

CHAPTER LIII

THE MESSIANIC HOPE

1. Recent investigators have brought to light many a vision of an era of heavenly bliss brought about by some powerful ruler, voiced in hoary antiquity by seer or singer in addressing the royal masters of Babylon or Egypt.¹ But no word in the entire vocabulary of ancient poetry or prose can so touch the deeper chords of the heart, and so voice the highest hopes of mankind, as does the name *Messiah* ("God's anointed"). From a simple title for any of the kings of Israel, it grew in meaning until it comprised the highest hopes of the nation. The Jewish vision of the future was not the twilight of the gods, which meant the end of the world with its deities, but the dawn of a new world, bright with the knowledge of God and blessed by the brotherhood of man. This, the Messianic ideal, is the creation of the prophetic genius of Israel, and in turn it influenced man's conception of God, lifting Him out of the national bounds, and making Him the God of humanity, Ruler of history. Israel's Messianic hope has become the motive power of civilization. In the time of deepest national humiliation it gave the prophets their power to surmount the present and soar to heights of vision; through it the Jewish people attained their strength to resist oppression, buoyed up by perfect confidence and sublime hope. At the same time its magic luster captivated the non-Jewish nations, spurring them on to mighty deeds. Thus it has actually conquered

¹ See Gressmann: *Urspr. d. israel. u. jued. Eschatologie*,—an instructive work, but full of unsubstantiated assertions, thus failing to do justice to the creative genius of the Jewish prophets.

the whole world of man. With every step in culture it points forward to higher aims, still unattained; it promises to lead mankind, united in God, the Only One, to truth and justice, righteousness and love. As the banner of Israel, the Messiah of the nations, it is destined to become the lodestar of all nations and all religions. This is the kernel of the Jewish doctrine concerning the Messiah.

2. This Messianic hope, on closer analysis, reveals two elements, both of prophetic origin: one national, the other religious and universal. The latter is the logical outcome of the monotheism of the great exilic seer, who based his stirring pictures of the glorious future of Israel upon the all-encompassing knowledge of God possessed by the Chosen People. The classic expression of this hope appears in Isaiah II, 1-4, and Micah IV, 1-14: "And it shall come to pass in the end of days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say: 'Come ye and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths,' for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." We note, indeed, that no reference to the Messiah or a king of the house of David appears either in this passage or any of the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah. Justice and peace for all humanity are expected through the reign of God alone. The specific Messianic character of this prophecy took shape only in its association with the older national hope, voiced by the prophet Isaiah.

3. The real Messianic hope involved the reestablishment of the throne of David, and was expressed most perfectly in the words of Isaiah: "And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a twig shall grow forth out of his roots. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord; and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither decide after the hearing of his ears; but with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the land; and he shall smite the land with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. . . . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."¹

This pattern of the ideal ruler may have been modeled after some ancient Babylonian formula for the adoration of kings, as has been asserted of late; and the same may be true of the mystic titles given by Isaiah to the royal heir: "Wonderful counselor, divine hero, father of spoil, prince of peace."² When the little kingdom of Judæa fell, the prospect of a realization of the great prophetic vision seemed gone forever. Therefore the exiles in Babylon fastened their hopes so much more firmly on the "Shoot," particularly on Zerubabel ("the seed born in Babylon"), the object of the

¹ Isa. XI, 1-8.

² Isa. IX, 5; the note in the new Jewish translation takes the words in a different sense.

fondest hopes of the later prophets.¹ When he, too, disappointed their expectations, probably due to Persian interference, they transferred the advent of the Messiah more and more into the realm of miracle, and popular fancy dwelt fondly on his appearance as God's champion against the hosts of heathendom (Gog and Magog).²

