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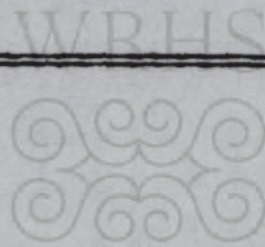
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Messiah, 1923.

"MESSIAH."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER,
THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,
DECEMBER 2, 1923, CLEVELAND.



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

I should like to have you distinguish this morning two things: the belief in a personal Messiah, and the Messiah idea itself. The Messiah idea is greater by far and much more important than the belief in the coming of a personal Messiah. One may not believe in the coming of a personal Messiah, and yet one may cling with great loyalty to the implications of the Messiah idea.

What do I mean by the Messiah idea? It is the belief that at some time in the distant future mankind will enjoy a golden age, an age of absolute perfection. It is the belief that at the end of the road of human progress there is an empire awaiting mankind in which all wrong will have no place, in which righteousness will prevail; when every man will dwell under his vine and under his fig tree; when men will beat their swords into plowshares, and when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Now, in no faith is this belief in a golden age as fundamental as in Judaism. Every religion has some idea of such a golden age, but in nearly all of them the golden age is in the past and not in the future; that long ago, in the good old times, man was perfect; man lived in a Garden of Eden, from which he was expelled through his own sinfulness or through the machination of some deity.

The Persians knew that age as the age of Yima; the Brahmans knew it as the age of Krita; the Greeks knew it

as the age of Chronos; the Romans knew it as the age of Saturn. They all shared this myth or legend in common.

The great Greek epic poet Hesiod describes this Golden Age in this manner: "First of all did the eternal god-dwellers in Libyan mansions create a golden race of speech-endowed mortals. They lived in Chronos days, when Chronos reigned in Heaven. And they lived as gods, the heart free from care. Neither troubles nor sorrows had they. . Enfeebled old age crossed not their path, but always the same in feet and hands. They delighted themselves in feastings apart from all ills; and they died as though subdued by sleep, and all good things were theirs, and the bounteous earth of her own will nurtured them well and plentifully, and of their own free will, peacefully they tilled their lands, with many blessings in store."

And again he says: "For they lived in earliest times on earth, a race of men free from care and trouble, free from wearisome worry, free from painful sickness that brings death to men, for mortal men soon age when sorrows hold sway."

Now, this ideal of a golden age, or this vision of a golden age in the distant past, was shared by all peoples including the Jews. Among the Jews it is known as the age before the fall of man--the Garden of Eden. But the Jew very early in his spiritual development, by a marvelous spiritual insight, soon transplanted this golden age from the dim distant past into the dim distant future, so that for the Jew the Golden Age became not a hankering after something that was

irretrievably lost, something which was irrevocable and untenable because already past and lost, but for the Jew the Golden Age, the Messianic Age, became a goal for the future--an ethical impulse, a striving for something yet to be achieved; and so the Jew, too, in this regard, as in almost all other regards, transformed a notion, a fable, a myth, an insubstantial thing into a marvelous ethical motif.

Now, this is the Messiah idea. But what is the belief in the personal Messiah? The belief in the personal Messiah is this: that some extraordinary person will some day come, supernaturally endowed, marvelously equipped, some semi-divine being, who will bring about this golden age. Now the religions of antiquity shared this belief in common likewise; but nowhere did this belief in the coming of a personal Messiah become so highly developed as in later day Judaism, and more especially in Christianity.

The Greeks, you will recall, had the myth of Prometheus, this semi-god, this man god who bestowed great benefactions upon mankind; who stole fire from heaven to give it unto the children of man; who taught mankind the useful arts. And the religion of Zoroaster, that appears similarly such a mythical figure, who some day will destroy all evil and reward all the virtuous and raise all the dead.

But nowhere, I say, is the belief in the coming of a personal Messiah so dominant as in later day Judaism, and more especially in Christianity.

Now these two ideas, the Messiah idea and the

belief in the coming of a personal Messiah, very often merge, become identified, become one, become confused; but they are not necessarily one, and this is a thought that I would like to underscore this morning. The Old Testament, for example, is replete with allusions to this Day of the Lord, this Golden Era yet to come, when peace and justice will reign supreme. I read you that marvelous Chapter 11 of Isaiah this morning, this dream of man's rebirth into a perfect order of things. And yet the Old Testament knows nothing of the coming of a personal Messiah in the technical sense of the word, in the meaning which it has for us today.

