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Senior Thesis

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A SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

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Zion's Herald, Issue of February 9, 1921

A SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

The story of the temptation of Jesus is given to us in the three Synoptic Gospels. Mark gives us, as in the case of other events, the shortest and most definite account. They all agree as to the important facts of the story, only in minor details do we find any differences. Perhaps our best understanding of Christ's reason for going into the wilderness is to be found in the interpretation that He went into the wilderness to pray and meditate.

It was there as he meditated that he was tempted. But if he could not have yielded there would have been no real temptation. The severity of the temptation for Christ was to come from another source. As Professor Henry C. Sheldon says: "The unique relation of the humanity of Christ to the divine, may be thought to have furnished him with special support in temptation. In one point of view this must appear to have been so, though it is far from legitimate to imagine the divine and the human in Christ to have been related like two physical magnitudes of which the lesser necessarily yields to the greater. But in another point of view, the extraordinary in the person and consciousness of Christ can be seen to have added to the sharpness of the

trial, since trial is to be measured by the height of the dignity it assails as well as by the depth of the discomfort to which it casts down. It may be easy for a lamb to be led as a lamb to the slaughter but how should it be easy for the lion of the tribe of Judah to be so led? How should it be easy for him, who out of the fulness of His conscious life and power could call himself "the resurrection and the life" to be made a spectacle of shame and dying? Thus, the very factor in his personality that gave him special support, at the same time involved special trial, as broadening the contrast between conscious dignity and actual lot. As Bruce has well remarked, "Sinful dispositions, though certainly making men more liable to fall before temptation, do not increase the painful sense of being tempted, but rather diminish it". We must allow the possibility of Christ's being tempted, but the pain of the temptation in the case of Christ, is not to be estimated by the liability of falling".

The temptation was not merely to turn stones into bread or to leap from the pinnacle of the temple, or to accept the kingdoms of the universe from Satan. It was no temptation for an ordinary man but it was a temptation for Jesus Christ. He realized that he had Messianic power, that He was the Messiah. It was here that He

was to decide what kind of a messiah He would be, what kind of a kingdom he has to establish and what methods he would use to establish it.

Christ was divine but not so divine as not to be human also.

"And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man." Luke 2;52

Nor are we to suppose that Jesus stopped growing in wisdom and favor with God and men when he became thirty years of age and began His public ministry. He was taught as all Jewish youths of his day and all days were taught. He learned the Scriptures and was familiar with the writings of the prophets. It seems probable to suppose that Jesus knew the many current ideas relative to the Messiah and the kingdom, for the people of his day had not one universal idea of the kingdom of God but many and divergent ones. The Messianic hope had always been a live issue with the Jewish people. Other nations had looked backward but the Jews had looked forward. Other nations had told of the great men they had had in war and government in past history. The Jews not only told of the great men they had had, which were many, but they also told of the one supremely great man they were to have, the Messiah. He the Messiah would ponder over these many ideas while

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he was alone there in the wilderness. It is quite reasonable to suppose that he would there decide which one of these ideas, if any, he would accept and which he would reject. It was a period of temptation, but it was a period of decision as well.

The first temptation was an appeal for him to use a miracle to supply his bodily needs. In his baptism he had come to the realization of the fact that He was the Messiah, as the Messiah he had unusual power, how would he use it? "Command that these stones be made bread" It was a great temptation. Would he establish the Kingdom of God by relieving economic pressure? It was a challenge to over throw the existing order. Just what the people hoped for. They were anxious for a change. The Jewish people were then under the heel of Rome. Many of them were poor and ill-fed. If he could feed himself, he could feed them. We know that he was filled with social sympathy. It must have grieved him to see men unable to enjoy fullness of life because they were impeded by hunger. It must have been a great temptation to him to feed hungry men, it was what they wanted, what they expected and what they needed. If He had supplied sufficient food, clothing, shelter, good environment and equal opportunity for all, many men in Jesus' day would have thought the Kingdom of God had

surely come.

The people placed their hope in material force, Jesus placed his hope in spiritual force. They expected the Kingdom to be established by force. Christ in his later ministry refused the use of force. The people saw in force the one way to overcome the tyranny of the world, they saw in force a possible way to overcome the Caesars and to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth. Would He use force and line himself up with the powers of Man? His later teachings show that he did not use it, it would thus seem that he came to that conclusion early in his ministry, at what better time than at the time of his temptation.⁷ Many today think that the Kingdom of God will be established when economic wealth is divided equally among all men, when all have sufficient food and clothing, good environment, and equal opportunity for self development. When all classes and casts are done away and all men are really equal, then to many the Kingdom of God will have come.

