

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

The Confession of Nathanael, John i. 45-49.

PROF. RUSH RHEES.

NEWTON CENTRE, MASS.

THE present paper does not aim to present a minute exegesis of the passage under discussion, for the verses offer few exegetical difficulties; nor will it enter the great debate of the Johannine criticism, except in so far as this confession constitutes one of the problems of that criticism. The argument here offered can readily concede that in the Fourth Gospel the phraseology of the whole narrative may be colored by the Christological concepts of the author, and that the Johannine picture of Jesus may be partial, and to that extent disproportioned, from the standpoint of strict history. It is maintained, however, that this narrative of Nathanael's first meeting with Jesus contains nothing which vetoes for the fact as here narrated an early situation in the course of Jesus' ministry.

I. It is needful to notice briefly three expressions in the passage: (1) "An Israelite indeed" (vs.⁴⁷), (2) "I saw thee under the fig tree" (vs.⁴⁸), (3) "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God, thou art King of Israel" (vs.⁴⁹). Treating them concisely we remark:

(1) The expression *Ἰδε ἀληθῶς Ἰσραηλείτης* is not self-explanatory. It may signify, one true to the hope of Israel as the elect people of God (cf. 1¹¹), or it may derive its significance from the name Israel, and designate Nathanael as "one who has striven with God and has prevailed" (Gen. 32³⁶). The words which follow (*ἐν ᾧ δόλος οὐκ ἔστιν*) naturally recall the change of name from Jacob to Israel; while the allusion to another scene in the life of the patriarch in vs.⁴¹ (cf. Gen. 28¹¹ *ff.*) lends further probability to the second of these interpretations. In either case this comment of Jesus is no sufficient cause for the ardent confession of vs.⁴⁹, but must be taken with Jesus' response to Nathanael's "Whence knowest thou me?"

(2) It is plain that Nathanael found in Jesus' words, "I saw thee when thou wast under the fig tree, before Philip called thee," more than a mere statement of commonplace fact; they constitute in this

narrative a sign which quite swept away Nathanael's earlier incredulity (vs.⁴⁰), and brought him to the conviction earlier ascribed to Philip (vs.⁴⁰) and Andrew (vs.⁴¹). Opinions differ as to what constituted the sign. The readiest explanation, and the one most in accord with the rest of the argument in this Gospel, is that Nathanael when sitting under the fig tree was either so far distant from Jesus (Holtzmann), or so concealed from ordinary vision (Weiss *et al.*) that the fact that Jesus saw him was evidence of supernatural power. However, such a mere supernatural seeing does not answer Nathanael's question, nor account for his confession, unless it is further assumed that Nathanael's occupation when under the fig tree was such as to justify the opinion of him which Jesus had expressed; *i.e.* the words must be held to indicate that Jesus had read the man's heart, and knew him to be a worthy representative of the true Israel. It is commonly noted that in the East the fig tree, whether beside the highway, or at a man's own door, was a customary place for retirement for reading, meditation, or prayer. It is fair to infer that Nathanael, as one who was 'looking for the consolation of Israel,' had been indulging this pious longing during his quiet hour under the fig tree. Hence the aptness of Jesus' words and the surprise of Nathanael at hearing so true a description of himself. Such an 'Israelite indeed' would inevitably be awake to the expectancy aroused by the preaching of the Baptist (cf. Lk. 3¹⁵), whatever his personal relations with the new prophet may have been; and such a reading of his inmost thoughts and yearnings by the stranger whom Philip had so exaltedly introduced to his attention, taken with the extraordinary circumstance of the fig tree, might readily persuade the longing and expectant heart that Philip was right, and that the Baptist's message; 'the kingdom is near,' was to find fulfilment in the man from Nazareth.

(3) With this we are brought to the confession itself, and must note that Nathanael's two declarations concerning Jesus form a poetic parallelism which is a marked anticlimax, unless the title $\delta \upsilon\iota\delta\varsigma \tau\omicron\upsilon \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ is taken as essentially equivalent to, and not as of signally higher dignity than, the other title $\beta\alpha\sigma\iota\lambda\epsilon\upsilon\varsigma \tau\omicron\upsilon \text{'I}\sigma\tau\alpha\eta\lambda$. If this anticlimax is to be avoided, we do wrong to read into this confession any of the more metaphysical content which has come to predominate in the Christian use of the term 'the Son of God,' notwithstanding the fact that that transcendental significance is quite at home in the circle of ideas which we meet in the Fourth Gospel.

