

The Eschatological Question in the Gospels and Other Studies in Recent New Testament
Criticism

Cyril W. Emmet

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Of the seven essays which make up this volume, six were published before in various periodicals. New is the opening essay on The Eschatological Question in the Gospels, and both in point of size and timeliness it deserves the first place given it by the author. It is an attempt to show the weakness and fancifulness of the interpretation of the life of Jesus, which in his remarkable book *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* Schweitzer has recently propounded on the basis of what he calls the principle of "thoroughgoing eschatology". It is not in itself a difficult task to expose the glaring defects of this structure and the arbitrariness of the process by which it was reared. The faults are so obvious that exposure might even seem superfluous. But it should be remembered that they are covered up to the uncritical reader by the magnificent stylistic features of Schweitzer's book. Moreover the hyper-eschatological interpretation of Jesus' career is so introduced in this book as to seem the inevitable correlate of the lengthy preceding critique of the liberal Life-of-Jesus literature; a critique so incisive and convincing that it has earned the author just praise even from quarters where the "thoroughgoing eschatology" is not exactly in favor. Not only Father Tyrrell, who swallowed the whole theory, but men of far more critical and cautious temper, such as Burkitt and Sanday, own their indebtedness to Schweitzer's book. In view of all this a real danger exists that out of admiration for the splendid historical critique, the crude wild theorizing which the brilliant German author has so closely linked with it, will receive more serious consideration than it should and would receive were it offered by itself. Consequently Mr. Emmet performs no superfluous task in carrying Schweitzer's critique one step further and including in it the "thoroughgoing eschatology"-stage itself. After first giving a succinct but extremely lucid and thoroughly fair exposition of the hypothesis to be criticized, he applies to it the usual exegetical and historical tests and finds it wanting in both respects. He further contends, with much force, that the Christ of "thoroughgoing eschatology" is unfit to figure as the ideal and inspirer of historic Christianity, and that the little that might be gained by this new interpretation of his life (such as e.g. the direct derivation of the idea of the church and the sacraments from his teaching) would be bought at an altogether disproportionate cost, seeing that the theory makes Christ himself a deluded visionary and his whole career a tragic failure.

Emmet throws back upon Schweitzer the charge which the latter so persistently makes against the liberal biographies of Jesus, viz., that they read too much between the lines of the Gospel-tradition, especially as found in Mark, and psychologize too much in weaving the single items together. He has no difficulty in showing that Schweitzer is equally guilty of both these faults. It is, however, hardly fair to characterize this as inconsistency. The two cases are not alike. There is this difference that, while Schweitzer openly acknowledges his work to be a mere experimenting upon the data, the writers in the liberal camp would have us regard their work in the light of scientifically constructed biography. The latter assume the interlinear meaning and the psychology to be somehow suggested or intended by the sources themselves. To this delusion Schweitzer is not subject; he knows that the ideas which bind the parts together are of his own devising. Of course it remains quite possible that the psychology of the liberals may in individual instances prove more correct and better to fit in with the tradition than the psychology of the extreme eschatologists. An illustration of this is furnished by Emmet's discussion of the element of secrecy in the Messianic self-presentation of Jesus. The earlier

writers explain this from the desire of Jesus to keep his person and work free from all association with the political Messiahship. Wrede gives a literary explanation, finding in these features the dim reminiscence in the tradition, or in the mind of the Evangelist of the fact that Jesus had not been the Messiah during his lifetime. The eschatologists, and especially Schweitzer, claim all this material in the interest of the mystery attaching to the eschatological Messiahship as something inherent in and inseparable from the conception, as part of the whole apocalyptic, transcendental frame of mind, by which they think Jesus was dominated. Now, in order to preclude the older explanation from the outset, Schweitzer goes to the extreme of denying the existence of a politically-colored Messianic hope at the time of Jesus. If such a hope did not exist, then the secrecy practiced by Jesus cannot have been induced by it. But Emmet argues forcibly that there is no reason to assume the political Messianic hope to have been dead or dormant at that juncture in Jewish history, and that consequently it is quite permissible from a historical point of view to bring the phenomena of secrecy into connection with it. One might, however, well add the caution that sweeping, all-inclusive explanations should be avoided here as elsewhere. Wrede made the mistake of lumping all the instances of secrecy and quasi-secrecy together, and forcing them all to conform to his peculiar hypothesis. The older writers were perhaps equally unwarranted in attributing everything in the nature of secrecy to a recoil from the political Messiahship. In all probability a variety of motives were at play and some of the secrecy was actually due to the mysterious atmosphere which naturally accompanies the transcendental eschatological Messiahship. Especially into the use of the Son-of-Man title this seems to have entered. Mr. Emmet himself admits that the two traditions in regard to the Messiahship, the political and the eschatological, were alive and active side by side in Jesus' day. And it is at any rate significant, that, while silently rejecting the former, our Lord appears in no wise to have shunned or criticized the latter.

