

The Apostolic Age in Light of Modern Criticism
James H. Ropes
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As Dr. Ropes himself tells us, the view of the Apostolic age and its contribution to history underlying his book is substantially that maintained by Ritschl. The book is intended for a wider circle than that of technical scholars; and while the acquaintance and interest of the author with the detailed problems shines through on every page, these are not brought unduly to the attention of the reader. The author writes in a vivid, interesting style, which from the point of view of form raises his work above the average and renders it eminently suited to serve its popular purpose.

On the teaching and work of Jesus as the presupposition of the development of the Apostolic age Dr. Ropes scarcely touches. In this lies a serious disadvantage of the method of treating the Apostolic age by itself. It is only fair to say, however, that in the present case this is in no wise due to skepticism with regard to the trustworthiness of the Gospel-traditions, at least so far as the synoptical record is concerned. The author does not belong to the group of critics who think that the first safe ground from which to approach the history of the Apostolic age are the Pauline records. "The picture of the life and character of Jesus as given in the synoptic gospels shows on the whole a remarkable and convincing consistency and credibility." With regard to the Fourth Gospel his views are less conservative. We are told that "its chief value lies rather in the realm of truth than of fact," but this does not mean that its teaching, rather than its history, is authentic. "Truth" in this antithesis means that sort of super-historical truth which can coexist with the total or partial fictitiousness of its setting. The Gospel is great as a product of human thought. In regard to Acts Dr. Ropes takes the position recently advocated by Harnack. The book as a whole as well as the we-pieces, and, consequently, the Gospel are the work of the man named Luke. This does not preclude, however, a semi-skeptical attitude towards the tradition of the earliest history recorded in the pre-Pauline part of the book. While the results of criticism give a fair degree of confidence in the pictures of the general development of events, the detail is held in many cases to be merely a part of the telling of the story. The speeches are probably no more than the free composition of the writer. On page 78 we get a suggestion of Von Dobschütz's hypothesis, that the account of John 20:19-23 represents another version of the story of Pentecost. The early disciples are characterized as "fundamentally Jews, and Jews of a popular, semi-pharisaic, messianistic type; a measure of the spirit of freedom of Jesus with regard to Jewish legal prescriptions is supposed to have lingered among them. Soteriologically they combined the methods of salvation by law and by the death of Christ. The representation of Acts with reference to the persecution or non-persecution of the early disciples is not criticized. The epoch-making character of Stephen's speech from a doctrinal point of view is denied. On the conference of Acts 15 Dr. Ropes' view both as to the reliability of the account and the significance of the proceedings is conservative. In this connection we meet with the following curious statement: "A Christian Church excommunicated by the mother church . . . would probably have been a failure. What form the presentation to the world of pure spiritual religion would have taken we cannot know, but Christianity as we know it would never have come into being (i.e. in the case of failure of the leaders to agree at Jerusalem). This suggests a theory about the separability of the essence of pure spiritual religion from all its historic embodiment, which we confess it is hard for us even to imagine. It is assumed that after the conference the Jewish Christians grew more and more one-sidedly Judaistic, a body of sectarian separatists, although James continued faithful to the attitude of

approval of Paul. What the church owes to Jewish Christianity are the following four things: (1). The tradition of the life of Jesus in the Gospels; (2). The idea of the Messiah and the whole theological system which this implies; (3). The apocalyptic spirit, i.e., interpreted in modern language, historical optimism; (4). The Old Testament. In passing we observe, that the First Epistle of Peter is, with some hesitation, accepted as genuine; that the Second Epistle is declared a late production of the second century; and that the Epistles of James and Jude are not mentioned anywhere by Dr. Ropes.

