**Historical Context and Atmosphere**

Today the prevailing opinion is that at the time of Jesus, during the first thirty years of our time reckoning, the general situation in the world was particularly favourable for the appearance of Christianity. However, if one had said to a true Israelite of those times, a certain Nathaniel for instance, “The time is auspicious for the coming of the Messiah or at least a great prophet,” he would have shaken his head pensively and answered something like this: “If you are saying it is***high***time, then you are in the right; but otherwise you are not. The years left to us for the manifestation of a prophet are numbered and are slipping rapidly away.”

In worldly and efficient Rome, pursuing its explicit goals ruthlessly, consistentlyand systematically, cultured paganism had risen to its unprecedented world-encompassing zenith. The severely religious, proudly pagan principle on which this power was founded was embodied, as it were, in the Caesar family; those presumed favourites of Roman divinity were its representatives on earth and they comported themselves accordingly.

For the peoples under the yoke this subjugation to Rome – from a secular point of view – was a benefit, even under the Caesars, but for Israel and its hopes it posed a much greater threat. A new, brilliant, rigidly structured era was on the advance, one that made all Israel’s hopes of its God leadingIsraelto become a beacon for all peoples appear to be vain and childish fantasies.

If the world situation threatened to stifle all Israel’s great hopes in its breast, it did appear to offer tempting compensation as the new direction the world was taking was for no one else more beneficial than for the resourceful Jews, schooled as they were by iron doctrine. The confederation of synagogues spanning the whole civilized world gave them an economic advantage over other peoples. Thus the world lay at their feet, beckoning them to use the natural intellectual legacy of clarity of vision and strength of will bequeathed to them by their forefathers to their ***economic*** advantage and to interpret the “bountiful era”, foretold by the prophets, in an “intellectual” (as one prefers to call it today) way, as pertaining to material gain, that is, to wealth; and to see in the lustre of their prosperity the fulfilment of that same promise – or at least to console themselves thoroughly for its non-fulfilment.

A further danger threatened in that the terrain prepared by God for the historic development of salvation, the independence of Israel, was sooner or later to be overrun or engulfed by the Roman state. A repetition of the Babylonian captivity loomed, this time one without end. Jerusalem did not have to go to Babylon, but Babylon came to Jerusalem, spiritually and politically.

Thus the Jews found themselves under foreign rule, under the ***family ofHerod*** which through the grace of Caesar and his house had been raised from the darkness of an insignificant mountain people of Edom to the throne, and then soon after – at least in Judah– directly under Rome and Caesar himself. Only in matters of religion were they – thanks to the utterly fearless tenacity with which they defended their law, their honour of God – permitted to retain their freedom and independence. This freedom was used in a wonderful way, a way unique in the world until that time, so that people belonging to different geographic kingdoms and subject to different rulers voluntarily submitted to a mutual, spiritual superior authority which reigned in the name of God, and this not without severity.

The foundation of this authority was based on two sacred institutions, one ancient and one from a more recent era, respectively, the ***temple*** and the ***synagogue***. Both had their own official guardians and custodians – priests in the temple and scribes in the synagogues.

The temple, in which God had promised to be close to his people, was the heart of Israel. The religious service was only partially related to ours. Preaching, for instance, was not known. In its essence, it dealt less with feeling than with ***law***; a disquisition of the rightful relationship between God and his people. This proceeded in a grave, profoundly devout and precisely determined manner, but – as we know – did not exclude hymns of praise accompanied by powerful music and holy festivals which could often be (as in the case of the Feast of Tabernacles) very joyous affairs. This festival in particular made it possible for the people of Israel to congregate from all parts of the world in a way unknown to all other peoples. The priests held sway in the temples, which were not accessible to the people. One had to be ***born*** to the priesthood. Whosoever (Jesus, for example) was not a scion of the House of Aaron was never permitted to enter the sacred portals and had no possibility of becoming a priest. The individual priests therefore were only the virtual representatives of ***the*** high priest who “carried the sins of the multitude” and who “represented Israel before God”.

We believe today that within the priesthood at the time of Jesus, a patrician group who claimed descent from the “House of Tzadok” held sway. This was a priestly sect which according to the Holy Scriptures (Ezekiel 44:15) had proved faithful to the Lord through times of difficulty and whose progenitor Tzadok had shown the House of David unfailing loyalty. They called themselves Tzadok’s Children, or Sadducees. They were an aristocratic group of people – their manner towards their superiors, those in power (who of course could bestow high priesthood), was unctuous and obsequious, towards their inferiors proud, severe and aloof. What was happening “in the countryside” was of little interest to them. We encounter them outside the walls of Jerusalem only very seldom and only if there was a very good reason for it.[[1]](#footnote-2) A genteel fear of anything effusive and fantastic on the one hand, and on the other the need to remain on good terms with pagan culture – with which their elevated status brought them into contact – might sadly have been the reason that their views (namely those dealing with the afterlife) oftentimes came perilously close to disbelief.

Over this granite-likesubstructure, the immutable temple worship service based on divine decree, there rose, slender and light, a superstructure of a free human institution for the further fulfilment of religious need – the synagogue. This stems from the time of the Babylonian captivity when the temple, the sanctuary, lay in ruins; over time the synagogue had undergone an unforeseen development. For those living at a great distance from the temple, the synagogue at least partly made up for its absence; in many casesit offered that which the press offers us today and was the heart of the religious community. Through the synagogue, the Sabbath was spiritualized and could attain its full significance;through it every Jew could gain knowledge of the Holy Scriptures; through it the feeling of belonging to a family – fostered by the temple with its feast days – permeated throughout the whole community and was regarded as something local and to be cherished; through it the abidingcommunion of prayer with God, as represented by the temple, was brought to the consciousness of the individual at the place of his abode. Through it also, new fields were opened to the noble desire to impart religious knowledge to others by those who strove for higher things. This was possible as the temple was absolutely closed to non-Aaronites. In the synagogue, freedom of speech existed in a manner that would have been impossible for the church to emulate as it wasforbidden. This proved to be greatly beneficial for Jesus and the apostles also. The scribe was the professional speaker and leader of the religious service in the synagogue.

In a similar way to that of the priests of the Sadducees, a form of spiritual association had achieved a ruling position – the brotherhood, or league, of “Pharisees” (those “set apart”, or perhaps “the exact, the precise ones”). With extraordinary tenacity and remarkable success they sought to keep the people within the compass of sacred customs and ideas, unfortunately – as we know now – in a very marginal way. Their idea was to organize an Israel within Israel by segregating, as they put it, “…this people who knoweth not the law are cursed” (John 7:49) from the others who represented a league of the true Israel. This endeavour was completely alien to the whole spirit of Israel which had always been addressed and treated by God as one people;alien also to the spirit of the prophets. Jesus called this attempt “…a plant,which my heavenly Father hath not planted…” (Matthew 15:13) and saw no justification nor future for it. The ruling delusion of the Pharisees and the people as a whole (who revered them greatly) appeared to be that in ***their*** case everything was just as it should be; they were seen as the quintessence of the true Israelite.Today, we can hardly imagine how difficult it must have been for Jesus to counter this complacent, supposedly biblical righteousness.

The priests, among them the Sadducees, and the scribes under whom the Pharisees had attained their ruling position were the shepherds of the people. From both groups a new authority arose, a high council called the Great Sanhedrin composed of seventy-one “high priests and elders”. Arranged around this central authority, numerous synods (of seven members each) officiated in the country. Matthew spoke disparagingly of these councils (Matthew 10:17).

Thus, in spite of foreign rule, the people lived according to their own strict and sacred laws and remained faithful to their unity as a people of God throughout various fragmentations under different rulers. It was probably precisely because they found a new replacement for their loss of bourgeois independencein their sacred law, that the warmer, more lively elements of the people became all the more loyal, zealous and devoted to the same. Rapture for the law and pleasure in obeying it blanketed the entire people like autumn sunshine.

One could, if one wanted to renounce Israel’s innermost significance, feel complacent and say, “What is eternal is the law, we will devote ourselves to that; the other, the promise, we will turn our backs on.”

Essentially, this is what happened. Hope remained, but without an inward connection to religious life it led – as it were – a separate existence. That unified, innocent awareness of the connection ofthe living God, the Saviour,to His people – this retreated into the memories of the past as a belief in fundamentalism and in envisioning the future as related to the coming of the Messiah. For the ***present***, however, for real life, the religion of Israel had been reduced to the level of pure***legislation***.

A closer look at how this type of “legislative Israeli culture” developed and its significance in light of the Old Testament is valuable in gaining an understanding of the work of Jesus. The beginnings reach back to the time of the restoration of the temple after the Babylonian captivity, at the time when prophecies fell silent with the last prophet Malachi, and the prophetic books came to an involuntary end.It was a period of rapid decline, as we can read in those prophets, according to whom God, as the revelation, unequivocallywithdrew, possibly forever (cf. Malachi). A period of declinedescended on Israel, a timeregarded as an “evil time”. It hadoften been experienced before but was formerly only of temporary duration. Israel was no longer witness to the living God. That “God does not answer us” once perceived as “abandonment of Israel” now became the ***rule***. “We see not our signs: *there is* no more any prophet…” is ***perhaps*** the lament from that time[[2]](#footnote-3) (Psalm 74:9)

It was a peculiar situation: One had the Holy Scriptures which told of God’s former relationship to his people; one refreshed and strengthened oneself with them, but the ***thing*** mentioned was no longer in one’s ***possession***. The situation gradually arose, and was essentially being actively worked towards, of losing a true understanding of the sacred experience of theancestors. One was thus in a new religious state; one of ***memory***,and not of ***possession***. In the First Book of the Maccabees (9:27, 4:46, 14:41) one can discern the nostalgia for an earlier time but in a manner which clearly reveals how much the understanding of such sacred things had diminished. One hoped against hope that “a prophet”[[3]](#footnote-4) would come again. But to do what? So that he would make dispositions on cultural laws and constitution! This is how far the main focal point of the religion had become removed from ***life***, from inner transformation before God, and moved towards a legislative cult. Also, so clumsy were the concepts with regard to a prophet that they thought if one should come, he would immediately find “official” public acceptance! As if not exactly the opposite had always been the case!

Thus, the spiritual life of Israel, as described by the Holy Scriptures, became imbued with a completely new and strange character.

The innocence and elemental strength with which people as a whole had always accepted that they must pay penance to the wrath and punishment of God and seek His presence – this had vanished. One had learned to do without the great Acts of God and to live in the absence of them; the emphasis shifted to one’s own acts, to the law, to – due to this severance of a connection with the living God – a very ***superficial*** morality which also shifted the emphasis of religious life from an observance of the great whole onto the individual person. Thus the foundation of that ancient belief“And Israel cried to God” was slowly losing spiritual ground and therewith also the power of ***truly*** moving, in a religious way, the justified hopes of a “cry to God” in people’s hearts. Hope did not die, as mankind always loves to hope, but it lacked spirituality in many cases; partly a dead desire, partly a superstitious game for envisioning the future.

One could classify the hopeful ones in Israel at that time into three categories: Firstly, the simple folk; secondly, the biblical scholars and scribes; thirdly, those whom I would like to call the “true Israelites”. These groups were to correspond to three different types of hope: thehope of the people; the hope that is taught; and the biblical hope.

Israel felt drawn to hope for two different reasons: due to its ***history*** and due to the Prophecy or ***promise***. The former, history, permeated naturally much deeper and more directly throughout the people than the latter, which is why we call this type of hope thehope of the people. Throughout its entire long history, Israel has always experienced succour from God in response to its cry in times of trouble and therefore felt justified, nay, the debt of gratitude demanded it, to continually expect redress. God had always called forth prophets. This is why they naturally hoped that a prophet would ultimatelyappear again.The longer their hopes remained unfulfilled, the more they began to speak of “the” prophet they awaited and not of “a” prophet (John 1:21).

In particular, Israel had justification in hoping that God would give it ***national independence***again, hopes based on lessons such as the Flight from Egypt, the Rule of the Judges, the victories of Saul and David, Hezekiah’s experiences, the return from Babel; in short, the largest part, and almost the most glorious part, of Israel’s history relates of such aid from God. During the time of the Maccabees this desire for independence was fulfilled, they had a ruler who was one of the Children of Israel. Whether or not he was from the House of David was more a matter between God and the House of David than between God and the people of Israel.This is why the Apocrypha, originating from this period, does not mention the hope for a “Christ”. However, when the Maccabees had to yield to the family of Herod, the desire and hope for a lawful ruler raised its head once again (as at the time of the Babylonian captivity), a ruler who first and foremost should be from Israel. In addition to being from Israel, however, the new ruler should not only appear bya fortuitouscircumstance as in the case of the Maccabeerulers, but should be one called, authorized and appointed by God. This is – I think – what is meant by “anoint the most Holy” (Daniel 9:24) and “the Messiah the Prince” (Daniel 9:25). The word anointed stands in opposition to unanointed, i.e. kings who rose to power, unlawfully or otherwise secularly – without God’s particular decree for Israel. The word “Christ”, Messiah (the Anointed), became the general expression, embodying all the desires and hopes of Israel.

The word is not to be found anywhere else in the Prophecy; in Isaiah 61:1, the unbiased reader (at least if ignoring the later division into chapters) will hardly have an impression other than that Isaiah, after promising the most splendid, tremendous and “unbelievable” things, continues in the same breath – and I am not fantasizing or exercising poetic license: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings to the meek…” (Isaiah 61:1). What he is heralding is to come to pass eventually, but the herald is **himself**.

If the word “Christ” is to be found nowhere elsein the Prophecy, except in David, in this form meaning hope, it can be found elsewhere as pertaining a great deal more to the ***thing***, or better, the ***person*** who is being thus designated. It is in this ideal of hope that the preachings of hope throughout ***history*** and those of the ***Prophecy*** come into contact. Sacred history moved towards the goal of human history that God had set Himself and revealed to us as a promise in the Prophecy with all the force of an inherent natural law;this despite mankind acting of free will and not excluding error, regression and decline. A ruler, whom history until then had been justified in hoping for, was explicitly ***promised*** butwas of a magnificence and splendour far, far exceeding anything Israel had experienced before. Thus the naïve hope of the common people and the enlightened hope, nurtured by the Bible, of the more spiritual Israelites came together under the name of “Christ”. When later Peter says to Jesus, “Thou art the Christ” (Matthew 16:16) we can see both forms of hope united in this acknowledgement. In Jesus he sees both ***history***and the ***Prophecy***fulfilled. “In you our holy history has achieved the aim for which it has struggled and you are the one promised by Prophecy.” As the name “Christ” has served in an exemplary manner to introduce the interrelation between Jesus and the Old Testament, we are now justified in expounding on – and also obliged to expound on – the history and the significance of this concept in the Old Testament.

The concept had its roots in the curious interrelation in which God stood with the people of Israel. The Israelites’ hope and belief stemmed not from the individual “I” but from the people as a whole. Israel as a people had been called into being by God for a higher purpose, a God who stood close by it and in whom it could repeatedly experience the living God and the Holy One. Thus of its own accord a call came to create a holy order and structure, through which this generalized relationship of God to His people was imparted to the individual. God accomplished this partly in a structured way and partly in a free manner through His servants, these were in the main the high priest and “his brothers”, the priests. Through him and his associates the standing of every individual before God was to be safeguarded in its truth and sanctity and to be renewed if necessary. Thus he was first and foremost a representative of the history of the ***conscience*** of his people before God. However, originally he represented – according to law – God as the supreme ruler over all, but not with the power of his own free discretion but only as a transmitter of revelation. This revelation – and here we see the similarity to conscience – did not extend to new thoughts and ideas, but answered only yes or noto any questions asked.

It was inherent in the nature of this sacred profession that it did not offer its bearers the freedom of a free unfolding and recognition of their own personality. The fact that this office – and ***only*** regularly and according to law – was handed down through anointment is associated with the nature of the office; insofar as it symbolized that the significance of the priest lay not in what he himself was, but what was bestowed upon him by the office. The free life of Israel did not, therefore, manifest or unfold itself in his person but culminated naturally in rulers (judges, kings) and when these deviated from God, God neglected Israel‘s superficial history to initiate spiritual truth in the form of the prophet. Samuel united these three forms of the pastorate in the freest and most spiritual way (he was not a high priest, not even from the House of Aaron, but only a Levite). However, neither his people nor his house was sufficiently advanced for this ideal pastorate to take on a permanent form. The people demanded a prince of a markedly secular character (a layman governance in contrast to Samuel).

God then commanded that the youthful Saul be ***anointed*** as king. What does this mean now?

The most outstanding, pioneering servants of God were not anointed to their service by another but ***called*** by God through explicit revelation (Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah).[[4]](#footnote-5) Originally, the anointment appears to have been handed down (from Moses to Aaron, from Samuel to Saul and the boy David, from Elijah to Elisha). A transmission such as this was the case in Saul’s anointment by Samuel but had a significance transcending both individuals. In Saul’s anointment God is answering the people’s demand for “a prince, such as the ***other heathens*** have”. He affirmed this, inasmuch as He acknowledged the princedom as a permanent institution for the future; but denying it also by proclaiming this profession to be a sacred one, which would remain under His influence whether they liked it or not.

The significance of anointing a king was illuminated in the choice of David and through David’s clear understanding of this significance. David, a layman through and through in the best sense of the word, invested with the governance of rough reality and still intrinsically priestly, understood that to rule is a service to God, a service as holy as the priesthood. The sacred character, the divine significance that the ruling power had assumed under Samuel could now be confirmed, in David, as a permanent feature. David completely honoured and embraced the divine significance of the anointment as well as his own divine significance, as imparted to him thus. He recognized that with the anointment God had made him the shepherd of the people of Israel, and from now onhe was responsible for this to God and blessed by Him. He was now the heart of the body of Israel; he was the bearer of the life history of his people and embodied the ***task*** he had been set. To carry out this task, for which a human life would not be long enough to complete, his call in its entirety became significantonly when God confirmed this for his ***whole house***. In addition to the House of Aaron, which administered the divine covenant with Israel, even in its innermost significance***over*** it, the House of David rose up as the bearer of a divine-human history on earth. Here, a second aspect throws light onto the meaning of “the Lord’s Anointed”. If the Israelite’s hopes and dreams are not for himself alone but for his people as a whole, then he rises above the evanescence of his days, above the fleeting moment. Israel as a people does not die and in the same way its earthly leader, “the Lord’s Anointed”, is for the people, as well as for each bearer of this name, a permanent power, sublimely elevatedabove the passage of the ages. This is not only the manner in which every people and every ruling house regard themselves, but it is also uniquely different. Israel is called by God, yes, created by Him as His servant in order to initiate the salvation of the people, a new epoch, a divine epoch. This is why Israel does not see the future as a downfall but rather as a victory. A victory of God on earth. And, as this task devolves on the House of David, or on “the Lord’s Anointed”,as the bearer of the task, this eternal character is thus assumed. As long as Israel remains faithful and true it will have its abiding “Lord’s Anointed”. Thus the current bearer of this name is merely the representative of an ideal, timeless person through whom God will lead His cause to victory. What God says to the respective living Lord’s Anointed (e.g. Psalm 2) is not directed atthe individual, temporal figure but to the “office” of the Lord’s Anointed. Thus, this Lord’s Anointed prevailed through all the changes of fortune in Israel’s history as a perpetual power on whom the pious Israelite pinned all his hopes and desires for the great whole. Psalm 89:48expresses serious doubts regarding the final salvation of the whole world if God should withdraw the promised help from His anointed one (obviously not merely the current individual but this Godly institution itself).

It is in the essential nature of this timeless office that it would call for a holder in whom this idea would be entirely embodied: the consummate one who would fulfil the task and thus, logically, be the last. Here history with its inherent growth meets with the Prophecy.

How did the Israelite imagine this ideal, eternal figure - the Lord’s Anointed? With today’s mentality, we would simply imagine a timeless institution, proof against all winds of change; and if we imagine a divine appointment to achieve only great and true ***actualities*** then at least ***one*** aspect of the concept would be expressed as stated in Psalm 2:6, “Yet I have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion”. Luther uses the word “appointed” in his translation, indicating the permanent, unchanging form underlying the varying individual manifestations.[[5]](#footnote-6) However, the plenitude of the concept is not yet exhausted. Today we know that Jesus, the “last”, the consummate “Lord’s Anointed”, is older than all his predecessors. This means that this consummate Anointed is not only an idea but a person prevailing behind the veil of visibility. However, the Israelites did not know this, as it is not the customary behaviour of the divine or sacred to herald their presence before the correct time or without reason. This truth, though, in an incipient way, had been entrusted to the chosen ones by God in a lightly veiled form, namely when in Psalm 110 one anointed by God, a king, speaks of what the Lord told ***his***lord, that is, the ideal anointed one. In Micah 5:2, the one who is to come is not ***explained*** but is assumed to be ***knownalready***, the one who will be “ruler in Israel” and “whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.”

