

THE MESSIANIC IDEA IN CONTEMPORARY JEWISH THOUGHT¹

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ON the eve of the Sabbath and Festivals a hymn is regularly sung in all Synagogues and Jewish homes, called 'Yigdal' (Magnificat). It contains in poetic form thirteen principles of the Jewish faith, originally formulated in the twelfth century by Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher who had such a profound influence on his contemporaries (such as Thomas Aquinas), and among them there is a verse which runs, 'He will send our Anointed (Messiah) at the end of days to redeem them that wait for the end—his salvation'.

That is one of many allusions to the coming of the Messiah in the Hebrew Prayer-book in general use today. Some of them actually mention his descent, as the phrase in the Festival Amidah: 'May our remembrance rise and come and be accepted before thee . . . together with the remembrance of Messiah, the son of David'. Sometimes a synonym is used, as in the opening paragraph of the Amidah: 'Blessed be thou O Lord our God Who wilt bring a redeemer (Goel) to their children's children (i.e. of the patriarchs) for thy name's sake', or in the prayer for the Royal Family in England which ends—'and may the redeemer come unto Zion'. More often still (as in the Alenu prayer) the worshipper petitions God to hasten on the age of redemption for Israel and for mankind, when 'God's kingdom shall be established on earth and all the children of flesh will call upon thy name'.

When we examine the liturgy of any modern religious community two questions of fundamental importance immediately arise: (1) whence did the ideas and beliefs it embodies originate? and (2) how far are these ideas—and this is particularly important with regard to a very ancient liturgy like the Jewish—held today by those who belong to the religion concerned? For we know that the sanctity and authority attached to forms of worship are such that they are not easily changed even when the ideas they express no longer appeal to, or have the same meaning for,

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the majority of worshippers. (It is interesting in this context to note the elimination of the phrase 'perfidios Judaeos' from the Good Friday liturgy through the action of the present Pope, a change for which Jews throughout the world are profoundly grateful.) The Jewish liturgy dates from the Gaonic period (sixth century) but, though some prayers are much more recent, others go back to biblical times and the Second Temple. When, therefore, we consider what part the messianic idea plays in contemporary Jewish thought, we shall have to examine what this concept first meant to its creators, and then what it means to the various sections of the Jewish people today.

A study of the origins of Messianism shows that it was a blend of several types of aspiration and belief about the future, and this means both the future of Israel and of mankind as a whole. It was first formulated in the minds of the Hebrew prophets, later carried on in the thought of apocalyptic writers of what is sometimes called the Daniel literature, and finally given form and substance in the Rabbinic period. The Hebrew root from which the word Messiah is derived means 'to anoint'. Its later and religious connotation came from the practice of anointing with oil anyone (e.g. a king or priest) who was to be sanctified or specially marked out for the service of God. Even a heathen prince, Cyrus, is called 'my Messiah' by a Hebrew prophet of the captivity, for his task was to deliver God's people out of the hand of their oppressors. Gradually, however, the term came to be associated with the idea of a prince of Davidic descent who should establish Israel at the head of the nations and inaugurate an epoch when 'the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established at the top of the mountains and all nations shall flow unto it'. This conception coupled the spiritual supremacy of the Jewish people with an age of peace and prosperity for all men.

A second, rather different, figure emerges from certain chapters of the Second Isaiah. Here for the first time we find suffering beginning to be interpreted in terms of its vicarious purpose. In the so-called servant songs, the messianic figure, possibly as an individual, but more likely the elect people of God, symbolically personified, has to play the humiliating role of scapegoat. They were to be despised and rejected by the nations, the chastisement of whose sins was to be upon them. But in the end their suffering would prove to be their glory and many transgressors would be

turned to righteousness by it. The impact of this teaching upon the whole life and ministry of Jesus cannot be too strongly emphasized. And it must be remembered in this context that the belief of the early Christian Church was not a ground of division between them and other Jews.

Thirdly, while it would appear that the figure visualized in the messianic passages of the prophets is that of a human ruler, there emerged during the Hasmonean period another quite different figure of apocalyptic literature, the 'Son of Man'. There is some doubt about the meaning of the title. In Ezekiel it is used simply to signify a frail child of man, or Adam; in the later apocalyptic books (e.g. Daniel and Enoch) the Son of Man is a supernatural figure who appears in the clouds and receives dominion over all people in perpetuity. We may say that the Messiah came to be thought of as the ruler of the new kingdom in so far as it was to be brought about in history, while the Son of Man would be enthroned by the direct intervention of God. The latter conception was therefore more free from any particular aspirations on the part of the Jewish people. It is most completely expressed in a book of the first century B.C., *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*.

Then shall the Lord raise up a new priest,
 And to him all the words of the Lord shall be revealed;
 And his star shall arise in Heaven as of a King,
 Lighting up the light of knowledge as the sun the day . . .
 And there shall none succeed him for all generations for ever,
 And in his priesthood the gentiles shall be multiplied in know-
 ledge upon the earth,
 And enlightened through the grace of the Lord.

