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From the End of the World
to the End of World:
Apocalyptic as a Social Hermeneutic

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A reception will follow in D'Autremont Hall.

work to build a secure life. I Corinthians was a favorite already of Bishop Ignatius, as was Matthew's gospel, and the focus of the life in Christ came to be the witness of "doing good," by which I Peter's writer means causing no unnecessary offense to society. In my life-time we have suddenly become aware that the female half, or more than half, of church and society are disenfranchised, 2,000 years without full responsibility and full reward, all in the name of good order.

What can we learn from all this, those of us who live today in the "pacified provinces" of a different empire? Do we take the tack often heard in early church history of excusing the church because of the pressures it is under, arguing that my church's survival depends on not offending the old families, that real alternative community is possible in heaven but not on earth, that my task is institutional maintenance and someone else will put their energy into building ways of life? Particularly when our eyes have been opened to see the elaborate world-wide system that gives us wealth from the poverty of others and of women most of all, a system that allows us great freedom for distracting entertainment but not freedom to threaten the security of this system, how do we find resources to build a new life? I suggest we look to the hidden voices of our history. Listen to these people. There is energy for us in the witness of the miracle tellers who get out the good news they have experienced regardless of the cost. There is wisdom for us in the witness of the Corinthian women prophets who celebrate gains on every side and speak to God and for God until their lives are crowded and the new ways of life have begun. Today hidden voices continue the same story. A good ear is all we need to be tuned to the economic-social-spiritual movement of God who raises up the people that can lead us in a new way.

The Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Discovery of the Apocalyptic Jesus

William R. Herzog

Albert Schweitzer, when he had finished analyzing the history of research into the life of Jesus from Reimarus to Wrede, drew the following conclusion: "The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth and died to consecrate this work, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb."¹ In every particular, Schweitzer had created a Jesus drastically different from the Jesus who ruled over the kingdom of liberal theology. When he turned to the gospels, he caught a glimpse of an alien figure whose hard sayings and seemingly incomprehensible actions were determined by a thoroughly eschatological conception of history.

According to Schweitzer, Jesus came into Galilee in possession of the mystery of the kingdom of God. The procession of seasons from seedtime to harvest was about to end forever. The parables of the sower and the self-growing seed suggest Jesus began his ministry during the annual planting because he was convinced the kingdom of God would be revealed at the coming harvest. He did not however proclaim this mystery openly, but kept it in his heart as he gathered disciples and continued the task begun by John, the preaching of repentance.

¹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Trans. by W. Montgomery. Macmillan, New York, 1956, p. 398. The original German edition, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, appeared in 1906, and the first English translation in 1910.

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To prepare Israel for the harvest, he sent his disciples to extend the call to repentance, not expecting them to return before he would be transformed into the Son of Man and appear in glory (Mt 10). They knew *what* they were to proclaim (the coming kingdom of God), but not *why* (it was at hand).

The harvest came; the disciples returned; but the parousia did not arrive. Puzzled but determined, Jesus staged a messianic feast in the countryside near Bethsaida (recorded as the miracle of the feeding of the multitudes) hoping thereby to hasten the coming of the end. But this too failed to achieve the expected consequence.

Jesus withdrew, Schweitzer went on, and along with his disciples he reconceived his mission. Perhaps he had been mistaken in believing that preaching repentance by itself would initiate the messianic tribulations. He concluded that God, by an act of mercy, had cancelled the clause in the messianic contract requiring all people to pass through the great tribulation and had instead written a new rider requiring the suffering and death of the Messiah alone. This was the secret of Jesus' passion and death.

Impelled by this conviction, Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem to play out his appointed role, but once again the course of history betrayed his dogmatic conception. As Schweitzer put it,

"Jesus . . . in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man, lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on the last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn and crushes Him. . . . The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think Himself the spiritual ruler of [human-kind] and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign (370)."

According to Schweitzer, Jesus never came forward publically as Messiah but lived out a secret dogmatic conception that viewed the kingdom of God as exclusively future and imminent. His ethics were never intended as "an ethic of the kingdom of God" but an "interim ethics" designed to prepare men and women for the coming catastrophe. Nor could Jesus have planned to establish the kingdom in any form on earth because it was solely in heaven. Far from consecrating a pious life, Jesus' death represented his last, desperate effort to inaugurate the final apocalypse.