Hoping for an ideal Lord’s Anointed, “I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession” (Psalm 2:8), ***history’s*** sermon of hope links with that of the Prophecy. The latter also promises a victor from the House of David who will resolve the previous significance of everything and who will erect the eternal kingdom of God. The Prophecy, of course, does not call him the “Messiah” or “the Anointed” as long as there was still a Lord’s Anointed, until in ***Daniel*** (9:25).Thenceforward, it became the expression of the longing for a resurgence of this Godly office as well as for the appearance of the promised ruler. Thus, this ***single*** word conveyed the evident longing of the people for a divinely appointed ruler in a clear and explicit relation with the highest goals of the Prophecy; providing a bond between the latter and the practical needs of the present, as well as serving to glorify the wishes and hopes arising from the evil situation of the time. This explains how gradually the name Messiah, or Christ, embodying the simple hope of the people became the name for ***him*** whom God had promised to the ancestors.

Of course, this glorifying influence was only partially effective. The hope based on the Prophecy, the hope of the bible scholars, was not always of the right kind. I would like to call it, insofar as it was a purely human, worldly hope, and to differentiate it from that drawn only from history, as hope that was ***taught***. The Prophecy became regarded as more akin to fortune-telling, as a handbook telling the story of the future, and it was believed that one could understand and know exactly how things would come to pass. The greater aspects, however, for the understanding of which a loveof God and for one’s fellow humans is necessary, werecompletely ignored. This resulted in the most scholarly of these scholars of the future,[[6]](#footnote-7)even in the midst of the most holy and turbulent events of fulfilment, not noticinga single thing; yes, they even continually protested against them because they did not correspond to their “handbook of the history of the End of Days”. Thus they had a purportedly precise image of the “End of Days” and were convinced they must wait and hope for a - I don’t know how mechanical – appearance of the same. However, in the meantime they were satisfied with the accustomed and “ordinary” tenor of events and consoled themselves with their law-abidance.

But the broad annals of world history do not usually narrate the most holy, most vital, most promising aspects of an epoch, which is the case here also. In addition to that class of people whom I would like to designate as “those of insufficient hope”, there were also other, unpretentious and modest “true Israelites” who in all naiveté wished to experience again something of what the Holy Scriptures had told them: the return of God’s grace; newtestimonies to a living God; aholy story which was again worthy of being recorded in the holy books, thereby adding ***new*** pages. How differently now ***they*** refreshedthemselves at the fount of the prophecies, how differently now ***they***perused them! The spirit which had written the same now prevailed within them. What did they find? What can we say about the “hope of Israel”? May the following help to throw light on these questions.

**The Biblical Hope**

Striving to understand the hope of those true Israelites will also serve to liberate us from the one-sidedness of our entrenched conception of the Prophecy of the Old Testament. It was no less a person than Luther who led us to this understanding. When he raised the Holy Scriptures from the dust in which they lay and – with only meagre means at his disposal – attempted to understand the Prophecy, his healthy common sense led him to discover a fundamental tenet which served extremely well initially in throwing light on the subject and avoiding unproductive interpretations. The tenet was: To explain the Prophecy based on the ***fulfilment*** as recorded in the New Testament and based in particular on the person of Jesus.

This was cause for great relief; similar to that experienced by a pupil who receives the answer along with the mathematical problem he has been given. However, this involves a similar hazard. It does not allow the complete originality of the Prophecy to unfold its free and unbiased effect.

Both the life of Jesus and the promise now stand forth in a new light and again receive in full measure the significance due to them which had formerly been curtailed. The whole gravity of the work of Jesus only becomes recognizable when we see him contend to make things ***become***; when, in our eyes, it has not already been decided how it will come to pass before his appearance and without his intervention. The gravity of this, his work, is illuminated when we see how he accepts the goals and tasks he has been set in the Prophecy, but also how the achievement of and solution to these are the subject of his struggle.

The essence of the promise, however, manifests itself again in all its authenticity in those who are not yet fulfilled; that is, if we do not force ourselves to the arbitrary and artificial assumption that it is “essentially” fulfilled by the coming of Jesus and his life story until the Ascension and Pentecost and, therefore, was dealt with 1800 years ago[[7]](#footnote-8). (Peter, for instance, did not think this [2 Peter 1:19]). We begin to see that yet more, and greater, tasks must be fulfilled by Jesus than has been the case up till now. His life story is not yet ended; He continues his work and expects collaboration from us in our belief in him and in the promise and in the yearning hope that the promise will be fulfilled.

Now let us put ourselves in the shoes of those Israelites full of hope for whom the means of clarification, “the transpired fulfilment”, was not yet at hand! We will then be able not only to judge the Prophecy more independently, but also the history of Jesus (for the main part justifiably called the fulfilment) and to differentiate between the two.

The Prophecy, running like a red thread through the Old Testament from almost the first page, has its source in God’s divine and fatherly communion with humankind through the medium of His servants and condenses all humankind down through the ages into ***one*** person, His story into ***one*** life story with a clear and sublime goal. This clear view into the most distant future, imparted by God, is something so great that we can only grasp at how, for instance, God recalled it to the minds of the despondent peoples of the Babylonian Captivity while emphasizing that only ***He*** had the power to herald the future. But with His words, God had reached down to the level of humankind: ***He*** almost wants to prove that He is God and no other. Actually, the phrase “herald the future” is not the best description for the Prophecy. The Prophecy depicts God as dependent on what occurs, as if He were not the actual cause of what occurs, as if all that remained to Him was the fact that He ***knew*** it in advance. This is the stance taken by the alleged soothsayers. From this perspective, everything that happens, happens due to “destiny”, as if this were a book of the future already written and they, the soothsayers, are able to read it.

The divine Prophecy is different; it is more natural, more sacred, more simple.It is made up of two parts: the main part is the ***promise***; an additional part is the ***prediction***, the Prophecy in a narrower sense.

The promise is a way of making predictions for the future which in mankind is a natural habit. It is a fruitful means of, on the one hand, letting the future have an effect on the present and, on the other, of working towards making real what has been determined for the future. The promise is God’s hand stretched out to humankind, who, if they so wish, can take it. It is, as often described (e.g. Isaiah 40:8) particularly as God’s***word***, much as we say, “a man’s word is his bond” or “a promise is a promise” (word = promise). The word of God is a thing of value for humankind, the value of which depends on how much credence they attach to this word.

This “word” does not claim to determine humankind’s free will in the manner of an ironclad destiny; it is merely made available to people. It strives and urges in silence for its fulfilment but does not coerce. The promised word on Solomon, for instance, is expressed as “sleeping”. If Solomon is faithful then God will “awaken” the word.

This is primarily why – because for fulfilment the other part, the human, must contribute and because this part is very ***unreliable*** –another type of Prophecy is advantageous and necessary, the ***prediction***. The prediction refers quite particularly to the obstacles that humankind will lay in the path of the fulfilment of the promise. The prediction is to present in the proper light the imminent deferment of the fulfilment or apparent non-fulfilment of the promise.

What is the ***content*** of the ***promise***, the subject of the hope of Israel?

The content of the promise is made up of two great things:

1. A great ***victory*** for God’s concerns on earth
2. A ***victor***, through whom this victory shall ***happen***

It is in the nature of things that the ***former***, the victory, is named first – it is the intended ***purpose***; the second, the victor, is the ***means*** through which this purpose is to be accomplished.

In the very first promise we encounter in the Bible, in the word of God to the serpent (1 Moses 3:15) this victory is promised in all its glory: a complete and final victory of ***mankind*** over the serpent gained with pain and mortal peril. If the serpent has outwitted and overcome mankind, led it to renounce God and chained it to himself, has “caused enmity between God and the woman”, then God wants to come to mankind’s aid and replace in its mind the implanted poison of enmity towards God with the power of hatred towards the serpent– “put hatred between the serpent and the woman”. A battle is to take place which will end with a complete victory by mankind and the destruction of the temptation, that temptress from the kingdom of death. That only a single individual will gain this victory is not stated here, but is also not precluded.

Redemption for the fall from grace, complete reconciliation with God, restoration of the creation in its original state where “behold, it was very good”, this is the great task that God set Himself and which He places foremost as a promise in the bible. Yes, it is actually established in the very first words of the bible, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”. A divine order of things where sin and death have disappeared and mankind, reconciled with God, is placed in complete union with God – that is God’s objective. It will not manifest in the manner of something that is going to occur beyond the history of the world, but as something that is to conclude the history of the world. Yes, this work of God is the only fruitful substance of the history of the world, it is also the substance of the bible which for this reason tells the history of Israel because in this the only true ***progress*** , namely progress towards ***this*** goal, is to be found. This goal and God’s working to achieve it,this is ***Christianity***, as long as we do not understand Christianity as merely the certain natures of individual people but as the great acts of God.

It is clear that this first promise promises much more than has ever been fulfilled up to today.

We can see a similarity to this first promise when God speaks to Abraham, 1 Moses 12:1ff.: “In thee (later: “by your seed”) shall all families of the earth be blessed.” The ultimate purpose is the same, a blessing for all families; the instrument for achieving this purpose is described as a “***people***”, a great family, but not yet as a single individual.[[8]](#footnote-9)

This aspiration now appears in the auguries of the prophets, namely Isaiah 2:40-66, but also elsewhere, in more light, in a greater and better development and at the forefront of all promises – the glorious Last Days, a transition to a purely divine state of affairs is promised. A time which will appear, not with legendary abruptness but in a human and historical manner, although wonderfully and rapidly and bringing glory. The Saviour found a name for this goal, He called it the ***Kingdom*** or, actually, the ***Royal Dominion, of God***.

If this goal comprises one focus of the entire bible, another focus is the ***Saviour***, or the instrument of God, through whom the goal is to ***be*** ultimately achieved.

More in the background of the Prophecy rather than this foremost idea of the goal, but nevertheless increasingly apparent, is the image of a wonder child as a gift to us from God; or more specifically, a son of David who, in the royal manner, will bring about this new era and administer it.

Here now, where fulfilment shines in the Prophecy, we must remember what we have said about the relation between fulfilment, promise and Prophecy.

When the Saviour, in the distress of his suffering, says, “How else will the word be fulfilled!” he is thinking more of the promise than of the Prophecy. He would have been thinking less ***that*** one must say “How everything has to come to pass at the right time” than of the fact that all conditions must be fulfilled for the ultimate eventuation of what had been promised. On the nature of these conditions, however, the Prophecy threw some light. As already mentioned, this Prophecy appears less frequently as a direct discourse from God and more often as revelations from the Holy Spirit that were bestowed on the prophet and were often experiences or conclusions from events that had taken place or from the prophet’s own experiences.

In this sense, all holy history is essentially – even if the narrative does not explicitly say so – prophetic provided it reveals the character that the flawed, hostile-to-God nature of mankind imprints on the struggle for the kingdom. In the manner in which those such as Abel, Noah, (who was not heeded), Joseph, Moses and others fared, this is how he who will ultimately lead the struggle to victory will also fare. What David suffered, according to Psalms 22 and 41, this one will suffer the same, even if there is not a breath of this mentioned in the aforementioned Psalms. However, this is not all; because this ultimate victor is the main figure towards which everything is aimed and those earlier, faintly drawn figures serve only to foreshadow this greater one, then actually the reverse is the case. It is not their sufferings that are reflected in his, but his retrospectively in theirs; and so, for instance, the Psalms again attain a consciously prophetic touch. Thus to a certain degree the Prophecy becomes the promise again, inasmuch as it gives an indication of the ***obstacles*** which are counterpoised to the fulfilment of the promise.

This is the reason that for God, or before God, the Prophecy does not, as it were, have the same binding strength as the promise and why it is not heralded by God so loudly and directly as the promise. On the contrary, it is couched in uncertain terms, shrouded in mystery, and almost under seal. This distinct connection with the promise, which we understood with an almost formal exactitude to follow the fulfilment, was not to be revealed to anyone before the fulfilment. It should not be the case that God would attach the stipulation to His glorious promise that “you will do it thus and thus”, as if we must then carry it out in this way. God does not want to design and rule human history by force, but truly; if mankind had such foreknowledge and was bound to this knowledge then any true history would be made impossible. While one can say of the promise that it should and must be fulfilled, one could say of the Prophecy, when it is fulfilled, that “it ***must***” but hardly “it ***should*** have come to pass”. But it does not insist, particularly under duress, even when it is demanded that it should be fulfilled. One can frequently apply Hieronymus’s beautiful “*praedicit, non* ut *veniat, sed* ne *veniat*” (God pronounces, not that it ***comes*** but that it comes ***not***). Amos 7 strongly illuminates this.

The contrast in which promise and prediction often stand to one another due to the disparity in their divine destiny can be seen in Matthew. Jesus can and ***should*** be brought up as David’s son. He was offered to God’s city of Jerusalem as he was born in Bethlehem and there divinely attested, but it came to pass differently, as it ***must*** and as foreseen by him. He became a “Nazarene”, that is, a disdained figure, one afflicted with the insignia of the insignificant. He could and “should” be recognized by Jerusalem as the Messiah and thus entered Jerusalem in a way ostentatiously reminiscent of the promise (Zechariah 9:9), but it came to pass otherwise: The daughters of Zion, instead of rejoicing, crucified him and yet, it came to pass as it (according to the Prophecy) “***must***”.

A clear example for our observation is Isaiah 53.[[9]](#footnote-10)

We now know – after the fulfilment – most certainly and clearly that it is the Saviour, but in the place itself any indication is lacking (which would have been so natural!) that the person in question is one and the same with the king’s son promised in Isaiah 7-12. Yes, the appellation “my servant”, “servant of the Lord” is used in such different ways in those chapters that the question posed by the Ethiopian treasurer “of whom speaketh the prophet this? Of himself or of some other man?” (Acts 8:34) becomes quite understandable and even today still preoccupies some scholars. In those chapters the prophet has gained insight as to the divine significance of being a prophet and, in the above-mentioned chapter 53, into the hidden meaning of suffering inherent in this. In this light he sees more and more clearly the figure of the great prophet at whose cost the curse of Israel and the world will be turned away. He senses himself that this person is ***one*** with the wonder child and the king’s son, Isaiah 7-12, but is unable to bring both images into a uniform picture. He has presumably not received ***particular illumination*** from God on this matter, and ***more***, when God told him he did not dare to know and even less to speak. As we now know – after the fulfilment – that the wonder king did not arise in hisentire actuality until after the resurrection and that he had fulfilled the Prophecy of Isaiah 53 beforehand as a prophet in the guise of a servant, crucified. However, before the fulfilment one could hardly have known this, and this was as it should be. One circumstance served particularly to veil the ***prophetic character*** of this chapter until it had been fulfilled. ***Formally*** it does not describe something that ***will*** happen but something that ***has*** happened. We, as the fulfilment now lies in our past, do not realize this, but it was hidden from readers in the pre-Christian era that here there was something that ***would*** happen, and that is the way it should be.

Presumably, these great hopes usually resided only in the hearts of a few, mainly the prophets, for whom insight was not only for the satisfaction of their curiosity but had become consolation for hearts troubled by the suffering of the present and as an answer to the supplication for the whole, to a struggle striving against becoming part of the general ruin. The lament of the hopeful before God, that they were derided for their hope with the question “Where is thy God?” (Psalm 42, Micah 7, Habakkuk 7 etc.), recurs repeatedly. The prophets began to ***write*** down their knowledge for ***posterity*** because they found so few sympathetic ears and little understanding in their own world.

At the time Jesus was born, things were different and seemingly better. People knew and believed everything. But how much more their belief had become a thing of system and theory and less of a thing of the heart was shown to us by Matthew with a ***single*** stroke of his quill; after the announcement that the child Messiah had been born “Herod… was troubled and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3). It was just this, which the majority of people were in their hearts afraid of – a return of the testimony to the living God. For a very few in the land this was the subject of their profound yearning and increasingly confident hope. It is the nature, that is, the truth of the holy story that they soon ***had*** a part of that which they hoped for. God had remained the same, ready to attest Himself before His people. And here we have Simeon in particular, presumably a simple burger. “The spirit of God was upon him (επαυτον)”, he had God’s attention on him and it entered into him. This was already a dawning. A Pharisee might perhaps say “Well yes, every righteous man must in a way have the spirit of God”, but this was something else again and the effect it had proved this. He waited for a “consolation of Israel” – that is, something not necessarily specific but only generally for what was the most crying need, a return of God’s grace. But this was not all. He reminds us of Daniel. After Jerusalem has been in ruins for seventy years, seemingly irredeemably swept from the face of the earth and “only” a word of promise given to the prophet Jeremiah, hope for resurrection after seventy years was now offered, but the number of Jews who only ***wished*** to be allowed to return from Babel had shrunk greatly. (As the metropolis and the Jew appear to be made for one another.) Then it was ***Daniel***who vouched for his whole people before God and did penance. Here Simeon saw the desire for the promised salvation dwindling away, and the more he saw this, the more ***his*** desire for the ***greatest***, for the promised Saviour grew. It was evidently not of his own volition, it was a compulsion from God that came over him to assume this post and to fulfil it. “Lord, now” – he said, as he finally experienced it, surely with the feeling of finally having finished a difficult and heavy task – “lettest thou thy servant depart in peace (δεοποτα)”. The pledge received from the Holy Spirit perhaps throws a curious light into the world of his thoughts. Death and the Lord’s Anointed are both items which the pledge deals with. Death is the enemy of those who hope, and seemingly the eternal victor. “And shall I die before having seen ***his*** conqueror?” - “…he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord’s Christ”. His description of what was hoped for is witness to how ***spiritual*** his hope was: “…thy salvation which thou hast prepared… a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel”.

The small group of those in Jerusalem waiting for “a salvation” were drawn to him as well as to Hannah. Hannah, that very old widow, was also part of these newer times. After all, she was a prophet, even though this was known only to a few. The fact that she forgot to sleep and eat when she was at prayer (for which there was no lack of material) is evidence of a rich and powerful spiritual life.

Whether or not Zechariah, who as a priest was placed much higher on society’s scale, was close to this circle we do not know. His hopes still retain a somewhat patriotic and political tinge (Luke 1:74) but the depth of their spirituality and profundity is shown, for instance, by his insight into what his people are lacking – namely forgiveness of their sins and the knowledge that this is where salvation lies. And perhaps, if we were to look more closely into his and his wife’s hearts and lives we would recognize that they fared exactly as once did Samuel’s mother; that the joys of parenthood were denied them for so long because they could ***pray*** and had compassion with all Israel and thus, in manner of speaking, the whole spiritual misery of Israel hung on their lives in order to be drawn by them out of the “horrible pit”.

In the same hour that he pleaded Israel’s cause in the temple, the solemn proclamation was made by an angel that now the great time was to commence; his son who would be bestowed upon him in a miraculous way was destined to be the instrument of this new dawning.

Now we leave this circle of hoping ones, whose waiting for the actual ***seeing*** of the confirmation of their hopes would extend over thirty years, and turn our attention to the son of Zechariah, John the Baptist, in whom the beginning of the fulfilment was embodied.

**John the Baptist**

Solitary and enormous, like a great boulder from some primeval mountain falleninto the midst of a populated plain,stood the huge, archaic figure of John the Baptist.

It was a time which could be compared to that of today, a time of flourishing trade, emerging enlightenment, surprising secular advances – a time marked by hedonism as well as moral decline. It was for Israel a quite singular time, as the idea of the appearance of men sent by God seemed to belong to the dark ages of antiquity or to the “legend”.

The sad condition of the Holy Land is described by Luke in his succinct manner by listing the heads of the church and state (Luke 3:1 and 3:2) obviously in the expectation that merely naming Tiberius, Herod, Annas and Caiaphas would be enough to remind his contemporaries of the complete desolation and hopelessness of the situation and the ethos of the times. Anything but a religious re-awakening was to be expected in this era, bearing as it did the imprint of its pattern of deceit, salaciousness and cruelty.