4. The conception of the priest-prophet Ezekiel is very significant in this connection; for him the kingdom of Israel's God could only be established by the restoration of the throne of David, the servant of the Lord, and by the utter destruction of the hosts of heathendom, who were hostile to both God and Israel. In accordance with this hope the author of the second Psalm presents a dramatic picture of the Messiah triumphing over the heathen nations, a picture which became typical for all the future. "Why are the nations in an uproar? And why do the peoples mutter in vain? The kings of the earth stand up, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord, and against His anointed: 'Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.' He that sitteth in heaven laugheth, the Lord hath them in derision. Then will He speak unto them in His wrath, and affright them in His sore displeasure: 'Truly it is I that have established My king upon Zion, My holy mountain.' I will tell of the decree: The Lord said unto me: 'Thou art My son, this day have I begotten thee. Ask of Me, and I will give the nations for thine inheritance, and the ends of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.' . . ." Henceforth the conception of the Messiah alternated between Isaiah's prince of peace

¹ Jer. 'XXIII, 5; XXXIII, 15; Zech. III, 8; VI, 12; see Sellin, l. c. Compare Ps. LXXX, 16 f.; LXXXIV, 10; LXXXIX, 39, 52; CXXX, 10; see Ewald's commentary.

² Ezek. XXXVIII-XXXIX; Sibyll. III, 663; J. E., art. Gog u. Magog; Bousset, l. c., 251 f.

and the world-conqueror of the Psalmist.¹ The name Messiah does not occur in Scripture in the absolute form, but always occurs in the construct with JHVH or a pronoun, signifying "the Anointed of the Lord." Accordingly, it expresses the relation of the Anointed to God, his sovereign, in striking contrast to the heathen kings who themselves claimed adoration as gods. The very name Messiah excludes the possibility of deification. The term Messiah was used with the article only in much later times, *ha Meshiah*, or in the Aramaic, *Meshiha*, from which we derive the name, Messiah.

5. In the course of time, however, as the people waited in vain for a redeemer, the expected Messiah was lifted more and more into the realm of the ideal. The belief took hold especially in the inner circle of the pious (Hasidim) that the Messiah was hidden somewhere, protected by God, to appear miraculously after having vanquished the hostile powers. The Essenes, the representatives of the secret lore, developed this conception in the Apocalyptic writings, thus giving the Messiah a certain cosmic or supernatural character. They probably modeled their thoughts upon the Zoroastrian system, where *Soshiosh*, the world savior, would appear in the last millennium as the messenger of Ormuzd to destroy forever the kingdom of evil and establish the dominion of the good.² Thus, when Isaiah says of the Messiah that "by the breath of his mouth he shall slay the wicked," this is referred to the principle of evil, Satan or Belial, who was sometimes actually identified with the Persian Ahriman.³ Moreover, after the Persian system, the whole process of history was divided into six millenniums of strife between the principle of good and evil, represented by the Torah

¹ For the prince of peace, see, for example, Zech. IX, 9.

² See Bousset, l. c., 255-261.

³ See Targum to Isa. XI, 4, where the older Mss. read Arimalyus, later on corrupted into Armillus. See Bousset, l. c., 589.

and the ungodliness of the world, and a seventh millennium, the kingdom of God or the Messianic age. The dates of these were calculated upon the basis of the book of Daniel, with its four world-kingdoms and mysterious numbers.¹

6. The Biblical passages which refer to "the end of days" were also connected with the advent of the Messianic age, and the so-called eschatological writings speak of fixed periods following one another. In accordance with certain prophetic hints, they expected first the "birth-throes"² or "vestiges" of the Messianic age, a great physical and moral crisis with the turmoil of nature, plagues, and moral degeneracy. Before the Messiah would suddenly appear from his hiding place, the prophet Elijah was to return from heaven, whither he had ascended in a fiery chariot. But, while he had lived in implacable wrath against idolaters, he was now to come as a messenger of peace, reconciling the hearts of Israel with God and with one another, preparing the way to repentance, and thus to the redemption and reunion of Israel.³ The next stage is the gathering together of Israel from all corners of the earth to the holy land under the leadership of the Messiah, summoned by the blast of the heavenly trumpet.⁴ Then begins that gigantic warfare on the holy soil between the hosts of Israel and the vast forces of heathendom led by the half-mystic powers of Gog and Magog, a conflict which, according to Ezekiel, is to last for seven years and to end with the annihilation of the powers of evil. Before the real Messiah, the son of David, appears in victory, another Messiah of the tribe of Ephraim is to fall in battle, according to a belief dating from the second century and possibly con-

¹ Dan. II; VII; IX; see J. E., art. Eschatology.