That the expression 'King of Israel' is a simple Jewish Messianic

designation seems to be proved by the title mockingly affixed to the cross of Jesus (Mk. 15²⁶), by the taunt of the multitudes who stood by, "Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, now come down," etc. (Mk. 15³²), and by the other current title 'Son of David' (Mk. 10⁴⁷).¹ Mention only is needed of the Messianic picture of the theocratic king in the 2d Psalm; of the prayer of the devout Jew in the first century B.C., "Behold, O Lord, and raise up unto them their King, the son of David";² and of the fact that in the Targums the Messiah is always called King Messiah.³

It is not otherwise with the other term in this parallelism. To the Jewish mind the title 'the Son of God' served to designate one among men exalted to high dignity, either as God's chosen (so collectively Israel⁴), or as God's representative (so the theocratic king, the Messiah⁵). The collective use is not peculiar to the Old Testament; it appears as well in the Psalms of Solomon.⁶ For the specific reference of the title to the Messiah it would seem to be conclusive to refer to the question of the High Priest at the trial of Jesus, "Art thou the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?" (Mk. 14⁶¹; Matthew 26⁶³ has "the Son of God"); while the Book of Enoch (105²) and the Fourth Book of Ezra (7^{28, 29} 13^{32, 33} 14⁹) furnish extra-canonical confirmation from late pre-Christian and early post-Christian Jewish literature.

The language of this confession of Nathanael appears thus to be simply and purely Messianic, in the sense in which this hope was held in the early decades of the first century A.D., and the incident depicts a devout Jew, who finds one who can read his inmost thoughts, which have been turned with longing towards the promised hope, and who is therefore moved to join with others in hailing the new Master as the expected King of Israel. With this conclusion the discussion of our passage would be complete, were it not that such an interpretation meets at once two serious difficulties: (a) Is it conceivable that with no further acquaintance than Nathanael as yet had with the character and power of the lowly Nazarene, any Israelite could have thought of him as the nation's Messiah? (b) Even if such a confession is conceivable in the circumstances, is it credible in view of Jesus' question and comment at Caesarea Philippi

¹ Compare the certainly quite Jewish words of the Annunciation (Lk. 1^{32 f.}) and of the Song of Zechariah (Lk. 1⁶⁹).

² Psalms of Solomon 17²⁸; cf. vs. 26.

⁴ Exodus 4²² Jer. 31⁹ Ho. 1¹⁰ 11¹.

³ Weber, *Jüdische Theologie*, 383.

⁵ Psalm 2⁷ 89²⁷ 2 S. 7¹⁴.

⁶ 18⁴: ἡ παιδεία σου ἐφ' ἡμᾶς ὡς υἱὸν πρωτότοκον μονογενῆ.

(Mt. 16^{18f.}), when he welcomed as an advance on all that had preceded a confession by Peter essentially equivalent in terms to this one of Nathanael? We will take up these questions in the order named.

II. The first necessitates a consideration of the remarkable complexity of the Messianic hope in the time of Jesus.⁷ It is noteworthy that the one hope of Israel appears in diverse forms according to the documents from which we draw our impression. This is no more a matter for surprise than that no two party organs should represent precisely the same conception of the significance and relative importance of public questions in modern politics. But it is not always taken into account. Among other phases we will notice four which seem to have had considerable emphasis in New Testament times.

(1) Baldensperger is probably right in finding the most characteristic Messianic development of Judaism in *Apocalyptic*. This mode of conception is defined by him as "a separation of the Messianic hopes from the earthly, political ideal, to bring them into conformity to the later Jewish idea of God, and an elevation of them into the realm of the supernatural" (p. 100). Apocalyptic holds fast to the theocratic watchword, "The Lord is King," but abandons all idea of human effort in connection with the establishment of the Kingdom. That is to be a "stone cut out of the mountain without hands."⁸ The chief sign by which the approach of deliverance is to be inferred is a present of seemingly intolerable trouble. The deliverance will come by a catastrophe — a judgment which will mean peace to the righteous and eternal destruction to the ungodly and the sinners. In this type of thought the Messiah comes to be a heavenly Being, the Son of Man,⁹ who will be revealed when the time for judgment is ripe. Now many of the lines of this picture appear in the Christian writings

⁷ Reference may be made, for the hope as found reflected in the writings of the rabbis, to Weber, *Jüdische Theologie*, 348 ff. (Leipzig, 1897, the 2d edition of his *System der altsynagogalen palästinischen Theologie*). The Talmud, however, is now held to be of quite secondary worth as a source for New Testament times. A concise and clear setting forth of the hope as reflected in Jewish literature more nearly contemporary with the New Testament is to be found in the first part of Baldensperger's *Das Selbstbewusstsein Jesu*, 3-122 (2d ed., Strassburg, 1892). Schürer draws from both sources and presents results very concisely (*History of the Jewish People*, II. ii. 126 ff.). Use has also been made of the summary introductions to Briggs's *Messiah of the Gospels*, pp. 1-40 (New York, 1894), and Wendt's *The Teaching of Jesus*, i. 33-84 (New York [1893]).