Such views constituted a frontal assault on the theological and historical consensus of the day. Although virtually ignored in Germany, Schweitzer's book set off a lively debate in England during which Schweitzer was not so much refuted as repudiated. The character of the discussion is most instructive. It was as though the publication of Einstein's theory of relativity engaged other scientists neither in a constructive discussion of its ideas nor a critical evaluation of them but rather sent them scurrying to nearby orchards where they could sit down under fruit trees waiting for a convenient apple to

drop to reassure them that Newton had been right after all.

One curious episode may illustrate. A year after the German edition of the *Quest of the Historical Jesus* appeared, William Sanday, as temperate a scholar as could then be found, gave it an appreciative review in *The Life of Christ in Recent Research* (1907). Sanday contrasted the grandeur of Schweitzer's portrait of Jesus with the tepid depiction of Jesus as little more than a great teacher of morals. Though admittedly extreme, the work had reminded Sanday just "how far the centre of gravity of our Lord's mission and ministry . . . lay beyond the grave" and "to what an extent [Jesus] conceived of the kingdom of heaven, that central term in his teaching, as essentially supernatural (121)." This was hardly a hearty endorsement of Schweitzer's radical position, which Sanday attributed to his youth and Teutonic temperament.

Sanday's weak endorsement did not seem so innocent to W. R. Inge. In his review of Sanday's next book, *Christologies Ancient and Modern* (1910), he took the occasion to scold him for associating with the "school of Schweitzer" and lending his prestige to "a production which I am old-fashioned enough to think blasphemous." Inge believed that Sanday's favorable comments had allowed the book to obtain a "vogue" it would not otherwise have had "in this country."²

A year later, Sanday indicated he was indeed revising his earlier enthusiasm. In addition to recording his change of heart, Sanday chronicled the coalescence of the opposition to Schweitzer into a consensus. His smug opener reveals how quickly the scholarly community, caught off balance by Schweitzer's creative work, had regained its composure and scampered off to the familiar orchards to discover an abundance of falling apples: "The question of the apocalyptic element in the Gospels has given rise to rather acute controversy in recent years, but I think that at the present moment it may be said to be working itself out satisfactorily."³

But how had the recovery happened so rapidly? How had the issues been articulated and how were they resolved so "satisfactorily"? Between the appearance of the *Quest* in 1906 and the writing of Sanday's article in 1911, two series of events took place which together defined the two issues that would occupy center stage in the unfolding drama. Those issues could be stated in the form of two questions: 1) was the kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching future (as Schweitzer contended) or present reality (as the consensus had it); 2) was Jesus' teaching concerned with eschatology (as Schweitzer contended) or ethics (as consensus had it)? These two foci furthermore, defined an ellipse encompassing a larger question: what was the scope, in-

² *The Journal of Theological Studies* 11 (1909-1910) 586.

³ *Hibbert Journal* 10 (1911) 83.

tent, and nature of Jesus' ministry? This issue did not surface so early or so clearly, however, because Schweitzer and his critics agreed on this crucial point. I shall return to this later.

The first series of events was centered at Oxford, where Sanday taught. There in 1908 the Third International Congress for the History of Religions was held, and in the sub-section on "The Christian Religion" three papers were devoted to eschatology, two opposed to Schweitzer, one defending him.⁴ The two opponents, F. G. Peabody and Ernst von Dobschütz, mapped out a common strategy.

Peabody sought first to reconstruct Jesus' ethics, and then from that reconstruction to judge whether they implied an eschatological orientation as consistent as Schweitzer had maintained. He thus proposed to reverse Schweitzer's method of placing Jesus' ethics into an established eschatological framework. Naturally, said Peabody, Schweitzer had failed to find evidence for an "interim ethics," because he began with the assumption that "the ethics of Jesus exhibit on the whole a kind of sanity, universality and applicability, which are independent of abnormal circumstances and free from emotional strain . . . in these, and not in mysterious prophecies of an approaching desolation, the conscience of the world has found its Counselor and Guide."⁵ Ernst von Dobschütz followed a similar tack. Jesus proclaimed a kingdom of God brought to earth by Jesus' perfect union with God, not by any mysterious actions. Through Jesus, this union is available to all. Jesus thereby discarded "all external, political, miraculous significance, but [took] the inward, moral meaning as already fulfilled."⁶ Eliminate Jesus' eschatological ideas, he declared, and "his ethics remain unchanged."⁷ Von Dobschütz developed his ideas in four lectures delivered at Oxford and published in *The Expositor* in 1910. They reaffirmed Jesus as the teacher of an individual ethic and mediator of a personal inner communion with God.

