

Seton Hall University

eRepository @ Seton Hall

The Bridge: A Yearbook of Judaeo-Christian
Studies, Vol. II

The Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies

1956

Book Review: 'The Messianic Idea in Israel' by Joseph Klausner

J. Edgar Bruns

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/jcs-bridge-II>

Recommended Citation

Bruns, J. Edgar, "Book Review: 'The Messianic Idea in Israel' by Joseph Klausner" (1956). *The Bridge: A Yearbook of Judaeo-Christian Studies, Vol. II*. 21.
<https://scholarship.shu.edu/jcs-bridge-II/21>

Joseph Klausner: THE MESSIANIC IDEA IN ISRAEL *

JOSEPH KLAUSNER is among the best known of contemporary Jewish scholars. Any book of his is sure to command interest and attention, but a book of his on *The Messianic Idea in Israel* no other scholar, Christian or Jew, can afford to ignore. Indeed, we must be grateful that it has finally been made available in an effortless English translation by W. F. Stinespring of Duke University. Like Dr. Klausner's other writings, this book shows his great learning and wide familiarity with his field. He brings to his work a manifest reverence for his topic; if his method is scientific, his attitude is worshipful. For him the messianic idea in Israel is not just an intellectual or emotional phenomenon in the history of his people; it is a hope and a dream that he shares with them and their forefathers from generation to generation.

For all that is admirable in it, Dr. Klausner's book cannot be said to fulfill every demand of objective study. Occasionally he appears to be guilty of unrealized contradictions, and throughout the book there is no really fair consideration given to Christian exegesis. No one can expect Dr. Klausner to agree with the Christian interpretation of the messianic prophecies, but one has a right—has one not?—to expect him to acknowledge that interpretation rather than, for the most part, ignoring it as though it did not merit attention. I fear, also, that Dr. Klausner at times misunderstands Christian theology. Whenever he presents Christian beliefs or discusses Christian exegesis, it is quite apparent that the teachings of liberal Protestantism are his concern—but its voice is not that of the teaching Church. It is always the "rationalistic" approach of the Christian to the Scriptures that he deplores and it is the "individualistic" approach of the Christian to his salvation that he finds incompatible with Old Testament revelation. Yet these are not characteristics of Catholic Christianity, the only Christianity that Judaism knew for fifteen hundred years; they are, the one an outgrowth, and the other a mark, of the Reformation. Whoever looks to the Reformation, and, more especially, to some of its modern corollaries, for a full and correct

* New York: Macmillan Co., 1955.

understanding of Christian doctrine will naturally fail to see the Church's continuity with the thought and institutions of the ancient Israel. I am sure that Dr. Klausner's failure to come to grips with Catholic teaching is not intentional, yet this is a not uncommon mistake among Jewish thinkers, perhaps going back to Judaism's conflict with medieval Christendom and a resultant tension. The unfortunate consequence is that even today, when old hostilities are dead, Catholic tradition is passed over, leaving vast areas unexplored or misunderstood.

Dr. Klausner's justified impatience with Christian scholars who are "rationalistic theologians from the soles of their feet to the tops of their heads" (p. 145) is an illustration in point. He condemns the widespread tendency to cut up the prophetic books and assign to them a multiplicity of authors, blaming it on a lack of imagination. "These scholars," he writes, "cannot imagine that some prophet might have lived a long time, with the content and even the style, of his prophecies changing in the course of time" (p. 200). But he shows no awareness that Catholic exegetes hold a position similar to his own. Ten years ago a Catholic scholar, approaching the problem of the "Deutero-Isaiah," voiced almost these same sentiments, and, in doing so, clearly expressed the Catholic attitude which, without ever wavering in its belief in the supernatural character of Scripture, seeks to meet the difficulties of Higher Criticism. Father W. McClellan, S.J., suggested that chapters 40-66 of Isaiah were "the fruit of enforced retirement after 698 . . . a transition from tongue to pen . . . the visions of a recluse who was no longer a public orator" (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, October 1945, p. 468), thereby accounting for the difference of style and content between the first and second halves of this great prophetic book. Father McClellan is not singled out here because his suggestion is in any way final, rather because his position closely parallels that of Dr. Klausner.