² Sota IX, 15; Enoch XCIX, 4; C, 1; Matt. XXIV, 8; Bousset, l. c., 286.

³ Mal. III, 23; B. Sira XLVIII, 10 f.; Sibyll. II, 187.

⁴ Isa. XXVII, 13; B. Sira XXXVI, 13; Tobit XIII, 13; Enoch XC, 32; II Macc. II, 18; Bousset, l. c., 271.

nected with the Bar Kochba war.¹ In another tradition, probably older, the true Messiah himself is to suffer and die.² At all events, he must destroy Rome, the fourth world-kingdom. But he is also to slay the arch-fiend Ahriman, afterwards known as Armillus. Moreover, he will redeem the dead from Sheol, as he possesses the key to open all the graves of the holy land, and thus all the sons of Israel will partake in the glory of his kingdom. Then at last the city of Jerusalem will arise in splendor, built of gold and precious stones, the marvel of the world, and in its midst the Temple, a structure of surpassing magnificence. The holy vessels of the tabernacle, hidden for ages in the wilderness, will appear, and the nations will offer the wealth of the whole earth as their tribute to the Messiah. All will practice righteousness and piety, and will be rewarded by bliss and numerous posterity.³

Opinions differ widely as to the duration of the Messianic age. They range from forty to four hundred years, and again from three generations to a full millennium.⁴ This difference is partly caused by the distinction between the national hope, with the temporary welfare of the people of Israel, and the religious hope concerning the divine kingdom, which is to last forever. A very late rabbinic belief holds that the Messiah will be able to give a new law and even to abrogate Mosaic prohibitions.⁵

7. At any rate, no complete system of eschatology existed during the Talmudic age, as the views of the various apocalyptic writers were influenced by the changing events of the time and the new environments, with their constant influence upon popular belief. A certain uniformity, indeed, existed in the fundamental ideas. The Messianic hope in

¹ See Chap. LII.

² IV Ezra VIII, 28.

³ Sanh. 96 f.; J. E., art. Eschatology; Bousset, l. c.

⁴ Sanh. 97 a, b, 99.

⁵ Midr. Teh. Ps. CXLVI, 4; see Buber's note.

its national character includes always the reunion of all Israel under a victorious ruler of the house of David, who shall destroy all hostile powers and bring an era of supreme prosperity and happiness as well as of peace and good-will among men. The Haggadists indulged also in dreams of the marvelous fertility of the soil of Palestine in the Messianic time,¹ and of the resurrection of the dead in the holy land. But in Judaism such views could never become dogmas, as they did in the Church, even though they were common in both the older and younger Haggadah. These national expectations were expressed in the liturgy by the Eighteen Benedictions, composed by the founders of the Synagogue, the so-called Men of the Great Synagogue; here the prayers for "the gathering of the dispersed" and the "destruction of the kingdom of Insolence" precede those for the "rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of the throne of David." But the mystic speculations on the origin, activity, and sojourn of the Messiah, which were a favorite theme of the apocalyptic writers and the Haggadists during the pre-Christian and the first Christian centuries, gave way to a more sober mode of thought, in the disappointment that followed the collapse of the great Messianic movements. On the one hand, the Church deified its Messiah and thus relapsed into paganism; on the other, Bar Kochba, "the son of the star," whom the leading Jewish masters of the law actually considered the Messiah who would free them from Rome, proved to be a "star of ill-luck" to the Jewish people.² "Like one who wanders in the dark night, now and then kindling a light to brighten up his path, only to have it again and again extinguished by the wind, until at last he resolves to wait patiently for the break of day when he will no longer require a light," so were the people of Israel

¹ Ket. III-III2; comp. Irenæus: Adver. Haeres. V, 32.

