

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT JESUS.

BY DR. CHARLES F. DOLE.

IV. THE QUESTION OF MESSIAHSHIP.

We have now to consider one of the most perplexing of all the questions about Jesus's personality. How far did he take himself to be in some sense or other the special messenger of God, a unique being, a Messiah, or anointed one, a kind of king; if not to rule the nations, yet at least their lord in a spiritual domain? Conflicting opinions rage over this point. On the one hand, the key note of all the Gospels is doubtless the idea of Messiahship or Christship, out of which the creeds of Christendom grew. On the other hand, it is now held that Jesus was quite or almost innocent of such teaching and that this idea grew up after his death. Professor Schmidt's new book, *The Prophet of Nazareth*, makes this contention the learned issue of his study. The term "son of man," he tells us, so far from having a unique and personal application to Jesus's office, is simply the Syriac term for man. Thus man, not Christ, is lord of the Sabbath. Not Jesus alone, but man then is come to seek and to save the lost? Shall *man* then preside at the judgment?⁸

It seems to me most likely that the Messianic idea of Jesus grew up, doubtless with the help and suggestion of his disciples, from the seed of his original words. It is not easy at all otherwise to explain so numerous a group of passages ascribed to him. The origin and growth of the resurrection stories seem also more likely to have come with Jesus's help, by way of preparation for them, than without any such help. They also came, I surmise, along with a wave of interest and belief in occult and psychical phenomena, of which we get hints in the Gospels, as for example, in the story of Herod's theory of the reincarnation of John the Baptist in the person of

⁸ Matt. xxv. 31. Compare xii. 32; xx. 18, 28; Mark viii. 38; xiv. 21; Luke vii. 34; ix. 44; xii. 40; xviii. 8; xix. 10.

Jesus (Matt. xiv. 2), in the story of Jesus walking on the sea (Matt. xiv), in the legend of the transfiguration (Matt. xvii), as well as in the ghostly appearances in Jerusalem after Jesus's death (Matt. xxix. 52, 53). Would it not be far more likely that Jesus, the child of his age, might have shared in, and given occasional expression to ideas which were immediately in the air all ready to be uttered, than that he should have been free of such ideas—a modern man before his time? No one can easily explain his very frequent assumption of some species of unique and authoritative character, except by the quite natural belief that he took himself to be,—I will not urge more than a man, but a man appointed by God for a peculiar mission.

This idea was congruous with the prophetic office, and specially with the passages which he loved to quote from the book of Isaiah. (See Luke iv. 18.) You certainly have to do violence to his language in order to dissociate the centrality of his own person from numerous passages. The more than prophetic "I" and "mine," while not so exaggerated as in the Fourth Gospel, yet run all through the Synoptic Gospels. The very words "Come unto me all ye that labor," emphasize this centrality of thought. He seems to call disciples to him and to be known as their Master. What does the verse about the bridegroom being taken away, after which his disciples will fast, mean (Mark ii. 18 etc)? Why does he seem to say so much about "my sake" and "my name"? "Whosoever shall deny me will I also deny." (Matt. x. 33.) Why should the least in the kingdom of heaven be greater than John the Baptist? (Luke vii. 28.) The words "Son of man" hardly make sense, if you always insist upon translating them to mean merely man. "The son of man came eating and drinking and they say, 'Behold a friend of publicans and sinners.'" (Matt. xi. 19.) Here is a very emphatic mode of saying "I," as apart from ordinary men. "He that soweth the good seed is the son of man." (Matt. xiii. 37.) This is another emphatic *I*. Why again does Jesus seem to put away his own family relations in favor of the wider relationship to his disciples? (Matt. xii. 50.) Shall we rule out altogether the tradition of the profound interest of people generally, of Herod, of John the Baptist, of Jesus's own disciples, especially of Peter, (Matt. xvi. 13 etc.) in speculating as to Jesus's office and claims? Can we keep just what we like in the story of the interview between Jesus and Zebedee's sons (Mark x. 35 etc.) and suppose that nothing at all was said of a kingdom of glory, in which, after the impending crisis of sorrow, the disciples hoped to share?

