25</sup>

Christianity, however, did appear upon the scene with its own version of a universal calling, and it is finally time to turn our attention to Kaufmann's central assertions about its origin, its mission, and its hero. There is a special fascination, he says, in the transformation of Christianity from a sect founded

24. The observation was made by Menahem Haran, "Al Gevul HaEmunah," *Moznayim* 24 (1967): 52-53. Note too Moshe Greenberg, "Kaufmann on the Bible: An Appreciation," *Judaism* 13 (Winter 1964): 86: "Though himself not a man of faith, Kaufmann leaves room for the answer of faith to the phenomenon of the Bible." It is especially worth noting that the responses to Kaufmann's central thesis have been marked by a striking irony. The desire of traditionalists to affirm the monotheism of ancient Israel produces the inclination to explain away prophetic denunciations of idolatry, while radical critics insist on taking them at face value.

25. See, for example, *Golah*, pp. 220, 224, 255, 292.

by a Jewish messianic figure into a universal faith that encompassed the world. Jesus was thoroughly Jewish, but his message, ironically, was narrower than that of mainstream Judaism in the first century. In the eschatology of the biblical prophets, which continued to dominate the messianic vision of many Jews, the people of Israel prevail over the nations of the world and are the instrument of universal redemption, but the framework of the present order remains intact. To the increasingly popular apocalyptic mentality, on the other hand, an entirely new world was imminent, and that world was not seen through the prism of national divisions. This, however, did not make its message more universal; on the contrary, apocalypticists tended to envision the utter destruction of the gentiles as well as of most Jews.

Jesus, then, who was a major representative of this world-view, was not only unconcerned with gentiles and the imminence of their destruction; he was convinced that a majority of Jews would also be doomed in the impending cataclysm. Repentance would save a small sect of Jewish believers, and despite some lovely ethical sentiments, the key moment in that repentance is the acceptance of Jesus himself. Kaufmann argues vigorously that Jesus' forgiving of sins and his performance of exorcisms through his own power demonstrate that he used the term "son of man" in the apocalyptic sense; though he had no pretensions to divinity, he regarded himself as a celestial being destined to redeem the world. The central teaching of Jesus, then, is the imminent kingdom to be ushered in by the apocalyptic son of man who is now among us.

Though this conception largely obscures the national mission of the traditional Jewish Messiah, that mission could not be fully exorcised. Thus, Jesus came to Jerusalem for the purpose of being crowned king of the Jews. His execution, which was an entirely unanticipated disaster, came at the instigation of the Jewish authorities on the grounds of false prophecy and blasphemy. Indeed, many tentative believers may have regarded the threat of execution as the best way to force him to produce the sign that so many had requested. In Kaufmann's typically sharp and felicitous formulation, Jesus was crucified even by those who believed in him.<sup>26</sup>

Within Judaism, belief in a crucified Messiah could survive only in sectarian form, but the mission to the gentiles began to succeed just as the message to the Jews was being largely rejected. Ironically, says Kaufmann, it was precisely the narrowness of Jesus' teaching that led to Christian universalism. The Jewish rejection of the good news was received with special bitterness

26. *Ibid.*, p. 394.

and perplexity precisely because the Christian message was initially directed only to Israel. Hence, the idea was born that Jewish rebelliousness had led to the transfer of the gospel and the election from carnal Israel to the gentiles.

To Kaufmann, the ultimate success of the Christian mission was not due to ethics, which were neither new nor central; it was not due to the downgrading of ritual, which did not really occur and would in any case have had little impact (circumcision aside) on the attractiveness of the faith; nor was it due to the universal character of Christianity, which was no greater than that of Judaism. Christianity, like Islam, prevailed because of the power of the Jewish message. It was that message and that message alone which swept away the pagan world. Monotheism could not be accepted directly from the Jews because Judaism, through the accidents of history, had come to be associated with exile and defeat. Thus, it was indeed Jewish national identity that served as a stumbling block for gentiles, but this was not a limitation stemming from the national dimension of Judaism as an idea; rather, it was one that had been created by the fortuitous historical circumstances of destruction and exile. The gentile world could not identify itself with a dispersed and defeated nation. This obstacle needed to be removed, and Christianity and Islam removed it.<sup>27</sup> In the final analysis, however, it is Judaism that conquered the world.<sup>28</sup>

