

WAS JESUS A PROPHET?
(Comparisons to Jeremiah)

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The Book of Matthew in the New Testament tells us that when Jesus came to Jerusalem, by way of the Mt. of Olives, and riding on a white donkey, all the people were stirred and said, "This is the Prophet Jesus from Nazareth (21:11)"#1 We Jews, of course, do not accept that part of the Christian faith which teaches that Jesus was the Son of God or that he was the Messiah. I want to make it clear at the outset that I am in sympathy with this historical Jewish view. On the other hand, these things aside, we may still profit by considering the question, was Jesus something other than the Messiah which might reserve a niche for him in Jewish thinking. In the past, most Jews have felt that to speak of Jesus at all was blasphemy, since he seems to have suggested that he might be God or the Son of God, but if we are secure in our opinion that Jesus was a human being, as other mothers' sons are human, then, it seems to me that we can objectively look at the man and try to determine if he has a significant place amongst Jewish teachers of the past.

Anyone who reads the New Testament closely has to be impressed that it is, for the most part, a Jewish book, written primarily by Jews. It is filled with quotations from our Bible, and much of what Jesus says, although not in quotes, is clearly a restatement of Talmudic teaching or a direct quotation from Talmudic lore. I read the New Testament to learn something about the Jewish people of 2,000 years ago, and I see revealed in the pages of the New Testament evidence of the sharp battles between different Jewish groups of that period such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the apocalyptic preachers#2 There is also revealed the battle between the ruling power, the Romans, and the Judeans who were suffering under the Roman conquest. As the story unfolds in the New Testament, Jesus appears as the foe of all of these groups except the apocalyptic preachers. While he seems to identify with the suffering of the prophets who came before him, and while Jesus quotes many of the prophets at great length, his great hero seems to be John the Baptist. John was a Jew who believed with a few other evangelical teachers that God was about to bring about a cataclysmic upheaval which would result in a purification of the world. In this upheaval, nations and multitudes would be destroyed; the evil would be consigned to suffering; and the righteous would be rewarded. John went about teaching, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand". John and his followers believed that the great upheaval was imminent and the more glorious reign of God, the reign of justice and peace was around the corner. As a sign of repentance, John required his followers to practice t'vilah, that is, to be baptized with water; hence, he was called, "John, the Baptist".

- 1.- In "Ancient Judaism & The New Testament", Macmillan Co., N.Y., 1959, Dr. F.C. Grant holds that Jesus looked upon himself as a prophet, pp 81 ff.
- 2 - See "Who Crucified Jesus", S. Zeitlin, 2nd ed. Harper, N.Y., 1947, p. 96 ff on the Apocalyptic Pharisees.

The New Testament tells us that Jesus came to John to be baptized. From this we learn that Jesus annexed himself to the apocalyptic group on the fringe of the normative Jewish society. If we are to accept all the words in the New Testament, Jesus decided to become the leader of the sect which John The Baptist had dominated before him. Indeed, Jesus is quoted as saying that John was Elijah returned to the earth to announce the coming of the Messiah, namely, Jesus (Math 11:14). The followers of Jesus, like the followers of John, were those most ready to believe a doctrine which taught that "the last shall be first". The message of Jesus was geared to the poor and to the lower classes. That is why Jesus spoke in parables or stories; that is why Jesus inveighed against the rich; that is why he seemed to be against all aspects of the establishment, whether it be the Roman government or the Jewish aristocracy. If the Pharisees, the representatives of the Jewish middle class, with their passion for learning, seemed to be the main target for criticism by Jesus, it is because they were closer to the poor and more concerned about them, than were the Sadducees, who were the wealthy quislings assimilated into the Roman culture and governing group. The Sadducees and apocalyptic group were diametrically opposed. They had little communication. The Pharisees and the apocalyptic group were engaged in a struggle to influence the mind of the masses.

Was Jesus a Prophet? Can we claim him, no more or less, as a grand and fervent proclaimer of truth and friend of the poor as was Micah or Jeremiah? The answer is not so simple. A prophet in the Jewish tradition was a "Na-Vih", that is, one who helped to bring to pass that which God wanted³. The great prophets, men like Isaiah, Amos, and Jeremiah, were men who either possessed, or were thought to possess, direct power from God. The Book of Jeremiah quotes God as saying to Jeremiah, "See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." When the prophet spoke, our fathers believed, it was impossible to stay the realization of that which he had declared, whether it was favorable or unfavorable. The prophet mediated the command of God, and once the command (davar-word) was vocalized, nothing could stay that event from taking place. Yet, with all of this power, or assumed power, none of the prophets ever thought that he was more than a vessel for God's spirit. No prophet ever dreamed that he was more than human, more than a mere conveyor of God's message.

