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Eschatology As a Determining Factor In Schweitzer's Lebensanschauung

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"This paper was written under the direction of"

Carl J. Peter

(Fr. Carl J. Peter)

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INTRODUCTION

In attempting to discern the meaning, matter, and influence of eschatology in Schweitzer's view of life, it is important to bear in mind that we are dealing with an ambiguous term together with the thinking of a somewhat dualistic, paradoxical personality.

In view of this consideration, the results of such an attempt will hinge closely upon two basic elements, one of which is a concise definition of terms as they relate to New Testament studies in general, and to Schweitzer's viewpoint specifically. The other is the need to see Schweitzer, in a sense, set on the scales of our time, in the full meaning of his individuality. This is essential because, for the general public, he is the jungle doctor of Lambaréné, while in the eyes of the theology student, Schweitzer appears as the man who more or less liquidated nineteenth-century liberalism and offered to twentieth-century theology its "point of departure."¹ Taken in isolation however, either approach greatly narrows the view of the total personality involved, because his work in Lambaréné can be understood only in relationship to his Lebensanschauung, his dynamic view of life as a whole, inherent in which are his theology and ethics, and vice versa.

¹James M. Robinson, quoted in The Quest of the Historical Jesus Introduction, (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. xviii.

I. CLARIFICATION OF TERMINOLOGY AND SUBSEQUENT RELATIONSHIP TO SCHWEITZER'S UNDERSTANDING.

The leitmotif of Schweitzer's method of investigation into the historical life of Jesus is eschatology. James M. Robinson makes it quite clear in his introduction to The Quest of the Historical Jesus that this issue was Schweitzer's major criterion as he presented the history of research from Reimarus to Wrede.² The term itself, as such, has been in use only since the nineteenth-century. Etymologically, it is derived from the Greek (τὸ ἔσχατον), 'to eschaton'; it is the theological doctrine of "the last things."³ Biblical eschatology is often subdivided into three areas: personal, collective, and cosmic. Modern scholarship is divided as to whether the term 'eschatology' should be used in a restricted or a broader sense. Those who insist upon a radical cleavage between the present age and the next, understand eschatology in the narrow sense; while those who employ the term in the broader sense insist that eschatology "means a future which lies outside history, in the sense that it will not be determined by historical factors."⁴

Schweitzer's own theory, known as 'consistent' eschatology, or as he himself called it, "thoroughgoing" eschatology, leans toward a narrow interpretation wherein he insisted that

²Ibid., p. xvi.

³Karl Rahner, H. Vorgrimler, Theological Dictionary, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p. 149.

⁴J. L. McKenzie, "Royal Messianism," Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Volume 19, 1957, p. 49.

Jesus considered himself as an eschatological, apocalyptical figure. Schweitzer was thoroughly convinced that Jesus' conviction about the imminence of the Kingdom of God could not be ignored. According to Schweitzer, Jesus thought himself (quite wrongly) to be the Messiah; he was convinced that when he sent the disciples on their missionary tour of the Galilean hamlets, the Kingdom was soon to come, (again mistakenly). Then, when the end time did not come as Jesus had expected, he tried to force the issue by his own death. Thus, for Schweitzer, eschatology must stand in the central point of historical Jesus research, and its task is to discover to what extent the eschatological thought of Jesus is determined by his environment, which is filled with eschatological expectations, and to what extent it transcends it.

Though notably a scholar in several fields, Schweitzer's main intellectual interest was initially theology, and his basic theme that of research into the life of Jesus; which he prodigiously pursued in The Quest of the Historical Jesus, a task which took him four years to write.⁵ From his autobiography, we learn that predestination to scholarly research into the life

⁵ Robert Payne, The Three Worlds of Albert Schweitzer, (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1957), p. 84.

of Jesus became evident in his eighth year when, at his request, his father gave him a copy of the New Testament.⁶ From then on Schweitzer studied it zealously, and scrutinized its contents critically.

