

The Lamp under the Bushel. Messianic Secrecy in Locke's Christology

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Neither do men light a candle, and put it
under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and
it giveth light unto all that are in the house.
(Matthew, 5:14-15)

Abstract: Locke published (anonymously) his first work on religious hermeneutics in 1695: *The Reasonableness of Christianity as delivered in the Scriptures*. The fundamental thesis of the work is that the only article of faith one must believe in order to become a Christian is that Jesus was the Messiah. This article is indeed all that is necessary to believe to be a Christian, but it is not all that one must do to deserve salvation: if you believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, then you must take him as a guide in your life, and your works. You must try sincerely to understand what his teachings are and live by them. Locke's work also seeks to respond to the following question: if Jesus was really the Messiah, and if to believe this is so important, why did he keep this identity hidden for most of his life? Why did he not declare it openly? Locke's answers to these questions are an essential part of his interpretation. To fully understand them one must take into account two crucial contexts: the theological debate on the nature and on consequences of the original sin, in the seventeenth century, and the complex set of messianic expectations of the Jews in Jesus' time – the Jewish messianism – to which the *Reasonableness of Christianity* makes extensive references to explain Jesus' singular reserve about his messiahship.

Keywords: Messianic secrecy, faith, morality, antinomianism, Jewish messianism.

1. “*Salvation or Perdition depends upon believing or rejecting this one Proposition*”

In the summer of 1696, Locke received a letter from his friend and correspondent Philip van Limborch, the famous Dutch theologian¹. In itself it

¹ Philippus van Limborch to Locke 14/24 July 1696, in J. Locke, *Correspondence*, ed. by E.S. de Beer, vol. 5, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1976, pp. 665-71.

was a common occurrence: the friendship between Locke and Limborch was established in 1684, at the time of Locke's exile in Holland, and over the years they had exchanged dozens of letters on various topics, mostly having to do with their common theological interests. We do not know with what feelings Locke opened that particular letter, but we can imagine he might have been somewhat apprehensive, as Locke knew that his friend was reading a French translation of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. Locke's work had been published in 1695, and was followed almost immediately, in 1696, by a French translation, *Que la religion chrétienne est très-raisonnable, telle qu'elle nous est représentée dans l'Écriture Saint*, written by Pierre Coste. The translation did not name the original author and since the English version had been published anonymously, it is possible that Coste actually did not know it was Locke². Philip van Limborch, however, was certainly privy to the author's identity, and must have been anxious to read his friend's work. Nevertheless, he did not speak English well (his works are written mostly in Latin), and the first opportunity to do so was offered by the French translation.

Locke's hermeneutic treatise was important for both scholars: it was related in many parts to their conversations and correspondence³, and had the great ambition of helping put an end to the religious dissension that had been bleeding Europe throughout the seventeenth century, by identifying a common ground to the various theological positions, a core drawn directly from the

² At least, we have a letter from Coste to Locke, in which the author of the translation sends the text of his work, to have an opinion, without giving the impression of knowing that Locke was indeed the author of the original. Of course, however, this may have been a measure agreed between the two, to prevent prying eyes, intercepting their correspondence, from having material proof of the identity of the author of the work. In his letter, Coste implicitly denied that Locke may have been the author of the *Reasonableness*, suggesting that if Locke had not read the book yet, he could enjoy reading it in French (Coste to Locke, 23 June / 3 July 1696, in J. Locke, *Correspondence*, cit., vol. 5, pp. 432-34).

³ For example, regarding a passage from the second letter to John ("For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh", 2 John 7), it is Limborch who suggests the alternative – and interpretative – translation to Locke, the one which appears in the version of *Reasonableness* kept at Harvard (which we can consider the final version issued by Locke's hands): "That Jesus is the Messiah who is come in the flesh" (cf. J. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1999, p. 24). The suggestion is present in the same letter in which Limborch approves the general conclusions of the work. Furthermore, it was also Limborch, in the same text, who suggested to Locke to corroborate this alternative translation with a cross-reference to Mt 10:32 ("Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven"). Interesting interpretation of the texts in question, to tell the truth, but far from obvious. * The biblical references contained in this note, like all subsequent ones, are taken from the King James Bible of 1611, the translation used by Locke, which was a standard textual reference in the theological discussions of the time.

Bible⁴. This eminently political purpose of Locke's treatise is implicit throughout his work, and was in fact made explicit by Coste in a dissertation he added to the second edition of his French translation (published eleven years after Locke's death), bearing the programmatic title: "une dissertation où l'on établit le vrai et unique moyen de réunir tous les Chrétiens, malgré la différence de leurs sentimens"⁵.

In *Reasonableness*, Locke carefully analyses the historical books of the New Testament, and comes to a number of simple but very relevant conclusions: (1) the only article of faith that one needs to believe in order to call oneself Christian is that Jesus was the Messiah, sent by God to men for their salvation⁶; (2) This does not suffice however to obtain salvation or *justification*: one must also act or *work* according to one's faith; (3) in order to work following one's faith, it is necessary to understand the teachings of Jesus, to study as much as possible the scriptures through which those teachings have been handed down; (4) reason alone is not sufficient to discover a system of moral rules capable of guiding men on the path of salvation: due to the fragility of human reason, it needs to integrate reason with revelation; (5) there is no contradiction between the message of the gospel and reason.

All five of these points are important, but one – the notion that one must act according to faith to obtain salvation – is especially important for the

⁴ So Locke's aim was intended by Limborch himself: "Hoc recte percepto (i.e. the general tenor of the *Reasonableness of Christianity*) gravissimas ac acerbissimas in Ecclesia Christiana disputationes feliciter componi posse puto; saltem Ecclesiae, non obstante opinionum diversitate, pacem facili negotio posse restitui. Ea enim, quae nunc a plerisque ut unicum ferme Christianismi fundamentum urguntur, objecto fidei non comprehendi planum fiet. Quod unicum anathematis, schismatibus, et odiis tollendis remedium est", Locke, *Correspondence*, cit., vol. 5, p. 668.

⁵ Coste, in all his editorial operations, had shown considerable independence of judgment. For example, the English text of *Reasonableness* was not divided into chapters with titles, and the division according to which we read it today was introduced precisely by Coste, who had also inserted more or less long titles for each chapter, bringing the attention of readers on the point that he judged more significant from time to time. Locke did not disapprove of the young scholar's initiative and indeed thought of introducing a similar subdivision also in a subsequent English edition of *Reasonableness*. However, as for the programmatically political character of the title of Coste's dissertation, Locke would likely have considered it too explicit for his tastes.

