JESUS' CONCEPTION OF HIMSELF AND OF HIS MISSION ON EARTH.

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FOR a while, historical criticism was centered around the life and literature of the Old Testament. Many were alarmed, lest this precious treasure would be lost to us; but the process of turning on the light of history has resulted in giving us a body of sacred literature that is more edifying for religious purposes as well as more usable. The truth will never hurt in the end.

Just now the center of historical investigation is the life and literature of the New Testament. This means that every possible light of history is being turned on the life and work of Jesus with the desire of arriving at a historical estimate of Jesus' own personal Consciousness. We must not overlook the fact that we have not Jesus' own autobiography, neither have we records of his deeds and words taken down by shorthand in his presence while he was acting and speaking. But what we do have is biographies of Jesus written from one to three generations after his death. Moreover, according to Luke's own testimony, and from an examination of his gospel, we learn that in the composition of his gospel he used written sources; and, after examining Matthew's gospel, we find that he did likewise. What we have in our gospels is different interpretations of Jesus arising from different religious and social situations.

I believe that each of Jesus' early interpreters grasped something of the significance of his life and work; at the same time we must concede the possibility that each one misunderstood him in one way or another. Each interpreted him in the light of his own religious needs and the religious needs of the time and situation in which he wrote. Hence we should not be surprised, if we find the early sources differing somewhat among themselves. In the light of mod-

ern scholarship we are surely able to understand Jesus better than were his interpreters of any age in the past, by no means excepting the first century. The fact is that, according to the representation of our gospels, Jesus was misunderstood by those of his own generation, by not only the people at large, but also those disciples who were most closely associated with him; hence we should not be surprised, if he was in a way misunderstood toward the end of the first century, when our gospels were written; in the fourth century, when our creed was formed; and in the subsequent ages prior to the days of historical criticism. The fact is that from the first to the nineteenth century men thought little of the life of the earthly Jesus, but centered their thought on the Christ of glory. Our creed, which took shape under the philosophical speculation of the fourth century and purports to be an adequate statement of Christianity, mentions only two events in the earthly life of Jesus,—that he was born of the Virgin Mary and suffered under Pontius Pilate. It says nothing of the great meaning of his words and deeds,—freedom, truth, righteousness, brotherhood, love. It would be a too hasty conclusion to say that the historical method has already solved the problems as to what was Jesus' estimate of himself and of his mission on earth, yet we feel justified in expecting valuable results from the historical process.

When Jesus was on earth, his personal followers seem to have regarded him as the Messiah in the nationalistic sense, as the one who was eventually to gather a political following and free the Jewish nation from the Roman domination. When he submitted to an ignominious death, his followers thought that God had forsaken him, hence all their hopes for him as Messiah disappeared. They at once sought safety in retreat, or in repudiating him. As soon as they attained their faith in his resurrection and exaltation to heaven, then they began the process of reconstructing their faith in him as Messiah, and this new faith took the form of belief in him as the Messiah in the apocalyptic sense, that is, as the Messiah, who would come on the clouds of heaven miraculously ushering in his kingdom. They at once conceived it to be their duty to make the people ready for the coming of the Messiah, which they expected to be within their generation. Then they began the process of reconstructing their remembrance of his words and deeds in the light of their new faith, and the tendency must have been to magnify those elements in his life that had an apocalyptic significance. Some circles of early Christians seem to have made less of the

apocalyptic element than others did. This is true of the Logia source as opposed to Mark. Well, the fact is that Jesus did not during the first generation return on the clouds of heaven as the apocalyptic Messiah, nor has he returned yet. So by the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, under the influence of Greek philiosophy rather than Jewish Messianism, Jesus was being interpreted not as the Messiah in the apocalyptic sense who would return on the clouds of heaven to set up his kingdom on earth, but as the eternal Logos of God who would return to earth in a spiritual sense; or, if he would return in person at all, it would not be on the clouds of heaven to set up his kingdom on the earth, but rather to take his beloved followers with him to his Father's house. This is the point of view in the fourth gospel. And this is the point of view that has had the greatest influence in the later history of the Church down to the present century.

