

# THE GROWTH OF THE MESSIANIC IDEA

BY DR. H. OSCHEROWITZ

## I. THE PROBLEM AND METHOD.

IN any discussion of the Messianic idea the first problem is one of delimitation. To what phenomena in history may the term Messianic be significantly applied? The proper distinction between the messianic idea as an answer to the hopes of the future and other ideas found in the eschatological literature must be made. To do this the messianic idea, regardless of how closely it may be directly or indirectly related to other phenomena, must be made to stand out in significant contrast. It is true that any concept has a technical content, which may in another period be replaced or modified. It is furthermore true that a technical concept is surrounded by a fringe of ideas which are not *directly* related to it. So, for example, many ideas are called "socialistic" which have nothing to do with socialism in any narrow sense of the term. Similarly there has been the growth of the messianic idea in both the narrower and the wider sense. To determine then what is messianic, and what is not, depends largely on how we select our material. We may first try to get a technical core of the concept and follow that through its history to the exclusion of other material. We may, secondly, suggest similarly with other allied phenomena thus broadening the scope of the concept. Thirdly, we may include phenomena which suggested by the "original" or narrower concept.

### The Discussion of the Method.

The method employed by Gressman, Gunkel, Jeremias and Oesterly, showing the similarity between the messianic idea of the Jews, the idea of a "Heilbringer" is valuable for a comparative study of religion, but its weakness lies in the fact that it apparently

gives more significance to a *general* concept than to a particular phenomenon which has its own distinctive characteristics. What shall be done in the following pages is to show, if possible, the growth and crystallization of the concept in its narrower aspect, its use and its decay, omitting all the outer fringe of ideas which ought to be classified as eschatological, not as messianic, and all attenuated similarities, as suggested by Oesterly, who identifies the messianic idea of "Heilbringer." He makes messiahs of Marduk and Osiris. He discusses Indra in India, but fails to discuss Rama and Krishna. He relates the "helper-gods" of the Zuni and Algonquin Indians to the Hebrew messiah. Those figures discussed are, however, characterized more by their differences than by their similarities. In nearly all these cases the only common element in them is that they "help" men and when we recall that that element is really the criterion of a god the whole attempt loses force, and falls off into the meaningless void of a single general concept. The term messiah is in this method applied to all religious figures who are obviously and outstandingly beneficent. The Jewish Messiah was not Messiah because he was outstandingly beneficent. He was beneficent because he was Messiah. But what was he as Messiah?

The word Messiah means the "anointed one." It is derived from the word *mashah* which means "to smear." It was used both in a religious and non-religious sense. In Jeremiah xxii. 14, it is used in painting a house vermilion. In other places it means to smear or wipe for the purposes of consecration (Gen. xxxi. 13; and especially Exod. xvix. 36, xxx. 26-29 and Dan. ix. 24). In the sense in which it later became classical or technical it applies to the "smearing" of persons to consecrate them. As such the term is used of kings or future kings, prophets and priests. We read that Samuel anointed Saul (I Sam. xii. 3) and David (I Sam. xvi. 13) and we also read that Cyrus was anointed (Isaiah xiv. 1). Having been anointed the fact is made into a title and the personal is Messiah, i. e. "the anointed." Similarly Elijah is anointed by Elisha (I Kings xxvi. 16). Isaiah feels himself to be "anointed" by the Lord (Isaiah lxi. 1). The priesthood is also anointed (Lev. iv. 5; vii. 36; Exod. xi. 13, 15; Numbers iii. 3). Whether anointing had a long religious history among the Hebrews is an open question. Robertson Smith thinks it was an intermediate stage between the eating of the whole

animal and "the later fire rituals."<sup>1</sup> According to Gressman the religion of the Hebrews, in the early Caananite period, was soaked with Phoenecian and Caananite culture, so that all elements of the "holy" or "sacred" are lacking in the Genesis account.<sup>2</sup> Yahveh appears to men, Abraham and Lot, wrestles with Jacob and no calamities befall them as they did to the carrier of the ark. The problem remains:—Were these stories written *late* under Caananite influence or was the early period in Canaan one either of Caananite rationalism and superculture or practical simplicity? The answer to the question is irrelevant to a degree. We know at any rate that those anointed and consecrated in this early pre-Davidic period were Messiahs. They were special servants of the Lord, of Jehovah. As such the concept of Messiah was vague and nebulous. Moreover, the idea of a personal Messiah who had more than purely local scope was unknown. The Messianic idea was not yet tied up to eschatology.

