

Paul and His Interpreters
Albert Schweitzer
The Princeton Theological Review 12:142-149. [1914]

As the preface tells us, this work is a continuation of the author's "*Von Reimarus zu Wrede*" of the English translation of which, published under the title *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, a review appeared in our January number for 1911. The method of procedure is in both works the same: to a historico-critical survey of the previous discussions of the subject there is subjoined a positive construction in which the preceding critique is turned to account to reach a theory which shall avoid the mistakes and failures of the past. Of the work on Paul, however, we receive for the present only the historico-critical installment. The positive half is to appear later as a separate publication. But sufficient indications are scattered through the volume and enough advance information is afforded in the concluding chapter to warrant the prediction that to the explanation of Paul, as well as to that of Jesus, the author expects to apply the principle of "thoroughgoing eschatologism," and that the adjective "thoroughgoing" will be found equally pertinent in both cases. In fact, the principle reigns so supreme that one might easily fancy it to have affected the author's subjective attitude of mind towards his material. There is a pronounced eschatological atmosphere about the criticism of the previous literature; in its incisiveness and comprehensiveness and finality it appears like a great judgment transaction. On the whole, however, it cannot be denied that the judgment is fair and well reasoned, so that the tone of sovereignty characterizing it is in part justified by the author's extraordinary command of the subject. As concerns the positive side of the matter, here our remembrance of what the principle produced by way of interpretation of the life of Jesus cannot but cause serious misgivings. It should be kept in mind, however, that there must be from the nature of the case considerable difference between the thoroughgoing eschatological treatment as applied to Jesus and as applied to Paul. In his book about Jesus the author set himself the task to show how the eschatological force produced a life tragedy. In the present he merely undertakes to show how it produced a system of belief. It is evident that this difference must work to the advantage of the discussion foreshadowed in our volume. There is every reason to expect that the results in point of sanity and plausibility will be far less open to criticism. A great deal of the unnaturalness of Schweitzer's construction of the career of Jesus was due to the fact that a purely abstract scheme of eschatological belief was here represented as having been translated into a concrete conduct of life, every step being explained as consciously predetermined in the mind of Jesus from purely doctrinaire premises. With Paul, on the other hand, we have arrived within the region of doctrine and here the predominance of the theoretical doctrinaire point of view will seem less out of place.

The great problem of the history of dogma is, according to Schweitzer, the development of the religion of Jesus into the Christianity of the Hellenic world. It involves in reality three problems, one connected with the transition from Jesus to primitive Christianity, another connected with the relation of Paul to primitive Christianity, a third touching the origin of Hellenic Christianity either in dependence on or independently of Paul. Baur was the last to attack this great complex problem in its entirety and to attempt a comprehensive solution. Since his days, and beginning with Ritschl, the problem has, if not in form, at any rate in substance, been evaded and glossed over, a procedure facilitated by the conventional division of the territory to be explored into the three separate provinces: Life of Jesus, Apostolic Age, History of Dogma. At the same time Baur's solution, even after his critical edifice has fallen, still continues to cast a spell on the interpretation of Paulinism. The

striving of Baur and the old Tübingen school was to solve the problem, how a purely Hellenic system of belief could have grown up out of Jewish antecedents, on the principle of carrying back as much as possible of the Hellenic substance into the first origins of the process, in other words by virtually Hellenizing Paul. The Tübingen view took for granted that the principles of universalism and law-freedom were already symptoms of the process of Hellenization. Thus the way was opened up towards applying the same explanation to those elements in the Pauline teaching which, in contradistinction to the forensic circle of ideas, may be conveniently grouped together as the physico-mystical trains of thought, such as the antithesis between flesh and Spirit, the subjective process of redemption, the Christ mysticism, the Pneuma doctrine. Since Lüdemann's investigation of this subject in his work on the Pauline anthropology (1872) it has become fashionable to distinguish a Judaistic and a Hellenic element in Paul in the sense indicated. Pfleiderer in the first edition of his *Urchristenthum* (1887) and Holtzmann in his *New Testament Theology* (1st ed., 1897) are the classical exponents of this critical consensus about the presence of a Hellenic strand in Paulinism. But the same assumption underlies equally much the theorizing of the ultra-Tübingians of more recent date of the Dutch school and others, who propose to explain the Pauline epistles in toto as products of the second century, for here it is again the correct perception that a movement of thought which is especially Greek cannot have sprung up in the mind of a Jewish man by a sudden aberration, but requires for its rise and maturing an actual Hellenic environment and a considerable lapse of time. And once more the case is not different with regard to the still more recent "*religionsgeschichtliche*" interpretation of Paul on the basis of the Hellenistic syncretism, and in particular of the mystery religions. This theory also starts with the supposition that those elements in which it discovers parallels to contemporary syncretistic or Hellenistic religious ideas, and which it accordingly proposes to explain and illustrate on the principle of derivation from this or at least from a common source, are actually Hellenic.