The second series of events, a series of articles in *The Interpreter* during 1910 and 1911, represented a more detailed engagement.⁸ F. C. Burkitt, Schweitzer's main defender in Britain, argued in detail that the parables and sayings of Jesus point exclusively to the coming of a future kingdom, a con-

⁴ P. S. Allen, ed., *Transactions of the Third International Congress for the History of Religions*. 2 Volumes. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1908.

⁵ "New Testament Eschatology and New Testament Ethics," in P. S. Allen, ed., *op. cit.*, II, 309.

⁶ "The Significance of Early Christian Eschatology," in P. S. Allen, ed., *op. cit.*, II, 317.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁸ F. C. Burkitt, "The Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven," 131-148; B. H. Streeter, "Prof. Burkitt and the Parables of the Kingdom," 241-247; F. C. Burkitt, "The Parables of the Kingdom," 353-358; Willoughby C. Allen, "Mr. Streeter and the Eschatology of the Gospels," 359-364.

tention that was answered by B. H. Streeter. Burkitt countered Streeter's attempted refutation but was not favored with a further reply. Willoughby Allen argued against Streeter's basic position, namely that the gospel tradition moving from Q through Mark to Matthew grows more eschatological, Q being almost devoid of eschatological sayings, Mark being thoroughly uneschatological, and Matthew showing the most eschatological flavoring. This reading had enabled Streeter to conclude that "the nearer we get to [Jesus] the greater is the emphasis on the present, the gradual and the internal aspects of the Kingdom, and the greater the reserve with which the detail of contemporary apocalyptic is endorsed."⁹ Allen argued the reverse: Q was the most apocalyptic, and Matthew acquired its apocalyptic tenor from Q.

The argument between Burkitt and Streeter began with key parables and sayings and eventually resolved itself into a debate over the meaning of specific words, especially *ephthasen* in Mt 12:28: "If it is by the spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God *is coming/has come* upon you." They also clashed over *basileia*, Streeter arguing for "reign" because it fit better his understanding of an inner, ethical realm, and against "kingdom," which implied a physical, political entity. Schweitzer had favored the latter meaning.

In short, within five years following the publication of the *Quest*, the issues had been defined and joined: future or present kingdom, ethics or eschatology. Behind both issues lurked the larger question of the nature and scope of Jesus' ministry, but that was not addressed, and now I want to analyze why.

It would seem that Schweitzer was aware of the issue. He took some satisfaction in having gone beyond Johannes Weiss, who had shown that Jesus had proclaimed a future kingdom by interpreting Jesus' entire ministry, words and actions, from this point of view. Schweitzer not only placed Jesus' ministry in the context of Jewish apocalyptic. He also lifted it out of that background in one particular and placed it in bold relief. While all other Jewish apocalyptic movements had been connected with social upheaval and political events (the book of Daniel, for instance, was written against the background of the persecutions of Antiochus IV, and IV Ezra and Baruch in response to the destruction of Jerusalem), the Jesus movement was not. How then did it arise? "The apocalyptic movement in the time of Jesus," Schweitzer wrote, "was not connected with any historical event . . . What is really remarkable about this wave of apocalyptic enthusiasm is the fact that it was called forth not by external events, but solely by the appearance of two great personalities . . . They themselves set the times in motion by act-

⁹ B. H. Streeter, *op. cit.*, 245. Note that this position is exactly opposite to the current position held by most New Testament scholars. In his refutation of Streeter, Allen had foreseen what is now the common view.

ing, by creating eschatological facts (*Quest*, 370).” Despite his efforts to place Jesus in history, Schweitzer reveals here how close he is to his opponents: both construct their Christologies on the “great personality” theory of religion. Jesus does not really belong in history, nor is he subject to the external conditions of history, but transcends them. When Streeter argued against the eschatological reading of Jesus, he used the same rationale:

“Above all in the mind of our Lord do we trace the individuality and independence that belong to all commanding genius. He is no mere re-echoer of the ideas of his time, eschatological or otherwise.”¹⁰

