

Week 2: The search for the historical Jesus: Justification and problems

- A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the historical Jesus*, 1906 (ET: 1910) Online at: www.earlychristianwritings.com/schweitzer/
- J. Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, London 1990
- C. St. Evans, *The historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, Oxford 1996 (the full text is available at 'Oxford Scholarship Online')

Historical Jesus II

- 'Crisis' of quest for the historical Jesus at the outset of 20th century theology?
- Does this mean this quest has lost its justification?
- This would be a theological judgment which was indeed frequently made, especially in the 20s and 30s, but has also been rejected.
- Relation of historical and theological problems is complex; they mutually influence each other.

1. Albert Schweitzer and his *Quest of the historical Jesus*

- Theological classic, full of learning yet pursuing a clear cut agenda; admirable style.
- Recalls the 'quest' as a particular kind of narrative:
- Fuelled by dissatisfaction with 'dogmatic' Christology.
- Hoping that historical research would bring Jesus back to life – which it did.
- Failing to realise that it would also de-familiarise him.

Schweitzer and the *Quest* II

- The study of the Life of Jesus has had a curious history. 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 for centuries 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. What surprised and dismayed the theology of the last forty years was that, despite all forced and arbitrary interpretations, it could not keep Him in our time, but had to let Him go. 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 returns to its original position. (p. 399)

Schweitzer and the *Quest* III

- The end of the quest is marked, on the one hand, by 'radical scepticism'.
- Not Schweitzer's but W. Wrede's position
- W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, 1901 (ET: 1971)
- Jesus' life was in stark contrast to what his disciples believed of him after the resurrection.
- → 'Messianic Secret' is devised to mask this contrast.

Schweitzer and the *Quest* IV

- Schweitzer's own position is 'radical eschatology', but in their conclusion the two views are similar:
- The historical Jesus of whom the criticism of the future [...] will draw the portrait, can never render modern theology the services which it claimed from its own half-historical, half-modern, Jesus. He will be a Jesus, who was Messiah, and lived as such, either on the ground of a literary fiction of the earliest Evangelist [this was Wrede's view], or on the ground of a purely eschatological Messianic conception [Schweitzer's own view].

Schweitzer and the Quest V

- In either case, He will not be a Jesus Christ to whom the religion of the present can ascribe, according to its long-cherished custom, its own thoughts and ideas, as it did with the Jesus of its own making. Nor will He be a figure which can be made by a popular historical treatment so sympathetic and universally intelligible to the multitude. The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma. (pp. 398-9)

Schweitzer and the *Quest* VI

- Two observations:
- Schweitzer's criticism is directed against a specific (historical and theological) version of the 'historical Jesus' which produced (psychologically manipulated) 'Lives of Jesus'.
- His final dilemma is a fundamental paradox of any historical research which familiarises and de-familiarises at the same time.

Schweitzer and the *Quest* VII

- Theologically the problem results from a belief that the 'historical Jesus' could be a quasi-soteriological substitute for traditional Christology.
- Schweitzer's own view is not so different (merely unhistoric): Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from Him and flows through our time also. This fact can neither be shaken nor confirmed by any historical discovery. It is the solid foundation of Christianity. (p. 399)

Schweitzer and the *Quest* VIII

- Schweitzer's book closes one chapter, but not the quest for the historical Jesus.
- Neither in the Christian tradition nor in the 19th century was the view he opposes the only way to integrate the 'historical Jesus' into theology.

The historical Jesus and the Christ of faith

- If Christ was fully man, he must have been historical.
- His historicity must bear the marks of his divinity.
- Since all history is interconnected, the Incarnation must have influenced all history.
- Major theory (Hegel, Schleiermacher): the Incarnation transforms history into an intelligible whole.

The historical Jesus and the Christ of faith II

- History is the medium through which salvation is passed on to us, viz. Christianity/the Church.
- This view continues older traditions of 'theology of history', but under conditions of historical research which is open-ended.
- As a major philosophy/theology of history one might question to what extent it really needed the 'historical Jesus' or not merely his existence/resurrection.