

The Messianic Hope in the New Testament  
Shailer Mathews  
*The Princeton Theological Review* 4:260-265. [1906]

This volume of the Decennial Publication of the University of Chicago contains two distinct elements. One is of a purely exegetical and historical nature and consists of an inquiry into the place which the Messianic hope holds in the several types of New Testament teaching. The other is of a dogmatic or philosophical nature and represents an attempt to show, that in all these types of teaching, and in the Christian religion in general, the Messianic concept belongs to the form, not to the essence, that it can be dropped and has been dropped without detracting anything from what is of real religious value in Christianity. With regard to the former of these two elements the book must be considered a very creditable production. The author has, so far as the New Testament is concerned, a thorough knowledge of the exegetical facts and shows considerable skill in tracing their historical correlation. Less successful than the treatment of the New Testament writings themselves in point of lucidity and convincing character is the discussion of the Messianism of Judaism in Part I. The lines of the Messianic hope of the prophets are not drawn firmly, owing largely to the fact that the author does not seem to have reached any definite conclusion as to the genuineness and date of the Messianic prophecies, on which question, of course, the entire historic interpretation depends. He takes for granted that the source of the Messianic conception was an "elemental optimism" of the Hebrew people, only subsequently ethicized by the prophets. Even with the prophets the "ethicizing" was very incomplete, for, as we are told on p. 7, "The prophets had expected that the divine deliverance would consist in the establishment of a Hebrew nation as untranscendental as Assyria and Egypt, its confederates, and through the agency of no more miraculous intervention than would be involved any political readjustment like the triumph of Assyria or of Cyrus." It is not many years ago that Volz argued against the pre-exilic origin of all Messianic prophecy on the ground of the miraculous, magical, unethical character of the processes whereby the Messianic transformation is brought about. He found the hope too transcendental to be ascribed to the prophets as the modern school of criticism loves to conceive them. According to Prof. Mathews, there was very little transcendental or miraculous about it. While bound to disagree with Volz in his critical conclusions, we feel convinced that in his exegetical appreciation of the prophecies he is more nearly right than our author. In the field of the literature that lies between the two canons Prof. Mathews is particularly at home, as his *History of New Testament Times in Palestine* in the series edited by himself abundantly proves. We read the two chapters devoted to this period with great interest, and if we are somewhat disappointed by finding that the subject as a whole has not become perceptibly clearer to our apprehension than it was before we do not feel warranted in laying the blame for this on the author. The phenomena in the apocalyptic literature are so confused and confusing, that it is perhaps impossible to reduce them to historic law. Strange to us is the hypothesis stated on p. 22, to the effect that the apocalyptic mode of writing is a literary form of expounding the day of Jehovah which results from Hellenistic influences. If the spirit and general tendency of the apocalyptic literature were anti-Hellenizing, it is somewhat difficult to believe that the form was borrowed from Hellenism.

But as stated above, the center of the book lies in its exposition of New Testament teaching and here our admiration of the author's work and our agreement with his results, so far as exegesis is concerned, can be expressed with much less qualification. A piece of excellent work, quite unusual for its balance and discrimination, is the discussion of our Lord's kingdom-concept. Prof. Mathews

here skillfully avoids the two extremes of a de-eschatologizing spiritualism, such as has been quite recently exemplified once more in Muirhead's *Eschatology of Jesus*, and of a hyper-eschatological historicism, which will not recognize any present spiritual kingdom in the genuine teaching of Jesus. Several other points might be mentioned in which the author evinces great independence of exegetical and biblico-theological judgment over against the vogue of modernizing interpretations. The presence of an absolute predestinarian element, and of the concept of vicarious penalty as entering into the atonement, are candidly recognized in Paul's teaching, and the center of his system is sought in eschatological Messianism. In this connection we quote an interesting sentence from p. 173: "Historical orthodoxy, as represented by the older Protestant theologians and practically all those of the Roman Church, has come closer to the center of the Apostle's thought than those later interpreters, who have made the mystical union of the believer with Christ or faith as an incipient and potential righteousness the center of Paulinism." It is true, over against such points stand others in regard to which we cannot accept Prof. Mathews' interpretations and that not merely because we wish to adhere to the older Protestant theology, but, as we believe, for good exegetical reasons. We think it an error, both from the point of view of Jesus and from that of the Synoptists, to speak of an incarnation in the life of our Lord in virtue of His possession of the Spirit. Our Lord's possession of the Spirit is viewed in the Synoptic Gospels throughout as of charismatic not of personal moral or religious significance. The author evidently conceives of the filial relation and the possession of the Spirit as interchangeable to our Lord's consciousness, distinct not in reality but only in point of view. The treatment of the Pauline eschatology, notwithstanding many excellencies in other respects, suffers somewhat from the author's espousal of the theory that the Apostle placed the Kingdom of Christ as a preliminary, temporary kingdom after the Parousia; in other words from ascribing to Paul a mild form of Chiliasm. With this is connected the refusal to acknowledge that Paul in some sense identified the kingdom (of Christ) and the Church. We do not think that on this view sufficient weight is given to the fact of the resurrection of Christ, which must have appeared to the Apostle as anticipating the eschatological resurrection and therefore in its immediate consequences also anticipating the eschatological kingdom. The only other point we desire to touch upon concerns the Christology of Paul. By treating of it exclusively with reference to the Messianic concept, even where the (real) preexistence comes under consideration, the higher sonship which lies back of the Messiahship has been obscured, and the classical passage in Phil. 2 is scarcely touched upon. Only from this defect can we explain to ourselves the statement made in connection with the Epistle to the Hebrews to the effect that this Epistle goes farther in its ascription to Christ of a preexistent metaphysical sonship than Paul. We also think it unproven that in Hebrews the metaphysical sonship appears as an inference from the Messianic exaltation of Christ. The Epistle merely shows that the pre-existent glory of the Son and His official greatness in the state of exaltation are mutually adjusted. The one fits the other, but that the thought of the one was developed out of that of the other it gives us no reason to suppose.

