

The Quest of the Historical Jesus  
Albert Schweitzer  
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Schweitzer's book, of which this English translation is now offered to the public, contains two distinct elements. The larger part of it is a historical critique of the life-of-Jesus literature. To this is added a constructive attempt to interpret the life of Jesus on extreme eschatological lines. The constructive part is, however, of much smaller compass than the historico-critical section and besides brings no new material, being virtually a testament of the views developed in the author's earlier treatise, *Das Messianitäts-und Leidensgeheimnis. Ein Skizze des Lebens Jesu* (1901).

The entire book is brilliantly written. Dr. Schweitzer wields a trenchant pen. His thorough familiarity with the extensive literature enables him to handle it with supreme ease. He evinces great skill in making the biographers of Jesus speak for themselves, not so much by direct quotation, but rather by a free reproduction of what is individually characteristic and epoch-making in the work of each. Still, the chief value of the work lies not, after all, in these popularly attractive features, but in the philosophic grasp which the author reveals in tracing the inward trend of the life-of-Jesus movement in its logical necessity from Reimarus up to the present day. As a true philosopher of history he interprets to us in a most illuminating and convincing manner the progress of this theological movement step by step. No doubt it is to no small extent the author's personal detachment from what he describes that enables him to do this. He is so subjectively free of the theological motives and principles which inspired the "liberal" life-of-Jesus production as to be for that very reason an ideal judge and historian of the same.

It will well repay us to note briefly some of the outstanding conclusions reached by Dr. Schweitzer concerning the motives, tendencies, methods, and results of this interesting phase of theological activity in the nineteenth century which now seems to have reached, if not its ultimate limit, at least a significant milestone in its career. As to the motive from which the whole movement sprang, we are told that it "did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history, as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma." "Hate as well as love can write a life of Jesus and the greatest of them are written with hate." By "hate" in this connection is meant not hate of the Person of Jesus, but hate of the supernatural nimbus with which He appears surrounded in the faith of the church. And this defect in the initial motive has proved a veritable *vitium originis* in the entire after-history of the movement. Because the so-called "historical Jesus" was at the outset enlisted as an ally in the great theological strife of the age, he had forever after to put on the armor and wear the colors of the party that had enlisted Him and to share in its successive evolutions and transformations. He had to become all things to all: to the vulgar rationalists a rationalist, to the liberals a liberal, to the mediating theologians, a mediating type of mind and character. Like a Nemesis this inability to see in Jesus anything else but the reflex of its own opinions and prepossessions has pursued the investigation and treatment of the subject. With unsparing severity the author lays bare its baneful influence upon the "liberal" school in particular. The "liberals" were obsessed with the idea that they had a mission to perform in writing the life of Jesus. It was "to defend the originality of Jesus by ascribing to Him a modernizing transformation and spiritualization of the eschatological system of ideas." The "spiritual" was to them, of course, identical with the content of their own theology. From a different angle, but much to the same effect, a characterization of this school is given in the

following sentence: "Historical criticism had become in the hands of most of those who practiced it, a secret struggle to reconcile the Germanic religious spirit with the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth." The intimate connection of this whole "liberalizing" tendency with the Marcan hypothesis as a fixed principle in literary criticism is well brought out. Mark, with its scarcity of discourse and its assumed gradual development in the career and consciousness of Jesus, offers so much less serious resistance to the elimination of the eschatological, unaccountable, in a word, the supernatural, than the other sources. The Marcan hypothesis from its very birth was delivered into bondage to an *a priori* view of the development of Jesus. Hence not Reimarus, not Strauss in his original *Life of Jesus*, not Bruno Bauer, but Weisse, Wilke, Volkmar, Schenkel, Weizsäcker, and H. J. Holtzmann are at one and the same time the godfathers of the Marcan hypothesis and the typical champions of the "liberal" spiritualizing interpretation of the character and teaching of Jesus.

