

THE HIDDEN MESSIAH AND HIS ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM—II¹

The Entry into Jerusalem is a point on the line which goes back to the crucial decision to 'go up' to the city and forward to the consummation on the Cross. It has about it, as a messianic sign, an ambivalence, a purposeful ambiguity to explain which would be equivalent to explaining the chief riddle of the Gospels for the uncommitted reader—the mystery of the identity of the protagonist. We are accustomed to read that story forward; yet it is not a paradox but a sober historical truth to say that it was written backwards. I mean that the earliest references to that story speak of a period 'beginning from the baptism of John to the day when he was taken up from us' (Ac. 1:22), and the earliest professions of faith, to supplement which the story was written in the first place, are concerned with the fact that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures . . .' (1 Cor. 15:3-4). It began, in other words, from their experience of the risen Lord as a *present* reality, and this forced them and their readers to explain the meaning of the death which preceded the resurrection. This, we feel, was an almost insuperable difficulty in the way of the first Christian catechists and missionaries, and it is interesting to see at what point of their apologia their non-Christian audiences stop listening. Paul, speaking to a cultured Greek audience (Ac. 17) gets a sympathetic hearing until he comes to the resurrection. For men for whom it was axiomatic that salvation can come only with liberation from the body and the material world (*to sōma sēma*—is not the body a tomb?) this bringing to life of a dead corpse was a too patent absurdity, and so the whole case collapsed, and Paul went on to Corinth a disappointed man.

For one addressing a Jewish audience the case was no easier. The idea of the rising of the dead was at least familiar even if not all accepted it (most did), but, for practically all, the idea of a dying and dead Messiah was a contradiction in terms. 'We know that the Anointed One remains for ever (Jn. 12:34)—so our Lord's Jewish interlocutors in Jerusalem, and the same ghost haunted the wrangle between Church and Synagogue for long years afterwards, as we know from Justin's polemic with Trypho and from other early Christian apologists. The Christian preacher and writer had to represent that death as being the result not of human machinations but

¹ cf. *Scripture* 1961, pp. 51-6

of a positive act of will on the part of Jesus himself; he goes to his death with his eyes open, because he wills it; and so the writer must read back through the passion to the moment when that act of will was elicited—for it will be from that moment that the drama of the passion and death really begins.¹

We do not think it is very difficult to pinpoint that moment from the record of the ministry which we have in the four Gospels. There is an inconclusive ministry in Galilee which the third evangelist has summarised in the account of the rejection at Nazareth.² During all this first period there is, especially in the Second Gospel, a quite haunting return to the theme of the identity of the central figure: 'What is this? a new teaching'; 'We never saw anything like this'; 'Who is this that even wind and sea obey him'; 'Where did this man get all this from?'—the question is repeatedly asked, but as yet there is no answer, and Jesus can say, almost in exasperation, 'Do you not yet understand?'

Then comes the turning-point. In Caesarea Philippi he is acknowledged as the Anointed King, the *Christos*. This opens the road to the final witness and brings about the decision to carry the war into the heart of enemy territory, since 'it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem' (Lk. 13:33). Those who have recorded for us this decision were fully aware of its immense significance, so much so that it moulds the rest of the narrative and determines the course of events. Upon the confession of Peter there follows the prediction of the sufferings of the Son of Man, and the pilgrimage to Jerusalem begins. He is already en route when he turns back to rebuke Peter, telling him to get behind him, that is, not to impede his way as Satan attempted to do at the beginning. In order that the others might have no illusions he says clearly: 'If anyone will *come after me* (that is, on this journey) let him deny himself. . . .'³ There is to be real danger of loss of life, and how real that danger was for that handful of men, every dramatic circumstance of the journey and its end will show.

We know from contemporary and near contemporary writers that there were three possible routes for pilgrims from the north: the easiest, due south, went through Samaria and got you to the city in three days. Josephus tells us that 'for rapid travel it was essential to take this route'—but we note that, when he himself had to send emissaries from Galilee southwards, he made sure that they went under

¹ The destiny of Christ was and is present in the timeless moment of God, but the decision is none the less real.

² Lk. 4:16-30

³ In the Lukan parallel we read: 'take up his cross *daily*' which does no more than place the saying of the Lord directly at the service of the Christians for whom he was writing and those of later times.

an armed escort five hundred strong. The Samaritans often planted ambushes as in the case described above, and we recollect the incident in which James and John wished to call down fire, after the refusal of Samaritan villages to receive their master when he went up to the city. That he took this route at least for the first part of the journey seems certain from Luke, but progress could not have been due south all the way, since we find him also in Transjordan Perea and at Bethany across the Jordan; the last stage from here to Jericho and on to the city is common ground for the four.

