

# The Messiah's Earthly Work\*

## Part One

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### I. THE PURPOSE OF THE MESSIAH.

#### a. In the Synoptists.

As the purpose of any man may be inferred from his work, so we may infer the purpose of Jesus from his work; but we are not now concerned with possible inferences. We are asking rather after the direct and positive teaching of Jesus: what he himself said of his purpose, and how he sought to achieve it. According to the Synoptic Gospels the Messianic consciousness of Jesus dated from the hour of his baptism, and by the meditation and temptation in the wilderness he adjusted his thought to the new consciousness. He came forth from the wilderness, and for a little more than two years engaged in public work, which clearly has as its sole aim the establishment of the kingdom of heaven. We cannot go back of the baptism of Jesus and speak of the purpose which actuated him in the earlier years of his private life, except to say that the purpose of the boy Jesus, to be about the things of his Father (Lk. 2:49), was doubtless the purpose of the youth and the man. We are sure as we look at the public life of Jesus that in his earlier private life his deepest concern had been to please God, and day by day to follow perfectly the guidance of His Spirit. But we know of no other plan or life-purpose which he had at that time. When, however, the consciousness of Messiahship had been divinely awakened within him, immediately his life came entirely under the sway of the great purpose which that

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\* Originally published as chapter six of *The Revelation of Jesus*, New York: MacMillan, 1899.

Messianic consciousness called forth, namely, the purpose to do the work of the Messiah as God should make it known to him. All his time and all his energies were henceforth consecrated to this single end.

And the work of the Messiah, the work of his earthly life, as Jesus regarded it, was the establishment of the kingdom of heaven, the realization among men of that ideal relationship to God of which he was conscious in his own soul. It was this which he constantly preached, and for the coming of this he taught his disciples to pray. Sometimes Jesus speaks of the aim of his mission in more specific, or in narrower, terms than the establishment of the kingdom of heaven. Thus it is to call sinners to repentance (Mk. 2:17; Lk. 5:32), or to fulfill the Law and the prophets (Mt. 5:17). Again, it is to sow the good seed (Mt. 13:37), to preach the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk. 4:19), to induce men to choose the one thing needful (Lk. 10:42), to give rest to those who labor and are heavy laden (Mt. 11:28), and to give his life a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45). But all these ends are subordinate to the establishment of the reign of God in the heart of man.

*b.* In the fourth Gospel.

The Messianic purpose is differently stated in the fourth Gospel, but the difference is formal rather than essential. We find it, for example, in the word of Jesus in the allegory of the Good Shepherd: "I came that they may have life and may have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10). Other closely related terms are incidentally employed. Thus, Jesus came to *save* the world (Jn. 5:34; 12:47). He came to give men the *truth* (Jn. 8:31-32; 18:37); to give them the *glory* which the Father had given to him, that is, the *name* of the Father (Jn. 17:5-6). But the characteristic designation of the aim of his mission is to give *life* (e.g. Jn. 3:15; 5:40; 6:33; 8:12; 11:25; 17:3).

The conception of eternal life which we find in the fourth Gospel is narrower than the conception of the kingdom of God, as I have indicated in another connection. It has a close correspondence to the first meaning of that term in the Synoptists, namely, the reign of God in the heart. That is life, eternal life. But, as we have seen, the term *kingdom of heaven* has other meanings than that of a divine reign in the heart, and to these other meanings the conception of eternal life in the fourth Gospel is not akin.

This life which it is the purpose of Christ to give is prevalingly thought of in the fourth Gospel as a *present* possession,<sup>1</sup> while eternal life in the Synoptists is always regarded as belonging to the future age (e.g. Mk. 10:30;

<sup>1</sup>It is referred to the future in Jn. 4:14; 6:27; 12:25.

