

Jesus und die Heidenmission  
Max Meinertz  
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The question of Jesus' attitude towards universalism and missions, while ever of supreme importance, especially in a missionary age like ours, has acquired new interest from the manner of its treatment in Harnack's work "The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries". The chapter devoted to "Jesus Christ and Universal Missions" marks undoubtedly a weak spot in an otherwise exceptionally strong and able book. True, Harnack's position on the negative side does not differ from that of many recent critics. He denies the authenticity of the great missionary commandment recorded in Matt. 28:19 and of the more or less parallel passages at the close of Mark and Luke. But, in characteristic consonance with his general disposition to treat the tradition as gently as possible and to remove difficulties rather by skillful exegesis or textual reconstruction than by violent critical measures, he maintains that in the body of the Synoptic Gospels there is on a fair interpretation comparatively little to be found that puts Jesus in a false historic light. The Synoptists have, in his opinion, exercised great self-restraint in not to any large extent carrying back the missionary idea and missionary sentiment of their own time into the sayings of Jesus. Now other critics who on the historical question share the negative attitude of Harnack, yet fail to observe this self-restraint in the Synoptical record. Johannes Weiss, to mention only one writer, while just as skeptical as regards the great commission, succeeds in discovering much more material steeped in the missionary-spirit in Jesus' teaching. Harnack tones down and puts a minimizing exegesis on such statements, so as to bring them in line with the view that Jesus' universalism was confined to the "intensive" kind and to the O.T. eschatological forecast of the ultimate inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom of God, neither of which called for positive missionary effort. Weiss, on the other hand, gives the statements their full force, thus explaining them, so far as their missionary import is concerned, from the outlook of the later church. Harnack recognizes more as authentic, Weiss more as influenced by the missionary-principle. Only in regard to Jesus' historical position they practically agree.

In view of the new interest thus imparted to the discussion, Meinertz' treatise is most timely. After stating the problem it deals in succession with the universalism of the Old Testament, cotemporary Judaism, the "intensive" universalism of Jesus' doctrine and person, his explicit universalism, his missionary-ideas, his missionary command, the teaching of the several Gospels, the missionary-command and the subsequent development in the Apostolic Church. This scheme is natural and lucid. In the statement of the problem a good orientation is given as regards the history of opinion in recent criticism. The treatment of Old Testament teaching and of Judaism is not merely important from a dogmatic point of view, in so far as it exhibits the organic development of the ideas of universalism and of missions, but also apologetically important, because it creates a strong *a priori* presumption that Jesus must have formed definite, positive views of the conversion of the Gentiles. For, if such views were entirely lacking in his consciousness, it would have to be said that he remained behind the highest development of the Old Testament, on which even Judaism marks an advance, so far as the putting into actual missionary practice of the prophetic universalistic missionary teaching is concerned. On this as on other points the outcome of negative criticism is that the ideal perfection of Jesus' belief and teaching is impaired. He ceases to be not merely divine, but also ceases to be our absolute standard as a man. In the present case he fails to rise to an adequate appreciation of