At some places in the New Testament, Jesus seems to say that he regards himself in a similar way. For example, he is quoted as saying, "Not everyone who calls me Lord shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven" (7:21 ff); but in other passages Jesus seems to say that he is to be identified with God himself (Math 22:41 ff). If we were good Christians, we might say that at one time in his life, Jesus had a more modest opinion of himself, but, later on, he came to understand himself as the incarnation of God. Trying to be objective about the text, which seems to contra-

3 - Most authorities translate Navih-Nabi "one who proclaims, speaks". I hold the title is more dynamic, coming from the verb "to bring", i.e. to mediate the word or result.

contradict itself in many places, we might say that Jesus may have thought one thing of himself, and those who wrote about him may have made something else again of him. For example, Buddha is worshipped as God in the Far East, but Buddha, himself, did not even believe in God! Once a great man dies, what he becomes through the evolution of fact and legend can be something entirely different from what he was. Nonetheless, for our purposes, we have to assume that all of the events and statements in the New Testament have equal weight. Such being the case, we would have to conclude that Jesus was not a prophet in the classical Jewish sense. To be sure, Jesus quotes the prophets constantly. He was fond of quoting Hosea's teaching. "I, the Lord, desire mercy and ^{not} formal ceremony".⁴ He quoted from the Book of Leviticus, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself", and he quoted Rabbi Hillel's Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you".⁵ The Jesus described in the New Testament was more than a teacher of the ethical Jewish tradition, however. Two names were applied to him; one was Messiah (or Christ) and the other was "the Son of Man" or "Son of God". To discuss Jesus we have to understand these terms.

WAS HE THE MESSIAH?

The traditional Jewish view of the Messiah, as defined by the prophets, is that a flesh and blood son will be born to a descendent of King David who will rule over an independent Israel, who will overthrow the foreign power, and usher in an era of peace and justice. The word Messiah, means "annointed one" or "King", but the text of the New Testament tells us that Jesus did not like the phrase "The descendent (or son) of David". He preferred the phrase "the Son of Man" or "the Son of God" (Math 22:41 ff). It is important for all students of this period to know that this latter phrase(s) refers to a non-Jewish doctrine which had initially developed in Persia. The doctrine of "the Son of Man" refers to a time when a semi-divine being (a Son of God) will come in the clouds, judge the nations, separate the good from the evil, assign the good to high reward, and assign the evil to Hell. #6 The earlier prophets of Israel knew nothing of this doctrine of "The Son of Man". Certainly, it was not involved in their teachings. This doctrine belongs to a later period, since the bulk of the great prophets were from five to eight hundred years earlier than Jesus. (Ezekiel uses the term " Son of Man" to mean merely himself, i.e. a human or prophet).

#4 - "formal ceremony" or "sacrifices"

#5 - Hillel, who lived 50 years earlier, said it this way, "Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you".

#6- See the discussion, "Judaism", Vol. II, G.F. Moore, Harvard U. Press, 1950, pp. 330-340; Moore traces the development of the simple messianic doctrine into later fusions. The more fanciful notions of Esdras and Baruch were not considered worthy of inclusion in the Jewish Bible. c.f. F.C. Grant, Ancient Judaism & The New Testament, pp 70 ff on "The Son of Man". See also Grant, pp 132-3.

