

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

ALBERT SCHWEITZER.

ON the twenty-fourth of March last, Dr. Albert Schweitzer sailed for the Congo as a missionary. That fact, I believe, has aroused a keener interest than anything else in his distinguished career ; and this it is which has led the Editor of the *EXPOSITOR* to ask me to give a short account of him in these pages.

He was, of course, already a remarkable man. In addressing the readers of this magazine, it is not necessary to enlarge on his distinction in theology ; those who are least in sympathy with his views will be quite ready to acknowledge the wideness of his learning, the acuteness of his criticism, the brilliancy of his style. But it is not, perhaps, equally well known in this country that he is a distinguished musician, being both a leading authority upon Bach and a brilliant performer on the organ ; while in the last few years he has become a fully qualified Doctor of Medicine and has written ably upon medical subjects.

It is natural that a decisive act on the part of so interesting and versatile a thinker should arouse the desire to know something more about the man himself.

My qualifications as a biographer are slender, but as the translator of some of his books I have, of course, been in correspondence with him for a number of years ; more recently I have met him in the flesh ; and a good deal of information which lay outside my personal knowledge has been very kindly communicated by a friend of his in Strasbourg.

Let us begin with the personal impression. It happened that in the spring of last year we were both in Paris at the same time, and were able to arrange a meeting. I found him, as to outward appearance, a tall, broad-shouldered

man in the late thirties, powerfully built, but, even according to English standards, not excessively stout. He has a pleasant dark eye, dark hair worn rather short, with no suggestion of the dilettante, features blunt but well cut, with the strong chin of the man of action; the whole personality keenly alive and magnetic.

He had not, he explained, a moment to sit still that day, but would I come with him in a taxi while he did some errands, and we could talk between times? So, for a couple of hours or more, we rushed over half Paris, stopping here to pick up a set of surgical instruments—which I understood some friend had presented to him for use abroad—at another place to visit a hospital—he was at this time taking a post-graduate course in Tropical Medicine—at another to make some arrangements for a forthcoming organ recital.

In the intervals he talked untiringly, about theology, English theologians—about whom he asked some shrewd questions—politics, his own plans, a Cambridge friend who had visited him in Strasburg, and so forth. (As regards international politics, by the way, he is personally Anglophil and would abhor the idea of war with England; but he cannot understand, on general grounds, why England “refuses to take Lord Roberts’ advice and adopt compulsory service.”) By the time we separated I felt that I knew more of him than one would get to know of many people in a week.

Another day he dined with us, and told a number of interesting stories, among them a little personal anecdote, which, slight as it is, I feel I must try to reproduce, for it is characteristic. One day, he said, he was sitting on the banks of the Rhine with some big historical tome open before him. As not infrequently happens when one tries to read in the open air, he had been feeling that there was more in life than could be got into print and paper. As he was

about to shut the book, a little insect of some kind fluttered in between the pages, and he checked the action of closing it just in time to avoid crushing the little creature. The incident struck him as symbolic. He said to himself, "I am like that poor little midge—in danger of being crushed under the weight of history!"

It was charmingly told, the German sentiment conveyed with the French lightness of touch—he was speaking French—which Schweitzer gets from his Alsatian blood. And it goes deep. Whatever scholars may be tempted to think sometimes, a knowledge of the past does not absolve a man from the responsibility for living his own life.

On another occasion we had the pleasure of hearing him play Bach on the organ. It was a rehearsal, and he took us up into the organ-loft, where we watched with interest and listened with delight while he played some of the Passion music. Workmen had been busy with the organ, and Schweitzer, who has himself an expert knowledge of organ building, was dissatisfied with something and had the foreman up to talk to him. His fault-finding was done, I noticed, not with (what always seems to us) the excessive excitement of the French artist, but with an unemotional, rather British thoroughness, with just a touch of additional energy. Leaving the concert-hall in his company, we had to negotiate one or two of those Paris crossings which make one think what a nice safe, quiet place London is, after all. It was after being piloted through one of these maelstroms with excellent judgment and coolness, and not a moment allowed for shivering on the brink, that a lady of our party—an Irishwoman—summed up her impression of Schweitzer thus: "You know, the heathen won't have a ghost of a chance with Herr Schweitzer; they'll just *have* to be converted!"

So much by way of direct impression of the man as he is

to-day. A glance at the upbuilding of this various and vivid personality will not be without interest.

His diversity of gifts finds some explanation in his ancestry. His mother's father, a clergyman, was very musical, and built an organ for himself without ever having had any technical training in that, one would suppose, highly technical art. Her brother, pastor of the church of St. Nicholas in Strasburg, was the editor of the earliest liberal Church paper, a man of high culture and attainments. His mother herself is described as a woman of fine abilities and still finer character; one of those whom the call of duty never finds waiting. His father, again, is a man of impressive personality, kindly and calm, and liberal in opinions. Those who read Dr. Schweitzer's earlier book (*Von Reimarus zu Wrede*) in the German, will remember that it is dedicated to his father, as one well versed in the subject.¹

It is interesting to note—in view of the fact that his son has often been said to write more in the style of a novelist than of a theologian—that Herr Schweitzer has published a volume of short stories. The household, says the aforementioned Strasburg friend, is a delightful one to visit.