Again, why did the authorities put Jesus to death, if he claimed nothing beyond the gift of ordinary prophecy? What assumption of authority could have led to that extraordinary story of the cleansing of the temple? What else but the sense of Messiahship could have made him so silent beneath the questions at his trial?

Jesus's singular unwillingness to be publicly known deserves attention here. If we can believe the tradition, he habitually imposes silence about himself at least in the early part of his ministry on one and another of those whom he has treated. It may be said that this tallies with the sentences which urge the doctrine of quiet coming of the kingdom, without violence and observation, as we to-day think it comes. I raise the question whether these verses do not all lend themselves to a different interpretation? One of the great motives of Jesus's life seems to have been the beatitude, "Blessed are the Meek." The law of the world, he teaches, is that the mighty shall be brought down and the lowly exalted. He has accordingly an instinctive dread of being put forward and made a popular hero. The idea of a suffering type of leadership, taken from Isaiah, has impressed his mind. Through the gate of suffering humiliation and even death lies the way of victory. None the less, but all the more, may he claim and expect final exaltation. The lowly shall be exalted. That is his creed. There is nothing inconsistent between this thought and the expectation of the coming of a "great and terrible day of the Lord," a day of retribution. This tremendous equalizing of accounts and rewards is indeed the fact to be looked for. The familiar text about the kingdom of God coming "not with observation" now tallies with this idea of the lowly Messiah, who through the valley of humiliation is on his way to glory.

Even we modern men are able to hold both ideas in solution at one and the same time; on one hand, the thought of a ceaseless law of evolution, the possibility also on the other hand of epochs of seemingly rapid and even revolutionary movement. Both ideas have truth in them and fall back on analogies in nature. We are inclined therefore to think that Jesus did distinctly, naturally and sincerely voice the expectation of his age, looking toward some sort of a catastrophe and a miraculous renovation of social conditions. This seems altogether more likely than that he failed to share the common hopes of his oppressed and imaginative people in favor of an interposition of their God in their favor. He doubtless believed that he was the chosen leader in the way of the new hope. He spoke with an assumption of authority. He doubtless thought himself

gifted to heal the sick and to drive out the demons. People rallied to him and responded to his treatment, carried away by the contagion of his own conviction and hope. All this is quite in line with what we know of the psychic working of human nature.

It may be objected that this thought of Jesus makes him less simple than we had supposed. It gives a double aspect to his character. But it does not make him less human or natural. Let us use a familiar historical illustration—one of many that might be cited. It is the case of Savonarola, the great Florentine preacher and reformer. Perhaps no man of higher, nobler or more austere virtue and purpose ever lived. On one side, you have the pure gold of a great and constant devotion, true till death, a generous humanity, an overwhelming sense of common duties and practical ideals. On the other hand you see a man of prophetic visions, the child of the Middle Ages, ruled by the superstitions of his people, one day working with sane mind for reform through the sure development of the institutions of Florence, the next day confidently expecting the miraculous interposition of angels. At his best and noblest he preached the doctrine of love. All the same, and with no sense of incongruity, he denounced the rulers of his people and stirred the antagonism of men with his passion, subtly akin really to the passions of the men whom he denounced.

