

The Prophet of Nazareth
Nathaniel Schmidt
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Prof. Schmidt's book bears an appropriate title. When he calls Jesus "The Prophet of Nazareth" the negative implication is that the founder of Christianity claimed to be a prophet only, not the Messiah; the positive implication, that the great influence exerted by Him in the past and expected still to proceed from Him in the future is essentially a prophetic influence, the influence of teaching, not that of supernatural power. Towards impressing these two facts upon the reader the whole book is directed. He who would look in it for a detailed and exhaustive discussion of the life of Jesus would be disappointed. Barely two chapters of fourteen are given to this, covering no more than 78 pages out of a total of 422. In part this is due to the negative, agnostic conclusions at which the author arrives in his discussion of the sources; so little certain is known of the history of Jesus that a brief compass suffices for telling it; consequently, we hear much more about the Gospels and their criticism than about Jesus Himself. But to a larger degree this disproportion is due to the author's consciously-pursued aim of eliminating the Messianic factor from the life and mind of Jesus, which can, of course, be done only through a lengthy critical investigation. Evidently Prof. Schmidt feels, and correctly so, that in the Messianic consciousness lies the root of the whole evil growth of Christology, of all the supernatural, divine attributes the Savior has borne to the church through the ages: here also lies the fatal hindrance to that clear appreciation of Jesus in his prophetic character, from which he has such high hopes for the future. As long as Jesus continues to figure as the Messiah, He will also loom in the minds of men as that which the early church, on the basis of his Messiahship, made Him, the divine dispenser of supernatural powers. It boots little to reject the Fourth Gospel with its high doctrine of the Lord's preexistence and divinity, or to eliminate from the Synoptics all analogous testimony to the superhuman character of Jesus; whilst the Messianic element remains, the saving Christ, the divine Christ will ever anew be born in the hearts and heads of mankind. Hence, Prof. Schmidt is not satisfied with the makeshifts that are sometimes resorted to, where it is desired to neutralize this factor without going to the extreme of rejecting it in toto as unhistorical. He will have none of the view that the Messianic idea was the perishable form in which the unique religious and moral consciousness of Jesus clothed itself, nor of the view that the Messiahship was to Jesus a burden rather than a glory and joy, nor of the view that He contemplated Himself rather as one destined to Messiahship in the future, than as one clothed with Messiahship in the present. All these attempts are shallow compromises: the simple truth is that the Messianic idea played no role in the mind and experience of Jesus whatever. It is true the author claims to have reached this conclusion against his own wishes and prepossessions, under the sheer compulsion of the evidence. Nevertheless, we here and there discover clear traces of the influence which his idealization of Jesus as a prophet and religious genius has had in making the Messianic consciousness appear to him an *a priori* impossible thing. In discussing the classical passage Matt. 11:27 he declares: "Such an utterance is out of harmony with the admittedly genuine sayings of Jesus, and casts an undeserved reflection upon his character. . . . How can the gentle teacher . . . be supposed to have imagined himself possessed of all knowledge and regarded all other men as ignorant of God?" (p. 152). That is to say, it is ultimately the character of Jesus, as the author apprehends it, which protests against his Messiahship.

Prof. Schmidt is careful to undermine the Old Testament basis of the Messianic interpretation of

Christ and Christianity. He bestows a great deal of pains upon showing that the traditional exegesis of the prophecies and types is a delusion. In fact, he goes to the trouble of examining all these predictions and types and pointing out how in each case they can be interpreted with perfect naturalness without aid of the Messianic theology. It might seem as if all this labor were superfluous for the author's own purpose. Whether the Old Testament prophecies contain a Messianic eschatology or not is or ought to be from his standpoint immaterial for the question of the Messianic consciousness of Jesus. The only relevant point to raise would be not what the prophecies contained, but what Jesus found there, how He interpreted them. If Prof. Schmidt, nevertheless, takes the trouble of clearing away from the Old Testament all this Messianic lumber, we feel tempted to believe that he here applies the same principle which led him to declare the Messianic element impossible within the character and mind of Jesus. If in Jesus, the supreme prophet, there is no place for this idea, because it is an idea belonging to a distinctly lower level of religious development, why should there be room for it in the great Hebrew prophets of earlier date?