What is an adequate statement, based on an historical interpretation of sources, of Jesus' estimate of himself and of his work? Did Jesus regard himself as a prophet or as the Messiah; if the Messiah, the Messiah after what conception? Some have held the view that at the beginning of his ministry Jesus hoped to become the Messiah in the nationalistic sense. He began his career as a teacher, hoping to win the Jewish nation to his point of view and eventually to lead the people in throwing off the Roman yoke. But when the nation failed to rally to him, and when the shadows of death began to cross his pathway, he lost hope of becoming the Messiah in the nationalistic sense and began to claim that, after his death and resurrection and exaltation to heaven, he would return to earth on the clouds of heaven as the Messiah in the apocalyptic sense. Others have held the view that he began his career as a teacher of righteousness after the order of the Old Testament prophets, not regarding himself as the Messiah in any sense whatever. He hoped to bring about the regeneration of the Jewish nation; but failing to win the people and believing that his word would triumph in the end, he then for the first time in his career began to think of himself as the Messiah, and that in the apocalyptic sense, who after his death and exaltation to heaven would return to earth on the clouds to judge the world and set up his kingdom. Still others hold to Mark's representation of Jesus' consciousness: From the beginning of his career, Jesus was conscious of being the Messiah in the apocalyptic sense. During the early days of his ministry, he purposely concealed this conscious-

ness presumably for fear that the people would misunderstand him. Toward the end of his life, he unqualifiedly asserted that he was the Messiah in the apocalyptic sense, and, after his exaltation to heaven, would within that generation return to earth on the clouds with great power and glory. Still others accept as historical the picture of Jesus as given in the fourth gospel: From the beginning of his career, he knew that he was the Messiah, neither in the apocalyptic nor in the nationalistic sense, but in an ethico-religious and metaphysical sense, as the eternal Logos of God and the divine mediator of light and life to the world. Others, finally, think that they find in Jesus no consciousness of being the Messiah in any sense whatever; but that, from the beginning to the end of his career, his purpose was merely to preach inner righteousness and sonship to God somewhat after the order of the Old Testament prophets; and that whatever Messianic language is attributed to him originated not with Jesus but with his interpreters.

I hardly feel that in the light of all our sources either of the above interpretations is an adequate historical statement of Jesus' estimate of himself. From the time of his baptism, if not earlier, he had the consciousness of being the Son of God in a unique sense of the term. The expression, Son of God, carries both an ethical and a functional connotation. He regarded himself Son of God in an ethical sense in that he believed himself loved by the Father. Yes, he regarded himself as the only begotten Son of God in that he was pre-eminently beloved in the sight of the Father. He regarded himself Son of God in a functional sense in that he believed there was committed to him by the Father a special office and responsibility. From the beginning of his career, he felt resting on him the responsibility of self-denial and the leading of others into the relation of sonship to the Father that he himself sustained. The fact that, from the beginning, altruism played so large a part in his life and message suggests that he felt a peculiar responsibility for the salvation of men from sin. So from the beginning to the end of his ministry, his purpose was to be the Savior of men from a life of sin to a life of heart righteousness and sonship to the Father. His program was to induce men to repent of sin and follow him, to live the kind of a life that he lived, to be dominated by the same principles that dominated him, to sustain the same attitude of a son toward God and of a brother toward man that he himself sustained. He was absolutely sure that he himself possessed the secret of correct living and was able to impart the

secret to others. He believed that correct living meant life, abundant life, eternal life. From beginning to end, his message was pre-eminently ethico-religious, and so sure was his conviction on the subject of correct relations toward God and man that he regarded himself as the Lord, that is, the ruler of man's life and conduct.

In the light of the ethico-religious message of Jesus, I think we can best approach the subject of his Messianic consciousness. I fail to find the evidence that Jesus at any time of his career entertained the ambition of becoming the Messiah in the political sense. His message was ethico-religious rather than political. He approached man as the Savior from sin rather than as a political reformer. Again, I find no convincing evidence of a change of purpose in Jesus' program, due to disappointment or else. Furthermore, I think that we must accept as historical the view that from the beginning to the end of his ministry Jesus did regard himself as the Messiah. It occurs to me that it would be decidedly an unhistorical procedure to deny to Jesus a Messianic consciousness of some kind since each of our early sources attributes such a consciousness to him. Moreover, it is probably true that the attitude of Jesus toward the Messiaship as set forth in Mark, and taken over by Matthew and Luke, is more nearly historical than the attitude as set forth in the fourth gospel. In the synoptics, Jesus is represented as constantly putting forth the effort to conceal his Messiaship and restrain any public declaration of it. Not until his arraignment before the high priest does he publicly confess it. In the fourth gospel, however, Jesus is represented as constantly engaged in efforts by word and deed to prove his Messiaship and induce people to accept it. The fourth gospel seems to be an interpretation of Jesus made by some of the devout disciples of the apostle John who at the same time were thoroughly saturated with the Stoic system of philosophy. That they based their interpretation on some memoirs of the apostle John is suggested in one instance by Jno. xxi. 24. "This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things; *and we know that his testimony is true.*" The italics are mine. On the other hand, while we must admit that there is room for the element of interpretation in Mark's portrayal of Jesus' Messianic consciousness, an interpretation influenced by the Jewish apocalyptic thought, at the same time Mark's representation of Jesus' determined and constant effort to restrain any comment on his Messiaship is more in keeping with the point of

view, which I insist is historically founded, that Jesus' message was pre-eminently ethico-religious rather than Messianic or apocalyptic.