Albert Schweitzer had the advantage—from almost all points of view it is an advantage—of passing his early childhood in the country. He began his education at the village school, passing, however, before long to the Grammar School (*Gymnasium*) at Mülhausen, where he lived with an uncle. From an early age he had decided to enter the ministry, and passed in the usual course from the *Gymnasium* to the University. He was from the first a "serious student," and his Strasburg friend adds a touch of characterisation which is too good to lose. "He never spoke or judged about things or books without having read and

¹ The dedication runs: *Meinem Vater, Pfarrer Ludwig Schweitzer zu Günsbach, dem feinsinnigen Kenner der Leben-Jesu-Forschung.*

studied them himself. He likes to be quite independent, and will always defend his opinion without thinking of his own advantage, if he is convinced that it is right." It is interesting to know that the intellectual courage which was so marked a feature of his opinions and criticisms in the *Quest of the Historical Jesus* was so deeply rooted in his character. When that book appeared the author was often accused of a certain arrogance, but the more discerning critics saw that at least his confidence was the confidence of sincerity, not of pretension.

He studied philosophy and theology not only in Strasburg but also in Berlin and Paris, but of all his teachers the one who influenced him most was the veteran H. J. Holtzmann, of Strasburg. (Readers of *Paul and his Interpreters* will remember how he sets Holtzmann apart from all other critics, giving him a chapter to himself.)

In 1899 Schweitzer published a study of Kant's philosophy of religion, and in 1901 he became Privatdocent at the University of Strasburg, where he lived an extremely busy life, lecturing, coaching, organ-playing, preaching once every Sunday at the church of St. Nicholas, to which he was attached as curate, and, through it all, steadily working at his books.

In 1901, too, appeared the firstfruits of his theological studies, *Das Messianitäts- und Leidensgeheimnis. Eine Skizze des Lebens Jesu*. The sub-title, a Sketch of the Life of Jesus,¹ shows the direction which his thoughts were already taking. In 1906 appeared the work by which he is chiefly known, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede. Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, translated under the title *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

Strong books, like strong men, are apt to make enemies, and there was hardly a German theologian of any eminence,

¹ This work has not been translated.

living or dead, of whom this book did not contain some trenchant criticism. It is hardly to be wondered at if its immediate effect was to produce more irritation against the author than sympathy with his ideas. It was easy, too, to show that the constructive part was by no means all of a convincing character. Still, the book won its way, and succeeded at least in making the eschatological theory a vital interest in theology, a question towards which scholars must take up a decided attitude. It is to the credit of English theology that one of the first critics of eminence to give the book a cordial recognition was Dr. Sanday, while a particularly thoroughgoing acceptance of its main ideas is seen in the relevant chapters of Tyrrel's *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*.

Meanwhile his musical studies had not been neglected. In 1905 appeared the earliest form of his great work on Bach. It was written in French at the request of Professor Widor of Paris,¹ who wished to have an exposition of the Chorales and Chorale Preludes for his pupils. This was re-written, on a much larger scale, in German in 1908, and in the same year Schweitzer attended a congress at Vienna in order to advocate certain improvements in organ-building, yet another subject in which he is an expert.² An excellent English translation of the German *Bach*, by E. Newman, incorporating important alterations and additions by the author, was published in 1911.³

Towards the close of the same year appeared his long-

¹ Under whom he had himself studied. Earlier, in Mülhausen, he had been a pupil of Eugène Münch.

² He has himself invented some mechanical device in connexion therewith, and has written on *Französische und Deutsche Orgelbaukunst und Orgelkunst* (Leipzig, 1905). Readers who are interested in organ-playing may be glad to have a reference which I have not had the opportunity of checking to technical contributions of his in *Die Musik*, 10th "Jahrgang," "Heft" 2 and 3, and *Die Orgel*, 1910 (with C. M. Widor, on the rendering of Bach's Preludes and Fugues).

³ Breitkopf and Härtel, Leipzig and London.

expected *Geschichte der Paulinischen Forschung* (translated under the title of *Paul and his Interpreters*), the discussion of which will still be fresh in the minds of readers of the EXPOSITOR.

Since his departure there have appeared two other works, a revised and greatly extended edition of the *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*—the sub-title now figures alone, since *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* has ceased to be appropriate, for Wrede no longer forms the lower limit, the history having been brought down to date. Incidentally the English literature of the subject receives considerably more attention than in the former edition. And that, it may be interesting to note, is partly due to the fact that Dr. Schweitzer has in the interval not only improved his own reading-knowledge of English, but has married a lady who is an excellent English scholar, a daughter of Professor Bresslau, of Strasburg, who has recently retired from the Chair of History.

The second work is much slighter, but is of considerable interest and importance—*Die psychiatrische Beurteilung Jesu*, a criticism and refutation of recent theories—which have obtained some notoriety in Germany—ascribing to Jesus some form of mental alienation. For this work Dr. Schweitzer is particularly well equipped, now that, to his critical acumen and historical insight, he has added a qualification in Medicine and some special study of mental pathology.¹

Such is the man who is now at Lembaréné on the Ogowe, nearly under the equator, studying the language, I suppose—I have heard from him *en route*, but not since his actual arrival—and exercising his medical skill for the benefit of the natives.² His medical training was, of course, under-

¹ A translation of this little work is to appear in the pages of this Journal.

² Should any reader desire to help the work of this unusual missionary, Frau Professor Fischer, 15 Thomasgasse, Strassburg, Elsass, would gladly acknowledge and forward any sums sent to her. It is to this lady that I am indebted for much of my information.

taken as being almost indispensable for a missionary in those parts, and because, says my Strasburg correspondent, "he wished to continue the work of two friends of his who died out there." That quiet statement brings home to us something of what his action means. Some good people have expressed to me much concern as to what he is going to preach. When I hear that anxious question, two things come into my mind. One is the sense of a deep and simple piety underlying the whole of his various, forceful personality which one derives from personal contact with him, and the other is a passage from the close of his history of the great Quest: "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word, 'Follow thou Me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands, and to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

W. MONTGOMERY.