Not less interesting than all this is the characterization Dr. Schweitzer gives of the method applied in the life-of-Jesus construction. With what self-congratulation and pride was the "liberal" school accustomed to present its own method as the ideally objective one and as based on and verifiable by the sources, over against the subjective and *a prioristic* constructions of the dogmatic tradition. As a matter of fact, if we may believe the author, the modern life of Jesus is not entitled to classification with history, in the strict sense of the word, at all. Dr. Schweitzer, to be sure, states this fact not for the purpose of criticism, but as an inevitable result of the character of the sources. But leaving this opinion for what it is worth, even so the old orthodox contention that the "liberalized" Jesus was not a product of research properly so called, is strikingly verified. To quote once more the author's own words: "The character of the problem is such, that historical experiment must take the place of historical research. That being so it is easy to understand, that to take a survey of the study of the Life of Jesus is to be confronted, at first sight, with a scene of the most boundless confusion. A series of experiments are repeated with constantly varying modifications. . . . Most of the writers, however, have no suspicion that they are merely repeating an experiment which has often been made before. Some of them discover this in the course of their work to their own great astonishment—it is so, for instance, with Wrede, who recognizes that he is working out, though doubtless with a clearer consciousness of his aim, an idea of Bruno Bauer's. If old Reimarus were to come back again, he might confidently give himself out to be the latest of the moderns, for his work rests upon a recognition of the exclusive importance of eschatology, such as only recurs again in Johannes Weiss." All of which amounts to a confession that the modern interpretation of the life of Jesus has been sailing under false colors, when instead of openly acknowledging itself a species of experimentation upon an unwieldy material, it insisted upon posing as the product of genuine research, and demanded, but too often successfully owing to the unwariness of the public, acceptance as such.

The modern treatment of the life of Jesus has, according to Dr. Schweitzer, proceeded along two distinct lines and accordingly arrived at two distinct conclusions. Along the literary line it has led to thoroughgoing skepticism, along the historical line to thoroughgoing eschatology. The former movement culminated in Wrede, the latter Schweitzer, who does not permit his modesty to obscure the truth, finds culminating in himself. Formulated with respect to the central question of the gospel history, the messiahship of Jesus, the difference between the two positions comes to this, that the literary method of approach has issued into explaining the messianic element in the tradition as a later growth, whereas the eschatological method gives it a central place in the life of Jesus itself, makes it indeed the determining factor of the development of this life. Because the messianic

element is present in the Gospels, not after a desultory fashion but pervasively, the assertion of its secondary, unhistorical nature must needs lead, as in Wrede, to thoroughgoing skepticism, so far as the possibility of restoring the picture of the historical Jesus is concerned. Schweitzer emphasizes his agreement, or rather coincidence, with Wrede as regards the severe criticism to which both subject the modern psychologizing treatment of the account of Mark, a treatment which reads so much between the lines in the interest of a hypothesis of development and so unjustly discriminates between Mark and the two other Synoptics, as though the former belonged to a higher genus and had been guided by something like the modern historical spirit in handling his material. He also agrees with Wrede in the latter's polemic against the historical-kernel-method, and insists upon it that a report as a whole must be taken either as historical or as unhistorical that to take part and reject part, without reliance upon some objective criterion, is the height of arbitrariness. The whole "liberalizing" version of the life of Jesus, depending as it does on these two delusions, is utterly discredited. "The psychological explanation of motive and the psychological connection of events and actions which these writers have proposed to find in Mark, simply do not exist." "A vast quantity of treasures of scholarship and erudition, of art and artifice, which the Marcan hypothesis has gathered into its storehouse in the two generations of its existence to aid it in constructing its life of Jesus, has become worthless." "Thoroughgoing skepticism and thoroughgoing eschatology between them are compelling theology to read the Marcan text again with simplicity of mind. The simplicity consists in dispensing with the connecting links which it has been accustomed to discover between the sections of the narrative, in looking at each one separately, and recognizing that it is difficult to pass from one to the other." In recognizing this disconnectedness the thoroughgoing skepticism and the thoroughgoing eschatology agree. The difference comes in when each tries to explain the method there is in this Gospel-madness, the strange system that runs through the disconnectedness. Wrede has for this the explanation, that into the warp of the life of a mere teacher and miracle worker, which constituted the original story, there has been introduced, already by the tradition preceding Mark and still further by Mark himself, a strong weft of ideas of a dogmatic character, according to which Jesus was a higher, superhuman being called to the messianic office. And it is this latter, not the former, element which gives movement and direction to the Marcan narrative. Only in so far has the memory of the original course of events not been entirely obliterated, as the messianic, Christological scheme is introduced into the tradition not as an open profession on the part of Jesus, or as a recognized fact on the part of the disciples, but as a hidden thing, a mystery during the earthly life, not to be divulged until the resurrection. This still betrays, according to Wrede, the not entirely extinct consciousness that the messianic character did not exist in His lifetime, but was the after-product of belief in His resurrection from the dead. The atmosphere of mystery which pervades the gospel is partly due to this, partly it is the natural concomitant of the conception of Christ as a supernatural being. Such in a few words is the hypothesis of Wrede. Schweitzer subjects this hypothesis to a very acute criticism. He shows how Wrede is at a disadvantage as compared with his precursor Bruno Bauer, who considered the interpolation of the messianic element the personal, absolutely original act of the evangelist, whereas according to Wrede it was largely and primarily the collective act of tradition. The alleged process is too subtle to ascribe to a collective subject. Besides this, in the account of the incident at Caesarea-Philippi, of the entry into Jerusalem, and of the confession before the high priest, we have three instances which break through the scheme of messianic secrecy, so that Wrede himself is compelled to find here the hand of a more naive, less consciously productive tradition than elsewhere. But Schweitzer remarks that even here of naivety in depicting Jesus as the openly professed and openly recognized Messiah there is no trace, so that