It was during this period that John grew to manhood. Wonderfully heralded and bestowed as a son upon the priest Zechariah in his old age, he emerged from the circle of those who hoped, yes, it was as if he was a fruit of their prayers and yearning, the heir to their hopes. Apparently he remained in his parents’ house (in the priestly city of Hebron) as long as was necessary for him to gain that knowledge of the holy past, the holy task and the Holy Scriptures of his people, as well as those hopes that in part culminated in ***his person***, understandings that we later were to know he possessed. However, fairly soon, probably following the deaths of his parents, he felt driven to solitude. “Strong in spirit”, i.e. with a clear conscience, and judging human frailties with divine clarity in the light of God, his youthful disposition was no longer able to bear the impressions of a time which had abandoned God. Perhaps he even feared not being able to withstand the influences over a longer period of time and therefore fled to the desert. The caves of the desert of Judaea are (in that very hot country) quite hospitable asylums which have sheltered refugees of all kinds (David,for instance). Food was supplied by nature (locusts and honey have been mentioned, for example). His needs for jacket, shirt and bed were met by a robe of camel hair, probably inherited, which would also have made him independent of others to make his clothes.

And so he lived, the poorest and yet the richest man on earth, in splendid simplicity and complete self-reliance, independent of other people. For him, this severe, ascetic hermit’s life was not– as is sometimes the case – a futile end in itself or an “act of virtue”. It did not lead him to contemplate life with a self-satisfied, misanthropic attitude either. The advice that he was later to give to the tax collectors and soldiers shows us a healthy and practical man who accepts the conditions of human life as they are without bitterness and in the belief that an inwardly renewed person could develop within everyone. But it was not only this – his heart beat warmly for all his people, moved by their past, present and future. In this he was similar to the man from Tishbe, one of “the inhabitants of Gilead”, one Elijah who became a man of God because he was simply unable to accept the wretchedness of his time and was prepared to do almost anything, to employ almost any force, in order to have an effect on the entire people and to bring about a great change for the better.

We can sense something quintessentially of the common touch in both men, a moral inability to be satisfied with their effect on a small circle of the happily privileged.

Of course, both are isolated to begin with due to the fact that they do not want to be separated spiritually from the people as a whole. They do not want to be drawn by the people; they want to draw the people to themselves. They have ***active*** and original minds.

And it is because they cannot and will not separate their destiny in the highest sense, i.e. their position towards God, from the destiny of their people and their position towards God that they often stand necessarily externally isolated; as in the interplay between their spirit and that of the people, to which they are subjugated by their sentiments. This meant that their spirit would and should never be the inferior, receptive and guided one but always the victorious and dominant one. In their breast was a struggle between both of these spiritual powers which often forced them to withdraw once again into their seclusion. There are many great figures in world history whose wonderful power to sway the moods of the people was also founded on the fact that their spirit appeared to be as one with that of the people or the times, but these only ***appeared*** to rule, in truth they were ***being ruled***, swimming with the current – the ideas fermenting in the great whole would only begin to coalesce with them. In truth they were ***passive*** spirits and those men, Elijah and John the Baptist, were the ***active*** ones.

Thus Elijah, at that time when the Phoenician “enlightenment” or licentiousness threatened to flood the Holy Land and to sweep away the established belief in the living God, strove– with a power almost unique in the whole history of the Old Testament – for a change of front in favour of the belief in God on behalf of the entire people. A goal which he partially achieved, at least for some of the time. Malachi (4:5 and 4:6) characterizes the powerful manner of Elijah’s inspiration, the certainty that need would be felt for such a man, and God would send such a one again, and gives the impression that all the attainments known from history will be fulfilled by this future prophet.

 “He (the future prophet) shall go before him (as did Elijah) to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children” (i.e. return religion to an attribute of men and not of children, so that men would defer to that which filled the hearts of the children, and that the religion of the children finds its way to the fathers. In other words, the spirit of the descendants will turn towards that of the early times so that a divine history on earth, a closeness to God, is not regarded, or, if you prefer, honoured, as a thing of the past, but as something that ***today*** is justified in being felt and experienced in all its strength.)

In the words of the angel to Luke (1:17) this has been interpreted as “turn […] the disobedient to the wisdom of the just” which Luther, for his part, again takes to mean that the trite cleverness of “non-belief” would be completely revealed in all its hollowness and the “non-believers turned to the wisdom of the just”.

Such active men of the people can only be imagined if they act in a ***divine*** spirit. Only what is divine, what is solely right and ***helped from above*** is capable of victoriously countering the vehemence of the entire mood of the times. Such men – and I think of John the Baptist here – are the flowering of true humanity, but a flowering that cannot mature without a particular divine effect. In order to not only avoid and flee a time of ruin, as we normal human beings do, but to actually grapple with it and to conquer it, necessitates an extraordinary power of spirit, namely in the biblical meaning of the word. In the Bible, spirit is what is eternal, divine in us, that which strives towards God, embraces God, the root of belief and divine wisdom. This is why the ***spirit*** is always emphasized in the case of John and Elijah. (John will come in the ***spirit*** and strength of Elijah, John is strong and complete in ***spirit***, and John will be filled with holy ***spirit*** in his mother’s womb).

John had been chosen to his calling – and he was aware of this – by God, and in the innermost fibre of his being had been blessed and sanctified. To this same end was the unique, solemnly tranquil and simple story of his becoming a man. Here, his whole being was to gain the power and simplicity that we know of him. No colourful multiplicity, nothing in miniature, nothing to an easy design. It was ***one*** thought that he was to represent, as “a voice crying in the wilderness” as he would so trenchantly observe of himself later.

What was the idea that he would represent? John was, as we know and as he himself knew, called. He was to be the harbinger of an only somewhat younger contemporary whose birth and antecedents were cloaked in divine secrecy, a secret which assured the certain and close-at-hand fulfilment of all Israel’s hopes. These hopes, held in the quiet circles from which John originated, were encompassed by Luke in the words “waiting for the consolation of Israel” which reminds one strongly of the great words of Isaiah to the captives in Babylon: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” The prospect of a new era is being held out, while at the same time the maxims of the divine world government are undergoing a complete reversal towards Israel. Up till now, Israel had received “rather too much” (double) for all its sins as God had left it to itself in order that the utterly disordered pastime of estranging God could unfold in all the fullness of its inherent perdition. However, that was enough of that for the time being, and ***God*** wants to speak, and speak in a ***benign*** manner (in the original text the word is caressingly) and requires that comfort, and only comfort, should be given to his people. The pleasant time in which this comfort manifests ends, as we know, by God creating a new heaven and a new earth. This is a blessed as well as holy ending to the previous and so doleful first part of human history or the beginning of a second part; a kingdom of glory through the “Day of the Lord” is thus the ultimate objective of this Prophecy.

Thoughts such as these were John’s ancestral spiritual inheritance; they fermented and caused turmoil within him and thus, in his isolation, thoughts of the present and future of his entire people were continually turbulent in his breast. If he had been a child of our century we would presumably possess records of the struggles in his soul, such as those of Luther in his monastery. John’s struggles were not for his soul however, but for the salvation of his people. Even this was probably not the main emphasis of his concern and struggle, but was rather for the concerns of God on earth and therefore, naturally, salvation for humankind. A word of John’s can perhaps throw some light on his silent cares during that time, the word he flung at the Pharisees, “For I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham”. It is such a vehement, one would almost like to say violent, thought that it appears to be the result of enormous cares and a heated struggle for faith; it appears to be an answer to the question, “What if nothing more can be done with, nothing more be hoped of this degenerate people? What if Abraham’s seed is spoiled for all time?” “Nevertheless, God’s concerns must prevail, through Abraham’s seed all peoples of the earth must be blessed and if this is not possible, then God can raise children from these stones for Abraham.” These words are witness to the heroic cast of his soul, his indomitable desire that God’s concerns should prevail, as well as to a sober, critical manner which permits of no illusions with regard to the situation of the times as he grapples with the difficulty of victory with the whole weight of his mind.

One could cast doubt on these struggles of his, bordering on indecision, as they were inconsistent with the great amount of firm, divine affirmation that he was aware he possessed; but the true man, particularly he who lives spiritually, is full of such contradictions. Through the greatest and most certain knowledge of divine promise he is not rigid in a mechanical manner, otherwise all his struggles would be only illusion and any spiritual development unthinkable.

He was assured that the great time of salvation was near; that a task was entrusted to him and that he would be significantly instrumental in its advent. This especially was closely bound with the depth and breadth of his worries and hopes.

However, this time of salvation, as it stood before his soul, could not shine on him with the sweet light in which we encounter it in the first promise (1 Moses 1:3). The last revelation dealing with what was about to come to pass in Israel, the revelation of Malachi, had, due to the moral decadence of the people, necessarily assumed a grave hue. A victory for God was expected, a victory of goodness at any price; admittedly with a final, mighty attempt (Malachi 4:5-6) in order to ensure a ***propitious*** result for mankind, based on the ruthless decision to put an end to this era of sin.

His father Zechariah had been, with regard to the significance of this gift of a son, referred to this passage (Malachi 4:5-6). To be the instrument of this, God’s final attempt, ***this*** is what his son was destined for. Did John ever learn of this from his father? We cannot know, but it seems most probable. In any event, we will not be at fault if we assume that is was just these prophecies of Malachi that moved John’s heart, as they did any pious Israelite’s; and if we attempt to gain insight into his vision concerning the victory and the victor from the individual parts of John the Baptist’s early sermons then we see that they strangely correlate to that which Malachi (namely 3:1ff.) promises.

“The Lord” writes Malachi (= *dominus*, ruler master, not the Lord = Jehovah) “whom you seek shall suddenly come to his temple” and so on. The word can designate a person, can mean the promised son of David, but further along Malachi ascribes judiciary conduct to him which depicts him in the highest degree as the Lord; no lesser than the Lord Himself, the omniscient and omnipresent One, will serve as a “swift witness” (Malachi 3:5) who appears suddenly to ***judge*** “against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers and against false swearers”. So in the eyes of John, the one who comes is almost a ruler in heaven, on earth and in hell. “He will thoroughly purge his floor” (Matthew 3:12). He does not allow his mind to dwell on such meddlesome questionsas in what manner this is to be done and how much time it will take, but we have ***this*** impression: that he takes this act to be the end of previous human things, the Day of the Lord (which can, after all, be an extended period of time), the great final judgement. “He will [….] gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff (whose whole achievement was only to ***appear*** to be wheat) with unquenchable fire.” Where does John believe the garner, the storehouse, to be? In heaven? Hardly, at least not in the way we would think, as on the one hand it is implicit in the gift of the Holy Spirit, which he expects from the One who is coming, that ***human history is to continue***, and on the other, the Old Testament offered him scarcely any reason to believe that Heaven would be the future abode of humankind. The promise was not that we would rise to God in Heaven but rather (e.g. 3 Moses 26:12; Isaiah 60:2) that He would walk among us, or (Isaiah 65:17) that He wanted to create a new heaven and a new earth.[[10]](#footnote-11) God gave the ***earth*** to us humans, and God’s victory must not appear as a retreat with Him giving up this land and fleeing to heaven. He wants to stand, with His people, as “the last”, as the victor in the scheme of things. The solely earthly course, which the prophet consistently deemed to be God’s story of victory, is not only an adapting to the opinions of that time, he also wants to warn us not to assign the living God, as He has revealed Himself to us, to a dower house in the realms of fantasy (“in the mind” as we love to say) or in a future which will break upon us suddenly at some unspecified date. He wants us to believe uninterruptedly in God’s great story of salvation on earth until the great victory.

Thus at the great turning point, as a new mankind must emerge from the old one, John was far removed from regarding what for the individual person was seen as ***death***. He did not actually see before him merely an end, but much more a beginning of the human story.

In hoping for the coming judge did John also have thoughts that there might be more than just a judgemental role; perhaps a preaching, proselytizing, saving one also? It almost looks as if that might not be the case, as if he saw first and foremost that his alone was the task of conversion, the saving from judgement. It is the limitations of human knowledge that alone make possible a natural development and a true progress. This is in particular what drove John to derive all he could from his “today” and to urge those others, to whom he was sent, to a similar haste.

Because he saw in David’s son the expected worldly judge, he saw the complex Prophecy surprisingly simplified, shortening the path to fulfilment by overleaping all intermediaries. However, the character of the whole acquired a terrible gravity that coloured his sermons; fear and dread flow through his words, he sees his auditors as barren trees over whose roots the axe is poised in order to then consign them to the flames.

Things came to pass more benignly than he thought they would, but in the main his view of the subsequent period and certainly of the future to come was confirmed.

At long last “The Word of the Lord” came to him. A wonderful word! Not a word of mere speech that he was to convey or even a mere Prophecy, as had been given formerly to the prophets, but a word carrying a mission to undertake real acts. One has to go all the way back to Moses in order to find even an approximately similar mission. But in truth, the mission and authority that God bestowed on John surpassed in magnitude any task ever given to a mortal before and all that God had been prepared to do in earlier times.

Forgiveness of sins! How John himself must have sunk worshipfully to the ground in the face of this overwhelming mission, in the face of God’s unforeseen decision! What upheavals must have taken place in all his worries and heartaches that mankind was going unsuspectingly to meet that so severe judgement! God is ***victorious***, and is ***benevolently*** victorious by setting the end at the beginning, by ***beginning*** with what was actually ultimately hoped for. In the mission bestowed upon John, God comes close to us as He who ***willbe*** there, the “last” (Isaiah 41:4) as He who will enter His kingdom, with the call “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 45:22). John is, and remains henceforth, the voice of God, of the one who is coming.

He went to live on the banks of the Jordan that was thinly populated although there were many who passed by. He preferred to stay in ***one*** certain place without, however, binding himself to it. Who would have been the first wanderer whose heart he first warmed with the expectation of the great things that were to come, who was the first to be overwhelmed by this wonderful man and his words, and who felt urged to open his heart to him unreservedly and who first allowed the waters of the Jordan to flow over him for the forgiveness of his sins? The simple holy story does not tell us. Whoever it was, overjoyed and at the same time solemn, fresh and light as if new born, he went home, as truly, something real had happened to him; and he made it happen to others, made them take the thorny path and make their disagreeable confessions until the movement took possession of the whole land, the whole people. There must have been great reality, great substance, in the peace that those brought home with them because ***without this*** everyone prefers to keep his wicked affairs to himself.

A stiff judgemental wind blew here, a judgement without respect for the person, but nevertheless a wind of mercy. The day was in sight when the “swift witness” would bring everything to light and mete out punishment. “He shall***sit*** as a refiner and purifier of silver”, says Malachi (Malachi 3:3), i.e. he will take all the time in the world and make every effort to plumb to the depths the moral character of each one. For all those who now come of their own accord and open their hearts, nothing of what they have confessed will ***then*** remain on the day.

However, the judgement which was in sight would certainly have had another effect on the mind of John once he found himself in the blessed act of forgiving sins. Here, in his dealings, he did not stand on the side of humankind but on God’s side, as God’s messenger.From the moment when all sin would be washed away – a moment envisaged in heaven – the light of victory shone on him from heaven. A light that placed him regally above sin, this accursed abomination of the spirit, so that when individual sin was confessed to him it was naturally already pardoned and forgiven in his mind. Thus God’s majesty over sin was evident in both directions. God bestows nothing: everything must be confessed; and God bestows all: he is no longer interested in that which His light has already illuminated. Under the benign, judgmental but also all-forgiving light of God, which pours the clear light of day over everything, revealing that all happens in the presence of the Father, ultimately, in this light, the darkness, the remoteness from God, this hotbed of sin appears as a profoundly shaming, because hitherto ***willed*** by us, insanity; and this cannot withstand the radiance of truth for very long. John the Apostle’s heart was full of this light, broached to us through Jesus.He describes the demeanour of his former master, John the Baptist, towards this light in a wondrous and solemn manner (John 1:6-8): “He was not that light” he says, but in what awe and reverence he holds John is expressed in the fact that he finds it necessary to assure us of this! He was not that light, but instead “was sent to bear witness of that light”. In the forgiveness of sins, an insight was opened into the abode of light of the spirit; sending out the first rays of light of what was to come to us as the light of the world. This light of the forgiving God that he is witness to had already become a power over minds, drawing them out of the darkness of their ill-fated reticence into the light of God, drawing out the revealed sins that had been forgiven into the radiant light of God.

The unique phenomenon that was John was characterized in the most profound way by the act that he carried out under God’s decree: baptizing with water. This was something completely new and had neither been mentioned nor foretold in the bible. God did promise (Ezekiel 36:25) “Then I will sprinkle clean water upon you”, but who would have thought that He wanted this carried out so literally? Arguably, the priests had to wash themselves, and John might have seen this as a connection to the task laid upon him, insofar as on the Day of the Lord all appeared before the Lord in priestly cleanliness. However, the fact that these washings had to be undertaken repeatedly, that is, were without a permanent effect, proved their difference. They just happened to be a human acknowledgement of impurity, although the fruit of protection was promised. In John’s baptisms, however, lay a divine gift, and it was generally accepted that this gift had a divine power. One did not see blood flowing here, the blood of slaughtered animals that mankind frequently sacrifices when he wants to petition God in his favour, but beloved, pure, ancient and life-giving water that is still today the bearer of all life. It was not even the water in the temple font but free water, as it flows through nature, the pure blood of mother earth, as it were. This depicts John as a man with no history, meaning he stood between the Old and the New Testaments; standing independent as well as connected to both. It characterizes him at the same time as a wonderful, primal human phenomenon, as a messenger from the Creator. The Baptist was a creature who had originally missed his reason for being, as well as having left and lost the place where he could have stood in God’s creation benevolently and fruitfully, but now stood in this, his place, appointed in the fullness of his right of being. And the waves of the Jordan that flowed down never to return symbolized all the spiritual dirt of the past that was washed away forever with those waves.

It was evidently the simple people, archetypal, who thronged to John’s baptisms; the unkempt and the reprobate, or at least those who appeared to be such (Jesus mentions tax collectors and prostitutes). Above the broad base of this pyramid rose the Pharisees, the class who in their own eyes as well as in those of others saw themselves as pious, as well as – because of their attitude towards the holy place – the Sadducees. These Pharisees and Sadducees also came to John, not lacking goodwill, eager to observe this interesting, elemental, unexpected colleague and his workings and perhaps to offer him some friendly thanks and friendly advice. They did not, however – at least on the face of things – have any requirement for forgiveness of their sins. It has shocked us down through the ages the way in which John treated these men who had no need of his services. “O generation of vipers” is what he says to these venerated men in a clear allusion to the seed of the serpent (1 Moses 3:15) and blatantly expresses his surprise that they believe they can flee from the wrath to come. He flings at their supposedly divine and legal title of Abraham’s Children, of which they are so proud, the words mentioned above, “then God can raise children from these stones for Abraham”.[[11]](#footnote-12) It was probably not until later that they had different dealings with him, prudently no longer directly but through the medium of delegates; they demanded more or less on their authority that he give an account of his actions. This was quite understandable. What revolutionary upheavals must have been caused in their entire system of thought with the appearance of John in their midst! In the minds of these men, the holy story, apart from some – admittedly quite important – points, was finished and completed and belonged to the realms of historical belief; also, with regard to the unfinished points they had allegedly determined future progress with academic exactitude. And now this elemental figure, of whom they sought in vain to find a mention in the bible,appeared, heaping scorn on all their calculations. According to the decrees of the Holy Scripture, an elaborate religious service had been organized in the temple for all needs of the conscience – everything, for instance, that must be done when a sin had been committed was stipulated – and now, out in the wasteland, a holy shrine had been opened where, in a spiritual, simple and overwhelming way, an influence on these consciences was practised, not to frighten them and even less to silence them carelessly, but to purify and unburden them. This happened by means of a completely new and symbolic act which was nowhere stipulated or proclaimed in the bible.

One could surely sense in the mood of the people what an upheaval was taking place in their spiritual life on the banks of the Jordan. People began to be more punctilious about visiting the temple but they came in a different humour. Faithfully they still carried out the prescribed rituals, but obviously no longer in order to unburden their consciences but merely to fulfil a cultural duty called for by God. It was as if the Zion of the prophets, the heart’s core of the holy story, had been moved away from Jerusalem to the banks of the Jordan.

It was for this reason, because the significance of the temple and its religious services appeared to be threatened, that the Sadducees as well as priests came to see John, although normally they did not concern themselves with things that happened out in the ***country***, outside the main city.

Are you the “Christ?” or “Elijah?” or the “Prophet?”[[12]](#footnote-13) or “who are you?” John was asked. The questions are significant; one could collect them with regard to meaning under the ***one***: “Where are you mentioned in the bible?” It must have seemed strange to him, “Must one then be previously ***announced*** in the bible if one was someone appointed by God or even someone of divine importance? Was Elijah or Moses announced in the bible before they came?” He might have asked himself something along these lines. On the other hand, he also sensed a justification for this question and felt it incumbent upon him to pose the question to himself and to ponder the significance of it with complete clarity. “Perhaps I am really announced in the bible?” It must have sent a divine chill down his spine when he discovered that there was a possibility of it being true.