⁶ In chapter 5 of *Reasonableness*, Locke identifies in the theme of the messiahship of Jesus the element that made the break between early Christianity and the Jewish community inevitable. When Paul cursed the Jews of Antioch, telling them that their blood would fall on their heads, he did so out of their refusal to believe this single phrase, the one that declared that Jesus was the Messiah: "Tis plain here, St. Paul's charging their Blood on their own heads, is for opposing this single Truth, that Jesus was the Messiah; that Salvation or Perdition depends upon believing or rejecting this one Proposition" (Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 31).

understanding of the theoretical framework of *Reasonableness*. In chapter 5, Locke accumulates many references, taken from the Gospels and Acts, to show that all that is necessary to believe in to obtain justification is the simple proposition “Jesus is the Messiah”. However, immediately afterwards he specifies that this is not enough and that there are also things that need to be done : “All, I say, that was to be believed for Justification: For that it was not all that was required to be done for Justification, we shall see hereafter”⁷. In chap. 11, Locke returns to this point: an essential part of the covenant of grace consists in taking Christ as one’s sovereign (that is, as a guide for orienting one’s conduct), and acting accordingly from that moment on, at least as far as the limits and frailty of human nature allow. Indeed, under the covenant of grace, sincerity of one’s attempt and repentance for one’s failings can count as righteousness. In Locke’s view, these two parts of the covenant of grace are so essential in the evangelical and apostolic writings (even in those of the apostle Paul) that the one often implies the other, in a sort of theological metonymy: “Believing Jesus to be the Messiah, and Repenting, were so Necessary and Fundamental parts of the Covenant of Grace, that one of them alone is often put for both”⁸. The anti-Calvinist implications of this metonymic interpretation are quite obvious, given that the classic Calvinist reading of the New Testament (and in particular of the letters of the apostle Paul) upheld the crucialness of faith to obtain salvation but was certainly not prone to recognising works a similarly crucial role, especially where the text spoke only of faith.

None of the five key statements of *Reasonableness* was revolutionary in itself: their inspiration was on the whole close to that of latitudinarian theology, not far from the arminianism of Limborch. On the other hand, none of these claims could expect to go uncontested in the English cultured society of the time: in general, the *Reasonableness of Christianity* was bound to arouse controversy⁹, if only because of its anti-Calvinist implications, in the context of the heated debate on the consequences of original sin and the (related) Lutheran and Calvinist doctrines of justification by faith.

Locke work was inspired by the most modern trends in contemporary hermeneutics, using an historical-critical method that descended from the “new antiquarianism” of the 16th century. It was based on the idea that sacred texts should be read using the same philological tools used for any other text,

⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

⁸ Ibid., p. 111.

⁹ See V. Nuovo, Introduction to John Locke, *Vindications of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2012, p. xxx.

and above all, must be understood on the basis of the problems and culture of the time in which they were written, and in relation to the expectations and linguistic uses of their original audience¹⁰. Only in this way could they truly speak to those who read them centuries later, and who turned to them for answers concerning their own contemporary problems.

The *Reasonableness of Christianity* was not only important for what it said, but also for what it did not say: it took no position, for example, on the controversial issue of the Trinity – the debate that was raging in England and throughout Europe in those same years. From the start, countless interpretations began to be offered concerning Locke’s ideas on the topics on which he had not expressed himself. Locke, however, by stating that Jesus’ messiahship was deducible from Scripture and that belief in this principle was sufficient to make a man a Christian, seemed to imply that faith in the Trinity, or in the divinity of the person of Christ, was not an essential aspect of the Christian faith; that we are free to believe it or not believe it, without significant consequences for the eternal salvation of our soul¹¹.

2. “But whom say ye that I am?”

There would have been nothing strange, then, if Locke had been anxious to hear Limborch’s opinion on his new work. The more so because with this work of his late maturity, Locke was venturing on new ground, that of theological and hermeneutical writing, and his friend was one of the most influential Protestant theologians of his time: his judgment and his advice carried therefore a lot of weight. Locke must have also been anxious to be sure his friend would keep Locke’s identity as author a secret. Those were difficult times, and many books on controversial topics were published anonymously.

Locke had good reason to worry on this count. In the case of his earlier *Epistola de tolerantia*, Limborch had already betrayed Locke’s trust by revealing him as the author to his friends and colleagues. Could Locke hope that, this time at least, Limborch would be a “good keeper” of his confidence? Locke

¹⁰ See L. Simonutti, Introduction to Simonutti (ed.), *Locke and Biblical Hermeneutics. Conscience and Scripture*, Springer, Cham (Switzerland) 2019, p. 3.

¹¹ See, in this same volume, Diego Lucci’s essay, “Locke and the Trinity”, which gives a lucid reconstruction of the Trinitarian emergency at the end of the seventeenth century, and of the role that Locke had in that debate, both with what he said and with what he did not say.

was by nature a cautious man and did not easily admit, in writing, that he was the author of the books he had decided to publish anonymously, even when communicating with his closest friends. Indeed, at first glance, his attitude can seem at times almost paranoid. But a letter could be easily intercepted and opened, exposed to prying eyes, in a context full of suspicion and partisan controversy, between opposing political and religious factions. That is why Locke was so cautious: so much so that when we look at the catalogue he made of the books in his personal library, one sees that even there, in that most private of places, the *Reasonableness of Christianity* is not listed along with the works Locke published under his name.

The year 1695 was very important for the history of the freedom of publication: the Licensing Act had not been renewed, and therefore the preventive censorship, by state authority, on every book in press, was no more law in the kingdom of England¹². It had been replaced however by careful examination after publication, which could lead to legal proceedings against the author, the publisher (or possibly the translator)¹³. In theory, this concerned mainly works dealing with political subjects, or anyway judged to be seditious, and not austere theological treatises such as the *Reasonableness of Christianity*. Nonetheless, in May 1697 a Middlesex Grand Jury condemned Locke's book as scandalous, precisely on the basis of the new rules governing the lawfulness of works published in England, leading to a request to proceed against the author "according to the utmost severity of the Laws"¹⁴. This

¹² Among the numerous critics of the Licensing Act, there was also Locke himself, who was able to deal with that law as an advisor to his friend Edward Clarke, one of the members of the commission that was in charge of its modification (see "Locke's criticism of the Licensing Act of 1662", in J. Locke, *Political Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, pp. 330-37). It is striking what, in that text, Locke wrote about the possibility of publishing anonymously. He proposed that to prevent the possibility that anyone could print while remaining unknown, the law could prohibit printing, selling, publishing a book without the name of the printer or bookseller, establishing significant penalties whatever the content of the publication. In Locke's scheme, the printer or bookseller, whose name was printed on the book, would be responsible for anything it contained contrary to the law, as if he were the author himself, unless he could produce the person from whom he has had the work (*ibid.*, p. 331). This restraint, in Locke's opinion, was the only one that should be imposed on the press. In this perspective, the author always has the right to remain anonymous, and the legal responsibility for what stated in an anonymous book should pertain to the printer.

¹³ See T. Keymer, *Poetics of the Pillory: English Literature and Seditious Libel, 1660-1820*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019.

¹⁴ The same action was taken in that session against Toland's book *Christianity not Mysterious* and against another controversial anonymous book of religious argument: *A Lady's Religion* (cf. J. Champion, *Republican Learning: John Toland and the Crisis of Christian Culture, 1696-1722*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York 2003, pp. 70-71).

decision was not entirely surprising: the line between politics and religion had always been blurry in England, as elsewhere, and after the Puritan revolution, the long years of the Interregnum, and the recent change in the ruling dynasty, political and religious reasons appeared inextricably mixed.

In any case, shortly before the letter by Limborch, a violent attack against the *Reasonableness of Christianity* had been published by the fervent Calvinist theologian John Edwards, accusing Locke's book of promoting de facto the spread of Socinianism and atheism. It is worth remembering that atheism was then a crime in England, which, in the most serious cases, could carry the death penalty. Nor was it just Edwards: other books and pamphlets had recently come out – or were about to come out – both in favour of and against Locke's *Reasonableness*. Reviews – some favourable, others hostile – followed one another in literary magazines not only in England but throughout Europe. Moreover, some of the defences of Locke's work that were being prepared in those same days were so extreme and partisan that they ended up damaging Locke's reputation even more than the explicit accusations levelled at his work.

