

THE CHRISTIAN-JEWISH DEBATE

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CHRISTIANITY is without doubt the most disputatious of all religions. The Church was born arguing, and Judaism was the first opponent which it wrestled with, like the infant Hercules, in its cradle. In modern times this venerable controversy has been pushed into the background by the more urgent battle against a rationalism, that in its many different guises has threatened orthodox Judaism no less than Christianity. But the old volcano, though not very active at the moment, is by no means extinct. Thanks to the labours over the last fifty years or more of Dr J. Klausner, an eminent professor of the Hebrew University at Jerusalem, it has been steadily building up pressure which has recently issued in a premonitory puff or rumble.¹ This literary activity did indeed take place more than thirty years ago, and has been through a second and third edition since, but all that happened in modern Hebrew, which rendered it practically unavailable to the Christian reader, and therefore non-explosive as regards the Christian-Jewish controversy. It is only this year that it has appeared in this country in English—well, to be quite frank, in a quaint patois which is recognizable as a variant of the current language. According to a preface by the translator, the rendering of modern Hebrew presents special problems. We can well believe it; but they can scarcely be responsible for such unidiomatic, and at times incorrect, English as Dr Stinespring manages to achieve here. He would have served his author better if, besides submitting his translation to him and another Jewish scholar for correction, he had also taken the trouble to consult some suitable person who has English and not German for his mother tongue. Incidentally, we are curious to know what Hebrew words may lie behind such contraptions as ‘ethico-political’, ‘religio-spiritual’, ‘politico-material’, which creak at us from every other page.

But to return from Dr Klausner’s translator to Dr Klausner.

¹ *The Messianic Idea in Israel*. By J. Klausner; translated by W. F. Stinespring. (Allen and Unwin; 30s.).

Although his book is not controversial in intention, and only occasionally so in fact, his theme, to which he has given the devoted energies of a life-time, is the messianic idea; which means that it is the precise point on which the Jewish and Christian religions diverge. His book therefore is just what is needed to stimulate some valuable Christian-Jewish argument, of the only sort that is really worth conducting. It is all very well for Jews to snipe at such a doctrine as the divinity of Christ, which Dr Klausner permits himself to do by saying that it 'obscures monotheism in Christianity'; or for Christians to scoff at the Jewish practice of the Law. But such criticisms are almost bound to be, in the literal sense of the word, unintelligent, that is to say uncomprehending judgments passed on beliefs whose basic foundations are simply not grasped; and so they can serve no useful purpose, other than ministering perhaps to the critic's own private satisfaction. Was Jesus the Messiah, or was he not? That is the one point on which Christian and Jew can argue with some possibility of each knowing what he is talking about.

That Dr Klausner's messianic theme is intrinsically controversial is shown by the other publications in which his long study of it has issued. One is *Jesus of Nazareth*, the other *From Jesus to Paul*. In these books again the writer is at pains to state his intention of keeping to the objective sphere of pure scholarship, and to disclaim the role of apologist. But when a Jew explains away the resurrection of our Lord, or affirms that Paul seriously modified the original teaching of Jesus by his Hellenistic gentile ideas, then however objective he may think he is being, he has *ipso facto* left the field of pure scholarship for that of Jewish apologetics. And a very good thing too. Since Dr Klausner is a Jew, we expect him to disagree with Christianity, to disapprove of it even, and far from protesting we applaud him for saying why. There is nothing necessarily dishonourable or unscholarly or vulgar in being an apologist. Religious controversy is a necessary and profitable activity, provided it is conducted in a fair-minded way and as far as possible with good manners. Both the sobriety of Dr Klausner's scholarship and his courteous manners qualify him for playing the part of a modern Trypho.