It is significant and wonderful that he did not dare interpret as pointing to himself the passage that we find to be most certain as pertaining to him and that also, as we have seen above, came closest to what he thought might be true – the aforementioned passage in Malachi. We can understand this as it speaks of him in such glowing terms, sets him on such a pedestal that he himself, probably very diffidently and only in the innermost core of his being, almost without admitting it to himself, saw it as pertaining to himself and, at the same time, saw that he was completely barred from publicly announcing that he was the one mentioned there. How disturbing, how shallow and presumptuous would it have seemed if he had answered, “Yes, I am Elijah.” This would have only reinforced an awkward and untrue version of the way in which the Prophecy was to be fulfilled, a version that is as far away from us as from those who feel touched by the breeze of the fulfilment.

The passage in the bible, which he could safely have publicly indicated as pertaining to himself, is that curious call mentioned above in the Words of Comfort of Isaiah which lets the spirit of the prophet ring abruptly in our ears, the “voice crying in the wilderness”. Isaiah writes: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.” (Isaiah 40:3-5 and verse 10) “Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him.”

Here the Lord is not promising – as one would like to expect – to make a road from Babylon to Jerusalem for his people (where there are no mountains or valleys to be found in any case), rather He is calling His people to remove all obstacles for His coming to them. When the prophets see the broad spiritual condition of this our mortal world in the light of the beyond, thus being granted insight into hidden causes and the nexus with the spiritual realms of the beyond, then they see this in symbols that are outside our ability to envision. However, they have a much greater impression of reality and actuality than is possible for us children of the modern era to comprehend. The task of levelling these valleys and hills is set about with dispatch in the aforementioned Words of Comfort. In the great city of Babylon, a child-like idolatry and an unspeakably wretched licentiousness were surrounded with such a nimbus of worldly glitter and the glorification of art; and, on top of these things, the Jews – who were known to have a predisposition for this – opened up such a lavish profusion of commerce that these children of the captivity were tempted to doubt the truth of the beliefs of the fathers and to renounce their belief in the invisible living God whose holy kingdom had, after all, vanished from the face of the earth. John also at that time saw similar mountains of worldly greatness and valleys of despondency and crookedness of all kinds as a seemingly impenetrable obstacle impeding any influence of great and divine ideas on the times or on his people. If, however, John reviewed his influence based on his successes then he must have appeared to himself as a pioneer ruthlessly breaking through all these hindrances with an indomitable weapon; in other words, as the voice which not only calls for the preparation of the path, for the removal of the obstacles, but also as he who undertakes this, and in the way it must be done, spiritually.

How magnificent John’s status had become! What had moved the heart of the hermit for decades now ran like an earthquake tremor through the populace and pulsed in thousands upon many thousands of hearts. However severe and almost frightening the first impression of his ministry may have been – the ultimate result was sheer light. It had become light in the hearts of the people, the dark night of the alienation from God and the evil consciences were disappearing and the beautiful and divine light of God began to shine. What his father had once promised him in his cradle, that he would “give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins”, this had now become true. The concepts of “sin” and “forgiveness” (remission) had both been brightly illuminated by him and had thus suddenly become the ardent question of the day for everyone. In long-lived religions, piety degenerates into a type of art which makes it difficult for the simple man, the average person, to participate and repels him, so that even the healthy element in him is reluctant. Thus he observes the pious ones with a mixture of respectful but displeased awe and leaves his own questions of conscience unanswered. He throws himself into the interests of the day, of commerce and pleasure, of politics and party struggles and salves his conscience with the current phrases of the day which whisper to him that as he is more or less just like everyone else, everything will be all right. This “average person” now awoke with a start at John’s thundering call to judgement. It was not only this – as this in and of itself would not have had much effect – but the door to ***forgiveness*** had opened before him. “Forgiveness” had always been so far out of his reach that it was unattainable. His poor heart had already long been aware of the fact that there was no genuine and real forgiveness to be found in the sin-dissimulating platitudes of the world. However, in the face of the certain prospect of actual forgiveness, the lustre of the world paled into insignificance; all other interests receded and insight broke upon him: “To give knowledge of salvation … by remission of their sins” (Luke 1:77). This was the cause of great rejoicing among the poor folk, that God’s salvation could also be attained by simple people.

Thus solitary John suddenly became a sort of father for his people, a position which none of his predecessors had even remotely approached. How – to put it absurdly – Elijah for instance would have envied him this!

If we have understood John properly, then within his life and sphere of influence a great reversal took place in the spiritual history of mankind, taking place predominantly in the character of the holy story, the history of Israel.

It is not without justification that cultural history distinguishes sharply between the classical (Graeco-Roman) and the Christian (modern) way of thought. The main focus of the classical school of thought lay in the great world of visions; with regard to the individual man, he was only considered as part of the whole. The main focus of our thought today is on the individual self – the wonderful world of thought in which each of us lives has become important to us – the infinite value of one’s own self. We can discern something similar in the holy story. Israel is seen as a whole, but this is also merely as a means to an end to an even greater whole – all the peoples of the world. This view, this disparagement of the individual, could hardly be described in more ruthless and severe words than those of John, “God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham”. It is just this rough man with his enormous goals who has become something which is hardly mentioned in the Old Testament: a doctor and carer of individuals, a pastor! He sees the success of his long struggle with faith and hope in the peace of mind of the individual, in the health of thousands of restored souls. The “Day of the Lord” which he sees so close was still a long way away, but his light, refracted as if through a dewdrop, reflected “day” into thousands of souls.

We have permitted ourselves these general observations regarding John because we have now reached the zenith of his influence. We could become concerned for him on these heights – where does he go from here? What if the “***Great One***”, of whose coming he is so sure, does not ***come***, or does not match up to the great expectations invested in his coming? There were, and are, so many glittering religious visions which, with their imposing portals, resemble palaces from the outside with those inside calling down to us from the windows exclaiming how wonderful everything is. Once you have crossed the threshold, however, you soon realize that all the effort has gone into the façade, and the interior looks, and is, poor and mean. Almost the entire pleasure and effort of the inhabitants goes into constantly assuring themselves and those coming from outside how splendid everything is and how lucky one is to be there. Might this perhaps be the way John’s work will also end? His situation was certainly not a comfortable one, the question of his faith no small one. His whole work was aimed at being a beginning, more than that he could not accomplish. If the “Great One” did not come to continue the work, he would almost have been cheating his baptizands.

Of course, he does not give the impression of a gushing visionary; the simplicity, sobriety and humility with which he had already established himself, that is, to his large congregation, are witness to this. In answer to the great questions: How do we live henceforth? What should be the driving principle behind our actions? he had only one answer: love, Christian love, but a wholehearted love; one which is prepared to offer even great sacrifices without fuss, a love which is capable of being hard on itself for the sake of others.

Distinctive are his hints with regard to the professions of that time which were regarded with disapprobation. Another aspect of long-lived religions is that – at least apparently – their piety withdraws itself from public life, fleeing preferably into supposed particularly pious professions (such as orders for instance). This is accompanied by the secular professions becoming increasingly labelled as “impious”, so that when choosing a trade, the fact of its being “pious” or “impious” has to be taken into account. At that time, the professions of tax collector and soldier were among those regarded as disreputable, trades that had just sent a particularly large contingent to John’s baptismal movement. They would approach him shamefacedly asking “What shall we do?” obviously expecting the immediate answer, “Give up your trade as soon as possible!” But this was far from John’s thoughts. “As these trades are necessary, how good it is if they are carried out by men who walk in fear of God and practise brotherly love! Be ***honest*** tax collectors, gentle soldiers!”

But how he must have yearned to escape together with all his baptizands from this provisional solution which he, more than anyone else, astutely recognized as such. How must he have felt, knowing that washing off the old dirt would not be of much help over the long term unless new strength came to them from on high, the promised Holy Spirit? Here perhaps is when a change in his views began to take place with regard to what was to come, to the completely new idea of which John the Evangelist tells us. Of all that had been promised, his spirit held first and foremost fast to the needs of his heart. After all, he had now obviously been entrusted with the administration of God’s work on earth. He also knew that a certain ***licence*** to interpret what was to come according to the needs of the moment was inherent in the task along with the need to assess his requirements of God in accordance with this. The coming of the ***judge***, the coming of that which consigns one to the ***unquenchableflames*** was – as long as things stood as they did – not the need of his heart. This is why he yearned even more for Him who offers the ***spirit***, who baptizes with the spirit. He was given a vision which offers us insight into his worries as the paterfamilias of his congregation. He ***needed***, and he ***wanted***, to have a guarantee that here he would not become the victim of an illusion; he needed to be absolutely certain that the one acting here was truly in possession of a gift from above and not operating with merely human means so that ultimately only the old “nothing” was being presented in new clothes. “Upon whom (one day) thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.” (John 1:33) One day – and not just at the moment of baptism. The thought that the One to Come would allow himself to be baptized by him must have never crossed John’s mind.

Concerning the approach of the judgement, this must have made him ***fearful*** – as how would the world fare afterwards? His influence, be it ever so richly blessed, was only a drop in the ocean when one looked at the dissolution in the world.

Now, with the fact that he met Jesus personally, his views of what was to come had undergone a radical change, particularly with regard to what Jesus himself would bring. Let us not be too surprised! How much more puzzling and incomprehensible would have been the reverse, if encountering Jesus had not exerted an influence on his views. The Prophecy adjusts itself to our, human, way of thought, and in addition to this is often modified by us according to our own thoughts. In the Prophecy, however, God’s thoughts alone prevail and His thoughts soar far higher than ours. No-one saw this more clearly than did John, ever since he had realized that he was surrounded, as it were, by fulfillment. He realized with more clarity than we are able to empathize with how these heavenly wishes of fulfillment (I would like to call them “fulfillment tendencies”) are always in a constant state of flux – continually clinging to the current spiritual story. This is probably why he was so surprised but not disappointed when he became aware of the fact that everything would come to pass in such a different way: so much more benign, so much more divine, so much more on a human level than he had dared to think.

The way that John met Jesus, whom his heart had been full of all his life and whom he often portended, always with reverence and almost always with awe, was extremely unexpected and surprising for him. A man came to be baptized, perhaps from his appearance recognizable as a tradesman but still so far unknown to him.[[13]](#footnote-14) Every wish for baptism was preceded by the same fundamental confession of sins for which one sought forgiveness in the form of a deeply intimate talk which was certainly handled and managed by John in the freest of manners. But how wondrous sounded the lamentations of ***this*** man! None had come so bowed down by such profound woe! “We have sunk so deep, have lost our way. We have strayed from the path of life, from the will of the heavenly Father.” “Who?” “All of us, all, that is the misery, the whole world.” “Yes, but you?”, John might have asked, his knowledgeable and divinely clear gaze certainly reflecting the innocence and purity of Jesus, “You too?” Oh what a startled blush at the mere idea might have answered him: “Oh do not speak of me! I would come for all, we people are nothing, I would desire God’s consolation for all the people.” So he stood before him full of shame and misery for the sins of the world. Through this woe, however, shone a childlike innocence, a manly clarity, a divine confidence which John had never dreamt possible. It may have dawned upon him then. “Who are you then? What is your name?” It would have become quickly clear to him with whom he was dealing. Oh John, in theory you had always known it: you were not fit to unbuckle this man’s sandal, but how small, you giant, must you have become before this child! How overwhelmed you must have felt: “In the face of this tenderness, this childlike innocence and this power, all I am is nothing!” Now he knew him, but at the same time privately in accordance with his individual persuasion. The vision he had been granted demanded a certain restraint from him until the sign was vouchsafed him. He knew him and at the same time “knew him not” (John 1:33). At least he was certain of one thing, he “is mightier than I”, and already he rejoiced that he would now be permitted to receive the absolution he had given to thousands – and from Jesus. But Jesus did not allow this. The words in which Jesus answered John are witness to a manly and clear, but deeply humble, awareness of his superiority and on the other hand to the firm, well-founded decision to bow to the ministrations of John now. It sounds like an offer of friendship – the words “it becometh us”. “Today, we two are the servants of God, we will and must hold together and each in his own place do what becomes him.” It was a great and holy moment when Jesus stepped into the Jordan – the spirit of each man, each in his own fashion, but intimately connected, directed towards God, was hoping and praying for the salvation of the whole world.

And now the sign! It was high time – as one would like to put it – for John’s anxious mind. But when it came – what a poignant moment of renewal it must have been for him! Like no other he had seen into the hearts of men and had had to say to himself, “If no new one arrives from above, then far-reaching help will be impossible for me with only earthly means and of merely earthly stature.” And now, descending visibly from above, towards which he had believed and prayed to his whole life long – the promised one! If he also heard the Voice we do not know.

The first-known words of John after he met Jesus were the ones he spoke to his disciples when Jesus had returned from his days of temptation: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

“The sin of the world!” Had John learned this powerful word from Jesus, maybe during his confession of sins; or had he already known this, and it was one of the great thoughts which they shared and which drew them together in mutual understanding? Also for him, into whose ear flowed day by day new floods of human folly, human aberration, human abomination, it was natural that ultimately this whole total would agglomerate to a ***single*** mass so that he no longer saw the individual but only one great sinner, the world, and only one malefaction, sin. John’s insight was based on the confessions of sins which revealed to him the secret sources of public events, giving him at the same time a look behind the scenes of the world’s stage. Jesus, on the other hand, who grew up with childlike innocence in the midst of the hurly-burly of worldly life, retaining in this midst his innermost connection to God, remained conscious of his divine antecedents and also came to the same insight – in this idea, in this painful discovery they found themselves together: the world has gone astray, culpably astray, and now everything takes a different course from what it should and could have done.

These men approached life as children would (as does every child, in a sense), sheltered by a divine ignorance of evil and armed with a holy ideal that the healthy person carries in his heart. They remained free of a barter between what was innermost in them and what came to them from outside – they found that the way things were, by and large, was ***not*** the way things ***should*** be.

And they found something else: “It should be different; we are here to make things different”. Inherent in every higher divine insight into evil is the warranty that a remedy from above is planned. They knew they were born to this and sent from God; or rather, that Jesus was born to this and sent from God. This was comfort for both of them, comfort confirmed by the baptism as well as by a special sign from God.

How were things to change? How was Jesus now to “purge his floor”? That he would not hasten to “burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” was certainly immediately clear to John. “But the world is ripe for judgment! The judgment is announced, it cannot tarry any longer.” How must John have felt – whether in the talk before the baptism or perhaps at the sight of Jesus returning from the temptation, we do not know – when a glimpse was vouchsafed him into the wondrous plans of divine mercy and into the resolutions of Jesus! This consummator of the judgment, whom he had always regarded as the judge –he will be the one to be judged. On him shall fall the judgment for the sin of the world! He would begin to sense in what an involuntary, although also implicit, manner Jesus would make atonement for the sin, the renunciation of the world. He is “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world”!

What a wealth of heartfelt sympathy or compassion and what a wealth of gratitude lie in the words of John: “Behold – the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world”!

Later, when he saw Jesus surrounded by his disciples and working in the same manner as himself but with greater success, he saw in this different image the same significance of his person, this time in the light of the victory. “He is the bridegroom”. A marriage creates a community of all rights and legal obligations in such a way that neither side is beholden to the other. Each is so much the greatest personal gift to the other that anything else recedes into the background. The way Jesus during the baptism sees himself morally and legally as one with the world is regarded by John as the act of a bridegroom. As he sees the victory of Jesus, in a figurative sense, as “the ability to pay the debt of his bride” as a certainty, he now sees him as he works in the joyous state of a bridegroom. John speaks of them both as messengers from God: Jesus the bridegroom, John the friend of the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom precedes the bridegroom and is of great value to him, but his own ***whole significance*** is dependent on the ***bridegroom***[[14]](#footnote-15).

Standing on the heights of victory in his mind, John observes in this image the significance of his life and the imminent fulfillment of all the hopes he has held and proclaimed. It was no hardship to find himself small; it was a rest from the highly tense time of waiting which had put him to the hardest test. But how sorely he would have liked to have continued to have been effective! We know how precipitously this was denied him. He came to the notice of his prince who extorted from him – perhaps by approaching him in an intimate matter, even perhaps under the pretext of wanting to be baptized – a comment on his view of a dark chapter in the history of the prince’s marriage. What a sermon the prince’s wife must have read him later, perhaps noticing his guilty demeanor, on what such a rough and uneducated man, who didn’t even wear a proper coat, could understand of the tender needs and “sacred” rights of a heart of higher status and how perilous and irresponsible it was to let such a dangerous popular orator continue with his activities. “If he says that to your face, what will he say behind your back? And what might come of it?”

One cannot deny the force of such arguments. John was arrested, thereby being forced to end his life as he had led it earlier – in isolation. How heavy such a life must have weighed upon him ***now***, when his heart was bound with a thousand threads to the hearts of his people. This we can imagine, and it also might explain in part that obfuscation of his mind as he was in danger of losing faith in Jesus. There is something else that also explains this. The “one who comes” had occupied his whole heart for decades, occupied his entire imagination, and he, the larger-than-life hermit, envisioned everything in large, tremendous, extraordinary terms. The smaller and larger woes and joys of human life, of family life, he knew only in theory; all things such as sicknesses, emotional disorders and so on had no importance for him. Now it must have been difficult for him to understand that immediately after his incarceration, Jesus began to follow a completely different path. He plunged into the midst of the world, wandering through the same villages that he probably had visited when carrying out his trade. But it must have been completely incomprehensible for him when Jesus appeared to lose himself almost completely in healing the sick. In John’s great expectations of Jesus, this seemed to be too petty, too bourgeois, and maybe he was also worried that Jesus would – out of his pure good-nature (a quality he had already observed in him in “disconcerting” measure) – somewhat forget the elevation of his true calling. Maybe the reason for the question so officially asked by him “Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?” was only a way of reminding him – and as rough John saw it, in a courteous tone – to bethink him of his higher calling.

The great majesty of divine God is expressed in the way in which this perhaps greatest of human beings died. In the silence of the dungeon, unexpectedly and without warning, he must lay his head on the executioner’s block so that it can then be carried on a platter to the prince’s table as a reward for the elegant dancing of the royal maiden.

In this masterpiece of sin there was something of triumphal derision towards those who dared to think they could shake at the foundations of these rulers over the earth. But in this “humiliation of his servants” God gives the warranty for their ultimate victory, of their ***right*** to it.

**Jesus**

**Birth and Childhood**

Isaiah, in 64:4, hopes and prays that God will vouchsafe to those who wait for Him (that is, His revelation in the world) that they will experience things that heretofore no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has felt – things therefore that will far surpass in glory and splendour everything that up till now the holy story has mentioned or that the Prophecyhas foretold. Isaiah’s fervent wish is fulfilled by the birth of Jesus in a way that we could describe thus: the whole content of the hopes of the prophet became reality. Also, the fulfilment of the hopes of Isaiah in the ***later*** time that Paul (1 Corinthians 2:9) foretells with the certainty of someone who knows, will be again the revelation of Jesus, the Son of God. What the angel Gabriel announced to Mary in Nazareth surpassed in magnitude everything that a human heart would be capable of imagining. This wonderful act of God, to enter with part of Himself into the human family, this, the condescension of the Father, this is at the root of everything that follows that we will be dealing with here. It is the first impulse that will never rest until the Kingdom of God has been fully victorious.

Here we may be permitted in part to contemplate,insofar as it serves for the appraisal of what is to follow, on the one hand, the ***reason*** for and, on the other, the ***import*** of this act of God. The reason: That God did this proves how firm His intention was that our, humankind’s, story should be a truly human story. It is left to humankind what it will make of itself; whether it will follow its bad nature and go to perdition or if it will struggle to rise above itself and return to the Father. Because there was simply no longer the possibility for the latter, God gave us a human being. We would almost like to say, gave us Himself in human form. We could expound on this even more than we are able to put into words, and with regard to the main issue it would not be saying too much. However, this reason requires that the whole import, namely, that this gift was ***completely*** human and ***only*** human, be equipped – one would almost like to say endowed – with the whole necessity as well as ability for development; with the whole ignorance and weakness; with the whole duty to struggle and to become a human being. Not, of course, the kind of human being that we see in ourselves or that we believe we can recognize. We assume we can gain insight into the being of Christ by deducing the unknown “Christ” from the two supposedly familiar concepts “God” and “human”. This is, however, not the case (as Dorner explains Luther’s teaching); instead, the two concepts “God” and “human” are ***unknown*** to us and only become known through the third: “Christ”. Without this we know neither what God is nor what is human. Through this concept we not only learn to recognize God but also ***ourselves***. A human being is more - a higher being than it now appears to be and as it seems to itself. Jesus himself indicates this, in a certain sense immutable, divine dignity slumbering in us, when he repeatedly (e.g. Mark 11:23, Luke 17:6) ascribes to us part of God’s power if we only have enough faith. We are more than we think we are. Ultimately human beings ***were*** more, and should become more, than they are today. If we ignore all that sin and death have wrought with us since the beginning of humankind – how great the ***human being*** appears then to us! A being like this was Jesus during his time on earth, he ***alone***. He was not a ***pseudo*** human (as we might be in a different sense), he did not only subject himself to the physical aspect of the limitations inherent in the human essence, but also to the mental, the limited knowledge (ignorance of the future) and limited ability, insofar as these limitations do not lie in our lack of faith. In the fact that humankind was originally God’s child and created in His image possibly lies the reason that God approached us so closely and intimately. However, in our exceedingly unnecessary efforts to raise as high as possible the divinity of the Saviour, we run the danger of belittling the magnitude, the gravity and the reality of his incarnation. For the supposed elevation of his divinity we avail ourselves of peculiar means.