(*Testament of Levi*. XVIII. 2-9.)

This concept, though it had a profound influence on Christian theology, was in the main rejected by the Rabbis. This is made clear by Dr Epstein in his recent 'Pelican' book in the chapter dealing with Rabbinic Judaism, and it may be said that Rabbinic Judaism is in general the Judaism of today. Here is what he wrote:

The kingdom of God in the scheme of Judaism will be ushered in by the Messiah. The Messiah will be the central dominating figure of an age which will witness the reign of righteousness on earth, a righteousness which will bring universal peace and plenty, plenty of the things necessary for a religious life, with-

out taking away the need for sacrifice on behalf of ever-widening and growing ideals. But the Messiah in Jewish teaching is not a supernatural being, nor a divine being, having a share in the forgiveness of sin; much less is he to be confused with God. At the highest the Messiah is but a mortal leader who will be instrumental in fully rehabilitating Israel in its ancient homeland, and through a restored Israel bring about the moral and spiritual regeneration of the whole of humanity, making all mankind fit citizens of the kingdom.

Before leaving the background picture with reference to Messianism and showing the effect it has on the Jewish outlook of today, a word should perhaps be said about the disillusion which has been experienced by the Jewish people in regard to this boldly imaginative but perhaps too facile and optimistic concept at different stages in their history. Jewish history, it is sometimes said, teems with false Messiahs—that is the appearance of persons in many countries (a Rabbinic passage says the Messiah will appear in Rome) who claimed in each age to be the anointed messenger divinely ordained to redeem the people of Israel as a prelude to the advent of *Olam Haba*, the world to come or the Kingdom of God. Even before the beginning of the Christian era there was a group of men—we may call them the Apocalyptic Pharisees—who emphasized the supernatural element in the messianic belief, and looked for an immediate sign of deliverance from heaven. Josephus tells us that they were always urging the people to follow them into the desert, and he mentioned two 'false prophets', Theudas and a certain Egyptian, who were put to death by the Roman government after their promise to perform certain miracles had proved a delusion. Then there was the great rebel leader Bar Cochbar (Son of the Star) acclaimed even by Rabbi Akiba as a military Messiah, who led a formidable, and for a time successful, insurrection against Hadrian in 132, when he ordered a temple to be erected to Jupiter Capitolinus on the sacred site of the ancient Jewish Temple. It proved in the end a ghastly failure and led to the ruthless Hadrianic persecutions. Finally there is the romantic career of Sabbatai Zevi. He was born in Smyrna in 1626 and his father was an agent of an English firm. Hence he came aware of the fifth monarchy dreams of the English Puritans and was also profoundly influenced by Jewish mystical or Cabbalistic writings, e.g. the *Zohar*, which incidentally led to

the return of the Jewish community to England just over three hundred years ago. Sabbatai became convinced that he was no other than the long-awaited Messiah and such was the uniqueness and fascination of his personality that he was acclaimed by almost the whole Jewish world. The story of his meteoric rise, his marriage to a Polish convert to Catholicism, his subsequent downfall and final embracing of the Moslem faith is too well known to be repeated here. But, though a small sect continued allegiance to him after his death and a number of pseudo-Messiahs followed him, his fraudulent career proved a final disillusionment to the vast majority of the Jewish people, and no figure of comparable stature has been acclaimed as Messiah since his day.

In what ways have these early religious teachings about the coming of the Lord's anointed messenger and their subsequent strange, almost bizarre, expression in Jewish history, affected Jewish thought today? To answer that question we will have to make some examination of Jewish contemporary life and consider the various ideological groups into which the community is divided. But there are two basic views, one negative, the other positive, held in common by almost the whole of the Jewish community. First, the idea of the intervention of a supernatural agent to bring about the world's salvation, which belonged to the Apocalyptic school of thought has been virtually discarded. 'The Jewish Messiah', writes Joseph Klausner, 'is truly human in origin, of flesh and blood, like all mortals.'

Secondly, any narrow national militaristic ideas, which may have applied to the messianic concept, have entirely disappeared. The messianic hope is today concentrated on the future happiness, peace, and harmony of the whole of mankind, and this has been beautifully expressed in a passage from the late Chief Rabbi's *Book of Jewish Thoughts*:

When the harp of Judah sounded, thrilled with the touch of inspiration Divine, among the echoes it awaked in the human heart were those sweet sounds whose witcheries transport the soul into the realms of happiness. The melody has been our source of courage, our solace and our strength, and in all our wanderings we have sung it. It is the music of the messianic age, the triumph hymn to be one day thundered by all humanity, the real psalm of life, as mankind shall sing it when Israel's world-task of teaching it shall have been accom-

plished. Its harmony is the harmony of the families of the earth at last at peace, at last united in brotherhood, at last happy in their return to the One Great Father. (H. Kareira Mendes, 1887.)