² See Ekah. R. II, 2; J. E., art. Bar Kokba.

with their would-be deliverers, who appeared from time to time to delude their hopes, until they exclaimed at last: "In Thy light alone, O Lord, we behold light."¹ Samuel the Babylonian, of the third century, in opposition to the Messianic visionaries of his time, declared: "The Messianic age differs from the present in nothing except that Israel will throw off the yoke of the nations and regain its political independence."² Another sage said: "May the curse of heaven fall upon those who calculate the date of the advent of the Messiah and thus create political and social unrest among the people!"³ A third declared: "The Messiah will appear when nobody expects him."⁴ Most remarkable of all is the bold utterance of Rabbi Hillel of the fourth century, a lineal descendant of the great master Hillel and the originator of the present Jewish calendar system. In all likelihood many of his contemporaries were busy calculating the advent of the Messianic time according to the number of Jubilees in the world-eras, whereupon he said: "Israel need not await the advent of the Messiah, as Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled by the appearance of King Hezekiah."⁵

8. Throughout the Middle Ages, when the political or national hopes rose high, we find various Messianic movements in both East and West revived by religious aspirations. But Maimonides, the great rationalist, in his commentary on the Mishnah and in his Code, formulated a Messianic belief which was quite free from mystical and supernatural elements. His twelfth article of faith declares that "the Jew, unless he wishes to forfeit his claim to eternal life by denial of his faith, must, in acceptance of the teachings of Moses and the prophets down to Malachi, believe that the Messiah will issue forth from the house of David in the person of a descendant of Solomon, the only legitimate king;

¹ Pesik. 144 a, b.

² Ber. 34 b.

³ Sanh. 97 b.

⁴ Sanh. 97 a.

⁵ Sanh. 98 b.

and he shall far excel all rulers in history by his reign, glorious in justice and peace. Neither impatience nor deceptive calculation of the time of the advent of the Messiah should shatter this belief. Still, notwithstanding the majesty and wisdom of the Messiah, he must be regarded as a mortal being like any other and only as the restorer of the Davidic dynasty. He will die and leave a son as his successor, who will in his turn die and leave the throne to his heir. Nor will there be any material change in the order of things in the whole system of nature and human life; accordingly Isaiah's picture of the living together of lamb and wolf cannot be taken literally, nor any of the Haggadic sayings with reference to the Messianic time. We are only to believe in the coming of Elijah as a messenger of peace and the forerunner of the Messiah, and also in the great decisive battle with the hosts of heathendom embodied in Gog and Magog, through whose defeat the dominion of the Messiah will be permanently established." "The Messianic kingdom itself," continues Maimonides with reference to the utterance of Samuel quoted above, "is to bring the Jewish nation its political independence, but not the subjection of all the heathen nations, nor merely material prosperity and sensual pleasure, but an era of general affluence and peace, enabling the Jewish people to devote their lives without care or anxiety to the study of the Torah and universal wisdom, so that by their teachings they may lead all mankind to the knowledge of God and make them also share in the eternal bliss of the world to come."¹

9. Against this rationalized hope for the Messiah, which merges the national expectation into the universal hope for the kingdom of God, strong objections were raised by Abraham ben David of Posquieres, the mystic, a fierce opponent

¹ Commentary to Sanh. X; Yad, H. *Melakim*, XI-XII; H. *Teshubah* VIII-IX.

of Maimonides, who referred to various Biblical and Talmudical passages in contradiction to this view.¹ On the other hand, Joseph Albo, the popular philosopher, who was trained by his public debates against the representatives of the Church, emphasized especially the rational character of the Jewish theology, and declared that the Messianic hope cannot be counted among the fundamental doctrines of Judaism, or else Rabbi Hillel could never have rejected it so boldly.²

On this point we must consider the fine observation of Rashi that Hillel denied only a personal Messiah, but not the coming of a Messianic age, assuming that God himself will redeem Israel and be acknowledged everywhere as Ruler of the world. As a matter of fact, too much difference of opinion existed among the Tannaim and Amoraim on the personality of the Messiah and the duration of his reign to admit of a definite article of faith on the question. The expected Messiah, the heir of the Davidic throne, naturally embodied the national hope of the Jewish people in their dispersion, when all looked to Palestine as their land and to Jerusalem as their political center and rallying point in days to come. Traditional Judaism, awaiting the restoration of the Mosaic sacrificial cult as the condition for the return of the *Shekinah* to Zion, was bound to persist in its belief in a personal Messiah who would restore the Temple and its service.