There exists the problem:—Was the Messianic idea any more than suggested by such passages which refer to the anointing of Saul and David? Was there any real pre-Davidic eschatology? Gressman argues that there was. He insists that the idea of the Messiah was earlier than the prophets. He argues from the prophecy in Isaiah vii. 14, and believes that without the idea of a divine saviour child the prophecy is not understandable and that this idea permeated the ancient world long before David and was known also in Palestine and among the Hebrews generally. To this whole theory held by Gunkel, Gressman and Jeremias it may be said that while such passages as Isaiah vii. 14f may not be clear they do not *demand* the assumption made by these writers. There is no proof of direct borrowing and lastly, it is just as difficult to apply the theory of the strange or mysterious saviour child as it is to get along with a simply naturalistic interpretation. Later prophecy does not give any hint in the way of an elaboration or a name so that any direct foreign origin can be traced. In direct contrast it may be said that the whole tone of the historical accounts and the early prophetic writings suggest the absence of such a mythological concept. Whether Isaiah vii. 14 is "understandable" or not the first *evidence*

<sup>1</sup> Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 1894, p. 282f.

<sup>2</sup> Gressman, *Ursprung der Israelitisch Judischen Eschatologie*, p. 129.

of a personal Messiah subsequent to the early idea of a consecrated person is linked up with the name of David.

After the kingdom, which had been solidly welded together by David, who had been "anointed by Judah" (II Sam. ii. 7) and held together by Solomon, was divided after the death of Solomon, the prosperity which the whole land had enjoyed declined and lean years followed. To those who came later, the decline in brilliance and the increase of corruption made the Davidic period stand out by contrast. The interest in the Davidic dynasty was kept alive. Just what the strength of this movement was it is difficult to say. In Amos the backward view is already present (if the last verses of Amos are authentic or from the time of Amos). There is, however, nothing "mythological" or mysterious about Amos (Amos ix. 11). He prophesies that Jahveh will restore the "tabernacle of David" and for purely materialistic reasons, that Edom may be subjugated and the war wasted cities rebuilt. There is no trace of a necessity for a personal Messiah. In Hosea there is the first direct reference to a Davidic successor (Hosea iii. 5) who in the latter days will be sought when the people turn once more to Jehovah. The reference seems, however, to be rather casual, not laden with the sound of formal eschatology.

From the time of Amos to Isaiah two facts became indelibly fixed in the minds of the Jahvehistic prophets, the corrupt conditions of social structure which needed "saving" from complete collapse and the need for a reign by a strong king who would be a popular hero, such as was typified by David, whose memory was still alive and being kept so by the Jahvists. There is nothing to indicate that the Messianic idea had become greatly crystallized from the time of Hosea to Isaiah but the chief elements were already present. The Messiah was to be a saviour, a king and a descendant of Jesse.

In Isaiah the Messianic idea reaches its classical form. It is true that Isaiah was still living in the narrowly bounded world, that his imagination did not picture the glory of Yahveh, the universality of his power and did not anticipate the time when the nearness of Jahveh would turn into a remoteness as the extent of the world dawned upon his worshippers. Nevertheless, the situation gave to Isaiah the essential elements of the idea of the personal

Messiah. The changes henceforth were in the manner in which the Messiah was to function and his endowments.