This brief summary does not begin to do justice to Kaufmann's richly textured and brilliantly argued thesis,<sup>29</sup> but it does afford us the opportunity to take a closer look at several salient features of his presentation. In a sense, although Kaufmann's argument owes nothing to Maimonides, he has reproduced the tension of the Maimonidean analysis in a new and sharper form: to both thinkers, Christianity is an idolatrous religion whose essential mission is the destruction of idolatry. In Maimonides, there is no need to mitigate the idolatrous element in Christianity in order to accept this conclusion, since it is solely through the spreading of the Torah that the mission is achieved. Despite the gradualism which is the hallmark of the Maimonidean position, the final transformation of Torah-oriented idolaters into monotheists will come through the intervention of the Messiah *ex machina*, so that Christianity does not have to generate the monotheistic impulse directly.

27. For this crucial discussion, see *ibid.*, pp. 292-301.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 306-314.

29. On the day after Kaufmann's funeral, Abraham Malamat told Chaim Potok that Kaufmann's discussion of the rise of Christianity is "one of the most significant chapters ever written on the subject." See Potok, "The Mourners of Yehezkel Kaufmann," *Conservative Judaism* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1964) : 3.

Kaufmann, on the other hand, wrote after many generations of Jewish efforts to see Christianity in as monotheistic a light as possible, and he was able to utilize this perspective in the service of his central theme without rejecting the classical Jewish perception of Christian idolatry. If the concept of Christianity as idolatrous monotheism is implicit in the tosafists, it is explicit in Kaufmann. It is true that Christianity is a semipagan religion. Jesus has been worshipped for centuries as a god,<sup>30</sup> and this idolatrous belief may have grown out of his own grandiose (though nonidolatrous) self-perception. Early Christianity was marked by an increasing emphasis not on ethical values but on the mythological-magical character of Jesus,<sup>31</sup> and it was this emphasis that separated the new religion from Judaism, thus eliminating the barrier that the Jews' defeated condition had erected between them and the world of potential converts. For anyone familiar with Kaufmann, the term "mythological-magical" immediately conjures up the image of pagan religion par excellence. In other words, the monotheistic dimension of Christianity was the positive force that enabled it to prevail, while the polytheistic dimension was the facilitating force that allowed the monotheistic appeal to overcome the obstacle of Jewishness. And so—this idolatrous faith destroyed idolatry; this idolatrous faith spread precisely because its mission was the destruction of idolatry; at its core, this idolatrous faith is not idolatrous at all.

While modern Jews had generally recognized the essentially monotheistic character of Christianity, they had tended to emphasize its residual paganism and its abrogation of the Torah as the central elements in its success. Otherwise, why should it have prevailed over Judaism? Thus, Kaufmann's *emphasis* on Christian monotheism is unusual in Jewish writing, and his position on this question is essential to the significance of his entire life's work. The bulk of that work was devoted to the Jewish monotheistic idea and its impact on history, and it was crucial to him to insist that this idea had conquered the world not as a secondary, largely obscured element in a system deriving most of its power from other sources, but as the central, driving force of history. Kaufmann was not studying the religion of a Near Eastern people, however important it may have been; he was studying the belief that had changed the world. Though he was, of course, aware that polytheism was not fully uprooted on a global scale (and on rare occasions he speaks of Europe and western Asia rather than the world), the sweeping, almost poetic rhetoric of

30. *Colah*, p. 375.

31. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 407-408.

his perorations on this theme reveal his deep emotional involvement with a universal upheaval that he regarded as the core of his work.