Again, one suspects that Dr. Klausner's insistence on the "other-worldliness" of Christian messianism is chiefly due to his tacit identification of the Christian Church with the Protestant body, so largely and deliberately individualistic. Stressing what he calls the ethical, idealistic, and exalted but always terrestrial character of the Jewish messianic world, he writes: "The Kingdom of Heaven of the Jewish Messiah is not only within the soul of man, but also upon the earth" (p. 10), as if this last were no part of Christian doctrine. Luther's interpretation of Christ's saying that "the kingdom of God is within you," that is, within

your reach or among you, as if it meant that the kingdom of God is in souls alone, was born of his protest against the Catholic Church and of his attempt to find scriptural evidence for his "invisible Church." But any such misunderstanding is outside the mainstream of Catholic thought and practice. It is true, Christians have all too often forgotten—and alas! will forget—their social responsibility, though their Master clearly stated that they will be judged on whether or not they have fed Him in the hungry, refreshed Him in the thirsty, received Him in the stranger . . . (Mt 25:31-40). All too often Christians forget how James spoke out against those who live a life of glitter built on the sweat of men they have defrauded of their wages, and against those who scrape before the finely dressed while they scorn the ill clad (Jas 5:1-6; 2:1-13); how John warned that he who hates his neighbor is a murderer, and that he who says "I love God" but does not love his brother is a liar (1 Jn 3:15; 4:20). But when Christians forget their social responsibility, they forget Christ's kingdom too.

Further, despite Dr. Klausner's dislike of rationalistic criticism he is not altogether above falling into it himself. When discussing the Seventy Weeks prophecy of Daniel, he concludes that "the author . . . erred, therefore, by about seventy years" (p. 233), and he comes to this conclusion because the historical interpretation he, with many others, wishes to give the prophecy will not otherwise commend itself chronologically. The particular passage in Daniel (9:24-27) is admittedly difficult. But could it not be—as is the opinion of such Catholic scholars as Lagrange, Ceuppens, Chaine, and Saydon—that Daniel's figures, though not without reference to history, are largely symbolical; that he predicted a sequence of events and not their precise dates; and that there are in this prophecy, as in many others, more than one perspective? In it, there seem combined into one vision the Maccabean, the messianic, and the eschatological perspectives. Israel's oppression in the days of the Maccabees will lead to the new era of the messianic kingdom; this kingdom too will be oppressed, yet its sufferings will end in triumph and heavenly glory. No need, then, to place in doubt the inspired character of this prophecy by assuming Daniel to be in error.

When discussing the "Servant of Yahweh" prophecy in Isaiah 53, Dr. Klausner acknowledges that it was realized at least to some extent in the person of Jesus. He writes first that "the early Christians, from Paul the Apostle (Ac 8:32-35) onward, saw in [it] a reference to the suffer-

ings and death of Jesus of Nazareth," then admits that "as a matter of fact, some of his career did resemble what is described in Chapter 53," only to lessen the impact of this admission by going on: "The rest of his career is *intentionally* portrayed in the Gospels in such a manner that the events appear to have happened in fulfillment of the words in this chapter" (p. 162). Apart from the fact that this is the approach of rationalistic critics, Dr. Klausner offers no proof—and would, of course, be hard put to it to offer any—of this his assertion. He insists that the Messiah described in the Servant-Songs is not just an individual but even more the nation, the best of the people of Israel. "Thus," he says, "the whole people Israel in the form of the elect of the nation gradually became the Messiah of the world, the redeemer of mankind" (p. 163). But nowhere does Isaiah or any other prophet, nowhere do the saints and servants of old, claim so exalted an office as "redeemer of mankind." Do they not rather all say with John the Baptist: "I am not the Christ," "One mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to loose" (Jn 1:20; Lk 3:16)? Dr. Klausner's interpretation of the "Servant" as a collective body is not new, nor restricted to Jewish exegetes, but our ever growing knowledge of Semitic thought and language continually reduces its acceptability. A recent study of V. DeLeeuw's (in *L'Attente du Messie*, L. Cerfaux, ed., Paris, 1954, pp. 51-56), by analyzing the various words used to describe the person or activity of the Servant, demonstrates that, although he evidences certain prophetic traits, he is primarily and undeniably a king, and if a king, "undoubtedly he belongs to that dynasty alone which the prophets regarded as legitimate—the house of David." If the Servant is a collective body in any sense, it can only be in the same way that every prince or king represents his people.

