

A Critical History of the Doctrine of the Future Life. . . . and Immortality

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The first edition of Dr. Charles' Eschatology appeared in 1899. Fourteen years lie between that date and the publication of this second edition. The "Revised and Enlarged" on the title-page of the latter does not mean that any considerable new material has been added, or that the main positions of the first edition have been to any important extent modified. The one extensive addition occurs in the treatment of the nature of Apocalyptic, more particularly its relation to Prophecy and the causes of its pseudonymity. Here the writer offers a new theory. But the other changes do not affect the main character of the work as representing a definite view in regard to the development of biblical eschatology. So far as the Old Testament is concerned this view is that of the Graf-Wellhausen school. It might be summed up in the following positions: a purely paganistic ethically-indifferent individual eschatology (Sheol) prior to the introduction of Jahvism; the development of an ethical collective eschatology through the influence of the higher prophetism from the eighth century onward, and this first of all in the adverse sense of an announcement of judgment upon Israel, and only later in the favorable form of Messianic prediction (the promissory passages in Amos and Hosea being rejected); the moral transformation of the original paganistic views of the state after death through the individualizing of the ethical nationalism of the great prophets; the successive and only partially successful attempts at effecting a synthesis between the national and individual hopes through the doctrine of the resurrection, the synthesis being perfectly attained in Christianity only; the broadening out of this particularistic into a universalistic and cosmical eschatology under the influence of the ethical principle. Within the limits indicated by these positions the author is moderate in his views. He assumes a stronger admixture of the ethical element in the Mosaic conception of Jahve than perhaps most of the critics of the school would allow, although on his own showing the ethical ingredient postulated remained practically dormant until the prophets resuscitated it. On the other hand it might be classified as a somewhat radical position when the author sides with Stade and Schwally a.o. in ascribing ancestor-worship to the pre-Mosaic Hebrews and construing from this point of view their primitive heathen eschatology. In the second edition this is still adhered to, although in the meanwhile, in result of what has been written on the subject, the theory has lost considerable of its erstwhile prestige. We think the author too curtly dismisses the objections raised by Frey and Grüneisen, especially by the latter. He is, of course, within his rights when choosing to abide by his original judgment, but the theory has certainly become sufficiently shaken to require of every scholar, who still thinks himself able to uphold it, a careful restatement of the arguments and a refutation of the counter-arguments adduced. Instead of this, the author simply repeats the reasoning of Stade and Schwally in its original form. Especially Grüneisen's interpretation of the mourning-customs as defensive measures adopted to ward off the dangerous influence of the souls of the departed, is in many respects much more plausible than the interpretation of these same customs as acts of worship. And even if it should be urged that in this sphere of pagan superstition the line between defensive treatment of the spirits, or care and provision for the spirits, and of a positive religious cult of them, is hard to draw, it still would have to be remembered that the phenomena of the mourning-customs at any rate would not point to ancestor-worship in the specific sense, but could at best only be used to prove the worship of the departed in general, so that many of the far-reaching corollaries of the theory in regard to the tribal and family-organization of Israel appear unwarranted. As the matter stands the non-expert reader will be apt to

form from Dr. Charles' statements a very inadequate conception of the merits of the controversy. Even Eerdmans, whom none will suspect of conservative leanings, declares in a recent issue of the *Theologisch Tydschrift* (1913, II, p. 124) that the whole theory of the primitive religious cult of the departed turns out to have been "*een groote misgreep*" i.e. a huge mistake. The point at issue does not concern pre-Jahvistic paganism exclusively, but also affects the view taken of the Old Testament teaching itself in regard to the state after death. Charles assumes that Jahvism, in order to combat ancestor-worship, conceived a theory of the nature of the soul, which implied the destruction of all life in Sheol. The trichotomy of Gen. 2:7 makes the existence of the soul depend on the presence of the spirit, which at death withdraws to its source in God. Nothing therefore remains to descend into Sheol. According to the author the denial of immortality in Eccl. 12:7 is the logical outcome of the anthropology of this creation-account. But, he assures us, the destruction by Jahvism of all life in Sheol was necessary with a view to the truly ethical doctrine of the future life. We do not believe that the intent of Gen. 2:7 is to deny the continuation of the individual life after death. And we cannot help feeling that the ethicizing of the future state, by means of the (temporary) denial of the survival of man, would be a procedure beneath the dignity of revelation. Nor do we believe that there is, as the author seems to assume, a historical connection between what he calls "the later view" in regard to Sheol as a place of silence, inertia, forgetfulness (in distinction from the older ascription to it of a relatively high degree of life, movement and remembrance) and the anthropology of Gen. 2:7. This passage, if it did imply the cessation of man in toto, could only have led to the abolishment of Sheol. How it could have operated towards depressing the degree of activity in Sheol we fail to see. The whole distinction, moreover, between an alleged later and an alleged older view, is without sufficient basis. Dr. Charles favors it evidently, because it falls in with the theory of primitive ancestor-worship. The whole thing amounts to a difference of emphasis in the various popular conceptions reflected in the Old Testament as concerning the degree of life and activity ascribed to the dead, and with a difference of religious principles it has nothing to do. As a matter of fact, even on the alleged older view of Sheol the dead are so wholly deprived of energy and influence as to exclude every idea of their worship by the living. Grüneisen has convincingly shown the incongruousness between the general Old Testament view of Sheol and the theory of ancestor-worship, although he falls into the same mistake as Charles, viz. of finding in Gen. 2:7 the view that the soul does not survive death. Only according to him this is not the later doctrine, it is the general and original teaching of the Old Testament. And the popular belief about Sheol and the shades were inconsistent with it.