the presumption becomes strong that in these cases we strike the bedrock of solid tradition. The story of the passion also runs directly contrary to Wrede's hypothesis, for those who set up the theory of secrecy could have had no possible interest in representing Jesus as having been openly put to death as Messiah, i.e., in consequence of messianic claims. A more general ground on which the author criticizes Wrede's scheme is that primitive theology had no ostensible motive for dating back the messiahship of Jesus to the time of His earthly ministry, at least, if one may judge from the relative indifference of Paul and the Acts with regard to the pre-resurrection period. It is impossible to explain how the messianic beliefs of the first generation arose, if Jesus throughout His life was for all, even the disciples, merely a teacher. If it is difficult to eliminate the messiahship from the life of Jesus, it is far more difficult to explain its re-entrance subsequently into the theology of the early church. The mere belief in the resurrection as such can not have produced the messianic character; else, those who believed in the rising from the dead of John the Baptist must have regarded him as the Messiah. And, if the messiahship actually dates from the resurrection, why is it that the messianic teaching is not put into the mouth of the risen Jesus? Exception is justly taken to Wrede's method of treating alike all prohibitions of Jesus to make known His work and forcing them all into the same category of the messianic secret, whereas it is plain that the motives varied in the several cases. Equally unwarranted is the identification of "the mystery of the kingdom" in the parable teaching with the messianic secret. Wrede fails to recognize that "second wider circle of mystery which has to do not with Jesus's Messiahship, but with his preaching of the kingdom."

Since, then, the thoroughgoing skepticism of Wrede does not solve the problem, the only experiment that remains to be tried is that of thoroughgoing eschatology. To be sure, the eschatological key has been tried on the lock of the Gospel-mysteries before, only it was not the key of *thoroughgoing* eschatology. Schweitzer's objection to the eschatologists that came before him, like Johannes Weiss, is that they applied the principle in question to the teaching of Jesus only and not to His life. They make Him think and speak eschatologically, but fail to see that He must have acted in the same spirit. The true explanation of all the mystery enshrouding the Gospel-account lies in this that it is "dogmatic history," history molded in its actual unfolding by theological beliefs. "The chaotic confusion of the narratives ought to have suggested the thought that the events had been thrown into this confusion by the volcanic force of an incalculable personality, not by some kind of carelessness or freak of the tradition." The concrete working out of this principle yields the following outline of Jesus' life. The ministry took up less than one year. This reduces the period of popular preaching and teaching to very narrow limits. After but a few weeks of such activity Jesus entered upon a policy of concealment. The explanation of this is not that His cause was lost and He had to flee. That is a mere figment of psychologizing, pragmatizing interpreters of Mark. Jesus had been dominated from the first by a dogmatic idea, the idea of the immediate nearness of the kingdom, as made certain by the initial fact of the movement of repentance evoked by the Baptist. Jesus, however, was not so much borne upon the current of eschatological expectancy; He Himself rather set the times in motion by acting, by creating eschatological facts and emergencies. He expected the kingdom not only in the near future but definitely at harvest time in that same year of His ministry. The parabolic references to the harvest have this for their realistic background. The mission of the twelve of Matthew 10 was to make known the impending arrival of the kingdom. When Jesus sent them forth, He did not expect to see them back in the present aeon (vs. 23). With the coming of the kingdom His own parousia was to coincide. It was His purpose at that time to initiate the great eschatological crisis, to let loose the final woes, the confusion and the strife, from which should issue the new supernatural world.