Whether the three passages referring to a personal Messiah in Isaiah indicate the development of his mind, scholarship has not revealed, for the dates of the three passages are uncertain. In Isaiah vii. 14, there is the bare mention of a child to be born of a young woman and to be called Immanuel. In Isaiah ix. 6, we find either an elaboration or a new idea. The child is called "Wonderful, Counsellor, Everlasting-Father, Mighty God, Prince of Peace." The title "Mighty God" is unique for the Old Testament, and "Everlasting Father" is unusual for the period. Unlike vii. 14, there is definite mention that the child shall occupy the throne of David though the passage does not say precisely that he falls in the Davidic descent. Isaiah seems to have had the idea of a human-divine figure in mind and here the suggestion that there was borrowing, perhaps unconsciously, may be justified. It is to be noted, however, that the passage in itself quite striking, is not directly referred to in the Old Testament, nor in the Apocalypses or in the New Testament. The passage seems not to have exerted any influence on later thought. Far more important, though less striking, is Isaiah ii. 1f. This passage had considerable influence on later Messianic thought. The term branch which Isaiah used became in the course of the succeeding century a technical Messianic term (Jer. xxiii. 5).

The prophecy in Micah v. 2 refers to the birth of a Messianic king but omits mention of all Davidic connections. The prediction that he will be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah gives the prophecy a touch of the "mysterious" and suggests foreign influences or the possibility of its being a later interpolation.

The century after Isaiah saw the defeat of prophetic ideals and the suppression of prophetic activity. Not until Josiah institutes the Deuteronomic reform does light once more flash in the darkness. But the light was only a flash. The destruction of Judah was imminent and came with unflinching certainty. Jeremiah lived through the whole terrible time. Yet if we look for his contribution to Messianic thought we find it almost nil. He has faith that Yahveh will eventually prosper the Davidic dynasty but he does not intensely visualize even in his deepest gloom the coming of a personal Messiah. He speaks of the Branch which is to grow up out of the Davidic line (Jer. xxiii. 5; xxxiii. 15) but he is also anxious

to assert immediately that there will never be a dearth of priests. Jeremiah's whole faith is in Yahveh. He will save Isreal. The Davidic kings will never be absent but these coming kings are never referred to as in Isaiah ix. 6 as extraordinary persons. Yahveh will restore and save Israel; the Davidic kings will rule.

The Exile was begun and after a time the exiles were allowed by Cyrus, "the anointed one" to return home. Ezekiel returned with them. The whole current of thought during the exile was not Messianic. Isaiah spoke about the "suffering servant" (Isaiah 52:53). The editor of Amos (Amos ix. 11-15) saw a new era in the land of Israel and Ezekiel saw not only the restoration but the healing of the old breach between North and South. If the attitude of Ezekiel can be called Messianic it is so only in a wider impersonal sense. The same is true of Isaiah and the editor of Amos. Ezekiel was a priest, and if not expressly, at least inwardly suspicious of the more self assertive nationalism of the older Isaiah. His references to the Davidic dynasty (Ez. xxxiv. 23 and xxxvii. 24) were like Jeremiah's secondary to Yahveh. Yahveh will save. A new heart and a new spirit is what Yahveh will give them, not a saviour.

In Haggai we find not a new situation but for the first time an expressed confidence in an individual by Yahveh. The work of the destruction of the enemies of Israel is not completed, but Yahveh's day will come and then he will choose Zerubabel as ruler in the new age. He is the specially chosen servant of Yahveh, so prophesied Haggai and Zerubabel was a "son" of David. But whether Haggai was an opponent of the priesthood which is unlikely and played up Zerubabel is unlikely. At any rate, the crown fell to Joshua, a priest, while Zerubabel disappears from the narrative entirely. To Joshua is given the technical title of the "branch." Thus in this period the idea of the Messiah was still flexible enough or the pressure of the immediate politico-social situation was sufficiently great, so that a priest could replace a king as Messiah (Haggai ii. 21-23; Zach. vi. 12).

With Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, the idea of messenger or forerunner appears. This forerunner is to precede the coming of Yahveh to the temple. It is an idea that affected all the later history of the Messianic idea, for it is made to carry over and apply to the Messiah instead of Yahveh himself. At this

period the Messiah himself was very probably, as Goodspeed suggests, the messenger.<sup>3</sup>

With "Emmet" we can say that while the eschatological elements of the Old testament were plentiful, an "expectation of the Messiah in a strict sense, occupied a comparatively subordinate place." Before David there is no intimation of a Messiah of a Babylonian or Egyptian complexion. After David and the Golden Age there is a general tendency to look back with longing eyes to the "good old times" but no idea of a personal Messiah appears until the time of Isaiah, but even here it is not exploited. It remains unimportant and negligible. Yahveh himself was thought of as the saviour. The idea of the permanent renewal of Davidic rule persisted, new branches of the line were to grow out of the mutilated stem, but the individual, personal character, the coming of a definite person or messenger from Yahveh had not yet developed. Emmet thinks that the idea of a personal, unusually endowed Messiah was a popular belief.<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel, he thinks, emphasizes Yahveh to counteract the action of the popular idea.

