

Jesus und Paulus
Julius Kaftan
The Princeton Theological Review 5:496-502. [1907]

The value of this little brochure should not be measured by its size. It derives unusual interest from the fact that the Jesus-Paul controversy stands today in the forefront of theological discussion, and even more from the fact that one of the best-known representatives of the old Ritschlian guard here throws down the gauntlet to the two most able and conspicuous champions of the "*religionsgeschichtliche Methode*", Drs. Bousset and Wrede. Dr. Kaftan calls his booklet "a friendly controversial treatise", but for all that it is not lacking in candor and incisiveness. If some things are said in it which too clearly reflect the peculiar Ritschlian standpoint of the writer to meet with our unqualified approval, a great many more things are said whose pertinence and convincing character is entirely independent of any dogmatic presuppositions. In a certain sense one might even say that the writer's consistent Ritschlianism has endowed him with a peculiar qualification to expose and castigate the flagrant faults of the method against which his attack is directed. He first of all addresses himself to the principles on which, according to their editor, Schiele, the *religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher* are based. To most of these he takes no exception. There is one, however, which falls under his condemnation: "the principle of the inexorableness of the scientific method, which arranges all spheres of the universe according to their special character and subjects them to the common rules of reason". Dr. Kaftan objects to this, that there is no such thing as "inexorable method"; method is not a matter of "ethics", but of "technique", more subject to change than almost anything else. What really hides itself under this phrase of "the inexorableness of scientific method" is nothing else but the inexorable determination of the advocates of the method under review, that the Christian religion shall have no special standing, but shall in the investigation of its origin and development submit to the same laws of reason which apply to other religions. In other words, the *a priori* rationalistic principle of the naturalistic character of Christianity finds here expression. This, of course, cannot but provoke the violent dissent of a Ritschlian of the old type, for whom the tenet still holds, that, ruling out all natural theology, ours is a religion derived entirely through revelation in Jesus Christ. But it is interesting to observe the specific Ritschlian form this protest against rationalism assumes with Dr. Kaftan. He bases it on the positivistic principle of the theoretical unknowableness of the metaphysical background of things, on the relativity of all science. All dogma must be excluded from scientific investigation, not only in the premise, but also in the conclusion. "Shall an exception to this be made", he asks, "in favor of the dogmas of rationalism?" He rightly divines that back of all the talk about method, lies the modern view of the world with its bald negation of the supernatural. But his Ritschlianism shuts him up to a position where he can wield no other weapon against this than the neo-Kantian contention that no theoretical worldview is possible of any kind, rationalistic or otherwise, and that the maxim of "the inexorable method" is a base betrayal of the principle of the relativity of all scientific knowledge. Still, it is of some value to be able to register the judgment (however supported) of a man of Dr. Kaftan's reputation, to the effect, that in the work of the "*religionsgeschichtler*" an *a prioristic* rationalism voices itself. Precisely, because it is avowedly based, not on theological, but on philosophical grounds, the judgment is above suspicion of prejudice. If one of us conservatives were to offer such criticism the retort would come quickly, that we call rationalism everything that is not in line with our supernaturalism, though it be the pure induction of science. To Dr. Kaftan's criticism no such answer can be made. And the criticism of unscientific *a priorism* is all the more pertinent in the present case, because the followers of the new method almost weary us

with their protestations, that they desire to offer and do offer nothing else but pure distilled science, from which every traditional, dogmatic ingredient has been removed. They make a point of showing us the real Jesus, the real Paul, not the Jesus and Paul as we are accustomed to see them through the colored glasses of our creed. Where such professions are made, it is doubly unpardonable to lay on the colors of the "*moderne Weltanschauung*".

