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THE EXPECTED OF NATIONS

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OR almost two thousand years the Church has invested Jesus Christ with the title "The Desired of Nations." The Old Testament is replete with prophecies concerning the person and work of the Redeemer Who was to redeem Israel from all his iniquity. No one can reasonably doubt that the Hebrew race awaited the advent of the "Great King."

But this particular expectation, however vivid and minutely detailed cannot be assigned as the cause of a general expectation of nations which the title indicates and the Church proclaims as if she were assured there could be no possible objection to that statement. Holy Scripture shows us that the Hebrews were an exclusive race, by divine command forbidden intercourse with the pagan nations that surrounded them. It is highly improbable that the fundamental tenets of a race chosen of God, filled with racial pride and naturally despising and holding themselves aloof from intruders, could permeate the religious beliefs of all peoples. It is then our purpose to investigate this expectation of the Gentiles, to discuss its nature and universality, to probe its origin.

"On perusing the records of antiquity we are met by two most striking features pervading all the productions of literature. On the one hand, a universal wail ascends up to heaven deploring the wickedness and the misery of the human race; on the other, a universal strain of expectation vibrates in the human heart, looking forward to a better future and to a coming redeemer."¹ This statement resolves into two facts: first, the common belief that there once was a "golden age," an age of innocence and

¹ A. J. Maas, S. J., *Christ in Type and Prophecy* (New York, 1893), I, 57.

happiness when "men lived like gods; their minds were without care, their bodies exempt from toil, and their days spent in one continued round of banqueting and pleasure"²; second, this period of misery and suffering—the iron age—was to be followed by a return to the "golden age" through the person of a redeemer who was to raise mankind from its fallen state.

Obviously this paper cannot hope to embrace within its scope every instance found in history that illustrates these facts, so we must confine our activity to examples taken from the most prominent among the nations of the earth.

Attesting the fact of the general misery of the human race consequent to sin, "the ancient Egyptians and Indians looked upon life as a time of penance and reparation. According to them, the soul is a fallen spirit condemned to a union with a material body in punishment for its previous misdeeds."³

The Persians and the Mexicans had much the same belief. Zoroaster claimed the present world to be under the dominion of an evil spirit. The Mexicans announced to their new-born infants the sadness and hardship of the life they were beginning. The American Indian legend of Hiawatha is based on the tradition of Algonquin and other Indians tribes. "Again, the ceremonies of baptism, circumcision and the other rites of purification following among so many nations the birth of the child, are as many signs of the general belief in man's innate depravity."⁴

To this dominant idea of human guilt can be traced the universal custom of expiatory sacrifice, especially human sacrifice. The Mexicans and Indians believed that human sacrifices would cease at the end of the present era—the iron age. The Mexicans believed that the goddess Centeotl (like the Greek goddess of justice, who had disappeared on account of human sin, but was to return at the end) would finally gain the victory and abolish human sacrifices. In the same manner, the Indian Kali (the fallen Eve) has caused death and human sacrifice alike. But she rules only over the present age and the good Durga-Bhawani will return and gain the victory. "There have been various theories to explain the meaning of sacrifice. Thus Tylor saw in sacrifice an attempt to secure the favor of the gods.

² A. J. Maas, *op. cit.*, I, 57.

³ A. J. Maas, *op. cit.*, I, 57.

⁴ A. J. Maas, *op. cit.*, I, 57.

W. Robertson Smith perceived a meaning that the worshipper was sharing a meal with his god. Dr. J. G. Frazer has thought that he can find in sacrifice an attempt to save the god of the worshippers from the inroads of old age. L. Marillier thinks that sacrifice is a magical rite to bend the will of the god to the will of the worshipper. Dr. Westermarck regards the offering of a victim as an attempt to save the life of the worshipper.

Doubtless it can be found that all these ideas of sacrifice have at different times and places found some expression, but under them all we see the psychological origin of sacrifice in the sense of human guilt and the desire to express human contribution."⁵

Turning to the Greeks, we find that the testimony of Greek literature is especially important in the question of an early belief in man's fall. Hesiod speaks of the iron age "consuming man in labor and sorrow"; Homer considers man the most miserable of all that live and move on the face of the earth (*Iliad*, xxiv, 446). The opinion of the later scientific Greeks agrees perfectly with that of the earliest writers of fable. Socrates opines that we must cling to the best of human beliefs as to a board on the ocean, till we shall be favored with the safety of a divine boat. Plato and his disciples bear witness to man's pitiful condition.