Another point in regard to which the enlargement claimed for the new edition might have been expected to show itself concerns the antiquity of the promissory (Messianic) eschatology and of the cosmical framework of the eschatological expectations in general. These appear in accordance with the modern theory as after-developments. But Gunkel, Gressmann and others have presented some very weighty arguments in support of the opposite view, and if their conclusions are correct, the whole scheme of development above outlined and almost conventionally followed by the Wellhausen-School will need considerable revision. Here again no fault could be found with the writer, if after due presentation of the evidence he chose to adhere to his original conviction. But Dr. Charles does not raise the question at issue anywhere. Throughout the discussion only casual references to Gunkel occur, e.g. pp. 182, 198. On p. 189 we read about the "cosmological myths" in Gen 1-3 and of other elements of a similar nature preserved in the prophets. From the next page we learn that "in later Judaism these cosmological myths were transformed into eschatological expectations." And a little later this is qualified by the statement that "this transformation of primitive myth into eschatological

expectation was already known to the prophets at all events in poetical form.” That under these vague and easy statements a far-reaching problem, involving the whole development-hypothesis with which the writer is identified, hides itself, no uninformed reader would be led to surmise. Practically the author treats the controversy as non-existent. After what Gressmann has written, one is surprised to find on p. 99 the following statement: “In Zephaniah the judgment appears for the first time to be universal. Its universal scope is the necessary corollary to the Monotheistic faith of the prophet.” We believe that the number of Old Testament scholars ready to subscribe to this statement at the present day is considerable less than it was in 1899, when the first edition appeared. There is an increasing recognition of the fact that much of the wider eschatology is older than the eighth century, and therefore cannot be explained as the product of the ethical monotheism of the prophets of that period. Either the monotheism of which that eschatology is claimed to be the correlate must be older likewise, or no real connection between it and ethical monotheism exists. In the latter case the universalistic, cosmical setting of the earlier eschatology will have to be explained from Babylonian influence. Dr. Charles, who is prevented by his general position, from adopting the former view, should have at least made clear on what grounds he rejects the other side of the alternative.

By far the most valuable, and we may add the most reliable, part of the work is that which deals with the apocryphal and apocalyptic literature. Here the writer is an acknowledged authority, and we can only be thankful to him for the illuminating way in which he has presented to us the essential points and the great lines of development in the confusing mass of phenomena. In view of his long preoccupation with the subject, it can hardly create surprise that the author magnifies the value of this literature for the student of biblical eschatology. His praise of it, not merely of its eschatological teaching, but also of the ethical content of some of its documents, and that in pointed contrast to the Old Testament, is so generous, that we do not see how it leaves room for any canonical distinction between this literature and the recognized Hebrew Scriptures. In this connection the author attaches no blame whatever to the pseudonymity of most of these writings. He offers for it the well-known excuse that in those days the modern conception of literary property was entirely unknown. We fail to see how this covers the point. The case is not one of appropriating the work of others as a literary product, but of usurping the authority of others as a moral asset. And the new hypothesis which the author brings forward to explain this feature of the apocalyptic writings is found to accentuate most painfully the moral aspect of the matter, and insofar to discount the force of the conventional excuse. According to Dr. Charles the pseudonymity arose from the absolute control which legalism with its doctrine of the completeness and finality of the law as a rule of faith and practice had gained over the congregation. This state of affairs made it necessary, if any new truth was to be presented, to introduce it under the auspices of primeval religious personages, so that its acceptance might not seem to be in contravention to the monopoly of the law. This amounts to saying, that the writers gained for their views a hearing under the guise of pseudonymity which they knew could not be accorded to it had they stood back of them with their own persons. In doing this they committed a fraud, not to be sure upon Enoch or Moses, but upon the representatives of legalism, whose control they dared not openly to dispute. And it is difficult to understand how the latter could be so naive as to be taken in by this palpable disguise of the pseudepigraphical writers. Whether the author’s new explanation of the phenomenon, be successful or not, at any rate it ought to have led him to tone down somewhat his high estimate of the literature in question.

