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Messianism in the Fourth Gospel

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I would appreciate it if you could have a copy of this made for me. John's gospel will be a very rich book for you now. This is a fine piece of work. Let this enter your system and you will be a power for God.

Messianism in The Fourth Gospel.

It has always been recognized, both that messianism had a large role in Jewish culture and that these messianic expectations were, for at least a group of the Jews, fulfilled in Jesus. Scholarship has tended to limit the messianic interpretation of the life and work of Jesus to the Synoptic Gospels however. These were earlier, and more primitive. Thus their Christology was of the adoptionist type, and the Messiah tended to become a more political figure. For these scholars, it took the Greek influence to rid early Christianity of its narrow messianism and universalize him into a savior and lord.

Recent archaeological discoveries and cultural studies of the Hebrews and their contemporaries, have combined to show us the fallacy of this view. The attempt to confine messianism to the Synoptic Gospels has resulted from a misunderstanding of the full nature of messianism. The Messiah could in no way be called a mere political figure in whom the Jews became particularly interested as their persecution increased during the Greek period of their history. From the beginning, messianism has been the all inclusive culture of the Hebrews. Since the first experiment with the king-ships, the whole of Hebrew thought was moulded in this pattern. The Messiah, who during the earlier stages in the development of Hebrew culture, was the king, was more than the political head of the state. He and his line were sacrosanct. Although chosen, at the time of his coronation, in as much as he was the representative of God on earth, he was pre-existent. As such he was chosen son of God, and yet from the beginning he was destined for the position. As king he was also the representative of the people. He was their corporate personality. His welfare, meant their welfare. As Messiah, he was responsible not only for good rule, political security, but also for the productivity of nature and thus economic security. The messianic function was to insure fertility and healing as well. The ritual of the whole culture was built around this conception. The Messiah was rejected by the people, he entered a struggle with the powers of darkness and was apparently slain. After the appointed time he was restored by God, the powers of chaos were imprisoned for another season, the abundant life was secured for the state for another year.

The terms and symbols of this cult are used constantly throughout

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the Old Testament. Every author moves with complete familiarity in this messianic pattern - even those who bitterly criticize its inadequacies. Messianism is the popular way of thinking for the Jew - and for his world - about almost everything. All his hopes are centred in messianism. This is the political mess of course. His messiah keeps him secure from his enemies. As well, however, the messiah is responsible for land being fertile, for his flocks being productive, for his own health as well as prosperity. Salvation in all its aspects, was due to the messiah. In messianism the Jew found the assurance of all his hopes. The very victory of cosmos over chaos was a messianic conception.

This all inclusive nature of messianism did not leave it as the conception developed at the hands of the Jewish Religious critics. The failure of political messianism at the collapse of the Kingdom and even during the Restoration, meant that the law became the messiah. The ethical teaching of the prophets had some fruit. With the messiah as law there was a tendency to lose the warmer personal touch of the old messianism. However, no matter how arid some of the exponents of legalism had become, the common people clung to the fervent hopes of the old messianism. The same is true during the period of the schoolmen when wisdom is the messiah. The fact that the old messianic pattern must be still used even when wisdom is substituted for the king, shows us how tenacious and how all inclusive was this messianism. Yet through all these depersonalizing influences, messianism as we shall see from the Gospel, still retained warm personal associations for the common people.

In the intertestamental writings we get ample proof that messianism, in spite of the legalism of some of the religious leaders, is not dead. It is an active faith still and still includes all the hopes of the people in all the aspects of life. As yet, salvation of any kind, came in messianic terms. The final judgment, the triumph of the right over evil, the victory of life over death - all in terms of the messianic pattern.

Thus it can be shown that the Fourth Gospel is the interpretation of the work and significance of Jesus in terms of this pattern. The Synoptics have no exclusive claims to messianism. It is the basis of John's Gospel. Much that has hitherto been interpreted as Hellenistic influence can now be shown to be part of this fuller messianism. John is an author steeped in this pattern. As do the people, he clothes his hopes for life and his faith in its goodness in messianic terms. The personal influence of Jesus of Nazareth has

caused the author to see in Him all that man could be and had done of him. For him this man of Nazareth fulfilled and superseded all the hopes of messianism. His life was thus interpreted in this pattern. And this is done without the aid of the traditions of the virgin birth and Davidic origin which were available to the Synoptics.

Thus we have in this Gospel, not an apologetic, not an attempt to spiritualize the significance of Jesus because of the failure of early adventist prediction, but rather a spontaneous interpretation of the man himself. He lived and influenced his fellow men. Upon the author, or the author's master, he exercised such a ^{long} influence that he was interpreted in terms of that pattern which for generations had clothed the hopes and faith of his people. John's interpretation comes with all the spontaneity of a fervent faith. It is not calculated apologetic. It has no interest in institution. Its interest is in the significance of so great a personality.

