

The Origin of Paul's Religion

Paul and Jesus (Part 8)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

If Paul is to be compared with Jesus, it is said, those elements which are derived from Paul must first be separated from the Gospels. Even after this separation has been accomplished, however, there remains in the Gospel picture of Jesus a certain amount of similarity to the Pauline Christ; it is generally admitted that the process by which Jesus was raised to the position of a heavenly being was begun before the appearance of Paul and was continued in some quarters in more or less independence of him. Thus if Paul is to be compared with the real Jesus, as distinguished from the Christ of Christian faith, the historian, it is said, must first separate from the Gospel picture not merely those details which were derived distinctly from Paul, but also the whole of the supernatural element.¹ Mere literary criticism will not accomplish the task; for even the earliest sources which can be distinguished in the Gospels seem to lift Jesus above the level of ordinary humanity and present Him not merely as an example for faith but also as the object of faith.² Even in the earliest sources, therefore, the historian must distinguish genuine tradition from dogmatic accretions; he must separate the natural from the supernatural, the believable from the unbelievable; he must seek to remove from the genuine figure of the Galilean prophet the tawdry ornamentation which has been hung about him by naïve and unintelligent admirers.

Thus the Jesus who is to be compared with Paul, according to the modern naturalistic theory, is not the Jesus of the Gospels; he is a Jesus who can be rediscovered only through a critical process within the Gospels. And that critical process is very difficult. It is certainly no easy matter to separate natural and supernatural in the Gospel picture of Jesus, for the two are inextricably intertwined. In pulling up the tares, the historian is in danger of pulling up the wheat as well; in the removal of the supernatural elements from the story of Jesus, the whole of the story is in danger of being destroyed. Certain radical spirits are not afraid of the consequence; since the Jesus of the Gospels, they say, is a supernatural person, He is not a real person; no such person as this Jesus ever lived on earth. Such radicalism, of course, is absurd. The Jesus of the Gospels is certainly not the product of invention or of myth; He is rooted too deep in historical conditions; He towers too high above those who by any possibility

¹ For what follows, see, in addition to the paper mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, "History and Faith, in *Princeton Theological Review*, xiii, 1915, pp. 337-351

² See Denney, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 1909.

could have produced Him. But the radical denials of the historicity of Jesus are not without interest. They have at least called attention to the arbitrariness with which the separation of historical from unhistorical has been carried on in the production of the "liberal Jesus."

But suppose the separation has been completed; suppose the historical Jesus has been discovered beneath the gaudy colors which had almost hopelessly defaced His portrait. Even then the troubles of the historian are not at an end. For this historical Jesus, this human Jesus of modern liberalism, is a monstrosity; there is a contradiction at the very center of His being. The contradiction is produced by His Messianic consciousness. The human Jesus of modern liberalism, the pure and humble teacher of righteousness, the one who kept His own person out of His message and merely asked men to have faith in God like His faith-this Jesus of modern liberalism thought that He was to come with the clouds of heaven and be the instrument in judging the earth! If Jesus was pure and unselfish and of healthy mind, how could He have applied to Himself the tremendous conception of the transcendent Messiah? By some the problem is avoided. Some, like Wrede, deny that Jesus ever presented Himself as the Messiah; others, like Bousset, are at least moving in the same direction. But such radicalism cannot be carried out. The Messianic element in the consciousness of Jesus is rooted too deep in the sources ever to be removed by any critical process. It is established also by the subsequent development. If Jesus never thought Himself to be the Messiah and never presented Himself as such, how did His disciples come to regard Him as the Messiah after His death? Why did they not simply say, "Despite His death, the Kingdom of God is coming?" Why did they say rather, "Despite His death, He is the Messiah"?³ They could only have done so if Jesus had already presented Himself to them as Messiah when He had been with them on earth.

In recent criticism, such radicalism as that which has just been discussed is usually avoided. The presence of the Messianic element in the consciousness of Jesus cannot altogether be denied. Sometimes, indeed, that element is even made the determining factor in all of Jesus' teaching. So it is with the hypothesis of "consistent eschatology" of A. Schweitzer and others.⁴ According to that hypothesis Jesus expected the Kingdom of God to come in a catastrophic way in the very year in which he was carrying on His ministry in Galilee, and all His teaching was intended to be a preparation for the great catastrophe. Even the ethic of Jesus, therefore, is thought to have been constructed in view of the approaching end of the world and is thus regarded as unsuitable for a permanent world order. This hypothesis not only accepts the Messianic consciousness of Jesus, but in one direction at least it even exaggerates the implications of that consciousness.

³ J. Weiss, "Das Problem der Entstehung des Christentums," in *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, xvi, 1913, p. 456.

⁴ A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, 1913, pp. 390-443.

Usually, however, this extreme also is avoided, and the historian pursues, rather, a policy of palliation.

Jesus did come to regard Himself as the Messiah, it is said, but He did so only late in His ministry and almost against His will. When He found that the people were devoted to sin, and that He alone was fighting God's battle, He came to regard Himself as God's chosen instrument in the establishment of the Kingdom. Thus He had a tremendous consciousness of a mission.

But the only category in which He could express that consciousness of a mission was the category of Messiahship. In one form, indeed, that category was unsuitable; Jesus would have nothing to do with the political aspirations associated with the expected king of David's line. But the expectation of the Messiah existed also in another form; the Messiah was sometimes regarded, not as a king of David's line, but as the heavenly Son of Man alluded to in Daniel and more fully described in the Similitudes of Enoch. This transcendent form of Messiahship, therefore, was the form which Jesus used. But the form, it is maintained, is a matter of indifference to us, and it was not really essential to Jesus; what was really essential was Jesus' consciousness of nearness to God.