All these, however, are matters of relatively small importance compared with the main contention of the author, viz., that the Messianic interpretation of Jesus and His work belongs to the perishable form and not to the imperishable essence of Christianity. Throughout his exegetical and historical discussion, in which we can recognize much that is unusually good, he keeps this dogmatic goal constantly in view. We are not supposed to forget for a moment that all the things Jesus and the Apostles believed under the head of the Messianic eschatology were so many accidental modes of thought now ready to be discarded. It would be little to the point to say that such a view is destructive

of the authority of the Word of God, for evidently Prof. Mathews does not occupy a standpoint to which the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures appears a living issue. The matters at stake here are far deeper and more fundamental than the question of Scriptural authority. The whole concept of revelation must have undergone a radical transformation, where it is possible to assert that an idea which has played such a role in Biblical religion as that of the Messiahship, an idea which came down through centuries from the Old Testament into the New, which formed one of the two great crystallizing points around which the thinking of our Lord grouped itself, which so vitally coalesced with Jesus' self-consciousness as to become inseparable from the latter, which shaped and molded all subsequent Apostolic teaching—that such an idea represents a mere fringe to the garment of revealed truth. What remains on such a view of the adjustment of the content of revelation to its form it would be hard to tell. Who can shut his eyes to the fact that a theory like this, which makes Jesus the Supreme Revealer of God, and yet makes the larger part of the doctrinal consciousness of Jesus a mere passing phase of thought, must greatly weaken the position of Christianity both dogmatically and apologetically? Once let the element of relativity enter into these large molds and forms into which the revelation of truth was cast, and it will be difficult to persuade people that its essence, however defined, can be absolutely permanent. In such an internecine war between the content and form of revelation, revelation itself bids fair to suffer most in the end. Besides this, the Messiahship of Jesus is that aspect of His Person and work which lies historically at the basis of our religious approach to Him. Whosoever denies the essentialness of the Messiahship will necessarily be under strong temptation to declare with Harnack that in the true Gospel, the Gospel stripped of all its historic accidentals, Jesus stands not on the side of God as an object on whom religion terminates, but on the side of man, or, to use Harnack's own words, that in the gospel as preached by Jesus there is no place for Himself. Now we desire to emphasize strongly that Prof. Mathews does not draw this inference, and it has been a source of satisfaction to us, in reading his book, to observe this. It is explicitly stated on p. 133 that "on the basis of Jesus' own self-estimate and the results of a reverent criticism, a man may believe in Him as the incarnation of God, as the revealer of a forgiving God, as the type and teacher of the perfect human life, as the Risen One who brought life and incorruption to light," of course, "without necessarily committing himself to a formal acceptance of his strictly Messianic interpretation." Passing by the other phrases, because they are of somewhat uncertain definition, here at least "the Risen One who brought life and incorruption to light" guarantees a substantial content to the conception of Christ as an objective religious value. And on p. 222 we learn that this life of which Christ is the source for the Christian "is at bottom not moral, but ontological with moral corollaries," there is in it "a process of development we can only call hyperphysical." And in harmony with this the author also believes that the resurrection of Christ, as a historically authenticated fact, belongs to the essence of the Christian religion. Life, therefore, has a clearly defined supernatural content. What Prof. Mathews offers us is by no means identical with the vague Ritschlian concept of "eternal life." As just stated, for this we cannot but be grateful, even though the suspicion can hardly be suppressed that the author's Baptist affiliations, rather than a general desire to uphold objective supernaturalism, are at the bottom of this emphasis on supernatural life as the essence of Christianity. But the question arises, how does Prof. Mathews separate this essence from the historically conditioned forms in which Christianity presented itself to the minds of Jesus, Paul and the other New Testament writers? The criterion which he applies for distinguishing between the religious essence and the eschatological form is, that the former can be shown to have been the fruit of direct personal, practical experience. The objection might be raised, that the ontological, hyperphysical life as such cannot be the object of experience, so that after all the danger