The overriding consequence of the “great personality” approach assumed by both Schweitzer and his opponents was to remove Jesus from history. This in turn affected the meaning of his ministry. Clearly Jesus’ ministry could not be related to the external realities of the world but derived from the transcendent relation Jesus enjoyed while in the world. Jesus’ union with God became the model or the means by which we might enter into communion with God while in this world and so transcend the conditions of mundane existence as Jesus had done. Piety focused on ways to enhance such detachment from worldly cares, and ethics on the means to live a purer life. Von Dobschütz put it this way: “Christianity is a religion of faith, the gospel giving not only guarantees for the future life in another world but bringing itself confidence, peace, joy, salvation, forgiveness, righteousness—whatever man’s heart yearns for.”¹¹ If Melancthon was correct in claiming that “to know Christ is to know his benefits,” it also appears that a docetic Christ provides docetic benefits. That Schweitzer did in fact arrive at this same position is shown by the closing words, where he states the enduring meaning of Jesus:

“He comes to us as the one unknown . . . as of old by the lakeside . . . He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill in our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him . . . He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship (403).”

After all was said and done, Schweitzer found Jesus in personal communion and the call to moral duty.

Far from undermining either liberal or conservative Christianity, Schweitzer had strengthened the one conviction they shared in common, that Jesus was the Master of the inner life and quite unrelated to the affairs of the world beyond some generalizing of the demands of personal morality.

¹⁰ B. H. Streeter, *op. cit.*, 246.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, 320.

The subliminal message of the *Quest* fortified this position. Jesus had been unable to change the world, and when this “one immeasurably great Man” had tried to will a new order, he had been broken on the wheel of the world’s realities. The structures of the world could not be changed. True, Schweitzer had masked this message by insisting that the apocalyptic movement of Jesus could not be traced to any political or historical circumstances, but this subterfuge failed to conceal his basic point.

One example will have to serve to underline this reinforcement, although the evidence for it is overwhelming. In 1911 E. F. Scott wrote *The Kingdom and the Messiah*. Like Sanday’s article of the same year, it reveals the extent of the conterattack against Schweitzer. For Scott, Jesus came to change the human heart, and “it is this inward change involved in the coming of the kingdom to which the thought of Jesus was mainly directed.”¹² Hence Jesus refused all nationalistic warlike roles associated with the messiah, even transmuting the title of Son of David into its “ethical and religious equivalent (182-184).” Jesus did not oppose Rome but exorcised demons and assaulted the powers of wickedness in spiritual places. For the same reason Jesus was “against the Zealots with their reliance on political agitation” and in sympathy with the Pharisees “who left deliverance solely to the good pleasure of God (144).”

Of course Scott does have to deal with the crucifixion. Jesus was put to death by hostile authorities. But why would they want to put to death a man who taught a piety of the heart, encouraged inner purity, and opposed all subversive movements? To the degree that Scott removes Jesus from the realities of his day, he also renders the crucifixion a puzzle. Jesus must have been crucified on the basis of a misunderstanding, for who would execute a teacher spreading a message of inner renewal devoid of political, economic, and social overtones? He should rather have been supported by a Roman grant to advance their rural pacification program. This was a religion that could be described as an “opiate of the people.”

If Schweitzer believed that he had undermined liberal or conservative religion by subsuming Jesus’ ethics under his eschatology, thereby reducing them to an “interim ethics,” he was mistaken. He achieved less a reconsideration of ethics than an elimination of eschatology. As Schweitzer demonstrated the futile implications of making eschatology the center of an investigation of Jesus’ ministry, he in effect cut off discussion of the reign of God as a socially transforming reality that could influence the course of events in the world and contributed to the retreat of Christian religion to the inner domain of the heart and will.

The loss of apocalyptic precipitated by Schweitzer’s work led to the loss of the possibility of reading Jesus’ ministry as a socially transforming praxis.

¹² *The Kingdom and the Messiah*, Edinburgh, 1911, p. 99.

The reason for the rejection of apocalyptic was clear: the world had not come to an end. Schweitzer had made the double miscalculation of Jesus the cornerstone of his reconstruction. Much later, Bultmann would reiterate the same theme. "The mythical eschatology," wrote Bultmann, "is untenable for the simple reason that the parousia of Christ never took place as expected. History did not come to an end, and as every schoolboy knows, it will continue to run its course."¹³ Schweitzer, Bultmann, and a host of others dismissed the apocalyptic materials of the gospels because they assumed that their primary referent is the natural world, and since the natural world continues, apocalyptic must be discontinued. It is this assumption that I will now examine in more detail.