Mt. 7:14; 25:46). The idea that the believer *has* eternal life even now is necessarily involved in Jesus' conception of that life, according to the fourth Gospel. He always associates it with his own person, and regards it as resulting from the appropriation of himself by faith. Thus he says: "I am the bread of life" (Jn. 6:48); "I am the living bread" (Jn. 6:51); "He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life" (Jn. 6:54); "He that eateth *me*, he also shall live because of me" (Jn. 6:57); "I am the life" (Jn. 11:25). The Father has given him authority to have life in himself (Jn. 5:26), and this life is communicated through a personal relation in which Jesus and his disciples become one (Jn. 6:56; 15:4; 17:23). Such a relation is implied in *eating* him, or *abiding* in him as the branch abides in the vine. It is manifest, then, that eternal life becomes the possession of a soul when Jesus is accepted, and therefore it is spoken of as something which the believer has here and now. Were this not the case, then the Messianic purpose, according to the fourth Gospel, would be a purpose whose realization belongs to the future age. But since the Messianic purpose is stated by John as the purpose to give a present life, it is manifestly the same purpose that is involved in the Synoptic expression of a present heavenly kingdom. The Synoptic expression of the Messianic purpose, however, gives a certain prominence to God, and the Johannean expression gives an equal prominence to the Messiah.

## II. THE MESSIANIC PURPOSE REALIZED BY TEACHING.

### a. In the Synoptists.

Jesus began to realize the Messianic ideal by *teaching*. He came not as the Jews had expected, with outward pomp and military power, but as a herald and teacher. He appeared in Galilee calling men to repentance and faith in the Gospel (Mk. 1:15). He taught in the synagogues (Mk. 1:21). When he left Capernaum, after his first activity there, he told his disciples that he must go to the other villages, to preach there also (Mk. 1:38). According to Mark, he had come forth from *Capernaum* in order to preach elsewhere; while, in Luke, this was the purpose for which he had been *sent*, that is, the purpose of his life as a *whole*. Of these two versions of the word of Jesus, Mark's is probably the historical one; but the broader idea of Luke is surely in accord with the manifest aim of the life of Jesus.

Again, the Synoptic report repeatedly summarizes the tours of Jesus in Galilee as tours of preaching, or of preaching and healing (Mk. 1:21; 6:6; Mt. 4:23). When he went from Galilee into Perea, Mark says that, as his *custom* was, he taught the people (Mk. 10:1). When he came to Jerusalem, he taught in the temple, and at the time of his arrest, he rebuked those who came against

him as against a robber, with the words, "I sat *daily* in the temple teaching, and ye took me not" (Mt. 26:55). Jesus represents the unfaithful as saying, at the last day, "We did eat and drink in thy presence, and thou didst *teach* in our streets" (Lk. 13:26). Thus he seems to have regarded teaching as his primary and fundamental work. In harmony with this fact, we find that his disciples and people in general most commonly addressed him as *teacher* or *rabbi* (e.g. Mt. 8:19; 12:38; Jn. 1:38, 49; 4:31).

Jesus never put his miracles by the side of his teaching, as though they were coordinate with it. As we have shown elsewhere, Jesus subordinated miracles to teaching. They were a proof of his Messianic claim, but in themselves they involved no teaching in regard to God which was not contained in the miracles of the prophets. The distinctive religious message of Jesus to the world was not expressed through his miraculous works. These works, however, since they confirmed the Messianic claim of Jesus, were of course of great value, and Jesus could say to the lake-cities that because his mighty works had not led them to repentance, their fate should be less tolerable than that of Sodom and Gomorrah (Mt. 11:20-24). They had seen these works, and could not, without willful hostility to the truth, deny that they were proofs of power and of a beneficent purpose. They ought, then, to have perceived that these mighty works were God's visible seal upon the claim of Jesus. This is their significance both in the Synoptists and John; but this function does not raise them to a place beside the teaching of Jesus.

The importance of the revelation of Jesus, as a means of realizing the Messianic purpose, lay in the fact that he thereby communicated a unique and absolute knowledge of God. It is plain, even in the Synoptists, that he claimed to have such knowledge. He claimed it when he said that he came to fulfill the Law and the prophets (Mt. 5:17). For the Law and the prophets had as their great aim the effectual revelation of God's will to men; and they did, indeed, reveal it by "divers portions and in divers manners," and they had a "shadow of the good things to come" (Heb. 1:1; 10:1). But one who should *fulfill* the Law and the prophets, who should perfectly realize the ideal after which they struggled, must of necessity have a perfect knowledge of the divine will.