Hence all so-called Messianic predictions are explained as hopes attaching themselves to contemporaneous historical persons. It was the elevation of Jehojachin from his dungeon and the birth of his son Sheshbazzar that inspired the sublime oracles of Is. 9 and 11. In some of the Psalms living Hasmonæan rulers are referred to and only considerably later were the Psalms Messianically interpreted. "So far as documents give evidence, the expectation of a future deliverer of Israel, designated as the Messiah, seems to have appeared for the first time soon after the conquest of Palestine by Pompey in 63 B.C. It is found in the so-called Psalms of Solomon" (p. 68). And even this Messiah, become an eschatological figure at so late a date, remained for a long time purely political, and the Messianic hope was cherished only by some fractions of the people. The author does not think much of the most recent theory, that the Messianic eschatology was developed under the influence of Persian thought, for the very reason that the Persian Saoshyas were of an unpolitical character. It is no wonder that he refuses to credit Jesus with the application to Himself of a notion of such antecedents and such content. But surely our Lord Himself took a different view of the origin and meaning of the Messianic material in the Old Testament. Nor can we see that the author has done justice to the Apocalyptic literature. He practically ignores the transcendental Messianism that is indubitably present there. The whole recent trend towards recognizing a high Jewish Christology is left out of account. Little is said about the doctrine of the Messiah's preexistence. Partly this is again due to a late dating of the sources (e.g., the Similitudes of Enoch from the time of Domitian), partly to the assumption of Christian interpolations in the original Jewish documents. The author seems bent upon the persecution of the Messianic concept even here and determined to rout it out of its last refuge in the apocalyptic writings. To be sure, after so little attention has been paid to the transcendental Christology, it is somewhat surprising to read on p. 89: "The reaction against thoughts peculiar to the followers of Jesus had probably removed some of the transcendental aspects of the Messianic ideal" (i.e., from the thought of post-Christian Judaism). The Messiah expected even by an Akiba was just the kind of man that Simon was". But from the entire preceding discussion the impression might easily have been gathered that the Messianic ideal had never varied much from the type of Simon.

Coming to the Gospels, we here also find that the author's critical views are well-adjusted to the main thesis he advocates. None of the Gospels were written by apostles or eye-witnesses, or existed at all before some sixty years or more had passed since the death of Jesus. They are late translations of

the original Aramaic tradition, suffering from a load of accidental or intentional changes, weighed down with layer after layer of corrections, comments and interpolations. Prof. Schmidt expresses himself so strongly on this point, that one might justly expect the historic existence of Jesus itself to become imperiled by his doubts. He himself feels this and confesses to having faced this problem without fear or prepossessions. But “it was with a deep satisfaction the author found himself borne along by the force of what seemed to him incontrovertible facts to the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth actually existed, that some of the events of his life may be known to us, that some of his words may be recovered, and that his personality, imperfectly as we know it, and widely as it differed from the estimate of the church, is as sublime and potent for good as ever” (p. 233). If we enquire into the critical canons by means of which the salvage of this precious remnant out of the wreck of tradition is effected we find them to be the following: the translatability of a saying into Aramaic is a test of genuineness, especially when translated back it reveals an even more remarkable originality than in the Greek; the Schmiedel-principle, that an utterance which runs contrary to the belief of the later church about Jesus must be authentic, is brought into requisition; the later prevalence of the Messianic dogma especially is worked along this line, on the ground that whatever was least suitable for “the Messianic propaganda made by a group of demagogues and teachers in the interest of the Nazarene” must for that very reason go back to Jesus, e.g., the parables with their constant emphasis on the kingdom of heaven and the Father in heaven. That is to say: incompatibility with the Messianic idea creates a presumption of genuineness. But, if on the basis of such considerations the author is able to save sufficient material out of which to construe his conception of “the prophet of Nazareth”, it is obvious that, negatively viewed, his critical canons are admirably adapted for eliminating the Messianic element from the Gospels. Negatively almost anything can be done with a tradition that comes down to us in such a corrupt state. As to further details of Gospel-criticism the author falls in with Wrede in his skepticism about the alleged superiority of Mark from a historical point of view. “The assumption that he comprehended the growth of Jesus’ Messianic consciousness and the gradual unfolding of his Messianic program better than the other evangelists is not well founded” (p. 224). And in general the two-document hypothesis finds no favor in his sight. The hypothesis of a *Logia Jesu* is unnecessary for the explanation of the synoptic problem, indeed only productive of new difficulties. Even the Greek Matthew is older than Mark.

In arguing from the Gospel-material in favor of his main contention the author makes ample use of the critical freedom he has thus proclaimed for himself. His chief reliance is, of course, the ruling out of all the Son-of-Man-passages, so far as they have Messianic implications. The methods and conclusions on this point are the same as those employed by him in the well-known article in the *Encyclopedia Biblica*. Jesus used it a few times in genuine sayings of man generically. In the original form of the Synoptic Apocalypse (a Jewish work) a man was introduced who was none other than the celestial being of Dan. 7:13, identified sometimes with the Messiah, sometimes with Enoch, sometimes (as the author himself believes to be the case in the Daniel-passage) with Michael. This Synoptic Apocalypse was translated into Greek; and, because it was concerned with the destruction of Jerusalem, and Jesus was known to have predicted the overthrow of the Jewish state and cult, the Christians in adopting the Apocalypse could not help identifying the Son-of-Man figure with their Messiah. In its literally translated Greek form the phrase Bar-Nasha easily assumed the appearance of a title. Then gnostic speculation about “the Macrocosmic man” and “the second man” merged with this idea of the “Son of Man” in Daniel. While these things were floating in the air the translated apocalypse was incorporated in part in the Gospels, and from it, what appeared to be a Messianic

usage, was carried over into other passages of the gospel-narrative.