As long as apocalyptic is approached as an issue pertaining to the natural world, it can be dismissed. When however it is interpreted as a way of speaking about the social world, it will retain its significance. The world may remain but "world" is quite another domain altogether. "World" may live and die while the world continues its natural movements and cosmic rhythms.

What then is "world"? World is a social construction of reality¹⁴ involving two basic processes: 1) the objectification of society through its institutions, roles and traditions; and 2) the legitimation of society by "giving normative dignity to its practical imperatives." Taken together, a society's traditions, institutions and practical arrangement form a symbolic universe. World then is a deep structure of assumptions and expectations about the present social, political, economic order as well as the properly ordained arrangement for life in this setting. As such, world is always accompanied by a set of powerful sanctions which seek to root the present order in the will of higher powers. This was especially true during the Hellenistic era when, as Clinton Morrison has noted, the state was understood to be in the Cosmos. "Astrology's emphasis upon correspondence between heaven and earth served to draw the State into an integrated universe Again we see that the State not only existed in the Cosmos, but played a decisive part in understanding the character of the universe The Myth of the Empire comprehended the whole of history, in nature and in humanity, in heaven and on earth . . . as the history of the Empire."¹⁵ Language about the natural world was not easily separated from language about the social world.

¹³ "New Testament and Mythology," translated by R. H. Fuller, in Hans Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth*, Harper & Row, New York, (Harper Torchbook Edition), 1961, p. 5.

¹⁴ See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1966. Other sociologists prefer the phrase, "social interpretation" of reality. See James T. Borhek and Richard F. Curtis, *The Sociology of Belief*, Krieger, New York, 1983 (1975).

¹⁵ Clinton D. Morrison, *The Powers That Be*, SCM Press, London, 1960, 82, note 3.

The role of religion in sanctioning world is crucial, for with its blessing and legitimating force, any social construction of reality, including its prejudices, distribution of wealth, class or rank stratification, policies and exploitation, becomes the Divine construction of reality. As Berger explains,

The fundamental "recipe" of religious legitimation is the transformation of human products into supra- or non-human facticities. The humanly made world is explained in terms that deny its human production. The human *nomos* becomes a divine cosmos, or at any rate, a reality that derives its meanings from beyond the human sphere.¹⁶

The ideological plausibility provided by religion may explain, in part, why world is usually accepted not merely as "what is" but more insidiously as "what must be," or "what ought to be," or "what has been ordained to be."

It was just this sense of world, a human construction of reality passed off as the divine order, that was being perpetuated from both Jerusalem and Rome. In Rome, Caesar was portrayed as little less than a god to whom reverence was due, certainly as a divine benefactor responsible for the salvation of the peoples of the Empire. Roman religion was an orchestrated syncretism including astrology, temple cults, augurs, oracles, and legends whose common purpose was to demonstrate the consent of the gods, the stars and planets, and the principalities and powers, to Roman rule. When we encounter Jesus' apocalyptic sayings depicting stars falling from heaven, the sun (associated almost always with the Emperor) refusing to shine, the moon turning to blood, he is assaulting the cosmic imagery (and undermining the symbolic universe) invoked to legitimate Roman rule. Similarly plagues, famines, and earthquakes meant that the earth no longer consented to the "peace of Rome" which had been fortified by appeals to the fruitfulness of the earth and the security of its peoples.

In Jerusalem the Sadducees, in collusion with Herodians and wealthy Pharisees, constructed their version of the divinely ordained society, or their "world." The Sadducees controlled the Temple, whose demand for tithes imposed hardship on the rural poor, mostly tenant farmers who barely managed to subsist on the estates of the urban elites. The Sadducees understood themselves to be the divinely appointed guardians of the High Priesthood and the prerogatives attendant upon control of the Temple's functions. If the Sadducees controlled the Temple, the Pharisees governed the constitution that regulated its activities, the Torah. Together they controlled the redemptive media of their society. The significance of that control is outlined by Sheldon Isenberg in a discussion indebted to Kenelm Burridge:

¹⁶ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1967, 89.