First of all, then, Kaftan takes Bousset to task for the latter's representation of the historical Jesus, or, more strictly speaking, in Bousset he takes issue with the entire modern conception of Jesus. For Bousset is excellently suited to serve as a type of this conception, since he does not stand for any of its abnormal excrescences or exaggerations. Bousset admits that Jesus considered himself the Messiah. He holds to the historicity of the title "Son of Man" as a self-designation on Jesus' part. If there be something fundamentally wrong from the historic point of view in his picture, it may safely be assumed that the same faults belong in far more accentuated form to other less guarded and less sane descriptions. Now the main criticism urged against Bousset's view of Jesus is this, that it does not give due weight to the Messianic element as the central factor in the Savior's self-consciousness. Bousset first describes Jesus as a prophet, his activity as prophetic activity, and only towards the close comes to speak of the idea of Messiahship. This sequence is characteristic of the relative importance attributed to these two aspects of Jesus' work. The Messianic idea was for him simply a form in which he expressed the content of his inner life, an inadequate form, and not only that, but also a burden under which He had to labor in silence until the close of his life, a conviction which never became a source of true joy to him. Kaftan very properly protests that this is a marvelous way of writing history. Not a particle of proof has been adduced either by Bousset, or by any other of the modern writers, who so glibly talk of a distinction between the religious content of Jesus' life and the clumsy Messianic form, in which it found expression to himself, not a particle of proof has been adduced to show that in Jesus' own consciousness there was any basis for such a distinction or that any reality corresponded to it. The distinction has its sole origin in the aversion of the modern mind to the Messianic concept, an aversion born from the perception that the latter sums up in itself the supernatural, eschatological aspect of Jesus' Person and work. What is offered as the historical picture of Jesus is in reality the profession of faith of a modern Christian, his estimate of what Jesus should be, in order to appeal to our age, not a faithful reproduction of what Jesus was to His own mind and experience. If anything is plain, then it is this, that according to the Gospels Jesus did not feel the Messianic vocation as a burden. Nor was it the mere fringe of His consciousness, it was present to Him at all times, dominated and colored all other aspects of His life and activity. If a large part of His ministry bore prophetic features, this was not because before all else He regarded Himself as a prophet, but simply because He judged such prophetic work essential and subservient to the prosecution of his Messianic calling. In other words, we have in the Gospels not a prophet in the guise of the Messiah, but a Messiah engaged in prophetic work. Because Bousset reverses this and is not able to view the prophetic activity in a Messianic light, he also misinterprets "the enthusiastic features" in the career of Jesus as morbid phenomena of his nervous constitution. Over against this Kaftan places the view, that all the religious and ethical teaching which formed the content of Jesus' prophetic message, appeared to Him in the light of an anticipation, a provisional application and possession of the principles and blessings of the Messianic Kingdom, so that the religion and ethics of the Gospel-sayings should, in order to reproduce the true mind of Jesus, be interpreted, not according to the shallow modern conception, but in their full soteriological value. And the Jesus who thus viewed and felt Himself at every point of his work the Messiah confidently expected from God

the authentication of His Messianic dignity in some solemn supernatural act, whereby the new aeon would be actually introduced. This act the disciples believed to have taken place in the resurrection, and therefore dated from it the new order of affairs. From a Jesus thus interpreted and from Him only can we say that there is a direct line of transition to the primitive apostolic preaching. A Jesus-religion, such as the modern theologians conceive of, has never existed, neither before the death of Jesus in his own mind, nor after his resurrection in the mind of the disciples; and "if it had existed, this would have been in direct opposition to the mind and intent of Jesus Himself. If anybody thinks that the signs of the times point in such a direction, that the further development of Christianity should be held to that course, let him act on that conviction; but let him not appeal in justification of his view to the historical Jesus, for every appeal of this kind is a stupendous self-delusion" (p. 27).

