

MODERN DISLIKE OF THE MESSIANIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN JESUS

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One of the most significant developments in modern discussion of the life and teaching of Jesus is the growing disfavor into which the messianic element in the Gospels has fallen with a certain class of writers. We do not refer to skepticism or denial in regard to the messiahship objectively considered. The question whether or not Jesus was the Messiah has meaning only within the limits of a strict biblical supernaturalism. I presupposes the recognition of the reality of both prophecy and the fulfilment of prophecy, and therefore finds its natural place in the controversy between Jesus and His opponents in the gospel narrative, as it also has been the dividing issue ever since between the Christian church and Judaism. With the modern Jew, on the other hand, who has lost his belief in the supernatural, it were foolish to argue about the fact of Jesus' messiahship, for on his premises the unreality of this fact is *a priori* included in the impossibility of all supernatural phenomena.

The question about the messianic consciousness belongs to a totally different situation. It deals exclusively with the problem whether Jesus believed and claimed to be the Messiah, and deals with it altogether irrespectively of the warrant in fact for such a belief or claim. Those who incline to answer it in the negative do no, as a rule, occupy the standpoint of supernaturalism. They are like the modern Jew in this respect, that for them the messianic reality is an impossible thing and in so far void of practical interest. From a religious point of view Jesus is not valuable for them in the capacity of the Messiah but under some other aspect, variously defined, be it as a religious genius or an ethical teacher or a social reformer. One might expect from this religious detachment that such writers would be peculiarly fitted to discuss the question of the messianic consciousness on a purely historical and psychological basis, after the most calm and disinterested fashion, since, whichever way the balance of evidence may incline, the result cannot affect or disturb them in their inner religious conviction. The expectation is not fulfilled. To a careful observer of the trend of discussion it soon becomes apparent that something warmer and more exciting than an average academic interest is animating those who take part in it. Although the arguments that are plied to and fro are of a strictly exegetical and historical character, it is undeniable that that the "heart which makes the theologian" is not so utterly absent from the debate as some would fain have us believe.

How is this theological atmosphere which persists in clinging to the discussion to be explained? The explanation is not far to seek. Absolute disinterestedness, even in regard to the consciousness of Jesus, is possible only where one has lost all religious touch with Jesus and denies to Him all significance in one's own spiritual life. So long as any personal religious attachment to Jesus, of however attenuated a kind, is retained, the question what Jesus thought of Himself, and consequently the problem of the messianic consciousness, immediately asserts its importance and ceases to be a matter of unconcern.

Now to a large extent the writers who hesitate or refuse to ascribe to Jesus the messianic consciousness are not prepared to eliminate His figure entirely from the field of their practical religion. They have not ceased to be Christian in so far as they still invest Jesus with a supreme spiritual significance for themselves and desire to sustain a specifically religious relation toward Him. They have some category of religious preeminence or leadership under which they classify

what Jesus is for them. Every category, however, of this kind carries with it certain definite implications as to the inner life of Jesus; it assumes within Him a kind of self-consciousness such as is in accordance with the spiritual interrelation which those who regard Him in this light seek to cultivate. And while this is so positively, it also works in a negative direction. Every religious classification of Jesus has its exclusions as well as its inclusions. While it must needs postulate a certain state of consciousness, it must of equal necessity extrude and repel certain other forms of self-estimate on the part of Jesus, on the ground of their being incompatible with, or uncongenial to, the religious regard entertained for, or the spiritual fellowship exercised with, Him.

Looked at from this standpoint, the messianic consciousness may prove as objectionable an element and equally difficult to deal with as the messianic fact. Nay, it is easy to see how the former may prove more obnoxious and more troublesome than the latter, because it lies in the sphere of what is historically and psychologically verifiable concerning the life of Jesus, whereas belief or disbelief in the messiahship partakes far more of the dogmatic judgment about the significance of Jesus, such as is not capable of direct scientific substantiation. The messiahship one can let alone on the theological or philosophical grounds; the messianic consciousness if aggressive and will not let anyone alone who at all makes the figure of Jesus an object of serious study and finds in it a source of religious inspiration. If the messianic consciousness is real, then there is danger that at any moment it may turn back upon any favorite character or consciousness that the modern mind has projected into Jesus and expose that latter as unreal, because it could not possibly have dwelt together with the consciousness of messiahship.