All of this was certainly enough to worry even a less cautious man than Locke. Still, he had realistically not much to fear in terms of the legal consequences of his publication. But, as an author so aware of the underlying mechanisms of prejudices, to whom he had dedicated illuminating pages of his *Essay concerning the Human Understanding*, he certainly must have feared that the mud-slinging that Edwards was unleashing against him would be enough to cool his intended readership. The purpose of Locke's book was substantially irenic: to cool the current controversies among Protestants, not to create new ones. Edwards' attack threatened to turn *Reasonableness* in one of many partisan publications, the subject of slander and suspect, accessible only to a limited number of intrepid open-minded readers¹⁵, undermining for good its conciliatory purpose.

Numerous other speculations have been made about the importance Locke attached to maintaining his authorship secret. One of the most common is that Locke saw some unresolved contradictions between his chief work (the *Essay concerning the Human Understanding*) and this theological treatise, and did not want the one to be read in relation to the other. While possible, this seems unlikely, given that Locke continued to revise both volumes up to the last year of his life¹⁶. It is also possible that Locke intended to prevent any controversy

¹⁵ Cf. Nuovo, Introduction to John Locke, *Vindications of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, cit., p. xix.

¹⁶ Cf. Higgins-Biddle, Introduction to John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, cit., p. CXXXI.

concerning *Essay on Human Understanding* from affecting his new work, prejudicing readers against it. Finally, it is possible that Locke might have paradoxically thought to protect *Reasonableness* from the prestige attached to his name: the mechanisms of censorship were such that the same words could have a different impact if attributed to a famous author or to an unknown one.

In any case, Locke's possible concerns about Limborch's discretion, as well as his judgment, were probably dispelled on the first quick reading of his letter. The author's identity was kept secret (Limborch's letter talks about the book as if it written by someone else)¹⁷, and Limborch, while criticizing a few secondary aspects of the volume, expressed his great appreciation for the work, and in particular for Lock's discussion of the question of Jesus' early silence on his messianic role. In dealing with this problem, Locke started from the following questions (connected to each other): Why, according to the historical books of the New Testament, did Jesus not explicitly declare, from the beginning of his public life (i.e. after the baptism by John the Baptist) that he was the Messiah, the one whom the Jews had been waiting for generations? Why did he not make his role evident, through miracles that only a divine being could perform, in the most frequented public places, in front of reliable witnesses, miracles that could have made his message immediately known and universal? Why, when he performed miracles and healings, did he do them in secluded places, and often ordered his beneficiaries not to tell anyone about these miracles? Why, when his disciples began to understand the truth about him, did Jesus enjoin them to keep the secret, up to the very last days of his stay on Earth¹⁸?

After meditating on this issue for a long time, Locke arrived at what he felt was a satisfactory answer. Nevertheless, when reading the passage in which he introduces the question of messianic secrecy, one can glimpse something of the hermeneutic perplexity which Locke must have felt when he began to reflect on this issue:

This concealment of himself will seem strange, in one who was come to bring Light into the World, and was to suffer Death for the Testimony of the Truth. This reservedness will be thought to look, as if he had a mind to conceal

¹⁷ See, as an example of Limborch's prudence, the following sentence, referring to the rumours about the author of *Reasonableness*: "Illius autorem volunt esse amicum meum. Ego respondi, nihil mihi de eo constare; et cum autor, quisquis ille sit, latere vult, nostrum non esse conjecturis, ut plurimum fallacibus, indulgere" (Locke, *Correspondence*, cit., vol. 5, p. 668).

¹⁸ "But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God", Matthew, 16:15-16.

himself, and not to be known to the World for the Messiah; nor to be believed on as such¹⁹.

Explaining this aspect of the earthly parable of Jesus of Nazareth is certainly important for any theological interpretation of the New Testament. However, it is crucial for Locke, since in his interpretation of the message of the New Testament the messianic character of the figure of Jesus is the only thing to believe in to obtain salvation²⁰. If this is the only thing one needs to believe, and if it has such significant consequences for the eternal destiny of the souls of the witnesses of those events (and of those who will hear or read this story, generation after generation), why hide it almost to the very end? Why light a lamp and then keep it hidden under a bushel?

Locke's answer to this question occupies about a third of the *Reasonableness of Christianity* as a whole, and therefore Limborch's praise of his friend in this regard concerned a substantial aspect of his work. It is an extremely articulated response, which starts from a precise reconstruction of the context of Jesus' earthly journey, a reconstruction that Locke mostly based on Jesus' *ipsissima verba*, and a meticulous reconstruction of the precise temporal sequence of Jesus' words and actions. A characterizing aspect of Locke's interpretation is indeed his preference, in narratological terms, for the *fabula* told by the Gospel rather than the *syuzhet* (the plot) through which it is communicated, for the chronological reconstruction of the events, rather than the way the writers of the sacred histories present them.

There were many works among those Locke had been studying in recent years that could help him chronologically reorder the events narrated in the historical books of the New Testament. Among these were John Lightfoot's *The Harmony of the Four Evangelists with each other and with the Old Testament*, and also *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae and Centuria Chronographica*. He had long read the *Histoire et concorde des quatre Evangelistes*, by Antoine Arnauld²¹. Above all,

¹⁹ Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 40.

²⁰ A further reason why this theme was so relevant to Locke was the programmatically literal character of his hermeneutics of the New Testament, united with his basic option of never questioning the reliability of the text handed down. When, centuries later, the theme of messianic secrecy was taken up by the German theologian William Wrede, the explanation of those apparent New Testament discrepancies was completely different: in his book *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1901), Wrede suggested that Jesus' instructions to the disciples to keep quiet about the nature of his work (e.g. Mark 1:44) were not really uttered by him, but were apologetic devices of the Church, later introduced, to explain the embarrassing fact that the contemporaries of Jesus did not immediately acclaim him as the Messiah.

²¹ About Lightfoot's works, see Locke's notes in Locke, *Manuscripts*, f. 1, foll. 302-3; f. 2, fol. 328; f. 3, foll. 302-3; and regarding Arnauld's works, see *Manuscripts*, f. 28, fol. 42.

he had established relationships of trust and friendship with Nicolas Thoynard, who was then compiling his *Harmonia Evangelica*, a work of New Testament interpretation which included a meticulous reconstruction of the events narrated in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles²². Locke attached great importance to this chronology, since Thoynard's method seemed to provide him with the tools to read and interpret Scripture without resorting to external authorities or allegorical interpretations: "in many passages, without the need for further explanation, it stands out at first sight clearly order and meaning of evangelical history"²³. And a few months later, faced with Thoynard's hesitation to publish the results of his work, Locke added that a work so well done and so precious would not be lost without serious damage to religion²⁴.

The precise chronological reconstruction of the events is, in fact, the first step of the interpretation proposed by *Reasonableness*, and serves to extract from the facts themselves the centrality of that single and decisive article of faith, completely independent of the crowd of articles that over the centuries the various religious confessions had used to differentiate themselves from others. Locke's aim was to make Christianity a factor of unity in the construction of the social edifice, which is the exact opposite of what he had experienced in his formative years, the troubled period of the civil war that had torn apart England, the foundational trauma of Locke's moral character.

In any case, already from this first hermeneutic passage, an articulated hypothesis emerges on how Jesus chose to reveal the secret about his role and mission: (1) Jesus let the evidence of the facts speak from the beginning, performing miracles and healings, which testified to the divine character of his person, but he did it away from the most public places, far from Jerusalem, where, until the last week of life, he actually went only as a private citizen; (2) he used turns of phrase and circumlocutions, which implied the messianic character of his figure, but were such that they could not be immediately understood, in fact, they could only be understood *a posteriori*, through a sort of contrastive hermeneutics; (3) he explicitly declared his messianic role only at the end, after the Resurrection.