The word Messiah in Hebrew is Mashiah, which means the anointed--the anointed of the Lord; and in the Old Testament the term is applied to all Jewish kings and to priests who were inducted into office by having oil poured over their heads. And so the Old Testament speaks of King Saul as the Mashiah--the Messiah; and of King David, and of Zerubbabel. The Book of Leviticus speaks of the high priests and the sons of Aaron as being the Messiahs of the Lord--the anointed of the Lord. Isaiah of the exile speaks of a non-Jewish king, Cyrus, king of Persia, as the Messiah, the anointed of the Lord.

The Golden Age, according to the writers of the Old Testament, was to be brought about not by some semi-divine being but by God himself. God will restore the throne of David; God will punish the wicked; God will bring about the day when men will beat their swords into plowshares. God,

of course, may use great men to effect his purpose, just as he used Abraham, Moses and Elijah and David, to bring about this perfect order of things; but such men are not divine and possess none of the attributes of divinity. They are just human instruments in the hands of divinity such as all men are.

It was not until the second century before the common era that the idea of a personal Messiah, as we understand it today, began to gain headway in Jewish thought. It was not until the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. that the idea of the personal Messiah was becoming a very prevalent and popularly entertained thought in Israel, and it was not until many centuries after that time that the belief in the Messiah became a dogma in orthodox Judaism.

The Mishnah, for example, that authoritative code of rabbinic law, compiled about 200 A. D., does not even mention the word Messiah; and as late as the fourth century of the common era a rabbi by the name of Hillel declares "Israel has no Messiah." In the fourth century this opinion of Hillel was an extreme opinion, to be sure, for the belief in the Messiah at that time was already popularly held. But it is significant that a rabbi in the fourth century can declare that Israel has no Messiah, for if the belief in the coming of a personal Messiah had become an essential of the faith, a dogma of the faith, this rabbi would not have entertained such opinions.

What may be said, then, of the belief in the coming of a personal Messiah, as far as Israel is concerned, is this: that it originated very late in Jewish thought. The prophets knew nothing of it. The psalmists knew nothing of it. The early teachers of Israel knew nothing of it. It originated very late in Israel, and it gained currency and it gained in favor as Israel lost its political independence and became subject to the yoke and the tyranny of Rome in the first century before the common era.

When Israel lost its independence and became an oppressed people, the wish to be redeemed, the wish to regain its independence naturally grew apace in the hearts and the souls of the people, and so they began to hope and pray for the coming of some redeemer, a scion of the house of David, who would crush the power of Rome, punish the wickedness of the oppressor and restore Israel to independence.

Now, the more they were oppressed and the greater the power of Rome loomed in their eyes, the more supernatural did the figure of the Messiah become in their eyes; for in order to crush a power as great and mighty as Rome, an ordinary human agent is not able to do that, and so the redeemer who would accomplish such a thing would have to be supernaturally equipped, almost a semi-divine being; and so the concept of the Messiah becomes more and more mythical and more and more legendary as the condition of the people becomes more and more depressed and more and more hopeless.

Jesus appeared in the first century of the

common era, just at the time when the hand of Rome weighed heaviest upon the people, at the time when Messianic expectations were in the air. The Romans knew of such Messianic expectations entertained by the people, and they also knew that the idea of the coming of the Messiah was in the minds of the people identified with the restoration of the throne and the dynasty of David and the overthrow of the rule of Rome, and so the Roman procurators looked with suspicion upon any man whom the people may regard as a Messiah, and upon any nationalistic movement which partook of the character of a Messianic movement; and so they ruthlessly destroyed any man or any group of men whom they thought was tainted with Messianic notions, and so Jesus was crucified. Fifty years before him another Messiah - Theudas - was killed by the Romans, and Josephus, the historian of that epoch, mentions three other Messiahs who arose in that period of storm and stress and who suffered at the hands of the Romans.

From that day on, from the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the people, to this day, every great crisis stirred within the hearts of Israel the hope of a return, the hope of redemption, the hope of a Messiah. The opinion gained ground in Israel that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by a period of terrible persecution - the "birththroes of the Messiah." And so the Jews came to see in every period of persecution which befell them the footprints of the Messiah. Whenever

they were exiled from one country to another, whenever they were oppressed, they came to see in their suffering and in their oppression the promise of the advent of the Messiah. The fall of Rome, the rise of Mohammed, the fall of a Mohammedan dynasty, the invasion of the Hun, the Crusades, the expulsion from Spain, the Cossack rebellions in the seventeenth century,--all these mighty movements and critical periods in the world's history stirred in the soul of Israel the hope that the Messiah was about to come, and when that hope was stirred to the highest pitch, a Messiah actually did arise, and Jewish history is full of pseudo-Messiahs, of false Messiahs, who, at these critical moments, in response to the eagerness and the prayerful waiting of the people, announced themselves as the Messiahs, and were, of course, after a few years, proved to be false Messiahs.