Such palliative measures will not really solve the problem. The problem is a moral and psychological problem. How could a pure and holy prophet of righteousness, one whose humility and sanity have made an indelible impression upon all subsequent generations—how could such a one lapse so far from the sobriety and sanity of His teaching as to regard Himself as the heavenly Son of Man who was to be the instrument in judging the world? The difficulty is felt by all thoughtful students who proceed upon naturalistic principles. There is to such students, as Heitmüller says, something almost un-canny about Jesus.⁵ And the difficulty is not removed by putting the genesis of the Messianic consciousness late in Jesus' life. Whether late or early, Jesus did regard Himself as the Messiah, did regard Himself as the one who was to come with the clouds of heaven. There lies the problem. How could Jesus, with His humility and sobriety and strength, ever have lapsed so far from the path of sanity as to assume the central place in the Kingdom of God?

Here, again, radical minds have drawn the logical conclusions. The Messianic consciousness, they say, is an example of megalomania; Jesus, they say, was insane. Such is said to be the diagnosis of certain alienists. And the diagnosis need cause no alarm. Very likely it is correct. But the Jesus who is being investigated by the alienists is not the Jesus of the New Testament. The liberal Jesus, if he ever existed, may have been insane. But that is not the Jesus whom the Christian loves. The alienists are investigating a man who thought he was divine and was not divine; about one who thought He was divine and was divine they have obviously nothing to say. Two difficulties, therefore, face the reconstruction of the liberal Jesus. In the first place, it is difficult to separate the

⁵ Heitmüller, *Jesus*, 1913, p. 71

natural from the supernatural in the Gospel picture of Jesus; and in the second place, after the separation has been accomplished, the human Jesus who is left is found to be a monstrosity, with a contradiction at the very center of His being. Such a Jesus, it may fairly be maintained, could never have existed on earth.

But suppose He did exist, suppose the psychological impossibilities of His character be ignored. Even then the difficulties of the historian are not overcome. Another question remains. How did this human Jesus ever come to give place to the superhuman Jesus of the New Testament? The transition evidently occurred at a very early time. It is complete in the Epistles of Paul. And within Paul's experience it was certainly no late development; on the contrary it was evidently complete at the very beginning of his Christian life; the Jesus in whom he trusted at the time of his conversion was certainly the heavenly Christ of the Epistles. But the conversion occurred only a very few years, at the most, after the crucifixion of Jesus.

Moreover, there is in the Pauline Epistles not the slightest trace of a conflict between the heavenly Christ of Paul and any "other Jesus" of the primitive Jerusalem Church; apparently the Christ of Paul was also the Christ of those who had walked and talked with Jesus of Nazareth. Such is the evidence of the Epistles. It is confirmed by the Gospels.

Like Paul, the Gospels present no mere teacher of righteousness, but a heavenly Redeemer. Yet the Gospels make the impression of being independent of Paul. Everywhere the Jesus that they present is most strikingly similar to the Christ of Paul; but nowhere not even where Jesus is made to teach the redemptive significance of His death (Mk. x. 45)—is there the slightest evidence of literary dependence upon the Epistles. Thus the liberal Jesus, if he ever existed, has disappeared from the pages of history; all the sources agree in presenting a heavenly Christ. How shall such agreement be explained?

It might conceivably be explained by the appearances of the risen Christ. If, at the very beginning of the Church's life, Jesus appeared to His disciples, after His death, alive and in heavenly glory, it is conceivable that that experience might have originated the lofty New Testament conception of Jesus' person. But what in turn caused that experience itself? On naturalistic principles the appearances of the risen Christ can be explained only by an impression which the disciples already had of the majesty of Jesus' person. If they had listened to the lofty claims of Jesus like those which are recorded in the Gospels if they had witnessed miracles like the walking on the water or the feeding of the five thousand, then, conceivably, though not probably, they might have come to believe that so great a person could not be holden of death, and this belief might have been sufficient, without further miracle, to induce the pathological experiences in which they thought they saw Him alive after His passion. But if the miraculous be removed from the life of Jesus, a double portion of the miraculous must be heaped up upon the appearances. The smaller be the Jesus whom the

disciples had known in Galilee, the more unaccountable becomes the experience which caused them to believe in His resurrection. By one path or another, therefore, the historian of Christian origins is pushed off from the safe ground of the phenomenal world toward the abyss of supernaturalism. To account for the faith of the early Church, the supernatural must be found either in the life of Jesus on earth, or else in the appearances of the risen Christ. But if the supernatural is found in one place, there is no objection to finding it in both places. And in both places it is found by the whole New Testament.

Three difficulties, therefore, beset the reconstruction of the "liberal Jesus." In the first place, it is difficult to disengage His picture from the miraculous elements which have defaced it in the Gospels; in the second place, when the supposed historical Jesus has been reconstructed, there is a moral contradiction at the center of His being, caused by His lofty claims; in the third place, it is hard to see how, in the thinking of the early disciples, the purely human Jesus gave place without the slightest struggle to the heavenly Christ of the Pauline Epistles and of the whole New Testament.

But suppose all the difficulties have been removed. Suppose a human Jesus has been reconstructed. What is the result of comparing that human Jesus with Paul? At first sight there seems to be nothing but contradiction. But closer examination discloses points of agreement. The agreement between Jesus and Paul extends even to those elements in the Gospel account of Jesus which are accepted by modern naturalistic criticism.

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