It is this widespread assumption of a Hellenic ferment in the mind of Paul which Schweitzer challenges and attacks. He pursues it relentlessly in its variegated forms through the successive chapters of this book. No one will be able to read the criticism without receiving a profound impression of the inherent weakness of the theory and being struck with wonder at the long and almost undisputed supremacy it has been able to maintain in the circles of liberal criticism. On the credit side of the theory, as originally conceived, stood only the dualism of flesh and Spirit, and that only in a general superficial way. In the particular aspects of the doctrine no influence of Greek conceptions has ever been pointed out. Many more, and more weighty, considerations stand on the debit side. An incredible capacity is ascribed to the apostle for combining contradictions after the most naive fashion. The inclusiveness of his mind far exceeds the limits not merely of the logically but also of the psychologically conceivable. Then there is the need in which the advocates of the theory find themselves of overspiritualizing Paul's statements in order to make them approach the Platonic conceptions. A serious obstacle is further encountered in the self-evident primitive Christian, eschatological background of Paul's doctrine of the Spirit, as soon as this is viewed in its broader aspects and not with one-sided reference to the antithesis between flesh and Spirit. Still further account must be taken of the strange phenomenon that the original apostles never suspected anything Hellenic in Paul's teaching. But the crowning argument is furnished by the observation that the representatives of the later Hellenizing development in Christian theology—Justin, Ignatius, and the others—do not recognize Paul as the one who had made a beginning of Hellenizing the gospel. They do not appeal to him nor make use of him to authenticate their conceptions as genuinely Christian. Schweitzer very cogently and pointedly puts this argument by saying that in case modern

criticism were right in professing to find Greek elements in Paul, it would have to be credited with an acuter instinct for what is Hellenic than the very men who Hellenized Christianity. The argument may also be made to work in the opposite direction, because Paul, no matter whether he borrowed from Hellenism or not, was at any rate unconscious of doing so. Therefore the same anomaly would return here: modern criticism would have shown a better instinct for the provenience of this factor in Paul's thought than the man who himself introduced it.

The element of truth in the theory Schweitzer would find is this, that the Pauline mysticism bears a certain analogy of form to the Greek mysticism. It externally has the air of being a twin formation to it. But this applies only to the later Hellenistic form of Greek religious thought, not to the Hellenic philosophical thinking in its older, more general character with which the earlier critics used to reckon. The presently prevailing phase of the theory, which asserts a dependence of Paul on the Greek-Oriental syncretism of his time, specifically on the mystery religions, is in so far better off than the older form. It can actually point to a common fund of religious expression between Paul and these contemporary systems of religion, and is able to offer concrete evidence in support of its position. But so far as identity of substance between Paul and Hellenism is concerned, the new theory of the "*religionsgeschichtler*" makes out no better case than the earlier critics did. The preliminary objection to be raised to it is this, that Paul is obviously Judaistic through and through, and that, whatever influence from the quarter named might have been exerted upon him would have had to come indirectly through its previous absorption by Judaism. "The suggestion that apart from this he might be personally and directly affected by Oriental influences calls for very cautious consideration. In particular we ought to be very careful to guard against raising the possibility to a certainty by general considerations regarding all that the child of the Diaspora might have seen, heard and read." What might be conceived and has to be recognized in the case of large collective developments spread over considerable periods of time, cannot without more be transferred and made a principle of explanation in the case of an individual. And, if the question be put on this broader basis of a possible infiltration of syncretism into the later Judaism and through it into Paul, the inherent implausibility of assuming such a thing immediately springs into view and much more clearly obtrudes itself, than where the whole issue is staked on the possible influences which Paul the individual might have or might not have absorbed. Of course this objection is only preliminary. Ultimately the question is a question of fact. The two points at issue are whether there is substantial identity between the syncretism and the mysteries on the one hand and Paul's religion on the other hand, and whether the substance of Paul's religious thought can be explained in no other way than through derivation from that extra-Jewish source. Both these questions the author answers in the negative. His examination of the alleged identity between the two systems is not only very searching, but also possesses the merit of bringing together what from various sides has been advanced against the hypothesis in question, so that an easy survey of the controversy in its present stage of development may here be obtained. Schweitzer strenuously insists upon it that in putting the question Paul's views shall not be confounded with those of the Johannine theology and, on the basis of the correspondence of the latter to the ideas of syncretism, a similar correspondence affirmed with regard to Paul. Thus it is not permissible to compare with the terminology of the mystery religions the conception of a "rebirth," as occurring in Paul, for it is precisely characteristic of Paul that he does not currently avail himself of this representation, but speaks instead of a "dying and rising with Christ." Generalizing this the author makes the striking observation that "the Paulinism which the students of Comparative Religion have in view is mainly an artificial product which has previously been treated with the acids

