

What did Jesus Think of Himself?

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THE re-publication of Albert Schweitzer's *Mystery of the Kingdom of God*¹ calls attention to a question of central importance which is far from settled: What did Jesus think of himself? Did he actually believe that he was the divinely appointed Messiah of the Jews, as the Gospels say he did? Or was this idea merely attributed to him by his devoted followers? The task which this paper will undertake is to re-examine Schweitzer's interpretation, to consider its present status and to offer certain new evidence which tends to support his thesis that Jesus did think of himself as the Messiah and that only as we recognize that fact will we ever be able to understand him.

The Mystery of the Kingdom of God was published first in 1901 as the second half of a book entitled "Das Abendmahl".² At the time, Dr. Lowrie tells us, it attracted little attention. It was only in 1906 with the publication of Schweitzer's brilliant *Geschichte der Leben Jesu Forschung*³ that attention was compellingly drawn to the view which it sets forth.

According to Schweitzer, Jesus' messianic claim dates from the time of his baptism and his temptation in the wilderness, but he kept it secret even from his closest friends. He did talk of the "Son of Man" who was to usher in the Kingdom of God, but he spoke of him always in the third person and in the future and he gave no hint that this Son of Man was to be identified with himself. What he did stress was that he and his disciples were charged with a great responsibility in connection with his coming. He also taught that the coming of the kingdom was to be attended with great suffering and sacrifice. The "eschatological woes," according to Schweitzer, were to precede the coming of the Kingdom. They were

acts of violence by which strong men would take it by storm.

A climax came at the time Jesus sent out the twelve. He was convinced that by the time they returned the Kingdom of God would have come. The twelve returned, jubilant over their accomplishments. They had been well-received and the demons had been subject unto them. But the kingdom had not come and Jesus had to adjust himself to that fact. Hence his withdrawal into the wilderness away from the thronging crowds. The solution then came with the transfiguration. There the baptism experience was repeated in the presence of three of the disciples. Jesus charged these three to keep it secret, but Peter thoughtlessly disclosed it to the other disciples.

The transfiguration experience brought with it a new conception of his role. Before that he had expected eschatological woes in which all would share. Now he is convinced that he may suffer for others and thus bring in the kingdom himself. He therefore decides upon the journey to Jerusalem, knowing that it will mean his death, but believing that he will be raised from the dead. These convictions he communicates to his disciples. According to this interpretation Judas betrays his master, not by telling where he may be found, but by informing the Pharisees of the messianic secret.

Following the publication of the *Geschichte* and its translation into English in 1910 the eschatological problem was widely and heatedly discussed. Over certain aspects of this discussion Schweitzer himself was deeply concerned. He was especially troubled by certain pathographic studies which made their appearance. A French psychiatrist thus published a four volume treatise on *The Insanity of Jesus* and other studies of this sort appeared in Germany, in Denmark and in the United States.⁴ He therefore undertook to refute them in his medical thesis, a monograph entitled *Die Psychiatrische Beurteilung Jesu*.⁵ In this he proceeds

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from the assumption that the one possible charge against the mental health of Jesus is that he was a paranoic and that paranoia is a disease process which originates in a certain way and runs a predestined course. This, Schweitzer says, was not true in the case of Jesus. He was able to win and retain disciples. He was adaptable and responsive to social situations and considerate of the feelings of others. He was thus without that mistaken and unreasoning aggressiveness and imperviousness to new ideas which characterizes the paranoic. The only reason for questioning the sanity of Jesus would be the messianic claim. That Jesus did make such a claim seems to him certain. Even after we make all possible allowance for the distortion of his actual utterances by his followers, he sees no possible escape from the conclusion that Jesus did think of himself as the Messiah. But, he holds, this idea, like that of the Kingdom of God that was to come, did not originate with Jesus himself. It originated in an atmosphere which was saturated with eschatology. Jesus was one of those who thought in terms of doctrine. He looked forward to a messianic parousia and believed in it so sincerely that he sought to translate it into reality, even at the cost of sacrificing his own life. In him we see theological beliefs breaking in upon the natural course of history and throwing it into confusion by the volcanic force of an incalculable personality.

In the fifty years which have elapsed since Schweitzer focused attention upon this problem, little new light has been thrown upon it. Schweitzer's *Psychiatric Study* is good as far as it goes, but his psychiatry was of the old Kraepelinian type. He was thus without the dynamic concepts which might have enabled him to meet the psychiatric challenge which his thesis evoked. And New Testament scholars have neither undertaken nor encouraged exploration in this field.