The discussion of the New Testament Eschatology covers much less space than that of the

intercanonical period. Considerable of it skims lightly on the surface. In regard to the teaching of our Lord, which the writer does not take special pains to separate from that of the synoptical gospels, his standpoint is opposed to that of the extreme eschatological school. He recognizes the presence in Jesus' teaching of the idea of a present, spiritual kingdom. The evidence however adduced in support of this view will need some sifting. E.g. when the opening message of our Lord's ministry to the effect that the kingdom is *at hand* is appealed to, the author overlooks, that the extreme eschatologists use the very form of this message as an argument on their side, on the ground that a kingdom at hand is not a present kingdom. Dr. Charles also seems to think that our Lord began with the idea of the present kingdom pure and simple, and added to this the eschatological expectation as an afterthought, when his experience had shown Him that the optimistic forecast of a gradual, uninterrupted development of the present kingdom could not be realized. This is a construction based exclusively on the fact, that what the writer considers the earliest sayings of Jesus contain no explicit reference to the eschatological aspect of the kingdom. But, even if the question of criticism were discounted, it would remain an argument from mere silence. The author does not deny that our Lord expected a new heaven and a new earth as the scene of the perfect kingdom. The question is pertinent how He could have possibly conceived otherwise than by way of catastrophe of the creation of this final environment for the kingdom. On this point the writers are not lacking, who make the development of Jesus' mind move in precisely the opposite direction, viz., from the eschatological to the present kingdom. And it does not appear that they have any greater difficulty than the advocates of Charles' view in arranging the chronology of the sayings to suit their theory.

The author agrees with the extreme eschatological school in one point. He ascribes to Jesus in his later teaching the view, that the consummation of the kingdom would take place within the lifetime of that generation. The possibility of interpreting the sayings pertaining to this head of a spiritual advent to the church is not considered, although in other connections the actual occurrence of such a way of speaking in the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse is admitted. While conceding that Jesus here held a mistaken view, Dr. Charles strives to minimize the importance of the mistake. It was a mere question of time which did not touch the essence of the matter. But here once more it might have been worth while to take some account of the contention of the hyper-eschatologists to the opposite effect. On their view not merely the fallibility of our Lord on a chronological question, but the character of His ethics is involved, not to speak of the bearing which the subject has acquired on the question of our Lord's mental balance.

In other respects the author's tendency is to use the ethical or sub-ethical character of the eschatological sayings of Jesus as a test of their genuineness. We notice in this connection that he eliminates from the great eschatological discourse the so-called "Small Apocalypse," considering it with Weiffenbach and others a purely Jewish document. The grounds on which this is done are those usually adduced. In our opinion they are wholly insufficient to bear out the view in question, when once the unwarranted idea is abandoned, that Jesus could have no eschatological interest that was not motivated ethically and spiritually in the most direct manner. If interest in eschatology is not in itself a culpable thing, why not allow for it in Jesus, who was a true man in this respect also. It is hardly self-consistent when the author argues on the one hand that the signs of the end enumerated in the small Apocalypse cannot come from Jesus, because He declares that no one knows the time of the end, and that it comes by surprise,—a declaration to be taken in the most absolute sense, and yet on the other hand appears to find no conflict between this declaration of absolute ignorance and the

positive declaration that the parousia will come within the time of the then living generation.

The discussion of the Pauline eschatology is largely subordinated to the development-theory which Charles holds in common with Teichmann, Pfleiderer and other recent writers. Four periods are distinguished, the first represented by 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the second by 1 Corinthians, the third by 2 Corinthians and Romans, the fourth by Philippians, Colossians and Ephesians. We do not believe that on the author's own premises, the necessity of separating 1 Thessalonians from 1 Corinthians, i.e. the first period from the second, can be demonstrated, for Dr. Charles does not believe that 1 Thess. teaches a resurrection of the unchanged body, as other advocates of the development-theory assume. Nor can it be maintained that the eschatology is in 1 Thess. unpneumatic, for, if on the one hand the body is to be changed, and if on the other hand the dead are νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ, there is no other conception that will account for these two features, than the Pauline conception of the union between believers and Christ in the Spirit. As to 2 Thess. the only thing to mark this off from the later Epistles would be the doctrine of the Antichrist. The difference as regards 1 Corinthians would amount merely to this that here Paul is silent on the subject, for certainly nothing is said here that excludes it. The case is somewhat different with Romans for, here, as Charles urges, the optimistic perspective of Chap. 11 clashes with the pessimistic outlook of the Antichrist-expectation of 2 Thess. 2. But the writer overlooks that according to the latter chapter itself the Antichrist-movement spreads itself and gains force on the basis of an extended apostasy, which apostasy, to judge of it in the light of other New Testament statements, takes place within the church. Accordingly there is no contradiction here either.

