

Der Zweifel an der Messianität Jesu
A. Schlatter
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The question of the Messianic consciousness of Jesus has in recent times become a burning question. To any one who sees beneath the surface it is plain that not merely critical or historical motives, but the most vital religious and theological interests are here at play. Prof. Schlatter calls attention to this when he remarks that the unwelcome character of the religious consequences following from the recognition of Jesus' Messianic purpose has obviously influenced the denial of the latter as expressed in the conjectures of Wrede or in the vacillating reflections of Wellhausen. He does not, however, specify what are the great issues at stake. Nor does he address himself in this treatise to examining or refuting the historico-critical arguments with which the opponents of the Messianic consciousness seek to justify a doubt arising actually from dogmatic prepossessions. What the author aims at is something midway between these two. While recognizing that the deeper source of the doubt is theological, he also recognizes that there is at least a semblance of support for it in certain phenomena of the Gospel-account. But, instead of dealing with these phenomena directly, he prefers to deal with certain peculiarities of the Messianic consciousness, to which in his view the phenomena are ultimately traceable. The method is that from the center of the Messianic consciousness and the Messianic calling the conditions are deduced which would inevitably give rise to doubt. And this is justified by the peculiarity of the situation which is found in this, that the apparent grounds for the modern doubt, so far as they are objective and not merely *a priori* theological, appear to be identical with those that already led Jesus' contemporaries to call his Messiahship into question. Wrede and Wellhausen in principle take exception to the same features in the account of Jesus' activity as did the people of Jesus' own time when confronted with these features in his actual career. The result of such a mode of treatment is that the objections are not always treated with the fullness of detail that an interested student of the controversy might desire. A full answer, e.g., to Wrede would have to take into account a great many things, which Schlatter does not even touch upon. Sometimes it may be questioned whether the peculiarities of Jesus' Messianic procedure on which the author dwells actually explain the phenomena of which the skeptical critics have made so much, and whether not perhaps other factors must be brought into requisition. But, nevertheless, the author has, to a remarkable extent, succeeded in throwing light upon the perplexing aspects of our Lord's attitude with regard to the Messiahship and has shown that these perplexing elements are not accidentally there, but the necessary result of the way in which Jesus fundamentally conceived and approached the Messiahship.

The difficulties, in Dr. Schlatter's view, go mainly back to three causes. The first of these is that Jesus broke with the nation of Israel and gave to his Messiahship a meaning and value independent of its acceptance by his own people. This was the result of his absolute insistence upon the ethical and religious nature of the Messianic function. Because it existed for the very purpose of realizing righteousness, it had to adopt the method of summoning to repentance, and, where repentance was refused, not to shun the consequence of this, but to proceed unswervingly to the treatment of Israel as rejected of God. In discussing this it is strikingly brought out how thoroughly Messianic our Lord's preaching is not merely in individual traits such as that the last messenger in the vineyard-parable is the Son or that the mission of Jesus appears in the supper-parable as a banquet for the Son, which might be explained from subsequent Messianizing remodeling of the tradition, but in

its whole trend and tenor, since it everywhere implies that now the last, decisive crisis has arrived for Israel, that the nation by its attitude towards Jesus must either make or break itself, that he is set for the rising or falling of those to whom the message comes. Even if all else were discounted, Jesus' ethical preaching, although so often contrasted with his Messianic message as if it were something independent of the latter, or even heterogeneous would alone suffice to establish the highest conceivable official consciousness on his part. If no more than a reformer, he would still be an authoritative, royal, Messianic reformer. The conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount is not out of keeping with its beginning or central portion. All this is eminently true and of the greatest importance for a correct understanding of our Lord's work. The main question, however, is how far the phenomena which Wrede has grouped together under the rubric of "the Messianic secret" are explainable from this primary principle. So far as Jesus' holding back and keeping silence towards the people are concerned, undoubtedly much can be set down to this cause. Johannes Weiss has already pointed out that the secretive employment of the parabolic method of teaching must be explained not from Mark's desire to introduce into the Gospel a phantom-like pre-resurrection Messiahship, which was to appear real and unreal at the same time, but from his apologetic desire to account for Israel's unbelief by the theory of hardening, Mark following in this respect in the footsteps of Paul, Rom. 9-11. It is only necessary to go one step farther back to arrive at Schlatter's explanation. The necessity to withdraw the truth in general, and the truth of the Messiahship in particular, was not first an apologetic necessity in the mind of Mark or Paul, but from the outset an historical necessity is the actual life of Jesus, because his presentation of himself as the Messiah of repentance had led to the forfeiture by Israel of the Messianic inheritance. Thus "the Messianic secrecy" is seen to be the first result of the ethical Messiahship. And what applies to the parables would apply to other forms of Jesus' self-withholding or self-withdrawal such as the prohibition to make known his healing activity. The only fault that can be found with this is that it does not explain the other difficulty on which Wrede has placed equal emphasis, viz., that the disciples from whom the Messiahship was not kept secret appear, especially in Mark, utterly incapable not merely of understanding but of apprehending it. Here the solution will have to be sought in another quarter than that explored by Schlatter. It must also be remembered that the judicial withdrawal of Jesus cannot be introduced as a principle of interpretation until a somewhat advanced stage of the public ministry, since the unrepentant attitude of the people needed some time to develop and show itself. In so far as similar phenomena appear from the beginning as to some extent they do, it will be necessary to assume that at different times the same attitude may have been prompted by different motives. No doubt to the mind of Wrede, who insisted upon lumping all instances showing a general resemblance together and upon postulating for all one uniform explanation, this appeared tantamount to a confession of weakness or failure. It may well be questioned, however, whether on the principle that we deal here with the actual life of Jesus, and not with the mind of the Evangelist, such an exegetical monism is a safe principle to follow. Reality is not always uniform in its determining causes, even where the phenomena appear strikingly alike.