A society conceives itself as having been constituted by a power or powers which transcend it. In its religious behavior . . . it brings order into its comprehension of that power. Generating a series of rules for maintaining an appropriate relationship to the power, it allows its members to plug into the beneficial effects and avoid the dangerous ones. Through the socialization process [men and women] in society feel themselves under obligation All of it is bound up in obligation to the constituting power Society also provides the ways by which debt may be discharged The ways which society provides for the discharge of the indebtedness are the redemptive media.¹⁷

As long as "the people of the land" could be socialized into a sense of indebtedness, they were obliged to pay their tithes and live in squalor while their ruling elites lived in conspicuous wealth. As long as the Sadducees could justify their use of the Temple to wield their power and accumulate their society's surplus and as long as the Pharisees could disguise their oral interpretations as divine revelation given to Moses at Sinai, they were in a position to explain the misery of the "people of the land" and to legitimate their mastery.

When Jesus taught in Galilee, he proclaimed a judgment. "The time is fulfilled; the reign of heaven is at hand; repent and believe." This is a word for hope for the "people of the land" because it tells them that time is running out on world as they have known it. The future need not be a replay of the past. Jesus proclaims a new future whose advent requires a reorienting and re-visioning of world: repent and believe.

But how does Jesus carry through this project? He conducts a first century "pedagogy of the oppressed," whose first problem is identified by Paulo Freire: "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation they can transform."¹⁸ This involves a relativizing of world, and it is in his parables that Jesus undertakes this task. Many scholars have noted that Jesus does not describe the "kingdom of God" as do the apocalyptic writers. One finds no lengthy depictions of the new heaven and new earth in his teaching. But this observation fails to comprehend the larger coherence of Jesus' ministry. The miracles and parables together describe in word and action the praxis of the reign of God. The miracles are examples of a momentary eschatology when the

¹⁷ Sheldon Isenberg, "Power Through Temple and Torah in Greco-Roman Palestine," in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty. Part Two: Early Christianity*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1975, 27. The discussion is indebted to Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities*, Schocken Books, New York, 1969.

¹⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Seabury Press, New York, 1970, 34.

powers of the new age touch human life and transform it, while the parables offer glimpses of another world where the power relations and social givens of this world are suspended and examined, perhaps even subverted and shattered.

Two examples may clarify. The parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Lk 18:10-13) challenges world as sanctioned by Temple and Pharisaic piety. It is set in the Temple, the center of world, and the presence of the Pharisee identifies him with the sanctions of that world-maintaining system. His prayer is a reiteration of the values of his sect, and he imagines that his habit of tithing is a stinging rebuke to the publican. The publican is a despicable figure, hated by everyone, a pariah who cooperates in visible ways with the elites who turn sentiment against his likes to take the heat off themselves.

The hearers of the parable therefore expect the Pharisee to utter an acceptable prayer and the publican to fail at prayer. How can he succeed? He has neither soul nor piety. Yet the opposite occurs; it is jarring. As the parable crosses up world, it judges Pharisaic piety and devotion while justifying an unregenerate sidewinder who is from everyone's point of view hopelessly lost. The structure of Temple and Torah, including the practices of tithing and fasting so dear to the Pharisees, comes crashing down upon the hearers of the parable. If they let it sink in, not one stone will be left upon another that will not be thrown down. We do not need the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus to know why he was accused of threatening to destroy the Temple.

The parable also poses some hard questions. Paulo Freire has contrasted two types of education, banking education (big jug, little mug theory) and problem-posing education. "Problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality That which had existed objectively but had not been perceived in its deeper implications . . . begins to stand out, assuming the character of a problem and therefore a challenge (*Pedagogy*, 68-70)." So in this parable, the Temple and its obligation-incurring regulations begin to stand out as a problem. If Temple and Torah cannot justify a person, what can? A simple appeal for mercy? By itself? If so, then what is the purpose of the Temple and devotion to Torah? If publicans can be justified and Pharisees are not, how is one to live in a world that judges them in precisely the opposite way?