Had Jesus commemorated his birthday by giving a Christmas dinner to every family in the then known world, fed every man, woman and child for all the three years of his ministry, so that there was not a hungry soul to be found, provided clothing and shelter for all, he would not have thus ushered in his Kingdom. During his life his

Following would have increased, but on his death his followers would have forsaken him, as they almost did as it was and he would not have had the power to have drawn them back again, were he only a wonder worker. The world today would have known him only as a wonder worker.

Jesus accepted the conditions and limitations of human life. He lived his human life in a normal human way. If he had used supernatural power to supply his bodily needs during the period of the temptation, men would have allowed him to have continued doing so all the remainder of his life. He had far more provocation for using supernatural power later on than he had in the temptation. It was necessary that in the period of the temptation he should come to a decision as to what a legitimate use of his supernatural power would be. Could he expect men to believe in him in a natural way if he lived in an unnatural way? If he had used such power he could not have been tempted in all points like as we are. If he had gotten one meal in that way men would have been content to have allowed him to get all his meals in the same way. When he fed the five thousand they wanted to make a king of him for they saw at once that such a king would do away with the necessity of a commissary department. Such followers would have followed him merely for the loaves and the fishes. To relieve economic pressure is

not enough. There is a danger in over emphasis on sociology, "The Social Gospel" and Social Service, in our day.

"..Man liveth not by bread alone.."

This is the beginning of many statements in which Jesus puts emphasis upon the spiritual

"My Kingdom is not of this world"

The Kingdom of God as it was manifest on earth was away from the earthly, but Jesus always recognized the need of earthly maintenance. He did not declare the Kingdom to be either entirely earthly or entirely heavenly.

Eternal heavenly life was to be the crowning blessing of earthly righteousness. Right use of good was to receive good in return. The people put their faith in material wealth, Jesus put his faith in spiritual wealth.

They were mundane in their expectations of the character of the Kingdom of God. To them the Kingdom meant economical wealth and release from all pressure. Economic wealth was expected by religious means. Jesus put the emphasis on the spiritual, but he recognized the human need also. In the words of Professor Rauschenbusch:-

"Jesus never despised the physical needs of man.

Surely he who spent his strength in healing the sick; who remembered the hunger of the multitude; whose first thought of Jairus daughter was that the little girl needed something to eat; who took pride that his disciples

never wanted for anything while they were with him; who put a prayer for daily bread in the central place amid the brevity of the Lords Prayer,-was too human, too wise to belittle the physical foundations of human life". He never failed to put spiritual values above physical values, they were the everlasting verities.

Poverty was not the chief evil in Christ's day, it is not the chief evil today. To have merely given release from economic pressure in Christ's day would not have ushered in the Kingdom of God any more than it would in our day. As Laidler, the great socialist, has said, "Poverty is not the chief evil. Socialism condemns the present system, however, not only on account of its effect on the physical well being of the community, but also because of its reactions on the intellectual and ethical life of society. Indeed most socialists contend that, even though each man and woman willing to work were assured of safe employment, of reasonable hours, of healthful surroundings, and of a wage that would permit him to supply his family with decent food, decent clothing and decent shelter, even though all employers were enlightened and adequate labor legislation passed and enforced; in fact, even though the workers no longer suffered any of the physical ills which capitalism brings in its wake, nevertheless the present system would be con-

demned, because of its disastrous reactions on the intellectual, the aesthetic, and ethical life of the masses."

A change was needed, but mere economic or social betterment would not be sufficient. Jesus saw this and refused to become a mere social reformer. As in the Garden, so here he sought to do the will of his Father, and who can say that it was not here that he discovered fully what his Father's will was for him. If he did, then it was here in the wilderness that he made the decision as to how he would conform to his Father's will, to use the power his Father had given him in accordance with his Father's desire.

The second temptation was even more subtle than the first. It was a temptation to perform a perfectly useless miracle in order to attract attention to himself. Knowing that he was the Messiah, he could not but have felt that his Father would take special care of his only Son. The people had been saying, "give us a sign" "Cast thyself down". Such a sign would have been just what they wanted. According to the popular expectation, the Messiah would step from the pinnacle of the temple, for so they had been taught from Daniel 7:13 and Mal. 3: 1. Would Jesus astonish men or build men? He, in his later life, never did perform any useless miracles.