⁸ Dan. 2⁴⁴ f.

⁹ Dan. 7¹³ f. and Enoch 37 to 71 *passim*.

of the New Testament, and in the pre-Christian teaching of John the Baptist there is much that is apocalyptic in character, e.g. 'the axe lying at the root of the trees,' 'the fan to purge the threshing floor,' 'the baptism with the Spirit, and with fire (of judgment).' The call to repentance too would be at home among thoughts so set on a coming of God to judgment, although Apocalyptic is generally concerned rather with the troubles and hopes of the righteous, than with a call to sinners.

(2) The summons to repentance is, however, the characteristic of the Messianic teachings of the *Talmud*.¹⁰ And in the strict legal exactness of Pharisaism as it appears in the New Testament, as well as the flocking of the multitudes to John the Baptist, we see that repentance was not an unfamiliar theme in the current religious thought. Everything that we know of the Scribes in the New Testament period, their love for tradition, their scornful criticism of the 'people of the land,' their early interest in and later contempt for John the Baptist, leads to the conviction that such Messianic ideas as they would cherish would be much the same as we meet in the later rabbinic lore. In fact Baldensperger seems to have a good case in arguing that Apocalyptic itself is a sort of Messianic Haggadah,¹¹ a child of the synagogue, testifying to the hunger and thirst after the living God, which found only a salt mockery in the dry Halachoth of the Scribes, and yet was not able to fall back on the more straightforward conceptions of the prophets. We are not surprised, therefore, to find in the Talmud an essentially apocalyptic expectation of a coming catastrophe. Yet this is not the main feature of the rabbinic picture of the future, the interest is rather centred in the permanent exaltation of the Law and the synagogue; and if repentance is emphasized as a prerequisite to the coming of the Messiah, Israel's unrighteousness being the cause of the delay, righteousness and penitence are legally conceived. Only a superficial agreement can be found between this demand for repentance and the preaching of him who ignored the privilege of descent from Abraham (Mt. 3⁹).

(3) A third phase of Messianic thought in New Testament times is the *Zealot*, or Nationalist. With this party, as with the Apocalyptists and the Pharisees, the fundamental article of faith was, "The Lord is King"; only these nationalists were not able by means of legal refinements nor elaborate hopes to quiet present impatience with Israel's subjection to a foreign Master. The familiar words of

¹⁰ Weber, 348 ff.

¹¹ *L.c.* 117.

Josephus¹² tell of the indignant restlessness of many of the people in their longing for the restoration of the theocracy. We meet with this feeling in the Fourth Gospel (6¹⁵), in the remark that, after the feeding of the five thousand, the multitudes sought to compel Jesus to assume the *role* of a king; while the hypocritical question concerning payment of tribute to Caesar (Mk. 12¹⁸) and the account of the fears of the priests because of Jesus' popularity (Jn. 11⁴⁷) testify to the widespread influence of Zealot hopes among the masses of the people. In fact Edersheim has some warrant for maintaining that "a deeper view of the history of the times would, perhaps, lead us to regard the whole country as ranged either with or against this party."¹³

(4) But that word of Edersheim's does not do justice to the quiet 'remnant' in the land, — readers of the Scriptures, devout worshippers of God, too simple-minded to be quite carried away by the apocalyptic visions, though loving them; too genuinely religious to be content with Pharisaic legalism, though revering the Scribes; too quietly trustful in God to join in the Zealot movements, though longing for 'the consolation of Israel'; the 'seven thousand in Israel' that had not lost the sense of the nearness of God, — not because they critically rejected the speculations and casuistry of the learned (so far as they thought on these lines they seem to have followed the Scribes), but because they were content to take their hearts for guides and to make their own in simple faith the words of the older prophets and psalmists. Such seem to be the Simeon and Anna, the Zachariah and Elizabeth, who appear in the first chapters of Luke, such a Joseph of Arimathaea, and such most of the disciples of Jesus, members of the common people who heard Jesus gladly. And we have extant the outpourings of heart of such devout souls from the time of the beginning of that Roman dominion which in Jesus' day was such an offence to Zealot patriotism. I refer, of course, to the so-called Psalms of Solomon.