and reagents of Greek theology.” It is further urged with great force that Paul cannot have known the mystery religions in their later, more spiritualized form, filled with the yearning for redemption, but only in their cruder, earlier form, which would be much less likely to appeal to him than the other form. Another point on which stress is laid is that the mystery religions lack the figure of a Redeemer God, who could be placed over against the messianic figure of Christ in Paul’s religion. The question of identity in regard to sacramentalism is carefully investigated, and the conclusion reached, that the apparent analogies discovered are not as a matter of fact obtained by any direct information about the sacramental elements in the mystery religions, concerning whose character and *modus operandi* there is admittedly little exact knowledge, but through the unwarranted approximation of the mystery religions to the primitive nature religions. The idea of an eating and incorporation of the deity on the part of the worshiper is thus first imported into the mysteries on the principle that these involved a survival or revival of religious ideas belonging to the lowest strata, and then on the basis of this it is asserted that Paul might have derived his sacramental conception from that source. Directly it cannot be proven that the idea of eating the deity entered into the mystery religions, and the circumstance that its natural correlate, the sacrificial feast, plays no role in these cults, rather tells against its occurrence there. If analogies are to be pressed, it were much better for this reason to go to the ancient cults as such. Even here, however, Schweitzer refuses to acknowledge a real analogy. He does so on the ground that Paul knows nothing of the eating and drinking of the body and blood of the Lord, but only of the eating and drinking of the bread and the cup. This is quite true so far as a literal Capernaite eating of the body and blood is concerned, which is, of course, excluded by the fact that on Paul’s premises the exalted Christ no longer possesses flesh and blood, but it is incorrect if meant to eliminate the conception of an assimilation of the Person of Christ described in terms of eating and drinking His body and blood, for that this conception was actually present to Paul his quotation of the words of the institution, which cannot have been to him an empty formula, clearly proves. In our opinion there is actually here a conscious recurrence for the explanation of the supper upon the ancient (Old Testament) idea of the sacrificial meal, as the reference to Israel after the flesh, who eat the sacrifices and so have communion with the altar in 1 Corinthians 10:18, also shows. Schweitzer’s position on this point is not, however, to be explained from a mere desire to pursue the mystery hypothesis into its last recesses, but he thinks to have reasons for believing that the primitive church, as little as Paul, knew of a partaking of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper, that the words of the institution did not form part of the service, and that no consecration of the elements took place.¹ In regard to the other sacrament, that of baptism, a similar line of argumentation is followed with the same result. In the mystery religions the idea of purification nowhere definitely passes over into that of renewal. Nothing is known in them of a baptism in the name of the deity. The name magic does not appear connected with the rite of purification. Nor is the *Pneuma*-endowment associated with it as is the case in Paul. When Schweitzer further urges as a characteristic distinction, that, whereas in the mysteries the sacramental idea is the logical outcome of the symbolism, with Paul the sacrament is irrational, because there is no inherent symbolic connection between contact with the water and the dying and rising with Christ, he seems to overlook that such a connection is actually traced by Paul when he represents baptism as a burial with Christ and a coming to life again. To be sure, for the advocates of the theory in question this yields no advantage, for it implies a symbolism of which the mysteries know nothing.