In discussing the passage in Matthew 16: 1-4, where

they came to Jesus seeking a sign, Professor Rauschenbusch says: "This demand for a miracle pursued Jesus all thru his teaching activity. He settled it on principle in the desert temptation, he would not leap from the pinnacles of the temple, or do anything to turn his work into a holy circus. But the demand followed him to his death. 'If thou art the Son of God, come down from the cross.' A good stunning miracle would seem a short cut to faith, the most convincing way of furnishing proof of his divine mission. Also it would be mighty interesting. He tried to keep his acts of healing private. In this passage he advised his opponents to use their intellect in more useful directions than stargazing for signs from heaven. They were weatherwise. Let them read the signs of the times. Storms were brewing on the horizon. Forty years later Titus destroyed Jerusalem and broke the back of the Jewish nation. The prophetic mind of Jesus saw it coming (Luke 19: 41-44) If they had accepted this teaching of peace instead of getting intoxicated by visions of revolutionary apocalypticism, the doom might have been averted. He was trying to bring their feet to the ground, turn their minds to realities, and make their religion socially efficient."

The people expected the Kingdom to be ushered in by magic. They expected the Kingdom to come by some

catastrophic magic suddenness. Jesus refused to preface his Messiahship by a miracle when he refused to leap from the pinnacle of the temple. To have done something unusual was what they wanted, but Jesus dashed their hopes and drenched the fire of their expectations when he refused to usher in the Kingdom of God by some supernatural act.

The people looked for a king who should gain power by self-aggrandizement, with Jesus the Messianic king should be one who gained power thru service. They were sure the Messiah would be a king. Would Jesus live his life in service for himself or in service to others? He said: "I came not to be ministered unto but to minister". Surely he who had such an idea of his life did not wish to be thought of as a king. In the Kingdom of God, as Jesus pictured it, there was no room for lordship, as Professor Rauschenbusch has said, it might better be called "The Commonwealth of God and Man."

Our interpretation of the work of the Messiah depends on the idea of God and Christ that we hold. The nature of the kingdom which Jesus came to establish, as well as the method he would use, together with the success to be attained in establishing that Kingdom are clearly suggested by the following quotation from Professor Rall.

"We believe in the God and the Father of our Lord

Jesus Christ, not the God of the distant past alone, or of some far off hope, but a living God, dwelling in his world and working with men today."

"We believe in Jesus Christ. It is in him that we see this God in whom we trust; it is in Him that God reveals His will to us and gives himself to us in forgiveness and fellowship; it is in Him that we see not only the Savior of souls but the Lord and Savior of all life, the rule of whose spirit will be the salvation of the world."

"We believe that this new world of our hopes, this kingdom of God, is to come through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the power of the spirit of God in the world."

"We believe in an all-inclusive Gospel; that it is God's will that all men should be saved, and that all that life of man should be redeemed in home and state and industry."

"We believe in the kingdom of God present now and coming in its fullness on the earth. For us the Kingdom of God is the rule of that spirit of Christ which is the spirit of God, the rule that shall win the hearts of men and control all human life.

"We believe in a God who dwells in men and works thru men and in the church as the fellowship of His people, in whom his spirit dwells and thru whom he pur-

posses to win the world for Christ."

If we accept the doctrines of modern premillennialism, then all these hopes are vain. As Professor Rall further says: "First of all as premillennialists we should say, these hopes of ours are wrong, the Kingdom of God is not here, and we have no right to expect it until Christ comes visibly to earth. That coming is imminent, but that does not mean in the near future. It has been imminent for nineteen centuries and we may have to wait nineteen centuries more."

"What may we expect before that time? Two things. First, so far as men are concerned, a limited number of people will be saved. That is all. God is not trying to save the world now, He is not trying to save all men. He has no such plan for our day. He has not had any such plan for these last nineteen centuries. There is an elect and limited number being gathered out of the world, and God has no saving purpose for our time beyond that. Second, so far as the world is concerned, we may expect that it will grow worse and worse. That too is the plan of God. It is predetermined. No activity of the church, no reformation or revival can change it, it is part of the unalterable plan."