Namely we descendants possess, in contrast to those peoples of former times, something of the omniscience of God. What was then the unknown, uncertain “tomorrow” is regarded by us dismissively as “yesterday”. This lets us partake of that peace of mind which flows from omnipotence. Confidently we stride with David towards Goliath; we know, after all, that his stone will find its mark. Nothing is easier for us now than to believe the great miracles that came to pass – they were on time after all. Because we now know that Jesus was the Son of God, we love – or believe it is our faithful duty – to transfer our share of omniscience and omnipotence to him by imagining that he knew from the very beginning everything that we know now of the course of his life, death and victory, in the same way that we take for granted all the great things that he accomplishes.

The image we thus perceive is that of a being with divine characteristics who is in all other respects apparently human. What the gospels offer us is ***more***: It is God Himself who approaches us – divested of His external attributes or abilities, omniscience and omnipotence – as a real ***human being***. God Himself who loves us, struggles for us, suffers for us, dies for us, is victorious for us. We are in danger of losing the blessed and glorious gravity of the true ***reality*** of Jesus if we imagine him almost solely as a pseudo human being. What Jesus means to us we can summarize in the answer to the two questions as to what he was and who he was as he first appeared to us, “What was Jesus?” “A man”. “Who was Jesus?” “God”.

This impression from the gospels compels itself to our notice. The more objectively we read them, the more light is thrown upon how his becoming a man was ***complete***.Just because of this we are confronted, all the more tremendously and poignantly, I would say less with his divine nature itself and much more with his personal essence or one-ness; the identity with the Father, which he himself calls his essence: “I and the Father are one”.

The Saviour[[15]](#footnote-16) did not bring a pronounced consciousness of his antecedents with him into the world. This, as is the case with any insight into the significance of his person and his profession, is at the inner core of his own history of mind. It is just this which is the greatest and most essential element of a great ***fact.*** All the ***more*** so is ***this***: that in order for it to have an effect, it is not necessary for he who is subjugated to it, he whom it concerns, to be ***aware*** of this. The fact that Jesus is of divine origin also becomes for us blindingly clear when we see in him the whole and pure ***man***. Ever since I saw it as my duty to throw light on the life of Jesus while he lived amongst us and since I have delved deep into his life in the light of this task, the impression of how ***completely*** he became a man has become more profound and compelling. I would have to go to paralyzing, debilitating and disturbing extremes if I were to repress these impressions in my further writings. I humbly ask the reader, therefore, if one could not, and may not, think of Jesus thus. For my part, I do so in the firm conviction that it is just because of this that his divinity shines forth in a more brilliant light.

Among those whom we have mentioned who hoped is Joseph. He was born to this, as it were. After all, as a descendant of David, he was the rightful inheritor of these hopes; the man who felt Israel’s distress and ignominy as legitimately his own. The proud tree of the royal family of Zion had been felled – as foretold by the prophets (Isaiah, Micah) – and only the stump, Jesse, remained. Now the circumstances of the descendants were not evocative of David, the king, but of Jesse, the farmer; and it was only what the farmer in Bethlehem owned that still remained to the family – thanks to the humane laws of Israel (at the time of Domitian they still owned thirty-nine acres). Joseph was a “tekton” or builder, a profession which, in contrast to architects who built larger buildings, generally built simple farmhouses which at least were distinguished from mere huts by the virtue of having sturdy roofs which could be used as living spaces. Concomitant with this trade was the fact that a journeyman’s years usually preceded settling down, usually on the occasion of a marriage. Such a wandering life might have been the reason that we encounter this Judean of such good lineage in the disdained town of Nazareth. Joseph might have found temporary work there before he met Mary “of Nazareth” who then became his bride and entered into possession of his rights, his pain and his hopes, and this, as we may believe, with all the power of her soul.

Never before, for those who awaited with such patience the coming of the Lord, was there such a discrepancy between the glory and the certainty of their hopes on the one hand, and, on the other, the embarrassment, evil appearance – yes, the ignominy – that they were subject to from the outside world for their hopes, or even the fulfilment of these. The approach of God to mankind which was to transcend immeasurably in benevolence and reality all ideas of the forefathers had been announced. But what only Mary already knew, could she tell Joseph? Could she expect of him that he believe it? And when in her despair God came to her aid and announced the tidings to Joseph, how did they both face the world? They had to keep their secret hidden deep within them, even if their hearts almost burst with it.

As Joseph owned land in Bethlehem, it must have suggested itself to him to settle there as soon as he had built a house. It was probably this ownership, more than his lineage, which forced him to go to Bethlehem for the tax assessment decreed in the name of Caesar Augustus.

When this duty called him to Bethlehem he was – for serious reasons – still a bridegroom. The same reasons made it necessary for him to take his bride with him, although her condition made this inadvisable. He had to do this so that in his absence she – as a virgin – would not become the victim of folk-justice, or even of the criminal court, when she gave birth to a child. He set out with a heavy heart, doubly so as the son of David who was to sign himself as a subject of Caesar at that very same place Bethlehem – the city of David. Before he had taken that step the son was born. His position before the census officials must have been peculiar when he went in order to give legitimate form to the family relations between himself and Mary and himself and Jesus. He was permitted to record Jesus, a gift of God to himself and the House of David, as his son.

How painful and humiliating it would have been for the son of David to declare himself and his firstborn son as property of the Roman Caesar, therewith renouncing all hopes for Israel, if he had not known that this son would be the victor and fulfiller of all promises. And truly, Rome would become well-acquainted with this firstborn in the following centuries. It was no coincidence that this boy was declared the property of the Roman Empire, more or less as common property of mankind, at his birth.

The welcome that this child was accorded by those from whence he came, the heavenly host, was quite different to that accorded him by the authoritarian mien of the census official. How blinded are we, when we opine that above us, beyond our vision, only a cold nothing holds sway; or perhaps some mathematics, at the most a little philosophy! But of course, we poor humans can hardly be held accountable as this realm of the heavenly host recedes, as if shyly, before our unhallowed human gaze. It would never be able to show itself as completely as it could here, where the magnitude of the event made it appear quite natural, so that one – if they had been silent–could almost have questioned its actual existence, the magnitude of the event or even knowledge of the same.

Just as understandably, it was only simple shepherds who were permitted to be witness to this heavenly joy. Thirty years they had to wait until the first traces of acknowledgement of what they had seen were forthcoming; and one or the other of them had probably died during this time. Over the years they would surely have been obliged to suffer pitying smiles at their gullible imagination. At least, today, even the most calloused critic would admit that their imagination or that of the supposed inventor of this “legend” had taken advantage of a quite remarkably fortuitous illusion, insofar that the child, whom they adored in his cradle, did indeed attain a position in the world’s history like no other had even remotely reached before him.

The moment was of a curious solemnity when the boy, on the occasion of the required cleansing of the mother in the temple, was introduced to that quiet circle of the ones who hoped. Let us not be surprised that the rest of Jerusalem took no notice of the child in spite of the knowledge of the angels’ singing becoming known in the way of rumours! What wonders are experienced by a farmer holds no interest for the city dwellers. Certainly, it was “immediately clear” to the educated that the whole incident was based on an enthusiastic self-delusion, all the more so – as the following story will show – as the event came at an inopportune time for otherwise so orthodox Jerusalem. We[[16]](#footnote-17) are referring to the visit of the wise men. It is like a prophecy of the future destiny of this child up until the latest times to see him finding recognition from distant heathens who – presumably still drawing on the spiritual inheritance of Daniel – were deemed worthy of a divine sign, while Jerusalem, supposedly so stalwart in faith and hope, was alarmed at the mere suggestion that the promised one could have been born.

Because of Herod’s murderous plan, the child was forced to flee to Egypt and Jerusalem was delivered from embarrassment and trepidation. If Jerusalem had warmly accepted the witness of the angels, it would have cherished hopefully the thought of “unto us a child is born” in its heart and followed with sympathy his further life, so it could not have been lost without trace. However, this meant that again – as once before when Joseph was sold to Egypt – the green wood of Israel was cast out and supplanted by the withered. Later Jesus would have to struggle laboriously as a simple, often unrecognized private citizen for the right to his people which had been so firmly guaranteed by the promise as well as by the announcement at his birth. Thus, God’s merciful plan for salvation seemed once again to be thwarted by mankind’s inability and unwillingness to recognize it. Once again, though, God had turned what they thought to make evil into good, so that we now all must say: The way it came to pass was good.

Here a short outline of his childhood story: flight to Egypt; sojourn there; relocation to Nazareth . This can lead one to suspect a life rich in fear and deprivation and in all kinds of hardship and danger, but our sources with their holy constraints give us no particulars of this.

These sources are just as parsimonious in their reports of the inner life of the child Jesus. A delicate veil of secrecy is thrown over the springtime of the mind of young Jesus, and we may only timidly and with intent of great humility attempt to raise it somewhat. Within these limitations, however, we may do this, and we have the need to do it. After all, ever since Jesus was a child a beam of the wondrous light that lit his own childhood is thrown over all children who stand in his domain so that it draws us involuntarily close to eavesdrop at this quiet spring from which a rich river of blessings has poured over mankind. And if he, as a man, proclaims to us so warmly his great esteem of children, yes, even placing the child as an example before us, then visibly exalted, sacred, blessed memories shine through of his own time of childhood. Memories ***without*** melancholy, without the bitter aftertaste that the same tend to awaken in us, without the pain of regret for what is lost, thrown away, wasted; and on the other hand, in this way, he encourages us to take him seriously also as a ***child***, and to try to understand him in his nature.

The only things our sources report to us are in the words of Luke (2:40), “And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit[[17]](#footnote-18), filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him”. Here we may add the other words of Luke on his childhood and youth (Luke 2:52) “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.” There lies a wonderful, and obviously intended, simplicity in these descriptions. This is particularly noticeable in the manner in which God’s attitude towards him is portrayed; a divinely righteous, one would almost like to say unbiased, behaviour without regard to the person when the issue is the ***increasing*** of God’s grace towards him. In the words “he grew and waxed strong” lie also those first arts that gladden the parental heart when our firstborn learns to stand, to walk, to gain the knowledge and then the skill of language. But if this delights us in our own children, how moving must it be when this child must learn to use his limbs and the language in order to open the portal to the spiritual world of man. How differently from our customary observation of our children are we amazed – with Psalm 8 – at the secret of mankind: “Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger!” The word “wisdom” mentioned above is striking here as it is something that one seldom associates with a ***child***. Jesus, therefore, distinguishes himself from other children through lucid attention and the power of composing and collecting himself. In the Bible, wisdom is a strength not of the mind but much more of the will, the gift of correct perception paired with the strength and the decision to act in accordance with this perception.

The way in which this Jesus child felt himself in communion with his heavenly Father can perhaps be seen in the words of the John the Apostle (1:18): “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” Here, we hear the impression that John had of Jesus at all times. How comfortable the child ***is*** on his mother’s lap as if it were his actual homeland; so comfortable Jesus was, and felt himself at all times, at home in the Father’s lap. In whatever place he found himself, this was an integral part of his nature (and this is presumably the sense of the “ο ων” “who – is”) throughout all the changing times. From the lap of the Father he announced (or rather, explained to us) who God is (“εξηγησατο”). “He was in the bosom of the Father and he felt it”, this was the innermost foundation of his life on earth – as it was and always would be eternal. This wonderful childlike description is on the one hand the reflection of the supreme, divine fact that the divine is childlike, or, what is childlike in us is the essence closest to the divine and is able, therefore, to understand it; on the other, the childlike expression could perhaps refer to the early childhood of Jesus, insofar as John did not speak this word himself but took it from his master on whose bosom or “lap” he lay. For the true, childlike understanding of this word it is significant that Jesus made his particular brotherly love known and felt to John in a way that let him lie on his bosom or “lap” (John 13:23). What Luther translates here with “lap” (of the Father) and there with “bosom” (of Jesus) is in both cases the same word in the Greek. The great discrepancy between the two terms, that of Jesus to the Father and that of the Apostle to Jesus, remains and is also expressed less in the fact that Jesus always and in essence regarded the Apostle only seldom and mainly symbolically in this relationship, and more in the fact that Jesus was in “***the***” lap of the Father as inherent in his nature and also described as belonging there. On the other hand, Jesus ascribes only ***this*** symbolically in his behaviour towards John, which he often attests, namely that our relationship to him should become and be a similar one to that of his to his Father.

As a child on his Father’s lap Jesus grew up. This fact, his being in his Father’s lap, was the joy of his childhood. As would any child, he took it for granted without considering the cause and its unique significance. As we develop recognition of the self as the core of the story of our spiritual life, so, in a similar way – and how much more for him – the source of his spiritual story in his life here on earth lay in this fact of his being in God, and in the correlations of this with what lay forwards and backwards beyond the limits of his life on earth becoming ever more clear to him. John says (13:1 and 13:3) “Now, before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come…” and (verse 3) knew after the supper “…that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God” so one can hardly avoid the impression that for him a particularly bright light, an ultimately unequivocal clarity and certainty, had been cast on what he had often publicly confessed as pertaining to himself.

We are in the possession of other words which illuminate the spiritual life of the child Jesus. The first words that we know came from his mouth. He does not actually speak them as a child but as a twelve-year old boy, but what he says throws light retrospectively on the period of his childhood. It is the well-known gentle reproof to his parents in the temple (Luke 2:49): “Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?”

The light from the childhood of Jesus that glows around every child of Christ today emanates forth to us from these words. In the case of our own children it is the becoming aware of a high and divine calling and a sacred connection with the Father in heaven; and it is from our parents that this light first shines into our hearts. Their sense of responsibility, before God, for us makes our own “I” significant in a divine sense; together with our parents we feel subject to a mutual overlord, the Father in heaven. A serious but also blessed “should”, a “such and such must be so, Father in heaven wills it so.” And this is the divine spiritual atmosphere in which a child feels at home and which lightly strengthens it; in nothing else are the parents so understandable to the child, so beloved, so revered as in this mutual feeling of “I am meant to be the way I am.”

However – if we feel responsible for our children, bestowed on us – how responsible must Mary and Joseph have felt for ***this*** child, entrusted to them by God! With what awe must they have gazed on him and explained that it “must be so” for the sake of his Father (in heaven)! This awe of the sublimity of his being encountered in the child a radiant testimony of his ***own*** heart, a testimony from the Father, certainly in a most childlike ingenuousness.

We can sense all this in the words of the child. A childlike, divine elation at the significance of his own “I” and of the relationship to “his Father” can be heard here, but in the most simple and humble manner. The underlying tone is the feeling of a blessed duty, a joyous reverence. In these words we discover no immediate impression received from his Father, from the consciousness of a personal intercourse such as a revelation. It is as if the Father is in sacred concealment, from him as from all of us, and only evident with regard to what “must be so” according to His will.

The wonder of the boy, revealed in his “Wist ye not…?” shows us how close he knew himself to be to his parents in such thoughts. That which related to him, what “must be so” in his relations to “his Father” – that was the precious mutual property of these three. It was handed down to him from them, but he, the object, the content of this sacred truth – he for his part was the ***validation***, ever new, of this for the parents.

That God in heaven was his Father he had presumably been told by his parents, but it was more the manner in which they thought of him and treated him than the words alone – as what we ***think*** of our children, this is what they learn most rapidly and what penetrates most deeply into their subconscious. How brightly his parents’ testimony echoed in his heart, how childlike and at the same time clearly he felt his whole essence respond to it, that is his sacred secret, and with becoming modesty we will content ourselves with mere conjecture. Perhaps the word (Romans 8:15) “Abba Father” originated on the lips of Jesus, as a scholar surmises, and would therefore constitute an infinitely meaningful testimonial from his childhood.

He would scarcely have thought he was only God’s son and his parents would not have spoken of this to him. Therefore he would not have realized that Joseph stood in a different relationship to him than the relationship he saw in ***other*** children’s fathers. Mary indicates this with her words “Your father and I sought you”. The scribe also, after firmly stating at the beginning that Jesus had no man but only God as his father, later called Joseph and Mary “his parents”, giving them the title that not only other people but also the boy would have bestowed on them. It is inherent in childlike innocence that one does not waste concern on the nature of one’s forebears.

**The Twelve-Year-Old**

The first word Jesus spoke that is known to us offers insight back into the solemn springtime of his mind during childhood. The occasion that brought forth this word was the first of his acts known to us. It leads us from childhood out into boyhood. As the first fruits of a young tree are greeted with joy, so to a how much higher degree does the first independent intellectual expression of a child awaken our interest? How eagerly do we await these first independent intellectual expressions of a child, and how often is the whole image of the future man delineated therein. This is the case in a surprising but remarkably plausible manner with the boy Jesus. The whole, full, godly grandeur bursts pure and clear through the transparent shell of the boyish figure like the radiance of the dawning sun, but – and this is the most wonderful and sweetest – it is expressed with truly human and boylike traits which imbue the whole with inimitable sweetness. We saw the child, childlike, in all the high divinity which it is conscious and glad of, and, as a real boy walking towards us in our narrative (Luke 2:41ff.). But in the education of our children this is one of the most frequent and difficult pedagogic hardships that we encounter – the boy is ***absent***, one cannot ***find*** him!

Every ideal boy finds himself in a silent, unconscious struggle in self-defence of the human spirit which wants to unfold itself according to its natural law, but which at every turn encounters the patterns, rigid customs and orders on which he is to model himself. In a boy, ideas of high and pure origin often sprout and blossom which are not yet blemished with reality and have therefore not yet lost their first fragrance. Something divine is still pure in him that is more withered in those who stand above him. This is why often in his mind the artificial light of the laws of our private police pale before the suns shining in his heaven. Yes, sometimes when one sees a child with such a rich soul defenceless in the face of what are often peculiar ideals of the mother and others, one would like to comfort him with the words of David to the righteous, “He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken.” (Psalm 34:20).

But in Jesus how great was the distance between the high divinity in him and that manifestation of half-goodwill and half-badly-done that we call human tradition! How great was his probably frequent distress of heart in his humble situation and with the limited intellectual means of a boy of his type to steer his veneration for his parentswithout impairment through all the obstacles in his path. Now we see his “I”, with “I must be about my Father’s business”, strengthening, becoming firm in him. That “I am”, which we will encounter later as the fixed point, the turning point for the whole world out of ruin to a return to the father, it already echoes in the “I must”.

In his twelfth year he was permitted for the first time to take part in the feast in Jerusalem –this time not with his mother in the women’s forecourt but with his father inside the men’s forecourt with a direct view of the altar of burnt offerings and the temple; the forecourt where the intellectual greats of the people, the honoured teachers, drew the gaze and the ear of the crowds, just as he would draw them later to a much greater degree. He walked here, in this wonderful homeland of the people of Israel, which spread his whole past before his soul. But the essence of the meaning of the temple did not lie in all this; this was all mere consequence, effect, additions. The actual significance lay in the closeness to God, as granted by Him. God’s omnipresence is a great and tremendous fact but is not to be thought of as only mechanical or natural as often appears to be the case. This closeness has its borders and limits, and the latter are the emanations of its sanctity. God is a bountiful being and is not called “Jehovah Lord of Hosts” (Luther: “Lord of Sabaoth”) for nothing. Israel named God, especially in its strict adherence to his uniqueness, always in the plural “Elohim” = “the Heavenly ones, the divine beings”. When, for instance, Psalm 72:19 says “And let the whole earth be filled with His glory” then His glory is not regarded as a product of humankind as in “He shall be honoured by all people!” but rather as a powerful army through which He makes all manner of things known. This is how the “glory of God” inhabiting the temple is to be understood. A man-made place, enclosed in sanctity, had been created where God could live in the midst of this unholy world without damage to His holiness. Enclosed in sanctity, as the Israelite was only permitted to stand ***before*** the temple, and only ***he***, no stranger. Into the shrine, the place of worship, only the priest was permitted, and into the most holy place where the name of God lived only the high priest was permitted to enter; and this only once a year and only in dire need for the sake of the sins of Israel and with the most grave and protective measures. The Israelite looked to the heavens and saw him as the lord of heaven and earth, but his sobriety, modesty and his ***experience*** taught him to remain loyal first and foremost to this, God’s condescension to His people and to expect from the Lord in Zion, Jehovah’s aid from Zion. But this closeness was made known to those who approached in relation to the state of their conscience. The conceited, the guilty, most certainly did not feel anything of this in their presumptuous thoughtlessness. The innocent, the sincere, who approached with penance and faith, were given much, and tangibly.