²² On the epistolary and personal relationship between Locke and Thoynard, cf. G. Di Biase, *John Locke e Nicolas Thoynard. Un'amicizia ciceroniana*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2018.

²³ "Unde plurimis in locis sine explicationibus aliunde petitis ex ipso solum intuitu, historia Evangelica suus constat et nitor et ordo et sensus", Locke, *Manuscripts*, c. 27, f. 53.

²⁴ "tam egregium et proficium opus summo cum religionis damno ne intercidat", Locke, *Correspondence*, 26 September / 6 October 1685, cit., vol. 3, p. 30.

3. *“Take all England and remove it, upon thy Shoulders, into the West-Indies”*

Locke’s answer to the problem of *messianic secrecy* must be understood in the context in which he conceived it, namely the late seventeenth-century controversy over original sin and justification by faith, which is also the first of the contexts in which one needs to consider the works of Locke – not only the *Reasonableness of Christianity* but indeed Locke’s entire intellectual itinerary.

The Calvinist doctrine of original sin and the (related) doctrine of justification had had a significant influence on the post-Edwardian Anglican church. It had conditioned a document of great historical importance, those XXXIX articles which had been promulgated at Canterbury in 1571, and which had remained the founding text of the Anglican church. This is how original sin is defined:

Original sin is a vice and a corruption of nature that belongs to every man, transmitted by Adam naturally: because of this vice, which creates an enormous distance from original justice, everyone tends naturally towards evil, for which from birth he deserves the wrath and condemnation of God²⁵.

Strictly speaking, this hereditary state of sin could not fail to imply the total corruption and ineffectiveness of human reason and will, and from it logically derived a characteristic conception of justification: “It is only by merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not through our work and merit, that we can be considered righteous before God”²⁶.

This position devalued the role of reason and personal initiative in justification, advancing as the typical model of faith the sudden and unpredictable conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus²⁷. It gave rise to

²⁵ “Peccatum originis ... est vitium et depravatio naturae, cuiuslibet hominis, ex Adamo naturaliter propagati: qua fit, ut ab originali iusticia quam longissime distet, ad malum sua natura propendeat ... unde in unoquoquenascentium, iram Dei et damnationem meretur”, in *Synodalia. A collection of Articles of Religion, Canons and Proceedings of Convocations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1842, art. IX, p. 78.

²⁶ “Tantum propter meritum Domini, ac Seruatoris nostri Jesu Christi, per fidem, non propter opera et merita nostra, iusti coram Deo reputamur”, *ibid.*, art. XI, p. 79.

²⁷ See on this point W.M. Spellman, *John Locke and the Problem of Depravity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1988, p. 32: “The story of Paul’s sudden seizure on the road to Damascus, described in Acts 22:6-11, was the ideal model taken for the norm. All ideas of preparation for grace were rejected out of hand; God would call the sinner for reasons of his own and the question of whether or not those who were so chosen had conformed to the moral standards of their own puny intellects was of no consequence. Man’s reason counted for nothing in the process, its dilapidated and depraved nature having disqualified it from service”.

various interpretations, in the Puritan culture, among which the most rigid was that of the so-called “antinomians”. Antinomians argued that justification depended only on divine grace, which is irresistible for those who receive it, so much so that he or she is undoubtedly among the saved, regardless of his actions, and despite the contribution he or she individually makes to the work of salvation. This contribution can only be irrelevant, given the infinite disproportion between divine grace and human nature. No role is attributed to good works or virtue, not even as a preparation for faith.

During the civil war, the religious panorama was highly diversified but in general the influence of the antinomians was great. Their theses were thus summarized in an official document from 1644:

(1) That God doth never inflict punishment upon the Elect for his sins. (2) That God is never angry with his children. (3) That God sees no sin in those that are his. (4) That only such as are elected, are at all times beloved of God, in what condition soever they be, be they never so great sinners, yea in the very act of sinne it selfe. (5) That sanctification of life, in duties of Piety, is nothing at all esteemed of God. (6) That the godly finds no difficulties in the way to Heaven, but live in much pleasure and delight in this world. (7) That those who belong to God, are able in this world presently to distinguish between God’s people and the wicked²⁸.

Many opponents of the antinomian views described them – polemically – as an invitation to immorality, which risked discrediting the entire Puritan movement. Among them there was also Henry Hammond, a highly respected author, whom Locke had studied very attentively. Hammond expresses himself as following on the antinomian doctrine of predestination:

“the rigid doctrine (is) [...] apt to cool all those mens love of God, who have not the confidence to believe themselves of the number of the few chosen vessels, and to beget security and presumption in others, who have conquered those difficulties, and resolved they are of that number, and to obstruct industry and vigorous endeavours, and fear of falling, and so to have malignant influences on the practice”²⁹.

²⁸ *A Declaration against the Antinomians and their doctrine of Liberty*, in G. Huehns, *Antinomianism in English History*, The Cresset Press, London 1951, exergue. Of course, this reconstruction is a processual document, intended to give a synthetic (and non-sympathetic) review of the antinomian thesis. The interpretation is not entirely fair, but it is very close to how antinomianism was often perceived in the seventeenth-century context.

²⁹ H. Hammond, *Χάρις και Ειρήνη, or A Pacifick Discourse of Gods Grace and Decrees*, London 1660, pp. 17-18.

Attempts at mediation began to appear, such as the those of Thomas Hooker, who argued that God cannot save us without our participation and diligence – even if it remains true that not even we can save ourselves without the grace of God, which presents itself as a necessary condition of salvation, but no longer sufficient. God entrusts us with grace, the means of salvation, which it is then up to us to use. For Hooker it was clear beyond any doubt that only God can save us, but it was equally clear that “he will not do it without us, because we are reasonable men and women, and God affords us the means”³⁰. Both Hammond and Hooker were inspired by arminian positions – as did Locke and Limborch. All these authors had in common the idea that the sovereignty of God and the free will of man were compatible, and that original sin had not irremediably corrupted the human will.

The debate on antinomianism had been particularly acute during the years of the civil war and the Commonwealth, when moderate Calvinists like Baxter became concerned about the more extreme sectarians, particularly the Baptists. These years had been a formative phase for the young Locke, a student during the period of the revolution, who had looked with horror at the spread of ideas that seemed to him subversive of the moral and political order of his country³¹. However, the phase of the controversy that concerned Locke more closely began many years later, in a wholly changed political situation, namely in 1690, when *Christ Alone Exalted* was published, a posthumous collection of the works of the antinomian Tobias Crisp.

Crisp’s conception of the religious life and grace stemmed from the consideration – shared by much of English theology – that it was impossible to obey the Mosaic law in everything. Crisp emphasized this impossibility more than other theologians: for example, he interpreted the possibility of saving oneself by following the Law almost as a mockery. When the Law says *do this and you will live*, Crisp said, this is not a great help:

“poor comfort is it, because it first requires such doings that are impossible to be attained; just as if a Man should be condemned to die at a Bar, with this promise; take all England and remove it, upon thy Shoulders, into the West-Indies, and then thou shall be saved from this Death. The Judge had as good say nothing, for the thing is impossible to be done”³².