The parable of the persistent widow (Lk 18:2-5) pursues a similar strategy but with a different focus. The scene was familiar. A widow was involved in a lawsuit, probably with her husband's relatives over the disposal of the estate. Normally, in the absence of sons, it would revert to his family. The judge twice protests about neither fearing God nor regarding human status, a probable allusion to the fact that the unseen adversaries of the widow are wealthy. So the judge dawdles, hoping to receive a bribe from someone. The widow however has nothing, and her adversaries think they have an open-and-shut case so they are not tempted to offer inducements. Driven by her sheer desperation, the widow pesters the judge mercilessly to procure a

favorable settlement. Of course the hearers know her case is hopeless, because the law is always on the side of the wealthy. But lo and behold, the judge abandons the law, risks the wrath of the wealthy claimants, and vindicates the widow, thereby failing miserably on all counts. He has not decided the case on its merits but for the lowest of motives. He wants to get the widow off his back.

Imagine how such a parable might strike the ears of a Sadducee or Pharisee. The Sadducee would have been baffled. Why would the judge, charged with protecting the interests of their class, render such an incomprehensible verdict? It was unthinkable that any true judge would permit the inconvenience of a boisterous, ill-behaved claimant to deflect him from his task of preserving the inheritance of wealth and property for those who know what to do with them. It was a silly, inconsequential story.

Unlike the Sadducee, a Pharisee could read the parable as a story about judgment, for Pharisees believed in a judgment beyond human reckoning. But they would have been no more pleased, since they believed that vindication came by obedience to Torah. Yet in the parable, the widow does not plea for vindication based on Torah, nor does the judge even make the pretence of rendering judgment by that appropriate norm. How can one live one's life by the plumb line of Torah only to have an arbitrary judge show mercy to a desperate woman? It is neither fair nor just! In the topsy-turvy world of this parable, the meaning of judgment and vindication is thrown into chaos. This much seems clear: the justice of the parable is not the justice of this world. Perhaps, Jesus suggests, an inscrutable mercy, seemingly arbitrary and a bit scandalous to our ears, is the secret of judgment, and perhaps this outrageous mercy is greater than all the righteousness Torah can provide.

In this parable and others, like the parable of the dishonest steward (Lk 16:1-8), Jesus presented a subversive eschatology. Why? Because the eschatology of the Pharisees (or the Essenes for that matter) was little more than their social construction of world projected into the future. The Last Judgment became a confirmation of their daily judgments, an eschatological legitimation of the way they had put world together. By calling his opponents' eschatology into question, Jesus was subverting their vision of world. Dominic Crossan has argued that Jesus presents a comic eschatology, and through his parables the hearer can catch clues to a world whose emperors have no clothes save those tailored by their own ostentatious claims to power and privilege and bolstered by their conspicuous consumption.

A brief summary of Paulo Freire's pedagogy may help us see the strategy of Jesus more clearly. People live within an "epoch" constituted by a complex of interacting themes which form its thematic universe. These themes, which Freire calls generative themes, contain and are contained in "limit situations," and to change them requires "limit-acts." The dominant classes exploit this thematic universe (world) by presenting it as a fixed and closed system, the way things are and ought to be. This is why, as Freire

notes, "the dominated consciousness which has not yet perceived a limit-situation in its totality apprehends only its epiphenomena and transfers to the latter the inhibiting force which is the property of a limit situation. (*Pedagogy*, 94)." Hence the first task of a pedagogy is to help a people objectify their condition so that, as Viero Pinto writes, limit situations are not "the impassable boundaries where possibilities end but the real boundaries where all possibilities begin (*Pedagogy*, 89, n.15)." This involves the process of decoding the themes which define and justify world, the movement from mystification to conscientization, and investigating the generative themes for clues to reshaping world. Central to this task is the dialogical teacher. "The task of the dialogical teacher and interdisciplinary team working on the thematic universe revealed by their investigation is to 're-present' that universe to the people . . . as a problem (*Pedagogy*, 101)." One major means for making this representation is through the use of codifications, sketches or photographs, which become the focus of common discussion. The parables (I am suggesting) are Jesus' codifications, in narrative form, for discussion. I have tried to summarize the results of such possible discussions as seen from our vantage point in time, but the parables were open-ended, intended to elicit conversation and comment. Although we have the codifications of Jesus, no one was present to write a verbatim of the lively interchanges that must have followed.

Let's return for a moment to the codification of the publican and the Pharisee. Jesus represented to his listeners the system of economic exploitation in a nutshell: the Temple, the Pharisee who demanded the tithe, and the publican who collected the taxes or levies imposed by Rome. Since the issue is not ostensibly the economic situation, the people are likely to judge the Pharisee in the context of the Temple as a pious, righteous figure. Similarly, their hostility is riveted on the visible pariah who merely carries out the policies of the invisible elites. When the parable "represents" these familiar social types as a repentant publican and a haughty Pharisee, how are the people to respond? How does this parable pose a problem? What does it suggest about their "limit-situation"?