Again, the Synoptists have the claim of unique knowledge in the word of Jesus which was spoken when he realized that the mystery of the Gospel had been effectually made known to his disciples through him. First, he thanks God that He has revealed "these things" of the kingdom to "babes"; and then says that no one knows the Son but the Father, nor who the Father is but the Son and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal Him (Mt. 11:25-27; Lk. 10:22). Here is the claim to an absolute knowledge of

the Father, also the teaching that this knowledge can be communicated, and that Jesus regards the acceptance of it by men as the accomplishment of his mission. He speaks of this knowledge as given by the Father, and then declares that it is given through the Son, which obviously shows that, in his thought, what he reveals, God reveals.

It is significant that the invitation of Jesus to men to come unto him for rest follows immediately upon this statement that he alone can reveal the Father (Mt. 11:28-30). The evident implication is that men find rest for their souls as they receive from Jesus his revelation of the Father, or, to put it in another form, as they find the Father in him. Thus the Messianic purpose of Jesus was fulfilled by the way of teaching; but it is of vital importance to bear in mind the *personal element* in this teaching. Since it is *Jesus*, and no other, who communicates the saving revelation of the Father (Mt. 11:27), the acceptance of the teaching involves the acceptance of the Teacher as the Messiah sent from God to bring this teaching to men. The work of Jesus as a teacher cannot be separated from his work of winning disciples. He taught men in order that they might desire to follow him; and he called men to follow him in order that he might teach them (Mk. 3:14). Discipleship was the fruit which he always sought. "Follow me," now used in a literal sense (Mk. 2:14; 10:28; Mt. 8:21-22), and now in a figurative sense (Mk. 8:34-35; Mt. 16:24-25), are the words which perfectly express the sole end of his teaching. They who really accepted his teaching, accepted him; and they who accepted him accepted him as revealing the Father, and also accepted the Father as revealed by him. Thus the teaching of Jesus is not abstract, but personal. A man cannot accept it without becoming a disciple of Jesus, for the very heart of it is that Jesus himself is the revealer of the Father. In so far as men do accept it, the Messianic purpose of Jesus is accomplished, and the purpose of the Father is accomplished, who sent Jesus to do the Messianic work. Thus the life-work of Jesus, according to the Synoptists, was the work of a teacher, a revealer of God; but this work was accomplished through the offer and acceptance of a perfect embodiment of the revelation in the person of the Revealer, and not alone by the offer and acceptance of a new conception of God.

*b.* In the fourth Gospel.

In the discourses of Jesus in the fourth Gospel, the realization of the Messianic purpose, as far as it is accomplished by the life of Jesus, is accomplished *solely* by his work as a *teacher*; and thus we have the same

thought as in the Synoptists, but it is expressed with greater clearness and urgency.

The value of the revelation of Jesus rests upon the fact that it springs out of an immediate knowledge of God. The claim of Jesus to an absolute knowledge of the Father is presented much more fully by John than by the earlier evangelists. We meet it near the beginning of the Gospel, in the dialogue with Nicodemus (Jn. 3:13), and all the way through the narrative till the final conversation with the Roman governor (Jn. 18:37). Thus he said that no one but the Son of man had ascended into heaven, and hence no one but he could declare "heavenly things," that is, Messianic truths (Jn. 3:13). Likewise he says that the Father shows the Son all things which He Himself doeth (Jn. 5:20), which implies that He shows them to no one else. Again, Jesus claims full and unique knowledge when he says that no one has *seen* the Father save he who is from God (Jn. 6:46), and when in his last prayer he speaks twice of giving to his disciples the *name* which the Father had given to him (Jn. 17:11, 12). In like manner he says that the world knew not the Father, but he, in solitary contrast with the world, knew Him (Jn. 17:25). This knowing the will of the Father is expressed by Jesus in a variety of figures. Thus he *hears* the Father speak and teach (Jn. 5:30; 8:28). He *sees* in the presence of the Father the things which He speaks (Jn. 8:38); the Father *shows* him all that He doeth (Jn. 5:20), or, in general terms, the words that he speaks and the revelation that he imparts have been *given* to him by the Father (Jn. 17:8, 11). This language of Jesus implies that he felt perfectly certain of his teaching. What he had heard from the Father, or seen in His presence, he could and must utter without hesitation. And his teaching does indeed bear the stamp of perfect assurance. There is never a tone of doubt in it. Jesus is never confused or unprepared.