Now we read in Luke (3¹⁵) that while John the Baptist was prosecuting his ministry, preaching righteousness, rebuking all sham religion, announcing an approaching judgment, and baptizing a baptism of repentance, "the people were in expectation and all men reasoned in their hearts concerning John, whether haply he were the Messiah." To a strict Apocalypticist such an earthly Messiah would be an impossibility; to a Pharisee, one so disregarding of Jewish privilege could

¹² *Ant.*, xviii. 1, 6; *Bell. Jud.*, vii. 10, 1.

¹³ *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, i. 237.

not be the great Fulfiller; to a Zealot, John's purely ethical and unrevolutionary method would be a stumbling block. But one feeling as did the author of the 17th of these Solomonic Psalms might have judged so concerning John. For there we meet an expectation which looked for a Messiah made like unto his brethren (vs. ^{23. 33. 38. 42. 44}), who should, to be sure, sit on David's throne (²³), but whose chief work should be to purge Israel from all uncleanness (^{29 f. 33. 36. 46}) and to rid the people of their oppressors, but not by physical prowess (^{24. 28 f. 37. 39. 42 ff.}). He should lead his people in holiness (⁴⁶), himself being pure from sin (^{41 ff.}), a Saviour thus who should deliver Israel, but by spiritual agencies, winning moral victories through the aid of the full possession of the Spirit of God (⁴²), gentle, holy, convicting of sin, full of trust, and of the fear of God. Such a Messiah some were looking for, longing for, only a generation or two before John and Jesus began their work. Such a Messiah earnest and trustful souls were doubtless waiting for when John's word rang through the wilderness, and men of that temper might readily have questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether he were the Messiah; still more might they have bowed with Messianic recognition before that Greater One to whom John handed over his work.

Now Nathanael, as described in our passage, is just such a one as we conceive to have been the author of this late pre-Christian psalm, an Israelite indeed, one true to Israel's name, to Israel's hope, 'looking for the consolation of Israel.' He probably shared much with Zealot, Rabbi, and Apocalypticist. It is as impossible to set men of that day off into exact classes with reference to the Messianic hope, as it is to-day to say of any group of earnest students that each is the advocate of some definite social programme, Anarchistic, Socialistic, or 'Laissez faire.' Only we may surely trace in his picture the features of one who was at home in the warm religion of the prophets, and might have shared the feelings of Simeon, or of the late psalmist already quoted.

Given the preaching of John the Baptist, his announcement of a Greater One soon to come, the stirring of all hearts by the preaching and the announcement, and any sort of occasion for disciples of John to guess that in the Man of Nazareth a greater than John was present, and it seems very probable that such men as Andrew, and Philip, and Nathanael would, on the first experience of surprise with their new Master, reach some such conclusion as is ascribed to Andrew (Jn. 1⁴¹), and make some such confession as is here put into the mouth of

Nathanael. That such a confession signified any adequate appreciation of the words as applied to Jesus does not follow. It means simply that these men found in him a promising candidate for the fulfilment of their cherished hopes, — hopes different in quality from the insistent purpose of the later multitude which Jesus repelled (Jn. 6th) only as Nathanael and the others were more profoundly religious than that multitude.

III. If the preceding argument is valid, and we conclude that the confession ascribed here to Nathanael is such a one as suits the times and the particular circumstances here pictured, we still have to meet another difficulty before we can maintain that this narrative can be true to fact. If, at the very outset of his public career, Andrew, and Philip, and Nathanael owned Jesus as the Messiah, wherein was Peter's confession near Caesarea Philippi in any way remarkable? Jesus certainly found it to be so (Mt. 16¹⁷^a). Does not this fact exclude such a confession as is here ascribed to Nathanael, however possible such a confession might have been for a man like Nathanael?

