

“The Messiahship Formal or Essential to the Mind of Jesus?”
The Biblical Review 5:196-208. [1920]

The various unfriendly attitudes towards the Messianic consciousness as a rule assume the form of historico-critical elimination of the facts. There exists, however, also another way of invalidating the objectionable elements. It differs from the former method in that it recognizes the reality of the Messianic idea in the life and thought of Jesus. But, since the same shrinking from the unwelcome implications and consequences of the fact is felt, the attempt is made to reduce the influence of the fact (the existence of which cannot be denied) to the smallest possible proportions. This attempt assumes the form of representing the Messianic concept as a more or less accidental vehicle of thought by which Jesus tried to convey His deepest religious conviction concerning His person and calling. As such it must be carefully distinguished from the essence or substance of this conviction. The latter not only allows of other forms of expression, but even requires them, if it is to be made intelligible to the modern mind and effective in present-day religion. To Jesus, to be sure, the Messianic way of thinking was an inevitable mode of thought, because He shared with His age the formal concepts of religion. At the same time He was very far in advance of that age in His perception and experience of the ultimate realities of religion for conveying which to others He had to put up with this inadequate traditional form. And therefore, in order to do Him justice, we must separate the substance from the form and cast it into some other modern mould.

In many cases, those who hold this view do not take the pains to point out in the actual phenomena of Jesus' consciousness indications that would suggest such a distinction between substance and form. They absolve themselves from attempting this, because in their opinion it was not a distinction consciously drawn by Jesus Himself. He was naively unaware of it, that there lodged in His soul side by side these two things, the eternal essence of His religious and vocational experience, and the Messianic form in which this strove to express itself. The essence to such an extent outdistanced the form that, if Jesus had thought Himself through, He would have found it necessary to cast off the form and to substitute for it some other permanently valid category of self-interpretation. Only He did not thus introspectively analyze His own mind and never discovered that its form of expression fell far short of its essence.

In other cases, however, the unsatisfactoriness of leaving the matter in this shape and basing the distinction entirely on a judgment brought to bear upon Jesus from the outside, without seeking contact with His own reflection upon Himself, is realized. An endeavor is made to obtain historical and psychological support for the view advocated. In some way or other it is sought to introduce the distinction between religious substance and Messianic form into Jesus' own mind as an element of self-knowledge. He Himself came to feel more or less clearly that the Messiahship did not and could not cover all that He meant to be and accomplish. The phenomena which are supposed to indicate this state of mind are the following:

First of all, the minor emphasis which the Messiahship in comparison with other ideas receives in His teaching. Jesus, it is said, never dwells upon it as a matter of paramount interest, as He does upon such other things as the Kingdom, the Fatherhood of God, and the ethical value of man. Of these He spoke much and insistently, of the Messiahship little and evasively.

But, while this is still an argument from silence, others go farther and endeavor, in the second place,

to point out a positive expression on the part of Jesus of the sense of inadequacy with which the Messianic form of self-interpretation oppressed Him. He felt the Messiahship as a burden under which he labored and suffered, to which He never quite reconciled Himself, which never became a source of true religious joy to Him.

Thirdly, however, the reason most frequently assigned for the purely formal character of the Messianic consciousness is this, that it is believed to have sprung from a deeper and more fundamental consciousness, that of sonship. Jesus came to regard Himself the Messiah, because He knew Himself the Son of God. It is assumed that what was primary in development must also have been in His estimate primary in point of importance, what was secondary in development also secondary in point of importance. If Jesus only learned to believe in His Messiahship on the basis of His sonship, then all that it is necessary to insist upon for religious purposes is the sonship; the other may be discarded as a mere form in which, under the historical limitations of Jesus' mental life, the sense of sonship came to express itself.

In dealing with this view, the two ways of applying the distinction made—by bringing it to bear objectively upon the content of Jesus' mind and by importing it subjectively into His thought—require different treatment. So far as the former method is pursued, the obvious answer to make is that it does not represent Jesus' own judgment as to what is essential and what formal, but the judgment of those who apply it. There is no guarantee whatever, that our Lord, had He been led to discriminate between essence and form, would have drawn the line in this way and not rather have counted the Messiahship within the essence. The method is one of purely dogmatic appreciation, not of historical finding. It tells us what from a certain standpoint Jesus ought to have considered fundamental and what He might have treated as negligible, but it does not tell us what Jesus actually did assign or would have assigned to these categories, had the question been put to Him.