It is of course true that many at the present day declare their fellowship with Jesus independent of the acceptance or rejection of what Jesus Himself in His humanly and historically limited state of mind may have regarded as true, and apparently succeed in doing so. Their identification with Jesus is not one in the sphere of belief, at least not along the whole range of belief. Difference in theoretical religious outlook, even at important points, does not to their view preclude the sympathy and oneness in religious feeling and aspiration in which they continue to recognize the enduring center of their allegiance to Him. Still, it may be doubted whether this can be carried on to the extent of an emancipation from that focus of belief which constituted in Jesus His self-consciousness. If we may judge from the analogy of interhuman fellowship in such forms as love and friendship, it must be next to impossible so to feel in the religious sphere where all spiritual powers acquire a heightened sensitiveness and evince a desire for absolute possession and interpenetration. Communion between friends can survive where differences of opinion arise concerning outside matters. But where the differences of opinion relates to the inner life and touches the point of view from which one of the friends regards himself, there the very basis of spiritual fellowship becomes endangered, because the central point upon which it is exercised loses its transparency and accessibility; there is created a neutral indifferent area, where the love or friendship finds its limits and is made to feel its own deficiency. Even so, only to a far stronger degree, it must be with every religious attitude toward Jesus which attempts to stop short of accepting and treating Him at the face value of His official self-estimate. In the same proportion that one hesitates so to receive Him a principle of reserve and estrangement enters into the relationship; the circles of the subject and the object of religious communion intersect but no longer perfectly coincide. No one can take a Saviour to his heart in that absolute, unqualified sense, which constitutes the glory of religious trust, if there lies in the background of his mind the thought that this Saviour failed to understand Himself. If once it is established that He meant to be that very definite kind of spiritual helper which by historical right we designate as "the Messiah," then it becomes difficult to refuse His help in that very capacity, and force upon Him a role of religious helpfulness which He was not Himself

conscious of sustaining. The inherent perverseness of such a situation in a field where everything ought to be straightforward lies on the surface.

We believe that the doubt cast upon the messianic consciousness springs from an inner dislike of it, and that the dislike springs from the instinctive perception of its unsuitableness and unmanageableness as a companion to those other forms of consciousness, which the liberal theology is wont to regard as central in the mind and purpose of Jesus, but which are in reality nothing but a reflex of its own beliefs and ideals. We do not mean there there is anything intentional about this process, that the critical treatment of this element in the gospel account is subject to any conscious desire for manipulating the facts in the interest of a foregone conclusion. Instances of such a procedure are fortunately rare in the history of criticism. So far as conscious intent is concerned, most writers mean to practice a fair objectivity. It would be foolish, however, on that account to close one's eyes to the important influence which, in the face of an honest purpose to the contrary, theological sympathies and prepossessions exercise in the weight that is given to facts and the judgment that is passed upon them. There is an inevitable, unconscious partiality from which, where actual and practical issues are at stake, no historical investigator with the best will in the world can entirely free himself. While no moral blame can attach to this, it is none the less necessary to take this factor into account in criticizing any process of argumentation, be it one's own or that of an opponent. Instances may occur where its influence is so preponderant as to create a real weakness in the objective argument that is made out in support of a position.

It seems to us that the debate about the messianic consciousness is a case of this kind. Two considerations incline us to this opinion. In the first place, the objective arguments of a historico-critical nature advanced against the reality of this consciousness are of themselves so inadequate to support the conclusion based upon them as to suggest that theological proclivity must have made their weight appear greater to those who handle them than it is in reality. So much more and so much of a more cogent character can be urged in favor of the view that Jesus believed Himself the Messiah than can be urged against it, that one involuntarily looks for something subjective back of the arguments for the latter view to account for the confidence placed in their sufficiency. And, in the second place, the actual content of the messianic consciousness is such as to be exceptionally adapted to provoke reaction and dissent in the "modern" or "liberal" religious mind. It would be difficult to find a case where two ways of thinking appear to be so pointedly at variance and have so little in common as the messianic way of thinking on the one hand and the thought form of "liberal" Christianity on the other hand. Of the first of these two grounds for our conviction we expect to render and account on some future occasion. For the present we confine ourselves to a brief explanation of the second.