The parable of the sower (Mk 4:1-9) also "re-presents" this limit-situation. It has a familiar ring. What peasant did not know how much seed would be lost between planting and harvest? The verbs of the parable refer to this scarcity and to the violence behind the entire cycle of exploitation. As the seed is sown, the birds *devour*, the sun *scorches*, and the thorns *choke* it. Who was not familiar with these typical scenes? But the final harvest is a complete mystery. How could soil that yields 7 to 10 in a good year ever yield 30, 60, and 100 fold?

Suppose, however, the parable of the sower was calling the peasants to analyze their scarcity and its causes. Had they blamed the birds, the soil, the weather, the thorns and weeds for their situation? Perhaps they needed to look elsewhere. Who was responsible for *devouring* their harvests, for *chok-*

ing their attempts to put away enough to survive, and whose *scorched earth* economic policy brought them perpetual misery as they eked out a living on the edge of starvation and ruin? Did they not always harvest more than enough for their needs? Where did it go? Was that the way it had to be?

With a remarkable literalness, Schweitzer argued that the parable of the sower indicated Jesus began his ministry during sowing because he believed the final parousia would arrive at harvest time. I would argue that Jesus saw in tenant peasants' sowing and reaping for urban elites a pattern of world that needed to come to an end. Here was a limit-situation where world was being posed as a question. In his form-critical reconstruction of the parable, Jeremias found it to be an eschatological proclamation. The sowing begun in Jesus' ministry will lead to an unexpectedly bountiful final harvest. Jeremias was correct in identifying the apocalyptic nature of the parable but wrong in referring it to the end of the physical world.

Dominic Crossan got close to the tenor of the parables and Jesus' ministry in his study of the parables. They proclaim what he called "permanent eschatology."

Jesus is proclaiming what might be termed *permanent eschatology*, the permanent presence of God as the one who challenges world and shatters its complacency Jesus was not proclaiming that God was about to shatter *this* world, but seeing this as one view of world, he was announcing God as the One who shatters world, this one or any other before or after it.¹⁹

But Crossan tends to see this process occurring in the individual as the transformation of perception rather than occurring in the common political and economic structures of the social world. His is an interior eschatology in the tradition of so much biblical scholarship.

It may be appropriate to end by returning to Schweitzer. In the light of his reconstruction of Jesus and its implications, which I have merely sketched here, the larger hermeneutical issues emerge, for no one had identified the interpretive issues attendant upon a reconstruction of Jesus' life and ministry so clearly or so forcefully as Schweitzer. In his first chapter, entitled "The Problem," he observed, "But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character (4)." The reason was not far to find. It lay in the nature of the gospel materials themselves. "From these materials we can only get a Life of Jesus with yawning gaps. How are these gaps to be filled? At the worst with phrases, at the best with historical imagination. There is really no other means of arriving at the order and inner connexion of the facts of Jesus than the making and testing of hypotheses (7)." This article illustrates once again the truth of this dilemma.

¹⁹ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, Harper & Row, New York, 1973, 26.

What Schweitzer did not say but could have is that the Jesus tradition was never a static thing. From the beginning, the Risen Lord continued to speak to the early communities through their prophets. When the first gospel, Mark, was written, it already presented to us an historical Jesus and Risen Lord as a single figure. In this way, Jesus became the eternal contemporary of the church in its many circumstances. The attempt to write a life of Jesus or to interpret his ministry is but another way of "re-presenting" Jesus to a world far removed from the one he knew as an historical figure in Galilee and Judea.

In re-presenting the ministry of Jesus, I have also intended to pose a problem associated with that ministry. Have we failed to see the possibilities inherent in presenting Jesus as an apocalyptic figure? Might this reconsideration of apocalyptic not enable us to catch a glimpse of a Jesus engaged in a liberation praxis, reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it? And if Jesus was indeed so engaged, can we remain satisfied with any presentation of Jesus' ministry that limits his work to the task of changing the human heart without concern for the body within which it beats? Perhaps the surprise discovery of such an exploration will be the awareness that it is in changing world that we will change our hearts.