A word about Daniel's reference to the "son of man." In Dan. vii. 13 we have originally no intention of a personal Messiah. At the time of the writing the figure was introduced as familiar. Its meaning in the time of Daniel is uncertain. It became clearer in the post Old Testament period. Daniel pinned his faith not in a Messiah but in the pious, consecrated souls.

## II. POST-OLD TESTAMENT PERIOD.

We have seen that there was a general hope for a better future but that there were very few references to a personal Messiah in the literature. How widespread the hope for a Messiah was among the masses is difficult to say. The same disinterestedness on the part of the intellectuals and literary men seems to have continued after the Old Testament was closed. "Baldensperger" and others even go so far as to say that the idea was on the wane.<sup>5</sup> They point to the fact that the Apocrypha hardly mentions a personal Messiah.<sup>6</sup> The idea of a kingdom and another golden age persists, of course, but the idea of a personal Messiah is largely ignored. The Apocry-

<sup>3</sup> Goodspeed, *Israel's Messianic Hope*, Macmillan, 1900.

<sup>4</sup> Emmet, *Messiah*.

<sup>5</sup> Baldensperger, Wilhelm, *Die messianische Hoffnung des Judentums*.

<sup>6</sup> Schürer: *Geschichte des Jüdischen Volkes*.

pha seems to mention a personal Messiah only twice (in Esdras and I Maccabees xiv. 41).

The Messiah is mentioned in the Apocalyptic literature but this, it is to be noticed, is to a large extent popular, and He is also mentioned by the "Hellenistic" writers. The Sadducees on the other hand, who had no need of a Messiah, and the Pharisees who were more interested in law and the rule of the priesthood show us how unimportant the Messianic hope must have been and by whom it was fostered. A survey of the literature shows us how little concentrated attention was given to the Messianic idea.

In the Sibyllian Oracles III, 49 (168-151 B. C.) and III, 652-994, the references are, however, very short. The Messianic king is a servant of Yahveh's who will engage in war to end war. In a later book, V, the Messiah is a king who destroys Nero (130 A. D.). In "Enoch" little is said. The Messiah appears after the judgment as a white bull. The enemies of Israel and all heathendom worship him. (Enoch 83-90) (166-161 B. C.).

In the "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs" we find again the priestly character of the Messiah and his Levitic descent. But in the "Testament of Judah" we find him descended from Judah (xxiv. 5f). The Psalms of Solomon were written when Pompey ruled at Rome, 70-40 B. C. The Messiah is Davidic. Here the idea of the "anointed one" comes again to the fore. He conquers the nations, not on horseback but by the power of his word. He is sinless and holy, made powerful by the Holy Ghost. In the Apocalypse of Baruch written in the last decades of the first century A. D. the Messiah appears mysteriously from heaven to judge the nations after the "wars of the last days." The Messiah is the warrior, the slayer and ruler of the Gentiles. In the Fourth book of Ezra the nations rise against the Messiah at his coming but he will stand on the Mount of Zion and crush his foes. The heavenly city will be revealed and the ten tribes of Israel will receive their sacred land. The Messiah will rule 400 years and then die, as will all the people. After seven days the just will be resurrected and a new world be given to them.

The philosopher Philo makes mention of a warrior hero, and Josephus also, but shows no vital interest in him.

