

CHAPTER I

THE STUMBLING-BLOCK CHARACTERISTICS IN THE MESSIAH

"Unto the Jews a stumbling-block."

I CORINTHIANS I. 23

WHEN the Saviour came among His people He was far from being unexpected. On the contrary, no people either before or since has cherished such hopes of the advent of any man. A whole literature—the so-called Jewish Apocalyptic—had been built up, the object of which was to think out the future of the world, and the days of the Messiah were like the hinges of the door on which the whole turned. And this literature was not a thing without influence, standing aloof from the thought and action of the people, nor yet the reflections of a small and perhaps specially pious circle. The constantly recurring outbreaks of rebellion at that time, as well as the Gospels themselves, are proof enough of how strong and alive was the Messianic idea in the life of the people in the time of Jesus. Under the pressure first of the Idumaic and then of the Roman domination, the eyes of all Israel were directed almost fixedly towards the future, watching, as though under a spell, for the Deliverer, the Messiah. "Art thou He that should come?" asks the Baptist (Matt. xi. 3). Even the woman of Samaria declares, "I know that Messiah cometh" (John iv. 25). Brother rejoices with brother, "We have found the Messiah!" (John i. 41). The Pharisees are ready to discuss the question, "What think ye of Christ? whose son is He?" (Matt. xxii. 42), and upright men among the people eagerly acknowledge, "When Christ cometh, will He do more miracles than these which this man hath done?" and then boldly confess, "This is the Christ!" (John vii. 31, 41). The whole thought of the time, at least in Israel, was focussed on the

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question of the coming of the Messiah. To Jewish eyes the Messianic era did not appear dark and unknown, as the future does from the threshold of a New Year. Since the time of the prophets the people had constructed their own view of the Promised One, sometimes more, sometimes less distinctly; and the upshot of it was that their impressions of Him were as clear as though He had already come. But only once afterwards did the actual appearance of Jesus correspond with the hopes of Israel, and that only for a few moments; and only once, a little later, did it approach in some degree to their expectations. John vi describes the moment in which Jesus embodied the thoughts of His people. Like a popular king He distributes bread and nourishment to the thousands who are camped around Him. The excitement of the people is aroused. At once they are eager—not to *make* Him their king, but to do homage to Him as the king who has now appeared and whom they had not recognized in His disguise (John vi. 15). In the same way, at the beginning of the Passion Week, the solemnity of the entry into Jerusalem wakened again the thoughts of Jesus' kingship (Matt. xxi. 8, 9). But otherwise we do not find in Israel any desire to render homage to Jesus as the Messiah. With a nation longing passionately for the coming of the Messiah, how can this fact be otherwise explained than on the ground that the appearance of Jesus did not correspond with Israel's hopes? Or else His coming must have worked like a spark in a powder-barrel.

But Jesus made quite a different impression. His people were aware that He laid claim to the Messianic title; in fact, at the last this claim was made openly (Matt. xxvi. 64), and He became an offence, provoking their contradiction. This Man the Messiah? It seemed to His people a *contradictio in adjecto*, and in a fury they cried, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" But this is significant for us, for a Messiah who is an offence will not be a Messiah adorned without discrimination by the love of His followers.

Let us try shortly to find out what it was in Jesus as the Messiah that offended the people. We believe that He failed in two ways to come up to the expectations they cherished: He was too great, and He was too lowly to suit the ideas of Israel.

Jesus was too great for His people. One may ask, Is such a thing possible? Might one not assume that the greater the expected Messiah was the better? The more glorious He was, the more welcome in the circle of those watching and waiting for Him? But what claim to greatness could He make which would be a stumbling-block to His people? In Justin Martyr we read that Tryphon the Jew said of Israel's Messianic hopes, "We all know that the Christ will be a man, born of a man." And in agreement with this, all the older Jewish theology—not to speak of the later theology which is in direct contrast to Christianity—is so far from attributing a divine nature to the Messiah that it rather sets aside by forcible exposition anything which in Old Testament prophecy might be thought to suggest this. One has only to read Isaiah ix. 5 in Rabbi Jonathan's translation: "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; He has taken the law upon Himself to keep it. His name is called from eternity, Wonderful, the mighty God who liveth to eternity. The Messiah whose peace shall be great upon us in His days." And now compare the Nazarene with this conception: "Because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God" (John x. 33), that is how Israel declared its rejection of the Galilean Rabbi. And the evangelist mentions specially as the reason for the deadly opposition to Him that He said God was His Father, making Himself equal to God (John v. 18).

We must try to realize clearly Israel's fixed belief in one God. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord"—that was what they wore on their phylacteries (Matt. xxiii. 5) as well as in their hearts. And here was a man making Himself equal to their one God! The rabbis

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said of the Shekinah,¹ Where two or three are gathered together it is in the midst of them. But this Man said exactly the same to His followers about Himself (Matt. xviii. 20). By the prophets Jehovah had promised His people, "I will even betroth thee unto Me in faithfulness" (Hos. ii. 20), and now this Son of man put Himself in the place of God as the bridegroom. In one breath He spoke of Himself and His Father making their abode with the children of men (John xiv. 23). And while the pious Israelite spoke with reverence of the angels of God, and in the most glorious name which he knew for his God (Jehovah Sabaoth) praised the Highest as the God of countless hosts of angels, this Jesus, with what to the Jewish ear sounded the most arrogant presumption, spoke of the angels as *His* angels, to whom He gave orders as He pleased (Matt. xiii. 41; xvi. 27). Would it not be just the most pious among them all who would say to Him, as though He must be mad, "Whom makest thou thyself?" (John viii. 53).