The learned and intellectual Jews completely rejected the doctrine of the "Son of God", for, to them, it smacked of paganism. The Jews knew of one God who related directly to His children. The pagan religions all spoke of the chief son of God or of many divine sons of God. In the New Testament, we hear much talk of Hell and fire and brimstone. Satan is a prominent figure there, whereas our earlier prophets did not believe in a separate deity who was the Lord of Evil. The New Testament speaks of demons, little devils, who got into people and made them insane or infirm. We know from the Talmud that some of the Rabbis of this period also spoke of demons. Jesus is presented as an exorciser of these demons. Our prophets never spoke of demons. They didn't believe in them, even as modern people do not believe in demons. Much of the fame of Jesus, according to The New Testament, is based on his ability to chase away demons and to heal the sick. On previous occasions, we have spoken about two Hebrew prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who claimed to heal the sick. #7 On those occasions, we tried to show how many of the same stories about Elijah and Elisha were present in the New Testament, with some extensions. Still, when our Bible tells us that Elijah brought a young man back to life or cured a leper, we don't attribute deity to him, nor do we consider these healing prophets amongst our greater prophets. For us, the essence of religion is not miraculous healing of this type, but a courageous insistence on the uplifting of our fellow men. The prophet Elisha, even when he was himself dead, caused another man to be resurrected from the dead, #8 yet, we count Elisha as amongst our lesser prophets. Not even resurrection is sufficient for us to deify a man born of woman.

CHALLENGE TO THE PRIESTS

For the few minutes remaining in my talk, I should like to make some comparisons between the life of Jeremiah and Jesus, although Jeremiah antedated Jesus by, at least, 600 years. I would like to compare the Temple scene in which Jesus is described as overturning the tables of the money changers and the Temple scene involving Jeremiah, many hundreds of years earlier. Jesus, we are told, came into the Temple, which in his time was run by the Sadducees, or Jews who were Roman quislings #9, and he declared, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers'" (Mat 21:12). Please note that Jesus does not make a declaration in the name of God as a prophet does. He merely quotes from Jewish scripture. Now let us turn back the years and come to Jeremiah.

#7 - See "Similarities Between Jesus and Elijah - Elisha", H. Baumgard.

#8 - (2K-13:21)

#9 - Quisling was famous as a collaborator with the Nazis. Therefore, a "quisling" is a collaborator. The role of priest in these days was a political appointment. The Pharisees were less friendly with the Romans and less assimilated.

In his time, the Temple was controlled by a powerful and highly entrenched Jewish Priesthood that had seldom been challenged. To the large number of people assembled in the Temple for prayer, Jeremiah said, in the name of God, "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, and burn incense to Baal..and, then, come and stand before Me in this house and say, 'We are delivered'. Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" (Jer 7:9 ff). Please note that Jesus, 600 years later, uses the exact phrase "A den of robbers". In the New Testament we are told that Jesus overturns the tables of those selling pigeons to the people. These pigeons were used for sacrifices in the Temple. Jeremiah, told the priests, the people being present, God does not wish these sacrifices, nor did He ever command them (7:21 ff). It seems possible that the story concerning Jesus in the Temple is patterned, at least in part, after the more dramatic, and more detailed, Jeremiah story.

THE TRIAL

There are also startling resemblances between the trial of Jeremiah and the trial of Jesus. Jeremiah had been accused of treason for urging the people not to fight against the Babylonians, who were attacking the city of Jerusalem. Further, he had criticized the Judean king and the nobles for not having the interests of the poor at heart. Jeremiah had been placed in the public stocks, and some had spat on him as they walked by. Jeremiah, had identified with the needs of the poor, but he had made no pretence to be a healer, as Elijah had been 250 years earlier, nor did he pretend to work "miracles". The formula of Jeremiah was simple, justice would bring peace and prosperity; injustice would bring war and famine. The account of his trial, which is found in detail in the 26th chapter of the book which bears the prophet's name, tells us that the priests and the professional prophets brought him to trial and asked for his death. The princes and the people, however, asked for his release. The reason they presented for acquittal was simple, "Our tradition is that a man speaking his conscience may not be punished." #10 Jeremiah was released (see 26:16 ff).

The trial involving Jesus, however, was under vastly different circumstances. In the first place, the final court was a Roman court. Only the Roman Governor could judge his guilt or innocence. We are told that there was first a religious trial, during which the High Priest asked Jesus the question, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?" (Mat 26:23). We have said before that the High Priest, although Jewish, was a Roman quisling. Still, his question is hardly a Jewish question. The question implies that the Messiah and the Son of God are one and the same. We have already discussed that, for Jews, the Messiah was merely a human descendent of King David, while the "Son of God" was something else again. Jesus seems to answer that he is associated with the "Son of Man", a phrase perhaps equal in this context to the Son of God. #12 The council adjudges him worthy of death, and he is taken to the Roman Judicial court.

#10 - This is a paraphrase of the statements in Jeremiah 26:16 ff.

#11 - Other notions were not part of normative Judaism and are not Biblical.