How much, though, did Jesus certainly feel and receive! We have not been told in detail, in the gentle, divinely simple manner of the narrator. But from his entire behaviour, and ultimately from those words which he uses to justify it, it is clear that here he felt at home and breathed the air of infinity, causing the measure of time and thoughts of common things to slip away from him. He was now about his Father’s business and not only spatially but also spiritually. He moved among the questions pertaining to his Father, thus we see his mind far from indulging in emotive marvelling, instead, agile and determined to take full advantage of his time here. How many riddles amassed in a heart that, without knowing sin itself, had grown up in our sinful world, and how the full and whole love of the Father and complete trust in him was the only thing to be taken for granted! As some of his questions may, innocent and childlike as they were, have struck like thunderbolts in their consciences so that the people had to say: That we can find this or that ***comprehensible*** is the result of our sin and guilt! So may some of his answers have shone into dark hearts like the morning light of a new day and inspired them to new faith and hope!

The misunderstanding between him and his parents regarding the hour of their return home throws a bright light onto the boy’s behaviour generally. What would be more natural for the parents than to first make sure that the boy was among the homeward-bound caravan before they left Jerusalem? His normal behaviour had indulged them up till then. The constant task of parents, particularly that of the mother, is to remind boys again and again what the duty of the hour is, also to set goals for a pleasant passing of time – this task was obviously unknown to these parents; for lack of practice it had vanished entirely, the boy had obviously ***never*** given them cause to necessitate such a task. But the exception that the boy encountered here is such a wonderful combination of godly divinity and godly childhood with the most true, human boyishness that the most fertile perspicacity of human imagination could never have invented it.

**Education**

In this boy, who for that time had done an unusual amount of travelling (Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth, Jerusalem), in this boy who in the fervour of meeting the teachers of his people almost forgot his parents, we see a strange contrast to the adolescence and history of the youth of John. This contrast becomes much sharper when we look at the progression of Jesus’ education.

We differentiate today between two types of education that we give our youth. A ***humane***, ideal education – and ***real*** education. We will come to speak of the humane one later. The real education trains the youth in a practical skill, he is educated to become an instrument that is capable of developing a specialty – useful to the workings and goods of our culture.

It is worthy of note and important that Jesus also underwent this schooling. He learned and practised the craft of his father, a tekton, a builder of low status. There is scarcely another profession that entwines a man to such an extent with all the conditions of our life. The question of the material sends him over hill and dale and demands that he observe nature, for instance the wood, with a sharp and alert eye for the laws of growth. The workmanship demands first of all a judicious and calculated design and, in addition to this, knowledge of the laws of form and number, measurements, drawing and arithmetic. The execution demands a quick eye, assured arm, skilful hand and much sweat of the brow. The assembly of the components, the building of the structure, demands circumspection, courage and discipline. Inherent in the nature of the task is that it can only be carried out when many work together. On the one hand, one is busy with the “noble craft” in all imaginable fields and, on the other, one works together with others – often with a large number of others. And these “others”, due to the nature of their work, are hardened, often rough persons who do not usually treat a beginner – even a gentle, quiet one – very kindly. When Jesus later in his Sermon on the Mount is so knowledgeable about how I am to behave when unjustly smote upon one cheek, when my coat is taken or when I am coerced to lend money or offer other services – then this is reminiscent of the time of one’s youth. Some who have weathered a similar apprenticeship might be astounded by this true-to-life description. The labourer who has survived such a hard school and “can” do something looks down with thinly concealed disdain on he who only “knows” something, or even only “has” something, and we can hardly blame him. The pithy sermon that Jesus gave which converted the thoughts to proverbs almost of their own accord and which is regarded uniquely as “Christ’s style” in linguistic science – this sincere, brief manner of speaking so that the listener knows what is what grew and strengthened in rough air, in a youth spent among crowds of people and the bustle of work.

There is hardly another profession that leads so deep into strangers’ family lives, family histories; into their interests, tribulations and hopes. What an event, what a turning point in family history is the building of a house! And what a quantity of an unknowable future is associated with this! No small part of this future consists of the liveability and solidity of this house. What a field for brotherly love! Even in these most simple of buildings one had to understand, on the one hand, the present and future needs of the family and, on the other, their means and strengths. For instance, if someone wanted to build a house without a foundation (Mathew 7:26) then he must be warned against this, and if another’s plans were too ambitious (Luke 14:28) then he must be invited to “sitteth down first and counteth the cost”. This was all the more necessary at that time because of the cripplingly exorbitant rates of interest charged by the usurers and the rigidly severe legal system that spelled disaster for all those who exceeded their means. “As he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had” (Mathew 18:25).

Thus the Saviour stood firmly in the midst of daily life due to his practical profession, while at the same time enjoying the general advantages allotted to his people with regard to ***humane*** education. What does humane education mean? The fundamental idea is probably: He who wishes to participate to some degree in the spiritual leadership of his fellows ought to live again through the history of mankind for its inner meaning and life, for what had fruitful results. His heart will be filled with the heroic figures of the past who sacrificed all for their fatherland. He sits at the feet of the ancient thinkers and poets, thinking and feeling how mankind has felt from generation to generation. When this begins to live within him, he will be able to trace the true, living forces for the future in this wonderful life of mankind and to take possession of it. So can a new green branch begin to grow on the tree of mankind and bring forth new, heretofore unknown fruits. If, on the other hand, in his mind the great and whole history of mankind has merely taken place as a basis for a school exam, then naturally he will not become much more than the so-called “educated man”. Jesus was a green branch and the situation in which he grew up was perhaps – all appearances to the contrary – an exceptionally fortunate one. There was no other people as a ***whole***, at that time at least, who had such favourable conditions with regard to humane education as did Israel, particularly Judaism at the time of Jesus. Three great institutions contributed to this: the Holy Scriptures; the Sabbath; and the Synagogue – of which we have spoken already.

No other people officially collected, perused and ordered their literature as did Israel. No other people made it a sacred and general religious duty to learn this literature. What in other people’s cultures was a prerogative of the priestly class was a universal duty here. And this literature was not, as in the priestly literature of other cultures, of a mythological or liturgical nature, instead it was the history of the people, it was its laws, its poetry and wise sayings and the abundance of its hopes.

The second institution was the Sabbath, a day of rest guaranteed for all, including the poor and even the slaves, and which was devoted particularly to the study of the Holy Scriptures. In Greece and Rome the “fortunate” class had Sunday every day of their lives; the others, “the masses”, had a lifelong working day so that a permeation of the whole people with the same spiritual content was impossible. Thus, to a great degree, education broke down for want of the force, health and natural truth that it can only draw from the lowest stratum and its hard struggle for survival; this lowest stratum then missed that ideal transfiguration of its miserable existence.At the same time, in the Bible, the highest and greatest reveals itself so innocently and naturally to the soul because from it the spiritual life of a whole people speaks as if from that of a single individual. However, as we know, this is only one external advantage of this collection of scriptures.

What was the meaning of that sacred literature, and whence came that strangely fortunate design of the whole life of a people which allowed all to be constantly aware of their past, their tasks and their goals? We know – God made this people for Himself and educated them in order, by these means,to cause mankind to return to Him; and for this reason the literature – now perused and amassed – was in truth a ***sacred*** one, that is, one ruled by the spirit of God, a different spirit from the one ruling in the world at this time. Repeatedly God had revealed Himself in different ways to men of this people – and these revelations of God’s will and God’s plans of mercy for humankind were recorded in these Holy Scriptures. The history of this people had the great aim that one day all peoples would be blessed – ruled and blessed ­– and this history would have had, alone among all histories of peoples, a methodical content and truly progressive elements. Here everything of eternal value, the value of a good goal for mankind, was gathered – revelations and deeds of God and struggles of the people’s faith. It was a handbook for the following generations that united all generations of the past, present and future in ***one*** whole person who would read – and write – their life story here.

For Jesus this book was written in a very special sense. Everything had happened to lead up to this. He was the ripe ***fruit*** and at the same time actually the ***root*** of all that was divine which had happened on earth. The Scriptures were a letter from his father to himself that he was to find when he had become a man. It was not necessary for him to ***know*** this; one could say rather that if he actually did ***not*** know, if he immersed himself in the holy story and Scriptures with the complete ingenuousness of a simple Israelite then everything that he would sense here would also increase correspondingly in value before God. Thus in him the true Israelite, the true man would finally unfold to his full potential in an even more pure state.

Therefore he inwardly lived through the holy story afresh. His temptation in the desert where he refuses all evil suggestions with quotations from the fifth Book of Moses allows one to feel how in his youth he would have accompanied in prayer Israel’s journey into the desert; and how, in the face of Israel’s sins, he might have said “I will it so”, or “in me, Israel will surely one day do this differently”. And when God through the prophet Isaiah gives His instructions (Isaiah 26:20) for the woes of the last judgement “Come my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee (as in the night when the Angel of Death strode through Egypt): hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast”. One can see from Matthew 6:6 how closely Jesus took this to heart for all time.

However, his reading of the Holy Scriptures was different from ours. His inner communion with the Father, the Eternal – or the Father’s communion with him – made the ancient times come more alive for him, and brightly illuminated for him the imagesof those times, images often sketched with only a few sparse lines. What bright light, for instance, illuminates the entire period of the patriarchate for him merely by means of ***one*** thought: “God is not a God of the dead but of the living!”

This initially probably somewhat unconscious ***kinship*** with God, which in the fact of its being unconscious was all the more proof of its ***actuality,*** was manifested also in that wonderful freedom and truth with which he rose higher from written laws to the unwritten laws of the ***Creator*** (marriage Matthew 19:3ff. and love of one’s enemies Matthew 5:44 respectively).

Does not the latter also speak to us of his concept of nature? It lies in his vision of creatures, for instance the lily, whom he sees as separate from “her raiment”, or in the empathy with which he follows the vicissitudes in the fates of the seeds, among other things. In everything there lies a sensitivity, a warmth evocative of motherly love which is indicative of an inner connection with life and reminiscent of his ***kinship*** with the ***Creator***. He feels a loving care for his Father’s creatures, for his “children” in the broadest sense, wants to nourish them all and to array them in honour of Him. In his parables he does not treat creation as a collection of examples from which one can draw arbitrary images to illustrate higher realms of thought. Instead, he learns in them the manner of his father, His way of thought, so to speak, the great fundamental laws which permeate all realms of being from the lowest strata up to the regions of the spirit so that in the lowest levels the law of the highest is also reflected. In particular, the law of becoming, the law of growing development so obvious in the plant kingdom, later bestows on him much light and comfort regarding the future story of heaven on earth as he must increasingly experience what obstacles stand in the way of a rapid unfolding of this.

The rich fabric of world history and world formation which had accumulated in Rome and Greece; that colourful compendium of frequently glowing deeds and ideas that, however – due to lack of higher guidance – does not yield enough for the great aim, remained unknown to him. This was partly owing to the guidance of the Prophecy, partly due to his own abnegation. Thus he grew to manhood in, to some extent voluntary, poverty of education, in sacred simplicity, contemplation and limitation to the ***one*** object – the ***human being*** in his status before God, his task, his misery and his future salvation – and to that which the Holy Scripture offered him: the revelation of God and the holy story.

**Inner life**

If we wish to understand the inner life of Jesus in that quiet time, there is one great question we cannot avoid: “Did he live in the full consciousness of being the born son of God, come down from heaven to redeem the world? Did he methodically make the decision to live the life of a craftsman until he was about thirty years of age, and then to step forward as the Saviour?” This is how one usually thinks, but it has become increasingly questionable for me – at least in part. Presumably he would have received hints from his mother from time to time that he, or his situation, was imbued with something special; that he was called to “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21); and that God would give him the throne of his father David (Luke 1:32). These hints would have echoed in the yearning and intuition of his heart, but that he had ever learned the secret of his antecedents from his mother may be questioned. Perhaps he only looked up with divine shyness and a certain anxiety to the hope that his mother placed in him and impressed on him.

The more solemnly the ***call*** came to the individual servants of God, for instance Abraham, Moses, David, and Isaiah, the more one receives a threefold impression: 1. That they were indeed ordained from the beginning for that which they were called to do; 2. but the vocation was somehow connected to the state of their heart, their inner life history such as an answer to their prayers asking for the redemption of all; and 3. finally, that the call came ***unexpectedly***, that they had no idea what was in store for them. This is indeed almost indispensable for true human development. What I ultimately am must be the fruit of my life story. In Jesus’ case of course everything is different, insofar as he was not merely predestined to be the Saviour, but already ***was*** and then ***became*** a man. Could not this incarnation have been consummated in such divine greatness and perfection that it was not until, also in his case, the ***solemncall*** (at his baptism), coming as an answer to a life full of yearning and supplication for the salvation of the world, that the full and clear consciousness of his task and the significance of his person was bestowed upon him? If in his mind’s eye he soared towards a great future, so he did not “take thought for the morrow” here either. Armed with deep humility he was first and foremost a genuine, simple, actual carpenter, waiting for the things which were to come.

So he grew up in ignorance regarding the significance of his person and hardly – as one would say – “in silence”, but in the midst of the bustle of human life. Let us remember how inextricably interwoven human society is, namely how a young or otherwise dependent member of the same – a son, an apprentice, a labourer – is enmeshed within these bands, and how Jesus’ loving heart would have resulted in his being even more earnestly aware of this connection. We gain the impression of an enormous struggle of the soul which would have to follow from the disaccord between the conditions in his innermost heart and what he found outside himself, all around him.

He was in the lap of the Father. And to be there was the whole reason of his being, and there followed his whole understanding. This was his homeland: The power and the beatitude of the love of the Father for him and his for his Father. That the Father was in him and he in the Father – the clarity, truth, eternal meaning and innermost justification of such a way of being – all that he was later to call “his peace”. This he certainly took so much for granted, so much for the only right thing, that from childhood onwards he was governed by the idea: “This is what mankind is destined for, this is the true essence of mankind”, and how unspeakably painful must have been the discovery, growing day by day, that others were lacking in this peace. And yes, that ultimately he stood ***alone***, that he was the only real ***man.*** He expressed the latter later by assuming the name Son of Man[[18]](#footnote-19).

We may follow this isolation further. “I am not of this world” [[19]](#footnote-20) he says later; that is, ***not*** of this ***natural whole*** (cosmos) as creation presents itself to us since one other than God rules it. Herein his innermost I stood alone; his flesh and blood already belong to the natural whole – this was the first area of creation where he upholds God’s rule. “I will abide in the Father’s love because I obey His commandments and do as He wishes” as he says later with a sense of triumph which presupposes a perpetual and continuous victorious struggle. Here, within his body, he was implicitly lord and victor.

Outside it, however, he saw little of that of which his heart was full. The number of those whose deeds and disposition he understood surely decreased almost day by day, and the melancholy disappointments, the distressing riddles of this or that neighbour grew and grew. In his brotherly love, in which he involuntarily loved his neighbour as much he did himself, he will certainly almost have succumbed to the weight of the pain and shame of all that was incomprehensible and irresponsible in his neighbours. He suffered for the sin (second Corinthians 5:21) that he did not know, did not understand; it must have appeared to him as a terrible shattering, a kind of inner mental disturbance that had no right to endure in the face of “his peace”. Slowly, but evermore inexorably, the horrible prevalence, yes, the universality of this perdition became clear to him.

That he himself stood exalted above this perdition would have been a firm, continually increasing solace auguring victory – for ***all***, but never in the sense that the thought “it is only them, not me” would have brought solace. Indeed, we can hardly conceive how much affinity he felt with others and felt their sins to be his. When he finally gave himself to a criminal’s death the reasons for this were much simpler, more childlike than we in our school wisdom can conceive. He saw himself as together with us and said to himself: “It serves us right, we deserve that I be crucified.”

This darkness of anguish and agony of mind that befalls us when we contemplate that time as Jesus grew to manhood oddly brightens as if under the sun’s rays through evidence that we are able to gather from his own lips.

When later, during the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21) we hear him interpreting the law we feel this is not a teacher of virtue speaking who has thought of a new ethical system and is commending it to us; here a man is speaking from his life, a man of deeds. He is speaking to us from his full and warm heart, from the abundance of his experiences; he is an eager doer of the work, a man (James 1:25) “blessed in his deed”. There, Jesus has actually given us a glimpse into his nature, as he was as a youth and a young man, and which he preserved in the midst of life’s tumult. He put up with everything, took offense at nothing, was indulgent, generous, a peacemaker and obliging. He loved his enemies, blessed those who cursed him, was benevolent to those who hated him, prayed for those who insulted and persecuted him, and for everyone had a full and warm and open heart.

What joyous assurance of victory shines through this doing! One feels the powerful Godly I, in most childlike humility, how it knows itself to be the victor of the evil which is all around us. One has a premonition that he will be successful in ultimately drawing everything to himself and through himself towards the Father.

After all – and he knew this – he was not alone in these struggles, not on his own. His power of victory lay in his unity with the Father. That “**I** am …, you should” resounding down to us from Sinai finds an answer in Jesus from the centre of the connected world, a corresponding I: “I ***will***”. This is the solemnly sublime that we encounter in this struggle of love, solemn because we feel that both “I”s are the ***same*** in essence. He and the Father are one. In all the suffering that we see coming to him, the lap of the Father was his sanctuary. There, full of shame and distress, full of hope and trust, he carried all the misery of the world; and from there, corresponding to the increasing measure of his need, light, power, salvation and life flowed to him and the world. So was he, the man (1 Timothy 2:5) Christ Jesus, the **mediator** between God and man, insofar that through him what was human, with all the fullness of divinity that it was destined for and what it was conceived for, would be fulfilled and through him the whole confusion of the human race would return to “the lap of the Father”.

How must his hard struggle have led him into the Holy Scriptures! They teach all of us to understand today in the light of the past and in the light of the future planned by God. There he would have understood psalms in a new way and learned to pray with them more earnestly, such as Psalm 14 (“There is none that doeth good”); there also in the first chapters of the Bible (The Fall) light would have been shed; there finally solace drawn from the promises of the prophets; there he would have learned what he would later command those chosen by God, to call day and night “save us from our enemies!”.

**Baptism**

In such a situation full of anguish of heart for the world and full of yearning that the Father would undertake something, let us think of him at the time when John the Baptist appeared. How must the tidings of the wonderful deeds of this man revived him, of baptism of all people for redemption of their sins. This was what his heart had craved for, for all people. He must go there; none were so driven by such anguish of soul as he, because he suffered the anguish of all.

The actual heart of the baptismal movement was Judaea, where John was also generally to be found. As he had selected the entire “environs of the Jordan” as the arena of his activity, he would have been found occasionally in the northern arm of the Jordan, where we have already encountered the Galilean youths with him. So Jesus also travelled there. Did he perhaps have an inkling that he would never return to practise his profession? It is not easy to say; at least legend gives us no indication of this, but rather of the opposite as the narrators emphasize that he was ***driven*** (more precisely ***hounded***) by the spirit, therefore against his will, and at least contrary to earlier intentions, into the desert. This is easiest to understand ***because*** it would have been an inconvenient moment to leave his home for any length of time, let alone permanently because he had not foreseen this at all. Therefore he left his home, as did all the others who went to John, with no other thought than that he would be returning to his profession after a short absence.

So he came to John in order to pour out his heart’s sorrow, his entire sense of shame, his hunger for forgiveness and help for humankind before this servant of God and in the sight of God and at His hand. “Father we have sinned, forgive us”, “The world has gone astray, erred, apostatized”, thus we have interpreted his confession above. The great sin of the world as portrayed in the story of the Fall of Man, that “to be for oneself without God, God, to be one’s own God”, this was what brought him, penitent and comforted in faith, to his baptism before God. Yearning, but surely also trusting to receive a warrant consisting of “Be comforted, I will forgive and help you, humankind”, he went into the Jordan. He knew that John performed these baptisms at the command of God and not as an idle invention of his own mind; that God had pledged Himself to bestow forgiveness on those who came to search for His countenance for the same.