So much for the Jesus of Bousset. Now as to the Paul of Wrede. As is well-known, the latter writer, in his contributions to the series of *Volksbücher*, has placed Paul at the farthest remove from Christ, so as to present him practically as the second and more influential founder of Christianity. At the same time, this view implies a depreciating estimate of the value of Paul's work; the influence of the Apostle was away from the direction marked out by Jesus; it meant the substitution of a religion of redemption for the simple gospel of Christ. This religion of Paul is largely Christological in its origin, and through the Christology, of which it is the offshoot, reaches back into Paul's pre-Christian past, into Judaism. Wrede is inclined, on the other hand, to deny, or at least to minimize, the presence of the Messianic element in the consciousness of Jesus, so that inevitably Jesus and Paul are drawn far apart on this most important point. While thus making much of the element of redemption in Paul's teaching, Wrede relegates to a quite secondary place the doctrine of justification through faith. This was a mere temporary phase of the Apostle's preaching called forth by an apologetic emergency, of purely missionary significance, in no wise the center of his gospel. Redemption meant to him the process of the actual deliverance from the world, from the flesh, sin, the law, death. It takes place wholly in the objective sphere, in Christ, His death, His resurrection; all man has to do with reference to it is to believe, i.e., (according to Wrede's interpretation), to accept the doctrine. Prof. Kaftan not unnaturally thinks that this is as much, if not more, of a perversion of the historical Paul as the Jesus-picture drawn by Bousset is of the true Jesus. But he finds himself in a peculiar quandary when it comes to proving this, because Wrede has from the outset rendered his own position invulnerable by two assertions. The one is that by long intimate acquaintance with the traditional Paul the average theological mind has become utterly disqualified for seeing the Apostle in his true historic character. The other assertion is that the thought of the Apostle moves with entire freedom and carelessness, regardless of logical harmony in the field of doctrinal expression. Consequently, whatever might be gathered from the Pauline documents in refutation of Wrede's construction of the center of Paul's gospel, is sure to be put down to the account of logical inconsistency and not allowed to stand as evidence of a different construction. Under these trying circumstances our author decides that nothing remains for him but to offer a historical and psychological explanation of the genesis of this peculiar interpretation of Paul, which Wrede would foist upon us, and the demonstration of the un-Pauline character of which he has precluded by his twofold assertion. The explanation is as follows: the whole trouble lies in the unconscious bondage of Wrede to an old, inveterate prejudice, viz., that Paul was a dogmatist, and that, consequently, the interpretation of his thoughts ought to take its point of departure from a doctrinal conception. That is the root of the whole evil. The prejudice dates from the days of the old orthodoxy, but Baur and Holsten have carried it over into the modern

historical discussion of Paulinism. And so it lingers and works its havoc in the mind of Wrede. Now, it is not our present purpose to take issue with Kaftan as to the sense and extent in which Paul can be said to have been or not to have been a “theologian” or “dogmatician”. We are not quite ready to fall in with the present vogue of denying in toto the Apostle’s theological bent. It is not necessary to run into extremes here. Paul may have been a theologian to some extent, and yet it need not follow that his whole gospel was the product of theological excogitation. In some respects his theology may have been the fruit of his life-experience and in other respects his life-experience may have been shaped by his theology. Kaftan himself admits that there is an element of theology in the Apostle’s teaching, although he assigns this to the periphery rather than to the center. But, leaving all this to one side, we think the writer has skillfully laid bare the source of the radical distortion of Paul’s gospel in Wrede’s treatise. The gospel of redemption, broadly speaking, was certainly not objective in the sense affirmed by the latter; it was the outcome of a vital religious experience. Paul’s theology was a theology based on life, to be sure a life not purely subjective, but supernaturally communicated and authenticated to him, so that its bestowal could be called in the full sense of the word a revelation. And this applies likewise to his teaching on justification by faith, which Wrede would separate from the redemption-theology. Both are at bottom equally experiential, equally vital, and both belong together. The definition of faith as a bare acceptance of the redemption-doctrine, is a caricature of the true Pauline conception of faith. Besides this undue emphasis on the dogmatic element, there are two other features of Wrede’s interpretation of the Apostle to which Kaftan vigorously objects. The one is what he calls “an exaggerated striving after historical objectivity”. By this is meant that Wrede almost proceeds on the principle: nothing is genuinely Pauline if a modern mind is able sympathetically to understand it. The more unintelligible and bizarre the thoughts appear to us, the more certain it is that Paul actually conceived them. This is illustrated from Wrede’s treatment of Rom. 7 and reduces it *ad absurdum* by quoting his statement, that the picture of redemption drawn by Paul is absolutely “cold and impersonal”; that is to say, not to Paul, but to the modern mind. Undoubtedly this is true of the picture as drawn by Wrede. Whether the pretended reproduction be faithful to the original is another question. The second objection Kaftan makes is to the tendency evinced by the new method of emphasizing in Christianity all those features in which it presents points of contact, analogy with other religions and obliterating those features wherein consists its uniqueness and distinction. Others, especially Von Dobschütz, have urged this criticism before, but Kaftan presses it home with peculiar cogency. The “*religionsgeschichtler*” make everything of what he calls the “Stoffe”, and overlook the spirit within. With a sort of horror he receives Wrede’s declaration, that New Testament science stands as yet only at the beginning of this line of research, and asks in despair, whether it is absolutely unavoidable that we should enter upon this “wilderness-journey”. In a later passage, in a more hopeful frame of mind, he expresses his confidence, that within fifty years all these “infant-diseases” of the period of “*Religionsgeschichte*” will have been left far behind.

