

THE FUNCTION OF DIVINE MANIFESTATIONS IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

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The Function of Divine Manifestations in New Testament Times by Leroy H. Stafford

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LEROY H. STAFFORD

**THE FUNCTION OF DIVINE
MANIFESTATIONS IN
NEW TESTAMENT TIMES**

The University of Chicago

The Function Of Divine Manifestations
In New Testament Times

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND LITERATURE
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
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BY

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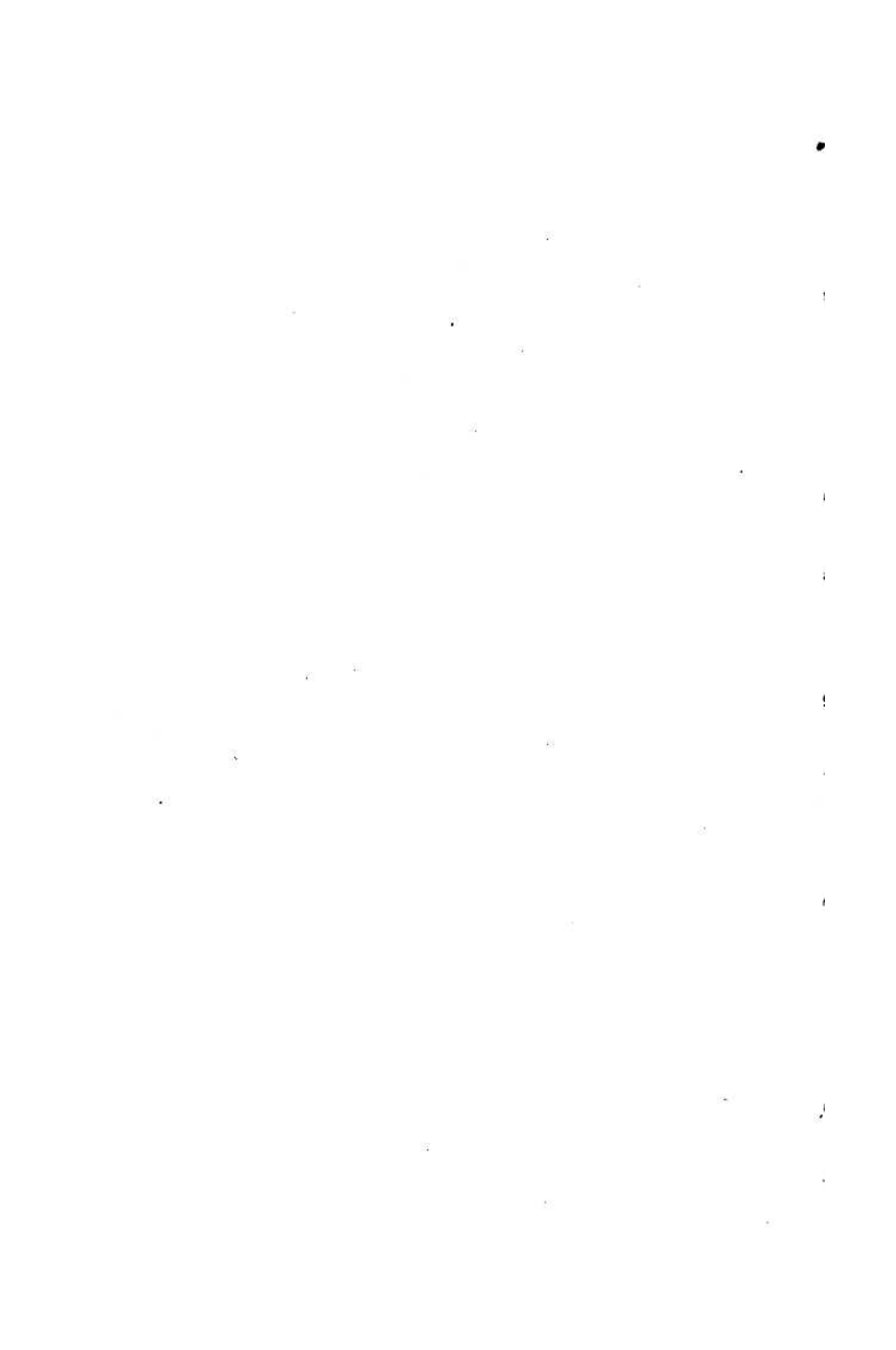
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Acquaintance with the historical remains of the ancient world reveals a mass of material relating to a wide range of occurrences which may be designated as divine manifestations. The character of these occurrences may be indicated by a few typical examples. The god Dionysos displayed himself to the Thebans in the form of a man. Yahweh the god of the Hebrews permitted Moses and the seventy elders to obtain a glimpse of his person. The divine Logos incarnate in the historical Jesus passed a considerable period among the dwellers on earth.