As has been said countless times, the Prologue sets the whole tone of the book. Here, although the Greek term is used, the pattern is entirely messianic. Certainly it is messianism that has come down through the wisdom literature. The essential qualities are thus however. As has been suggested, pre-existence was part of messianism. The ordering of Cosmos was part of the pattern and certainly the triumph of light over darkness. The figure of John as the King in heaven can be seen as part of the pattern. Certainly the rejection motif is familiar. Even God becoming incarnate is part of the picture. Thus in this passage which sums up the whole position of the book - the basic thought forms are messianic.

The pattern, so abundantly evident in the Prologue, is to be seen throughout the Gospel. Messianism is the very breath of the work. The most evident thing perhaps is the constant insistence on signs. John's Jesus is endlessly showing signs. So the miracles are interpreted. So his whole life is interpreted. This is the social psychology of messianism. This is the messiah known. Here John is entirely orthodox.

The next obvious thing which shows a mind steeped in the messianic pattern is the constant reference to feast days. The Author is most careful to indicate the coming of each feast. Scholarship has since shown that in this particular the author of the Fourth Gospel is more historically accurate than the Synoptics. Everything of significance in Jesus' life happens in connection with some Jewish festival. It is not a coincidence that

these festivals were originally messianic. These great occasions were the public climaxes of the messianic faith. Upon them and their right manipulation the health and wealth and security of the people depended. In this same vein we see John taking interest in the wedding motif. This was also part of the Pattern - the ritual marriage of the Messiah with the earth mother consort. Every wedding was one of these messianic festivals with small. Thus Jesus performs at the wedding in Cana - especially at the close of a seven day period following His first appearance in public is significant. John doubtless plays on this significance - He uses the wedding motif again as he refers to Christ as the bridegroom - to whom John is just a friend.

The author of the fourth Gospel sees in Jesus the fulfillment of all messianic functions. He is lord of the universe. He is responsible for productivity and wealth: Thus at the end of a significant seven day period he turns the water into wine. He brings about an abundant harvest of fish. He is in control of natural forces. He calms the troubled lake. He feeds five thousand. He fulfills the ancient function of a go-between among Gods and men. As the angel in Jacob's dream, as the old king on the Ziggurat, as Moses at Mt. Sinai, the Son of Man is the link between the people and God. The evangelist is most insistent on this union of Christ and God. The messianic function of healing and of control over life and death is also attributed to Jesus. Thus the blind man is healed and Lazarus raised. Finally the function of the Messiah as defender is assumed when Jesus, as he cleared the temple, was "consumed with zeal for his house." John attributes all the conventional messianic functions to his Lord and Master. He is certainly thinking within a messianic pattern.

The terms with which John describes the Christ, inevitably have messianic connotations. Often the metaphor is definitely messianic. In the prologue John uses the dove symbol of the spirit. This is an ancient symbol for the earth consort of the Messiah. In that land of Palestine, where a living was wrested from the earth only at the mercy of the capricious rain, water had always been the symbol of life. It was definitely part of the messianic pattern. It appears again and again in the hopeful writings of the early post exilic writers. Light was another messianic symbol. In the ancient rites of royal messianism, the lamp was the symbol of the King. The shepherd was another symbol of Royal messianism. This symbol had been under the scrutiny of the critical prophets and of this time had become

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somewhat ethicized. However John's use of it would fall on friendly ears. The shepherd metaphor was completely at home in the culture of his day.

One more striking symbol which is definitely part of the messianic pattern is that of the vine. In this way the corporate life of the old kingdom were symbolized. There was a symbol of life, of productivity as well as the symbol of the fact that all that was obtained only in corporate effort symbolized in the messiah. Thus the people received life through him. In his choice and use of the symbol, the evangelist is completely within the messianic pattern. He shows that he fully understands it.

However the most emphatic messianic element in the life of Christ is the crucifixion and resurrection. It has long been recognized, as it is directly pointed out by the evangelists themselves, that the crucifixion and resurrection fit the prophetic pattern - especially the suffering servant of second Isaiah. However it has not always been recognized that this motif is really part of the original messianic pattern. The scribes in their time used what was then the old and accepted pattern - sometimes if only to criticize it inadequately. They use the old myth of the ~~god~~ representative in the messiah-king, who was slain by the powers of darkness only to be raised again triumphant after three days. From the beginning, sacrifice has been recognized in religion as a law of life.