We have already seen that the people went still further in judging Him. "This man blasphemeth God," they said. But there was a second thing about Jesus that called forth their judgement. Of one thing the Jews were convinced, "No one can forgive sins but God only" (Mark ii. 7). The forerunner of the Messiah might prepare the way for the remission of sins (Mark i. 4), the Messiah Himself might make intercession for the transgressor (Isa. liii. 12); but that Jesus should dispense the forgiveness of sins as though this came from Himself went straight in the face of what His people believed any man to be capable, and they concluded without hesitation, "This man blasphemeth" (Matt. ix. 3).

There was no third time or, more exactly, no third reason for Israel to pronounce so harsh a judgement.²

¹ The divine presence which rested like a cloud or visible light over the mercy-seat.

² Though it comes a third time in the mouth of the High Priest (Matt. xxvi. 65).

But they had reason enough to be offended because of the greatness to which Jesus laid claim. Let us mention just a few of these reasons.

The Nazarene demanded too much service for Himself to be the Messiah. Israel expected Him to teach them to "serve the Lord without fear all the days of their life" (Luke i. 74). Led by Him they wanted to give themselves up more fully than ever to their God. But instead of this Jesus put Himself to a large extent in the place of God, making Himself the goal of their longing expectations (Luke xii. 35 f.), and declaring Himself to be the Lord to whom the servants should minister (Luke xii. 46).

Again, in the time of the prophets it had always been a sign of the false prophets that they prophesied "out of their own hearts" (Ezek. xiii. 2). But this Jesus was so conscious of being entitled to speak out of His own heart that He testified of the Spirit which He would send and which should receive and testify of Him (John xvi. 14).

Further, it pained and estranged the Jews when our Lord exalted Himself above the august figures of the past. "Art thou greater than our father Jacob?" asked the woman of Samaria (John iv. 12). "Art thou greater than our father Abraham?" inquired the Jews (John viii. 53). And they murmured against Him when He appeared to exalt Himself above the noblest figure of all, above Moses (John vi. 32, 41 f.). To this people, so proud of their forefathers, this seemed to pile injury upon injury; but it was not in this way that any man would be glorified in the eyes of Israel.

And then to think that the Nazarene should dare to touch the Temple so dear to Israel, to declare Himself to be a holier abode for the presence of God than this holy house, whose inner courts were too hallowed for Israel, and whose innermost courts too sacrosanct even for Israel's priests to enter! "But I say unto you, that in this place is one greater than the Temple" (Matt. xii. 6). What a claim for an Israelite to have to listen to!

"I will be yet more vile than thus, and will be base in

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mine own sight" (2 Sam. vi. 22). In these words King David once described to a scoffing princess the humility towards God which he exalted as a precious jewel. Israel expected to see the same gem gleaming on the brow of the Son of David; a humility that bowed to the dust before God, while exhibiting kingly majesty towards the children of men. And instead of this they saw in Jesus a Man who held His head high before God in heaven: "I and My Father are one; he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father" (John x. 30; xiv. 9), but who bowed Himself incomprehensibly before the children of men, choosing service to them as His motto (Matt. xx. 27 f.).

And this leads us to our second reason for declaring that Jesus' claim to be the Messiah made Him a stumbling-block to His people. He was not only too great for them; looked at from another side, He was too lowly. There was nothing about Him which fitted in with the people's conception of Him.

Jesus was too lowly for His people. I would mention first His attitude towards the authorities. Among the Jews God's agents had always been accustomed to confront earthly authority with more force and energy than this Man did. It was Elijah's own king who sent captains of fifty to take him. But the prophet did not hesitate to destroy them all (2 Kings i. 9). In a like case, while speaking of the power at His command, Jesus never lifted a finger to oppose those who had been sent to capture Him (Matt. xxvi. 52 f.).

The heroes of the Lord in Israel were still more regardless when it came to dealing with the Gentile authorities. In the eyes of the Jews these were no better than robbers. Mattathias, the father of Maccabeus, had not hesitated to strike down the Jew who, at the king's command, made an offering on the altar of Modin, and to kill the captain of Antioch at the same time (1 Macc. ii. 25). And this was the legacy he left to his sons: "Take also unto you all those that observe the law, and avenge ye the wrong of your people. Recompense fully the heathen" (1 Macc. ii. 67 f.).

And what did Jesus do? Speaking calmly about the heretic ruler who had been forced upon them, whom the Jews hated and from whom even the most pious longed to be delivered, He said, as though He knew nothing of the longing of His people, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt. xxii. 21).