A query arises here whether there may not lie in human nature, like tinder ready to be fired, an astonishing and almost infinite readiness, more than men are aware of, to be set apart, anointed and crowned as martyrs or leaders. Thus, the fishermen of the lake of Galilee are ready immediately to be Princes in the new realm. Thus daily, ill-equipped American citizens set themselves up for the highest offices. Thus, priests and ministers imagine themselves to be worthy of superior dignities and privileges and to deserve to live in palaces, or again to be given titles above other men. Is there not a sort of faculty of Messiahship latent in men? On its lower side it shows itself in the extraordinary egotism and conceit of quite mediocre men. On its best side, it is close to the infinite and divine element in humanity. "We know not what we shall be," inasmuch as we partake of the nature of God. The founders of religions and of sects have thus commonly thought themselves to be appointed of God. The recent story of Babism is a good illustration of this fact. Other cases easily occur. For example, some may recall a man of very noble nature, a rather conspicuous figure among radical American thinkers in the last century, who refusing the name of Master to Jesus though at the cost of personal loss and suffering,

yet fondly thought of himself as a sort of philosophic Messiah, whose teachings only needed to be followed by mankind to solve the doubts of the world!

Suppose now a man of profound spiritual genius, such a man as Moses might have been, or a man of commanding personality, such as Daniel Webster was to his contemporaries. Bring him to birth 2000 years ago, in a land where God was thought to speak to man in the dreams of the night. Let him be born at a period when all sorts of wonderful ideas were dawning on the world. Possess him with the tradition of the prophets. Fill his soul with ardor for his oppressed people. Let him fast and pray in lonely mountains. Let him hear voices and dream dreams. Let him in imagination fight battles with the arch-foe of souls. Lift him in insight above the people around him and let him hear their words of admiration at his splendid gifts. You have thus the natural material for the idea of some sort of Messiahship. All the more the praise of Jesus that his thought took the form of the meek.⁹ The more meek the man was, the higher the coming exaltation. This was at the heart of Jesus's doctrine. In his age, however, such meekness demanded a coming glory and victory to match it. Meekness was not inconsistent with the punishment and humiliation of his enemies. The more they triumphed in this world, the surer their doom would be in the next. This is the steady teaching of the New Testament. It seems to have been the thought of Jesus. If he knew better, alas, that he did not make the humane teaching plain! If now and then he hit close to the mark of the universal doctrine of love, he seems never to have worked this doctrine out into its consistent application in detail. How could he have done so immense a task as that, in the face of the prepossessions of his age and the demonology that haunted the world? As well expect Franklin to have worked out the theory of the newly found theory of electricity into the applications of Edison and Marconi.

The fact is, in taking account of Jesus's life and person, we can never afford to leave his theology out of our sight. It looks as if his God was thought of as literally a "person," in the narrower sense of the word, seated somewhere in heaven and ruling the world through the offices of his angels. Did Jesus ever anywhere clearly state the wonderful doctrine of the Fourth Gospel, "God is Spirit"? Never does he give a word of release from the almost Persian conception of the divided world and the Satanic kingdom. His faith

⁹ See the parable about taking "the lowest room" at the feast. Luke xiv. 7 etc.

is that God will at last triumph over the devil. Here is the native basis of a theology altogether different from what modern men can believe. The natural underlying practical conclusion is the final separation of the evil from the good. This idea has been the gloomy burden of the theology of Christendom. It has been woven into the warp and woof of the traditional Christianity. Jesus's great name is still used to sanction it.

We have already seen that we may never expect to recover a veritable likeness of Jesus. We have not the necessary authentic material. But more than that, the idea of Messiahship is inextricably in our way. It is not only wrought into the narrative. It is apparently also in the mind of Jesus. It was inevitable to his age. But it does not fit into the framework of our modern thought. It has become unhelpful ethically. The Messiah has the lineaments of a man, not the character of the God whom we worship. It is a Messiah who was mistaken, as for instance, in his prophecies of the end of the world. (See Matt. xvi. 28.) The world is coming to learn the use of a greater word than the "I" of a Messiah. The noblest of leaders may not safely dwell on the centrality of his own person. The more modest words "we" and "ours" alone keep men safe and in orderly place in the ranks of the common humanity. No one may assume a sole authority over his fellows.