So much for the general messianic vision shared by the whole Jewish community today. But now we have to consider three variations on this central theme, three ways in which there is or may be, some division of opinion or different shades of emphasis between the various sections of the community. They relate to: (1) the concept of the Messiah as a person; (2) the transforming of this to a belief in the coming of the messianic age; (3) the role played in this context by the Holy Land and in particular the present State of Israel.

Broadly speaking, the Rabbinic school of thought, which represents orthodoxy, the fundamentalism of the oral Law, still adheres to a belief in the coming of a personal Messiah. This, as has been said, is explicit in the language of the orthodox prayer-book as well as in such customs as the placing of an extra cup of wine on the Passover Night table ready for Elijah the prophet, 'the harbinger of the Messiah'. But even a section of the orthodox have given up the idea of a personal messenger of God, and substituted a belief in the advent of the messianic age, with its particular challenge to the people of Israel. This applies, too, to the whole Reformist and Liberal movement. Here let me quote some words from a recent book by a Liberal Jewish minister, the Rev. John Rayner, called *Towards Mutual Understanding*. He has been discussing the Christian belief in Jesus as the Messiah, and he writes: 'From the point of view of Liberal Judaism the question whether Jesus was the Messiah does not really arise. For it does not believe in a personal Messiah at all, but only in a messianic age. It does not believe that redemption will come through the agency of one individual, but through the collective progress of mankind under the guidance of God.' It should be added that there is complete agreement between them and the Orthodox that the test of the messianic age must be the establishment of universal justice, brotherhood and peace, and that this is still a consummation devoutly to be wished and to be striven for.

Finally there is the complication introduced by modern Zionism. How far is this a messianic, how far a purely political, movement based on national revival and social expediency?

The answer is that both elements have played and are playing a part in the building up of the State of Israel and perhaps to some extent are interlocked. They may be found respectively in the writings of Achad Haam and the policy and career of Theodore Herzl. 'In a word', as Sir Leon Simon writes in *The Jewish Heritage*, 'the apocalyptic and the strictly common-sense elements in the age-long hope of the exiled Jewish people for a return to its own land are so inextricably bound up together that any attempt to isolate the one group of motives from the other is artificial. The messianic hope cannot properly be described as either religious or political so long as these two terms are regarded as antithetic.'

This is expressed with great conviction and sincerity. I must, however, add my own deep misgiving about the claim that the modern State of Israel, whatever the hopes of its founders, has in practice any right (more for instance than this country) to be considered as messianically informed. It may readily be conceded that the building of the new State has been a triumph of courage, idealism and hard work. It has given new hope to great numbers of human beings who had lost everything, it has brought the maimed and the sick back to health, it has in places turned the desert into a highway. But there is a terrible, obverse side to the picture. The creation of the new state has not proved an unmixed blessing. To many concerned it has brought nothing but misery and despair. It has been the indirect means of uprooting hundreds of comparatively innocent people from their homes and causing them to live in penury and squalor. It has offended the religious susceptibilities of both traditionalists and progressives by much of its legislation. It has unsettled and in many cases obliterated the Jewish communities in a number of countries, where they represented an advanced section of the population. It has caused a state of tension among surrounding countries which oscillates between a cold and a fighting war.

We cannot on this evidence, whatever the provocations which Israelis face, accord the title Messianic to such a State. It is (I suppose that this is inevitable in the modern world) a secular State like other states, whose policy is based on expediency, self-interest and the will to survive. Had it been a messianic State the first thing it would do would be to bring back the Arab refugees to their homes. It could never for a moment acquiesce in the

deplorable conditions which prevail in the refugee camps. 'Is this the fast that I have chosen? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house?' (Is. iv, 3). Nor would it root out through its secret service and entirely illegal methods, a persecutor of its people from a peaceful country in South America, in order that it may enact the punishment he undoubtedly deserves. Here there is an issue on which the views of different sections of Jews seem at the moment to be irreconcilable.

I say for the moment, for fundamentally they are at one in their deeper aspirations for the messianic age and in regarding themselves as a messianic people. And it is on this note of agreement that I should like to close. The deepest and most cherished conviction of the Jewish people is that they have been consecrated, ever since the Sinaitic revelation and through their long, unique history of suffering and service, to keep undimmed before men's eyes the sublime messianic vision of a united humanity. They are specially qualified for this role by their dispersal among the peoples of the world. 'And the remnant of Jacob shall be among many nations as dew from the Lord, as showers upon the grass' (Micah. v). Theirs is a fertilizing and regenerative task, one they now share with many Christians and other religious groups. For the Hebraic idea of the messianic age is not just a piece of escapism, a rhetorical flight, an idle dream about an unreal world remote from our own. It is realizable in the world of time and space as we know it. It can be brought nearer and ever nearer by men's effort, working in harmony with the will of God. As Claude Tresmontant has so penetratingly stated in his recent book, *A Study in Hebrew Thought*, 'God created creative beings. History is a work in which divine action and the action of men co-operate. *Theou gar esmen sunergoi*—"We are co-workers with God".'