The chapters on Paul and Paul's theology are easily the most interesting and eloquent part of the book. The personality of the Apostle is drawn in bold lines. All the epistles, with the possible exception of 2 Thessalonians and the positive exception of the Pastorals, are recognized as genuine writings of Paul, Ephesians included. We have only two criticisms to make here. The one relates to the somewhat insistent protestation that Paul was not a theologian. It has become a vogue of late to celebrate the Apostle as a man of energy, will, action, organizing talent, the prototype of the ideal modern minister, or, so far as his mental qualities are concerned, the mystic, the poet. He is permitted to be all things to all men, only not a theologian to the theologians. Dr. Ropes exclaims with a degree of pathos: "Has ever a man been so misunderstood and shamefully entreated as Paul out of whose poetry men have made the propositions of a logical system?" We venture to assert, that, if Paul could come back, he would look upon the theological treatment of his teaching as among the least hard to bear of all the perversions to which he has been subjected. It is quite possible that he would even sympathize with theologians in their present reproach and eclipse. At any rate, the only basis on which such a denial of the theological strand in Paul's preaching and teaching can be made is an arbitrary definition of a theologian as one who cultivates the intellectual and speculative interest for its own sake. But to how many of those who have nobly borne the name of theologian in the history of the Church will such a definition apply? It is simply a modern, vulgar caricature. Dr. Ropes himself admits that Paul was trained in the Jewish theology, and that he carried over this substantially Jewish view of the world and of history into his Christian consciousness, only reorganizing it by the new principle given with the latter, nay on a later page speaks of the Apostle's flight of noble speculation, which the church as a whole was not able to follow. And if Paul was not a theologian, then the title of the author's fifth chapter, "Paul's Theology", is a misnomer. There surely is an inconsistency here. On the other hand, we are thankful for the emphasis which is laid (and to which even the one-sidedness just dwelt upon in a way contributes) on the inseparable connection between fact and truth, history and theology, in the Apostle's mind, on what Dr. Ropes felicitously calls the "dramatic" element in his conception of religion: "Paul's thought of God and Christ and the world is not as of an eternal, unchanging organism, whether mechanical or biological. It is rather always that of a moving panorama. He views the universe not as static, but as dramatic. In history the infinite and the finite meet. This is thoroughly Jewish, and for the religious life thoroughly wholesome." Only we do not quite like the implication of the qualifying adjective "religious" in the last clause, suggesting, as it were, that side by side with the religious view of the world there may be another to which other standards of wholesomeness do apply. We should also like to know how much of this dramatic conception of life is included in that "background of thought and a view of the world" of which we are told on another page that it has now "disappeared", and is the cause of "the repellent strangeness" of much of Paul's method and thought. Nor must it be overlooked that, while the dramatic, eschatological view-point preponderates, another more static representation involving the contrast of the eternal and the temporal worlds as coexisting spheres, is also to be found in Paul, and not merely in the later epistles, but from the beginning, as a passage like 2 Cor. 4:18 clearly shows. The two do not form a

contradiction, the temporal world not being eternal; the static dualism is resolved into the dramatic eschatology, but it was reserved for the author of Hebrews to work out this adjustment more clearly. It is not necessary to derive this strand in Paul's teaching from Hellenic influence, as Pfleiderer and others do; but certainly it is an element that comes to meet the Greek type of thought, and we would not go quite so far as to speak of "the peculiarly unhellenic character of Paul's view". Its presence is also noticeable in the Apostle's doctrine of the Spirit, as the element constituting and characteristic of the heavenly world. Dr. Ropes entirely neglects this side of the Pauline conception of the Pneuma; he deals with the Spirit exclusively from the point of view of a soteriological power.