Not only does Kaufmann insist that Jewish monotheism was the single positive factor in the success of Christianity; he is concerned to deny even a facilitating role to those characteristics of Christianity that were regularly cited as evidence of its superiority to Judaism. Thus, as we have already seen, he utterly dismisses universalism, ethics, and the discarding of ritual. On the whole, his arguments are forceful and often persuasive, but one of those arguments reflects a methodological problem that besets Kaufmann's work in a variety of contexts. He asserts that the prevalence of ritual in Islam, including even circumcision, constitutes decisive proof that Christianity's deemphasis of ritual cannot have been a major reason for its success.<sup>32</sup> Kaufmann has often been criticized for excessive emphasis on the power of ideas at the expense of a careful, empirical examination of less exalted historical forces, and this is a case in point. Islam spread from the outset in the context of military conquest. Christianity did not. Perhaps ritual is indeed a critical obstacle to the widespread acceptance of a new religion, but it is an obstacle that can be overcome by the sword. Eventually, of course, Christianity too spread through the exercise of concrete pressure, and in a different context, Kaufmann distinguishes between the period in which it converted individuals and the time when it began to convert groups. He does not, however, relate this transition to the ability of the church to mobilize the powers of the state: the distinction between attracting individuals and converting entire groups is analyzed solely in terms of the different ways in which they respond to the power of an idea and to the obstacle of Jewish exile.<sup>33</sup> Despite the probable validity of Kaufmann's essential point about ritual, the methodology of his analogy to Islam reflects a disregard of the sort of specificity that can often be achieved only by a descent from the rarefied heights of the history of ideas into the cluttered trenches of social, political, and military history.

In the service of his thesis, Kaufmann must downgrade the substantive differences between Judaism and Christianity by reducing them almost solely to the question of authority.<sup>34</sup> Although at a later point in his analysis he makes some brief remarks about the religious reasons for Jewish disbelief, the body of his discussion of the "conflict of covenants" gives little consideration to the possibility that substantive theological considerations can underlie the

32. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 422-423.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 314-333.

decision to reject the authenticity of a particular Messiah. The failure to fulfill biblical prophecy is not as incidental a concern as Kaufmann indicates; it goes to the heart of one's definition of the Messiah. Nor can it be asserted with serene confidence that the doctrines of later Jewish mysticism demonstrate Jewish flexibility of such magnitude that even belief in a divine Messiah might have been absorbed by mainstream Judaism.<sup>35</sup> There is much to Kaufmann's point that we are dealing largely with a dispute about covenants, but his minimizing of crucial distinctions results from his central theme: Christianity acted as the messenger of Judaism.

As for Jesus himself, Kaufmann's analysis once again reflects elements both old and new. Like his Jewish predecessors, Kaufmann sees little that is new in Jesus' ethics. Many Jews who made this point, however, agreed with Christian scholars that ethics lay at the heart of Jesus' message, and we have already seen Joseph Klausner's emphatic reiteration of this perception. Kaufmann, on the other hand, adopted the image of Jesus as a man obsessed with the apocalypse and his own role in the Kingdom of God.

At this point, we must confront a characteristic of Kaufmann's work which is rather disturbing and is by no means isolated. Kaufmann creates the strong impression that his analysis represents an original break with the portrait of Jesus the ethical preacher that is maintained almost universally by Christian scholars. It is true, he writes, that a small minority of such scholars reluctantly recognize Jesus' messianic claims, but even they attempt to strip those claims of any political dimension. These brief remarks appear at the beginning of the chapter on Christianity.<sup>36</sup> The footnote accompanying them refers to a concession by Wellhausen that there is a bit of truth in Reimarus' assertion of Jesus' messianic self-consciousness, and it continues with the observation that "Eduard Meyer also disagrees" with those who deny the value of the evidence for Jesus' messianism, although he believes that Jesus had "no political intentions."<sup>37</sup> And that is all. Kaufmann's crucial subchapter entitled "The Apocalyptic Messiah" is bereft of a single reference to the secondary literature on this theme.<sup>38</sup>

As we have already seen, the issues of the apocalyptic kingdom and the meaning of "son of man" were at the cutting edge of European New Testament scholarship at the time that Kaufmann wrote. Even before the turn of the century, Wilhelm Baldensperger had discussed Jesus' use of the term

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 315.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 339-341.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 340-341, note 1.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 355-379.