It has taken interpreters of the life and teaching of Jesus considerable time to realize the full import of the messianic idea which the Gospels represent Jesus as applying to Himself. At first the idea was supposed to belong to a much lower plane than was afterward seen to be the case. Consequently, in that earlier period the claim to messiahship could still be regarded as compatible with a limited, purely human self-consciousness. To be sure, even at that time some recognized that in the conception of Jesus' messiahship lay the fruitful source of all the high attributes with which subsequently His figure became invested in the faith of the church. But this was not at that time thought to be a logical explication of the actual messianic consciousness as it lived in the mind of Jesus; it was looked upon as an illogical process in the mind of the church. Jesus Himself had kept His messiahship within the terms of creaturehood and human subordination to God. The church had without historical warrant so enlarged the conception of messiahship as to make it practically inclusive of deity. Such was the original position in

consequence of which at first no umbrage was taken at the messianic consciousness. Later on, however, when the structure and development of the messianic idea came to be studied more closely, and the tremendous proportions which it had attained in the mind of Jesus to be more adequately realized, this view had to be modified. It is now seen that all the elements of the high Christology to which so much aversion is felt are implicitly given in the messianic consciousness as its integral constituents or necessity correlates. Not first the church, not first the tradition; no, the historical life, the historical mind of Jesus enfolded in the messiahship, all that belongs to His unique superhuman nature and dignity. He already must have thought the one in the other. Thus the acute situation is created in which the consciousness of the modernized Jesus finds itself face to face with the totally heterogeneous consciousness of the messianic Jesus of the Gospels, and feels that it cannot befriend itself with the latter without denying its own right of existence. Unwilling to do this, its only escape lies through denying the historicity of the messianic consciousness. Hence the eagerness and energy with which it has thrown itself upon all phenomena that seemed to discredit the tradition that Jesus considered Himself the Messiah.

The three factors which chiefly impart this unmodern and anti-modern complexion to the messianic consciousness are the supernatural character of the office, its soteric purpose, and the co-equality with God which it postulates for its bearer.

The messiahship is the most pronouncedly supernaturalistic conception in the whole range of biblical teaching. To think in messianic terms is to think in terms of supernaturalism. The messianic is really a species of the eschatological. When we say that the biblical religion is an eschatological religion, we mean that it ascribes to the world process a definite goal, such as cannot be attained by it in the natural course of affairs, but will be brought on catastrophically by a direct, divine interposition making an end of the present world order and introducing a new order of transcendental character. Eschatology, therefore, marks that goal of all that exists and happens a supernatural, and in doing this it further assumes that the final consummation is preceded by a history full of equally supernatural transactions in keeping with the end set for it all. It is in this setting that we must place the messianic idea. The Messiah gathers and sums up in Himself this whole movement toward the supernatural, bringing by His appearance and work the entire process to its ultimate fruition. The figure of the Messiah is steeped in eschatology. That we do not more clearly realize this is due to the fact that for us the Messiah has come and accomplished a great part of His task and yet what we call the eschatological crisis is still outstanding. But to the Old Testament point of view, and to the point of view of Jesus' time, and to the point of view of Jesus Himself, the coming of the Messiah signified the fulfillment of the eschatological expectation in its most comprehensive sense. Owing to the apocalyptic development through which the messianic idea had passed, this identification of it with eschatological values had become even more thorough than before. And to Jesus still more than to the mind of any apocalyptic seer the messiahship stood for a series of supernatural processes and transactions. It stood for acute, not evolutionary, changes, for miracles and miraculous regeneration of all things. To demessianize the consciousness of Jesus, therefore, means to desupernaturalize it, and vice versa.