This brings us to the main caption we have to make on the author's work. He seems to us not to emphasize sufficiently Schweitzer's merit in focusing attention upon the general, eschatological atmosphere of Jesus' consciousness and teaching. Crude and arbitrary as Schweitzer's treatment of the record may be, on this one point it appears to us convincing; the eschatological was much more prominent and dominant in the Savior's mind than the old liberal reproduction of his life and teaching allowed for. The framework of his thought was more supernatural, more superhuman, in the old orthodox sense, than had come to be believed. Emmet thinks that Harnack and Bousset are more nearly correct in distributing the emphasis as between the ethico-spiritual and the Messianic-eschatological than Johannes Weiss and Schweitzer. He also believes that a positive Christianity can more easily attach itself to Harnack's and Bousset's interpretation of Jesus than to that of the eschatologists, because, although the former give us a reduced Christianity, they give us something that can be built upon. We question the correctness of either view. Neither Harnack's theory, according to which the Messianic consciousness was a mere time-conditioned form, nor Bousset's according to whom it even was a burden to Jesus, can furnish a fit foundation for any adequate embodiment of the historic faith of the Church. We may *add* to these, but it would not be possible to *build* on them. And it is precisely here that the eschatological interpretation is strongest; after all excrescences are allowed for, it still must be said that it approaches far more closely than the other to the core and center of the supernatural consciousness of our Lord, as the Church has always recognized it.

The second essay on M. Loisy and the Gospel Story admirably shows how radical and negative the

French critics conclusions as laid down in *Les Evangiles Synoptiques* really are. The next paper adds to this a searching critique of Loisy's view of the resurrection. It well brings out the peculiar difficulty in which all those involve themselves, who, like Loisy, first reject the Gospel narrative in toto, and then endeavor to show how by some psychological process the Apostles might have arrived at their belief in the resurrection. It is curious to observe how in the face of this unsparing exposé of radical departure from the common Christian faith, the tender feelings for a persecuted fellow-critic continue to assert themselves in Mr. Emmet. He tells us that in the matter of M. Loisy's excommunication the sympathies of English students could only be on one side (which means, we take it, M. Loisy's side). And even his horror and revulsion from the most extreme deliverances of the French critic assume the following mild form: "If the Roman Church is ever to excommunicate, it could hardly be expected to hold its hand here." There is something in this urbane treatment of extreme critics by their more believing confrères which reminds us of the attitude of the labor-unions towards those of their numbers whose methods are destructive of life and property in the civil sphere. We miss the true note of indignation. Why should the state have the right to defend itself against those who assail its very foundations and not the Church? A Church which must hold its hand everywhere, in order not to violate the sacred rights of criticism, would afford a truly pitiful spectacle indeed.

The fourth essay deals with Harnack's monograph on the Second Source of the First and Third Gospels. It gives a clear and skillful resumé of the German critic's well-known conclusions.

The fifth paper briefly reviews the evidence, textuo-critical and contextual, bearing on the question whether the Magnificat should be ascribed (in the intention of Luke, not as to actual authorship) to Mary or Elizabeth. The author decides in favor of the traditional view.

In the next following paper the title of Galatians to be considered the first Pauline epistle in point of chronology is upheld chiefly on the ground that Galatians must have been written before the Apostolic Council (referred to in Gal 2 and identified with the proceedings of Acts 11, not of Acts 15) since otherwise it would have been impossible for Paul to pass by the decree of the Council in silence. We looked in vain for a mention of Zahn's name in this connection. Mr. Emmet also inclines to accept the Western reading of the decree of Acts 15 in its recent Harnackian interpretation according to which it refers exclusively to moral and not to ceremonial questions.

The concluding chapter deals with the Problem of the Apocalypse, which it classifies with the general rubric of Apocalyptic literature. The inspiration of the writer is defined as subjective, which means not only that it came from within, but also that it moves on various levels, high and low. And to the question "What right, then, have we to speak of the Spirit at all? How do we know that the book is in the deepest sense true?" the answer is given: "Simply because our Christian consciousness recognizes it as such." And "we believe it to contain the 'Word of God', because the Divine in us answers to the Divine mind of the writer". Which amounts to saying that the test of inspiration is such as by its very nature to make inspiration superfluous.