After having thus rescued both Jesus and Paul from misrepresentation, Dr. Kaftan easily reaches the conclusion, that the two do not stand apart, far less are in conflict with each other. Jesus more Messianically and soteriologically interpreted and Paul less dogmatically interpreted are seen to move along the same line and to agree in the substance of their gospel. Indeed, Paul is the one who, humanly speaking, has saved primitive Christianity from degenerating and losing itself in fantastic apocalyptic expectations. He has done this by emphasizing the spiritual essence of the eschatological hope as already accessible in the present life, both on its side of forgiveness and of redemption from

the world, binding these two to the Person of Christ and insisting upon it that the latter shall issue not into ascetic avoidance but into healthy Christian activity upon the world as the only means of truly entering into the life of God.

A concluding chapter is devoted to the triad Jesus-Paul-John. Dr. Kaftan finds it necessary to speak of this, because it is really in the Fourth Gospel he finds the beginning of the cleavage which separates the Catholic Church from the Apostolic age. Only the beginning; for what he refers to concerns not the kernel and substance of this gospel, only its Hellenistic frame. As to the main substance, he believes John to be in thorough accord with Jesus and Paul. In fact the Johannine discourses of Jesus, while not historical as such, are but the translation into gospel-form of the common apostolic conception of Christ as *κύριος*, a conception the apostolic church developed in true harmony with the mind of Jesus. But, if retrospectively conceived, the Fourth Gospel is absolutely true to the original spirit of Christianity, at the same time, considered prospectively, by reason of its Hellenistic setting, it prepares the way for the subsequent intellectualization of Christianity in the Hellenistic world. And to a certain extent there are traceable the faint beginnings of this process even in Paul. Only it is insisted upon, that both in Paul and in John, whatever there is of this nature lies on the periphery, not in the center. It becomes significant and influential only in view of the subsequent development, not within the sphere of the Pauline or Johannine teaching itself. These are the ideas with which we have long been familiar from Harnack, and we can forego criticizing them here. Dr. Kaftan is strong on the point of the distinctness of the New Testament writings from all other primitive Christian literature. He is not ashamed to profess himself still a believer in what has been scornfully called "the dogma of the New Testament". While this position, with its Ritschlian implications, may not, in our opinion, meet all the necessities of the case, yet we gladly take note of the author's tribute to the uniqueness of the New Testament, so far as it goes. As over against men like Bousset and Wrede, he is on our side.

We conclude our review with quoting a sentence from one of the last pages, because it gives in a few words the gist of the whole matter and is offered by the writer as such: "The modern theologians attempt to shove the idea of redemption aside into the periphery, whereas in reality it constitutes the center of all living, spiritual religion, in particular of Christianity. What we need and must strive after is that in all matters of faith this idea shall be recognized as the prime moving element."