The Dawn of the Messianic Consciousness.

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The purpose of these papers is to call attention to a statement contained, at least by implication, alike in the narrative of our Lord's baptism and in the longer version of the Temptation narrative—the statement that these events constituted a crisis in His life, inasmuch as He then, for the first time, became clearly aware of His calling to be Messiah. Even if we cannot postulate that the gospel representations are necessarily at all points in accordance with historical fact, yet so striking an affirmation, with more than one incident related in support of it, has strong claims to respectful study. An effort will also be made to determine what the contents of the Messianic consciousness may have been when it dawned, according to these narratives, upon the mind of Jesus. We shall seek further light on this question in other parts of the Gospels. But, while this question must be of even greater interest than what we first discuss, we cannot claim for the answer we put forward to it such strong probability as attaches to our central theme—to the assertion made in the narratives before us, that Messianic consciousness, whatever its contents, first came to Jesus at His baptism.

I.

With the Baptism, then, we begin. All four Gospels record or imply the fact—a startling fact enough, at first sight; a thing that would never have been invented by the most credulous Christian tradition, or admitted by the most careless, had it not been fact indeed, too well remembered in many quarters to be slurred over. Here is one set forth as the Messiah; and here is a narrative telling us how He submitted to a religious rite administered by another teacher, a teacher who in a sense was His rival. 'Without any dispute, the less is blessed of the better'—may it not seem a case for applying that principle? Recent study of the Fourth Gospel has taught us to think more of the vitality of belief in John the Baptist as a rival to belief in Jesus the Christ. Significantly enough the Fourth Gospel does what none of the others had done, when it introduces the Baptist as bearing direct witness to the descent of the Spirit upon Christ. But not even the Fourth Gospel puts in a denial of the accepted tradition that John baptized Jesus. And we have not even yet sounded the depths of the difficulty. John administered a baptism of repentance. Jesus lives in the faith of His church as without sin. How could such a one be baptized with such a baptism? The question is hard to answer. We may all the more confidently affirm this at least, that the baptism of Jesus was a fact, due to His deliberate choice.

But next, have we not strong reason from the course of events to accept the further testimony of the Christian Scriptures? Their testimony, that whatever the motives which led Jesus to be baptized, and whatever the significance baptism had for Him beforehand, it came to signify a call to public service, and that He emerged from it, to say the least, a new man? For let us consider the facts. He comes to it out of a life of silence, an unknown Galilean peasant; according to the tradition of one Gospel—practically (? Jn 8^{57}, but this would *strengthen* the argument) the only evidence we have on the point at all—a man of about thirty; if so, a man past the first flush of youth, and past the period when resolute and original action is most to be expected. So He comes to it; but He emerges from it differently—not to resume His former modest obscurity—to begin a work that rivals and then eclipses that of the great preacher whose voice had drawn Him, with so many others, to the Jordan. There is no doubt, further, that Jesus was conscious of superiority to John—might we not say of immeasurable superiority? He sends him the message, 'Blessed is he, whosoever shall find none occasion of stumbling in Me' (Mt 11^{6}, Lk). He pronounces the great eulogium, 'Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist'; but He adds the significant sequel, 'Yet He that is but little in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he' (Mt 11^{11}, Lk). What else could this supreme consciousness which came to Jesus be but Messiahship?

We turn to the detail of the narrative, and it confirms what we have already inferred from the trend of events. There hardly seems reasonable possibility of questioning the view, specially associated, at least in recent years, with the name of

Baldensperger, that we have a record here of how Jesus became aware of His Messianic calling. Two things are recorded: a descent of the Spirit upon Jesus, and a voice from heaven hailing Him as Son and beloved. When we look closely at the words ascribed to the heavenly Speaker, we see that they are of the nature of O.T. echoes. And there is no reason why this should surprise us. If the details of the narrative were shaped by Jesus for the information of His disciples—if the unutterable processes of His own soul were defined in words and symbols for their help—what could He do but use O.T. forms? Even on this construction of the narrative, the O.T. echoes are natural. But there is another and a bolder construction, on which they appear still more natural. The mind of our Lord was soaked in the O.T. If revelation came to Him, sudden and brilliant as a flash of lightning, might it not well be that words of the O.T. should leap into His mind, in their astonishing and glorious application to *Him*? If it is permissible to illustrate the psychology of religious genius and of Divine revelation by the humbler processes of our own psychology, we must hold that nothing could be more natural.

Of course, in speaking thus, we assume that the vision and the certainty belong primarily to Jesus Himself. That is plainly affirmed in Mark; not less plainly, if in different words, in the First Gospel; nor is the language of the Third Gospel really inconsistent with this. Even Luke merely uses the terminology of antique realism, a terminology more or less shared by all our records. Where a modern Christian might say, 'He saw in vision heaven opened,' and so forth, one Gospel says, 'He saw heaven opened,' another, 'heaven opened to Him,' and another simply 'heaven opened'—probably, according to their own thinking, with no discrepancy in meaning.

It is of course true that modern forms of statement have advantages which ancient forms do not possess. As we exchange Mark's terminology for that of other Gospels, we may be in danger of gliding away from the consciousness that we are studying inner processes in the Master's own mind; without noting the change, we may admit the impression that all the crowds present saw the descending Form and heard the Voice—a construction of the event which is in the last degree improbable. Nor does it weaken one's belief in a real Divine communication addressed to the soul of Jesus, if one holds that the eyes and ears of half-competent bystanders perceived nothing.[1] The form of words here is not without importance. In Mark the voice says, 'Thou art My beloved Son'; and this time Luke goes with Mark, while Matthew this time has a different form, 'This is My beloved Son,' etc., a form which occurs more appropriately elsewhere, in the Transfiguration narrative. On general grounds Mark may claim to be regarded as the earlier form of the tradition. In the present phrase, too, the change seems easier from 'Thou art' to 'this is' than a converse change—introducing the idea of a revelation specially to Jesus.

We surely then have in this record, whatever difficulty the interpretation may create in certain respects or for certain minds, the first full and clear emergence of Messianic consciousness in the thoughts of the Master. Voices do not come from heaven to utter truths that are already fully admitted and familiar. They are the clothing of new truth. In the light of this consideration we may confidently repel any attempt to make the communication refer to something profounder, something more personal, than Messiahship—if, at least, personal and official sonship are to be contrasted and set opposite each other. It may be that we shall ultimately reach the personal through the official; but the official must in any case be our starting-point.

And does not Christian feeling, if wisely instructed, welcome this view of the Divine message? If it be hard to think that quite new light on His calling came to Jesus, would it not be harder to admit that He received quite new light on His personal qualities and inward constitution? Something of the nature of the former seems inevitable. But the latter, unless in a carefully qualified sense, seems incredible.

[1] It is another question whether the Baptist may have received a share in the revelation. Mt 11[8], we think, rather supports that view.

(*To be continued.*)