“The heaven was opened[[20]](#footnote-21), and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him” (Luke 3:21-22); this apparently, according to the sources, was seen only by John for whom, as we have seen above, the ***visible*** sign was an ardent need. The fact that Jesus needed this gift from the Holy Ghost for the justification of his calling speaks clearly for our conjecture that up till then he had relied solely on the means available to all of us.

What an answer from the highest on high – from the Father, whom he had believed in, loved, and hoped for all his life – comes loud and clear to his ear, “Thou art my beloved Son” (Mark 1:11). This was first and foremost a personal solace for him; almost as if, in his distress at the general depravity, he had also become anxious that his personal peace was based on self-delusion or self-overestimation, a fear that he surely overcame with his belief; but the solace served as a reassurance, as is welcome in all beliefs. The enigma of his life was solved, his whole being certainly rejoiced at this glorious news, “It is thus, I am the son, I am the child and thou art my Father”. It was also a solace for all; for all he had stood before God and for all must these words have had a comforting meaning. This is also confirmed in the closing words, which are either “in whom I was well pleased” or, “in whom I took delight”. The first only has meaning when we are permitted to change it, as did Luther, to “in whom I am well pleased” and even then it would not tell us more than the word “beloved” already does. The second interpretation reminds us of a meaning of the word frequently occurring in the bible, for instance Matthew 11:26 (“for so it seemed good in thy sight”), namely that it expresses the will of God as good will. God was well pleased means “He graciously decided it”. In whom He took delight means “of whom I thought when I decided my will”, or also: “in whom I will carry out my will”. This second sentence supplies the great and practical consequence that He gave to the first. The first sentence expresses fully and warmly the joy He has in His beloved son, but God is love and this love is always practical, therefore this joy shall not be an idle one but should culminate thus: that by means of this beloved son, God’s will can now be carried out for the salvation of all. This was then the solace for all, and of which Jesus had need. If the first gave him bliss that transcended all thought, then the second gave him – as the answer to his distress he felt on others’ behalf – the command to lead the salvation for all to victory and the certain and divine warranty that he would be successful. You are he and you are born that all this sinful misery of humankind shall change. Now he knew that he was the one that the fathers of the church had hoped for, yes, that he was much more than they had ever suspected.

Now, for his calling, Jesus was equipped with the Holy Ghost in its fullness. One annotator (v. Hofmann) beautifully said “If God’s spirit had ever descended on any person so that he would speak God’s word, do God’s work, then it was a single call in the carrying out of God’s will for which he was to be awakened and equipped. The one who now received this was to carry out the unified saving will of God. This is why he received the spirit of God in the unity of his holy fullness of power. This was represented by the descent of the spirit which clothed itself in the gliding down of a corporeal, enclosed being.” Earlier men of God had also had their calling, their task, and at least one of them was particularly familiar with the holy work of God on earth; thus it is said of Moses that God gave him “His whole house”, His whole work of salvation insofar as it could be furthered. This mission or calling was always only a limited one in accordance with the time and the meagreness of the same (as the time was not yet come) as well as the personal inadequacies of those men. What they received from the Holy Ghost originated as an exception and also partly due to their inadequacies. Jesus, however, received it completely and utterly, due, on the one hand, to his calling which was to lead God’s work to its completion and, on the other, due to his antecedents and his personality which was founded on these and which for the first time – since humankind existed – offered an appropriate dwelling for the Holy Ghost; who exists in order to dwell in the human being. [[21]](#footnote-22) Everything that we subsequently see of an exceptional power in the spirit of Jesus – awareness of things that are hidden to us other human beings – we must ascribe to the spirit of God inherent in him. The prophets also had visionary power to a certain degree. What wasonly partially bestowed on them was possessed by the Saviour in abundance.

**Temptation**

The baptism was a turning point in the life of Jesus which infinitely surpassed all similar turning points in the lives of earlier men of God, such as Abraham, Moses, David, Elisha and Isaiah. As God once said to Moses, when he despaired of ultimate salvation for his people, “I will send you, through you I will save my people”. So here – naturally in a different manner – Jesus in his humble and quiet yearning heard the call: “Thou art the one, thou shalt bring salvation”. What a turning point in his life! The period of humble, although not peaceful, laborious work as a craftsman was suddenly and abruptly brought to an end, and he stood before a task that would stand unparalleled in the history of mankind, yes, a task which actually implied the task of mankind itself. The consciousness of being the promised Son of God, in the truest sense of the word, placed at the head of human striving, not externally but in essence, in spirit – this necessitated, in order to be understood and dealt with in holy clarity and simplicity, in faith and obedience, a quiet spiritual work full of self-abnegation, humility and innocence. It was necessary, and we can understand this, that between the two great periods of his life – his past and his future – a time of quiet contemplation be undertaken. A return to the normality of his former profession with all that it entailed was not to be thought of.

The spirit that had entered him immediately asserted its sovereign rights and “drove him into the desert”. Was it not also thoughts of bliss of his status with regard to his Father and of the certain victory for all mankind that stirred him there, in the wilderness? Certainly, but it is significant that the Saviour does not tell us anything of this but only of the hard struggles, of the ugly temptations offered him in order to drag his high calling down to the level of the flesh and the world; sensuous pleasure, the lustre of miracles, power over hearts and therefore over mankind cavorted before his soul in order to, as if only incidentally, distract him from the straight and narrow path of the simple execution of his work. Certainly, his feelings of bliss will have retreated somewhat in the face of the weight resting on him of the consciousness of the entire sin of the world. On the one hand, he saw himself as the Son of God and, on the other, as the one responsible to God for the entire state of the world. And in this world almost every fibre was connected with sin. The places he came to bore the imprint of the ungodliness of the world. Places that could lead one to pose the question of whether one could not also help draw upon aid in an ungodly way; places that were for the Son fundamentally daunting, shameful, almost reminiscent of sin.

However, the temptations he was subject to differed from ours in two ways: One, that they by no means reached him in the clumsy crudeness in which they gain power over us, but rather, at least partially, approached him garbed in an exquisite, sanctimonious and extremely dazzling form; two, that they, as we understand it, did not arise within him but came from outside, from someone who, from reasons which were not initially apparent, was obviously interested in him and of whose character and essence Jesus could only gradually throw light upon (according to Matthew).

We can see how tremendously seriously the Saviour took his preparation for the calling so suddenly thrust upon him in that he renounced food for the entire time. After his fast had lasted for forty days and hunger began to assert its rights within him, that unknown figure approached him with endearing commiseration on this, his hunger, and suggested to him that on the strength of his kinship with God (Jesus must have asked himself how the stranger knew this) “these stones be made bread” (Matthew 4:3).

Jesus recognized a “tempter” in this figure, that is, one who did not really take his own suggestion seriously and who also realized the wrongness of it, but who – perhaps in all friendship – wanted to test him. This is the affectionate form of love that “sees no malice”. And was it truly wrong? Could he not have thought that in deference to his high calling, he could rise a little above the lowly hardships of the current world order and now and in the future relieve himself at least of the onerous physical straits caused by penury and deprivation; as was the case with all those who must lead the masses with the strength of their spirit alone, such as officers of high rank and others who are relieved as much as possible of any physical strain? Could he not later, in the same way, here and there, lift the bane of hunger and manifest himself as a benefactor of mankind? No! He does not want to break his Father’s order, and least of all does he want to – nor may he – demand a privileged and exceptional position in such difficulties, as this would sever the cord of community with which he will draw his people up behind him and away from the whole connection with the misery of the world. He knows that even in the hard world order of the time that God can be found and his help received, and this is why he wishes to remain where he is, to make use of his right to God’s, the highest, aid in order to gradually unshackle this world order and to initiate a new one. He answers the tempter in a friendly manner. In his answer lies the acquiescence that the time might have come to consider the appeasement of hunger but why with a miracle? Does God need such circuitous paths? If he speaks a word then I am full. This – not the fact that not only the body but also the soul needs nourishment – is known to be the literal sense of the saying “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). And the Saviour then feels his hunger satisfied.

The tempter appears again, this time with a conspicuous churchly and biblical air. Suddenly Jesus finds himself – how? he does not tell us – on the otherwise inaccessible pinnacle of a temple. To the uncomfortable question which must have arisen in his heart as to how he was to descend again, the tempter gave him counsel: “Trust in God’s promise of saviour to all the pious in danger! Cast thyself down! For it is written He shall give His angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up!” (Matthew 4:6; Psalm 91:11.) A miracle such as this would have immediately verified Jesus as the ambassador of God in the eyes of Jerusalem. Did the counsellor believe this, or did he hope that God would forsake his disobedient son? How many similar whispers have been addressed to others with this almost irresistible power, and ended in unexpected death which we survivors interpret as voluntary suicide. It was part of the gravity of that struggle that Jesus, while at the dizzying pinnacle of his divine power and work, was beset by temptations similar to those that madness brings. To guard the whole wonderful power of God that was available to him, in complete and humble sobriety against anything grotesque – this was his task – combined two utterly discrepant ways of thought: the innocent, sober ***faith*** in the living God, on the one hand, and, on the other, untethered, superstitious and arbitrary fantasy. The first stemming from great discipline and strength of thought, the second from a disruption of the same and a true renunciation of thought – in essence already madness!

The Saviour immediately recognized the malice in this imposition and described its originator as a “Diabolos”, with which word the Greeks describe the calumniator, or he who spreads confusion, who confounds. Jesus probably suspected that the intention was to sow discord between him and his Father. The temptation was to petition and coerce miraculous and divine assistance by appealing, on one hand, to God’s promise and, on the other, to the need demanding these miracles, by means of daring behaviour supposedly based on faith. This temptation has filled many pages of history, namely that of the Christian church, with gloomy content: one conceals from oneself that this necessity is merely an excuse and wantonness and vanity are the hidden mainsprings, because the living God in His majesty is viewed through superstitious fantasy instead of clarity of thought.

When Israel once, after crossing through the Red Sea, suffered similar straits through utter lack of food and drink, the people tempestuously sought help from Moses as if they would make any further faith in God dependent on this help. The scriptures called this “tempting”. The majesty of the all-powerful God commands that our trust in him is an absolute one, that we ***trust*** in his help but do not ***stipulate*** it. Attempting to ascertain if God is with us is forbidden to us, is a sin, which may perhaps be ***punished*** with the apparent success of the test. Thus the Saviour must have, unobtrusively but not without invisible help from the angels of God, descended from his perilous height.

For the Prince of Darkness, the innocence which appertains to all those possessing divine sentiments is something incomprehensible and apparently always foolish. How must then this tempter have felt when this innocent recognized so adroitly all the fine snares of temptation and summarily tore them asunder; met every feint of the sword with a counterstroke to the very centre, the centre of conscience – insofar as such a thing was still in existence there. Finally he attempted it in a different way, a way appallingly true to life. According to the opinion of the Prince of Darkness, every virtue of humankind has its limits, every conscience a price at which it can be bought, and the height of the supposed virtuousness is measured simply according to the height of the price which is able to bring about its downfall.

Thus the tempter, in his final attempt, proceeds with shameless candour; he reveals himself, audaciously bold, as he who has dominion over all realms of the earth in all their splendour and offers him not only a sharing of this rule, but the whole power for himself. This will hardly have been without the ulterior motive that when Jesus would have agreed to these conditions, he could reconsider the keeping of his word perhaps not without zeal for the idea and for the prospect of what could be made of the world through the united efforts of two such great minds. We would be very much in error if we were to see in this enemy, with whom we will now become acquainted, the distorted figure that the Middle Ages have made of him. The world is his pride and his intention is to clothe it in a glow of apparent comfort and wealth, as well as supposed intellect and dazzling education and to assume the role of benefactor to the world. This intention is much more appropriate to his character then we frequently suspect, and his nature is much more brilliant, noble and magnificent than we think. The concession was probably also not difficult for him to make; to give the whole, in some measure, a religious tinge provided that he – not even in spoken sentences but only secretly – would be the one who ultimately all *cultus* would refer to under the arbitrary title: Godhead or Nature or Allfather. A refined, well-educated, decent and shining world, but one without a divine conclusion to its history and therefore without salvation for the souls; fine ***hopes ,*** as the case may be, for a “blissful immortality”, but without the ***fulfilment*** of the same.

To attain quickly and effortlessly a world of “Christian order” within this world by means of an unobtrusive union with the pervading and ruling spirit of this world – this was the prospect that would supposedly tempt Jesus to agree to the proposal. How some other “Christian” factional successes gained through intraworldly means might, in the light of God, belong to ***this*** category! A stable, allegedly apparently endless, transfiguration of the world that could, for instance, also adorn itself with the appellation of a gradual spiritual “coming of the kingdom of God” in which the actual abasement of the individual under God would be absent – that was the planned result of this proposed interesting compromise. What Jesus was in his innermost life, the innocent, living, personal communion with the Father, the Father’s constant tangible influence on him – this would have been withheld from mankind for all eternity.

The decision was not what was most difficult for Jesus herein, but doubtless the extremely painful discovery that he made.

The power of this peculiar someone, who was so obviously interested in him, was revealed to Jesus, and from now on this power would counter him in his striving for the salvation of mankind in an evermore horrific and hostile way. Paul was frequently to call this power simply the Darkness; so it was revealed here too. Secrecy and self-mantling are its strengths, and the more powerfully it rules, the more it is able to steal the consciousness of its existence from those it rules. The first fruits of any victory over this Darkness is the partial unmasking of the same. As the first reward for the trampling down of an evil craving, a perverse sentiment or suchlike is insight into the foolishness, wrongness and evil that are hidden there, so it was for Jesus; his constancy led him from victory to victory, from light to light.

In the godlessness of his fellow human beings Jesus had doubtless noticed something such as mental illness, a pathological torpor and darkness in all relationships of the heart and the mind towards God, also – namely in the area of sensuality – a pathological joy in what was loathsome and senseless and many another inexplicable enthusiasm for or against something. The generality of the manifestations might have done more than give him food for thought, but so far he had had only an inkling of ***the*** solution to this riddle, which presented itself now as a fruit of his struggle, and had thought of it with timid, critically sober conjecture. Even the bible (OT) offered him only sparse and at the same time veiled information. Just the thought that a powerful spiritual entity, in a certain sense a great personality, announcing himself to be independent of God and, invisible and hidden, seeking and finding influence over us human beings – just the thought is so painful and oppressive that indeed we have only been able to bear it since we recognize in Jesus the victor. This is entirely understandable when such “thinkers” reject this “opinion” out of hand, thinkers who construct their teaching system from the realms of the spirit according to their “preference”, according to what they think would be nicest.

In the case of the Fall, however, we already encounter in the serpent a spiritual power that woos mankind in order to rule them when alive and to own them when dead. The description is so sparse that a further continuation of the working of this power could be inferred, although it is not actually stated as such – which correlates to the fact that we encounter Israel’s presentiment of the existence of such a power only later, and only in isolated cases. In order to explain quite exceptional phenomena in the history of the human spirit (for instance that pious David had a census taken in Israel) or of the divine world rule (that pious Job had to suffer such affliction) the name appears: the “opponent”, the “resister”, the “enemy”. Thus a prophet Micah sees (1 Kings 22:21) “the spirit” (in Luther’s translation inaccurately “a spirit”) as the cause of the strange and false “fervour of conviction” of four hundred so-called prophets, and a better-known prophet Micah (7:8-10) sees in the spirit a nameless, anonymous “enemy” laughing scornfully at the moral destruction of Israel.

Nevertheless, this all occurs like isolated flashes of summer lightning, without inner, causally illuminating coherence.

And now one person walks up to Jesus and says with shameless directness, in view of the state of the world, “This all is mine!” A boast, and a calculated one, already lay in the words, and it is certain that Jesus is remembering his personal experiences during this time of temptation when he later (John 8:44) says of him, “When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.” But Jesus must have also said, “In his power of temptation and zeal of the temptation that I am now conversant with, it is clear that humankind, as I know it,is no match for him.” And all at once much becomes clear to the Saviour of the hidden strings that are frequently pulled to lead humankind astray. “Then cometh the wicked *one,* and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart” (Matthew 13:19); who in life has subjugated himself to his dominion will not escape it in death – it will be he who holds sway over hell, that is, the world of the dead (Hades).

What the Saviour had discovered here is in some measure reminiscent of a discovery that a prince once made. The prince recognized himself as being under the influence of “coincidental” experiences which all “coincidentally” seemed to guide him in one particular direction. Coincidentally he encountered this or the other person, saw that, these tidings came to light and so on – and all at once he sees that there is a ***plan*** behind everything and that he has been the victim of cunning calculation, perhaps the puppet of an evil sycophant!

How infinitely much more painful it is for us humans when, instead of the seemingly magnificent laws of the spirit and such things, we see a guileful hand playing its game with humankind following a well-wrought plan! How painful and crushing was it for the Saviour to recognize, in the most unexpected way, the provenance of so many distressing riddles in the figure of one ***person*** before him, a person of such guile and whose force of will would merit serving a more noble tenet than that of consummate evil that he now encountered!

The Saviour now knew: he is my adversary, I have been born as a man in order to conquer him. Over time he became ever more closely acquainted with this adversary and in the evening of his life here on earth (John 16:11) he bears witness to the fact that he is the ruler of this world (this universe)!

**Sunday Interlude**

Now, as if emerging from a dark cave, we step out into the sunlight with the Saviour when he leaves the desert to return once again to humankind. What will he commence with now? Will he immediately divest John of leadership? He does not. In the Holy Scriptures it has never been recorded that a later arrival has relieved an earlier one (for instance Joshua for Moses or Elisha for Elijah) during his life, or even independently worked alongside him. There was only ever one individual regarded as the attested servant of God. Even though John expressly declared him the main person and himself as only his predecessor, Jesus also acknowledged for himself this sacred order, with the caveat however that this was an exception to the rule. He did not place himself ***under*** John, but ***alongside*** him and kept himself more or less in quietude, in the background, leaving John as the main actor in the public work and holding his ***own***, the work of his special calling, back.

Thus he gained a time of leisure – a Sunday interlude we call this, as words such as leisure, holiday etc. would not be fitting – a time in which his task was ***to be***, a time to unfold his personality in the light of his calling quietly and without restraint, free of the demands of all kinds that the actual struggle of his calling would later entail.

John the Apostle , in his gospel offering us an afterthought to various events that the first three narrators did not, tells us much about this Sunday interlude which preceded actual public appearances and was for this reason ignored by the other narrators. It was also the Sunday interlude for the narrator in another sense, as it was the time that he saw the light; he saw “the life, that eternal life, that is with the Father”. We can feel this along with him due to the almost diary-like meticulousness of his writing, right down to individual occurrences. Nowhere else is the Saviour drawn so surprisingly true to his human traits. His unconcealed joy at the noble youths; the sincere praise that he bestowed upon them directly, that a dark-minded scribe would have decried as being unpedagogical or imprudent; also the bourgeois, homely and familiarly terse way in which he speaks to his mother (and at which she is ***not*** surprised) as well as his rough and masculine conduct in the temple. These and other things paint such a bright and colourful picture that we are positively surprised when we have permitted ourselves to read it naively as a description of a life. If we unholy human beings imagine a holy one, the figure that we think of easily loses all living warmth and freshness. Their movements are so regular and calculated as if a cold principle were driving them and not a warm heart. But in him, in whom “the word became flesh”, we see the holy one in his free and elemental manner manifested as noble, warm and real; we see a human being who lives, yes, who lives more vitally than do we all.

While Matthew and Mark agree that Jesus now entered on a quieter time in his life, insofar as according to them, Jesus did not appear publicly until after the imprisonment of the Baptist, Luke (4:14ff.) seems to contradict this. However, it is well known that Luke loved to leap over long periods of time without reference to the intervening events, as well as occasionally ordering his narrative according to aspects other than that of ***chronological order***; which is obviously the case just here.

We see the Saviour now, inwardly certain of his calling, as well as publicly attested to by John, going his way in quiet but in no wise timid reserve, only taking care, yes anxious, that he will not, before ***his*** hour has come, wilfully come forward. He awaits what is to come, as with the words of Samuel to Saul, “that thou do as occasion serve thee; for God *is* with thee” (1 Samuel 10:7). Thus step by step he goes where the occasion calls him: to John, to a wedding, to Capernaum, to the Easter feast in Jerusalem, to the Jordan, before finally returning to stillness.

**With John**

There, where the “holy story” lived, where the servant of God presided, at the meeting place for all those who strove and yearned for something higher, better – there is where he belonged first of all. Here Jesus“wandered”, quiet and initially unrecognized among those who came and went, waiting for the things which were to come. Here he would find first and foremost that which was indispensable for fruitful work: men of bright, full, innocent receptivity for him and his work, who were capable of understanding him completely. What would the Saviour have been if no-one had understood him! Those he found here were – as he gratefully avows on the evening before his death (John 17:6ff.) – a special gift from his Father to him. To begin with, he found them ***unsought***. He did not seek, he was not sought.