Jesus' crucifixion fits the pattern. There is first his prediction that if his body is destroyed, he himself will raise it in three days - the appointed time. There is the anointment of Mary. There is the few disciples with his ironic statement that one man must die for the sake of them all - ironic because John represents the orthodox Jews as being ignorant of the popular & soul satisfying messianic pattern. There is the rejection at the ^{crucifixion} ~~crucifixion~~, by most of his friends. Jesus tells them they will wail when he leaves - this practice was part of the messianic cult. There is the constant promise from Jesus that the people shall look for him and not find him. (Searching was another practice of the cult). Finally there is Mary's and the disciples' search at dawn and the Resurrection at that time - The final stage in the ancient cult.

In all this Jesus fits the ancient pattern. Throughout the Gospel John has followed the lead of the prologue. He has kept to his theme. His figure has fit the ideal form. And that form has been the faith of his fathers from time immemorial.

the messianism, John comes himself heir to the fuller tradition of the Hebrews. In this he is in line with their whole culture, as opposed to the legalists who were ignorant of the older, more warm-hearted religion. John represents these narrow religionists as Jews. They are arid legalists, their God is depersonalized and their ethic excludes and negates. Nothing is of God that does not fit their exclusive and narrow tradition. They are completely ignorant of the fuller pattern. Thus Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, knows nothing of the mystery of being born again. (3:9). As Jesus talks of giving his body and blood to followers that they might have eternal life, the Jews are unable to understand the mystery. (6:52) Yet that mystery was part of the old pattern. The Jews are ready to stone Jesus for his unbelief at claiming one-ness with God. They are ignorant of the fact that it is declared in their own law, "ye are gods" - those to whom God's message was addressed were called gods. (10:34). Unlike the true popular heritage, the Jews looked upon Abraham as dead. Thus narrowed of thought and made spiritless by preconceptions there was no room in their hearts for Jesus' teaching. They could pore over the scriptures, and although Jesus' essential meaning could be found there in the religious faith of the full Hebrew culture, the Jews could not find him. Caiaphas' bright thought that one man should die for the country is intensely ironical.

However among the people messianic hopes and conceptions are far from dead. We can see how full - if varied - intertestamental literature is of this pattern. And it is a more genial religious atmosphere. As in the assumption of Moses the ^{Judean} exclusiveness is not there. Like the early prophets, the whole of Israel is to be included in the new kingdom. The ethic in this popular literature has a certain kindness about it that is missing in legalism. This messianism was much closer to the heart and life of the people. Nathanail belongs to this wider heritage. He is a true elemental, in whom there is no guile," and he characterizes Jesus as the King of Israel. By this time a large part of popular sentiment had come to look for the Messiah in lowly origin. The fact that that beautiful passage had been added to Zechariah is evidence of this. Thus the people are ready enough to accept this Messiah. Certainly many are converted. The attendant who is sent to arrest Jesus returns saying "no man ever talked as he does." The Pharisees are made to say --

"Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed on him?"

But these common people who do not know the law are doomed. - 6

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The young man who is healed from blindness thinks there is something very strange about the Jews refusal to recognize Jesus as having special relationships with God. He is so insistent he finally has to be reminded of his mission, - as a sinner teaching the holders of the law.

Thus it can be seen that there was this broader tradition and that it was popular. By fitting the messianic mould, and of being interpreted in this way Jesus was saved from religious formalism. Christianity was to be not a severe religion of law - but a heart warming faith for the people. By linking itself with messianism, Christianity captured the main citadel of life. Jesus captured the hopes and dreams of the life of man.

By all that has gone before is not meant that the old popular religion was the best from the beginning. Certainly Jesus did not come to a messianism that was similar in all its aspects to the ancient cult. The messianic pattern into which Jesus fit was one that had been greatly developed since primitive times. The prophets had done their work on it. It had been ethiced. Its dualistic speculation had been reformed of prophetic monotheism. Most of its corner features had been removed. In the process, as we have seen, the extreme wing completely closed up its wings. There were however antitheses like form and truth. Through the process there had been both genius and extreme proponents of messianism. Thus Jesus came to messianism a spirit had been greatly purified: as we have seen there was that genial attitude to all people - the inclusion of the Samaritans. There was the ethical content, if it was somewhat negative. And most of all there were the purified messianic visions of second Isaiah's suffering servant, and Zechariah's man upon a donkey. It was the old pattern, but already many had seen its fuller possibilities and due to their work, messianism had many noble connotations.

However, even into this purified pattern, Jesus did not fit in a passive way. It is important to notice that Jesus, and his interpreters thought of his mission in messianic terms. But when we have seen this we have not seen everything. Nor would the author of the Fourth Gospel be satisfied if his readers stopped there. What is equally, if not more, significant, is that Jesus came to messianism bearing gifts. When his work was done the old messianic pattern was much fuller and much more satisfying. He made his immeasurable contribution even to the purified religion. To point this out.

was as much the intention of the Evangelist as to indicate Jesus' rightful claim to the messiahship. In this connection John pictures the common people being as much confused and misunderstanding of Jesus ideas as were the Jews. The pattern was as old as time but Jesus saw in it new elements and new truths.