Despite some uncertainty about topography there seems reason to believe that at an earlier stage of the tradition the memory of this journey was more sharply and precisely preserved. It is no ordinary journey, as we can tell from the conversation which was exchanged on the way: he speaks always of the Kingdom that is coming, and the disciples are intensely occupied with their relative places in that Kingdom. This leads to disputes which took place 'while they were going on their way' (Mk. 9:33). The second prediction of the Passion is made, according to reliable evidence, 'while they were gathering in Galilee'—that is, presumably, for the Passover pilgrim convoy.¹ After a brief pause in Perea, the last stage of the journey on 'the road going up to Jerusalem' through Jericho and Bethany was taken.

These are some of the traces of this journey in the earliest accounts which we possess, and it is good to re-read them if only because it is often presumed, in contrast to the more explicit *schema* of Luke, that they are entirely absent.² The Third Gospel does nevertheless make much of this decision of our Lord by which he 'sets his face' with great resolution to go up to the city. Luke gives us the best picture of the mounting tension among those who followed, and who interpreted his intentions well or badly according to their own expectations. It is he who tells us it was while so many thousands came together that they trod upon one another, that Jesus gave his solemn warning about the leaven of the Pharisees, that is, the political Zionism of the day, preoccupied with unredeemed Israel and the Solomonic kingdom no sooner won than lost. The warning, it is clear, went unheeded, as did so many others; indeed, many of the sayings of this period contain a warning, usually veiled, against the

¹ Mt. 17:22. The reading 'gathering' has the authority of the Vatican and Sinaitic codices among others. It is followed in RSV but not in Knox and Douai.

² For example, in the recent book of A. Hastings, *Prophet and Witness in Jerusalem*, p. 103, where the presumption is that Matthew and Mark attribute little importance to the journey. We know of more than one journey to Jerusalem, but these two, as does Luke, press everything into the one great Passover pilgrimage of the redemption; a progress, that is, to the supreme moment which, translated into topography, meant a progress to the city.

tragic consequences of misunderstanding what was to happen when they reached the city. Luke was fully aware how widespread this misunderstanding was, as we can see from the note with which he prefaces the parable of the nobleman (Archelaus?) who went into a far country (Rome?) to obtain the kingdom. Jesus related this little story at this juncture, he tells us, 'since he was near to Jerusalem, and since they *supposed* that the Kingdom of God was to appear immediately' (Lk. 19:11).

It is further evident that this failure to realise our Lord's intentions was not confined to the crowd at large. As the two disciples going down to Emmaus some months later admit, they *had hoped* that he would have been the one to carry out the 'redemption,' that is, the political vindication, of Israel; and there is the appallingly naive question put after the resurrection to the risen Christ, whether he was there and then to bring about the political restoration of Israel (Ac. 1:6). This deep gap between the two interpretations of the functions of the ideal Anointed King gives us the means of understanding some at least of the mysteries of the last week in the life of Christ, and in particular its inauguration with the triumphal entry into the city.

At his approach to Jericho Jesus is hailed for the first time, in St Mark at least, as the Son of David, a title which he does not repudiate. By now great crowds had gathered about him, and we might remember that the messianic coup of Simon, the slave-king, who had taken and burned Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, must still have been fresh in the memories of many, so that this part of the desert was an accepted gathering place for such attempts. John in fact gives us to understand that Jesus had a great following in this part where John had first baptised¹; and, although he does not mention the healing of the blind man he gives great weight and emphasis to the raising of Lazarus. We are here in close proximity to the hill of Olives and the valley of Kidron which was the *campo santo* where every pious Jew of that day (and long after) desired to lay his bones, in order to be at hand for the last trumpet call and the judgment.² From this, some have deduced, and perhaps correctly, that the raising of Lazarus was not only a great work of spiritual mercy but also and especially a living sign (*sêmeion* or 'sign' is the word for miracle in John's vocabulary) of the resurrection of the dead in the age the Messiah must come to inaugurate. In fact, John states quite clearly that it was 'on account of him (Lazarus) that the Jews were going

¹ Jn. 10:41

² The valley of Kidron is the same as Jehoshaphat, where God will judge, and which inspired the great scene of the vivified bones in Ez. 37.

away and believing in Jesus' (12:10). Here was a man who had actually risen from the dead; the last age, the end of the times is already upon us! And so they pressed on to the Holy City.