How utterly subjective the procedure is may be seen from this, that with the various writers applying it, in each case precisely that is declared to be the substance which constitutes the center of the writer's own theological belief, and the remainder a perishable form. The "liberal" theologians say the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man is the substance, the Messiahship is the form. Harnack says the substance consists in three things: The Kingdom of God and its coming, the fatherhood of God and the infinite value of the human soul, the better righteousness and the commandment of love; the Messiahship is the form. Another noted professor says the substance lies in this: Jesus, the incarnation of God, the revealer of a forgiving God, the type and teacher of the perfect human life, the source of supernatural life; the Messiahship is the form. It is perfectly clear that the liberal theologians define the substance as they do, because they are humanitarians; Harnack defines it as he does, because he is a Ritschlian; the other professor defines it as he does, because he belongs to an evangelical church. Each of these writers is, of course, fully entitled to his own dogmatic preferential estimate, but we should not be asked on the basis of this to believe that Jesus was equally ready to make light of His Messiahship as a mere matter of form.

The case becomes quite different where in Jesus' own mind traces of a depreciating estimate of the Messiahship are sought. Here the dispute is one as to facts pure and simple. Is it true that our Lord places less emphasis upon the Messiahship than upon other things? Is it true that He speaks of the Messiahship as a drawback and a burden? Is it true that His conviction of being the Messiah was an after-development out of the ethico-religious sense of divine sonship?

As to the first, it seems plain to us that the view in question does not sufficiently distinguish between making much of a matter and speaking much of the same. It is quite true that for a considerable period of His ministry Jesus spoke much more, and much more openly, of the Kingdom and the fatherhood of God than of the Messiahship. But it does not follow from this that His comparative silence with reference to the latter in any way evinces a disregard or disrespect of it in His estimate. On the contrary, while preserving silence in His verbal teaching on the subject, we find Him at the same time acting most outspokenly and unmistakably out of the fullness of His Messianic consciousness. Had the silence or lack of emphasis been due to low valuation, then the action ought to have been in accord with this. It is obvious that the relative silence is in this case no reliable gauge for the value Jesus inwardly attached to the conception. It must be due to other causes with which we need not here further concern ourselves.

When during the later period of His ministry Jesus breaks the silence and avows His Messiahship, this is not done after any half-hearted fashion, but with all the conviction and energy of an unfaltering mind and an unbroken will. Such an attitude is utterly inconceivable on the assumption of a purely formal or perfunctory acceptance of this idea. In the last analysis the mistake of the advocates of the theory under review consists in this, that they conceive of Jesus as dealing with the Messianic idea as a purely theoretical quantity, as an element in a system of thought, and therefore readily persuade themselves that He might have held it in all sincerity and yet have attributed to it no more than formal significance. But such a theoretical thing the Messiahship never was nor could be to anyone claiming its possession for himself. Least of all could it be this for Jesus, who placed His whole life in the most absolute sense in the service of God, and to whom, therefore, the category under which He subsumed this service acquired the character of unqualified obligatoriness, so as to exclude every thought of the mere formal or non-essential. To Jesus the Messiahship was a matter of the will, a matter of obedience to God, and to put into it anything less than the whole heart and mind and soul and strength, would have been in His view not merely to falsify the idea but to prostitute the office. For this reason the assertion that Jesus felt the Messiahship as a burden, not as a joy, is as unlike the actual life of Jesus as anything could possibly be. If it were true, it would disclose a most serious schism within the religious life of our Lord. It would mean that He had to concentrate His energies of service upon something into which He could not carry the enthusiasm of His heart. But there is nothing in the Gospel record that can warrant such an assumption. Not only are all indications of indifference and reluctance with regard to the Messianic function lacking, but we find proof of the very opposite. The one great occasion on which the Gospels represent our Lord as rejoicing in the Spirit and pouring forth His soul in jubilant gratitude to God, is an occasion where He reflects on His Messianic calling and views Himself as the personal center of the entire process of Messianic revelation: "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them unto babes; yea Father, for so it was well-pleasing in thy sight; no one knows the Son but the Father, neither does anyone know the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son willeth to reveal him" (Matt. 11:25-27). Nor must we forget that Jesus has derived from His Messianic calling the necessity to undergo death. This is the crowning proof that He did not treat the matter as an idea that could be entertained or discarded as the circumstances required. It was to Him something for which nothing else could be substituted, something by which He felt absolutely bound in His conscience, which He could not and would not surrender even to escape the loss of life. The Messiahship was a vital concern between God and Himself; He clung to it with the utmost religious energy, carried it through without swerving or wavering to its bitter end.