The first important contribution Jesus made was to continue the Prophet's work of spiritualizing the pattern. The relationship between the King and God is spiritualized into Jesus' relationship with God. His union of knowledge and thought and sensation. Thus Jesus is able to say to wondering Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world." The cultic rites are spiritualized. Jesus does not baptize with water but with the spirit. Jesus speaks to the woman of Samaria of the water of life, and to his disciples of the "meat" of doing his father's will. In this pattern spiritual values are the true reality. They are basic. The Harvest, so intimately a part of the old fertilized religion, is to be seen not in a material sense only, but in the salvation of those souls who have come out to him from the city of Samaria. Jesus insists that his messiahship is understood when he addresses the great crowd who followed him because he fed them.

"I tell you, it is not because of the signs you have seen, that you have come in search of me, but because you ate that bread and had all you wanted of it. You must not work for the food that perishes, but for that which lasts for eternal life." (2)

The worn religion of his fathers is lifted above, although not rejecting, the acquisitive materialism of its earliest forms. "The spirit is what gives life: flesh is of no use at all" (3) In this consideration he is misunderstood by many, even some of his followers. Jesus cries out in words, like the familiar one of Nazareth "You do not know either me or my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father too." (4)

This process of spiritualizing was no mere removal of material and temporal elements. This spiritualization was not the empty negativism of Karma. In thus treating the pattern, Christ raised human relationships to the status of divinity. Messianism was humanized and ethicized even as it was spiritualized. In fact it was an ethical consideration that the spiritualizing took place. The conception of the harvest, as a harvesting lost people has already been mentioned. Worship is not connected with either a temple or a mountain but is the spiritual and truthful relationship of a human being with God. At the very hour of Crucifixion, Jesus is conscious of his mother. His healing miracles, as well as his signs, come in answer to human need. The relationship between his disciples and him,

(2) 6:26-27

(3) 6:63

(4) 8:19

and between him and God is spiritualized and humanized. "If you love me, keep my commandments." "You are my friends if you do what I command you to do." "What I command you to do is to love one another." "A new commandment I give unto you that ye love one another... by this ye shall be known as my disciples if ye love one another. In these very human terms is God spiritualized and man's relationship to him given meaning for life among men.

Perhaps the most unique part of Jesus' contribution to the old religion is his spiritualizing of the messianic functions of ruler and judge. In that matchless passage of John 3:16 & we have it best expressed:-

"For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life, for God

did not send him into the world to judge the world, but that the world through him might be saved." - Thus attributes of forgiveness and

and mercy are attributed to deity and such qualities are demanded of all true men. In the same vein is the Christian's contribution of the true meaning of leadership. In his last symbolic act Jesus set a new note to the conception of leadership. He the Master and Lord, took a towel and guided himself.

"Do you understand what I have been doing to you? You call me teacher and master, and you are right, for that is what I am. If I then your master and teacher have washed your feet you ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example in order that you may do what I have done to you..."

Greatness is measured in terms of service. The greatest is he who ministers most. The Divine Kingship has been given a new meaning and a new quality.

As well as spiritualizing the pattern in this way, the life of Jesus universalizes its application. Any vestige of the old exclusiveness or particularism is completely gone. John again sets the tone in the prologue - "The real light which enlightens every man was coming then into the world." There is no fuller way of saying it. The messianic hope of salvation now applied to all mankind. This idea is sustained throughout the Gospel. "All that my father gives to me will come to me, and I will never refuse anyone who comes to me." (6:37) "I have other sheep too, which are not of this fold, I must lead them too, and they will hear my voice and they will all become one flock." (10) -- "Believed are those who believe without having seen me." (20) All men of all ages can respond to the call "Come ye that thirst." The brotherhood of all men is basic to this messianism.

(5) 10:16 &

(6) 20:29

In connection with this universalizing, the Christian contribution was also to individualizing. Without losing the values to be had in the old system of community mysticism, Christianity got the full values for the individual out of the pattern. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born from above. It is not a case of the individual receiving salvation through the state in the sense of the messiah. It is to be the personal experience of each true seeker after truth. The messianic experience is to be duplicated in the lives of all men.

"I tell you unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just one grain. But if it dies it yields a great harvest. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life." ②

Thus self sacrifice is the only worthy type of sacrifice. Messianic promises are granted to each individual seeker. "I tell you if anyone obeys my teaching he will not experience death" (8:51) Thus we have here finally a recognition of the high dignity of man. Individual worth and responsibility are fully realized in terms of an ancient religious pattern. The hopes and desires of each man are placed at the centre of the universe, and sustaining all the messianic promises.

"In the world you have trouble, but take courage - I have overcome the world."