All our sources agree that the messianic entry began at the hill of Olives, and from St Luke we gather that the rejoicing takes on a special intensity there (19:37). This is the holy hill of revelation towards which the first temple was orientated, the hill on which since time immemorial God had been worshipped.¹ Upon it Ezekiel had seen the new Jerusalem arise where, according to traditional teaching, the Messiah would appear. It was here that the Egyptian, mentioned above, assembled his band of 4,000, or 30,000 according to Josephus, and prepared to march on the city, and we read later that it was while they were standing there that the disciples asked the Risen Christ whether he was there and then to establish the Kingdom. The way to Jerusalem, the home of the heart, the shining city, was a well-trodden path not only in the hopes and prayers of the people, but also in those continuous, pathetic attempts to force the hand of God and to bring about the desired consummation by an appeal to violence. In the light of this it is not difficult for us to understand the fateful ambivalence of the event of which we have been speaking; what it probably meant for the crowds who clapped and acclaimed it; and what it meant in the mind of our Lord and in the counsel of God which was then coming to completion by unexpected ways.

It is this ambivalence and the real danger of the situation which explains the air of secrecy about the bringing of the animal upon which he was to ride and later the preparations for the Passover meal. We are struck, when we read the account of the former, by the great length comparatively speaking at which the incident of the untying of the colt is told; this and other indications might lead us to suspect that, in addition to the reference to the prophecy of Zachary which is quoted at length by Matthew and John, there is some other less apparent prophetic significance in this action. This suspicion had already occurred to some early Christian writers who see in the untying and bringing of the ass a fulfilling of the Oracle of Jacob on Jehudah who is the ancestor of David. The mysterious 'One who is to come' whose name is Shiloh has tied his ass to the vine, his ass's colt to the choice vine. Before he comes his ass must be untied so that he can mount it; and now he is here. As is evident, we are not attempting to paraphrase the text in accordance with its original meaning; that would be altogether too cavalier! But this corresponds with the general way in which this messianic text was utilised by writers both Christian and Jew of a later age. And the ass *was*, in

¹ 2 Sam. 15:32

fact, the mount used by the royal ancestor of Christ. We know from the Targums that Jewish liturgical usage applied the text of Gen. 49: 8-12 to the King Messiah, and there is a constant stream of rabbinical tradition to the same effect. Justin, who can be taken to be familiar with Jewish polemical tactics, goes so far as to say that the ass which bore our Lord in his messianic ride of triumph 'stood bound to a vine,¹ and other Christian writers, though not all so clearly, have evidently seen the Entry as the fulfilment of the Genesis oracle.

If we bear this in mind other allusions in the Entry narrative acquire a deeper meaning. Thus the acclamation for the 'One who comes,' though made in the words of the Hallel psalm 118 and therefore possibly referring originally to the pilgrim coming to the feast, must have had a fuller and more urgent resonance in the extraordinary tension of that moment. In fact, the Second Gospel adds—in explanation?—'Blessed is the kingdom of our father David which is *imminent*,' and the Third, 'Blessed is the King (Messiah) who is coming.' The Fourth Gospel adds a kind of explanatory gloss in much the same way that the Targums do for the Genesis text, which equates the 'One who comes' with the 'King of Israel'—as is familiar to us from the Palm Sunday liturgy. We should mention too that the prophecy of Zachary itself seems to be connected indirectly with the oracle of Juda.³

How would this have been understood at the time? The Romans, or some of them at least (and there must have been Romans present), knew of an obscure oracle that a world leader was to come from Juda—some of them later on found it a very convenient justification and legitimation of the claims of Vespasian when he was proclaimed on Palestinian soil, for did he not, at least for the time being, come from Judea (Juda)? It is unlikely, however, that any Roman bystanders at that moment would have had any misgivings about a king who elected to enter in triumph on an ass. This certainly wasn't the kind of royal *parousia* they were accustomed to see. For the discerning and thoughtful Jew, on the other hand, the choice of the ass opened up the basic possibility of understanding the intentions of its rider. He was the peaceful prince of Isaiah and Zachary; by choosing an ass rather than the more usual horse he was implicitly repudiating the current solution to Israel's dire plight. In the later scriptures the horse is practically a symbol of war and violence; it is, in fact, the war engine *par excellence*, and, apart from two cases in the Book of Esther,