#12 - Could Jesus have been saying, "I am just a human being"? See our discussion p. 3 and notes there.

(Compare Jeremiah 26:7-8 where, "The priests and prophets and all the people "pronounced a verdict of guilty. #13).

The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, has an entirely different question for Jesus. He is not concerned with the religious-aspects of Messiah or Son of God, since he doesn't accept those concepts anyhow. Pilate asks a straight-forward political question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Mat 27:11). Pilate understood correctly that if Jesus were, indeed, the Messiah, the political consequence of that title was that the people would follow him in his attempt to overthrow the Roman government and to usher in an independent Jewish state. In that role, Jesus was a real threat to the Romans who were always having difficulty controlling these stiff-necked Jews.

The text, then, takes a peculiar twist. It tells us that Pilate, who had unceremoniously crucified thousands of Jews, decided that he did not really want to punish this one, but he yielded to the cries of the multitude to kill him. Why they wanted him killed when they would benefit the most, if he were the Messiah or King of Judea, is something the New Testament does not explain. The authors of this story apparently did not understand that the interests of the people were not with the priests any more than that the interests of the Pharisees were with the priests, (the latter being Roman quislings).

The Book of Jeremiah tells us that the prophet influenced the people enough so that they gave little resistance to the Babylonians attacking them, yet Jeremiah was not killed for his obvious treason. Jesus seemed to have no great swell of support, and was, then, much less of a threat, yet, he was killed. The difference is, at least, in part, the difference between the mercy of a Jewish court and the practice of a foreign or Roman court.

We can conclude that while Jesus was in some ways after the manner of a prophet, his association with terms like Messiah gave him a political aspect not shared by prophets before him; and his connection with the term, "Son of God" gives him an association that takes him well beyond the boundaries of Judaism. Still, in all fairness, it must be said, that most of the teachings of Jesus were within the Jewish tradition, and that, as a weaver of parables, he was a master. One can learn something about Judaism by reading the New Testament and profit from it.

WHO WAS RELEASED?

One final scholarly speculation. The New Testament says that Pontius Pilate offered to release one of two prisoners found guilty that day. One prisoner was called, "Jesus, the Christ" (Mat 27:17ff); the other was called "Barabbas". (Matt 27-16 ff) The text indicates that the people asked Pilate to crucify "Jesus the Christ" and to release Barabbas. One interesting point is that Barabbas is an Aramaic name meaning, "The Son of the Father". The name raises the question, who was crucified, after all, if "The Son of the Father" was released?

#13- This was, apparently, the ecclesiastical trial to be followed by a secular trial.

Add to this the fact that some New Testament scholars hold that some ancient texts do not merely say "Barabbas", but Jesus Barabbas.#14

Suppose that we should read Matthew 27:21 as some ancient texts apparently read in this fashion, "... which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, "Jesus Barabbas." This would then present us with this possibility: Jesus, the Christ (Messiah) was crucified, but Jesus, the Son of the Father, was not. This opens up the whole question as to whether there were not two distinct personalities adding up to the one Jesus described in the New Testament. If we read back to the separate religious and political trials described in Matthew, we will recall that the Priests had condemned the man who called himself the "Son of God", whereas the Romans were most concerned about the man who called himself, "King of the Jews", that is, the Messiah. If there were indeed two men, bearing the name Jesus, then, it is possible that the man the Jewish Priestly Court, (consisting of those loyal to the Romans) condemned was released by the wish of the masses, (as we have indicated the Jewish masses were opposed to their own quislings).#15 This would place the responsibility for such crucifixion as took place squarely where it belongs, on the Roman plunderers of Judea.#16

#14 - The Holy Bible, the Revised Standard version, (T. Nelson and Sons, N.Y., 1953) says in a note, p.36, "Other ancient authorities read Jesus Barabbas".

#15 - Note that although Jeremiah was condemned to death by the priests, after the secular trial, the people voted for his release. The pattern could be similar here.

#16 - For a detailed discussion of the background of the trials, see S. Zeitlin, "Who Crucified Jesus?", especially chapter X. He points out, "Neither Peter nor Paul accused the Jews of crucifying Jesus", p.177. And again, "The Apostolic fathers never accused the Jews of the crucifixion of Jesus", p.179. All of these, according to Zeitlin, merely understood that the priests had turned Jesus over to Pilate who condemned and sentenced him. So, the historian Tacitus (Annals 15.44)