the trend of Old Testament prophecy. For in the Old Testament there is not merely an unconscious reaching out towards universalism, nor merely a prophetic eschatological forecast of the reception of the Gentiles, there is also, especially in the latter part of Isaiah, a prediction of positive missionary activity. And it can be shown in other ways that in the figure of the Servant-of-Jehovah, so prominent in this part of the prophecy, Jesus found his own person and office portrayed. How inevitable then it must have become for him to transfer to himself this particular feature also, that the Servant shall be a light to the Gentiles? But, if we are to believe Harnack and the others, Jesus failed to follow prophecy in this highest flight, where it caught the vision of a truly universalistic preaching of the true religion among the Gentiles. To be sure, it might be replied that the conditions were not alike, that Jesus believed the end of the world to be near, and that this foreshortening of his outlook kept under the missionary-thought, and that therefore the comparison between him and the prophets is unfair. But, altogether apart from the question of fact involved here, ought not the shortness of the time, instead of suppressing the missionary-idea, to have proven an incentive to greater ardor in its execution? And, strictly speaking, the theory of men like Harnack seems to be not that Jesus consciously conceived the missionary-idea with reference to the Gentiles, and then kept it in abeyance in view of the near approach of the end, but rather that he naively remained shut up to the narrower outlook, that he never so much as contemplated even in the abstract a mission outside of the limits of Israel. The difficulty becomes still more acute if this position be compared with the attitude of cotemporary Judaism. The Jews of that day conducted an active missionary propaganda, as Harnack himself has most strikingly shown, and the bearing of which on the conception and pursuit of apostolic missions he has not failed to perceive. The New Testament itself bears witness to this, Matt. 23:15, John 7:35, Rom. 2:17-23. Why should Jesus have escaped the force of this example? It is not necessary, of course, to put the missionary spirit of Judaism on a line with the missionary spirit of the Christian Church. Meinertz well observes that its motives were frequently far from pure, and that the position accorded to the Gentile converts was not, either for the present or the Messianic future, one of full equality with the Jews. He makes it quite clear that a new and fresh start was made by Christianity, that a new force was brought into play. But nevertheless the thought was there and it is difficult to believe that Jesus could have entirely passed it by and to no extent incorporated it into his teaching.

Since the “intensive universalism” and the “explicit universalism” (in the sense of prophetic forecast of the coming in of Gentiles) are acknowledged by the advocates of the negative view, most interest attaches to the chapters on “The Missionary Ideas of Jesus” and “The Missionary Command”. As is well known in regard to the discourse in Matt. 10, exegetical opinions differ sharply. Some, especially Harnack, say the whole discourse is meant as an instruction for the Jewish mission, and that not as a purely provisional enterprise of the moment, but conceived by the early Jewish-Christian Church as final, witness vs. 23, where it is foretold that the Apostles will not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of Man shall have come. Others say that, whatever the original import of the discourse, Matthew at least means it as an instruction for missions in the widest sense. Meinertz takes the view that both parties are right. According to him there are two elements in the chapter. Up to the 16th verse it is an instruction of the Apostles for their preliminary mission to Israel at that juncture. From the 16th verse to the 42nd the situation is an entirely different one. Matthew here has, in accordance with his general method, grouped together with the preceding a piece of the great eschatological discourse belonging to the closing days of our Lord’s life. The parallel passages, therefore, are found in Mk. 13 and not in Mk. 6 or Lk. 9. The piece describes not directly the work of missions, but the persecution to which the disciples will be exposed. But this persecution is placed at a future time,

beyond Jesus' life on earth. And the description indirectly shows that it will come upon the disciples while engaged in missionary-propaganda. This missionary-activity is further one that relates to the Gentiles, for v. 18 predicts that the disciples will be brought before governors and kings. Now by this division of the discourse into two distinct parts Meinertz removes the difficulty, that in v. 23 the first mission of the Apostles to Israel would be represented as lasting until the Parousia. Vs. 23 is simply an encouragement for the disciples in their later persecutions. They will never be without some protecting-place, they will not exhaust the possibilities of finding refuge, till the Son of Man be come. But why are these places of refuge designated as the cities of Israel, if in the preceding the area of movement for the disciples is drawn so widely as to include their appearance before Gentile governors and kings? Meinertz replies that, even if the coming of the Son of Man refers to the end of the world, there is no difficulty here, because it was natural to clothe the thought in a form adjusted to the outlook of the disciples of that time. But, as a matter of fact, he thinks the coming of the Son of Man here relates to the destruction of Jerusalem, and up to that time, while the Gospel was being carried into foreign lands, the Jewish land remained more or less the base of operation, so that the persecution and flight were literally from one city of that land to another. The author's view on this point is interlinked with his interpretation of the great eschatological discourse in general. Here also he thinks that the preaching of the Gospel to the world spoken of in Matt 24:14 and Mk. 13: 10 precedes the destruction of Jerusalem, and compares Paul's mode of speech in Rom. 1:8, Col. 1: 6, 23. Thus he explains the coupling together of "the end" in Matt. 5:14 and "the abomination of desolation" in v. 15 and the same phenomenon in Mk., vss. 10 and 14.

