

INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding the vast amount of useful work—linguistic, documentary, historical, and expository—which has been done during the last fifty or sixty years on the contents of the New Testament in general and of the Synoptic Gospels in particular, we are still without any comprehensive and generally-satisfying account of the real purpose of Jesus in his public Ministry and the real content of his teaching. Expression has indeed been given recently to the opinion that, in view of the almost exclusive attention hitherto paid to the analytical study of the several strata of New-Testament literature and the various preparatory disciplines of higher and lower criticism, the time has now come for scholars to concentrate their efforts on interpreting the message of the New Testament as a whole.¹ No doubt such a unification would be very timely and valuable; for there is unquestionably a great oneness pervading all parts of the New Testament, and the right understanding of any individual part depends therefore in no small measure upon the right understanding of the whole. At the same time it must be remembered that the dependence is mutual, and that the endeavour to obtain a complete and systematic view of the real content of Jesus' own teaching—in distinction (so far as possible) from the interpretation put upon it by his first followers—remains in consequence a vital pre-requisite for the true understanding of the whole Christian movement. Such an endeavour ought not to be thought of as rendered hopeless or unwise either by the close intermingling of record and interpretation in the Gospels, or by the new stress which many modern theologians are laying on the objective and transcendental aspects of Christian belief. Nothing that can rightly be said along these lines alters the fact that knowledge regarding the personal character and aim of Jesus himself is in large measure attainable through a critical examination of the Gospels and is absolutely fundamental to a right interpretation of the Christian message as a whole.²

¹ Dodd, *Present Task*, 12, 16, 29-38. Dr. Dodd explicitly declines (31f.) to call the desideratum a "synthesis"; yet this term would seem to be its correct designation.

² Cf. Dodd, *Hist. and the Gosp.* 38, 163 ("... what the character of preaching at its centre must always be: it is a re-presentation of the history of Jesus").

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It must, of course, be realized that, in pursuing such an inquiry, we have continually to be on our guard against the danger of reading into the records of Jesus what we most wish to find there, and of misrepresenting by our modern constructions a body of data which are throughout both fragmentary and occasional.¹ Many long-accepted opinions regarding Jesus' personal religion, social and national outlook, and dominating object in life, have been roundly declared to be the fanciful creations of scholars and preachers unaware of their modernizing proclivities. It has, for instance, been seriously argued that, in all probability, Jesus consciously pursued no plan, purpose, or programme at all, but followed quite casually what he felt from time to time to be the leading of God's Will.² Such a plea surely indicates that the dread of "modernizing" can go too far. Account must needs be taken, not only of the wide differences between the mentality of Jesus' age and that of our own, but also of those great unities which pervade and embrace all human experience and which alone render possible any real knowledge of the past.³ In particular, it is inconceivable that one who was conscious of fulfilling the rôle of Messiah, and who frequently referred to the purposes for which he had "come", could have been without a fairly definite and conscious "object in life".⁴ As for the danger of systematically classifying his unsystematic utterances,⁵ the analogy of such a science as botany or zoology (which largely owes to its classification of unsystematic material its power to explain that material) should encourage us to believe that the danger is not very serious. The mind of Jesus was, after all, a unity; and as a human mind it presents likenesses to our own. In classifying and interpreting his utterances, therefore, while we

¹ These difficulties have been very forcibly put by Dr. H. J. Cadbury in his *Peril of Modernizing Jesus*, *passim*. Cf. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 7-9, 18; Manson, *Teaching*, 116f.; D. W. Riddle in *J.R.* xiv (1934) 154, 162, 164; *Times Lit. Suppl.* 15 Oct. 1938, 656 ("the temptation to portray the Christ more in accordance with the writer's own personal ideals than in keeping with the data . . . is one that is not easily resisted").

² Cadbury, *Peril*, 120-153, esp. 140f., 153. Cf. Schweitzer, *L.J.F.* 404 = *Quest.* 356 (J. Weiss's insight "schaffte alle 'Aktivität' auf das Reich Gottes ab, und macht Jesum zum lediglich Abwartenden").

³ Bennett, *Social Salv.* 73f. Dr. Cadbury recognizes, of course, the existence of these unities (*Peril*, 4, 31f., 48, 148f., 191); but he makes a minimal use of them (e.g., 48: ". . . the aim of this book is to minimize the modernness of Jesus").

