

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLE:

THE MESSIANIC IDEA IN HELLENISTIC JUDAISM

by

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Our main literary sources for the messianic idea in Hellenistic Judaism are one section in Philo (praem poen 163-172) and the Sybilline Oracles particularly the third book.

Philo

As far as Philo is concerned, nationalistic ideas are marginal in his philosophy, which in the main deals with the conceptual world and its two poles, God and the soul. In this sphere, the idea "Israel" is allegorically interpreted as "seer of God", i. e. as the soul finding its way to God. The tangible bearer of this mystical concept is subject to the same limitations as the tangible world at large, which is not simply a world of falsehood but which derives its value only from adumbrating the world of truth or from representing it in a problematic way. Even though Philo cannot deny the ethnic-sociological existence of the people, this is for him secondary to what is symbolised in that existence.

This section in which he expresses the messianic hope of the people is therefore exceptional in his huge literary opus. Importance is also to be ascribed to the placing of the section at the end of a long series of books devoted to the laws of the Torah, a place which obliged the author, according to the laws of rhetoric, to rise above himself and seek special stylistic effects which – since Plato – included the realm of myth. One should not be hard on Philo, therefore, if he expresses opinions here which are in conflict with those we are familiar with elsewhere.

Philo here adopts popular traditions which in most cases he refrains from using. Even here he does not adopt them in their original form but brings them closer to his own views. Nevertheless, it seems to me that one can reconstruct them by taking them out of their Philonic wrappings.

Redemption means that all the Jews will suddenly gather together "in one place which God will show them". No doubt the popular source from which Philo drew identified the place of ingathering as the Holy Land, and the obscuring of its territorial identity is part of Philo's other-worldliness.

* in: *Machanayim*, no. 124, Shevat 5730 (1970), pp. 54-67.

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When Philo tells of the captors setting them free "for they were ashamed of ruling over their betters", one has to see the ethic-pacifistic censuring with which he filters his sources, which probably told of military victories. The notion that political relationships need moral justification by the ethic superiority of the rulers has its origin in Aristotelian politics. When this superiority lapsed, after the repentance of the "people of God-seers", continued oppression became impossible.

The liberated are guided, according to Philo, by a "divine appearance", visible only to the Jews and hidden from others. It is to be supposed that the popular version identified the "divine appearance" with an angel, the pillar of cloud, the *shekhinah* (the Divine Presence), or the like. It is interesting to note that such a representation of the redemption as a "return to Zion" is suitable only to the Diaspora perspective; from this we can infer that the version Philo adopts is an Alexandrian one.

Further on, Philo speaks of redemption thanks to three "advocates". While the second of these, the "holiness of the founders of the people", is a simple one, the use of the term "advocate" in relation to the others – the goodness of God, and the moral improvement of the repentant Jews – is forced. It is to be supposed, then, that the original tradition spoke of the founders of the people only, and that the three advocates were none other than the three Patriarchs. Philo, however, though he stuck to the number of three advocates, gave them additional content. The tradition, as reconstructed by us, can be seen as a development of the verse in Leviticus 26:42, whereas for Philo the concept of "merit of their ancestors", as naively received from the Pentateuch, was bound to create a delicate theological problem, for as a disciple of the ethical theories of the Stoa he protested against the distorted concept of a nobility winning rights for its sons without any effort of the sons' part. Here again he compromised, and while not rejecting the idea found in popular tradition he coupled it with motifs that he liked better.

Philo's closing words, which speak of Israel as "those being of important descent, who still retain the aristocratic spark which has in part flickered out", reveal a spark of national pride not found in this form in his other works; this section is therefore a precious testimony opening up for us a special corner of Philo's consciousness which is usually left in the dark. However, one should not be misled into thinking it a central statement when in reality it is only a sidetrack.

The Sibylline Oracles

The Sibylline Oracles have a much more direct relation to the subject of national redemption, particularly after Alexander the Great's conquests, when the Sibylline literature at large became the mouthpiece of the longings for freedom of all the Eastern nations, oppressed first under Hellenistic rule

and later under Roman. The coming of a Saviour is, therefore, a traditional subject in this literature, even before Jews came to adopt it and to adapt it to their needs.

It is, however, in a very early stage of Jewish Sibylline literature – in the third book, which was mainly written in the middle of the second century B. C. E. – that the idea of redemption takes on a very special form. At this time the Jews were not the oppressed of the world; the Hasmoneans had been victorious, the Temple stood again in all its purity in the centre of the nation, and the poet can allow himself to draw an idyllic picture of a people of saints dwelling around their sanctuary. Now it is Hellas which has sunk to the bottom of the pit: the warriors of the Legions, emphasised as being “barbarians”, pounce upon her and violate her honour. The poet interprets this calamity as punishment from Heaven for the “treason” of the Hellenes, who had betrayed the true God and worshipped idols. The mythological Greek kings of the past – the Sibylline poet fixes their date as “1500 years ago” – had seduced them to this, since in their pride they had installed the worship of kings and had thereby led Hellas astray. The description of the present travail, which clearly incorporates fragments of verses from the Reproof section of the Bible (Lev. 26, Deut. 28), shows a great measure of identification with the sufferings of Greece on the part of the author. Their only way of redemption is to return to God; then there will a time of happiness for all mankind.

The author, who has a cosmopolitan outlook, gives this happiness dimensions not found in Jewish eschatological literature, for which the polarisation of Israel and other nations blots out differences and tensions among those nations. The Sibylline poet sees as the root of evil in the historical world the kings who set out to war, and therefore the time of redemption is seen as a time when “king with king shall be friend to the farthest corners of the earth” and wars will cease for ever. And if he speaks of one *nomos* for all mankind, which God will give them all from Heaven, one should read this prophecy bearing in mind the background of the Stoic view of the ideal state, which is not any particular state similar to existing ones, but a unity of all mankind living under the same *logos* which also reigns in the cosmos. Such a state, comprising the whole creation (“cosmopolis” in Greek), appears in philosophical thought only as a pious wish, whereas the anointed king of Israel, who will rise with God’s help, adds to this wish just that concreteness which Greek thought alone can never achieve.

Summary by the author, translated by Chanah Arnon

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