Throughout his youth, there is a consistency in the unchanging features of Schweitzer's spiritual physiognomy, which can be clearly discerned in a definite determination of theme and central thesis. In fact, it was in accordance with this particular characteristic that, on a rest day during the autumn manoeuvres, spent in the Alsatian village of Guggenheim, Schweitzer, then a nineteen-year-old theological student, and temporarily a raw recruit, discovered the golden key to 'eschatological interpretation', as outlined above.⁷ And with its aid, he was to attempt during the course of the subsequent years, whether directly or indirectly, to resolve the riddles left unresolved by nineteenth-century research in the life of Jesus.

II. INFLUENCE ON THE LIBERAL QUEST FOR THE JESUS OF HISTORY.

Schweitzer was well aware that the liberal theologians would not readily give credence to his eschatological interpretation of the life of Jesus. Perhaps the most vivid description of the effect upon the world of theological thought produced by The Quest of the Historical Jesus, that is, aside from J. M.

⁶ Albert Schweitzer, Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 4.

⁷ Werner Picht, The Life and Thought of Albert Schweitzer, (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 40.

Robinson's assessment mentioned earlier, is that which was given by Dr. Micklem, Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford. He said: "The publication of Dr. Schweitzer's book (The Quest) was like the explosion of a vast bomb in the theological world. It finally blew up the nineteenth-century liberalistic interpretation of the life and teaching of our Lord,"⁸ By this he re-emphasized the fact that Schweitzer marks the end of the old quest.

Schweitzer's work in exposing the weaknesses of most of the nineteenth-century attempts to study the historical Jesus, forced New Testament scholars in his day and thereafter, to consider more seriously, the problem of the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus. In his view, the principal goal of the liberal quest up to this time was to study Jesus with modern methods, and so make him intelligible in a strictly human fashion to the modern mind. Liberal Protestantism tried, Schweitzer maintained, to rediscover "the historical Jesus" as a man who had lived in a certain period of history, under certain political and social conditions. Above all, in Schweitzer's opinion, it attempted to be strictly scientific, which was taken to mean rejecting everything that might be attributed to the supernatural or that smacked of superstition, especially miracles and any

references to the Second Coming or last judgment, which undeniably loom largely in the Gospel accounts and Logia of Jesus. Schweitzer describes this point in his own words:

The earliest representatives of the historical science which busied itself with research into the life of Jesus found themselves obliged to struggle for permission to undertake the task of establishing by purely historical methods, the existence of Jesus . . . They make it their special endeavor to explain all the miracles of Jesus as natural events misunderstood by the multitude, and thus they try to put an end to all belief in the miraculous.⁹

The essence of Schweitzer's approach - on the contrary - sees Jesus as a man who had lived in the generation that believed in these things and had actually believed in them himself. In The Quest of the Historical Jesus, Schweitzer writes that:

The general conception of the Kingdom was first rightly grasped by Johannes Weiss . . . (in whose footsteps Schweitzer followed) . . . All modern ideas, Weiss insists, must be eliminated from it . . . we then arrive at a Kingdom of God which is wholly future; as is indeed implied by the petition of

⁹Albert Schweitzer, Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) p. 45.

the Lord's prayer, "Thy Kingdom Come." Being still to come, it is at present purely supra-mundane.¹⁰

Also, in his book, The Mystery of the Kingdom of God,¹¹ Schweitzer deals specifically with the three mysteries mentioned earlier which are embodied in the central Mystery of the Kingdom of God, which he believes were in the mind of Jesus. This Dr. Schweitzer considers decisively central to his whole position and seems to explain for him all of the eschatological sayings of Jesus. In explaining the three 'mysteries', he begins with Matthew 10:23, which is the first and main text for Schweitzer in telling what he believes was the great expectation of Jesus. He then continues to the second, the mystery of the Messiahship, based on the coincidence of the phrase "who is to come" in Matthew 11:3 and 14. From this he proceeds to the third mystery, that of the Passion wherein Jesus came to the conclusion from Is. 53 that as Messiah, he must first die for his people, expecting in that way to bring about his own Second Coming and the Kingdom of God. Schweitzer believed that he had solved the difficulties he had found in the liberal interpretation of the historical Jesus. Once satisfied that he had succeeded in solving the riddles posed by

10

Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 239.