"Second, as premillennialists, we should have to change our idea of the church. The real church will be

a select group of the saints, elect, 'called out' and destined to salvation. But with the churches as we know them, the organized groups of Christian followers, the church to which we belong and to which we have pledged loyalty and love, it is quite different. These churches, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic, Methodist Episcopal and all the rest, are not only corrupt today but growing worse. There is no prospect for them but to be spewed out of the mouth of God. As with the world so here, no reform, no revival, can change this, for this is settled in the plan of God. We belong to these churches but we have no hope for them."

"Third, as premillennialists we should change our idea of the task of the church. The church must get rid of the delusion that God wishes to use it to bring in the Kingdom of God on earth. God has no such intention. The business of the church is not to Christianize the world, but simply to evangelize it. An evangelizing simply means proclaiming the message of the Gospel. This will serve a double end: It will be the winning of the elect number out of the world, and it will serve as a witness against all the rest, to be used in the day of judgment. It will be all right to help ameliorate conditions but the idea of transforming society, the idea of a Christian order, the watchword 'The World for Christ'

that is all a delusive hope and not our task."

"Fourth, as premillennialists we would have to give up all our social ideals and aims. Christianizing the social order is an error. The redemption of society is a mistake. So is the idea of a Christian state in any true sense of the term. A Christian China for example, cannot be our goal anymore than a Christian America. All these things belong to the present order. They are corrupt and can only increase in corruption. There is no hope for state or society or industry."

"Fifth, as premillennialists we would have to give up our old time Methodist confidence in the power of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit. These are adequate for the salvation of the elect, but not for the salvation of the world or the bringing in of the kingdom. God does not intend to save the world by such spiritual means, but by force, by supernatural irresistible power. The spiritual means are failing and will fail. Not the Christ of the Gospel and of Calvary, not the indwelling Christ working by the spirit of God, is to save this world, but a Monarch at the head of his armies, crushing revolt and setting up a literal throne, just as the Jews expected of old. The Gospel takes second place as the power of God unto Salvation."

"Finally, as premillennialists we should have to

give up a large part of the stirring message that has come to us in the new emphasis on stewardship. Our Redeemer God would no longer be that Lord who dwells in men and works thru men by his Spirit and depends upon men. Rather it would be an absolute sovereign, coming from without, working his ends by sheer power."

We can make no such deductions from the life and work of Christ as premillennialists make, they make their deductions from the more obscure and difficult writings of the Scriptures. Christ came to interpret God to man. As such an interpreter he was the manifestation of God and the personification of Good. He did not cast himself down from the temple, or do any other spectacular miracle merely to please the people. He never asked a man "Believest thou that I can work wonders?" (He said "Believest thou that I am the Son of God?") He taught about a kingdom that was to be gradual and natural. He likened the kingdom to a mustard seed, and to leaven, in Luke 13: 18-21. He came not to astonish men but to teach them. He came to this conclusion in his temptation. That he expected the coming of the kingdom to be gradual is certainly shown by the fact that he kept his Messiahship in the background.

When he healed the leper, Luke 5:14, he said:

"..tell no man." When he healed Jairus daughter, Luke 8: 56

he said: "...tell no man." When Peter made his confession Luke 9:21, he said: "tell this to no man." When he had fed the five thousand, John 6:15, he fled - "Jesus ... withdrew...into the mountain alone."

Jesus continually refused to give the people a sign. His emphasis, as has been said regarding the first temptation, was on spiritual life. He came to give fullness of life, he came to overthrow evil with good, to give forgiveness of sins, to bring into the correct relationship with God, to give God to men, and to crown his work by giving to all who would accept it, the blessing of eternal life.

The third temptation was to conform to the existing order. It was not a temptation to have a miracle performed or to perform a miracle, it was rather a temptation to accept the apparently easy path. "All these will I give thee". As there were many who expected him to establish the kingdom thru a miracle, so there were those who thought that the existing order was acceptable and would need little change, here was a temptation to gloss, to smooth over, to white-wash. A temptation to avoid the opposition of the Jewish people and become their king. Then, on the throne, he could announce himself as the Messiah. It was a temptation to adopt their social, their moral and their religious standards.

Certainly Jesus did not do this. He did not compromise with the existing order, the social or moral standards, or their religious practices.

He did not openly oppose the political regime, but in Mark 8:15 he warned them against the Pharisees and Herod. And he prophesied the downfall of the existing order: Luke 19: 41-44.