His book is a survey of the development of Israel's messianic expectations in three phases; in the canonical books of the Old Testament (i.e. the books of the Jewish canon, our proto-canonical

books); in the apocrypha (our deuterocanonical books) and pseudepigrapha of the last centuries B.C.; and in the rabbinical sayings of the Tannaim of the first two centuries A.D. Most of us of course are in no position to criticize his statement of Jewish messianic doctrine, but I think we need feel no qualms about accepting it as authoritative. It is only natural that some of his O.T. interpretation should run counter to the accepted Christian tradition of exegesis.² But there is much more in this study of the messianic expectations of the prophets which is perfectly acceptable to the Christian exegete. The author analyses them into a dramatic sequence of sin—punishment—repentance—redemption, and makes some illuminating remarks about the variations which are made on this theme by individual prophets. How suggestive, for example, for the study of grace, that Ezekiel³ reshuffles this sequence into sin—punishment—*redemption*—*repentance*. Some prophets are more aware than others of the universal scope of the redemption to come; some centre their hopes on a personal, others on a collective Messiah, others again simply on God himself. It is also rightly stressed how inseparably Israel's messianic expectations were tied to Israel's history. It is to the Egyptian bondage and the deliverance from it under Moses that Dr Klausner traces the roots of the messianic idea. Because Israel had no golden age in the past at the beginning of its history as a nation, its constant bias from the start was to project one into the future. The nation's mood therefore is predominantly one of forward-looking hope instead of backward-looking nostalgia. Through all the changes of Jewish history it was the divinely given task of the prophets to protect and guide this hope, whether it was being softened by the complacency of a false security, or battered by the disillusionment of disaster. The prophets were thus extremely sensitive to contemporary events, which neces-

2 This is most obvious in his treatment of the Servant passage, Isaiah 52–53. Even on purely critical, objective grounds, the Jewish case which he puts forward does seem very unconvincing. As Kissane says in his commentary, it is most unlikely that a prophet who never makes any bones about the sinfulness of Israel, should suddenly present the nation personified as the *sinless* victim atoning for the sins of the gentiles. Quite apart from anything else, in what sense could such a prophecy be expected to come true? It is also perhaps significant that Dr Klausner completely ignores the reference to a personal Messiah contained in Psalms 2 and 110 (109), which the N.T. alluded to more than any other texts in order to support the messianic claims of Jesus; in which, incidentally, it seems to have been quite in step with contemporary Jewish tradition.

3 I use throughout the same spelling for O.T. names as the book we are considering, which follows the Authorized Version.

sarily conditioned their messianic utterances. We need find nothing disconcerting in the commonly held opinion which Dr Klausner supports, that the personal Messiah of many prophecies was often some contemporary figure on whom the prophet pinned his hopes of national deliverance. Thus Hezekiah would be the proximate subject of Isaiah's Emmanuel prophecies, and Zerubbabel the mainstay of the hopes of Haggai and Zechariah. Dr Klausner makes the ingenious suggestion that the same role was played for a time in Jeremiah's expectations by the unsatisfactory king Zedekiah, to whom he sees an allusion in the words of Jeremiah 5, 6, 23, 'Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, that I will raise up unto David a just shoot . . . and this is the name which they will call him, "The Lord is our Justice"' (Vulg. 'The Lord our Just One'). This name is in fact basically identical with Zedek-iah.

But what of the failure, more or less complete, of these 'acting Messiahs' to live up to the prophetic expectations? On the one hand it constrained the prophets to stress the 'ethico-religious' aspect of the messianic idea; but on the other, Dr Klausner insists over and over again, it never led them to jettison altogether its 'politico-national' content. This they always retained, but projected now into an indefinite future, and painted in colours of an exaggerated imaginative hyperbole. That is all very well as far as it goes, but it is here that we begin to be aware of the inadequacy of the Jewish interpretation which Dr Klausner propounds. He does not really grasp the profound significance of that prophetic hyperbole. Is it enough merely to knock off 75 per cent or so for 'oriental imagery', and take what you are left with—which will depend of course entirely on your own subjective estimate of how much you ought to leave—as being the prophet's basic 'politico-national' message? It seems a meagre way of treating inspired Scripture. The basic message which the Jewish tradition extracts from the glowing messianic hyperboles of the prophets is the assurance that one day Israel will be nationally independent in its own land, and religiously, even perhaps politically, predominant in the whole world, acknowledged by all gentile humanity as its crown. To quote Dr Klausner's own words: 'Included in the messianic expectation is the concept of a general going forward to that messianic ideal; 'in other words the idea of progress in the broadest and most exalted sense'.