Not only did they wait for the coming of the Messiah, but many leaders of Jewish thought, many devout souls, spent years in calculating just when the Messiah is to be expected. You can readily see how that would come about. A man who is under terrible disability, in want, in misery, suffering, would naturally wait like him who waits for the coming of the dawn, for the coming of redemption. And so we have in the Talmud rabbis who prophesy that four hundred years after the destruction of the Temple the Messiah would come. That period coincided with the fall of Rome, and the Jews of that day expected that the fall of Rome, the traditional enemy of Israel, would usher in the Messianic age.

Another apocalyptic book, known as Pirke De Rabbi Elezer, calculates that the Messiah would come in 639, two years after the Arabs conquered Jerusalem. The great Saadia, the first of the great Jewish philosophers, a man of keen logical reasoning power, nevertheless sets aside a whole chapter in his philosophic book, Emunot we-De'ot, setting forth opinions to prove on the revelations in the Book of Daniel just when the Messiah would come, and he proves conclusively that the Messiah would come in the year 968 A. D..

The great Nachmanides, the rationalist, the disciple of Aristotle, on the one hand urges the people not to engage in any speculations concerning the coming of the Messiah, and on the other hand he writes a letter to a Jewish community saying that there is a tradition in his family that the Messiah would come in the year 1216 A. D. Rosseau, the great commentator of the Bible and the Talmud, believed that the Messiah would come in 1352. Maimonides wrote a book called "The Book of the End" - in which he proves conclusively to his satisfaction that the Messiah would come in the year 1403. And the most tragic figure of all, the most pathetic figure of all, is the figure of Isaac Abravanel, who lived at the time of the Spanish expulsion, in 1492, and who was of the greatest influence in the court of Spain. He gave half of his fortune to enable the king to carry on his work. He offered the remainder of his fortune to his king if he would revoke the order of his expulsion.

But when the order was issued Isaac Abravanel, who traced his lineage to King David himself, refused the privilege of remaining in Spain, and left, along with three hundred thousand of his unfortunate brethren, into exile; and five years after that time, in 1497, an exile in Naples, a broken old man, Isaac Abravanel begins to write a series of three books - The Wells of Salvation, Announcing Salvation, and The Salvation of His Anointed, in which three works he tries to prove by Biblical passages, by Talmudic passages, that the Messiah undoubtedly, without fail, will come in the year 1503.

This attempt to calculate the coming of a Messiah, of course, is not limited to Jews, but among Christians, too. There are the so-called Millenarians who calculate from time to time when the second coming of the Messiah will take place.

To summarize this belief in the personal Messiah, as far as Israel is concerned: originating late in Judaism, it developed right through the period of the exile; not because of greater spiritual insight on the part of Israel, not because religiously they rose to higher levels; the belief in the personal Messiah did not develop because it was a natural corollary to the fundamental principles of the Jewish faith: the belief gained ground and developed in Israel because of the persecution and because of exile and because of the untoward vicissitudes and fortunes of the life of the people.

Whenever Israel was at peace, whenever Israel

enjoyed freedom, the idea of a personal Messiah fades into the background, just as it has faded today among even the orthodox Jews in the lands of peace. Whenever there is persecution and expulsion and misery, then this hope is stirred again, this outreaching of the soul of the people for a redeemer and for redemption.

Now, modern Judaism, progressive Judaism, has given up the idea of the belief of the coming of a personal Messiah. Reformed Judaism, liberal Judaism, has gone back to the Old Testament. Liberal Judaism believes that the belief in a personal Messiah is not an essential of faith; it is not part and parcel of the authoritative teachings of Judaism, and what is even more important, it is not true to the history of human progress. Progress implies process. Man develops; man rises from one stage to a higher stage, painfully and slowly. Perfection cannot be achieved by one act, by one man, at one time. No figure, however divinely endowed, can by a wave of the hand or by sudden appearance in the arena of the world, bring about human perfection. And even if he could, it would not be desirable; for bestowing perfection on mankind is worthless; achieving perfection by the human race is worth while.