³⁰ T. Hooker, *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn Unto Christ*, in *Writings in England and Holland*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1976, p. 176.

³¹ See Raffaele Russo, *John Locke e gli antichi maestri*, Guida, Naples 2003.

³² T. Crisp, *Christ alone Exalted: being the Compleat Works of Tobias Crisp, D.D. containing XLIII Sermons, On several Select Texts of Scriptures*, London 1690, vol. I, sermon 8, p. 119.

This position in itself was not at odds with the Calvinist or Anglican mainstream. The controversial point, however, comes immediately after. Crisp was not willing to recognize any difference in principle between Mosaic law and any system of ethical norms that was considered necessary to obtain justification, or at least as a preparation of the heart to receive grace. For him, anyone who accepts a cause-effect relationship between transgression and punishment was mistaken: “you that will still maintain and establish the Curse as a necessary attendant upon transgression and disobedience, and take this to be your condition and your portion, you are the Men that are under the Law, that are under the curse of it”³³. Nor can it be said, according to Crisp, that works prepare the believer to receive grace. On this position, indeed, he lets the full weight of his sarcasm fall when, in the sermon for the death of the vicar of Wroughton, he said: “Is not this to put a Cart before the Horse, or rather to send the Cart a going, and the Horse must come after? To have man sanctified before they can be justified. If Men must be thus qualified, before they believe to Justification, How can Christ be said, To Justifie the Ungodly? By this Rule he rather justifies the Godly”³⁴. Crisp adopted the position he attributed to the primitive Christians, who, to the pagans who accused them of believing in an immoral doctrine, replied that God did not tell them that he would love them if they were holy, but that if he loved them, they would be holy³⁵.

In any case, the uselessness of works for salvation according to the Calvinist or antinomian teaching must be viewed in relative terms. It is not as if Calvin (or Crisp) encouraged a morally dissolute life. What he argued was that a moral conduct as blameless as possible is a consequence of strong faith, a faith which in turn derives from divine grace. He believed no one could embrace the grace of the gospel without passing from the errors of his past life to a straight path, and without applying all his efforts to the practice of repentance³⁶. Calvin applied these principles also in his practice. The tensions that arose in the reformed church of Geneva after 1541, when Calvin tried to induce the Genevans to “live according to the word of God”, introducing severe discipline and excluding notorious sinners from communion are well known. And just as strict, of course, was the personal conduct of the English Puritans. However, Locke’s point is that in Calvinism, as in Lutheranism, we do not find a truly religious foundation of morality: if good works are not seen as also

³³ Ibid., p. 121.

³⁴ Ibid., vol. IV, sermon 10, pp. 98-99.

³⁵ G. Huehns, *Antinomianism in English History*, cit., p. 14.

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.3.1.

instrumental to one's own salvation, this cannot help resulting in a weakening of the moral conduct of all Christians.

For this very reason, Crisp's book, at the time of its re-publication in the 1690s, was immediately attacked by a moderate Presbyterian of Baxterian inspiration, Daniel Williams³⁷. Moderate Presbyterians insisted on the conditional character of grace and describe justifying faith in ways that included repentance and the promise of new life. In this same spirit, Williams argued that the sanctification of life and sincere obedience to the teachings of Christ are necessary for the salvation of every believer, so much so that without them there can be no salvation – even if they are not sufficient, nor possible, without grace.

For Locke, the publication of Crisp's works represented the reappearance of the old ghosts that had troubled his youth. And the position Locke expressed in *Reasonableness* had much in common with that of moderate Presbyterianism³⁸, but it was even more explicit. Locke spoke of Jesus as the ruler of a new kingdom, and used a political vocabulary in pointing out that he proposed laws to those who wanted to be his subjects, and that he made those laws an essential part of the pact of grace. In short, Jesus asked obedience to his commands in addition to faith in his being the Messiah, in order to be admitted into the kingdom of God.

Chapter 12 of *Reasonableness* expresses this point with particular force: Jesus is *King*, and he expects his commands to be observed by his *subjects*, who owe him *obedience*, in the absence of which they will face *punishment*. This is what the *Transgressors* can expect for having challenged the *Authority* of their sovereign, or the Authority of those who have the *Power to chastise the disobedient*. Therefore: “ ‘Tis not enough to believe him to be the *Messiah*, unless we also obey his Laws, and take him to be our King, to Reign over us”³⁹.

The language used here is that of sovereignty, but it is crucial, to understand Locke's position, to appreciate the *metaphorical* character of this terminology. Locke's Jesus certainly did not come to found an earthly kingdom alongside others, but to establish a new covenant between God and men, a covenant that passed through a radical re-orientation of the lives and conduct of human beings.

³⁷ Williams' sermons were published in 1694, under the title *Man made Righteous by Christ's Obedience*.

³⁸ See D.D. Wallace, Jr., “Socinianism, Justification by Faith, and the sources of John Locke's The Reasonableness Of Christianity”, in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 45, 1984, on this relationship between Locke and Baxter, also if in this article the derivation of Locke's theses from those of Baxter seems to me too exclusive.

³⁹ Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 128.

That is why it becomes essential, for Locke, to deny the antinomian identification of any code of ethics with the ancient Mosaic Law of works. Locke, actually, agrees with Crisp in deeming the Mosaic law impracticable for the purposes of salvation, and he too maintained that the multiple prescriptions of the Law crush any good practice in an unsustainable way. Indeed, in chapter 2 of *Reasonableness* (the one on the advantages that Jesus procured for men with his coming), the requests of the Mosaic law are presented as even more hyperbolic than Crisp thought, such that they were never have been absolved by any human being. Locke says: “For Righteousness, or an exact obedience to the Law, seems by the Scripture to have a claim of Right to Eternal Life ... *To him that worketh; i.e. does the works of the Law, is the reward not reckoned of grace, but OF DEBT*”⁴⁰; however, the problem is that no one can succeed. Locke quotes in this regard St. James, when he says: “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one *point*, he is guilty of all”⁴¹. In other words, Locke concludes, quoting the letter to the Romans: “*by the deeds of the Law, no one could be justified*, ... it follows, that no one could then have Eternal Life and Bliss”⁴².

In this regard, one cannot fail to note that the characterization of the Mosaic law as a hyperbolic law of works, a law that punished even the slightest transgression with damnation, is an extremely questionable theoretical interpretation on Locke’s part (a reflex of a similar prejudice, often present in the Christian theology of the seventeenth century). Both in textual terms and from the perspective of the history of religious practices, Locke’s mistake lay in radically separating the ceremonial part of the Mosaic law from the moral part, which according to Locke corresponded to the law of nature. This interpretation excluded from the set of rules of behaviour that made up the Mosaic ethics any possibility of forgiveness or reparation for transgressions: respecting those rules meant only doing one’s duty, and following them did not in any way allow for reparation of previous wrongs. In reality – of course – things in Jewish religious practice were quite different. The ancient Israelites, before offering sacrifices to God on the altar of the Temple for the forgiveness of their sins, had to show sincerity, reverence and purity of heart. To these dispositions of mind, it was necessary to add the confession of sins (Leviticus 5:5) and the restitution of (possible) illicit gains (Leviticus, 5:5 and 6:4), as part

⁴⁰ Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 12.

⁴¹ James, 2:10.

⁴² Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 13.

of the repentance process. Moreover, almost all the prophets denounced any mechanical and formal application of the Law. Jeremiah, for example, disputed with hot words the uselessness of a purely ceremonial devotion: “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: lest my fury come forth like fire, and burn that none can quench *it*, because of the evil of your doings”⁴³.

