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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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The Message from Bethlehem which is in Judea, 1923.



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"THE MESSAGE FROM BETHLEHEM WHICH IS IN JUDEA."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER,

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

DECEMBER 23, 1923, CLEVELAND, O.

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At this season of the year our brothers of the Christian faith are celebrating the nativity of a Jewish child, born in Bethlehem, which is in Judea, whose life and message shook the world and marked a turning point in the history of civilization. The faith which was built upon the simple Jewish gospel of this man has now conquered one-third of the world. Later ages may have obscured this man's message, and alien accretions of subsequent days may have cloaked this figure of this simple Galilean preacher almost beyond recognition, but with the passing of the years and the growth of knowledge among men, the man himself, this rare human personality and his intrinsically Jewish ethical ideals, are slowly regaining their place of supremacy and dominance in Christendom.

Progressing Christian thought today, through silence or through open hostility, are discarding the supernatural and the legendary elements which the succeeding generations have added unto this Jesus Saga. They are discarding the orthodox dogmas and theology which were built around this central figure. Progressive Christian thought today is beginning to lay stress not upon the miraculous, not the man, but upon the miracle of the man himself; not upon the supernaturalness of His teaching but upon the supreme naturalness, the inevitable naturalness of His teaching. And so liberal Christian thought is preaching, slowly but surely, essential Jewish doctrine, and Judea is again conquering Rome.



You have read recently in your newspapers of a great doctrinal struggle, of a great theologic conflict within the ranks of the Episcopal Church of the United States. Certain ministers of this denomination, and those orthodox of Protestant denominations, have challenged the authority of the bishops, and they have proclaimed certain doctrines which the orthodox are stigmatizing as heresy.

This struggle has been long in coming. Beneath the surface of conformity in the Episcopal Church, and in other orthodox Christian churches, there has for years been a ferment of unrest and discontent with certain orthodox dogmas which modern ministers find incompatible with their scientific thinking. So far most of these heretics have been more dramatic than courageous, but it is a sign of the times that a dissatisfaction is growing apace within the ranks of the hitherto most conservative and orthodox--a dissatisfaction, mind you, lodged principally against not the Jewish elements in the Christian religion but the typically un-Jewish or anti-Jewish elements in Christianity. And that is significant. These rebels are attacking not the ethics of Jesus, which are Jewish, but they are attacking certain dogmas which Jesus himself would have been the first to attack--dogmas which have come not from Bethlehem of Judea, but from Nicaea and Alexandria and Rome; from the Hellenic and the pagan world--dogmas such as the Virgin birth and the physical resurrection and the divinity of the man.

It is my firm belief that these rebels within the fold are beginning to follow in the footsteps of their



earlier Unitarian brethern. They may do so at present very unwillingly, but the tendency is clear and certain: they are preaching the Jewish doctrine of the one God and the one humanity.

Now, I say this with no sense of pride. Pride should not enter a religious discussion. I say this in vindication of a faith which has cost us much blood and many tears. I say it in vindication of an age old martyrdom. It is good that the world should know that the faith of the humble - if it be true and truthfully held - will ultimately triumph against the mighty millions in power and in control. It is a great inspiration to every dreamer who is uncertain of the success of his dream; it is a great inspiration to every idealist who is discouraged by the tremendous odds against him; it is a great inspiration to everyone who challenges the entrenched majority, to be able to look to this miracle of a small, weak, defenseless people clinging to an ideal, while the world about it denied that ideal, and ultimately, through the ages, slowly but surely, seeing that ideal triumph. I believe that it is a supreme vindication of idealism as well as of Judaism.

I said that the teachings of this man born in Bethlehem, in Judea, were essentially Jewish. They were not all regarded as orthodox or proper or acceptable in his day. But all His teachings, all of them, find their source and origin somewhere in the teachings of prophet and sage and psalmist who lived before His time. They are Jewish in essence and fashioned out of the soul and the soil of Judea. Jesus may have emphasized certain teachings of the earlier



teachers of Israel which needed emphasis in His day. Jesus may have modified some of the teachings through a new interpretation of them, but Jesus abrogated none. He did not come to abolish the law. He came, as He said, to fulfill the law. "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy but to fulfill." "Verily, I say unto you till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law till all be fulfilled." "Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments and shall teach men so to do, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; whosoever shall do and teach them the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus did not feel that the God who <sup>was</sup> worshipped by His brethern, the God of the Bible, was a cruel, vindictive tyrant, and that the world was in need of a new God idea. He knew the God of Israel as the fine minds of His day and those who preceded him knew Him. He knew the God of Israel as father and friend, just and merciful. Jesus did not feel as his followers and disciples today seem to feel, that the law, the Torah, under which his brethern lived in his day was oppressive and burdensome and crushing, that only the letter was observed but that the spirit was violated.