Calling to mind the conclusion of the preceding discussion, viz. that Nathanael is pictured as one of the 'devout' in Israel who looked for a holy, gentle, spiritual Messiah, and that something (namely, the *sign* of Jesus' far and penetrating vision) led him to find in Jesus a promising candidate for the fulfilment of his hopes, we shall find at our hand the material for answer to our larger question. The confession of Peter was made after months of intercourse with Jesus had opened the eyes of the disciples to the completeness of his contradiction of the current Messianic thought. What could the Apocalyptist make of the *man*, lowly, needy, in many ways subject to common human limitations, and, in addition, one actively opposed to the idea of a kingdom which comes with observation? To be sure Jesus adopted many features of the apocalyptic picture in his own teaching concerning the future of the kingdom, but this was for the most part after the confession at Caesarea Philippi, and in perplexing conjunction with the doctrine of a kingdom already among men, unobserved, acting like leaven, growing like mustard seed.

In even sharper contradiction did Jesus stand to the Pharisaic notions of an ultimate supremacy of rabbinic casuistry over all life. A lord of the sabbath, sovereign in his disregard of all current teaching concerning it; a setter aside of Levitical ceremonies, though claiming rather to discover thus their true significance; he could not be accepted by any who looked for a Messianic confirmation of the traditions of the elders.

The Zealots, in their turn, could scarcely have had a harder problem than to find the Messiah in him who 'did not strive nor cry, nor cause his voice to be heard in the streets,' who sought systematically to check the growth of ill-advised Messianic enthusiasm concerning himself, enjoining silence on the objects of some of his most marvelous cures.

Nor to the simpler minded disciples was the problem of Jesus an easy one. Their disillusionment as the days passed on, and their Master contradicted one after another of their cherished Messianic notions, steadily increased the difficulty of their problem. They continued with Jesus, not because he satisfied their preconceptions, but because he had given them something larger than their expectations (cf. Jn. 6⁶⁹), and had himself become the new and supreme fact for their lives. But how far they were from abandoning their preconceptions is seen in Peter's remonstrance with Jesus immediately after the great confession of Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16^{21 ff.}), and in the frequent later references of the disciples to a material realization of the kingdom (cf. Mk. 10^{35 ff.}). Peter's confession was a high declaration of faith in the face of seemingly insuperable obstacles to faith; it was, moreover, only the first step in the path of independent faith, as the immediate sequel proved. The disciples had still harder lessons to learn, more difficult stumbling blocks to pass. Compared thus, with that word of disciplined faith, the confession of Nathanael is as childhood's innocence to the established virtue of manhood, or rather to the victorious righteousness of youth. Nathanael owned at once a Lord who seemed to fit his ideas, little knowing the questionings and perplexities which were in store for him. Peter spoke from a long fellowship with a Master who had upset many cherished ideas, but who in some way would at length make all plain, and who in any case was the Master of his heart. The earlier does not rob the later confession of significance. The two differ as the utterances of simple hope and of at least partial knowledge.

If one inquire further why Jesus should have asked the disciples as he did "Who do ye say that I am?" after having been owned as Messiah by the disciples at the outset, answer may be made, that although we may not follow Baldensperger¹⁴ in assuming that the period between the Temptation and Caesarea Philippi was one of readjustment of his Messianic ideas on the part of Jesus, reaching certainty only shortly before putting this question to the disciples, it

¹⁴ *l.c.* 253 ff.

is altogether probable that after the first flush of enthusiasm passed off, the disciples had to go through a period of questioning and wonder in their own hearts concerning their Master. He certainly held them to himself by an irresistible charm, but it is doubtful whether in the days of growing knowledge of Jesus' disregard of current notions they found Messianic confessions so easy as they would have been in the first days. Then, when most of the popular following of Jesus had melted away, and his ministry seemed almost to be a thing of the past, Jesus put the searching question to these loyal disciples, and he heard the reply ringing true from Peter's lips and heart. Well might he rejoin "Flesh and blood did not reveal it unto thee," for nothing short of the divine revelation could have wrought such a transformation of ideas as would allow Peter to recognize the actual Jesus, despised and rejected of men, as the Messiah.

The conclusion is simple. Nathanael's confession is what might have been expected when such a man as Nathanael in times thrilled by such preaching as the Baptist's, and big with such hopes as filled all hearts, met with the Man of Nazareth and experienced for the first time the unique power and holy elevation of that Personality. It was not, however, the expression of disciplined conviction, but of confident hope. It rings with the buoyancy of youth. Peter's word at Caesarea Philippi, on the other hand, has the serious undertone of life's battle in it, as of a victory won against strong foes, but leaving the victor armed with courage for battles still to fight. How little Peter saw the severity of the coming struggles, his remonstrance with Jesus shows; how truly the victory announced in his confession was the arming for later warfare, the following months, and Easter, and Pentecost, proved.