The chief development during this period has been the increasing emphasis upon the social factors. According to one widely-held view the problem of determining what Jesus himself believed and taught is so complex as to

be insoluble, but the tradition itself is a solid historical fact. It is then a matter of secondary importance whether Jesus actually uttered the sayings attributed to him, or whether they were produced by the social forces of the Christian movement and ascribed to him as the head of the cult. In the matter of the messianic claim, Dean Case thus held that such an idea had no place in the personal religion of Jesus.⁶ He did indeed look forward to the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, an idea which he had taken over from the beliefs of his time and group, and his energies had been concentrated upon the task of preparing his fellow Jews for membership in that Kingdom. But even though the expectation of a Messiah may have been widely prevalent, it is too long a jump from the general acceptance of such a doctrine to the belief that one is oneself the official apocalyptic Messiah. He would therefore rule this idea out of Jesus' own self-consciousness as an idea which could never have arisen in the mind of any normal man. According to Lake and Jackson⁷ the Gospel of Mark and the other synoptics as well are far more a primary authority for the thought of the Apostolic Age than for the life of Jesus. They were written to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. But Jesus himself made no such claim. The authority which he actually claimed was that of the spirit of God. Moreover, Jesus did not teach anything about God that was new to Jewish ears. The Kingdom of God, which was central in his message, meant merely the sovereignty of God regarded as a present reality or an age to come in which the sovereignty of God would be unhampered by evil.

A large group of New Testament scholars have focused attention upon the view that the gospels were essentially missionary documents and that all their contents are group productions colored by the motive of propagating the gospel. To understand them aright we must therefore see each one of the various sayings, biographical anecdotes, miracle stories and apocalyptic utterances in the light of the life situation which brought it forth. The general result of this viewpoint has been an increase

in scepticism regarding our knowledge of Jesus as an historical person and increased emphasis upon what he meant to the early Christians.

It is important to recognize that scientifically-minded New Testament scholars during the past fifty years have agreed in accepting the principle of historical determinism. They have therefore been intent upon explaining the new developments in early Christianity in terms of some stream of tradition. Even Schweitzer felt it necessary to assume Jesus must have taken over his messianic consciousness from beliefs current in his time. And proponents of the view that Jesus did think of himself as the Messiah, such as Rudolf Otto, E. F. Scott and C. C. McCown, accept that view as historical because it corresponds to previously existing concepts, particularly apocalyptic writings such as the Book of Enoch and the idea of the Suffering Servant of Jehovah as portrayed by Second Isaiah. New research on this problem has thus been more or less limited to the study of new segments of apocalyptic literature and of eschatological ideas in other religions.⁸ Meanwhile the controversy regarding the messianic claim, evoked by Schweitzer, has largely subsided and most present-day New Testament scholars probably accept the view which ascribes the messianic claim to the followers of Jesus rather than to Jesus himself.

It is therefore to be noted that there is one important field which remains still unexplored. I refer to the field of religious experience, particularly those searching experiences in which the individual feels himself face to face with the ultimate realities of life, experiences of the type which bring forth new and creative ideas. For the past thirty years I have been engaged in the specialized study of the interrelationship of religious experience and acute mental disorder, and I am convinced that this study has yielded results which throw new light upon the problem and provide new evidence in support of Schweitzer's thesis.

These findings have been set forth in one of the chapters of my *Exploration of the Inner World*⁹, a book which is now out of print; but

they have never appeared in any of the professional religious journals and, so far as I am aware, they have been practically ignored by New Testament scholars. Perhaps I should let the matter rest in peace, but the issues involved seem too important, not merely for the understanding of Jesus, but also for the understanding of the profounder struggles of the human soul not to try to rescue them from oblivion.

The key to the problem, according to my findings, is to be found in the fact that certain forms of mental disorder are essentially problem-solving experiences. They are attempts at re-organization which tend either to make or break. As such they are related to the more dramatic types of religious experience as represented in such men as George Fox and John Bunyan and Saul of Tarsus and the Hebrew prophets.

Such experiences are of course to be sharply contrasted with those in which organic disease enters as a factor and with those in which some adaptation to defeat and failure has been made and accepted. Those who in the face of difficulties withdraw into a land of phantasy and wishful thinking show little interest in religion and they tend to drift in the direction of disintegration and fragmentation. Those who resort to concealment in its various forms are likely to transfer blame upon other persons or upon an organic scapegoat instead of grappling with the realities of religion. They then cease to grow and become stabilized upon an unsatisfactory basis.