Jesus was a pious, observing Pharisee Jew. He was not a rebel and He was not a heretic. He came to fulfill the law; He came to turn the minds of the people to the tremendous implications, the tremendous spiritual implications of each and every law. He did not counsel or advise his brothers to do away with Jewish ceremonies and Jewish



practices. He told his disciples, "Go not unto the way of the Gentiles, and enter not into the cities of the Samaritans." He was not a missionary, and he was not concerned with Israel sacrificing its peculiar religious customs and practices for the sake of winning converts, as Paul later on did. He did not come to found a new religion. The God of Israel and the Torah of Israel were sufficient unto him just as they were sufficient unto his disciples for a hundred years after his death - his disciples who worshipped in Jewish synagogues and observed the Jewish festivals and customs. His only mark of distinction was that they believed that Jesus was the Messiah.

And if the Sermon on the Mount, that marvelous Jewish sermon, is to be interpreted as the sum, the summary of the ethical teachings of Jesus, then nigh every one of the doctrines therein proclaimed have their counterpart in the Old Testament, in the earlier teachings of psalmist and sage and prophet.

"Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven," we read in the Sermon on the Mount; and in the Psalms written perhaps three or four hundred years before that time, we read, "The Lord is nigh unto them that are broken in spirit, and those that are contrite in heart." Humility was an old virtue extolled in Israel.

In the Sermon we read, "Happy are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." In the Psalms we read, "They that sow in tears will reap in joy." In the Sermon we read, "Happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." In the Bible we read, "The meek shall inherit the earth." In



the Sermon we read, "Happy are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." In the Bible we read, "He that followeth righteousness and mercy shall find life and honor." In the Sermon we read, "Happy are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." In the Bible we read, "Happy is he that considereth the poor, the Lord will deliver him in the day of evil." In the Sermon we read, "Happy are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." In the Bible we read, "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord and who shall stand in His holy place, he that hath clean hands and a pure heart." In the Sermon we read, "Happy are the peace makers, for they shall be called the children of God." And in the prophet Isaiah we read, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings and publisheth peace." And Hillel, you will recall, a contemporary of Jesus, said, "Love peace, seek peace, pursue peace, and love all mankind." In the Sermon we read, "Happy are they that have been persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." In the Old Testament we read, "I gave my back to the smiters ; I hid not my face from shame and the spitting of men, for the Lord God will help me."

And so throughout everyone of the doctrines the essential, ethical doctrines of this man of Galilee has its counterpart in the earlier teachings of His race found in the Bible. There are, of course, certain doctrines which this man preached which authoritative Judaism refused to accept, but it refused to accept them not because they were anti-Jewish, not because they were regarded as heresies, but



because they were impractical, unreal, visionary, extreme. And this is the thought that I would like to emphasize this morning. There are certain things which Jesus preached which Israel refused to accept, and which Israel was wise in not accepting. Jesus belonged to an extreme mystic sect in Israel. There were many such mystic sects in Israel for a hundred and fifty years before the coming of Jesus. These sects had apocalyptic visions. By that I mean that they regarded the world as soon coming to an end. They were looking forward eagerly to some catastrophe, some cataclysm by which this old order of things, this world as they knew it, with all its wickedness and all its sinfulness, would be destroyed by some miraculous intervention, and that a new order of things would in some miraculous manner take its place and supplant it.

John the Baptist came out of the wilderness, dressed in his raiment of camels hair and a leather girdle around his loins, proclaiming, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of Heaven is near at hand." He and his followers were absolutely convinced that the world was coming to an end, and that right soon; and that man should prepare himself through fasting and prayer and repentance and purification, so as to be received in this new kingdom which was descending from heaven.

Jesus heard the preaching of this man John, and was convinced of the truth of his apocalyptic vision, and he had himself baptised by John, and from that day on he became a member of this extreme mystic, ascetic group, and he, too, went forth into the hills of Judea and Galilee proclaiming,



"Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is near at hand." He believed that the Messianic times were come. He even had belief that he himself was the Messiah. But be that as it may, the conviction that the world was doomed, that before very long, in his very lifetime, or in the lifetime of his immediate disciples, a swift and sudden catastrophe would sweep these governments and peoples, everybody, and that a new order would come down, was very strong in him. And so he preached certain doctrines for this short inter-regnum before the day of the Lord; which may be very laudable and commendable for such a situation, such a circumstance, but which cannot be a livable, workable social program for life.