The claim of Jesus to teach what he has *seen* with the Father does not imply that he ignored the Old Testament, and claimed direct and immediate revelation as the source of all his teaching. He regarded the Scriptures as witnessing concerning him, and intimated that the sum of their teaching was that men should come to him for life (Jn. 5:39-40). But this thought, that men have eternal life in *him*, is surely a part of the doctrine which he said was not his but the Father's (Jn. 7:16). This is one of the Messianic truths which he has learned in communion with the Father (Jn. 3:12-13).

Again, his conviction that the Son of man must be *lifted up* may have come to him, in part at least, by reading the experience of Israel in the wilderness (Num. 21:9; Jn. 3:14). Occasionally Jesus uses the Scriptures in his controversies with the Jews, and in conversation with his disciples,

and yet at the same time he says that he speaks the things which he has *seen* with the Father (Jn. 10:34-35; 6:45; 13:18; 15:25). Therefore it seems plain that with reference to some of his teaching, at least, he *heard* the Father's voice and *saw* the Father in the Scriptures of the Old Testament — a conception which is in fundamental accord with that idea of the Old Testament which we find in the Synoptists (e.g. Mt. 5:17-19; Mk. 12:30-31; Mt. 22:37-40).

This leads to another point, namely that Jesus *acquired* his knowledge of the Father in his earthly life. Some of the passages in which he speaks of this knowledge harmonize with the view he gained it in a preexistent state,<sup>2</sup> though not one can reasonably be said to *require* that view. Jesus speaks of the Father's commandments to him in the *aorist* tense, which points to past time and so *might* refer to a preexistent state. Thus he says, "As the Father *taught* me, I speak these things"; and "The words which Thou *gavest* me I have given to them" (Jn. 8:28; 17:8). Oftener he uses the *perfect* tense in speaking of what he has seen with the Father, which also *allows*, but does not *require*, a reference to preexistence. Thus he says, "I speak the things which I *have seen* with the Father"; and "The Father who hath sent me, He *hath given* me a commandment, what I should say" (Jn. 8:38; 12:49-50). But still more frequently Jesus uses the *present* tense when speaking of the Father's communications to him, and once the future. Thus he says that the Father *shows* him what He does (Jn. 5:20), shows him day by day, as need arises. Again, he judges as he *hears* from the Father (Jn. 5:30), and the Father abiding in him *works* (Jn. 14:10). He knows that his Messianic witness is true, because he is conscious that he is not *alone*. He knows that the Father is with him, and that the witness which he bears is also the Father's witness (Jn. 8:16-18). These passages, as those in which he draws his teaching from Scripture, and that one in which he refers to a future teaching by the Father (Jn. 5:20), show that when Jesus speaks of seeing things in the Father's presence and hearing words from Him, we are not warranted in supposing that he refers in any single instance to a preexistent state. He refers rather to the teaching of the Father which he was constantly receiving in his earthly life. None of the passages require that this statement should be modified. When Jesus says that the Father *taught*, using the *aorist* tense, the word is spoken in both cases from the standpoint of the end of his life; and as *summarizing* what had been experienced in his earthly life, the *aorist* is appropriately used. And when Jesus says that he speaks the things which he

<sup>2</sup> Cp. Weiss, *Neutestamentliche Theologie*, 616.

has seen with the Father, using the *perfect* tense, nothing suggests that this form of the verb implies preexistence. One must bring that thought to the text before it can be found there. The significance of the perfect is simply this, that what Jesus has seen with the Father abides in full force with him to the present hour.