## III. THE RISE OF RATIONALISM.

At the beginning of the second century we find the non-Jewish author of the *Philosophumena* writing of the Messiah: "He will belong to the Davidic family but will not be born of a virgin and the Holy Ghost, but of man and woman, as all others are born. He, they believe, will be their king, a war-like and mighty man, who will gather the Jews to battle with all peoples. He will make Jerusalem his capital and restore it to its old condition, and also its inhabitants who will rule and sacrifice there in security for a long time. Then they will be attacked and in the war the Messiah will be killed by the sword. Shortly thereafter the end of the world will come by fire, and the judgment will follow."<sup>7</sup> This, in general, with some variations was the conception of the Messiah after the fall of Jerusalem. As time went on and the Jewish state became a memory the speculations on the time and conditions of his coming, and on the nature of the Messianic age increased. On the whole there was an essential agreement as to his nature. As we see in the passage above the Jews defended their conception against the Christian idea of Christ, against a Virgin birth, and against the idea that the Messiah had any share whatever in the godhead.

There were three phases of the Messianic speculations that stood out quite prominently; first, the restoration of political independence; second, the miraculous ushering in of the Messianic era; and third, the relationship of the Messianic hope to immortality. Political independence became the great hope again even though the political "Messiahs" became fewer. The Messianic age always had its beginning in Jerusalem in the fancies of the Rabbis. Fancy, however, ran wild. Daniel was assiduously studied for the date of its appearance, and the miraculous events preceding the appearance became so much a part of the speculations that when Julian, the Apostate, offered to restore Jerusalem, the Jews were not interested because the restoration was not cataclysmic. These hopes, however fanciful, were nevertheless a means of sustaining the courage of the Jews throughout the Dark Ages. They enabled them to endure persecution, not with resignation, but with pride, and even scorn for his persecutors, for eventually he would be the master.

<sup>7</sup> *Schürer, Ibid.*, p. 521-2.

## IV. THE INFLUENCE OF ARABIAN RATIONALISM.

The rise of Islam and Arabic culture was accompanied by a revival of activity on the part of Pseudo-messiahs among whom Isaac ben Yahub, Al Rai and Serenas are to be mentioned. But of far greater importance is the revolt against the Rabbis and their literal and materialistic interpretation of the Talmud. The Talmud for a long time fell into a period of disrepute and the revolt against the authority of the Rabbis became widespread. The Renaissance that was taking place had its influence more widely among the Jews than among the Christians. The Sufists and the Mutazalite with their rationalistic interpretation of the Koran taught the Jews to interpret the Talmud in the same way. Fancy ranged free but not any longer on a materialistic basis, for behind even the wildest speculations there was the desire to *explain*, which is so characteristic of periods of super-culture. The speculations deal, however, almost entirely with the Messianic age and not with the person of the Messiah. The "Book of Zerubabel" written by an Italian Jew introduces some fresh material. The Messiah is the "son of Joseph" and called Mehemiah ben Hushiel, and Elijah, the son of Armilas, and the anti-Messiah is the son of Satan and a marble statue. The mother of the Messiah is also introduced, Hephzibah, with the statement "my desire is in her." She will appear five years before the Messiah and slay two kings with the staff of Aaron which is being secretly preserved.

Beginning with the writings of Rabbi Jehudah Halevi (1080-1142) we find a new note, one which was to become of ultimate importance in the history of later Judaism. We find reflections upon the meaning and status of Judaism in God's plan for the world and its salvation. In later centuries this was to result in a disappearance of the Messianic belief.

By far the most important figure in the Middle Ages was Maimonides who was big enough to give a dignified rational account of the Messianic age. There will be no miraculous intervention in the affairs of nature. The Messiah will be a great king in Palestine who will rule the nations as they shall live in peace. Living conditions will be made less hard and men will be able to devote themselves to wisdom instead of war. There will be no immortality.

The Messiah too will die and will be succeeded by his son. The righteous will prosper, the wicked will fall. The Messianic age will be a natural but a god fearing age. Maimonides set the tendency which rationalism largely followed throughout the Middle Ages.