It is to be regretted that the author has not supplemented his negative procedure of eliminating the Messianic element from the life of Jesus by a positive construction of the genesis of the Messianic character of Jesus in the mind of the disciples after Jesus' death. To know how the phrase "Son of Man" became a Messianic title may be of some interest: of incomparably greater interest from the author's point of view is the problem how the prophet of Nazareth came to be considered the Messiah. Why was not the prophetic category sufficient for the veneration of his disciples in the sequel as well as during his lifetime? And to this we must add another remark with reference to the negative procedure itself. By a critical or exegetical examination one by one of the passages or groups of evidence in which the Messianic concept occurs the author seeks to convince us that there is no necessity for assuming its presence in the original history or tradition. But even granting (what we are by no means ready to grant) that he has in all these instances made out a plausible case, the number itself of the instances it is necessary thus to get rid of either by excision or interpretation is so great as to hang a heavy load around the neck of the hypothesis. Besides, even with all this mass of evidence neutralized in one way or another, one cannot help feeling that the Messianic spirit is still there in the Gospels, intangible perhaps, but none the less real and persistent. It is a spirit that will not be exorcised by dealing with individual passages. Even in his prophetic utterances Jesus speaks with an authority greater than that of any prophet. The problem is not to explain away certain Messianic elements in the sources, but to wipe out the pervasive Messianic character of these sources, and that in such a way as to retain of the de-Messianized material something substantial enough out of which to construct a lifelike plausible plan of the life and teaching of Jesus. We do not believe that with all his critical acumen, historical grasp and literary skill the author has succeeded in doing this.

Still another point in which we have to find fault with Prof. Schmidt's method concerns the over-assurance of his presentation and exploitation of critical views which are, to say the least, still under debate, as if they were definitely settled and could be henceforth used as so many axioms. Frequently views of this kind are given without so much as an intimation that even in far from conservative circles great diversity of opinion or skepticism on such matters prevails. We mention only two or three instances. The author espouses the view that the virgin-birth was superimposed upon the original form of the gospel-narrative according to which Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary. But he does not explain what the retouching precisely consisted in, nor make any reference to the serious criticism that has been passed upon every hypothesis so far proposed in this direction. While accepting the theory of the Gentile origin of the virgin-birth conception, he makes no attempt to reconcile it with the palpably Jewish character of the narratives of the nativity. Another instance is his acceptance of Wrede's view with reference to the recognition of the *Messiasgeheimnis* by the demoniacs. Here again we receive no inkling of the objections raised against this view within the critical camp itself. In general one would never infer from the author's smooth representation that the dissensus among critics even on the great dominating problems has increased to such an extent as to threaten chaos for their whole treatment of the life and teaching of Jesus.

Apart from the Messianic problem, the author's sketch of Jesus appears to us one-sided. The religious aspect of His personality and teaching remains altogether too much in the background, whereas the ethical aspect is magnified to the utmost. In fact, the author finds fault with Wellhausen, who, while describing with fine appreciation Jesus' religious message, fails in his view to do equal justice to his

ethical teachings. Wellhausen would be quite justified in turning back this charge with the terms reversed upon Prof. Schmidt himself. The religion the latter ascribes to Jesus is largely the indirect religion of ethics.

In the concluding chapters, entitled *The Present Problem and The Leadership of Jesus*, the author deals with the relation of Christianity to the practical issues of modern life. We have all respect for the earnestness with which the qualifications of Jesus to meet the needs of humanity at the present-day are upheld as over against all other intellectual or economic panaceas. In describing the pressing nature of the problems and the acute character of the evils of modern life no one will accuse Prof. Schmidt of undue optimism. But is it not over-sanguine to expect the cure for all this tremendous disease and evil from Jesus as a Prophet and Teacher? The Jesus who in former ages has healed the nations and renewed the fountains of life for humanity was surely far more than this. It is the old delusion of rationalism that the world can be saved by teaching. Even the Prophet of Nazareth as Prof. Schmidt loves to describe Him, must prove sadly unequal to this gigantic task, if He has no other means for its execution than the few ethical and religious apophthegms fished up by the critics, as alone genuine, out of the turbid stream of tradition.