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The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Jewish Environment (Part 3)

By John Gresham Machen

Despite this difference between the New Testament and the Jewish literature, it is generally recognized that the testimony of the New Testament must be essentially correct. The picture which is given in the Gospels of the intensity of the Messianic hope among the Jews must be founded upon fact even if Jesus Himself did not claim to be the Messiah. Indeed, it is just in that latter case that the testimony in some respects would become strongest of all. For if Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah, the attribution of Messiahship to Him by His disciples could be explained only by the intensity of their own Messianic expectations. As a matter of fact, however, Jesus did claim to be the Messiah; the elimination of His Messianic consciousness has not won the assent of any large body of historians. He did claim to be the Messiah, and He died be-cause the Jews regarded Him as a false claimant. But His opponents, no less than His disciples, were expecting a "King of the Jews." The New Testament throughout, no matter what view may be held as to the historicity of the individual narratives, is quite inexplicable unless the Jews both in Palestine and in the Dispersion had a doctrine of "the Christ."

This New Testament representation is confirmed here and there by other writers. Even Philo,[1] as Brückner remarks, pays his tribute, though in an isolated passage, to the common Messianic doctrine.[2] Josephus,[3] also, despite his effort to avoid offending his Roman readers, is obliged to mention the Messianic hope as one cause of the great war, and can only make the reference harmless by finding the Messiah in the Emperor Vespasian![4] On the whole, the fact may be regarded as certain that in the first century after Christ the expectation of the Messiah was firmly established among the Jews. The silence of great sections of the Apocrypha may then be explained partly by the date of some of the books. It may well be that there was a period, especially during the Maccabean uprising, when because of the better present condition of the nation the Messianic hope was less in the forefront of interest, and that afterwards, under the humiliation of Roman rule, the thoughts of the people turned anew to the expected Deliverer. But however that may be, it is altogether probable that the expectation of a Messiah was everywhere cherished in the Judaism of the time of Paul.

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[1] *De praem et poen*. 16 (ed. Cohn, 1902, iv, p. 357).

[2] Brückner, *Die Entstehung der paulinischen Christologie*, 1903, pp. 102f.

[3] Bell. *Jud*. VI. v. 4.

[4] Schürer, *op. cit*., ii, 1907, p. 604 (English Translation, Division II, vol. ii, 1885, p. 149).

If then the hope of a Messiah was prevalent in the Judaism of the first century, what was the nature of that hope? Two forms of Messianic expectation have ordinarily been distinguished. In the first place, it is said, there was an expectation of an earthly king of David's line, and in the second place, there was the notion of a heavenly being already existing in heaven. The former of these two lines of expectation is usually thought to represent the popular view, held by the masses of the people; and the latter is regarded as an esoteric doctrine held by a limited circle from which the apocalypses have sprung.

At this point, Brückner is somewhat in opposition to the ordinary opinion; he denies altogether the presence m first-century Judaism of any distinctive doctrine of a purely human Messiah.[5] The Messiah, he says, appears in all the sources distinctly as a supernatural figure. Even in the Psalms of Solomon, he insists, where the Messiah is represented as a king reigning upon earth, He is nevertheless no ordinary king, for He destroys His enemies not by the weapons of war but "by the breath of His mouth." In the Gospels, moreover, although the people are represented as looking for a king who should break the Roman rule, yet they demand of this king works of superhuman power.

Undoubtedly there is a measure of truth in this contention of Brückner. It may perhaps be admitted that the Messiah of Jewish expectation was always something more than an ordinary king; it may perhaps be admitted that He was endowed with supernatural attributes. Nevertheless, the view of Brückner is exaggerated. There is still to be maintained the distinction between the heavenly being of 1 Enoch and the Davidic king. The latter might perhaps be regarded as possessed of miraculous powers, but still He was in the essentials of His person an earthly monarch. He was to be born like other men; He was to rule over an earthly kingdom; He was to conquer earthly armies; presumably He was to die. It is significant that John the Baptist, despite the fact that he had as yet wrought no miracles, was apparently thought by some to be the Messiah (Lk. iii. 15; John i. 19-27). Even if this representation of the Gospels of Luke and of John should be regarded as quite unhistorical, still it does show that the writers of these two Gospels, neither of whom was by any means ignorant of Jewish conditions, regard it as no incongruity that some should have supposed such a man as John to be the Messiah. The Messiah, therefore, could not have been regarded always as being like the heavenly Son of Man of 1 Enoch. But it is unnecessary to appeal to details. The whole New Testament, whatever view may be taken of the historicity of its narratives in detail, attests the prevalence in the first century of a Messianic expectation according to which the Messiah was to be an earthly king of David's line.