11

Albert Schweitzer, The Mystery of the Kingdom of God; the Secret of Jesus' Messiahship and Passion, (New York: Macmillan, 1950).

the Liberal quest, the question lost its formerly central significance for him. Schweitzer's blunt conclusion is: either there is no historical Jesus at all, or he is a man of his own time. By this he means: "This Jesus is far greater than the one conceived in modern terms: he is really a supermundane personality."¹²

Schweitzer further sums up the quest for Jesus in saying:

It set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found him it could bring him straight into our time as a Teacher and Saviour. It loosed the bands by which He had been riveted to the stony rocks of ecclesiastical doctrine, and rejoiced to see life and movement coming into the figure once more and the historical Jesus advancing as it seemed to meet it. But he does not stay; he passes by our time and returns to his own He returned to his own time, not owing to the application of any historical ingenuity, but by the same inevitable necessity by which the liberated pendulum returned to its original position.¹³

The validity of this summary, however, does not depend on whether Schweitzer is right in his assumption that logical eschatology resolves all the riddles of the Gospel accounts. Yet,

¹²

Ibid., p. 251

¹³

Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 397.

in clarification of his 'logic', Schweitzer held that: "Following the clear statements of the two oldest Gospels, I confront the untenable explanation of the life of Jesus which has hitherto held the field, with the explanation which represents him as determined in his thought, speech, and action by his expectation of a speedy end to the world, and of the supernatural Messianic Kingdom which would thereupon be revealed. This consistently eschatological solution of the problems of the life of Jesus I work out in detail in The Quest of the Historical Jesus."¹⁴ His solution, however, raises many questions. One of these is the purpose of Jesus' teachings. If he was primarily concerned with establishing a supernatural, perfect Kingdom, why should he bother to give ethical instructions like the Sermon on the Mount? Because the liberal school esteemed Jesus as a great ethical teacher, Schweitzer recognized this problem and gave his answer by calling such teaching "interim ethics," i.e., for the time being, until the Kingdom should come. For Schweitzer, Jesus was not primarily a teacher. The outstanding characteristic of the historical Jesus as Schweitzer sees him is his greatness. For Schweitzer, Jesus stands for a unique, spiritually and ethically strong personality who has served as a shining example. This insight also answers another problem raised by Schweitzer's theory, namely, that of Jesus' alleged mistakes. He deals with this in the final chapter of the Quest

wherein he says:

The mistake was to suppose that Jesus could come to mean more to our time by entering into it as a man like ourselves. That is not possible. First, because such a Jesus never existed. . .¹⁵

Therefore, to those who would claim that he has destroyed faith in Jesus, he replies that the Jesus he destroyed never really existed except in the inventive minds of the liberal theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. Instead, he claims to have loosed Jesus from the wallows of false interpretation and restored him to his rightful place. But, needless to say, the Jesus of Schweitzer is difficult to grasp.

III. THE INFLUENCE OF SCHWEITZER'S QUEST ON HIS LATER LIFE.

There is little doubt that Schweitzer intended his life of Jesus to be definitive and to once and for all put an end to a seemingly senseless quest. When he seemed to have discovered the historical Jesus, Schweitzer found that he was still, and perhaps more than ever, an 'unknown,' to whose secret neither knowledge nor wisdom could readily provide the key, but only the act of surrender. As Gerald McKnight points out:

The important but little understood fact that emerged from The Quest was that Schweitzer believed Jesus' expectation of the end of the

world pointed to an ethic; that we should be prepared for the day of judgement while observing strict rules of conduct and avoiding war, revolution, and even divorce. It led to his embrace of the ethical as the fabric of his own experiment in Christ-like living, the rule which was to govern more than fifty years of service at Lambarène. Out of it grew Reverence for Life, originally invisible, later realized and recognized as encompassing the whole practical ideal.¹⁶