Does not Dr. Klausner walk on vulnerable ground also when he so firmly asserts that Judaism never took the step of postulating a divine Messiah (p. 24)? Toward the end of his book, he is forced to modify this claim by admitting that "of the divine nature of the Messiah, there are perhaps certain indications in the later Midrashim" (p. 466), but explains them as an indirect and unconscious borrowing from Christianity. Would it not be more logical and in better historic perspective to assume that they are survivals of ancient glimpses? Would it not be much more in accordance with the data we have to regard the divinity of the Messiah as something sensed and implied by the prophets and developed in later

apocryphal literature, well before there could have been any "Christian influence"? In chapter 9 (verse 6 of the Douay version, verse 5 of the Hebrew Bible), Isaiah says of the Messiah that His name shall be called "Wonderful, Counsellor, God the mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of peace." I do not wish to suggest that the prophet and his hearers fully realized the tremendous implications of his foretelling. But does not Dr. Klausner sidestep these when he transfers the content of these stupendous names from the Messiah, the son promised, to God Himself, and adopts the translation used in the Bible of the Jewish Publication Society of America: "And his name shall be called: Wonderful in counsel is God the Mighty, the Everlasting Father, the Ruler of peace" (p. 64). This translation does not seem very convincing; but, apart from that, there can be no doubt that the names are meant to describe the Messiah Himself, for in the next verse the prophet shows how these qualities will be reflected in His reign, and in chapter 11 he continues his description of this Messiah by endowing Him again with attributes reminiscent of the names in chapter 9. I cannot help fearing that Dr. Klausner avoids the challenge of Isaiah's prophecy. For did not a dark and yet luminous prophetic perception that fused the Messiah with Yahweh, a prophetic perception that saw Yahweh at work in the Messiah and the Messiah in Yahweh, dominate all of Isaiah's visions?

Similarly, are not the words of Micah that the origins of the King-Messiah are from of old, from ancient days (5:2 Douay, 5:1 Hebrew), deprived of all significance when Dr. Klausner says that they "indicate only the antiquity of his origin . . . but nothing more" (p. 77), and that this antiquity is His Davidic descent? It is hard to see how this could have been the prophet's meaning, since the house of David was not distinguished by its antiquity. All the Israelite tribes and families were equally ancient, and the house of David was not even the first to occupy the throne. On the other hand, in Scripture "of old" refers to God's doings in the times of the exodus (Is 51:9; 63:9), or—and this is really pertinent here—to the hidden depth of eternity: "From of old [wisdom] was poured forth, at the first, before the earth" (Prov 8:23).

The great reluctance of any Jewish scholar, theologian, historian, or philosopher, to see divine traits in the revealed delineation of the Messiah is based upon his fervent and admirable devotion to God's unity. Anything that might suggest a duality or trinity of persons in the divine nature is, to the Jew, anathema. He does not see how it can be reconciled

with the Oneness of God. Here we are at the center of a paradox, for the Jews have, through the centuries, accused Christians of rationalizing the biblical faith, of robbing it of its warmth and beauty by reducing it to the logic of Greek metaphysics. In Dr. Klausner's own words: "The prophet is not a philosopher of logic, but a philosopher of emotion . . . it is necessary to remember always that certain variations and inconsistencies are inevitable" (pp. 55-56). Yet it is the Christian who, sharing Israel's fervor for the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, asserts that God is One, yet Three, only to find the Jew accusing him of illogic! It was Tertullian, a *Latin* Christian, who, faced with the tremendous mystery of the Incarnation, could write that just that which made it seem outrageous to human ears, fantastic to the "logical" mind, or simply impossible—that it was just that which gave him the confidence of faith: "The Son of God was born: I am not ashamed of it, precisely because it is scandalous. The Son of God died: I believe it utterly, because it is absurd. And He was buried and rose again: I am certain of it, because it is impossible" (PL 2:761).

Just as Dr. Klausner will not allow a divine Messiah, neither will he acknowledge a Messiah whose kingdom is "not of this world." Although we have already disproved the notion that the messianic kingdom of Jesus makes no claim on man's social life, it is nevertheless true that the Church seeks no material kingdom. Yet here again the paradox returns; for Dr. Klausner says with sadness: "Alas! it is not the Hebraic, the prophetic, the Messianic-Israelitic social conception which has become a basis for bringing about redemption in the land of vision and promise, but a foreign social conception, linked up with economic and historical materialism, to which the prophetic idealism is a mockery" (p. x). When he says that the state of Israel must be guided by "prophetic idealism," no God-fearing man will contradict him. But is "prophetic idealism" so far removed from the "other-worldliness" of Christ's kingdom? The economic and historical materialism he condemns is such because it sees human life altogether grounded in this world, and because in this world alone it places all its hopes and seeks all its means. The prophetic ideal is to bring peace and love and godliness through an inner change of the whole man which makes him seek his strength in God and not in himself or the things of this world. To which of these two ways does the teaching of Jesus adhere? Dare I say that if Dr. Klausner followed his deepest inspirations, he would find the difference

between the true Jewish and the Christian concepts of the Messiah not quite so great as he thinks (p. 529)? For it is not a prince of this world who will overcome the evil fruit which the world itself has produced.

J. EDGAR BRUNS