This view of Messiahship becomes explicit in Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho, which was written at about the middle of the second century. In this book, the Jewish opponent of Justin represents the Messiah as a "mere man."

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[5] Brückner, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-119.

No doubt this evidence cannot be used directly for the earlier period in which Paul lived. There does seem to have been a reaction in later Jewish expectations against that transcendent view of Messiahship which had been adopted by the Christian Church. Thus the apocalypses passed out of use among the Jews, and, in some cases at least, have been preserved only by the Church, and only because of their congruity with the church, with Christian views. It is possible, therefore, that when Trypho in the middle of the second century represents the Messiah as a "mere man," he is attesting a development in the Jewish doctrine which was subsequent to the time of Paul. But even in that case his testimony is not altogether without value. Even if Trypho's doctrine of a merely human Messiah be a later development, it was probably not without some roots in the past. If the Jews of the first century possessed both the doctrine of an earthly king and that of a heavenly "Son of Man," it is possible to see how the latter doctrine might have been removed and the former left in sole possession of the field; but if in the first century the transcendent doctrine alone prevailed, it is unlikely that a totally different view could have been produced so quickly to take its place.[6]

Thus it must be insisted against Brückner that in the first century the transcendent conception of Messiahship attested by the apocalypses was not the only conception that prevailed. Despite its dominance in the apocalypses, it was probably not the doctrine of the masses of the people. Probably the ordinary view of the matter is essentially correct; probably the Jews of the first century were eagerly awaiting an earthly king of David's line who should deliver them from Roman rule.

If, however, the transcendent conception of Messiahship which is found in the apocalypses was not the only conception held by pre-Christian Judaism, it is none the less of special interest, and will repay examination. It is found most fully set forth in the “Similitudes” of 1 Enoch,[7] but appears also in 4 Ezra and in 2 Baruch.

In the Similitudes, the heavenly being, who is to appear at the end of the age and be the instrument of God in judgment, is usually called the Elect One, Mine Elect One, the Son of Man, or that Son of Man. He is also called the Righteous One, and twice he is called Messiah or Anointed One (xlvii. 10; lii. 4). This latter title would seem to connect him with the expected king of David's line, who was the Anointed One or the Messiah. Lake and Jackson, however, would deny all connection. The heavenly Son of Man, they maintain, was never in pre-Christian Judaism identified with the expected king of David's line that is, with the

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[6] Indeed Brückner himself (*op. cit*., p. 110) admits that there were two lines of thought about the Messiah in pre-Christian Judaism. But he denies that the two were separated, and insists that the transcendent conception had transformed the conception of an earthly king.

[7] All parts of 1 Enoch are now usually thought to be of pre-Christian origin. The Similitudes (chaps. xxxvii-lxxi) are usually dated in the first century before Christ. See Charles, *op. cit*., ii, pp. 163-281; Schürer, op. cit., iii, pp. 268-290 (English Translation, Division II, vol. iii, pp. 54-73.

"Messiah" in the technical sense so that it is a mistake to speak of "Messianic" passages in the Book of Enoch.[8] But after all, the heavenly figure of 1 Enoch is represented as fulfilling much the same functions as those which are attributed in the Psalms of Solomon, for example, to the Messiah. It would be difficult to conceive of the same writer as expecting two deliverers-one the Messiah of the Psalms of Solomon, and the other the Son of Man of 1 Enoch. On the whole, therefore, it is correct, despite the protest of Lake and Jackson, to speak of the passages in 1 Enoch as Messianic, and of the Son of Man as the "Messiah." In 4 Ezra xii. 32, more-over, the transcendent being, who is set forth under the figure of the lion, is distinctly identified with the Messiah "who shall spring from the seed of David." Of course, the late date of 4 Ezra may be insisted upon, and it may be maintained that the Davidic descent of the Messiah in 4 Ezra is a mere traditional detail, without organic connection with the rest of the picture. But it is significant that the writer did feel it necessary to retain the detail. His doing so proves at least that the heavenly being of the apocalypses was not always thought of as distinct from the promised king of David's line. All that can be granted to Lake and Jackson is that the future Deliverer was thought of in pre-Christian Judaism in widely diverse ways, and that there was often no effort to bring the different representations into harmony. But it is correct to speak of all the representations as "Messianic." For the coming Deliverer in all cases (despite the variety of the expectations) was intended to satisfy at least the same religious needs.

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[8] Lake and Jackson, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part I, vol. i, 1920, pp. 373f.