

# ALBERT SCHWEITZER

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Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) was born January 14, 1875 at Kaysersberg in Upper Alsace, Germany, the son of a Lutheran pastor. In 1893, he began his studies at the University of Strassburg, taking classes in New Testament with the well-known German scholar Heinrich Julius Holtzmann. From 1902 until 1912, he served in Strassburg as a lecturer in New Testament, as pastor of a church, and as director of the Thomasstift. Apart from being a New Testament scholar, Schweitzer also earned a medical doctorate and was an accomplished organist and authority on the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Starting in 1913, with occasional interruptions, Schweitzer served as a missionary doctor in Lambaréné, equatorial West Africa. During this time Schweitzer continued his work as a scholar, contributing, among other works, a study on *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*. Schweitzer also received the 1952 Nobel peace prize on December 10, 1953. He died at Lambaréné on September 4, 1965.

Doubtless Schweitzer's most influential scholarly work was his survey of studies on the life of Jesus, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A critical study of its progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, a work he wrote not even being thirty years old. In this book, written in a lively style, Schweitzer discusses and critiques approximately 250 (mostly German) works on Jesus in the previous (nineteenth) century. In the end, he concludes that writing a life of Jesus is impossible, because we do not have the data for a biography in the modern sense. Those who were trying to do so nonetheless, according to Schweitzer, ended up domesticating Jesus, removing him from his time and transposing him into their own in order to render him intelligible to a modern audience. But Jesus refuses to be domesticated, and thus all liberal modern lives are blind alleys, falsifications rather than expositions of Jesus' life.

For his part, Schweitzer endeavored to understand Jesus within his own first-century Jewish framework, presenting him under the rubric of what he calls "thoroughgoing eschatology" (though what he meant more closely approximates what today is understood as "apocalyptic," that is, the expectation that the world will come to an end through the cataclysmic, end-time intervention of God). Within this framework, Schweitzer understood Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God as the proclamation that in him, Jesus, the end of time had dawned and was imminent. Yet Jesus died, and history failed to come to an end. By implication, Jesus was mistaken. While not followed in every respect by anyone, Schweitzer's work has cast a long, influential shadow on subsequent generations of German and Anglo-American scholarship. The importance of Jesus' Jewishness and his first-century Palestinian milieu is widely recognized today. At the same time, many would concur that Schweitzer underestimated the role of Jesus' resurrection in spawning a movement that extends to every corner of the globe.

## *Bibliography:*

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