Last of all, the author comes to close quarters with Reitzenstein in discussing the question how far Paul’s “physical mysticism” as such, apart from his doctrine of the sacraments, which is supposed to

be only mechanically attached to the former, coincides with the mystery religions. The concession that the terminology of which the apostle avails himself was derived from the religions of the Greek Orient is readily, perhaps too readily, made. But Reitzenstein's chief sin is that he neglects the study of the Jewish apocalypses, and refuses to consider a possible explanation of the Pauline mysticism from that source. In the very doubtful myths about the god Anthropos, Schweitzer does not place much faith. The eschatological scheme of the two ages with their two Adams as their representatives accomplishes everything that this figure stands for and accomplishes it far more naturally. Similarly the dual personality in Paul is an essentially eschatological phenomenon, appearing before Paul in Jesus and the disciples, and therefore something far more primitive than anything found in Hellenistic mysticism. There is no need of explaining it from the deification of the believer. It means nothing else than that the two worlds struggle for existence in the same man. Less to the point appears to us the criticism that in the mysteries there is a God-mysticism, while Paul teaches a Christ-mysticism, for this rests on the professed view that the Pauline Christ is not God, only a heavenly being, a view which seems to us contrary to the facts. A real point of difference is noted in the process by which in each case the transformation takes place: in Paulinism this is objective, a world-movement from without draws the believer within its sweep; in the mysteries it is subjective, brought about by the vision and gnosis of God. Hence Reitzenstein, in order to make out a true parallelism with the mystery ideas, is led into subjectivizing the conception of dying and rising with Christ occurring in Romans 6 and elsewhere as if it described voluntary action on the believer's part. For all these reasons Schweitzer concludes that in this central matter as little as in the more peripheral question of the sacraments does any real resemblance or any real connection exist. If, he adds, a true dependence of Paulinism on the mystery cults were proven, this would only result in raising once more with renewed urgency the question of the ultra-Tübingians, whether it is possible at all to explain Paulinism within the limits of primitive Christianity. The only logical view to take on such premises is that primitive Christianity itself was already a syncretistic product, and with this we have arrived at the position of Gunkel and Maurenbrecher, from which there is but one step to Drews and W. B. Smith. In that case no explanation of Paulinism is required, for the simple reason that Paul added nothing new.

In the above review of Schweitzer's critique upon his predecessors, it is not difficult to discover the lines along which his positive construction will move. Undoubtedly it may be expected to shed valuable light on the Pauline world of thought in some of its most mysterious regions. Certainly the eschatological factor was a strong motive power in the apostle's mind. And as in the case of Jesus, the recognition of this cannot fail to do much towards a rehabilitation of the essential ingredients of the old orthodox interpretation of Paul. Consistent eschatology is bound to stand for supernaturalism, the objectivity of redemption, the predestinarianism of the application of redemption. That to Schweitzer's view these are purely exegetical and historical matters which do not represent any dogmatic conviction, we are, of course, well aware, but this does not detract from their importance to those who are willing to accept the exegetically and historically ascertained faith of Paul as authoritative for themselves. The only thing to be feared is, that the eschatologically explained Paul will turn out to be too one-sidedly a product of theological reasoning after the manner of the Paul of Holsten half a century ago. Schweitzer has done a good work in protesting vigorously against the modern vogue of discounting the theologian in Paul and making overmuch of the prophet, the missionary, the organizer, the religious enthusiast, a fault so conspicuous in the works of Deissmann and Weinel and other writers of this type. The protest is also in place against the tendency of an

earlier date, but which still survives, of making the whole content of the apostle's teaching spring out of the experience of the Damascus vision, by means of psychological evolution. There is, however, danger of running into the opposite extreme, that of deriving the system of the apostle from a purely intellectual source and detaching it from his religious life-experience. Both extremes, to our mind, are in conflict with the apostle's own statements. To name but one instance, in view of Galatians 2:19, 20 we should not like to subscribe to the author's statement (p. 105) that Paul always treats the abolition of the law as a logical conclusion, not as a psychological experience. It is much more natural to assume that in Paul, as always, the logic of doctrinal thinking and the experience of practical religion have gone hand in hand and mutually fructified each other. And back of both these stood that from which Paul himself derived his whole gospel as from its ultimate source, the objective revelation from God—a factor with which, we are sorry to say, Schweitzer does not reckon at all.

(Footnotes)

¹ In this connection we notice a slip on page 206, where the author finds the symbolism of the Supper in its eschatological reference obscure, because he does not see "how by eating and drinking the dying and return of the Lord can be shown forth?" Paul does not say that the eating and drinking show forth the return of the Lord; the showing forth is confined to the dying; the apostle's words are: "Proclaim the Lord's death till he come." The eschatological reference, while undoubtedly present in the sacrament, is not expressed in the symbolism, at least not so far as the parousia is concerned.