And so modern Judaism, believing in progress, believing in evolution, believing in the ability of man himself, of all men, to rise and to raise, has given up the idea of the coming of a personal Messiah. But it has not given up the idea--and this is basic--of a Messianic age, the

idea underlying the Messiah. We do believe, and, what is more important, we must believe in the coming of a Golden Age. In other words, we must believe in the reality of human progress. There are religions, there are thinkers, that question human progress. There are religions that believe that life moves in an endless, meaningless circle of change but not of progress. There are religions that regard progress as undesirable because progress implies effort, and effort estranges man from God. The ideal is to lose our personalities and our individualities in the great whole, in the one God. There are thinkers like Schopenhauer, who believe that progress is impossible.

Judaism believes in the reality of progress. Judaism believes not that man came out of the Garden of Eden and fell, but that man came out of the jungle and is now slowly, almost imperceptibly, painfully rising to the higher levels. Judaism maintains that there will be a day when the abuses and the wrongs afflicting the children of man today will disappear, a day such as is visioned by the prophet Isaiah, by the prophet Micah; a day of universal peace, a day of universal brotherhood, a day of universal reconciliation, when man will come into his own, into the estate, into the patrimony as a son of God.

Progress cannot be established scientifically, but it must be held as a faith. We must believe that life is progressing, because if we do not believe, then life is surely not going to progress. We cannot prove that life is worth-

while, but if we hold that life is not worthwhile, life will not be worth while. Life becomes worth while as we think it to be worth while, and as we live holding the worthwhileness of life up as a goal, an incentive and an inspiration, and so as a beckoning of religious thought, there must always be the Messianic kingdom--the empire of human perfection.

That is the first thought that we still hold to in this Messianic idea. And the second one is this: human leadership. Back of the idea of a personal Messiah is the belief in the efficacy of human personality, of human leadership. Now, it is true, and we acknowledge that no one man will bring about perfection, but we do believe that perfections are brought about through the instrumentalities of great, unique personalities - not of one anointed of the Lord but of many anointed of the Lord.

Civilization is an expression of great souls, of great individuals. They are born out of the mass; they receive their opportunity from the mass; they receive their tools from the mass, but it is the leader who leads, it is the leader through whom the new advance, the new outreaching of mankind, is made. It is the individual man of genius, of greatness, of insight, of courage, who becomes the channel for new revelations. And that, too, religion must believe in. The history of religion is the history of great personalities, to point out the way to higher levels and to purer air. And if democracy will cease to believe in the value of excellencies, it will become a deterrent factor in

civilization. It is not the mass, the multitude, the average that leads; it is the outstanding single individual who is the Messiah of his age and of his country.

And lastly, we believe in the Messianic idea of suffering. The Messiahs were always crucified. According to rabbinic law, the Messiah is chained, awaiting the hour of redemption. The great leaders of human thought are those who suffer most for the sins of mankind and for the follies of mankind; are those who vicariously atone for the evils of mankind. Mankind must learn the redemptive power, the quality of suffering. Life itself implies suffering. The fundamental reality of life is the wish to live, the will to live; but the wish is a desire, and a desire brings with it pain. Progress is a desire to advance, to reach out, to embrace more of reality, and that desire brings with it pain and suffering and sorrow, and only insofar as the human race is willing to endure suffering - the birththroes of the Messianic times - can it ever hope to advance.

To sum up, then, our attitude towards the Messiah idea: we do not believe in the coming of a personal Messiah who will make the world a Paradise. We do believe, first, that somewhere in the distant future there is a kingdom replete with blessings and happiness, but that this kingdom will not be reached automatically without effort, just by waiting, but that this kingdom must be achieved, must be built out of our hopes and dreams and labors and sacrifices and sufferings, and that this kingdom of perfect peace and

happiness will be brought about by the Messiahs of every age, by the leaders of every land through the ages, who, rising from the masses as the wave rises from the ocean, yet reach higher levels than the volume of the water.

And lastly, that we must all strive through our readiness to make sacrifices, to make Messiahs possible, and if possible to become Messiahs ourselves. Moses prays would that the whole people of God were prophets. I think that we can similarly pray would that all the children of man would strive, each in his humble sphere, to partake, if only partially and only slightly, of the function and the consecration of a Messiah, an anointed of the Lord, a redeemer of mankind.

