

Study 19: The Christ of the Church

THIRD DAY: THE PAULINE CHRIST NOT A CREATION OF JEWISH THOUGHT

1. It is not denied that the writers of the New Testament were influenced by the thought of their time. They used the language of their contemporaries. Along with this went of necessity other conceptions, some of which were directly transmuted into vehicles for Christian thought, while others were almost entirely transfigured when they became adjusted to the new religious ideas. The Pharisaic system, for example, and the struggle for a free gospel to the Gentiles accounts largely for the form into which Paul threw some of his epistles. But the kernel of his gospel is not Pharisaic. So also in the Epistle to the Hebrews the Jewish ritual becomes the foil for the universal Christian truths as to sacrifice and worship.

2. But to say that when Paul was once persuaded that Jesus was the Messiah, he drew from the theology in which he was educated the principal strands for the tapestry upon which Jesus Christ stands out as a glorious masterpiece of his own contriving, is to ignore not only his own testimony, but the real nature of current Jewish conceptions.

3. The contemporary Jewish writings are a bewildering bundle of materials from which some parallel might be brought forward to support almost any doctrine. Their Messianic figure was so indistinct in its outlines that it is difficult to determine what was really essential in it, while some of the Jewish apocalypses might give ground to the view that the Messiah was hardly a part of the hope of later Judaism (see Bousset, "Die Religion des Judenthums," p. 209). "Of a transcendental conception of His person, of a conception of Him as the bringer of a new revelation, or indeed of a redemptive, sin-removing activity, there is seldom a trace in the average Jewish writings" (218). "With perfect truth Dalman asserts that the thought of a preëxistent Messiah was quite alien to Judaism, and that we must be very cautious in assuming that there were ideas of preëxistence in this conception" (251).

4. Even if the Jewish speculations were richer than they are, they could not account for the Christ of Paul, for He was no complex of ideas, but a living Person. Paul does not present his gospel as a learned teacher, but as an impassioned preacher redeemed by grace. His own life consists of two halves. Once he lived as a Jew; now he lives in Christ. Is the language of Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 5:13-19, theory, or conviction rooted in overwhelming love? Who ever loved a figure in fiction as Paul or any average Christian loved Jesus Christ?