

"WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?"

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

"THE HOLY ONE OF GOD" WITH "THE WORDS OF

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ETERNAL LIFE"

In the Fourth Gospel, it's not (as in the Synoptics) Peter who makes the good confession "You are the Christ-Messiah, the Son of God" (Jn.11.27) but a woman, Martha; & in response not (as in the Synoptics) to Jesus' "Who do YOU say I am?" but rather his "Do you believe this [that "I am the resurrection and the life"]?"

For Martha, the content of "Christ-Messiah, the Son of God" is that Jesus is, & is the source of, **death-transcending life** (11.25-27). The Jesus-question / disciple-response pattern in the case of Peter (6.68f) has the same focus: How could we possibly leave you, Jesus? Nobody else has **death-transcending words**.

1 In the Fourth (chronologically the First?) Gospel, it's all the way Christus Victor over all the enemies of life on either side of the grave. The point of God's giving his son in incarnation & death is so that believing in him, we not "perish, but have everlasting life" (3.16 KJV; better, "eternal," as Vulg. "aeternam"; note that here it's not a question of heaven-or-hell immortality, but of life with God here & hereafter or of ceasing to exist). So pervasive is this radiant conviction that in Jn., "life" even without the descriptive adj. "eternal" means life in God transcending all powers & forms of death here & hereafter (so my "LIFE" IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL, 1943).

2 While the above is John's version of the point & power of the messianic tradition, what's its locus in that tradition? The baseline of the tradition is the prayerful expectation of an eschatological Davidic ideal monarch (in contrast, said the prophets, to Israel's generally doleful history of monarchy), ruling in a paradisiacal golden age of peace & prosperity. Times of trouble intensified this hope, which outweighed the temptation to fall into depression & despair. Call this the **political** messianic expectation--that of the Pharisees & subsequent "normative Judaism." In late Judaism (Second Temple), various sects had various versions. I'll call the Qumran version **hieratic** messianism, for the messianic high priest (rescuing the temple from its corrupt establishment) was superior to the messianic king--yes, two messiahs ("anointed" could be, in Israel & Judaism, prophets, priests, or kings). A **transcendental**, "Son of Man" messianism characterized some other sects (Daniel, Enoch): "This particular concept seems to have played an important role in the formation of Jesus' messianic ideology" (p.259, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE JEWISH RELIGION; p.211: "it was not so much his teaching as his conception of his messianic mission and destiny that was ultimately decisive....apparently [he] believed himself called to the messianic role of the Son of Man....he seems to have come to the conclusion that his task also involved suffering and dying"). Finally, I'll call **impersonal** messianism (without a defined person as messiah) the faith in an ultimate redemption not calling for immediate violent revolt. (While the great rabbi Akib[v]a believed the revolutionary general Bar Kokhba was the messiah, a millenium later the great scholar Maimonides warned against uncritical messianic enthusiasm.) Reform Judaism (ibid, p.260) "has tended to reject the concept of a personal Messiah, substituting for it the optimistic faith in the advent of a messianic era with 'the unity of all men as the children of God in the confession of the One and Sole God,' or 'the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace'."....Perhaps I should mention the category of **secular** messianisms, such as Zionism, Ethical Culture, & Reconstructionism....What think you, then, is Jn.'s locus among the messianisms? Transcendental, yes; but with mystical & quasi-gnostic qualities. In short, Jesus is "the true & living Way" (14.6, the adjectives being, in the Semitism, construct nouns; but notice 8.31f: by obeying Jesus' teachings, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free").

3 Instead of "Christ," Jn.'s Peter confesses Jesus in Second Isaiah's favorite expression for God, "the Holy One," but softens with the addition "of God." Significantly, Jn.'s Peter never says "Christ," though the corrupt Greek text behind

KJV 9.69 has him doing so (which is "decisively" wrong, perhaps imitating Mt.16.17 [p.215, Bruce M. Metzger, A TEXTUAL COMMENTARY ON THE GREEK NT, United Bible Societies/71]).

4 For Jn. & his community & "prospects" (ie potential converts to his community), what were the **antonyms** of "eternal life"? We've already seen one, viz oblivion ("perish," 3.16). A living death, a half-life in an underworld of shades & shadows is another. And the third is perpetual punishment. Against all three, Jn.'s gospel presents Jesus as the Lord of LIFE, full life qualitatively & (because on both sides of the grave) quantitatively (for to that ancient Mediterranean world, a thisworldly savior would have been only a half-savior).

This church-page ad caught my eye, then I was pleased to note that it was of my own church. Do people nowadays have afterlife hopes & fears strong enough to draw them to church? At least we can say that the afterlife is making a slow comeback in American & European culture, & that in many other areas of the globe it's never lost strength. Hans Küng's ETERNAL LIFE: LIFE AFTER DEATH AS MEDICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM (Image/85) was the first of a number of recent books on the subject by major theologians. Says K., "If I believe in eternal life, I can work for a better future, a better society, even a better Church, in peace, freedom, and justice--and knowing that all this can only be sought and never fully realized by man...it is always possible to endow my life and that of others with meaning." No split here into otherworldly & thisworldly religions. Contrast the decline of afterlife motivation in America's mainline churches, detailed in my "Aiming at Heaven" (#2516).


5 It's normal for human beings to face this life & the next with the **full emotional range**, drawn by hope & goaded by fear. If you draw this on the minimal grid, you'll have two hope-fields (one for each side of death) & two fear-fields (one for each side of death). If any box in this motivational matrix is empty in a person's case, that person is an emotional cripple. If all four boxes are empty, as workers in juvenile crime say is true of many they work with, what society has is an underclass of moral-spiritual zombies.

Where do you start to try to help zombies, the anomic, psychopaths, sociopaths? Case by case, wherever you/society has the best leverage. In many cases it will be the hope that comes with a job: employment hopelessness is the root of many evils. In some cases it's afterlife hope: as Küng argues, believing that God will give one a better life after death may motivate toward making this life better.

And in some cases it's fear of thisworldly and/or otherworldly consequences of continued self-destructive & antisocial behavior. When recently I mentioned to some juvenile-crime officers that society puts severe limits on their use of fear, one quoted Ann Landers to the effect that fear pervades the entire public-school system except the bottom: "only the kids are without fear." Said I, "the social disease of fear maldistribution. The Bible teaches three-tiered fear--of parents, of the civil authorities, & of God. Remove all three, as our society has, & only a small percentage of children will prove morally educable." Yet I've never heard this fact discussed in panels on "America's endangered public education." If FDR was right that "There's nothing to fear but [economic] fear itself," how can we overcome the psycho-political fear of using fear in pedagogy? Of course the public schools can't be expected to threaten miscreants with afterlife woes: that would violate "separation of church & state."

6 Should no one in society voice this threat? Of the half dozen recent books touching on this, I favor Piero Camporesi's THE FEAR OF HELL: IMAGES OF DAMNATION AND SALVATION IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE (Carlson/91), for providing a historical base.

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