The warrant to posit a third distinct period depends entirely on the exegesis of 2 Cor. 5:1-10. Of course there is an interpretation which finds here the prospect of the endowment with the resurrection-body at the moment of death. But many prominent exegetes interpret the passage quite differently, and there are some most serious objections to the exegesis espoused by Charles. Foremost among these stands the fact that on the basis of it that which Paul professes to shrink from, and which he hopes to escape by survival till the parousia, would have to be the momentary dissolution of the body. Now as a matter of fact the Apostle tells us in so many words that it is not this *momentary experience*, not the *articulus mortis*, but the *state of nakedness* from which he recoils. Dr. Charles does not enter into the question exegetically at all. He simply quotes the pericope, as if its meaning were so plain as to obtrude itself on the mere reading of it. The reader will do well to compare on this whole question the recent monograph of Deissner entitled *Auferstehungshoffnung und Pneumagedanke bei Paulus*, noticed in the October-number for 1913 of this Review.

The main peculiarity of the fourth period consists in this that Paul makes the evil angel-spirits the subject of redemption. The same view is, as a possible alternative, suggested by the writer, in connection with the two well-known Petrine passages. And throughout the author lays great stress on what he calls the "moralizing of Sheol" as the only legitimate issue of the trend of biblical eschatology. He does not hesitate to intimate that the possibility of repentance in Sheol must either lead to conversion or to final annihilation. Every other conception of Sheol, or Gehenna, in other words the doctrine of eternal punishment he stigmatizes as unethical. Where it occurs in the New Testament it is a Judaistic survival. We do not believe that the biblical development previous to the New Testament can be shown to tend towards the doctrine of a future probation. To be sure Sheol is moralized, in comparison with the primitive pagan conception of it as a place indifferent to ethical

distinctions, but in this sense Gehenna as the scene of eternal punishment is most intensely ethical. On the other hand if "ethical" be made to mean a state which admits of repentance, then there is nothing to show that such a moralizing was contemplated by any biblical writer, and Dr. Charles' advocacy of it is plainly not of a historical but of a theological nature, it being in line with his semi-pelagian predilections. If it were not for these he would scarcely have handled the Petrine passages and the statements in Colossians after such an easy and summary fashion. It is positively painful to read on how slender grounds the author finds even in Jesus' teaching the intimations of repentance in the future state. Every student of the subject knows that here also a great deal has been said on the other side and that not merely by believers of the doctrine of eternal retribution. The view that even after the final judgment there is no absolute finality runs directly contrary to and means the destruction of eschatology at its core.

We are glad to notice, that apart from the well-known passage in the Apocalypse, Dr. Charles finds no Chiliasm in the New Testament not in Acts 3, nor in 1 Thess. 4, nor even in 1 Cor. 15. He rightly points out that the whole trend of the New Testament, especially of the teaching of our Lord and of Paul, points away from such a doctrine and leaves no room for it.

Our chief criticism of the treatment of the New Testament would be that it fails to raise and answer the fundamental question to what extent the development of soteriological teaching in general proceeded on the basis of eschatology, and therefore partook of the character of an anticipation in the present of what was originally expected in the eschatological period. In bringing this question once more to the front the hyper-eschatologists, Schweitzer foremost among them, have rendered a real service. But our author does not touch upon this problem. For Schweitzer in particular he seems to have little respect, to judge from the following statement in the preface to the second edition: "Since Schweitzer's eschatological studies show no knowledge of original documents and hardly any of first hand works on the documents, and since further they make no fresh contribution to the subject, no notice is taken of him in this edition." One feels tempted to suggest that Schweitzer's case would not be the first one in which remarkable intuition into the meaning of historical developments had been evinced on the basis of a merely second hand acquaintance with the sources. We doubt not Schweitzer could learn a great deal from Charles, but that does not prove that Charles can learn nothing from Schweitzer.

The Drew Lecture for 1912 summarizes in a very lucid way the views elaborated in the large volume grouping them around the idea of immortality. Its perusal will be found helpful both before and after the study of the larger work.