There is an evident similarity between these practices and the ideas of faith and repentance, as conceived in evangelical morality. Locke’s failure to see this may be explained however with his interest in setting up a straw man, a negative hermeneutic pole – that of the Mosaic law of works – that would take the brunt of the negative observations on the law of works that are scattered in Paul’s letters, and which have so much importance in the Calvinist theological construction, protecting his own position from them. To this negative pole, Locke opposes the positive pole of the pact of grace, which includes a sincere effort on the part of the believer to operate according to the teaching of evangelical morality. In this perspective, the essential advantage of Christ’s coming for humanity is precisely having replaced the “impracticable” Mosaic law of works with the covenant of grace, which does not require perfect observance, but rewards sincere repentance and sincere effort to improve the orientation of one’s moral life.

4. *Jewish messianism in Locke’s hermeneutics*

In the context outlined in the previous paragraph, Locke’s hermeneutical strategy becomes clearer. His intent is that of founding the importance of the moral life for salvation directly on the sacred text, interpreting the sacred writings in their own terms as much as possible, without superimposing successive confessions of faith and extraneous theological and philosophical elements. We have seen that, in this perspective, it was essential for Locke to reduce the competing articles of faith to a minimum and assert instead the essential role of obedience to evangelical morality. Morality was not to be conceived as an inevitable consequence of grace, but as a free and conscious choice, the choice to become subjects in the Kingdom of Christ. This type of analysis allows Locke to reach his central objective, recurrent in this last phase of his intellectual itinerary: to save the works from a fideism which,

⁴³ Jeremiah, 4:4.

questioning the very usefulness of moral life, ended up compromising all the virtues capable of transforming a good Christian into a good citizen⁴⁴.

It becomes even clearer, then, in this context, that the reserve of Jesus regarding his messianic role is particularly problematic for a messianic interpretation of his figure such as Locke proposed. In Locke's messianism, the fundamental intent of the earthly parable of Jesus of Nazareth and his apostles had been precisely to persuade humanity of this simple proposition: "Jesus is the Messiah", and of the implicit need to obey his teachings.

The issue was complicated by the fact that even the simple proposition *Jesus is the Messiah* is problematic. What, exactly, does *Messiah* mean? Edwards, the first and ferocious critic of *Reasonableness*, had already pointed this problem, in his book concerning the causes of atheism: *Messiah* is after all a Hebrew term, and if Locke pointed to it as the only essential article for the great illiterate mass of the faithful of his time and country, how could he expect them to understand it⁴⁵? Of course, when Edwards asks this question, he is choosing to ignore the breadth of Locke's explanations on this subject in *Reasonableness*⁴⁶, but he is not wrong in recalling the importance of the Jewish context in the interpretation of this term, and of the use that Locke makes of it. Indeed, one of the most modern and original features of Locke's hermeneutical approach is precisely the placement of the figure and preaching of Jesus in the Jewish-Roman context in which it occurred, with a contextual and historical interpretation of his character and his words.

The significant context in which Locke places the historical story of Jesus is that of Jewish messianism, at the time of the Roman protectorate in Judea: "they were waiting for the Messiah, and for the liberation, which he was to bring, in a kingdom that he was to build, based on their ancient prophecies

⁴⁴ Locke completed this rescuing of the works, begun with the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, with his great hermeneutic book of the last years of his life: *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*. With this book, Locke moved his hermeneutical critique to the favourite theological arsenal of predestinationists. For a recent review of the critical debate on this book, see Maria Cristina Pitassi, "Locke's Pauline Hermeneutics: A Critical Review", in Simonutti (ed.), *Locke and Biblical Hermeneutics*, cit., pp. 243-56.

⁴⁵ "Why therefore doth this Author, who thinks it absurd to talk Arabick to the Vulgar, talk Hebrew to them, unless he be of opinion (which no body else is of) that they understand this Language better than that?", J. Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Several Occasions and Causes of Atheism, Socinianism Unmask'd*, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York & London 1984, p. 120. Edwards reiterated this same point in *Socinianism Unmask'd* (ibid., p. 32).

⁴⁶ Locke in his *First Vindication* observe that "this ... is so fully explained in the New Testament, and in those places I have quoted out of it, that no body, who can understand any ordinary Sentence in the Scripture, can be at a loss about it" (Locke, *Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, cit., p. 24).

about him⁴⁷. The very language of hope, used by Jesus, is entirely taken from that of the Jewish messianic hope⁴⁸.

That the imminent expectation of the advent of a messianic age was ubiquitous in the Jewish culture of the time of Herod, is true. This expectation is, also in the light of the most recent historiography, the significant context in which to place the preaching of Jesus, who, moreover, said he did not come to abrogate the Mosaic Law, but to complete it, and therefore did not reject the culture in which he had grown up.

However, it often is the case, in the history of ideas, that the most evident elements of continuity combine with the most significant differences. In the Jewish tradition as we know it, the figure of the Messiah is certainly recurrent. Nevertheless, the form it takes with the evangelical Christ is quite different. For one thing, in the Jewish tradition, this figure was not necessarily a single occurrence. In many Talmudic writings, there is explicit mention of *two* Messiahs, who must arrive one after the other⁴⁹. In other traditional writings, the messianic function is split in two: a messiah-priest and a messiah-King, a liberator, descendant of David. The latter is a significant figure, decisive for the Jewish hope of liberation, but subordinate to the figure of the Messiah-priest. Moreover, even the liberating Messiah is not always described in the same way. In some texts, he is a political leader, who would free the Jews from the Roman rule (and from corrupt clergy), in others an eschatological figure, who would change the history of the world, establishing a reign that would last a thousand years.

During the Roman protectorate, Jewish worship was centralized in the Jerusalem temple, and everywhere, in Judea and Galilee, people gathered to read the Torah and other Scriptures. The Jews of that time nourished, through those readings that marked their lives, a continuous current of hope, which however did not constitute a unified system of beliefs, since the traditional texts (which were read and commented on, repeated and sent to memory) belonged to

⁴⁷ “they were in expectation of the *Messiah*, and of deliverance by him in a Kingdom, he was to set up, according to their Ancient Prophecies of him”, Locke, *Reasonableness*, p. 37.

⁴⁸ See, for example, the paradigmatic position of a classic interpreter of the Christian perspective on Jewish hope, Pierre Grelot, who described Jesus as shaped in all his personality by the environment in which he was born, which he began to accept as it was, to transform it from the inside, developing latent potentialities to the extreme (P. Grelot, *La speranza ebraica al tempo di Gesù*, Borla, Città di Castello 1981, p. 12).

⁴⁹ For example, the Talmud (Sukka 52a) speaks of the existence of two distinct messianic figures: Mashiach ben Yosef (son of Joseph) and Mashiach ben David (son of David). Based on an interpretation of Psalm 21, that Talmud passage describes the killing of the first Messiah, ben Yosef, and the moment when the second Messiah, ben David, seeing this, asked God to give him the gift of life.

different epochs. They were read, as is the case for any religious text, in the light of the problems of the present day, and they were thus subjected to a continuous process of actualization that detached them from their original context.