The two points named are the most difficult and perhaps also the most interesting in the author's treatment of the material. But many other things he says are equally suggestive and instructive. The twelve Apostles, by their number, apart from their temporary mission, imply the idea of a new people of God, to take the place of the twelve ancient tribes. He hesitates, however, to apply this same principle to the 70 (or 72) disciples, as pointing by their number to the 70 or 72 Gentile nations known to Jewish lore. In the pericope of the Syro-Phoenician woman, which he thinks Luke omitted on account of its apparent particularism, he rightly presses the "first" in "let the children be satisfied first", although Harnack somewhat irresponsibly says that it should not be pressed, and quotes the interesting suggestion of Resch that this "first" is echoed in the Pauline sequence "first to the Jew then to the Greek". In the Sermon on the Mount attention is called to such universalistic terms as "earth", "world", "men", Matt. 5:13, 14, 16, and a careful inquiry into the New Testament usage of  $\gamma\eta$  brings out that almost everywhere it has universalistic associations. In connection with the parable of the supper, Matt. 22 and Lk. 14, not only the universalistic but also the missionary element is well brought out, as the latter finds expression in such terms as  $\alpha\pi\omicron\sigma\tau\epsilon\lambda\lambda\epsilon\iota\nu$ ,  $\kappa\alpha\lambda\epsilon\iota\nu$ ,  $\epsilon\iota\sigma\alpha\gamma\epsilon\iota\nu$  repeatedly used. The author does not, however, accept Zahn's view according to whom the sequence between Matt. 22:7 and 8 implies that the Apostles are not commanded to go to the Gentiles until after the destruction of Jerusalem. On the other hand, in Matt. 26:13 he adopts Zahn's interpretation to the effect that "this gospel" is the gospel which Jesus has preached and has commanded his Apostles to preach, not the gospel of the passion of Jesus ("she has done it to prepare me for burial"), as some critics interpret, making use of this interpretation to cast discredit upon the authenticity of the saying.

In the interesting chapter on the missionary-command and the subsequent development the author attacks the difficult problem how, taking for granted the authenticity of our Lord's explicit

universalistic and missionary-teaching, the rise of the Gentile missionary-propaganda in the early church could be so long delayed and, when it developed, could develop without apparent contact with or appeal to the authority of Jesus in this matter. The main answer given is that the problem with which the early church was confronted was not the abstract problem of the ultimate inclusion of the Gentiles in the kingdom, but the very concrete problem of the mode of their inclusion, of their standing after conversion as related to the church of the circumcision. For the solution of this problem, no appeal to the words of Jesus could have contributed much. Hence in the Cornelius-episode and on the occasion of the Council neither Peter nor James make such appeal. Further providential guidance and new revelation were required to bring about progress in the solution of this problem, and these were afforded in the martyrdom of Stephen, the experience of Peter, and the train of events which the scattering of the Hellenistic disciples consequent upon the death of Stephen set in motion.

What has been said will suffice to show that Meinertz' book constitutes a valuable contribution to the treatment of an important subject. It opens most creditably the new series of "Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen" to be published under the auspices of Dr. Bludau. For the work of an orthodox Roman-Catholic theologian it is eminently fair and unbiased in its exegetical methods. The only difference we have observed in this respect between what is here given and what a modern Protestant scholar might have offered, is that among the exegetical authorities quoted the older Protestant exegetes (not the modern ones) are conspicuously absent, although the Romanist commentators are not infrequently referred to. We are afraid, however, that many Protestant writers do no better.

In conclusion we cannot help regretting that (perhaps owing to a predominantly apologetic intent) the discussion is largely confined to the field of the Synoptical Gospels. From so well-informed a guide we should have liked to learn more than is here given concerning the universalistic teaching of the Fourth Gospel.