Schweitzer's Lebensanschauung, his attempt to understand the meaning of his own life and to likewise find value and meaning in the life of mankind was ultimately the result of his studies and reflection on the life of Jesus as well as his convictions on ethics. In his own words: "I live my life in God, in the mysterious divine personality which I do not know as such in the world but only experience as a mysterious will within myself."¹⁷ His belief was strongly that the ethics of Jesus culminated in the demand that his disciples should be different from the world, because they lived in expectation of the imminent end of the world. This "being different from the world" Schweitzer maintained, expresses itself in a complete self-surrender, an infinite sense of responsibility towards all

16

Gerald McKnight, Verdict on Schweitzer, (New York: The John Day Company, 1964), p. 188.

17

Albert Schweitzer, Civilization and Ethics, (London: Adam and Black, 1949), p. xiv.

life in the optimistic expectation that the "Spirit of God" will make all human thought subject to himself.¹⁸

It was essentially in support of humanity as well as a result of these convictions that prompted Schweitzer to sail for the African jungle in 1913, not long after the publication of The Quest. Dr. George Seaver, his biographer, summed up his definition of the historical Jesus and its effect on his development in this way:

It is the delineation of a figure, stark, august, tremendous - like the figure of Epstein's 'Christ'. And so he would have it left. He would not invest it with any theological nimbus to veil its heroic grandeur, he would not adorn it with any picturesque fancies to blur its sharp-edged outline. And having etched it thus he turns away, away from the historical Jesus of his own age, to find him as he is in ours - not in the study or the cloister, but in the field of self-renouncing action in lowly service to the least of his brethren.¹⁹

As Schweitzer sees it, therefore, Jesus' only significance for people is that through his prophecy of the coming of the supernatural Kingdom of God, he has shown that love must be the driving force if we are to promote that which is our purpose in living. What really matters to Schweitzer, then,

18

Oskar Kraus, Albert Schweitzer, His Work and His Philosophy, (London: Adam and Black, 1944), p. 38.

19

George Seaver, Albert Schweitzer, The Man and His Mind, (London: Adam and Black, 1949) in McKnight, Verdict on Schweitzer, p. 189.

is the ideology in Jesus' life, not the reality. As he sees it, the way in which we can derive benefit from Jesus' eschatological view is by working to promote the Kingdom of God here on earth. In one of his later writings Schweitzer makes this comment:

I find it no light task to follow my vocation, to put pressure on the Christian Faith to reconcile itself in all sincerity with historical truth. But I have devoted myself to it with joy, because I am certain that truthfulness in all things belongs to the spirit of Jesus. The true understanding of Jesus is the understanding of will acting on will. The true relation to Him is to be taken possession of by Him. Christian piety of any and every sort is valuable only so far as it means the surrender of our will to His.²⁰

With Schweitzer, such a surrender is a call to decision. His life reinforces the interpretation that he has given to Jesus, especially the eschatological element in his thought. In Schweitzer's viewpoint, Jesus' messianic supernatural kingdom must be replaced by faith and work, as a result of which this kingdom will come about if we obey the ethical instinct that is implanted in us all. In his own words he emphasizes this concept by saying: "What Christianity needs is that it shall be filled to overflowing with the spirit of Jesus, and in the strength of that shall spiritualize itself into a living religion of inwardness and such. . . What has been passing for

Christianity during these nineteen centuries is merely a beginning, full of weaknesses and mistakes, not a full-grown Christianity springing from the spirit of Jesus."²¹