10. A complete change in the religious aspiration of the Jew was brought about by the transformation of his political status and hopes in the nineteenth century. The new era witnessed his admission in many lands to full citizenship on an equality with his fellow-citizens of other faiths. He was no longer distinguished from them in his manner of speech and dress, nor in his mode of education and thought; he therefore

¹ Notes of R. A. B. D. to Maimuni.

² *Ikkarim*, IV, 42.

necessarily identified himself completely with the nation whose language and literature had nurtured his mind, and whose political and social destinies he shared with true patriotic fervor. He stood apart from the rest only by virtue of his religion, the great spiritual heritage of his hoary past. Consequently the hope voiced in the Synagogal liturgy for a return to Palestine, the formation of a Jewish State under a king of the house of David, and the restoration of the sacrificial cult, no longer expressed the views of the Jew in Western civilization. The prayer for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of the Temple with its priestly cult could no longer voice his religious hope. Thus the leaders of Reform Judaism in the middle of the nineteenth century declared themselves unanimously opposed to retaining the belief in a personal Messiah and the political restoration of Israel, either in doctrine or in their liturgy.¹ They accentuated all the more strongly Israel's hope for a Messianic age, a time of universal knowledge of God and love of man, so intimately interwoven with the religious mission of the Jewish people. Harking back to the suffering Servant of the Lord in Deutero-Isaiah, they transferred the title of Messiah to the Jewish nation. Reform Judaism has thus accepted the belief that Israel, the suffering Messiah of the centuries, shall at the end of days become the triumphant Messiah of the nations.²

11. This view taken by reform Judaism is the logical outcome of the political and social emancipation of the Jew in western Europe and America. Naturally, it had no appeal to the Jew in the Eastern lands, where he was kept apart by mental training, social habits and the discrimination of the

¹ See Philipson: *The Reform Movement in Judaism*, 246 f.

² See Einhorn: *Sinai* I, 133; Leopold Stein: *Schrift des Lebens*, 320, 336. For the term Messiah comp. Ps. LV, 15; Hab. III, 13; also Ps. XXVIII, 8; LXXXIV, 10; LXXXIX, 39, 52.

law, so that he regarded himself as a member of a different nationality in every sense. Palestine remained the object of his hope and longing in both his social and religious life. When modern ideas of life began to transform the religious views and habits in many a quarter, and terrible persecutions again aroused the longing of the unfortunate sufferers for a return to the land of their fathers, the term Zionism was coined, and the movement rapidly spread. It expressed the purely national aims of the Jewish people, disregarding the religious aspirations always heretofore connected with the Messianic hope. This term has since become the watchword of all those who hope for a political restoration of the Jewish people on Palestinian soil, as well as of others whose longings are of a more cultural nature. Both regard the Jewish people as a nation like any other, denying to it the specific character of a priest-people and a holy nation with a religious mission for humanity, which has been assigned to it at the very beginning of its history and has served to preserve it through the centuries. On this account Zionism, whether political or cultural, can have no place in Jewish theology. Quite different is the attitude of religious Zionism which emphasizes the ancient hopes and longings for the restoration of the Jewish Temple and State in connection with the nationalistic movement.

12. Political Zionism owes its origin to the wave of Anti-Semitism which rose as a counter-movement to the emancipation of the Jew, that alienated many of the household of Israel from their religion. Thus it has the merit of awakening many Jews upon whom the ancestral faith had lost its hold to a sense of love and loyalty to the Jewish past. In many it has aroused a laudable zeal for the study of Jewish history and literature, which should bring them a deeper insight into, and closer identification with, the historic character of Israel, the suffering Messiah of the nations, and

thus in time transform the national Jew into a religious Jew. The study of Israel's mighty past will, it is hoped, bring to them the conviction that the power, the hope and the refuge of Israel is in its God, and not in any territorial possession. We require a regeneration, not of the nation, but of the faith of Israel, which is its soul.