"son of man" in the context of its apocalyptic use in Daniel and I Enoch, and had even noted the implications of Jesus' forgiving of sins, which is one of Kaufmann's central points.<sup>39</sup> The works of Weiss and Schweitzer moved the apocalyptic kingdom to center stage. Kaufmann's grudging reference to Meyer gives no indication of the substantial discussion in *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums* of the possibility that Jesus perceived himself as a celestial, apocalyptic "son of man," a possibility that Meyer takes very seriously even though he does not embrace it with conviction.<sup>40</sup> Two years before the publication of *Golah VeNekhar*, a major scholarly conference was held in Canterbury which has been described as "the true triumph of apocalyptic in the interpretation of the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus."<sup>41</sup> Not a whisper of this intellectual ferment can be discerned in *Golah VeNekhar*.

While Kaufmann may have been only partially aware of the most recent research on the frontiers of New Testament scholarship, he surely knew more than he told his readers. Moreover, this is not an entirely atypical phenomenon in Kaufmann's work. Some scholars have leveled criticisms against his history of biblical religion not only for ignoring developments after Wellhausen that might have required him to shift the focus of his study<sup>42</sup> but also because he pays no attention to scholars whose views came closer to his own.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, the positions of those scholars are not close enough to Kaufmann's to sustain an accusation of unacknowledged dependence or even of an inappropriate failure to cite virtually identical views. With respect to *Golah VeNekhar*, however, Laurence Silberstein has noted omissions of major proportions, though he makes the point in muted tones. Thus, "none of the major writings of the historical-sociological tradition are referred to in the pages of *Golah VeNekhar*" despite the subtitle of the work and the evident influence of this school of thought in a variety of fundamental ways.<sup>44</sup>

39. Wilhelm Baldensperger, *Das Selbstbewusstsein Jesu im Lichte der messianische Hoffnungen seiner Zeit*, 2nd ed. (Strassburg, 1892), pp. 182-192, and esp. p. 172.

40. Vol. 2 (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1921), pp. 330-352, 446-447.

41. Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia, 1963), p. 56. The proceedings of that conference were published in *Theology* 14 (1927): 249-295.

42. Stephen A. Geller, "Wellhausen and Kaufmann," *Midstream* 31, no. 10 (December 1985): 46.

43. Jon D. Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs (Philadelphia, 1987), p. 291.

44. "Historical Sociology and Ideology: A Prolegomenon to Yehezkel Kaufmann's *Golah VeNekhar*," in *Essays in Modern Jewish History: A Tribute to Ben Halpern*, ed. Frances Malino and Phyllis Cohen Albert (East Brunswick, N.J., 1982), p. 181.

Again, "Although Kaufmann makes no reference to Durkheim, Rudolf Otto, or Weber, there are many similarities" between his views and theirs.<sup>45</sup> Silberstein deduces from this that although Kaufmann was surely aware of these thinkers, he "came to these issues by way of philosophy."<sup>46</sup> The most likely explanation for this recurring phenomenon probably lies in Kaufmann's penchant for polemical style. The argument in virtually all his works is structured dialectically and builds through a critique of earlier views. In this context, references to thinkers and scholars who anticipated important points in Kaufmann's position is structurally inconvenient, and he succumbed to the temptation of leaving them out. While there is little doubt that the remarkable dramatic impact of his work would have suffered from adherence to the proper conventions of scholarly acknowledgment, there is equally little doubt that in the final analysis this is no excuse.