⁴ Dr. Cadbury (*Peril*, 130-137, 208f.) discusses these items of evidence, but depreciates their historical value as owing too much to the later thought of the Church. His quotation of Bultmann in this connexion, however, betrays too ready an acceptance of that scholar's excessive scepticism.

⁵ Cf. Holtzmann, *Theol.* i. 176-178; Denney, *Jes. and the Gosp.* (1913), 214.

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may at times confuse the conscious and explicit with the subconscious and implicit, we are not likely to misrepresent his intentions simply through being too methodical in our quest for them.

The first result of the application of modern methods of criticism to the Gospels was the production of a series of books describing the life and teaching of Jesus in the manner that has come to be known as "liberal". The discovery of the fact that, in the successive documents making up our four Gospels, an increasing amount of doctrinal adornment and interpretation had been introduced, encouraged the assumption—natural enough to Christian devotion—that, if these unhistorical doctrinal accretions were stripped away, there would remain a "Jesus of History", whose teaching the modern Christian idealist could heartily accept, and whose leadership he could unreservedly follow. This teaching, it was felt, would be found to consist mainly of such inspiring doctrines as the universal Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the supreme duty of lovingkindness, the Kingdom of God as an ideal of social righteousness, and so on. There must have been countless Christian ministers, teachers, and workers, who drew their main inspiration for service from such a reading of the Gospel-story.¹

This "liberal" account of Jesus was not so far astray from the truth as many modern theologians would have us believe—certainly not so far astray as is the version which some of them are recommending us to substitute for it. It represented, at least, an honest and intelligent attempt to disentangle the essential and abiding realities from the less-essential vehicle in which they were conveyed. But it erred through over-confidence in its presuppositions and over-simplification in its treatment of the material.² It was accordingly destined to undergo a very severe shaking-up at the hands of those who, seeing the mistake of assuming the identity of the morally-acceptable with the historically-true, transferred the whole stress to that part of the Gospel-teaching which is least easily assimilated by the modern mind—the eschatology.

It is widely known how in 1906 the theological world was faced with Albert Schweitzer's substantial work, 'Von

¹ Grateful mention may be made of Josiah Strong's book, *The Next Great Awakening* (1903), as a fine sample of a class of literature to which many were deeply indebted.

² Cf. Weinel in *R.G.G.* iii (1929) 153 f., 160, 168f.; Manson, *Teaching*, 15.

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Reimarus zu Wrede'. In form a history, mainly, of the critical work done on the life of Jesus during the previous century-and-a-quarter, it culminated in a theory of Schweitzer's own, in which the eschatology was used as the key to everything else. This theory had, in a sense, been anticipated in Johannes Weiss's 'Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes' (1892) and a couple of other German works, and especially in Schweitzer's own sketch of Jesus' life, entitled 'Das Messianitäts- und Leidensgeheimnis' (1901). Schweitzer's views were introduced to English and American students by Sanday's 'Life of Christ in Recent Research' (1907), and were brought before a still wider public a little later (1910), when an English translation of his great work appeared under the title of 'The Quest of the Historical Jesus'. A second and revised edition of the German was published in 1913 as 'Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung'; and this has been several times reprinted (1921, 1926, 1934). It was not till 1925 that his 1901-sketch appeared in an English dress with the title, 'The Mystery of the Kingdom of God'.

Schweitzer's theory was briefly as follows. Jesus' mind was absolutely dominated by the fixed dogma of an eschatological programme, according to which the Messianic birth-pangs, the appearance of the Son-of-Man-Messiah on the clouds, the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment, and the supernatural inauguration of the Kingdom of God, were destined quickly to succeed one another in the very near future. From the time of his baptism onwards, Jesus was conscious of being himself the Messiah. But he kept this conviction a profound secret; and both the imprisoned John and the cheering crowds at Jerusalem thought of him as simply the Elijah-herald—a view which Jesus himself did not correct beyond saying that John was Elijah. Yet he spoke much of the Son of Man in the third person, and of the birth-pangs through which he and others were to go prior to his now-imminent coming. He thought this coming of the Son of Man, i.e., of himself, would take place before his Disciples had been able to call all the cities of Israel to repentance (Mt. x. 23). His ethical teaching, therefore, in so far as it bore on social conditions, was simply an "interim-ethic", devised only for the short interval which remained before the Kingdom should finally come. But neither birth-pangs nor Parousia took place; and it was their non-occurrence (not any imaginary loss of popularity) which caused him to re-mould his forecast. He concluded that the birth-pangs would befall himself alone, and that, in order to