Is it seemly, we may well ask in the face of this, to say that the Messiahship was a mere form, which we can set aside, without subtracting anything from the vital essence of His life and work on our behalf?

There still remains in the third place the argument that the Messiahship must be secondary and non-essential because it was developed in our Lord's mind out of a sense of sonship. This argument rests on a correct observation. Jesus Himself so represents it that His Messiahship is based on His sonship. In the passage just quoted He explains the Messianic fact of the commitment of all revelation to Himself from the more ultimate fact, that no one knows the Father but the Son and no one the Son but the Father. Messiahship exists because of Sonship. In the parable of the wicked husbandmen we trace the same relation. The final mission is the Messianic mission, and Jesus is entrusted with it because He is the Son, the highest and last whom the Father has to send. So far, then, the construction offered is in accord with the well-attested facts of Jesus' own consciousness. He knew that His Messianic character did not and could not express to Him the ultimate essence of His personal life. There lay something back of it without which the Messiahship could never have existed, but which could exist without the Messiahship. When, however, we enquire beyond this general basis of fact into the particular nature of the relationship affirmed, the construction appears to be at fault in two respects.

In the first place it should be observed that in Jesus' statements above quoted the connection between Messiahship and sonship is a purely objective one. He means to affirm that in the sphere of reality, in the actual order of events, the Messiahship came to Him as a divine appointment, because He was antecedently the Son of God. But He does not intimate in any way that in the subjective sphere, in the unfolding of His consciousness, the one grew out of the other. What the statements of Jesus refer to, then, is a matter-of-fact interdependence, not a psychical evolution.

Equally important is the second stricture that we must make on the theory in question. It concerns the kind of sonship which Jesus objectively puts back of His Messiahship. According to the theory, this is nothing else than ethico-religious sonship, differing only in degree from the filial relationship to God that any disciple may attain in the Kingdom. It consists in the perfect enjoyment and the perfect reciprocation of the love of God on the one hand and in the perfect accord of obedience with the purpose and will of God on the other hand. It is believed that Jesus at first lived in this ideal ethico-religious atmosphere wholly without Messianic thought or aspiration and that only in course of time the perception dawned upon Him that, since He was the only one who possessed this, and since it was the destiny of all to attain to it, He must be called of God to mediate it to the others, which conviction of a divine calling to make men participate in His own ethico-religious attainment was equivalent to the consciousness of Messiahship.

It does not require much historic sense to perceive that such a construction fails to do justice alike to Jesus' idea of sonship and to His idea of Messiahship. Both ideas as here conceived are pure abstractions which in this form never existed. A conception of Messiahship, in which the office would be equivalent to the making of men perfect in a religious and moral sense, Jesus could never have entertained for a moment as a full-orbed expression of what the Messiahship stood for. Not, of course, as if the task of creating ethico-religious values did not enter into the Messianic function as Jesus saw it. That is not the point; the question at issue is whether He could identify the Messiahship as such with that task and therefore infer from the incumbency of that task upon Himself that He

must be the Messiah. This we must deny. The inference would become possible and valid only, if, in addition to a consciousness of perfect oneness with God, Jesus had a consciousness of absolute supernatural knowledge and power such as no degree of religious or moral perfection can have possibly produced in Him or led Him to believe He possessed. Jesus expected to be the heir and representative of God in the most comprehensive sense, to sit at God's right hand, to quicken the dead, to judge the world, to regenerate the universe.