Here is the crucial difference between Judaism and Christianity. Fulfilment of messianic hopes means progress for the Jew, progress towards an ideal golden age in this world, progress towards a more faithful and exact keeping of the Law by more and more believers. Christianity rejects this as illusion; and we may say that it is because Christ held out no hopes of such progress that he was rejected by the majority of the Jews. He promised not progress but fulfilment, which those who accept Christ, whether Jew or gentile, recognize as being something quite other than progress; it is of a different metaphysical order, as different from progress as being is from becoming. The Old Testament or Covenant is in the order of becoming, and so we can recognize progress *within* it; but the New Testament or Covenant is in the order of being, it marks the fulfilment of the Old Testament, and in no sense a mere progress or advance from it. The fulfilment of a thing is a different sort of thing from the thing to be fulfilled; the fulfilment of a journey is not a bigger and better journey, but home; when the journey is fulfilled it is finished. In the same way the fulfilment of the Law is not more Law, it is Christ; when the Law is fulfilled it is finished. So the fulfilment of the political and national element in the messianic hopes of Israel, which Dr Klausner is quite right to insist was never lacking from the utterances of the prophets, is not a political national paradise for Israel, not some ideal Zionism, it is the Church of Christ.

The significance for the Christian, then, of the inspired hyperboles of the prophets is not that they give imaginative descriptions of some ideal progress, but that they point in a mystical way to some real fulfilment. The two-level, analogical, mode of thinking of Christian tradition, so we hold, gives fuller value to the O.T. Scriptures than the univocal, one-level mind of Judaism. Thus there is little room for typology in Jewish exegesis. The comprehension of the themes and patterns of sacred history is frustrated by neglect of the key (the key of knowledge, the key of David) which gives sense and harmony to the whole design. Dr Klausner traces the redemption pattern and its variations with admirable clarity, but he shows insufficient awareness of it as foreshadowing and leading up to, and being illumined by, an arch-redemption, a transcendent redemption, to come. Again he makes it clear what divergence, not to say contradiction, there was between the various strands of the messianic hope. Judaism with its one-level

mind can only reconcile these divergences by whittling them down. Christianity sees them reconciled by being transcendently fulfilled in Christ.

This principle of fulfilment as something that transcends the expectation, as being transcends becoming, enables us to answer Dr Klausner's objections to the Messiahship of our Lord. His chief criticism is that Christianity, and its founder, over-spiritualized the messianic idea by pulling out of it the strand of political national hope. But let us repeat, to expect a purely political satisfaction for a hope of the hyperbolical messianic order is to nurse an illusion. Surely the whole history of Israel and Jewry makes that clear. The end of such dreams is some travesty of a brave new world. When Israel was a nation, its expectations naturally had a political cast. Its religion and its politics were indistinguishable. But the fulfilment of those expectations means the transformation of the true Israel. It does not cease to be, but it ceases to be a nation, and becomes a 'meta-nation', it becomes the universal Church. Now there are severe critics of the Catholic Church who would be most surprised to hear it taxed with being *over-spiritual*. It is indeed manifestly untrue. The Church is a visible society with its feet as firmly planted as the old Israel's on *terra firma*. It is not political—but it is undoubtedly a city, a *polis*; it is not national—but its members are a holy nation, the *plebs sancta Dei*. Christ's kingdom is not of this world, and that disqualifies him, in Dr Klausner's opinion, for the position of Jewish Messiah; but it is most certainly *in* this world, and the whole world, in Christian teaching, is destined to be materially as well as spiritually subject to him.