arises of paring down the idea of life to that of a phenomenal, moral or emotional state. But apart from this, the whole distinction between inherited eschatological form and life content is purely abstract and impracticable. Life, as Jesus speaks of it, and as the Apostles refer to it, is a thoroughly Messianic idea; of any abstract life not correlated with the eschatological scheme of thought they know nothing. In their case as well as in ours, and in the case of every normal Christian, the experience of life is largely dependent on the doctrinal perception of what life means. Christianity did not come into the world as a life, without the previous and concomitant as well as the subsequent interpretation of the concept of life in a theology. As already remarked, Prof. Mathews himself has such a theology, which fixes for him the definition of life. So that after all it is not the distinction between experience and theoretical belief which separates for Prof. Mathews the form from the essence in the New Testament teaching, but rather the comparison of the New Testament doctrine with his own semi-modernized mode of thought. Because this comparison shows that the two have only the idea of life in common, the latter is declared the substance, the former the accident of Christianity. We on our part prefer to take our concept of supernatural life in the frame of its Scriptural, Messianic, eschatological interpretation. We feel the need of an external authority to tell us what life means, what are its antecedents, its consequences and its implications. Neither experience nor historical observation are sufficient for teaching us this. We know full well that the modern spirit of the times is not favorable to the eschatological element in the Gospel. But we also know that this is but one of the symptoms of the anti-supernaturalistic spirit of the age in general. A thoroughgoing supernaturalism will always demand an eschatological Messianic Savior. Nor do we quite see how Prof. Mathews' position can escape the charge of inconsistency. By accepting the resurrection of Christ as a historically authenticated fact, he himself introduces the element of the supernatural at a central point in his system. Why should it be said, after this, that "recently the rise of an entirely new conception of the universe through the philosophy born of the new physical sciences is rapidly removing this apperception" (i.e., the Pauline eschatological interpretation of the work of Jesus)? p. 204. If evolution enters a protest against eschatological Messianism, why does it tolerate the resurrection of Jesus as a supernatural fact? There is good reason for holding that creation, the resurrection of the Messiah and eschatology stand and fall together, and that any evolutionistic philosophy which takes exception to one of these ought to reject the two others likewise. And it should always be remembered, that in this debate about the permanence of the eschatological Messianic element in the Gospel, something more than the mere physical or ontological destiny of the world is at stake. The eschatological Messiahship of Jesus involves the judgment and through this indirectly the question of justification. Consequently to declare it unessential means in principle to abandon the great doctrines of vicarious atonement and justification. In point of fact, our author seems not to hesitate to take this step, for on p. 198 he declares with reference to the vicarious interpretation of Christ's death by Paul: "The modern mind, which does not think of God's relation to the world in monarchical and judicial terms, is naturally perplexed when it attempts to reconstruct this section of Pauline teaching. But it will be a sad mistake if, because we recognize the fact that the problem came from a controlling thought that has passed away, we should ignore the Pauline teaching." In our opinion the controlling thought from which the Pauline problem arose has not passed away and can never pass away, so long as the Pauline conception of God as a judge and the Pauline sense of sin remain, and these are as ineradicable as the human conscience. If the modern mind does not think any longer of God in monarchical and judicial terms, we can but look upon this as a sad symptom of its religious perversion. For those who do continue so to think of God, no Christianity will suffice which is not built up around the atonement as its very core and center. Even

a religion of supernatural life falls short of the religion that man needs to save his soul. And only in a religion which is more than this, can Christ permanently retain his central place as a necessary object of religious trust. For all the other functions of the Savior there is no *a priori* reason assignable why they should not have been performed by God directly without the mediation of Jesus. It would be rash to assert that for the introduction of supernatural life into humanity the Christ is absolutely indispensable. Only when we come to the function of atonement, it immediately appears that the Messiah sustains a relation to God and us which secures for Him, as the Christ, an absolutely permanent place and an eternal value in our religious life.

Like all the other volumes of the Decennial Publications, the book is handsomely printed. The only criticism we have to offer in this respect is that the citation of the title of books and treatises in the notes is frequently inexact. Wernle's *Reichsgotteshoffnung* is cited repeatedly as *Reichsgotteshoffnungen*; Kautzsch is sometimes *Kautsch*; the title of Kennedy's book is once given as *The Eschatology of Paul*, instead of *St. Paul's Conceptions of the Last Things*. Also the Scripture references are more often inaccurate than should be the case in a volume so carefully edited as a whole.