Moreover, this view that Jesus acquired his knowledge of the Father in his earthly life<sup>3</sup> is the only one which accords with the fact that Jesus in the fourth Gospel lays great stress upon his *moral* union with the Father, but nowhere distinctly alludes to a metaphysical relationship.

Now the communication of this unique knowledge of the Father, on which the fourth Gospel puts so much emphasis, is the Messianic work. This thought appears in various forms on the lips of Jesus. In the consciousness that he has this life-giving knowledge he calls himself the *light* of the world (Jn. 8:12; 9:5; 12:35). He sums up his activity in behalf of mankind as a bearing witness unto the *truth* (Jn. 18:37), and the centre of his claim to Thomas is that he himself is the truth (Jn. 14:6). He is the *way* to the Father because he is the truth, and he is the *life* of men because he is the truth. His truth is the spring of his life and the light of his way. Again, Jesus says that it is his mission to speak what he has *seen* with the Father (Jn. 8:38), and to make known all things which he has *heard* from the Father (Jn. 8:26; 15:15). In his closing prayer he refers to his life-work as a manifestation of the *name* of the Father, or a giving to men of the *word* of the Father, which is truth, or a giving to them of the *glory* which the Father had given to him, which is nothing else than the Father's revelation of Himself (Jn. 17:6, 8, 17, 22). They who *hear* his word from the Father live, because his word is spirit and life (Jn. 5:25; 6:63; cp. Mk. 4:4, 14). They are quickened by it, and pass out of death into life (Jn. 5:21, 24).

Such is the prominence which is given in the fourth Gospel to the teaching function of Jesus as the means of realizing his Messianic purpose. This is virtually the exclusive means, for the *signs* of the fourth Gospel (eight described) are subordinated to the teaching, as in the Synoptists. Jesus reproached the nobleman of Capernaum, and with him the Jews of that day in general, when he said, "Except ye see signs and wonders ye will in no wise believe" (Jn. 4:48). This implies that he thought there was a better ground of belief in him as Messiah than mere signs and wonders. Of course it does not follow that he regarded the signs as unimportant. The next day after feeding the multitudes near Bethsaida he said to the Jews, "Ye seek me not because

<sup>3</sup> Cp. Lk. 2:40, 52.



ye saw signs, but because ye ate of the loaves and were filled” (Jn. 6:26). Here it is implied that, in his judgment, the signs which they had seen *might* well have led them to seek him. In like manner he spoke of the resurrection of Lazarus as an event which manifested the glory of God, and which glorified the Son of God (Jn. 11:4, 40). It glorified the Son of God because, in connection with his claim, it showed him to be the Messiah, which is the function of all the signs of Jesus in the fourth Gospel.

But while Jesus thus spoke of his signs, he did not coordinate them with his teaching. In his final prayer, wherein he reviews his life-work and speaks of what he has done for the disciples, he does not mention the miraculous works, but speaks of the Father's *words* and the Father's *name*, which he has given to them. This is his great work, and it is this which is to be continued by his successor. The Holy Spirit will *teach* them, and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus *said* to them (Jn. 14:26). He is to bear witness of Jesus (Jn. 15:26). Thus the revelation of Jesus remains the essential means of accomplishing the Messianic work, while his signs had only a passing and incidental importance.

As the fourth Gospel gives prominence to *teaching* in the realization of the Messianic purpose, so it gives a corresponding prominence to the personal relationship which is involved in the acceptance of the teaching. Jesus manifests the *name* of the Father (Jn. 17:6, 26), that is, the Father's *character*, and he manifests this in his *own* character. “*I* am the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12); “*I* am the resurrection and the life” (Jn. 11:25); “*I* am the way and the truth and the life” (Jn. 14:6); “This is life eternal, that they should know thee, the only true God, and *him* whom thou didst send, Jesus Christ (Jn. 17:3). The thought of accepting the words which he has received from the Father alternates with the thought of appropriating him (Jn. 17:8; 6:57). In John, then, as little as in the Synoptists does Jesus ever separate between the verbal and the personal revelation of the Father, or think of the acceptance of his doctrine apart from the acceptance of himself.