Man's cry for help and pity grows louder the more civilized the human race becomes. When the wisdom and the civilization of the universe had been concentrated in Rome, then it was that Rome groaned most piteously. Cicero (*de rep.*, 3) says that nature is not man's mother, but his step-mother, producing him as she does weak and naked of body, timorous and cowardly in spirit, prone to passions and endowed with only a spark of soul and understanding. While Seneca (*de ira*, iii., 26) considers it useless to cover up with smooth words the universal malady. We are all bad. What one blames in another he finds hidden in his own breast. Wickedly we live among the wicked.

Coupled with the admission of general depravity and wretchedness we find the general hope of redemption. The expectations of a future redeemer is not less universally expressed in the classical literature of antiquity than is the persuasion of the fall. Among the Persians we note the belief in three redeemers, each of whom was to have a share in redemption; the

⁵ S. Burrows, *The Open Door* (New York, 1926), p. 198.

last, being the greatest, was to perfect it. Furthermore each of these redeemers was to be born of a pure virgin.

Even in India, whose religions were the pantheism of Brahmanism and the atheistic agnosticism of Buddhism, there was recognized the necessity of redemption, although in such a manner that man was made his own redeemer.

With regard to the Chinese, even Confucius, who was merely a utilitarian of the worst class, even this Epicurean materialist, in no sense a founder of religion, announced that the truly 'Holy One' should appear in the West. "I have heard," he says, "that the true saint will arise in the far West; he will end all confusion, without governing, he will excite unconditional faith without speaking, he will produce an ocean of meritorious works without changing the appearance of things. No one knows his name, but I have heard that he alone should be the true saint."⁶

Among the Greeks, too, we find Messianic expectation based upon Messianic prophecies. Latona, after her fall, is persecuted by the dragon Pytho because she has received the promise that her seed shall conquer and slay the serpent. The fable shows us Apollo slaying the serpent, but Greek hope was not satisfied with a past fulfillment of the prophecy. According to them, Apollo will return at the end of the iron age and restore the golden age. Besides Apollo, many other Messianic characters are known in Greek literature, such as Jason, Perseus and Hercules. All are born of a mortal mother, but conceived of a god; in the case of all there is the characteristic persecution on the part of the bad principle; all are noted for their victory over the serpent or the dragon, and nearly all bruise the monster's head.

Thor is the Germanic representation of the Messias. He is one of the two sons of the first parents, Odin and Frigga. He it is who gives battle to the serpent, but according to the later fables, will not conquer the serpent fully till about the twilight of the gods, i.e., the end of the present era.

The Mexicans believed that their beneficent god Quetzalcoatl, who had been obliged to leave the country after the golden age had flourished under his rule, would return and restore the former state of happiness. The Mexicans mistook the Spaniards for the messengers of Quetzalcoatl. "We well know," said Montezuma, "that the great king under whose obedience you

⁶ A. J. Maas, *op. cit.*, I, 60.

stand is a descendant of our own Quetzalcoatl. . . . This great Quetzalcoatl has left us several prophecies which we look upon as infallible truth. From these as well as from the records which for many centuries have been kept in our history, we know that he has left this land and has sought new lands in the East, leaving the promise that in time to come a nation descending from him should return and change our laws and our system of government."⁷

We have not as yet mentioned the general expectation of a Saviour existing about the time of Christ's birth. This expectation finds expression chiefly in two sources: the Etruscan books of fate and the Sibylline predictions. A few months before the birth of Augustus there happened a portent in Rome which signified, according to the Etruscan interpreters, that nature was about to give forth a future king of Rome. The frightened republican senate gave orders that no child born that year should live, and it was only by the endeavours of those whose wives were then pregnant that the decree was not entered upon the archives and did not gain the force of law. Later Augustus assumed the character of a prince of peace. On coins he called himself the saviour of the world.

Nor is it only the Etruscan seers that predicted the Messias; the Sibylline books are even more pronounced in this regard. Alzog states that "amid the prevailing and universal confusion men sought comfort and hope from the oracles which were preserved in the Sibylline Books, and which announced that the human race would one day rise to a higher and holier state, and again return to the early age of happy innocence."⁸ Virgil's fourth Eclogue, based on Sibylline predictions, was considered as a Messianic prophecy even by the Fathers of the Church. The veneration paid to the Sibylline oracles by the Middle Ages, exemplified in Dante and the *Dies Irae*, is of course today held up by modern scholars as an instance of medieval credulity and superstition. Textual criticism of the Sibylline prophecies, as we know them, has proved undoubtedly that the Messianic passages are spurious, that they are Jewish and Christian interpolations, some of them made as early as the second century B. C., some as late as the sixth century A. D. The true original prophecies were destroyed by the burning of the capitol in 83

⁷ A. J. Maas, *op. cit.*, I, 64.