Schweitzer does not believe in a personal God, but in a Jesus' Mysticism, i. e., a divine essence of being. For him, Jesus stands in history as a symbol of the gospel of love and is therefore timeless. This strong ethical spirit of Jesus stimulates the will-to-live implanted in us, and thereby makes it possible for us here in this world to work for the Kingdom of God that he 'thought' had a supernatural character. These views of Jesus' achievements also form the foundations of Schweitzer's views on religion, the latter's only significance, according to him, is that of "being man," purely and simply man, in the significance which Jesus attached to that. Even though Schweitzer has an almost mystical attachment to Jesus, his writings show clearly that he does not believe in Jesus as the "Son Of God," and he also does not reckon with any life after this one. From this, one can ascertain, without doubt, that Schweitzer's approach to life and the entire mystery which that embraces, is dualistic both philosophically and theologically. This inconsistency in Schweitzer's outlook is evident in his interpretation of the Weltanschauung of Jesus, and also in his statement on his own Weltanschauung. Oskar Kraus writes that "Schweitzer declares his Weltanschauung to be in essence

²¹

Ibid., p. 40.

identical with that of Jesus and yet almost in the same breath maintains that his is optimistic while that of Jesus is pessimistic!"²² It is not our purpose here to analyse in detail the inconsistencies which characterize Schweitzer's approach to a life-view. Such a task would involve a much more lengthy discussion. However, after studying briefly Schweitzer's own writings, one gets the strong impression that certain conflicting forces have been at work within him right from his early childhood, and have resulted in a dualistic attitude to the concept and mystery of God. For Schweitzer, God is a mysterious force that manifests itself in us as 'will-to-live.' If man obeys the call implanted in him, he will help to fulfill the purpose of life which is to promote the "kingdom of God." According to Schweitzer, furthermore, both God and the kingdom of God are only to be found inside people themselves. Schweitzer, in developing his theme of "reverence for life," nurtured a deeply religious surrender to all that lives. He never addressed himself to God as an abstraction, but met his God in identification with all that lives; animals, plants, and people, and held that this is the only way in which one can meet God.

His writings and works in Lambaréné show that, consciously or unconsciously, he tried to imitate the "spirit

of Jesus" in the only thing he considered needful, i. e., to practise the gospel of love, and if necessary to give his life in doing so. This has found its expression in the jungle hospital of Lambaré, and it culminated in the belief in the Kingdom of God. This impulse to serve continued to determine the whole of his subsequent life following the writing and publication of The Quest.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SCHWEITZER TODAY.

An analysis of the phenomenon of Albert Schweitzer presents a challenge for our time. The contemporary significance of him is three-fold. His theological endeavors in The Quest of the Historical Jesus erected a barrier to modernization in the investigations into the life of Jesus and forced biblical scholars to seriously think. In this event, Schweitzer was unmistakably a pioneer of the newer Gospel research undertaken in our own time. By his moralism in the sphere of practical Christian activity, Schweitzer becomes the personification of his own belief, and the representative opponent of the demoralization of our modern world, so caught up with issues of war, abortion, and other threat to life issues. As such, he stands in the center of an age of moral doubt; the paradoxical theologian, who appears now as a humanitarian moralist of our twentieth-century civilization. His single-

heartedness and simplicity amidst extraordinary scholarly aplomb undeniably attribute to the fact that there is something exciting and noteworthy about the real accomplishments and the moral grandeur of Albert Schweitzer.

In conclusion, then, it is true to say that his life was dominated by two impulses. One is a form of the ethic of love mentioned above. The other, rooted in rationalism, yet not dominated by it, rests in the very determined and systematic attempt he made to resolve the conflict between belief and knowledge which produced The Quest of the Historical Jesus. His supreme object in life, he held, was to prove the truth of these doctrines on a scientific basis.²³ A quick comparison of the thought of the eighteenth-century with our present day studies, shows that since Schweitzer's efforts, a variety of serious study and concentration has been prompted towards a solution of the problem of the quest of the Jesus of history. In this respect, Schweitzer is still with us today and the powerful impact of his thesis allows an extension of this historical survey to the present day.

23

Albert Schweitzer, Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1933), p. 114.

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