What then, you ask, shall we make of the actual Jesus? We catch the suggestion of a grand and impressive figure, after the fashion of an Elijah or Isaiah, intense, passionate, devoted, prodigal of life, absolutely willing to go wherever the vision or the divine voice bids. He is a great lover and equally a strong hater. He is possessed with a sense of a supernatural mission which he must needs die to fulfil. He is sustained with a sense of coming victory, of death leading to life. He has caught the idea that the suffering of the good is a sort of price paid, as it really is, for the renewal of the life of the world. He believes that, in some peculiar sense, he is set apart to pay that kind of price. Passages from his favorite prophet sway his mind to this thought. More and more, as he approaches the end of his brief career, he is lifted, as many another prophet has been, with this overmastering sense of the exaltation of his office. There blends therefore with the touches of the common and genial humanity, an almost repellant impression of aloofness, as of one already the inhabitant of another and mystic realm. On this side Jesus is well-nigh unapproachable. Normal human life is apart from this realm. It is the region of fanaticism and all religious extravagance. The characteristic of the earlier phases of

religious experiences, such as William James has related, is a vein of what seems to us modern men morbid and shadowy. The characteristic of modern religious experience is that it seeks the sunlight, and must be at one with bodily health and sanity.

I am aware that others may find or create a very different picture of Jesus. It is easy to see only what pleases one. It is easy to imagine a lovable and gentle man, free of every Hebrew feature, in fact the best type of the present-day clergyman, affable, and tactful, a favorite at dinner parties. Is it at all certain that the actual Jesus would be *persona grata* in the average home of the well-to-do citizen who prays in Jesus's name, more than he was in Pharisees' houses two thousand years ago? Recall his stern criticism of men's social and religious conventionalities.¹⁰ How many people enjoy meeting a genuine man who will tell them exactly what he thinks!

There is a common use of Jesus's life and character which deserves a word of consideration. I mean the complete idealization of Jesus, especially under the name of "Christ." Men tell us that they do not care who Jesus was "after the flesh," as Paul says, in view of their ideal of the perfect type of humanity. They therefore worship Christ, now become another more human, intimate and personal name for the idea of God present in human life. Men make under this name a beautiful and glorified conception of a human life, high enough to be called one with God. This is the Christ-centric religion of "progressive orthodoxy."

Many go further than this. They report that they have had profound spiritual experiences of communion with "The Risen Christ." We do not deny the fact of a spiritual experience. We merely suggest that the name which it bears is the least essential part of it. Under all forms and many names men have had a sense of peace, gladness, a companionship too high for words and some kind of divine guidance. This is the central fact of religion. The validity of the experience evidently does not depend upon the name or the symbol used, or any particular image suggested in the mind. James Martineau who says "God," is as well served as Dr. Lyman Abbot, the favorite name of whose God seems to be "Christ." The man who sees no visions and has no dreams may rest in the thought of a divine universe in which all is well.

One may admit that this symbolism, like its kindred Mariolatry, is helpful and ennobling. But it is not and cannot be an acquaintance with or an appreciation of the actual Jesus. Men who worship the Christ of the imagination as God certainly touch Jesus no more closely than

¹⁰ Read the story of Jesus in Simon's house, Luke vii. 36 etc.

the worshipers of Mary touch the actual mother of Jesus. The story of Jesus indeed suggests certain noble features which go to make up the imaginative conception of the ideal man. This process of idealization is like an artist's sketch in which one might not even recognize the actual forest and stream from which it has been suggested. Like the picture, it is the work of the artistic or poetic faculty. It is not even necessary for the worshiper of Jesus as the ideal Christ to know him at all. It is like the worship of Mary which may be ardent and uplifting, though no one knows anything about her. The difficulty of this use of the conception of Christ is that men confuse their ideal with bits of the ancient story. Their Christ so far from being the highest ideal whom they can conceive, is the man who called down woes upon his enemies. Such idealization perpetuates the spirit of enmity in the world.

[TO BE CONCLUDED.]