Another objection is that the Jewish Messiah is indeed 'the ideal man, but remains a human being'. But then so, in Christian teaching, does Jesus of Nazareth. There is no question of his divine nature in any way de-humanizing him. Let us be prepared to admit that nowhere in the O.T. is the divinity of the Messiah directly prophesied; it would be a mistake for the Christian apologist to try and prove it from the O.T., though, once recognized by faith, it can be legitimately read back into certain of the scriptural modes of speech. It can be seen to be hinted at, for example, in 'The Lord said to my Lord'. But granted that Jewish expectations knew nothing of a divine Messiah, it is wrong to suppose that messianic fulfilment is in any way to be constricted

or limited by messianic expectation. This sets a minimum requirement, but certainly not a maximum limit to its fulfilment. Dr Klausner himself points out that while some prophecies expect the redemption to come through the human Messiah, others look immediately to the Lord himself. Christians see both sorts of prophecy fulfilled in Jesus, who in St Peter's words is 'both Lord and Christ' (Acts 2, 36). The same reply can be made to the contention that there was nothing in the authentic tradition about the Messiah redeeming Israel and mankind by his death. Even granting, for the sake of argument, that Isaiah 52-3, Zechariah 12, Psalm 22 (21), etc., are not messianic, again I say that it is not legitimate to limit the fulfilment by the expectation. For our part, I think we can see in the denial of a suffering Messiah a symptom of that impoverishment of the scriptural heritage which may be regarded as one of the chief vices of rabbinic exegesis.

Dr Klausner has a most interesting chapter on the Messiah ben Joseph, a sort of junior precursory Messiah of the later Tannaim, who would be a great warrior and be slain in the battle with Gog and Magog, before the advent of the number one Messiah ben David in peace and splendour. This figure first appears after the failure of the Bar Cochba revolt in 135 A.D., and therefore has nothing to do with the suffering Messiah of Christianity. The explanation of him which Dr Klausner gives is most acute—and tells strongly in my opinion against the Jewish tradition in favour of the Christian way of looking at things. From the earliest times, he says, the Jewish Messiah had two sides to him, a political and a spiritual, being both a warrior king, and the king of Sion meek and riding on an ass. For the more noble among the prophetic spirits it was impossible to conceive of the godly Messiah as a shedder of blood and a wager of war. This inner contradiction (Dr Klausner's phrase) within the Jewish concept of the Messiah was not felt as long as the political tendency dominated Jewish thought. It was only when the vanity of political hopes was revealed by the Bar Cochba disaster that the full force of the contradiction was felt. It was solved by transforming the twofold character of the Messiah into a twofold Messiah, and transferring to the lesser, make-shift Messiah the whole function of waging messianic warfare.

To Christian eyes the Bar Cochba episode and this notion of two Messiahs to which it gave rise constitute a *reductio ad absurdum*

of the whole political element in the Jewish messianic tradition. This solution seems to be scarcely more than a re-statement of the crux in other terms. A much better solution, we feel, was provided by our Lord and recorded in the N.T., long before Bar Cochba was ever heard of. The most vivid presentation of it is St John's Apocalypse. The contradiction is conceived in slightly different terms from those of Dr Klausner; it is between the humble and the glorious Christ, the suffering and the triumphant Messiah. Both characters are spiritual, both are, not indeed political, but trans- or supra-political. Instead of cutting the Gordian knot by making them into two Messiahs, we resolve the tension between them into two advents of the same Messiah; first as the Lamb of God who is slain, next as the victorious Word of God, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, who comes riding on a white horse, and strikes the gentiles with the two-edged sword that proceeds from his mouth. It is precisely the more than worldly character of the warfare in the Apocalypse, its being a celestial conflict against the Dragon and the Beast, which saves it from the absurdity revealed by Bar Cochba in the Jewish political Messiah, and relieves Christians of the need of shamefacedly giving an inconspicuous subordinate place to the warlike side of the Christ's activity.

Jewry has seen other political Messiahs since Bar Cochba. After their disappearance no Jew has continued to believe in them. We might ask the Jew, who like Dr Klausner cherishes Israel's messianic hope, how he expects to recognize the Messiah when he does come. Will he have to sit cannily waiting for the claimant to achieve a startling success? An odd expression of faith that would be, if the Messiah is to have none but fair-weather friends. We may urge on such a Jew the serious responsibility he has of considering the one claim to the title which has remained unshaken by the vicissitudes of two thousand years' history, simply because it transcends history's political kaleidoscope. Dr Klausner's book on the messianic idea in Israel needs to be capped by one from the Christian side on messianic fulfilment in the Church, which could assure him and like-minded Jews that in accepting Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah they would not be deserting but re-joining the true Israel of God.