These observations should not be allowed to obscure the fact that even with respect to the particular point about Jesus' apocalyptic views, the fundamental thrust of Kaufmann's discussion is original. All the Christian scholars who wrestled with the issue remained deeply committed to Christian apologetics, and the reader of Kaufmann's analysis certainly comes away with a perception radically different from those that permeate the works of Baldensperger, Weiss, Schweitzer, and Meyer. Moreover, Kaufmann's deemphasis of the ethical element in Jesus' teaching extends into his discussion of the early church, where he argues for the ethical inferiority of Christianity through a strikingly original argument which is considerably sharper than the usual Jewish observations about the unrealistic extremism of Christian moral ideals. The new religion, he says, was so unconcerned with ethics that it rejected not only Jewish ritual but also the entire corpus of Jewish civil and criminal law—a corpus self-evidently superior to the torture-ridden *corpus iuris* of the Romans with which Christians were perfectly satisfied to live.<sup>47</sup>

The discussion of Jesus' career and particularly his trial demonstrates that Kaufmann had an eye for detail as well. In an important respect, this discussion breaks with the *Tendenz* of modern Jewish scholarship and apologetics and stands firmly rooted in the Jewish Middle Ages. In Kaufmann's view, the Jews did crucify Jesus, or at least they were responsible for the crucifixion. Virtually all modern Jews regarded such a position as inimical to fundamental Jewish self-interest, and Kaufmann's willingness to assert it is a striking indication of remarkable courage and independence. For all its boldness,

45. *Ibid.*, 186.

46. *Ibid.*, 181.

47. *Golah*, pp. 405-406.

however, the discussion of this point is marked by a serious flaw. Kaufmann argues that Jesus could properly have been executed as a false prophet, even according to mishnaic law, for refusing to provide a sign authenticating his messianic claims.<sup>48</sup> In fact, a person who refused to provide a sign might well forfeit his right to be believed, but he would not forfeit his life. Only a prediction or sign that did not materialize could be grounds for execution, and nothing in the sources indicates that this had occurred. If Jesus claimed to be the Messiah but refused to produce a sign, the only evidence strong enough to justify his execution would be the fact that he died without redeeming the world. Jews presented that evidence to the court of history, but it was too late to present it to a court of law.

In any case, Kaufmann's Jesus died as a false prophet. He had no unique ethical message, and neither did Christianity. He did not deemphasize ritual, and neither, at first, did Christianity. We have already noted Kaufmann's explanation for the transformation of the Christian message into a universal one, and here his crucial point was not to deny that Christianity developed this characteristic but to insist that Judaism had possessed it for centuries before the dawn of the new faith.

This assertion of Jewish universalism leads to a final, fundamental, and tragic tension in *Golah VeNekhar*. Kaufmann was a committed Jewish nationalist who saw the great Jewish mission as the dissemination of the monotheistic idea on a supranational, universal scale. Judaism made this possible by effectively abolishing the criterion of nationality through the establishment of religious conversion. But this sacrifice, if indeed it was a sacrifice, was to no avail, since the impediment of exile reintroduced the obstacle of ethnicity. Thus, the mission could be fulfilled only through the agency of Christianity and, later, Islam. Religion preserved the Jews as a national group, and in an age of nascent nationalisms, there was finally hope for the removal of the albatross of exile. Kaufmann regarded this as a consummation devoutly to be wished, though he wrestled with the dilemma of what would preserve the Jewish nation in a postreligious world.<sup>49</sup> In the

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 391–393.

49. See his "Hefez HaQiyum HaLeumi," *Miqlat* 4 (June–August 1920): 194, cited by Silberstein in all three of his articles on Kaufmann. (See nn. 20 and 44 above.) See also *Golah* II, p. 427.

After this article was submitted for publication, C.W. Efromson's translation of the relevant section of *Golah VeNekhar* appeared under the title *Christianity and Judaism: Two Covenants*, Jerusalem, 1988.

deepest sense, however, it is impossible to avoid the feeling that the national redemption of Israel comes too late. The nation's unique mission lies in the past, and its fulfillment has been achieved by proxy.

It is no accident that after completing *Golah VeNekhar*, Kaufmann turned his full scholarly attention to the biblical period, when the quintessential insight of the Jewish people was exclusively theirs and when the mission of Israel was still to be fulfilled. Kaufmann was no Toynbee, and his Jewish people, poised on the threshold of a national renaissance, was no fossil. Nonetheless, there is a disquieting sense that the nation's truly heroic age can never be recovered. In the chapter on Christianity, for all its celebratory rhetoric about Judaism's conquest of the world, lies the fundamental tragedy of *Golah VeNekhar*.

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