And so he said, "Resist not evil." "If a man strike thee on one cheek, turn the other." There is no reason or purpose in resisting evil, in trying to correct the abuses of life when life itself will be changed any moment now, when a new order is about to come. And so he preached pacifism - "Resist not evil." And so he said to his disciples, "Take no thought for tomorrow." "Therefore I say unto you take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Behold the fowls of the air; for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are yet not much better than they? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Therefore take no thought, What shall we eat? or, What shall we



drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? Take no thought, therefore, of the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

Now for a small group of men who lived in the twilight world of rare and marvelous expectations, these are laudable and commendable doctrines, but for the rank and file of men these doctrines are impossible. Men must work in order to live. Men must take thought for tomorrow. Men must practice the virtues of provision and prevision, of thrift, if social life is to continue uninterrupted. Men must disarm evil or evil will destroy the innocent and the evil-doer at the same time. As a practical program for life these doctrines are impossible; and so authoritative Judaism refused to accept them.

Judaism, which is concerned not so much with the hereafter, in the world to come, with the new order of things, but with the improvement of the moral life in this world; Judaism, whose ideal is "to improve this world through the ideal of the kingdom of God"--Judaism could not well accept such doctrines of pacifism which Jesus preached. Nor could Christianity, in fact. While Christianity is paying homage and lip service to the teachings of Jesus concerning pacifism and communism - for Jesus was both a pacifist and a communist-Christian peoples are the first to imprison and destroy anyone who would actually try to put these pacifistic and communistic teachings of Jesus into practice. Christian nations are the first to ex-communicate a nation which under-



takes to put into actual practice the communistic teachings of its founders.

So much, then, for the Jewish teachings of Jesus. The world did not come to an end, as he expected. The world does not come to an end; the world is not improved through sudden revolutionary moves. The world advances slowly, painfully, laborbusly, almost imperceptibly, and we grow not through an intervention of some supernatural powers, but through our labors and our struggles and our sacrifices; through the leadership and the consecrated loyalties of men and of women; and of such leaders of men, of such pathfinders who point the way to a new life and a higher life, this Jew of Galilee was one. He taught by maxim and by parable, by precept and example, more especially by example; by the passion of his own life, by the humble service which he rendered to the weak and the poor, the widowed and the orphan, by his rare kindliness of spirit, and by the ultimate act of supreme self-emulation.

He taught the men of his day and of succeeding days the true values of life. He taught purity; he taught humility; he taught kindliness; he taught above all that the highest good of life and the highest goal of life is love. He was the first Jew to have proclaimed this doctrine--not only Love thy neighbor as thyself, but Love thine enemy. Love them that hate you. He was the first to have said, "Judge not lest ye be judged." He was the first to have said, "To be angry against your brother is like unto slaying your brother." He was the first to have raised many of the ethical teachings of Israel to a higher degree of exaltation



and ecstasy.

Perhaps his teachings are not for the many but for the few. Perhaps the ideal of loving one's enemy is not possible for the rank and file of mankind. Perhaps only the select, the elect and esoteric few can really practice these ideals, but that they are ideals and that they represent the very pinnacle, the peak of the ethical achievements of the human mind, there can be no doubt.

The church which was builded on his teaching was perhaps the last to have practiced his teaching. The church which was founded around the simple gospel of the Jew of Bethlehem and Nazareth, who preached love, forgiveness, pity, brotherhood, was perhaps among the first to mock his teachings. It brought strife among men, and hate, especially against the blood kin of him whom they worshipped. There are many churches built to his name, but all too few who preach him in truth, as he preached the faith of Israel in truth.

It is surprising to see among the leaders in the world today who are organizing hate, the very ministers who have dedicated their lives to the service of this Prince of Peace. Christendom must return to the simple teachings of this prophet of Israel if it wishes to serve mankind and save mankind. The dogmas and the old theologies of his Virgin birth, or his divinity, or his resurrection, or his transfiguration, will not feed the souls of men and women today, or help mankind. But his teaching of love, of kindness, of humility, of forgiveness, of reconciliation of the spiritual values of life,--these things amidst the chaos and the confusion of the world today, these things



from Judea, of the soul of Judea, may yet heal and save.

Israel is grateful that such a man lived, and  
Israel may well number him among that host of titanic souls  
whom we call prophets of men.

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