Now it was the non-fulfillment of this acute expectation that made the great turning point in the life of Jesus. This and not “growing opposition” or “waning support” induced His change of attitude and procedure. From now on Jesus’ one thought is to get away from the people. It is from them He flees, not from the hostile scribes as modern theology imagined. For the non-fulfillment showed that the coming of the kingdom could not take place after the manner at first contemplated through repentance and a general tribulation befalling Himself and his followers alike. Jesus now saw that God had appointed it otherwise. The suffering expected for all must have been set aside, abolished for the others and concentrated upon Jesus alone, and that in the form of a passion and death at Jerusalem. He must suffer for others that the kingdom might come. According to Schweitzer, the idea of suffering had been associated for Jesus with the conception of the kingdom from the beginning, but only in a general way, insofar as the Messiah must needs share in the tribulation impending upon all. Now the suffering became His own individual destiny. Jesus further conceived of this suffering as atoning in dependence on Isaiah 53. The many for whom He suffers are not, as Johannes Weiss would have it, the unrepentant Jewish nation, but in the most comprehensive sense the chosen of all generations since the beginning of the world. It was discharging a debt which weighed upon the world. Inseparable from the prediction of suffering is that of the resurrection. In recognizing this Schweitzer again agrees with Wrede over against the modern theology, which endeavors to explain the resolve to suffer psychologically and declares the prediction of the resurrection unhistorical. But, whilst Wrede says: because both belong together, both are dogmatic and *therefore* unhistorical, Schweitzer says: they are both dogmatic and *therefore* historical, because they find their explanation in eschatological conceptions. Jesus, then, went to Jerusalem for the express purpose of bringing about His own death and resurrection. He was the sole actor in this the second stage of His career. “The things which happen, the questions which are laid before him, contribute nothing to the decisive issue, but merely form the anecdotic fringes of the real outward and inward event, the bringing down of death upon himself.” And He actually succeeded in forcing the history to obey this program even of dogmatic origin to the extent of confining the catastrophe to Himself and not involving the disciples.

In more than one sense this construction makes *tabula rasa*. It leaves nothing of the “figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.” It is also negative so far as the author himself is concerned, in that it obviously carries with itself the denial of every normative, authoritative character to the consciousness and teaching of Christ. The Christ of this experimental reconstruction is nothing but a deluded visionary. This historical Jesus, Schweitzer admits, must be to our own age a stranger and an enigma. In the “liberal” picture He had seemed for a while to be advancing to meet our age. But it was only apparently so. “He does not stay, he passes by our time and returns to his own. Indeed the whole idea, as if by a restoration of the actual Jesus, through historical methods, spiritual forces can be set free, and a new and vigorous Christianity built up, is a great error. The historical knowledge of the personality and life of Jesus will not be a help, but perhaps rather an offense to religion.” And yet, while admitting all this, Dr. Schweitzer is not willing to admit that by such a view the historical foundation of Christianity is destroyed. Jesus still means something to our world, because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from Him. But the author does not succeed in making plain how he conceives of this. It is something connected with the great sayings of Jesus. How such force can belong to these, seeing they are all eschatologically conditioned, it is hard to see. Beyond vague statements and phrases we get nothing that could help solve this riddle. It is “Jesus as spiritually arisen within men,” “the

spirit that goes forth from Him and in the spirits of men strives for new influence and rule." How little all this means appears from the author's own confession of inability to disengage that which is abiding and eternal in the being of Jesus from the historical forms in which it worked itself out, and to introduce it into our world as a living influence. The only thing somewhat more definite we learn is that the words of Jesus, precisely because they are based on an eschatological world-view, that is to say were unrelated to all historical and social circumstances, are appropriate to any world, since they raise man in every world above his world and time. But raise him to what? Certainly not to the transcendental sphere, the heavenly aeon which Jesus had in mind, for the reality of that is not recognized. And if there be substituted for this the vague modern ideas of "eternal life" or "inward freedom," or some such thing, what power could possibly proceed from the words of Jesus, realistically meant as they undoubtedly are, to induce such a misty indefinable state? It all comes back to a sort of vague spiritualizing of the eschatological hope, something which Prof. Burkitt also suggests, in the Preface, as called for by the times, now that the eschatological hope has proved to be no mere embroidery of Christianity, but the heart of its enthusiasm.