But none of these considerations reached the heart of the matter in which the Nazarene failed utterly to come up to the expectations of His people. This can be summed up in the word "king." The words Messiah and king were for the Jews synonymous. When Israel hoped for a Messiah they were hoping for a king. In the new-born child Herod feared the future, rightful king; the wise men from the East treated the babe as a king; the herald running before to proclaim Him urged Him to mount the royal throne; the disciples pled for places near His throne; the people announced their readiness to render Him kingly homage—and He eluded their claims and offers. When Saul ascended the throne, the people did not murmur so bitterly, "How shall this man save us?" (John xix. 14 f.; 1 Sam. x. 27).

Was Israel on the wrong track when they hoped for a king? Their own prophets had led them by this road. It was the Old Testament view: He through whom God was to bring His Kingdom to fulfilment must be above all a king, a conqueror, and at the same time a lover of peace. The picture of this advent had been brilliantly painted by the hand of the prophets. The government was to be upon his shoulders (Isa. ix. 6); of the increase of His government and peace there should be no end, upon the throne of David and upon His kingdom to order it (Isa. ix. 7). He was to stand and feed in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God, and to be great unto the ends of the earth (Mic. v. 4). And even the silent ones in the land, in times of depression and all through the deep humiliation of the nation, kept their hope stayed on the prophecies, and longed passionately for their king. Those, too, felt that the first action of

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the longed-for Messiah would be to break the alien yoke and to lead His people out of bondage, with miracles as in the time of Moses (Luke i. 71, 74; ii. 38; xix. 11; Matt. xx. 21). But this hope welled up stronger and more tempestuously in the breasts of the Pharisees and in the thoughts of the multitudes of whom they were the leaders. And while the quieter people spoke too of the inner regeneration and transformation which would take place when the Messiah appeared (Luke i. 75, 77, 79), the thoughts of the others had taken a political hue. In the utterances of the prophets the worldly expectations had been like the dross which would be refined away when the end was fulfilled. But instead of a beginning being made before the advent of the Messiah in clearing away the dross, it was just at this time that the moral and religious content of the Messianic prophecies had been buried, so far as the great mass of the people was concerned, under a wave of political dreams and aspirations; and the goal of their longing was now the king who should liberate his people.

And now Jesus? Was He not like a blow in the face when His people turned to Him with such hope and expectation? How could they see in Him the magnificent Son of David? Where was the glorious King of kings? Homeless and without possessions, the Son of God took the form of a servant. He had no place to lay His head. Even at the height of His earthly glory He appeared before his people riding upon the foal of an ass, and at the last He was broken and despised.¹

It may be said that this is exaggeration, and that His appearance was not so entirely without brightness as I have suggested. One might point to the rays of glory which His miracles lent to His person. But can we call it glory? Was there enough glory there for a Messiah? There was a similarity about His miracles; the great majority of

¹ Think, too, how often He hid Himself away from them (John vii. 1, 7 f., 10; viii. 59; xi. 54; Matt. iv. 12). Is there any evidence of splendour here?

them were performed on sick people. There was an avoidance of glitter, of anything to catch the eye, or anything to command respect in His miracles. They were performed in sickrooms (Mark i. 31; v. 42), in small circles of people, before comparatively few spectators; and very often those who had been cured were charged not to say anything about it (Mark i. 34; v. 43). Even in His miracles Jesus was concerned with the individual and with the saving of souls (Mark ii. 5; John v. 8); He did not consider their effect on the mass of the people. Only one of His miracles, the feeding of the five thousand, was concerned with the multitude—and then against His intention (John vi. 15)—and this one did move them, and brought Jesus an hour of glory in the eyes of thousands. But otherwise, to the mass of the people His miracles were not a proof of His Messiahship.¹

¹ For the sake of clearness we would draw attention to the two men who stood with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, Elias and Moses. Both of them had done more glorious miracles than He. What a number of miraculous deeds were performed by the Tishbite! Elijah brought a three-and-a-half years' drought on the land; was fed by ravens; made the widow's cruse of oil and barrel of meal inexhaustible; raised her dead child to life; brought down fire from heaven on his burnt offering; commanded rain to fall; ran before the King for miles, faster than the monarch's horses; again brought fire from heaven on the King's horsemen; divided Jordan with his cloak, and went up to heaven in a fiery chariot. It is a vivid picture, and the man it portrays almost dazzles our eyes. Still greater and more glorious were the acts of Moses: the plagues of Egypt; the passage through the Red Sea; the maintenance of the Israelites in the wilderness. Here is the same vivid diversity as in Elijah's miracles, but with an added splendour; all the miracles are performed on a multitude of people and before their eyes. If we think of these two, Moses and Elijah, we can understand what sort of wonders the Jews hoped for from their Messiah—miraculous deeds for the whole nation, in great variety and in great numbers. And there was an almost unbroken similarity about Jesus' miracles, which were performed on the unfortunate members of the community, and were closely connected with His preaching, symbols of His spiritual work, healing of the body at the same time as He healed the soul. Origen willingly admits to the Jew of Celsus that the miracles of Moses were greater.