¹ *First Apologia* 32; cf. Clem. Alex.: *Paedagogus* I, 5, 15

³ cf. 'Behold, your king comes to you' with 'Until Shiloh comes.' In Mic. 5 we have a passage where the One to Come is given the title *Shalom* or Peace, and the same chapter contains unmistakable reference to the One to Come of Gen. 49 (the Lion of v. 7). The king of Zach. 9 is evidently the peaceful king riding the Davidic mount.

we do not read of anyone not of military rank who rides on a horse. An interesting confirmation can be found in the very prophecy of Zachary where, after the promise of the humble, victorious king, the writer continues: 'I will cut off the chariots from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem' (9:10). Going back to the time of David himself, it is a sign of the pride of the rebellious Absalom that he uses chariots and horsemen when he sets up to be king. The conclusion then could have been drawn at once that the kingdom to come was not to be won by war or the use of violence.

There is, however, no evidence that the bystanders drew that conclusion. The mount was for them simply the mount of the One to come of the stock of Jehudah, the *David redivivus*, the man of war. After all, they would have thought, David himself mounted the ass and rode upon it into Jerusalem just as this Jesus is doing, and did not his son Solomon mount the royal mule when he went in procession to Gihon for his royal anointing? Was not this the first step in the fulfilling of God's promise to David's seed? Many, perhaps most, connected the fulfilment of this promise with the feast of the Passover they were then beginning to celebrate, and we can catch the undertone of excitement at the prospect of the imminent 'inbreaking' of the kingdom through the mighty works of Jesus which, as it were, threw down the supreme challenge to God. But there were also those who had everything to lose by such an eventuality or the attempt to realise it and, in the event, the kingdom of misguided hope did not 'break in,' and in the eyes of the world Jesus died at the hands of His enemies as a messianic pretender, shortly before the Passover began.

We have tried to offer a reading of this supreme moment in the human drama of our Lord and of the sequence of events which led up to it in the light, we might say the lurid glow, of the political agonies and frustrations of that age. It shows us, perhaps from a new angle, how, through the Incarnation, he placed himself utterly at the mercy of our human history by becoming a part of it. History translated into human life means destiny, namely a movement and an end—in the sense the Greeks meant when they used the word *telos*.¹ He was Jeshuah bar-Joseph, born into a Jewish tribe at a certain ascertainable point in time and place and, as we have seen, at a crucial moment in human history. A less desirable corollary of this is that by so doing he placed himself at the mercy of historians. The reading and study of the facts of his life and especially the last few days of his

¹ A better translation might be 'goal' (cf. Rom. 10:4 where Christ is the 'goal' of the Torah; also Rom. 6:21, eternal life as the goal of Christian existence etc.)

life invites or rather forces a decision, from us now as from those who witnessed and lived those days. It is here that the ways divide. In a reported conversation with Ferré, Professor Whitehead declared of Christ: 'His life was not an exhibition of overruling power. Its glory is for those who discern it and not for the world. It has the decisiveness of a supreme ideal, and that is why the history of the world divides at this point.'¹ Can history give the final verdict? For some, like Reimarus and Eisler, the messianic entry represents the ephemeral triumph of a popular agitator, a fanatical field preacher in search of a revolution; his *Putsch* fails and he is taken and executed by the Romans as they had taken and executed so many others whose ambitions were not commensurate with their inner possibilities. His cry of real despair on the cross, 'My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?' is sealed by a terrible and tragic finality. For others, like Schweitzer, he goes up to the city from his native Galilee to force the hand of God, to bring in the kingdom by the sacrifice of his life, but the Kingdom does not come in, and his sacrifice, for all the fine gesture, is wasted. For the Christian reader Christ is indeed, as he so emphatically stated before Pilate, a king, *the King*, but as he rode into the city of the Great King he knew that he had already rejected the kingdom of this world which Satan had offered at the beginning, and the title over the Cross which caught the eye of the dying thief was to be fully vindicated within three days, and in the years that followed.

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BIBLE LANDS BY JEEP—I

Seven thousand miles by Land-Rover in the heat of the Middle East may not be everyone's idea of a summer holiday. But if such a journey involves inconvenience, hardship and strain (and it does not require much effort of the memory to recall that it did), it also makes possible the sort of knowledge of Bible lands which no amount of books and photographs can ever adequately provide. Père Lagrange's dictum, that no-one really understands the Bible until he has visited the lands of the Bible, was not a mere recruiting slogan for the *École Biblique*. There is a depth and solidity about such first-hand acquaintance with the stage on which the history of salvation was enacted

¹ 'Whitehead and Ferré discuss God' in *Hibbert Journal* LVI, p. 267