Jesus was not a person the center of whose thought lay in the natural relation of man to God, with a little fringe remaining upon Him from the outgrown garment of apocalyptic, but one who lived and moved and had His being in the world of the supernatural, to whom the thought of the world to come was the life breath of His religion. Such a mind will not fit into the humanitarian idealism of which the "liberal" theology would make Jesus the exponent. What unconsciously underlies the aversion to the idea of messiahship is at bottom nothing else but the desire to do away with the large bulk of supernaturalism which the former trails in its wake. It is interesting

to observe how this anti-supernaturalistic motive has asserted itself and put in its work along closely parallel lines in both Old Testament and New Testament criticism. There are Old Testament critics who believe that the messianic hope cannot have formed part of the teaching of the great ethical prophets of Israel, and this on the ground that the messianic hope is inherently bound up with magical, miraculous—we would say supernatural—processes, whereas the interest of these prophets centered in moral movements dependent on an appeal to and a response from the free will of man. It is in both cases the naturalism of the modern way of thinking that seeks to expel the supernaturalism of the old view; and in both cases the center of the latter is reconnoitered and attacked in the idea of the messiahship.

The second chief motive that tends to render the messianic consciousness objectionable lies in the soteric purpose of the messiahship. The Messiah stands for "salvation," indeed "Saviour" is the most popular name by which the Christ has come to be named among His followers. The saving aspect of the work of Jesus, its "evangelical" character, cannot for a moment be separated from His messiahship. It is illustrated chiefly in His healing miracles, and these miracles He performed in a messianic capacity; they are not mere humanitarian acts, but mark the points where the regenerating, life-giving, world-renewing power of the kingdom has entered into this life and established itself as the beginning of the life to come. According to the uniform usage of the New Testament, Gospels as well as epistles, "to save" means, when applied in a spiritual sense, to rescue from the eternal death of the judgment and to introduce into the eternal life of the world to come. All weakening, attenuating interpretations that have been put upon the idea are excluded at the outset by this messianic setting in which it appears to the mind of Jesus, and to the mind of the New Testament generally. Formally it is, of course, possible to represent Jesus in some lowered sense, as a saving teacher or a saving prophet, a saving social reformer. But this can be done only at the expense of historical truth, because, so construed, the idea of salvation is wrenched from its messianic eschatological mooring and becomes something else than Jesus meant by it.

Now this old, solid idea of salvation, the basis of all "evangelical" religion, has become a stumbling block to the modern mind in many quarters. While the terms "Saviour" and "salvation" are not discarded, the substance of the transaction is entirely sacrificed. The question, therefore, arises how the Jesus of the Gospels can be freed of this antiquated, magical idea of salvation and become a fit exponent of the new Pelagian evangel of "uplift." There is but one way of doing this, and that is by stripping the Jesus of the Gospels of His messianic character. The moment this falls off Him, the distasteful soteriological notions of atonement, regeneration and justification disappear with it one and all. They are enucleated in their messianic root. And here also the Old Testament parallel is interesting. Among the motives that have led to the denial of the genuineness of some of the greatest messianic prophesies has been the feeling that the ideas of free grace and supernatural transformation, so prominent in them, are out of keeping with the intensely ethical spirit of the prophets. It is again the Pelagian view of religion which seeks to dislodge the Augustinian view from its double stronghold in prophecy and gospel.

Antisupernaturalism and antievangelicalism are not, however, the sole forces which have fostered the modern dislike of the messianism in the life and mind of Jesus. There is a third motive, which we believe to be even more potent than these. The messianic consciousness is interlinked with the right of the deity of our Lord to a place in the Christian world view and the Christian religion. If Jesus felt Himself the Messiah in the full sense of the word, then He must have assigned Himself a place in the scale of being above the creature and alongside God. The whole high Christology of the church lies in this as in a nutshell. Nor is this a mere theological