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usher them in as the prelude to his own later reappearance in Messianic glory, he would have to die. He went to Jerusalem deliberately for that purpose: not historical conditions, but dogmatic necessity, occasioned his death. The secret of his claim to be the Messiah, revealed at Caesarea-Philippi to the Twelve, was still carefully hidden from the public: but it was betrayed by Judas to the High Priest, and acknowledged by Jesus himself before the Sanhedrin. The Resurrection of which he spoke was identical in his own mind with the whole process leading up to the Parousia. To sum up, Jesus "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".¹

No attempt can be made here to summarize or even enumerate the many valuable contributions which have been made to the problem since Schweitzer first really convinced scholars that the eschatology of the Gospels must be taken seriously.² Comparatively few writers were found to express complete agreement with him. The general feeling was that he had gone too far; but every grade of difference between almost complete concurrence with his view and complete repudiation of it was represented. Of the attempts to refute the eschatological view in its entirety, perhaps the most noteworthy was that of the Rev. C. W. Emmet in 'The Lord of Thought' (1922): he argued that the distribution of apocalyptic matter in the Gospel-documents showed that much of it was erroneously ascribed to Jesus by early Christian writers, and that the remainder ought to be interpreted figuratively. The apocalyptic teaching, particularly that part of it which dealt with the future punishment of the wicked, Emmet judged to be so inconsistent with the doctrine of the fatherly love of God that one or other of them must be rejected as not having really emanated from Jesus; and the apocalyptic teaching was

¹ Schweitzer, *Quest*, 369 (not in *L.J.F.*). Schweitzer's own views are stated by him, rather unsystematically, in *L.J.F.* 368-443 = *Quest*, 328-395, and in *Mystery*, passim. Cf. also, Leckie, *World to Come*, 39-41.

² The more significant of them are noted in R. N. Flew's art. in *E.T.* xlvi. 214-218 (Feb. 1935), C. J. Cadoux's in *E.T.* xlvi. 406-410 (June 1935), and W. D. Niven's in *E.T.* l. 325-330 (Apr. 1939).

accordingly rejected as the less original of the two. But most scholars, while believing that Schweitzer had overdone his thesis, accepted in principle the plea that Jesus did entertain some apocalyptic expectations which were never actually fulfilled in the literal sense ; and on this assumption they have expounded and illustrated various phases of the problem with great skill and success.¹ But all these valuable contributions leave the mind of the reader still worried over certain unanswered questions. If Schweitzer has gone too far, how much farther has he gone than he ought to have gone, and why? Still more seriously, if Schweitzer is not wholly wrong, how are we to reconcile the resultant limitations in Jesus' knowledge with our Christian trust in him as Lord and Saviour?

Schweitzer's work has been incautiously welcomed in one quarter where it might have been expected to rouse the strongest disapproval. I refer to those who, in the interests of a more conservative Christology, regarded the liberal interpretation of Jesus as heterodox and dangerous. To see the Jesus Christ of the Church's Creeds represented as a pious human reformer, from whose words idealists could demonstrate the truth of pacifism, socialism, and other aberrations of a modern age, was so revolting to many with strong theological and ecclesiastical sympathies, that they felt grateful for any argument which demonstrated such a representation to be historically untenable. So we find them again and again observing with evident satisfaction that Schweitzer has at least demolished the liberal picture of Jesus—as if that demolition in some way helped to re-establish their own credal position.² They apparently did not realize that to flee to Schweitzer for deliverance from liberalism was (as the saying goes) only to leap from the frying-pan into the fire. For if it is hard to see the Christ of tradition in the Jesus of liberalism, how much harder is it to see him in the deluded visionary whom Schweitzer put in his place? Instead therefore of welcoming the new school of "konsequente Eschatologie" as a valuable ally of orthodoxy, these modern scholars should have heeded the warning which Hecuba gave to her husband:

“ Non tali auxilio, nec defensoribus istis,
Tempus eget ”.

¹ A good example is Mackinnon, *Historic Jesus*, 196-207.

² See, e.g., Relton, *Study in Christol.* 105f., 236f., 266; Blunt, *The Gospels and the Critic*, 46, 48, 69f.; V. Taylor, *Sacrifice*, 272f; *E.T.* xlvi. 148f. (Jan. 1937) and lii. 322f (June 1941).