It does not seem to have occurred either to the author or to the writer of the Preface, that there may still exist in the twentieth century a faith robust enough to take the Jesus even of the thoroughgoing eschatology at His word. We do not mean by this, of course, that any evangelical Christian could accept Dr. Schweitzer's reconstruction of the life of Jesus in detail. There is too much in it that is fantastic, e.g., such assumptions as that in the early part of His career Jesus passed for Elijah even to the mind of the Baptist; that Peter against the intention of Jesus revealed the messianic secret; that Peter's knowledge of this secret was due to the experience of the transfiguration, which therefore did not follow but preceded the incident at Caesarea-Philippi; that what Judas betrayed to the authorities was not the place where they could apprehend Jesus, but the messianic secret. On the other hand, it might be suggested that this "thoroughgoing eschatology" is not quite thorough enough, in that, e.g., it does not carry back the deliberate purpose to suffer and die an atoning death to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. There is certainly as much evidence for the early presence of this in Jesus' mind as there is for the early presence of the messianic consciousness in general. But all this should not cause us to overlook the good work which the eschatological school has done and is still doing in restoring to the historical Christ the sublime lineaments which He has always borne in the historic faith of the church. The Jesus of the eschatologists and the Christ of the church dogma are strikingly alike in several respects. For one thing, such men as Weiss and Schweitzer have rescued the historical Christ from the desupernaturalizing process to which the liberal theology subjected His person and consciousness. For, after all, apocalypics and eschatology are preeminently the sphere of the supernatural. A Christ in whose mind and life these two elements were dominant must be a Christ steeped in the supernatural. The apocalyptic and the eschatological further stand for a very pronounced and definite conception of salvation. A Christ who derived the ideals and impulses of His life from these must have laid claim not to the rank of a mere prophet or teacher or ethical reformer, but to that of a veritable Savior. And the same eschatological atmosphere excludes every undue emphasis upon human merit or effort as contributory to salvation and consequently brings out the principle of divine grace. One of the most striking features of Dr. Schweitzer's sketch of the mind of Jesus is the convincing manner in which the predestinarian character of many sayings is shown. To be sure, Johannes Weiss had already made a beginning with this. But it had been never before so distinctly enunciated that eschatology and predestinarianism go together. It will not henceforth be so easy to maintain that the predestinarianism of Paul is foreign to and absent from

the teaching of our Lord. The eschatological school must also be given credit for the rehabilitation of the principle of atonement as an integral part of the professed work of Christ, as indeed lying at the heart of His very purpose, to execute which through death He deliberately went up to Jerusalem. Here again Schweitzer follows in the footsteps of Johannes Weiss, but goes one step further, in that he makes the atonement refer not to the unrepentant Jews but to the sinful world as such. Still further, the eschatological Jesus resembles the Christ of the church, in that He is and acts as a thorough believer in fixed dogmatic conceptions, indeed makes dogma the parent of history. And finally, there is to be registered the great gain that the eschatological school has driven out of the life of Jesus the "liberal" figment of a subjective development in His consciousness both with regard to His work and to His person. Taking it all in all, there is abundant warrant for saying that the writers of this school have strikingly vindicated the right of supernaturalists, Augustinians, Calvinists to claim Jesus as their own. Everybody will have to admit that the historic church has more faithfully preserved the image of Christ, if thus He lived and thought and preached, than any school or phase of theology that has criticized her faith.

The translation, so far as we have been able to compare it with the original, has been admirably done. In the title of Dulk's book, on page 324, "The false *Step* in the Life of Jesus" does not correctly render the original "Der *Irrgange* des Lebens Jesu." John occurs for Peter on page 127. Bruno Bauer's birth year is given as 1809, and yet it is said on page 138 that when in 1839 he removed from Berlin to Bonn, he was "just at the beginning of the twenties." The original has not "beginning" but "end" of the twenties, but the slip is pardonable since the age of thirty is too advanced to be called "that critical age" in the life of a young man when he is apt to "surprise his teachers."