Most of the efforts within recent years to write the life of Jesus historically have taken either Mark's point of view with regard to Jesus ' Messianic consciousness, insisting that Jesus was a literalist on the question of the Messiaship, or the point of view, more nearly approached in the Logia of all our primitive sources, that Jesus did not regard himself as the Messiah in any sense of the term, but merely as a teacher of righteousness. I insist that from the beginning to the end of his ministry Jesus did regard himself as the Messiah in that he regarded himself as the fulfiller of the essence of the Messianic hope. Why should one interpret Jesus as a literalist on the subject of the Messiaship, while at the same time all concede that he was in no sense a literalist on the subject of observing the law of Moses and other religious institutions of Irael? The criterion of authority in conduct for him was not what the law of Moses or the tradition of the Scribes said, but rather what the welfare of humanity demanded. Relentlessly he applied this straight edge of authority to traditions and institutions hoary with age. He held no brief for any religious institution as such, but only as it ministered to the good of man. This point of view led him to repudiate entirely the Mosaic distinction between clean and unclean. It led him to lift prayer, fasting, alms-giving, and the observance of the Sabbath clear of a legalistic basis and give them a spiritual setting. So it occurs to me that it is decidedly unfair to Jesus to insist that he was a literalist on the subject of the Messiaship while we grant that he was not a literalist in other respects. If he possessed spiritual force and originality in the case of the law and other religious institutions, surely he did in respect to the Messiaship. Matthew is written from the point of view to prove that Jesus was the Messiah for one reason because his life in several particulars corresponds to statements made in the Old Testament, but nowhere do our earliest sources represent Jesus himself as substantiating his claims to the Messiaship on the ground that he literally fulfilled the Jewish Messianic expectations.

It seems that Jesus did regard himself as the Messiah in the sense that he brought real salvation to men. Back of all the imagery connected with the Messianic hope, whether of the Messiah in the nationalistic sense or in the apocalyptic sense, was the hope that God would through a new order of things usher in good to man. Unquestionably, Jesus regarded himself as God's agent in

making this good possible. He disappointed the hope of his followers that he would be the Messiah in the nationalistic sense. Likewise he disappointed their hope that he would immediately prove himself Messiah in the apocalyptic sense. But no one has been disappointed in his ability to bring real salvation to man, to the Jew as well as to the Gentile, and thereby fulfill the spirit of the Messianic hope of Irael as well as of the whole world. Human experience has demonstrated that his program of attaching men to himself and thereby leading them into experience of sonship to the Father brings real salvation from sin. In view of this program, it is probably true that Mark's representation, that Jesus endeavored to restrain any public confession of faith in him as Messiah, is historical; for he knew that, if they believed him to be the Messiah, they would necessarily regard him as the Messiah literally in the nationalistic sense. No one had ever advanced the idea that the Messiah in the apocalyptic sense would previous to his miraculous appearance on the clouds of heaven sojourn on earth as a man. So Jesus desired that his ethico-religious message have full sway in the minds of his hearers, not being complicated by the presence of any aroused political ambitions. It is probably true that at the end of his career he did confess that he was the Messiah. To have denied it would have been wrong and misleading. He knew himself to be a greater servant of the Jewish nation and of the world than the literalist of either Messianic school hoped of their Messiah

The synoptic gospels have interpreted Jesus as a literalist on the subject of the Messiaship. The evangelists regarded him as the Messiah in the apocalyptic sense and expected his return to earth on the clouds before their generation passed away. As already suggested, there is room for the possibility that much, if not all, the Messianic and apocalyptic language attributed to Jesus is due to the fact that Jesus was being reinterpreted by his followers in the light of their new faith in him as the Messiah in the apocalyptic sense. Yes, it is historically possible, if not probable, that he did not use as much apocalyptic language concerning himself as is represented in our sources. If he did use those terms, he must have employed them generally in a figurative rather than a literal sense. To conclude that he employed them in a literal sense is to some extent to discredit him. To conclude that he did not use them so freely as he is said to have used them, or that he employed them only in a figurative sense, is to interpret the earthly Jesus in this particular in keeping with the glorious fact that he was not a literalist and that his message was primarily ethico-religious.