In those cases in which there is a desperate attempt at reorganization, there is on the other hand marked religious concern and the chances of recovery are relatively good. The onset in such cases is usually abrupt. The patient becomes absorbed in thought, engrossed in some narrow circle of ideas, usually pertaining to his own role in life, to such a degree that he can think of nothing else. Then come ideas which he has never heard or read or dreamed of before, ideas with which he seems to have nothing to do. He feels himself face to face with the ultimate realities of life, and religion

and philosophy come alive for him. They become for him matters of life and death. God talks to him either to comfort or to rebuke. His eyes are opened to the fact that he is more important than he had ever dreamed. He is face to face with danger and death. Perhaps the entire world is involved, its fate dependent in some way upon him. But he has failed and in order to save the situation he is called upon to give up his life in some heroic act or gesture of self-sacrifice. Following this sacrificial attempt there may come to him the ideas of being born anew or of having lived before in previous incarnations and of being one with Christ or God. These ideas are found in case after case in the acute disturbances and they constitute a recognized constellation. Where we find one, we are likely to find the others also. In such cases the outcome will depend upon the degree of freedom from the malignant reactions of self-deception and easy pleasure-taking and the relative strength of the constructive and destructive forces in the life-situation.¹⁰

The conclusion follows that these acute disturbances are indeed attempts at problem-solving and that they have creative value. They begin under the same conditions that characterize insightful thinking,¹¹ intense interest and concentrated attention. They are characteristically fertile in ideas, but emotion is so intense that perspective is lost and the ordinary norms of judgment and reason are swept away and superseded by a social reference conceived of as superior and by some new scale of values which accompanies it.

Here then are facts which need to be taken into account in any consideration of the messianic consciousness of Jesus. Not only do the Gospel sources represent Jesus as proclaiming an imminent transformation of the world and claiming to be the long-expected Messiah, but we find also ideas of mission, of self-sacrifice, of death and of re-birth. He also believed that he was in direct communication with God. He had thus the entire constellation of ideas which characterize the acute disturbances which we see today in mental hospital patients. And the evidence that he held these ideas is so deeply embedded in the gospel sources that we cannot

rule them out. Can it be questioned that the Kingdom of God, which was so clearly central in his teaching, was something in the nature of a new world order which was to follow an approaching world catastrophe? Can we doubt that he expected to have a very important role in that Kingdom of God? Did he not talk of giving up one's life in order to find it again and apply that principle to himself? And did he not believe that he was to die and that his death would be followed by a resurrection or re-birth? And does not the presence of this entire constellation of ideas, which is pathognomonic of the acute disturbances establish a presumption which must affect our critical procedures in dealing with the gospel sources? What is more, our findings indicate that these ideas arise spontaneously in certain types of experience, regardless of race and regardless of culture. They do not need to be explained in terms of a stream of tradition, even though the prevailing beliefs of the cultural milieu may furnish the immediate vocabulary and even though these ideas are much more likely to be accepted if they meet with current beliefs which are hospitable to them.

What now does such an interpretation do to our estimate of Jesus? We have concluded that he not only had ideas of cosmic catastrophe and cosmic identification, with which alone Schweitzer and other New Testament scholars have been concerned, but also the entire constellation of ideas which characterize the acute psychoses. We have also concluded that the beliefs current in his time do not sufficiently account for his teaching and action. Does not this leave him just a deluded fanatic and psychopath, as Schweitzer's critics maintained that it did?

Three considerations support the view that this interpretation of Schweitzer's leaves his authority as a religious teacher unimpaired, if not enhanced.

In the first place such ideas originate in acute problem-solving experiences which tend either to make or to break and have therefore profound religious significance. In the case of Jesus such an experience is to be seen in his baptism and temptation in the wilderness. According to

the Gospel accounts this experience was characterized by such intense pre-occupation that for a period of forty days he did not eat. But there is no evidence of confusion. He seems rather to have shown remarkable fortitude. In any case he emerged triumphant. His personality was unified around a great purpose in life. There was poise and beauty and serenity of character. There was a fine adaptation to the world of things as they are. There was calm and courageous acceptance of a heavy burden of responsibility. There was a mind attuned to that which is timeless and insights which have stood the test of the centuries. His experience, whatever it may have been, must be judged on the basis of the results achieved.

In the second place, we see in Jesus a striking difference as regards the nature of the problem which was on his mind as compared with others who have passed through experiences of the same general type. There was in his case no evidence of any deep sense of personal failure or of conflict with gross instinctual drives and of repressed hostility and sensuality. His concern was rather with the fate of his people.¹² He is thus linked with the great Hebrew prophets. In those prophets we see men who were good enough and fine enough to identify themselves with their people and go down with them into the valley of the shadow. In Jesus we see the spirit of the Hebrew prophets speaking once again. Therein we may find the significance of his messianic consciousness. His beloved people were in danger. They were in the hands of oppressors. He sought a way out and found it in the way marked out by Second Isaiah, that of the Suffering Servant of Jehovah.