In view of all this, who does not feel that the sonship, adequate to furnishing the basis for such a Messiahship, must of necessity have been something far transcending the limits set for it in the theory we are considering? As a matter of fact the sonship to which our Lord traces back His Messianic commission is not something that we have in common with Him, not a purely ethico-religious relation to God, not something pertaining to His temporal human existence—but something unique, reaching back into His preexistent, premundane life; in a word it is nothing less than His Deity, or, strictly speaking, the relation which in His divine nature He sustains to the Father. It is that in virtue of which He can affirm that He alone knows God and knows God after the same fashion as God knows Him, with a knowledge that is the natural function of His sonship and therefore coeval with His sonship, whence also it is not said that the Son has learned to know the Father, but that He knows the Father. Wherever the affirmation of His sonship is made by Jesus Himself, or where it is proclaimed from Heaven by the voice of God, at the baptism and the transfiguration, or where it forms the object of Petrine confession at Caesarea-Philippi—in all those cases, while the Messiahship is connoted and included, the sweep of the title goes far beyond this and reaches out into the depths of the divine life of the Saviour.

Now, if the sonship of Jesus be taken in this solid intradivine sense, and not in the attenuated moralizing sense to which it has been reduced by the "liberal" theology, the problem of the comparative importance or secondariness of it and the Messiahship assumes quite a different complexion. To be sure, it remains true, on this as much as on the other construction, that the Messiahship is the secondary thing not merely in the order of being but also in the order of importance. When seen in the perspective sketched above, it will have to be classed with the things that are relative, not with the order of absolutes. This it shares with all other historic things as compared with the inner life of God. Of the world itself in its totality and all that is in the world, of man, of redemption, no such absolute value and significance can be affirmed as it is of the essence of religion to affirm of God. All these things could not be; of God alone can it be said that He and the content of His life are essential in the absolute sense, To this inner divine life the sonship of our Lord belongs, if we give it the full meaning that He Himself ascribes to it. It is an absolute fact as the Godhead itself is an absolute reality.

On the other hand the Messiahship is an element in the world-fabric; though belonging to the highest plane of the world-order, yet it does not pass beyond but remains included in it and therefore must needs partake of the relativity that belongs to the world as such. It is the core and goal of the world-movement, and within this movement all things exist for its sake and converge towards it. Nevertheless, when we have said this we cannot go on and say that it is essential as God is essential. In a very real sense, therefore, we are bound to admit not only but to maintain that the Messiahship and the Messianic consciousness of Jesus are secondary. But when we say this, we have affirmed its secondary character in quite a different way from that in which the view we are criticizing would affirm it. For, not as compared with the Godhead and the eternal

sonship, but as a factor in the world-process, within the sphere of religion itself, within the very order of salvation, within the historical life of Jesus, we are asked to believe that the Messiahship is a mere accidental form of conception, and the ethico-religious sense of sonship, an element also belonging to the finite created consciousness of Jesus, the sole important essential thing. On our view of the matter no such conclusion can be legitimately drawn. Though undoubtedly the world and redemption might not have been, yet the world existing and within the terms of redemption, the Messiahship is a primary and essential factor. In other words, there are things in our relative secondary world and in our contingent salvation which are none the less essential to and primary within this order of things and such a thing is the Messiahship of Jesus. While our Lord, looking back from the standpoint of His earthly life upon His premundane eternal abode with the Father, could regard all this temporal Messianic task and experience as a fleeting episode, yet relating Himself to the history of the work and the plan of redemption, He could not but regard this same Messiahship as a cardinal fact, transcending all other world-facts in its intrinsic importance.

The gist of the matter may be briefly summed up in the following three propositions: (1) As compared with the divine eternal sonship, the Messiahship is a secondary, relative thing. (2) As considered within the order of redemption, it is a primary essential thing. (3) As compared with Jesus' own ethico-religious sonship, the Messiahship, so far from being inferior in importance, occupies a higher rank. Our Lord's whole human nature and all that entered into it of religious and ethical experience was not a thing that existed for its own sake; it existed and operated for the sake of His official calling. It was a means to the end of the Messiahship, not the Messiahship a mere form for its expression. So long as Christians glory in the humanity of Jesus, not on account of what it is in itself, but on account of what it means for their salvation, they will feel bound to place the Messiahship above the ethico-religious sonship in the scale of values.