

Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology

On Albert Schweitzer

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3. Themes

Eschatology

Schweitzer put eschatology back on the map in biblical studies. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906) exposed the limitations of the many attempts to probe the life of Jesus that detached him from the cultural context of Judaism in the ancient world and thus ignored the eschatological expectation of the Kingdom of God in the ministry and message of Jesus. Schweitzer, in the course of his review of German New Testament scholarship, mediated the little-known conclusions of Johannes Weiss about the eschatological character of Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom of God to a wider audience within German scholarship. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* attracted the attention of the two most influential New Testament scholars in England, F.C. Burkitt (1864-1935) of Cambridge and W. H. Sanday (1843-1920) of Oxford, soon after it appeared in German. Schweitzer gained impact, because his book was translated into English within four years of its publication in Germany. His views became accessible to an English language audience very quickly, unlike other seminal German scholars. For example, Ernst Troeltsch's *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* was published in German in 1912 and was not translated into English until 1931. *The Epistle to the Romans* by Karl Barth was published in German in 1918, but had to wait fifteen years before an English edition was produced in 1933.

Mysticism

Schweitzer concluded that Jesus died a deluded prophet of a supernatural Kingdom of God that never broke into history. He was, therefore, faced with a problem. How to account for the ongoing devotion to Jesus Christ, the missionary work of Paul the Apostle, and the continuation of the Christian Church beyond the life of Christ down to the present age? Schweitzer replicated the kind of methodology he applied to the Life of Jesus studies in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* to the interpreters of Saint Paul in *Paul and His Interpreters* (1911). Schweitzer identified Paul as the one who solved the dilemma created for Christians by the death of Jesus and the non-appearance of the Kingdom of God that he proclaimed by means of a Christ mysticism that became central to Christian belief and experience.

Ethics

Schweitzer was challenged by the ethical demand of Jesus and what this may mean for Christians today and especially for his own life. Schweitzer came to embody the principle of self-denying service for others in his decision to train as a doctor and embark upon a new vocation as a medical missionary in Africa. The ethical principle of 'reverence for life' became

the watchword for his own commitment to act for others and the message that he increasingly sought to communicate to a world seemingly marching towards atomic warfare.

4. Outline of Major Works

The Quest of the Historical Jesus

The Quest of the Historical Jesus (originally titled *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*) reviewed the development of Life of Jesus research in German scholarship from Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) in the eighteenth century to William Wrede (1859-1906) at the turn of the twentieth century. Schweitzer characterized the quest of the historical Jesus as German scholarship's search for the truth whatever it may be and wherever it may lead. The Quest of the Historical Jesus is narrated in heroic terms as a splendid endeavor that has made a major contribution to the sum of human knowledge.

Schweitzer noted that Luther was not interested in comprehending Jesus within his first-century Jewish context or resolving difficulties and inconsistencies such as the place of the cleansing of the Temple in the ministry of Jesus. The Enlightenment created the climate within which Reimarus might question the New Testament tradition about Jesus of Nazareth. Reimarus was not an objective observer. He sought to discredit Christianity by demonstrating that it rested upon flawed historical foundations. According to Reimarus Jesus expected the people of Israel to rise up under his leadership, but his fellow countrymen did not. Jesus died as a failure. The disciples responded to the failure of Jesus' mission by reinterpreting their Messianic hope in future supernatural terms and proclaiming that he had been 'raised', and waited for the Messiah to appear. In the hands of Reimarus history erodes traditional theology. Schweitzer commended Reimarus for recognizing that Jesus lived in an apocalyptic environment.

Schweitzer portrayed Reimarus as initiating The Quest of the Historical Jesus. The work of David Friedrich Strauss represented a decisive turning point in Life of Jesus research. *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* appeared in 1835 and strove to reinterpret Christianity in line with rationalism and speculative Hegelian philosophy. Miracles were ruled out on a priori grounds. Strauss was especially effective in dismantling rationalized accounts of miracles. Strauss applied mythological explanations to the Gospels. He thus followed in the footsteps of biblical scholars that had applied mythological explanations to the Old Testament. A generation elapsed between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. Enough time passed for historical material to get mixed up with myth. Schweitzer concurred with Strauss, in part, "No sooner is a great man dead than legend is busy with his life" (Schweitzer, 1906, 79). No doubt, according to Schweitzer, mythical material ended up in such stories as the feeding of the multitudes. However, the existence of such stories in the Synoptic tradition cannot simply be explained by reference to Old Testament stories such as the manna in the desert. Such episodes in the life of Jesus must have been based on some kind of fact even if it is obscure to us now. Identifying the source of the form in which a story is told in the New Testament, for example,

under the influence of an Old Testament narrative, does not account for the origin of the event. Strauss overstated his case.

Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1865) portrayed Jesus as a timeless figure devoid of vitality. His account was a classic expression of the liberal Lives of Jesus that Schweitzer reacted against so strongly in his reading of the Synoptic Gospels. Schweitzer contended that the liberal Lives of Jesus made Jesus approximate to the psychology, values, and outlook of the authors that wrote about him. Jesus simply became a reflection of the scholars examining his life. Schweitzer believed Reimarus had been correct to locate Jesus in the context of first-century Judaism. The liberal Lives of Jesus were essentially unhistorical accounts of Jesus. A truly historic understanding of Jesus had to see him in the context he inhabited. From this perspective Schweitzer sketched out his own distinctive understanding of the historical Jesus.

Schweitzer felt that the fruit of historical scholarship, exemplified in Weiss' recovery of the eschatological perspective on Jesus, challenged the theologies current in his own generation. His review of *Life of Jesus* research called into question the liberal portrait of Jesus as an ethical personality who established the Kingdom of God.

Schweitzer's outline of Jesus stressed the distance between the historical Jesus and Schweitzer's own generation. Jesus believed he was the Messiah and expected God to intervene in history and bring the world to an end in the course of his ministry. The expected end did not materialize, but Jesus bore the suffering destined to sweep over Israel and the world. The personality of Jesus is the link between the historical life of Jesus and Christianity. Jesus summons people to follow him in changing the world. Ironically, the failure of Jesus' hopes when God did not intervene ultimately freed Jesus from the constraints of a Jewish worldview. Schweitzer concluded that Jesus can never be known by means of historical research, but his words can inspire people in any age. Ironically, the strangeness of Jesus makes it possible to capture the ultimate significance of Jesus. Schweitzer was impressed by the will Jesus exercised in seeking to effect a radical transformation in life in the present, to precipitate the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, by offering up his life to suffer death on a cross. As Mark Chapman has observed, commenting on Schweitzer's theology, "The ethical will of Christ persisted through time and could enthral the believer in intensity of desire for the Kingdom. Thus, even though Jesus may have been deluded in his plot to bring about God's Kingdom, his will for transformation could still captivate the individual and inspire ethical service" (Chapman 2001, 76). Schweitzer embodied this outlook on Jesus and the ethical response demanded by him in the decision he made to work as a medical missionary in Africa.

Schweitzer's achievement was remarkable. He reviewed, summarized, and critiqued a vast corpus of research into the *Life of Jesus*. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* is significant for several reasons. First, Schweitzer exposed the unhistorical character of a great deal of the *Life of Jesus* research. Too often the views of modern men had been imposed upon the thinking of a first-century Palestinian Jew. Second, Schweitzer located Jesus in his first-century Jewish context. Schweitzer believed that the historical Jesus could only be properly understood within the world of apocalyptic Judaism. In this respect he builds upon the research and findings of

Johannes Weiss. A great part of Schweitzer's significance is that he mediated a controversial development in German New Testament studies to an English speaking audience. Third, he rescued eschatology, the doctrine of the last things, from the margins of biblical studies and placed it in the center of scholarly discourse about the New Testament. A consequence of this shift in biblical studies is that the path was cleared to assign eschatology a renewed significance in the field of systematic theology. This outcome would be surprising from Schweitzer's point of view, because he believed that Jesus' eschatological perspective had effectively been discredited by the non-occurrence of the supernatural events he had announced in his preaching. Fourth, Schweitzer illustrates that what one believes to be true historically shapes the content of the faith one professes. Thus not believing in the resurrection of Jesus has consequences for the kind of Christianity professed and practiced. Ultimately, as his biblical studies and theological reflection developed beyond the publication of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* Schweitzer adopted a Christ-mysticism and moved increasingly in the direction of espousing a philosophy of 'reverence for life'. Fifth, Schweitzer does not escape from the very kind of rhetoric that he condemns so effectively on page after page in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*:

The Baptist appears and cries: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign. (Schweitzer, *Ibid.*, 370-71)

Schweitzer's rhetoric conveys notes of tragedy and irony in the death of Jesus upon the cross. According to Schweitzer Jesus' mangled body is still hanging on the implacable wheel of history. The image is one of an irresistible force that overwhelmed Jesus of Nazareth in history and still holds him in its power. Yet, simultaneously, this event constitutes a victory and a reign, since the force of Jesus' personality continues to echo down the centuries to the present. In spite of his death, as a prophet who fails to see the eschatological hope he proclaimed realized in his lifetime, Jesus continues to exercise an influence on humanity and the course of history. Schweitzer portrayed Jesus as trying to force the hand of history to usher in the Messianic Kingdom, an interpretation that has been vigorously contested. As Stephen Neil has pointed out, a servant of God in the biblical tradition does not attempt to bend history to serve his desired ends and there is no evidence that Jesus tried to do this (Neil, 1964, 199-200). Such an effort is entirely out of keeping with the Hebrew understanding of God at work in history.