He openly opposed their social standards. For example, in the fifth chapter of Matthew, he taught that anger ought to be treated as murder had been. In his invective against "The Sins of Hate" Matt. 5:27-28 he taught the sacredness of human life, the law of regard for the other party. In his invective against "The Sins of Sex", the ideal of one man for one woman, Matt. 5:27-28 He told them, in his invective against oaths, Matt. 5: 33-37, that he wanted a class of followers that did not need to use oaths in order to be believed. "Oaths are a device to limit the amount of truth in the world". He sought to eliminate revenge and repay only by kindness, in his teachings against "The Sins of Strife", Matt. 5:38-58.

The people put their hope in ceremonial practices. Jesus put his hope in ethical values. They thought that the coming of the Kingdom of God should mean the enthronement of Jewish law. The Jews said the Kingdom of God

shall come when all obey the Law. Jesus was indifferent to their ceremonies. He gave as proff of his Messiahship to the questioners from John, the fact that he had regenerated human life. He opposed their religious practices. He taught that worship was not enough. To him the test of the value of religion was its social value, as is shown in Mark 2:23 3:5. "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath." He put natural duty above artificial practice, as is shown in Mark:13-15. Their attention was centered on trifles and not on the eternal verities. He did not want religious observance but religious conduct. He condemned a type of religion that separated men as in Matt. 9:9-13. He was more concerned about mercy to the needy than about strict observance of religious practices. He made himself the friend of the outcasts of society and chose one of them as his follower.

The people looked for a kingdom that should be enjoyed by a select group. Jesus looked forward to a kingdom where the benefits should be shared by all. They thought that the triumph of Judaism and the coming of the kingdom would be one and the same thing. They talked of shifting the capitol from Rome to Jerusalem. Even the early Christians sought to force men to become Jews as a necessary requirement to becoming a Christian.

Peter and Paul had no small controversy as to whether men must conform to Jewish Law in order to be true followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus went out of his way to talk to people who were not in the select group. He disregarded all the rules of the Jews to talk to the Samaritan woman at the well. As Professor Rauschenbusch has said concerning the story of the Good Samaritan: "He went out of his way to set a Samaritan up as a model of humane kindness, above the priest and levite." Jesus taught that the coming of the Kingdom of God should be natural, normal and gradual. He did not conceive of time as divided into two eras, and separated from each other. When does a boy become a man? It is gradual. For you cannot put your finger on the spot at which the change takes place. Neither can you put your finger on the spot where the old era is to change into the new, the old is continually becoming new.

Jesus was absolutely at variance with the ethical conceptions of his time; he set forth the higher virtues which were to be received as an inner gift. Jesus felt the solidarity of the human family, and saw that generation after generation were repeating the mistakes of their fathers. This was at least one reason why he was against the existing order. Certainly a wrong example ought not to be copied. "Practice makes perfect"

but only if the example is correct.

Jesus was the champion of the people; as such he could not be satisfied with a social order which oppressed many. As in the time of Jesus, so today mere smooth-over of present conditions is not sufficient to usher in the Kingdom of God upon the earth. Lowell has pictured what Jesus would see and say if he were to come back to the earth today. He has given us such a picture in his "Parable" where he shows how Jesus would see "how the men, 'my brethern', believe in me."

"With gates of silver and bars of gold
Ye have fenced my sheep from their Father's fold;
I have heard the dropping of their tears
In heaven these eighteen hundred years.

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"Then Christ sought out an artisan,
A low-browed, stuned, haggard man,
And a motherless girl, whose fingers thin,
Pushed from her faintly want and sin.

"These He set in the midst of them,
And as they drew back their garment-hem
For fear of defilment, 'Lo, here,' said he,
'The images ye have made of me.'"

Our present order needs to be changed from within, it is all right to try to ameliorate social conditions by social service, and social reform, but that alone is not enough. There must be a radical change in the desires and motives of men. So it was in Christ's day. It was in the temptation period that he came to the

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firm conclusion, never repudiated by a single act, that he could not accept conditions as they were and be as other men. When he said, "Get thee behind me Satan", he turned his back on the old day and on old ways, and faced toward the fulfillment of a new day, in which men could realize their fullest possibilities. It was here in the wilderness that he learned what his Father's will was, and made the decision which gave him the strength to say at all times, "Not my will but Thine be done."

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