#### V. DEVELOPMENT IN THE KABBALAH.

The Aristotelianized Judaism of Maimonides and the rationalistic study of Talmud were, however, no food for the people nor even for the intellectuals in periods of bitter persecution. The sustenance they needed was found in mysticism and in the "spiritualistic" speculations of Kabbalists. Among the Kabbalists there was a wide range of differences. Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1195-1270) was cool and rationalistic, never giving way to the fanciful speculations which sought to understand the advent of the Messianic age by the juxtaposition of numbers. He reiterated the old claim that belief in a messiah was not essential to Judaism though he himself was a believer. Others, however, were more imaginative and active. Abraham Abulafia of Judea (1240-1291) announced himself as Messiah. Moses de Leon (1250-1305) brought out a book called Zohar which became the most widespread hand-book of Messianic speculations and even replaced for the time being in large circles the Talmud as a sacred book. Later came another assertion from Albo (1380-1444) that the belief in the Messiah was not essential, but in a century like the fourteenth when the Jews suffered unspeakably such a view could not become dominant. In the fifteenth century it was severely criticized by Don Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel (1437-1509) who though rationalistic enough in his belief regarding the nature of the Messiah, nevertheless engaged in Kabbalistic speculations as to the date of his coming, which he set at 1530, thereby facilitating the rise of "Laemlein" of Germany, who declared himself to be the forerunner of the Messiah.

The terrible persecution of the Jews was somewhat relieved by the rise of Protestantism and the kindly attitude of Luther. In the seventeenth century, the Jewish speculations on the Messianic age very often were approved by Christian speculations upon the coming of Christ. Such was the case with Menasseh ben Israel (1604-1657) whose speculations had a great influence upon Cromwellian

politics in England. In the East Sabbatai Zebi, also a brilliant Kabbalist, born in Smyrna in 1621, began his colorful career as a pseudo-Messiah. According to the Sabbatians the Messiah possesses a divine personality and is a part of the "original soul" and the first man, also that he is the son of God and the daughter of Zorah, thus establishing a trinity. The last great figure who posed as Messiah was Jankier Frank (1726-1791) who combined Mohammedian, Catholic, and Jewish ideas with the personality of a charlatan. He had no influence, however, on Messianic thought.

#### VI. THE PERIOD OF REFORM. MODERN JUDAISM.

The Eighteenth Century was the dawn of a new era. The Enlightenment, with its wider point of view, had its influence on Judaism and produced the great figure of Moses Mendelssohn. The spirit of liberalism drawn from the well of the French Encyclopedists began to breathe a new and truly modern life into Judaism so that it was eventually to escape in part some of the pitfalls that Christianity had fallen into. Napoleon assembled the great Jewish Synod and aided the Jews to a new and freer self consciousness. Hopes ran high, many of which were to be dashed to pieces. Two parties arose which took a position with respect to the Messianic hope. One party regarded the new political freedom as a solution for all the problems of the Jews and renounced the Messianic idea. David Friedlander in 1882 wrote urging that all prayers with a Messianic tendency be abolished and that the Jews serve their various adopted countries. The other party found no real relief in equal political rights and still looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, who would grant them not only equal political rights but also their own king in a divinely ordained Jewish kingdom.

Samson Raphael Hirsh (1808-1888) the great orthodox leader of the nineteenth century, suggested the compromise which was the revival of the spirit of Maimonides and Halevi. He urged the Jews to interpret their nationalism in a spiritual sense rather than as a state which is to exist for materialistic benefits. Israel whether distributed among the states of the world or possessing a state of its own is God's means of revealing himself to humanity for the achievement of a universal brotherhood. Zacharias Frankel (1801-1875) thought Hirsch's theory too abstract but though he was a

firm believer in the Messianic hope, he had no definite ideas on the subject and those that he had he changed quite often.

After the establishment of the reform society at Frankfort a. Main in 1843, discussion was continued at the various Rabbinical Conferences. In Pittsburgh in 1885, the Conference decided that the restoration of the Jewish State under the rule of descendants of David was not a part of the Messianic hope, that the destruction of the Second Jewish Commonwealth gave the Jews their real spiritual mission, and that the belief in a bodily resurrection was not essential.

Messianic interpretations of the status of the Jews in their new found freedom continued, however, and it was in a messianic strain of thought that the Zionist movement was introduced. The idea became widespread that the Messianic era will be introduced only after Palestine was reinhabited by the Jews. The Zionist movement, however, was supported by all strands. In any case the Messianic hope today extends beyond the materialistic interest of the Jewish people, and its spiritual interpretation dominates both the orthodox and the liberal parties of Judaism.

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