matter. If He claims to be the Messiah, this determines not merely our theological judgment in regard to His person; it practically determines the devotional attitude of our hearts in respect to Him. In a messianic capacity He must have meant to draw toward Himself the prayer, the faith, the worship of His followers; whereas, if He classified Himself un-messianically, He must have intended as a prophet or teacher or reformer to keep Himself outside the range of these devotional operations of our souls; our prayer, our faith, our worship will, if we heed His own desire, have to pass Him by, and, without being intercepted by Him, will have to terminate directly upon God. To reuse to put into the mind of Jesus the messianic consciousness means to refuse to put the consciousness of deity there and His claim to be the rightful recipient of religion. Although this may not be true of every aspect of the messiahship, since the idea does not always in the Old Testament appear in its highest potency, yet it is eminently true of the messiahship as conceived by our Lord Himself. Here the indispensableness of strictly divine prerogatives in order to the adequate exercise of its functions springs into view immediately. This is due to the thorough spiritualizing of the idea which it has undergone in the mind of Jesus. So long as the Messiah's task is conceived to lie in the sphere of external, national, earthly kingship and salvation, it remains possible to regard Him as the representative of God without investing Him with divine attributes. But when His function comes to lie in the sphere of spiritual relationship to god, when He is conceived as the intermediary in the specifically religious concerns of the soul with God, then His calling places Him in the very center of the field where the forces of religion play; then it becomes immediately imperative that He shall Himself belong to the category of the divine. How can He for God receive trust and answer prayer and accept worship and forgive sin and cleanse the soul and quicken the dead and judge the world, unless there be in Him the prime qualification for these function, that He be God, for these functions are functions which God cannot delegate to any creature, not even to the Messiah as supreme in the scale of creation?

It is plain, therefore, that the consciousness of deity in our Lord is postulated by the thoroughly spiritualized character of His messianic consciousness. This is fully in accord with our Lord's own statements concerning the manner in which His messiahship objectively rests on and grows out of His divine sonship. The subjective connection of thought is here but a reflex of the objective relationship in reality. Looking at it from this point of view we may say that the Son of God was the only one in whom the messianic idea could come into its full rights and into its ripe fruition in the religious sphere, the only one who could make out of it an eternal thing, the only one who could receive it with its absolute content into His own life and consciousness without committing blasphemy and trespassing upon the rights of God.

It will perhaps be said that the propositions just laid down—no messiahship without deity, nor consciousness of messiahship without consciousness of deity—cannot be reversed. In the abstract this is true. It is logically quite possible to affirm the deity of our Lord and the consciousness thereof, and yet to deny His messianic character and His consciousness in regard to it. But practically this is of no significance. The cases will be rare where persons are believers in the true deity of our Lord and yet draw back from affirming His messianic office and state of mind. Such cases are oddities in the world of doctrinal thinking; their place is in museums, not in the outdoors of living religious thought. Where faith has taken the infinitely greater leap of affirming the deity of Jesus, it can only by a queer perversity of nature hesitate to take the smaller one of affirming His messianic character. Where such a position is apparently assumed, it will be found on closer examination that not the full deity of our Lord in the accepted sense is avowed, but a modified, metaphorical sort of deity which puts less strain on faith for accepting it than the messiahship would. Besides, the view stated, while logically possible, is entirely out of touch with the situation as it has historically developed itself. In reality the disclosure of the

deity of Jesus has been made in the closest touch with and in constant dependence on the disclosure of His messianic dignity and work. The knowledge of His messiahship has not been added to that of His deity, so that it subsequently could be separated from the deity and leave the latter intact. The reverse is true; the historical revelation process has been the opposite to that of the order of existence.

As a matter of fact, those who reject the messianic consciousness do not do so because they have something higher and more inclusive which would render it superfluous as a distinct item of faith. They do so because they desire to substitute something lower and less difficult to believe. We are not asked to cease calling Him the Christ because after calling Him Lord and God we could not possibly do more. What we are asked to do is this, to drop the name Christ, because He shall suffice us as an example, a teacher, a leader. And because it is awkward to receive Him at this lower value, with the historical fact staring one in the face, that He thought it necessary to offer Himself at an infinitely higher value, therefore it is impossible that the messianic consciousness should be allowed its place in our Lord's life without criticism and molestation. The whole innate trend of modern religious thinking is against recognizing it. There is only one alternative to this. For those who despair of eliminating it on historical grounds, it becomes what it was to the Jews of our Lord's lifetime, the great *skandalon*, the offense, which leads to the rejection not of His messiahship only, but to the rejection of Jesus Himself.

Marked up by Lance George Marshall