The other point on which the author's treatment of Paulinism seems to us open to criticism concerns the manner in which he defines the historical connection between the Christianity of Jesus and that of Paul. "Paul's thought is not a continuous development from the thought of Jesus, but is in a measure a new start, yet so controlled by the supreme expression of Jesus' nature, not in words but in his life and death, that it is fully dependent upon Jesus and in fundamental harmony with Him." In other words, because Paul interpreted the life and death of Jesus as a supreme manifestation of God's love, the new start he made happened to coincide with the central principle of our Lord's teaching, viz., that God is love. And Paul thus interpreted the life and death of Jesus, because indirectly he had come under the influence of the revelation of divine love made in the historic life of Jesus and in his teaching. We would remark upon this: 1.) That in order to establish a true historical connection here it must be shown that the Pauline or the earlier apostolic doctrine of the saving significance of the death of Christ was the outcome of Jesus' revelation of the love of God in his life and teaching. Did the early Christians and did Paul come to believe that Christ's death was a saving act, because they had learned to view his whole life and appearance as a revelation of love, or did this idea spring from other sources? 2.) The close resemblance which Dr. Ropes traces between the Pauline doctrine of the death of Christ and what he takes to be our Lord's teaching on the love of God exists only because in his rendering of the thought of Paul the substitutionary, penal significance of the cross is obscured. To be sure, the cross reveals the love of God, but it likewise reveals the divine justice according to Paul. Of the latter Dr. Ropes does not speak at all. He admits the death was to Paul vicarious, but vicarious he curiously enough interprets as equivalent to "non-penal". What the real rationale of the cross was for Paul, how and why it expressed the love of God, apart from his righteousness, we do not learn. No one who rules out the idea of justice as entering into the transaction of the cross has ever succeeded or will ever succeed in explaining this. The Pauline doctrine becomes irrational when everything is thus staked on the divine love to the exclusion of God's righteousness. Once we take the Pauline statements at their full substitutionary value, the assumed harmony with what is alleged to be the Synoptical teaching on the fatherhood of God disappears, and not merely in the point of historical nexus, but also in the point of identity of conception the proposed theory of the continuity of development between Jesus and Paul appears unsatisfactory. There is no escape on such premises from the position of Wrede, that Paul was the true founder of Christianity, that is, of Christianity historically and soteriologically considered and not as a mere abstraction. The only remedy here lies in a different interpretation of our Lord's teaching, such as will do justice to some other elements contained therein as well as to that of the divine love.

The Ritschlian predisposition of the author in a theological and not merely historical sense reveals itself in the reserve which he maintains towards the intrusion of the supernatural as a veritable reality in the historical sphere. His observations on the appearances of Christ and on the conversion of

Paul go no farther in each case than that the reality of the experience as an experience is affirmed: "There can be no doubt that the first disciples passed through real experiences which they believed to be the appearance to them of the crucified and risen Christ." . . . "There were real events and their effect was momentous." And with regard to St. Paul's conversion we learn that his experience must be conceived in analogy with other conversions; and that, while thus "the non-natural and anti-natural character of the conversion is abandoned", this is by no means equivalent to denying "the divine character of this great event". These quotations sufficiently indicate how the supernatural is here reduced to mode of divine operation by way of immanence. In one of the opening pages of the book occurs a passage which distinguishes between the critical and the non-critical historian after this fashion, that the former takes history as a chain of causes and effects, in which immanent divine forces have wrought out the purposes of God, whereas the latter makes out of it an inscrutable series of divine acts, which one may observe, but the processes of which he cannot expect to understand except as God may directly reveal knowledge of them to us. But such a supernaturalism as would deny itself all recourse to immanence and make everything a miracle has never existed in fact, nor can it be shown that this is the logical outcome of any sane form of it. It is a pure figment of the critical imagination. The exclusiveness of this matter lies with the positivistic theologian, not with the supernaturalist. Dr. Ropes would, in the sphere of history, explain everything from immanent processes. While professing his willingness to accept miracles, he will treat them only as "ultimate facts", i.e., he is not willing to deal with them in his capacity of a historian, and recognize them as direct supernatural interpositions, and so to accord them the significance wherein their value as miracles consists.

By a strange oversight the quotation about the muzzling of the ox in 1 Cor. 9:9 is on page 195 derived from Proverbs instead of from Deuteronomy.