How much awareness could Locke have of all this? Locke obviously did not know the Qumran manuscripts, but he did have direct access to all that elements of the Jewish tradition that had merged into the Old Testament. Not only that: even the Talmudic and sapiential tradition was by no means unknown to him. We have already said that Locke was an attentive reader of John Lightfoot, the great English Judaist, author of the *Horae Hebraicae*, a reference for an entire generation of scholars. And Lightfoot, before Locke, had insisted on the importance of knowledge of the Hebrew historical and linguistic context for an adequate understanding of the New Testament:

“when all the books of the New Testament were written by Jews, and among Jews, and unto them; and when all the discourses made there, were made in like manner by Jews, and to Jews, and among them; I was always fully persuaded, as of a thing past all doubting, that that Testament could not but every where tastes of, and retain, the Jews’ style, idiom, form, and rule of speaking”⁵⁰.

Lightfoot was by no means an isolated figure in the English landscape of the time. Indeed, there was an ancient tradition of studies of Hebrew language and of Hebrew culture in England dating back to the times of the venerable Bede and Alcuin. A Hebrew language school had already been established in Oxford in the time of King William II. A great English intellectual, famous for his Jewish and Talmudic culture, was Roger Bacon. Further, many other scholars thought it was necessary to draw on the study of sacred texts in their original language.

Nevertheless, the interest in the Hebrew language and culture had often been met with fierce resistance. There had been recurrent outbursts of antisemitism accompanied by the expulsions of Jews from England on several occasions. In those periods, the interests of scholars such as Roger Bacon were looked upon with suspicion and hostility. Indeed, some considered the knowledge of Jewish culture as a means of interacting with the Devil⁵¹.

⁵⁰ J. Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae Et Talmudicae; Or, Hebrew And Talmudical Exercitations Upon The Gospel Of St. Matthew*, in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot*, D. D., Master of Catharine Hall, Cambridge, edited by the Rev. John Rogers Pitman, A. M., London 1823, vol. XI, p. 3.

⁵¹ See, on this context, D.M. Walton, *John Lightfoot, the English Hebraist*, Ackerman & Glaser, Leipzig 1878.

The study of the influence of Jewish religious thought on European culture has found in recent times an important interpreter in the works of Eric Nelson, who has demonstrated that not only a special focus on the Hebrew Bible had existed throughout the Middle Ages, but above all that the Reform opened the way for a real revival of Jewish studies (after the relative eclipse of predominantly classical humanism). Those studies included the reading of the Hebrew Bible in its original language, without the mediation and interpretations imposed by the authoritative comments of the Catholic Church⁵². Hence the great influence that the economic, political, social and cultural ideas contained in the Old Testament, in the Talmud and subsequent rabbinic literature had on the ideas and sensibilities of many European theologians, philosophers and politicians at the beginning of the modern age, also through the mediation of a widely read author like Maimonides.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that at the time of the reign of Henry VIII, the study of Hebrew was once again widespread in English universities, together with that of the classical languages. Against those who contested the “anti-Christian” character of this academic practice the king himself intervened, officially stating that the study of Greek, Hebrew and the associated literatures should not only be permitted, but should become an indispensable requirement of university education. It was at that time that the University of Oxford’s chair of Hebrew was born. Nor was the study of Hebrew interrupted in the era of the Stuart dynasty: indeed Charles I and Bishop Laud promoted the study of the Hebrew language and culture. Some of the most important English works on Hebrew culture date back to the period of the Civil War, when Lightfoot wrote the works afterwards carefully studied by Locke. Furthermore, during Locke’s formative period in Oxford, many of the most illustrious scholars of the Hebrew culture resided in the city, including the famous Edward Popocke, an expert in Jewish prophecy.

The sources which Locke could draw on for his knowledge of Jewish literature and culture, and Jewish messianism, in particular, were therefore many and diverse. The most direct information we have of his studies on the subject relates in any case to the works of Lightfoot, which we know were not only present in Locke’s private library, but also the object of study and meticulous notes. From this set of readings and stimuli, Locke drew the conviction that

⁵² E. Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic. Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 2010, p. 2, pp. 10-11 and *passim*. See also Y. Leiter, *John Locke’s Political Philosophy and the Hebrew Bible*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018.

it was impossible to understand the historical physiognomy of Jesus – born in Bethlehem, lived in Nazareth, and died in Jerusalem – without taking into account the Jewish context in which he lived and the system of expectations and hopes that defined his figure. In Locke's perspective, the historical Jesus was shaped by the environment in which he was born and raised. Of course, according to Locke, Jesus started from that historical context as it was, and then transformed it from the inside, developing latent potentials in it, in a radical and revolutionary way. In fact, Locke too, like all Christian culture, interprets the ancient prophecies *ex-post*, as a prophetic announcement of the decisive event in the history of salvation, the coming and works of Christ. However, the peculiarity of Locke's interpretation lies in placing himself also *ex-ante*, within the system of expectations of Jewish messianism, from the point of view of one who had come to fulfil it.

Of course, it was not easy, from Locke's historical and hermeneutical perspective, to grasp precisely what Jewish messianism consisted in (indeed, it is not easy also for contemporary historiography, for which Jewish messianism remains an open question). The study of the messianic expectations of the Jews of the generation immediately preceding the life of Jesus is a minefield: a terrain crossed by internal tensions and contradictions, divisions between political and religious parties, different priestly and tribal affiliations, different basic religious options.

In short, the nature of Jewish messianism varied with the religious parties and factions that made up the conflicting mosaic of Jewish culture of that time. However, a few points can be established: there was at least (1) a *sacerdotal* interpretation of the coming messianic figure (the Messiah would have purified the cult of Israel, corrupted by unfaithful priests); (2) a *political* interpretation of the Messiah, that of the arrival of a charismatic leader and liberator, who would free the Jewish people from the oppression in which they lived; and (3) an *apocalyptic* interpretation, the arrival of a Messiah who would mark the end of time and inaugurate a celestial kingdom, in which even the dead would be resurrected, joining the righteous of the last generation, and would last forever⁵³.

⁵³ In Lightfoot, Locke could learn of the two Messiahs of the Talmudic tradition and of the different expectations of the Jews concerning the Messiah: "For, since they despised the true Messiah, who came in the time fore-allotted by the prophets, and crucified him; they still expect I know not what chimerical one, concerning whom they have no certain opinion: whether he shall be one, or two; whether he shall arise from among the living or from the dead; whether he shall come in the clouds of heaven, or sitting upon an ass, &c: they expect a 'Son of David;' but they know not whom, they know not when" (Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae Et Talmudicae; Or, Hebrew And Talmudical Exercitations*

Of the above, Locke chooses to attribute to the Hebrews of the time of Jesus only the expectation of a *political* Messiah: the Messiah expected by the Jews was a powerful royal messiah, a descendant of David, a great prophet (capable of extraordinary miracles) and a political leader, who was supposed to come and put an end to the suffering and oppression of the Jewish people and to build a new great earthly kingdom, where those belonging to the then living Jewish generation would be the first to enter. This political expectation on part of the Jews, according to Locke, was based on an erroneous interpretation of the ancient prophecies. It fell upon Jesus to deal with this gigantic misunderstanding, taking it apart one piece at a time, gradually introducing the idea of the New Kingdom and the New Covenant, whose political language was – as we saw in the previous paragraph – only metaphorical. In doing so, Jesus had to undo a deep-seated prejudice. So deeply rooted was this prejudice, that it was shared by the apostles themselves, who in this respect participated in the mentality and ideas of their time⁵⁴.