⁸ J. Alzog, *Manual of Universal Church History* (Cincinnati, 1874), I, 98.

B. C. There existed, however, many copies which were again carefully collected about 77 B. C., so that Vergil may well refer to the original text. Present-day scholars seem to have overlooked one point in their easy assumption that the Jewish and Christian accretions render the Sibylline prophecies invalid Messianic predictions. They admit that the Hellenistic Jews of Alexandria had begun to propagate Hebrew belief by means of psuedo-Sibylline prophecies fully a century before the original prophecies were destroyed. Now it seems quite improbable that the most enlightened men of pagan antiquity could have been misled, unless the original prophecies contained at least some prediction that permitted subtle interpolation. Cicero himself was alive when the originals were destroyed; Vergil was practically his contemporary. Cicero takes no exception to the Messianic predictions; he notices nothing amiss. His own prophetic utterance (*de rep.* iii, 6) is perhaps the most remarkable instance of this period: "There shall no longer be one law at Rome and another at Athens, but one and the same law, eternal and immutable, shall be prescribed for all nations and all times, and the God who shall prescribe, introduce and promulgate this law shall be the one common Lord and Supreme Ruler of all, and whosoever will refuse obedience to Him shall be filled with confusion, as this very act will be a virtual denial of his human nature; and, should he escape present punishment, he shall have to endure heavy chastisement hereafter."⁹

The examination of ancient traditions shows us that "with the exception of the negro tribes, concerning whose traditions we know very little, all the pagan nations of both the old and the new world have their own special Messianic prophecies, which are all said to date from the very beginning of man's existence on earth."¹⁰ With regard to the negro tribes, the later researches of Le Roy and Frazer have brought to light much of the negro tradition. This tradition is very clear in regard to a primitive fall from grace but very obscure with reference to a redeemer. However, if we keep in mind the almost incredibly low degree of civilization of the negro race and the supposition that its backwardness can be traced to the curse pronounced by Noe upon Chanaan the father of that race (*Genesis ix*; 25), we can easily understand that a fading tradition would more ten-

⁹ J. Alzog, *op. cit.*, I, 99.

¹⁰ A. J. Maas, *op. cit.*, I, 73.

aciously grasp the idea of a disgraceful fall while weakened imaginations distorted and corrupted the idea of redemption almost beyond the point of recognition.

Many theories have been advanced with regard to the origin of these prophecies; some ascribe the agreement of the various national Messianic hopes to chance; but surely that is a most unscientific way of explaining an established historical fact. As we have noted, these prophecies are said to date from the very beginning of man's existence on earth. An appeal to the intercourse between the Jews and the various races as the source of Messianic predictions is unsatisfactory since, although it may account for accidental perfections in the expectations of a few nations, we know that the outstanding character of Jewish national life was that of exclusiveness. It seems to us that on the only true supposition that all men descend from Adam, the pagan Messianic ideas must be the remnants of a primeval revelation. Only in the inspired word can we find a reason that sufficiently and conclusively explains the most remarkable tradition of universal antiquity.

That reason is contained in the third chapter of Genesis: "I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed, and she shall crush thy head." "Around that promise clustered all the revealed truth given to Adam and the patriarchs, which comes down to us in the traditions of the early nations. It was the one bright star in the total gloom which lighted up the ancient nations in every land into which the children of Adam wandered. All nations expected His coming."¹¹

This advent of a Saviour permeated all thought, all pagan worship. True it is that the course of centuries corrupted and mutilated the once clear and perfect revelation and the worship consequent upon that revelation, yet just a few centuries previous to Christ's advent, a pagan philosopher could advise an upright man in words almost prophetic: "I would have him take the best and most irrefragable of human theories, and let this be the raft upon which he sails through life, not without risk, as I admit, unless he can find some *Word of God* which will more surely and safely carry him."¹² When St. John wrote his Gospel the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Saviour and Redeemer of all mankind, he worded the 14th verse of the first chapter "And

¹¹ J. L. Meagher, *The Religions of the World* (New York, 1896), p. 26.

¹² Plato, *Phaedo*, 85 (Jowett's Translation).

the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, (and we saw His glory, the glory as it were of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth."

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STELLA VERITATIS

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The Christmas Star
Shed its beam afar
And guided the Wise Men on,
Till the Lord of all
Was found in a stall
And they worshipped the Virgin's Son.

But again it shone
On Joanna's son,
When he came to the laver of grace,
And its light was seen
As its glorious sheen
Illumined our Father's face.