In the third place it seems not without the bounds of possibility that Jesus was right in thinking of himself as the Messiah. Even the hospital patient who thinks of himself as Christ or God may not be wholly mistaken. Grappling with the problem of his own place in the scheme of things, overwhelmed perhaps by the sense of personal failure and guilt, he suddenly has his eyes opened to an insight of which in his normal periods he is oblivious. He sees him-

self as of infinite importance. That is something which high religion has always taught. It is moreover something which nuclear science is telling us today, the astounding fact that even the most commonplace person is literally a galaxy of solar systems. The difficulty in most of these cases is not the fallacy of the central idea but in the disruption of the personality which results. Such an idea, if taken seriously, it is not easy to assimilate. It calls for a drastic change in the concept of the self, and the idea of the self is the nucleus of the personality. The significance of Jesus would then be found precisely in the fact that, passing through this most searching experience, he came forth unscathed and achieved the highest degree of harmony not only in his inner organization but in his social perspective. Because of the purity of his motives he was able to arrive at a true vision of the high destiny of the human soul and its relationship to the spiritual reality of which we are a part. He experienced in its fullness the truth after which the acutely disturbed patient is blindly groping, that man is made in the image of God and can never be satisfied except in oneness with that which is best in his social experience.

Our findings thus support Schweitzer's view that Jesus did think of himself as the divinely-appointed Messiah of the Jews and that only as we recognize that fact will we ever be able to understand him. They make possible an even more thorough-going eschatological interpretation. We are ready to recognize the origin of the messianic consciousness of Jesus in experience of a type uncomprehendingly dismissed as pathological. From such a conclusion we see no escape. But we have found that experiences of this type have profound religious significance, and that even though Jesus may have descended into hell, as the Apostles' Creed says he did, he emerged victorious with insights which enabled him to speak as one who had authority concerning the laws of the spiritual life.

In conclusion, let me say that the study on which this interpretation is based is still in process. I find myself ever more thoroughly convinced of the validity of these findings.

While the cases which exemplify the more desperate attempts at re-organization in clear-cut form are not too numerous, constituting, perhaps, 2 per cent of our non-organic new admissions, I have brought together enough of them to permit me to speak with some assurance. However, my study has not as yet been verified by other workers. In calling attention to the problem, I am therefore guided in large part by the hope that there may be those who will see in this interpretation a lead worth following up and that New Testament scholars may be ready to supplement the study of their fragmentary ancient sources with the study of significant living human documents. I am very sure that such study should yield new and important insights, not merely into the experience of Jesus and other prophetic persons, but also into the profounder struggles of the human soul which affect us all.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Translated by Walter Lowrie, New York, Macmillan, 1950; original printing in 1913.
- ² According to Wilder (*Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus*, Harpers' 1950), Schweitzer had been aroused by liberal interpretations of the kind best exemplified by Wrede which read all the eschatological passages out of the historical life of Jesus and took great liberties with the sources in making him over in the guise of a modern ethical teacher.
- ³ Translated under the title of "*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*", London, A. & C. Black, 1910
- ⁴ C. Binet-Sanglé: *La Folie de Jesus*. Paris, Maloine, 1908-15; de Loosten: *Jesus Christus vom Standpunkt eines Psychiaters*. Handelsdruckerei Bamberg, 1905; Emil Rassmussen, *Jesus: eine vergleichende pathologische Studie*. Leipzig, Zeitler, 1908; Hirsch, "Religion and Civilization," *Truth-seeker*. New York, 1912. For a good digest of these books see Bundy, *The Psychic Health of Jesus*, New York, Macmillan, 1922
- ⁵ Published in 1913, recently translated by Charles R. Joy under the title of *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1948
- ⁶ S. J. Case, "The Alleged Messianic Consciousness of Jesus," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, December, 1926
- ⁷ *Beginnings of Christianity* (New York, Macmillan, 1920) I. 268-289
- ⁸ A notable exception is the contribution of Rudolph Otto, who, approaching the problem from the standpoint of a student of mystical religion, has called attention to certain traits of "charismatic" religious leaders, such as Mohammed, Zoroaster and Buddha which support the view that Jesus would believe in his own divine mission and that the Kingdom of God would have for him both present and future aspects. (*The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man*, London, Lutterworth Press, 1938.)
- ⁹ Chicago, Willett, Clark & Co. 1936, Chapter IV
- ¹⁰ Boisen: *op. cit.*, reference footnote 9, chapter I.; also "Form and Content of Schizophrenic Thinking," *Psychiatry*, 1942; "Onset in Acute Schizophrenia," *Psychiatry*, 1947; "Experiential Aspects of Dementia Praecox," *Am. J. Psychiatry*, 1933. See also Sullivan, H. S. "Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry," *Psychiatry*, 1940
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- ¹² Simkovitch, Vladimir, *Toward the Understanding of Jesus*, New York, Macmillan, 1921