Now, the expectation of this royal, davidic Messiah was undoubtedly widespread in the years of Roman domination in Judea, which among other things explains the violent reaction that Matthew attributes to King Herod in the face of the Magi's announcement. While the evidence from which modern historiography draws is much broader than that available to Locke, it does not lead to contradict Locke's fundamental point: the extent of the expectations for a political liberator by significant sections of the Jewish population of that time, the decades immediately preceding the life of Jesus. But, as already mentioned, this expectation was not the only one, not even the prevalent one. The exclusively political, royal, interpretation of the figure of the Messiah in Jewish culture, offered by Locke, over-simplifies a complex cultural stratification.

Be as it may, this is Locke's hermeneutic thesis: Jesus did speak in the terms of the Jewish messianism, but he radically reinterpreted them, in a way that he could only gradually reveal, as it was susceptible to disconcert and scandalize his contemporaries, including the apostles themselves. In particular, Jesus had to do away – little by little – with any political interpretation of the role of

Upon The Gospel Of St. Matthew, cit., vol. XI, p. 12). The tone of Lightfoot was not sympathetic with the ancient beliefs of the Hebraic people, and it could not be different, in the puritan context in which he wrote. However, the content of those beliefs was there, for everyone to study and to consider.

⁵⁴ In fact, Locke dedicated a manuscript to these expectations of the apostles, a paraphrases of Acts 1:3, in which the apostles ask Jesus, after his resurrection, if the time had finally come when he would restore the kingdom of Israel (Locke, *Manuscripts*, fo. 98^r e 98^v, and Locke, *Reasonableness*, p. 195).

the Messiah, a circumstance which imposed a substantial secrecy on him until the end, so that he could not be accused of subversion, an accusation that it would have prevented the fulfilment of the prophecies, according to which the Messiah was to be condemned as innocent.

The strategy of the gradual unveiling, at the centre of Locke's interpretation of the figure and actions of Jesus, was also directed at the meticulous fulfilment of the prophecies – a decisive leitmotif in the *Reasonableness of Christianity* – according to which a crucial part of the public life of Jesus can be explained precisely by the need to give posterity a tool to understand, beyond any reasonable doubt, the messianic character of his figure, based precisely on the comparison between his life and the ancient prophecies⁵⁵.

Locke meticulously records, and consistently interprets, the various moments of bewilderment created by the mysterious words of Jesus. Even when those words, repeated by an age-old habit, have become commonplace, Locke tries to underline their enigmatic character for those who were listening to them for the first time. *How long dost thou make us to doubt?* This was the question, in the last days, which some unspecified “Jews” posed to Jesus, turning to him under the portico of Solomon, near the Temple. *If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.* The doubt and bewilderment of these ancient interlocutors of Jesus also resonate in the pages of Locke. The bewilderment of contemporaries – apostles, Pharisees, Romans – is indeed one of the mightiest impressions that we can draw from this short essay of religious hermeneutics of 1695.

Locke, therefore, states that Jesus could never have fulfilled the prophecies if he had immediately publicly preached that he was the Messiah, that is, for many of his contemporaries, the king who was about to establish the kingdom announced by the prophets. Neither the Jews nor the Romans would have allowed him to carry out his ministry. For this reason, says Locke, the words of Jesus were mysterious and enigmatic almost to the end: “he so involved his sense, that it was not easie to understand him”⁵⁶.

⁵⁵ A relevant passage from the *Acts of the Apostles* is commented in Locke's *Reasonableness*, the interrogation of the apostle Paul by King Agrippa, in which Paul explicitly connects the ancient Hebrew prophecies with the life and with the death on the cross of Jesus, providing an explicit interpretative key of the Old Testament, read from a Christian perspective: “I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles”, Acts 26:22-23. Locke's text reproduces this passage verbatim, and immediately afterwards he adds: “Which was no more than to prove that Jesus was the *Messiah*”. See in Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 33.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

One of the most enigmatic passages in the Gospels, and one of the most problematic for Locke's messianic interpretation, is the story that describes the last days before the Passion. According to the sacred text, in fact, not even then did Jesus publicly admit that he was the Messiah, not before the Roman rulers and the Jewish priests. At that point, the reason could not be merely prudential: as Locke says on the subject, *he knew his hour was come, and was prepared to his death*⁵⁷. From the text, it is clear that Jesus has, at this point, abandoned the prudence of the first part of his ministry, so much so that he performed miracles in the Temple in front of the priests. Even then, however, he did not clearly state, before the authorities, that he was indeed the Messiah. In fact, he also hid the fact that he was born in Bethlehem, as for the Jews of that time, being born in Bethlehem would have been a clear sign, in the case of a prophet, that he was the Messiah. In the climate of messianic expectation that pervaded the country, everyone knew Micah's prophecy by heart:

But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting⁵⁸.

Locke attaches great importance to the fact that Jesus did not state his birthplace, not before the priests (who believed him a native of Galilee), nor before Pilate, who explicitly asked him where he was born without receiving an answer⁵⁹. Locke's point is that if Jesus had declared he was born in Bethlehem, not only the priests but even Pilate would have been suspicious about his plans, and the governor would have believed him guilty of subversive projects against the empire. By doing so, however, Jesus caused Pilate himself to declare him innocent, thus fulfilling the last prophecy: the Messiah was to be led to the gallows as innocent⁶⁰. On the other hand, if Jesus had openly declared himself to be the Messiah, Pilate would have had no choice but to pursue him for high treason according to Roman law. Jesus would not have been martyred while innocent, and would have not fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy about the suffering and innocent servant, the one who smarts for the sins of

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

⁵⁸ Micha, 5:2.

⁵⁹ "And hence we see, that when *Pilate* asked him, *John XIX. 9*, Whence art you? Jesus gave no answer" (Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 77).

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 77-80.

others. Instead, it was possible for Pilate to declare him innocent of the charge of political subversion⁶¹.

5. “How long dost thou make us to doubt?”

Let us briefly summarize, by way of conclusion, the interpretation we have proposed here of how Locke deals with the theme of messianic secrecy, in the context of his interpretation of Christianity, and of the centrality that the foundation of ethical life has in his thought.

Locke’s interpretation of Messianic secrecy is a hermeneutic net built by Locke to defend the politico-religious core of his interpretation of Christianity: Christianity as an easy to understand religion, within anyone’s reach, based on a single article (the messiahship of Jesus), but with vast moral implications. In order to credibly establish his message, Jesus had to fulfil all the ancient prophecies concerning the Messiah while avoiding presenting himself as such, especially to the authorities. Everything he did and said was intended, from the beginning, to make people understand, although only in retrospect, this fundamental truth.

This interpretation becomes evident only when one examines carefully the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth in the context of the widespread Jewish messianism of his time, which defined the conditions in which he lived and worked. The careful analysis of Christian scriptures, *seen in the light of Jewish messianism*, was the tool that Locke used to complete his overall and ambitious project: to propose an interpretation of Christian religion that would help overcome the divisions between competing factions, which had long bloodied England and Europe. A religion that would not undermine the importance of leading a moral life but would instead provide its basis. A conception of religion that would ensure that anyone who adopted it would be not only a good Christian, but also a good subject, and a good citizen.

It is interesting – in this perspective – that Locke insisted so much that his friends kept the bond of secrecy about who was the author of *Reasonableness of Christianity*: there are, as we have seen, various reasons for this, but Locke here clearly manifested an attitude of discretion and secrecy that had much in common with that of his Messiah.

⁶¹ Higgins-Biddle observes in this regard that Locke is here consistent with his *Epistola de tolerantia*, according to which magistrates cannot exercise tolerance towards people and churches that threaten public order. See Higgins-Biddle, in Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., no. 3, pp. 44-45,

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