

Letter to Adolf von Harnack on Jesus as Messiah and Paul as a New Beginning

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Translated by
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Esteemed friend!

I wanted to answer your third card – for which I am sincerely thankful – immediately, but I could not find the time. I feel, however, compelled now to reply to it with a few words.

As a matter of fact, I am not at all far from the formulations in your *Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1,² pp. 89–90 [ET = 93–94].³ However, on p. 88 [ET = 92], I would make

¹The original copy of this letter from William Wrede to Adolf von Harnack can be found in the Nachlass of Adolf von Harnack, which is held in the Berlin State Library – Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz). I have translated this letter from the excellent German edition published in H. Rollmann and W. Zager, eds., “Unveröffentlichte Briefe William Wredes zur Problematisierung des messianischen Selbstverständnisses Jesu,” *ZNTbG/JHMTb* 8 (2001), 274–322, here 315–17. I have also incorporated (and sometimes supplemented) the information that Rollmann and Zager provide in their footnotes. Rollmann and Zager assign this letter the title [Brief William Wredes an Adolf Harnack, Berlin]. I have given the English translation a title that highlights two of the most noteworthy features of its content – namely, what Wrede says about Jesus as the Messiah and what he says about Paul as a new beginning. For two contrasting appraisals of the nature and significance of Wrede’s messianic reconsideration in this letter, see Rollmann and Zager, “Unveröffentlichte Briefe,” 274–82, esp. 279–80, and M. Hengel and A. M. Schwemer, *Jesus and Judaism*, ed. W. Coppins and S. Gathercole, trans. W. Coppins, BMSEC 7 (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 196–97, 527, 537. Cf. also M. Hengel, “Zur historische Rückfrage nach Jesus von Nazareth: Überlegungen nach der Fertigstellung eines Jesusbuch,” in *Gespräch über Jesus: Papst Benedikt XVI. im Dialog mit Martin Hengel, Peter Stuhlmacher und seinen Schüler in Castelgandolfo* 2008, ed. P. Kuhn (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 1–29, here 23; J. Schröter, *From Jesus to the New Testament: Early Christian Theology and the Origin of the New Testament Canon*, ed. W. Coppins and S. Gathercole, trans. W. Coppins, BMSEC 1 (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 104.

²A. von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1: *Die Entstehung der kirchlichen Dogmas* (Freiburg am Breisgau: Mohr, 1894); ET = A. von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1, translated from the third German edition by N. Buchanan (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1901).

³Cf., e.g., Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte*, 89 (cf. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 93): “The crucified and risen Christ became the midpoint of his [sc. Paul’s] theology, and yet not only the midpoint, but also the only source and ruling principle. For him this Christ was not Jesus of Nazareth, the exalted, but the mighty personal spiritual being in divine form who had lowered himself for a time, and who as Spirit has broken up

a new sectional division with Paul after the first significant transition from Jesus to the community of Christ-believers. I find the difference vis-à-vis your presentation in *Wesen des Christentums* (Lecture X) to be stronger and to some extent strong.⁴

By the way, I understand very well that from a certain point of view one can and may say that all differences as they enter history are husks and clothes. What ultimately matters are a few simple truths and sentiments, and vis-à-vis philosophy, materialism, pantheism, Buddhism, etc., Paul and Jesus also belong together. This, however, appears to me as a final value judgment about things in which the historical *connections* are actually completely unimportant to us, in which the thought of continuity and development recedes. From this standpoint, Luther and Thomas or Bernhard as well as Augustine and Schleiermacher also belong together. If, however, we ask about the historical relationship between two such entities, then I think the differences become significant, and vis-à-vis Jesus Paul will then appear to me not as interpreter and continuator but as a fundamentally new beginning, only hidden through the fact that the second believes himself to be the proclaimer and interpreter of the first.

The Christianity of history appears to me like a great conglomerate formation in which something new always begins and transitions to transitions can be observed from all sides. The foothills that are most distant from the core of the original bedrock hardly still show a similarity (I am thinking, for example, of rationalism and Greek monasticism) and show no greater similarity – apart from the purely external bond of the veneration of the same person – than that shows, in terms of chemical composition, with certain component parts of other buildings that emerged in a similar way (such as Islam). They are as far from one another as two different religions of roughly the same level or, alternatively, as a religion from a form of philosophy. The metaphor breaks down, for in the world of rocks these *organic* transitions do not exist as they can be seen in historical formations. But one can indeed imagine for a moment a conglomerate as an animate and organically growing thing. I am convinced that you will not reject this perspective. To me, our difference appears to lie in the fact that in Paul I already find an approach that is characterized by a predominantly deviating chemical composition and that this approach then introduces an abundance of formations that, despite all distinctives and deviations, are, nevertheless, related to this approach and not to the original bedrock.

I am more inclined than earlier to believe that Jesus regarded himself as designated to be the Messiah. To be sure, it necessarily came along with this that those who venerated him as such incorporated an aspect into their religion that did not belong to his religion or had an entirely different meaning there. (For my part, however, I doubt that Jesus was “Son of God” in the specific sense suggested by you.) Certainly, existing

the world of the law, sin, and death, and from now on overcomes them in believers.” On this, see W. Wrede, *Paulus*, RV 1/5–6 (Halle an der Saale: Gebauer-Schwetschke Verlag, 1904), 53–68, 89–97, 103–106; ET = W. Wrede, *Paul*, trans. E. Lummis (London: Philip Green, 1907), 85–115, 155–69, 176–82.

⁴See A. von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums. Sechzehn Vorlesungen von Studierenden aller Fakultäten im Wintersemester 1899/1900 an der Universität Berlin gehalten von Adolf Harnack* (Leipzig: Heinrichs, 1900); ET = A. von Harnack, *What is Christianity? Lectures Delivered in the University of Berlin during the Winter Term 1899/1900*, trans. T. B. Saunders, 2nd revised ed. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1902).

ideas about the Messiah also now joined themselves easily with the impression of the person. But that would nevertheless be a displacement, even if it adapted itself in the most natural manner. Even if they should be nothing more than the simple reflex of the impression of the person of Jesus, they would still introduce a new aspect that made its own impact and drew new ideas to itself. Thus, the primitive community surely already represents a new formation with respect to Jesus, even if it has also grown up so naturally. To me, however, Paul, in turn, appears to represent a powerful step beyond the primitive community (which you do not in general deny) in the fact that he detaches faith from the human person of Jesus, is not decisively shaped by its distinctive piety, takes up ideas of a different origin to a very different degree than the primitive community, and uses them to grasp the person. Since these ideas predominate in him and fill what is shared with the primitive community with a new spirit, I cannot acknowledge him as an interpreter and continuator of Jesus in the sense that one is otherwise accustomed to use these predicates in history. However, I vividly feel what a poor thing paper is, at least for me, and how much easier it would be to come, if not to an agreement, then indeed to a clarification of the differences if I could sit next to you for a few minutes and the counter-speech could be sparked off by the speech!

I wish you all the best for the new year! May your work bear rich fruit!

Warmly Yours,

W. Wrede

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