Zeus once drew off a flood of waters which swept over the earth, and Yahweh sent an inundation to destroy mankind. Demeter made the corn to grow, Zeus regulated the seasons and sent hail, snow, and rain, and Yahweh caused the earth to yield its increase. Deity in a vision informed the mother of Augustus that her son had been engendered by Apollo, and an angel in an apparition announced to Mary the mother of Jesus before her marriage that she should conceive under the influence of the Holy Ghost and bear a son who should be called the Son of God. The divine frenzy of the worshipper of Dionysos indicated to him that he had actually *become god*, and the Christian in a similar state felt that his exalted mental condition was proof that an immortal spirit dwelt within him.

Calamity, famine, and pestilence were indications that Zeus was punishing wrongdoing. Yahweh smote the patriarch Reuben in the loins for seven months on account of sin. Because of deception Ananias and Sapphira were stricken dead by God. The pagan preacher or prophet who could say "Such is great Zeus' word to me" (Liv. xxv. 12) was looked upon as a "messenger from Zeus to men," a "pedagogue of the public" to lead men to God (Epict. *Disc.* ii. 22) and spoke with as much assurance of being the mouthpiece of deity as did the Hebrew or Christian prophet who could say "Thus saith the Lord." A star informed the world that Caesar had become a god; a similar phenomenon revealed to the magi that the infant Jesus was worthy of worship. Deity chose by lot the

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twenty-one priests required to fill up the ranks of the reorganized Roman sacerdotal college. Yahweh thus indicated his choice of Saul for king, and selected the priests who were to hold positions of trust and honor in connection with the temple-service. So also God chose Matthias instead of Barsabbas to take the place of Judas in the early Christian ecclesiastical organization. The *Sibylline books* told the Romans that Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva desired certain sacrifices before granting the state aid against the Carthaginians. From their sacred writings the Hebrews and the Jews discovered that Yahweh would not protect the nation if circumcision, or other requirements, were neglected. In a similar manner Christians discovered that God's will for them was holiness in living "because it is written, Ye shall be holy, for I am holy."

It is to phenomena such as these that the designation divine manifestation is applied in the following pages. Synonymous with the term as thus employed are various other expressions, such as supernatural manifestation, supernatural occurrence, superhuman manifestation, manifestation of deity, and supernatural phenomenon.

To define divine manifestation as the term is here used is by no means easy. A working definition, however, may be set down at this point: the term supernatural manifestation, as it is used in the present discussion, is taken to mean any experience of an individual or of a group which those undergoing it, or those discussing or recording it, interpreted as due to the activity of personal powers other than human.

In the world in which Christianity originated experiences of this nature were of frequent occurrence. They were not, however, limited to the period in which the new faith arose, nor were they confined to any particular race, geographical area, or social stratum. King and emperor, soldier and statesman, litterateur and peasant, Greek and Roman, Hebrew and Graeco-Roman, Jew and Christian, all alike experienced divine manifestations.

In view of the universal character of supernatural manifestations, the purpose of the following pages is two-fold: first, a presentation of typical Jewish and Hellenistic examples of divine manifestations similar to those in the Christianity of the *New Testament*, and, second, a comparative study of the function of these phenomena in the life of the Judaism, Hellenism, and Christianity of the New Testament period. In other words, the problem to be investigated is, What did divine manifestations do for the people of the Mediterranean world in the first century? Was

the part which they played in the Christianity of the New Testament period similar to or entirely different from the part which they played in the life of the contemporary world?

It cannot be too strongly insisted at this point *that the interest of the following pages centers primarily in the question of function, and that the matter of genetic relationship based on identity of form is completely below the horizon.* At no point in this discussion is it argued, either explicitly or by implication, that, because similar phenomena may be found in Hellenism, Judaism, and Christianity, the one must necessarily have copied from either or both of the others. How it came about that similarities of form exist is undoubtedly an interesting and important question, but it is one with which we are not here concerned. In passing, the author may state that it is his personal opinion that any solution which finds the answer in any scheme of copying or borrowing, whether carried out consciously or unconsciously, on the basis of individual forms, is entirely too formal and mechanical to fit into the vital needs of an actual social situation. Rather it is his opinion that, viewing the problem in its entirety, we must conclude that similarities in form among Hellenism, Judaism, and Christianity, when such are found, are due, not directly to borrowing but indirectly to the fact that the three had their roots deep in a common soil. This common soil was the entire social situation of the time—a soil made up of common human needs, desires, aspirations, and of a common world-view.

An illustration may serve to clear up this point. Vespasian, Josephus, and Peter had visions which gave them divine help at crises in their lives, not because any one copied or imitated either or both of the others, but because it was a generally accepted tenet of the life of the time that the dream or vision was one of the ways in which divine help could be secured. This dissertation therefore does not argue the question of genetic relationship based on identity of form, either in the matter of visions and dreams, or in the matter of any of the phenomena discussed in the following pages. It asks simply, What did visions, and all other divine manifestations, do for the people who experienced them? and it leaves out of account all reference to the problem whether Christianity copied from contemporary sources or whether contemporary sources copied from Christianity.

The media through which experience of the superhuman came to the people of the time were various. A classification which may not be