Here we come to that exact report by John the Apostle in which he records almost a whole week, day by day; the week that was the turning point in his life, a life the first half of which he lived as a disciple of baptism and the second half as the disciple of Jesus.

Let us (arbitrarily) assume that it was Sunday (the first working day) as those priests and Levites (John 1:19-51) sent by Jerusalem came to John!John speaks to them of Jesus as of one who he deems to be close by, is just out of sight. He is wondering, during the forty days of temptation (of which John knows nothing), where Jesus is. The following day, a Monday therefore, he sees him from afar and reports to his disciples what he knows of him. How much compassion, reverence, and gratitude lie in the words, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29.) The admonition is meant to give the disciples firm and at the same time clear official assurance that Jesus is the one whose coming he has always referred to in his preaching and how, of him and in him, his boldest expectations have been surpassed.

In two Galilean youths the decision ripens overnight to belong to the “Lamb of God” (this name truly does not promise a comfortable life) as disciples, and on Wednesday John again sees Jesus from afar and points to him. It is intrinsic in the quiet majesty of the story that the Baptist does not dare approach Jesus to greet him, and Jesus also does not approach. Wonderfully tenderly it is now described how the two youths quietly leave their masters and follow Jesus everywhere without having the courage to speak to him until he notices them; and so in a short conversation a bond is forged that will last into eternity.

They spent the evening with him. It seems to have passed in stillness. The full heart does not require many words, neither in order to understand nor to be understood. The force of the first impression, however, enriched with the experience of a long life, echoes from the words of the Apostle that he wrote in his old age (John 1:1ff. and 1 John 1:1-4): “That which was from the beginning”; that was the releasing word for his impressions in this enlightening clarity, simplicity and holy illumination. “That is the ***primordial beginning***”. So we should have been, so everything should have become; everything else later is an error in our history. It is as though in John, humankind suddenly remembers the dawn glory of their “beginning”. And this ***primordial beginning***, it was with God and (directed) towards[[22]](#footnote-23) God. There it was at home and there went its significance, its striving; yes, its whole essence was therein which is why this followed without struggle, without faltering, without choosing; effortlessly, from the heart, “from the ***beginning***”. One could not describe more illuminatingly the innermost principle of the spiritual life, the love of God, the consummation and attunement with God as the primordial home of the spirit, and everything that comes later as incidentally unnatural, than with these words, at the same time innocently simple but overflowing with ***light*** and ***warmth***. This is the bright, joyous, sublime light from the glory of that which is “the beginning, the A” and which then of necessity will also be “the O, the end”. “In him was ***life***”, he goes on to say, “and the ***life*** was the light of men.” Today a death-light is shining. Uncleanliness and insolence are seen as ingenious; parsimony, lies and deceit as clever; the mass murderer is a bright star on the firmament of world history, his cold-heartedness – an abundance of death – has made him “great”. Compassion, humility, gentleness – they are too “childlike”, they are branded with the stigma of mild, blunted intellect. Lust for one’s own death as well as for that of others in the false glow of hate, of pride, yes, of baseness, that is the light of man today – thus might Johnhave said – but now I see that it was different once: ***life*** was the light of all mankind, that is, intended as light for them.

The following pictures speak so vitally to us that we have no need to illuminate them more vividly. How in Simon they bring Jesus a welcome prize; how Jesus himself now calls to shy Philip to follow him; how Philip communicates to the critical, perhaps already often disillusioned Nathanael their great, sublime discovery and in response to his scathing punditry (which, however, unknown to Philip was in error as Jesus was born into the House of David in Bethlehem) answers with the only words, the first, he has heard from Jesus “Come and see!” as if these words made up a whole chapter of thought (which indeed they do, in the essence of the experience). Only I cannot just quite pass over this Nathanael. “A true Israelite” is actually a real “man of hope”, “in whom is no guile”(John 1:47), that is, whose hope is not dulled nor yet ***exaggerated***, whose pure hopes are for pure divinity. It is moving how, in Jesus’ description, Nathanael obviously finds himself well-described, properly depicted, but sees now more than ever that to doubt the authenticity of Jesus is his duty, as could not these words be regarded as badly disguised flattery? “Whence knowest thou me?” “Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the (ύπò τήν σ.) fig tree, I saw thee.” This was the Saviour’s Holy Spirit, which had sensed a yearning prayer from within the mass of foliage. But how must Nathanael have felt at seeing himself discovered in his most holy and – as he thought – hidden moment in his life, in his innermost and ***noblest*** feelings, and by whom! This was a lightning bolt as if from the eternal kingdom of heaven, a foretaste of how it would be some day with the Father.

Nathanael recognizes him as he for whom he sighed under the fig tree. What an answer to his prayer! The names that he bestows on Jesus are witness to the true – and also very conversant with the Bible – Israelite. “Thou art theKing of Israel; thou art the Son of God.” One must understand the latter less from the aspect of the whole extent of the fulfilment, and more as coming from the pre-Christian Israelite way of thought; for instance, as in the words of God to David referring to his issue: “I will be his father, and he shall be my son.” (2 Samuel 7:14), which practically implies one who was ***not*** initially God’s son. There is also much unreservedly foreshadowed here. A presentiment of Jesus’ status as God’s son flickered from time to time in the disciples’ consciousness, but it would have apparently transcended the limits of possibility that this would become a clear and firm conviction for them, until the ***affirmation*** came from Jesus himself (Matthew 16:17).

So now the Saviour was surrounded by five or maybe six youths. The fact that Jesus had already gathered disciples to him could be remarked upon, or be taken as proof against our opinion of a “Sunday interlude”. However, the Saviour was a friend of man, of togetherness and coexistence. Nothing was further from his nature than a monologic Christianity, a piety that is its own subject and whose whole conduct is composed of continually feeling its own pulse, as it were. The Saviour wanted to live in the plural, in a society where there is community and discourse.

**The Wedding at Cana**

Now the Saviour is surrounded by a new spiritual family instead of his earlier, natural family. A family that – similar to the Baptist – is wonderfully detached from the earthly and free from the worldly. Its foundation is in the divine, its goals in the great sacred onward movement which, although not yet clearly described, was nevertheless established in the person of Jesus. In the hard school under John the disciples had been prepared for such severance from the mundane. For the name “Lamb of God for the sins of the world” that he had bestowed upon Jesus demanded complete renunciation of all worldly pleasures. Even more effective than this early training though was the heavenly glow of Jesus’ personality. From him radiated a freedom from earthly things; not – as it must have still been in the case of the Baptist – of a half anxious, half humble character, no: a freedom of the ***king***, of the ***victor***, of that which entails a new order and the ***kingdom of heaven***. John’s renunciation was a retreat in the face of the world of the strong. Jesus knows he is the stronger, he wants to ***conquer*** the world. This difference was immediately apparent.

An even greater surprise for these world-renouncing disciples (the majority of them most likely formerly John the Baptist’s disciples) can hardly be imagined than the call: “We are going to a wedding!” It was the final day (according to our arbitrary choosing of the day) of that memorable week, and this ***date,*** that is, the ***speed*** of the reversal in their way of living and thinking was obviously unforgettable for Johnthe Apostle. The wedding is of course the zenith and consummation point of natural human life where the pasts of two families clasp hands to enter upon a mutual future; a ceremony that pays a tribute of gratitude and honour to pure earthly joy, to domestic happiness. Of all the true human traits in Jesus, which understandably emerged most clearly during this “Sunday interlude”, we find here the richest yield. The most surprising is the embarrassment that at this (apparently not exactly poor) wedding feast a lack of wine began to make itself felt. Perhaps one had not counted on Jesus coming with so many companions or one had expected an almost complete abstinence from these Baptist disciples – at any rate events did not follow as we would have expected, namely that the majesty emanating from Jesus would have allowed only the merest sips to pass the guests’ lips. It came to pass differently: it was a sacred but intimately familiar occasion in which Jesus’ words “Can the wedding guests fast?” were fulfilled.

His mother discovers the embarrassment of the hosts and is obviously long-used to having Jesus’ counsel and helping hand in all the small and great contingencies and emergencies that life brings. She apparently also feels that it is probably indirectly due to Jesus that the awkwardness has arisen in the first place. The answer Jesus gives in response to his mother’s low-voiced hint is brusque (in some translations less brusque than others): “Woman, what have I to do with thee?” (John 2:4.) There is nothing derogatory here and particularly no contradiction to the ***title of Mother:*** in the word “woman”; he merely desires to accentuate the difference of ***gender***, not as a form of address but to explain what he is saying. In effect; “Our cares are different, you are a ***woman***. And it is ***woman’s*** work to see to what is set on the table.” Two different things emerge from the brusque tone: one, that plain family speech spoken between ordinary people which, because one does not speak in exaggeratedly honeyed tones, is always down-to-earth and sincere, therefore guaranteeing a reliable cordiality and calmness; – and then secondly, an almost irritable anxiousness, not wanting to “attempt God”, not wanting to be inveigled into standing out with his specialness, divineness, for a mundane reason. It was that “wisdom that is from above” (James 3:17) that “is first pure”, far removed from wanting to press forward and assert oneself. That he was consciously on guard, also against his mother, (similar to the demand for blessing of Moses [5 Moses 33:9ff.] to the righteous priests, “Who said unto his father and to his mother, I have not seen him” etc.) is understandable.

His mother is not much deterred, she is already preparing the servant for what her son will do – and she is not proved wrong. Here things are taking place as, for instance, they frequently do in a sensible marriage when a righteous deed is born out of two united wills. The woman thinks quickly and is decisive, she is not responsible after all! She throws the idea before the man, the man struggles for his independence – as he must, he carries the responsibility and has the duty and the task to form an opinion. Thus he is often curt and defensive. However, the woman knows this and – is not proved wrong; the man does the deed, and does it better and more completely than she thought would be the case.

“Mine hour is not yet come”. In these words echo that fear of exercising his higher power prematurely. But what is he to do now? If he leaves the gathering with some excuse then the embarrassment would be lifted. He may not do this, however, life is worth more than food, and he and his disciples are worth more than the wine.

One thing did suggest itself, namely to regard the incident as an apt coincidence and to turn it to good account. He could say “We have paid tribute to the human and worldly custom of celebrating merrily together, so it would now be seemly to give our community a more spiritual cast.”

The entertainment had always certainly been an “edifying” one in its liberality, but far removed from any deliberate intention. Could one then not end it with some solemnity and give it a pronouncedly intentional edification, and was not the wine running dry an appropriate occasion to achieve this?

The Saviour understood very well the serious and austere striving to wage the strictest war against the pleasures of this world, also the seemingly innocent ones, and to place himself with force and artifice, almost coercion, in a spiritual state. Something had gained power over the world as it was that did not come from the Father and which contradicted our nobler self. This terrible power extends also to our limbs and their urges. Every striving is a well-intentioned attempt to resist this power. However, the Saviour could not, would not and may not oppose this power. He refused to recognize it; neither when it tempted him, nor when it asserted its claim in a warlike manner as described above. After all, the gifts that he was enjoying in the form of food and wine did not come from that power but from the Creator, from his heavenly Father, and he did not want to let this benevolence of the Creator and Father towards His human children wither away. He maintained his rightful status as son, as child, firmly upright; this also against that striving; this all the more as the same striving always led to compulsion and therefore to inner mendacity. He knew how under the constraints of such artificially willed and generated moods the truth of the soul and hence its innermost life, its capability of creating and making ***changes***, suffocates. Thus he could now deem that his “hour had come” after all in this small embarrassment. He could break a hole for his friends in this world power’s dungeon ceiling through which a light of benevolence from above could shine on them, from the land of truth, from God Himself, so that they could imagine how mankind is called to stand in beauty and how everything that belongs to all and should still come to all, in him and to him, the Saviour, had already come to pass in reality.

With regard to help, he himself had a curious attitude. He wanted to experience it, not to call it into being himself. “My Father sees the discomfiture and that it is ***my*** fault, that it is my bounden duty to ameliorate it.” So he sent water to the chief steward and leaves the rest to the Father or – as one could also say – to those angels he had mentioned to Nathanael thus: “They will have already told the Father and will have received the necessary instructions.” The enthusiasm of the servants for the wondrous guest and for carrying out his instructions caused them to bring more water than the Saviour had actually had in mind thereby helping the wedding couple to a rich and sacred tangible memory of this day.

What a holy, blissful reverence might have overcome the gathering when the secret ran from ear to ear as to ***whence*** this new wine came and that it was a direct gift from the heavenly Father! One scarcely dared to talk about this, but with what premonitions of the things they might hope for from him did they look at Jesus! That Jesus would facilitate sensual comforts of a certainty did not enter anyone’s mind. On the contrary, it was the sensual pleasure offered to us, by God’s grace, in sustenance that was consigned to holy care. Henceforward they had the constant reminder of that holy hour and of God, the Creator, the Merciful, of He who ***is*** there, and ***was*** there and who will ***come***.

“This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee”, John (2:11) tells us, “and manifested forth his glory.” For whom is actually the succulent flavour that the plant, in tender motherly love as it were, gives to the mantling of its seeds (such as grapes, pears, cherries and so on) to help them on their journey? It is not for the seed, for the seed this flavour were a senseless waste; for it and, yes, also for the living creature that enjoys this fruit, the mere nutrients would suffice adequately. This music of flavour sung by a thousand voices ringing out from the fruits of the plant kingdom belongs to the language of benevolence of the Creator towards His children which permeates all creation, is the power of God embedded in creation. Herein, that these powers served the Saviour so joyously, John saw his glory, saw how his innermost primordial essence (1:3) is based on the primal principle of this godly power. “And we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten son of the Father” (John 1:14), that is, how a father gives; how he can only give to an only son from whom he must withhold nothing in favour of other brothers. Nature, creation, is not like the Saviour’s elder brother who has inherited the physical and left only the other side of divine essence, the spiritual, to his younger brother. Instead, God as a father equipped the Saviour with ***all*** glory – we should take note that he, he whose whole benevolence we encounter in him, is the Creator, the Lord of All.

1. This circumstance makes one lean more to the assumption that they belonged to the aristocracy rather than to a party calling themselves the “Righteous” (Zaddik). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In verse 8 we have“…they have burned up all the synagogues of God in the land.” and synagogues did not arise until after the return from Babel. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Hausrath (Neutest. Zeitgeschichte I, 172) translates this passage (due to a printing error in the quote 14:14) inaccurately and misleadingly as “the prophet” which alters the quite natural yearning for a prophet into (what came later) a semi-superstitious expectation of a specific prophet (John 1:21).With this passage he smoothly refers to the promise, 5th book of Moses 18:15. However, he misunderstands this and therefore translates it incorrectly. Moses forbids Israel to go to the soothsayers and instead promises that God would never permit the lack of a ***prophet*** such as he is and to whom they should go (this is how Peter also understands it in the Apostles 3:22-23 when he continues, “all the prophets” – those promised by Moses – “have likewise foretold of these days”). Israel had the right to have a ***prophet at all times***. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. That Elijah is not mentioned here is in line with the singularity of this“inhabitant of Gilead” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Here perhaps we should refer to the first book of Samuel, chapter 2. The assumption might be permissible that the transmitter of Hannah’s prayer – perhaps her son Samuel – added this hope for the Lord’s Anointed to his mother’s prayer as his own wish. It could have bearing on David being hard-pressed by Saul. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. This “hope that was taught” created a whole body of apocryphal prophetic literature up until Christian times. Whether or not the “Book of Enoch” contains the Messiah expectations of the Pharisees is open to question as this is also possibly of more recent date. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Today we would of course say “…2000 years ago” as the first edition of this book appeared in 1884. - Ed. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. This should not be seen as a contradiction to Galatians 3:16. Abraham’s seed will – and this lies in the nature of things – not accomplish this, his task, in random dissipation, but rather as a structured whole throughout his historical development. After Paul experiences the fulfilment, how the history of this people in its task culminates in a single person, the Saviour, he is completely justified in associating this promise specifically with the Saviour. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. This chapter also contains promise but, of course, promise and prophecy cannot be separated in detail, only in its entirety does it speak of the Saviour’s apparent and temporary downfall. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. For today’s concepts (insofar as they are not biblical) both are of course equally incomprehensible; why would one need a ***new*** heaven and why a new ***earth***? Here, however, heaven is seen as being influenced by the earth, as suffering under the earth’s lingering malady (as there, conversely, there is joy for the repentant sinner) and the earth is honoured as the God-given abode of humankind which should not forever lose its divine destiny. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. From the words of Matthew 3:11, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance”, it hardly follows that John did actually baptize the Pharisees he called the generation of vipers. In these words John only proffers his services for repentants. The Pharisees, however, were at that time bound so strongly to their sect that scarcely one of them would dare to make an exception and bow under John’s baptism. That John would have also baptised unrepentants, although “unwillingly” as J. C. K. v. Hofmann (Weissagung und Erfüllung, II, 70) assumed, is unthinkable. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. “***The prophet***“, not ***a*** prophet; it was the expectation of a particular prophet, an unbiblical formulation of their understanding of the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. It may seem strange that John was not personally acquainted with his kindred contemporary (John 1:33 “And I knew him not”.) However, on the one hand, John had been a recluse from an early age and, on the other, the ***disappearance*** of Jesus, the feared child of Bethlehem, had to be prolonged for a further length of time. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. This comparison of Jesus’s relationship with his congregationto that of a bridegroom with his bride is used also by Paul twice in Ephesians (5:25ff.) and in 2 Corinthians (11:2). In the latter we find again the ***friend of the bridegroom,*** which Paul applies to himself and any servant or messenger of God in order to throw a harsh light on the meanness of those supposed servants of Christ who attempt to gain profit and honors for their own person from their auditors and charges. “I am jealous over you” he says “with godly jealousy (cf. “I the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God”), for I have espoused you to ***one*** husband, that I may present you as a ***chaste*** virgin to Christ.” This means, “I wanted to be an ***honest*** friend of the bridegroom who will not abuse the trust of the bridegroom by trying to win at least a small part of the bride’s heart for himself.”It is an unfortunate and unholy misunderstanding if one applies this comparison of Jesus’s relationship with his congregation also to his relationship with the individual soul, even going so far as to expound upon it. This results in something unnaturally cloying, almost sensual, usurping the holy image, expressing the true religious sense, yes, the honor of the Lord in a injurious way as is the case in the modern English song “The bridegroom cometh” particularly in the melody of the same. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. This is a word with which we can approximate the Greek word “Khristos” and which we can use as the Christians at the time of the Apostles used the word “Christ”. For the Christians of those times the latter told them what Jesus was, it does ***not*** tell ***us*** this. For us, it – as a foreign word – sounds like a given name, a second name added to “Jesus”. The translation “anointed one” does not mean the same thing for a child of today as it once did for the Israelite; better the word “victor”, for instance, insofar as the Messiah is he who undertakes victory for God. However, we need a word, such as the “Christ” of earlier epochs, that is public property and has entered into the language. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. When Zündel uses “we”, he most likelyusually refers to himself and Johann Christoph Blumhardt. Cf. preface to “Apostelzeit”. *Ed* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. The words “in spirit” are actually missing in most of the oldest manuscripts, so the words were only “…the child grew and waxed strong”. It is not impossible, however, that the word was originally included and was later removed by anxious hands who thought that a growing or strengthening in ***spirit*** was irreconcilable with the ***deity*** Jesus. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. The Israelite says “son of man” simply for “man”. Cf. Psalm 8:4. The whole question of Jesus (Matthew 16): “Who do the people say is the Son of Man? Who tells you that I am he?” would lose all meaning and sense if for a long time Jesus had already been wanting to describe himself as the Messiah with the words “Son of Man”. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. This world. Luther translates three words from the New Testament with “world”. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. When John here, and later Stephanus, sees the heaven opened even within a closed hall then we can recognize how for our senses a visible existence creates a shell which conceals an invisible existence, surpassing in reality and truth the visible one by far, and how from their senses this shell is partly removed or made transparent. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. In the Holy Scriptures, the word “spirit of God” is usually employed as a contrast to the spirit of a ***humanbeing*** rather than to differentiate from something ***else*** in God (such as we differentiate between a person‘s body and soul, flesh and spirit). It usually designates ***that*** of God which can, and should, live in us (for instance,“The man had the spirit of God” or “I will give my spirit unto you”. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. “Towards God” is the possible literal translation. Here (and 1:18) John gives the relation of Jesus to God the character not of stillness but of vital movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)