The second cause, with which the author deals more briefly, is found in Jesus' reliance on the word as an instrument for asserting his Messiahship. The hidden, spiritual character of the kingdom had for its correlate the hidden, unrecognized character of the Messiah. But here also the contradiction was only an apparent one. Not in spite of his activity through the word, rather in virtue of it Jesus carried through his true Messianic function. For to Jesus the Messiahship was not purely prospective, so that the word might have served the bare purpose of predicting it or preparing for it. The word is a

Messianic instrument in the fullest sense. Hence the doubt whether such an attitude of dependence on the word can be reconciled with the claim to Messianic power. The removal of the difficulty depends again on a proper appreciation of the God-centered, religious form which the conception of Messiahship assumed in the mind of Jesus. Because the Messiahship is for the purpose of revealing God and establishing communion with God in the spiritual sphere, the word is its normal instrument. But to the people of that time, in whose minds self-centered ideas strongly colored the whole Messianic outlook, such a Messiahship naturally appeared attenuated, elusive, unreal. And that something not unlike this process repeats itself in the modern mind is clear from the suspicion into which since long the idea of the present, spiritual kingdom has fallen. It is true many of those who deny the latter, throw themselves with all the more eagerness on the eschatological kingdom as embodying the true conception of Jesus, and with reference to this at least uphold the reality of a vigorous Messianic consciousness in a prospective sense. But where less enthusiasm prevails for the eschatological, it is just as possible to construe the matter in this way that Jesus, while looking forward to a future kingdom, did not put his own person in a Messianic relation to the same. Or the Messiahship comes to be regarded as a mere accidental form in which Jesus' sense of his own religious uniqueness expressed itself. Thus the temptation reappears to substitute the preacher of religion for the Messiah. But here as in the other case the mistake is that the absolute, authoritative, royal tenor of Jesus' religious preaching is not appreciated. The trouble is not merely that the emphasis on something else rules out the Messiahship, but that with the Messiahship ruled out, this other thing becomes distorted to the view and ill-proportioned.

The third cause which Dr. Schlatter names as contributory to the ancient and modern doubt on the Messianic question is the passivity of Jesus with regard to the honor and glory of his office. Jesus did not make any effort on his own part to appropriate what was his right. He waited for the Father and for others to give him the name above every name. It is pointed out that this also was the result of the profoundly religious spirit in which he apprehended the Messiahship as something given from God and existing for the sake of God. Hence he did not force it even upon the disciples. But, while remaining silent about the Messianic title, he felt no hesitation about freely and openly claiming the Sonship which underlay the former. In the case of the Sonship the God-centered, thoroughly religious nature of the idea was so obvious that the possibility of misinterpretation in an egotistic sense was of itself excluded. Many good and striking things are said by the writer in this connection. If we were to make any stricture it would be that the self-effacement of Jesus is too exclusively placed to the account of his general filial attitude towards God and not sufficiently placed in a soteriological light as an aspect of his humiliation, after the manner of Paul in Phil. 2. Nor are we quite satisfied with the view Dr. Schlatter would seem to take of the Sonship itself. This is too much restricted to the religious sphere, the solid trinitarian underground is lacking. Hence the assertion that the Sonship cannot even be thought apart from the Messiahship, and the polemic against the Christ who could do without an office as necessarily a gnostic Christ. But if we are thoroughly in earnest with our ascription of deity to the Savior, we cannot deny him the attribute of self-sufficiency (in this case independence of the need of office) which is characteristic of God. These, however, are matters not essential to the argument. The main point is that the self-effacement, the passivity of Jesus is set forth as an important factor in Jesus' conduct which explains his abstention from positive assertion of his Messianic dignity even in the midst of the fullness of his Messianic work, and so is adapted to resolve the doubts which the coexistence of the two apparently irreconcilable attitudes has produced in the mind of observers.

In a brief concluding chapter the author deals with the light that is thrown back from the Messianic conception of the early Church upon that of Jesus. The pre-Christian Jewish Messianic conception was far from completely ethicized and spiritualized. How then can the presence of such a thoroughly ethical and spiritual Messianic belief in primitive Christianity be explained otherwise than on the supposition that it was inherited from Jesus? The same applies to the exchange of places that appears to have happened as between "the people" and "the king" in point of importance. Previously the implication had been that he who belonged to the people would share in the Messiah and his reign. Now the watchword becomes that appurtenance to the Messiah determines one's place among the people and in the kingdom of God, and in result of this the eschatology becomes simpler, and more spiritualized because centered in the Christ. For this also a historical cause can be found in the work of Jesus only. The unique character of primitive Christian ethics, which reckons not with relative conceptions, but with such absolute conceptions as forgiveness, justification, regeneration, sanctification, finds its explanation in nothing else but the absolute character of Jesus' Messianic work as an accomplished fact not only to the minds of those who preached such things, but also to their historical experience. Finally, the unanimity with which in early Christian teaching the Messiahship of Jesus is based on his Sonship, whereas in the abstract other derivations were possible, bears conclusive testimony to the reality of the role played by Sonship and Messiahship and their intimate union in the life and teaching of Jesus.