ADOLF SCHLATTER AND JUDAISM:
GREAT ERUDITION AND FIERCE OPPOSITION

Adolf Schlatter’s Jewish erudition is unparalleled among New Testament scholars of Second Temple Judaism, Hermann Lichtenberger states. However, it is not only his learning that makes a study of Schlatter a must in this book; through his vast literary production, Schlatter exerted great influence both on the broad German Christian public and on Christian leaders. As the teacher of generations of pastors, and a widely read author of Christian literature in Germany, in a way rarely seen for a New Testament exegete who passed away seventy years ago, his books are being republished, especially in the United States, and Schlatter’s importance for ‘biblical theology’ is often stressed. During his lifetime,

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1 Hermann Lichtenberger, “Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) und das Judentum” (Bonn 2003), 20. Professor Lichtenberger has kindly allowed me to use this unpublished lecture manuscript from the SNTS 2003. For Schlatter’s biography, I am indebted to Werner Neuer’s comprehensive book Werner Neuer, Adolf Schlatter: Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1996), a much shorter version being Werner Neuer, Adolf Schlatter: A Biography of Germany’s Premier Biblical Theologian (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1996). Within the scope of this investigation, I cannot discuss more than Schlatter’s attitude to Jews and Judaism. For the sections of his book relevant to this study, Neuer relies on his reading of Schlatter’s abundant correspondence with his son, Theodor Schlatter, whereas my discussion deals primarily with the public aspect of his work, that is, what might have affected the public. Therefore, if Schlatter seems to be saying something else in the correspondence, I will still consider what is on the printed page. Moreover, as the reader will notice, my reading of Schlatter sometimes differs from Neuer’s, which tends to downplay some of Schlatter’s negative sides. Lichtenberger, too, notes that Neuer at times treats Schlatter in a somewhat ‘friendly’ manner, Lichtenberger, “Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) und das Judentum”. Schlatter and his relationship to the Jews has lately attracted the interest of other scholars, besides Lichtenberger, also James McNutt, James E. McNutt, “Adolf Schlatter and the Jews”, German Studies Review 26, no. 2 (2003), James E. McNutt, “Vessels of Wrath, Prepared to Perish. Adolf Schlatter and the Spiritual Extermination of the Jews”, Theology Today 63, no. 2 (2006). See also Leonore Siegle-Wenschkewitz, “Adolf Schllatters Sicht des Judentums”, in Christlicher Antijudaismus und Antisemitismus. Theologische und kirchliche Programme Deutscher Christen, ed. Leonore Siegle-Wenschkewitz, Arnoldshainer Texte (Frankfurt am Main: Haag + Herchen Verlag, 1994).

2 On this, see McNutt, “Vessels of Wrath, Prepared to Perish. Adolf Schlatter and the Spiritual Extermination of the Jews”, 182.

his influence was also felt abroad, for example in Sweden, where his four-volume work “The New Testament Interpreted and Explained” was widespread. In this context, Schlatter is especially important because he was a teacher and mentor to several scholars who were influential during National Socialism—Gerhard Kittel, Walter Grundmann and Paul Althaus—and because his own position during the ‘Third Reich’ is in fact complex. However, Schlatter had a long scholarly life prior to this, and so I will discuss Schlatter’s work in two parts, before and during National Socialism.

According to Schlatter, his interest in Judaism began in the context of Jewish missions. His older friend Johannes Schnell, an historian of jurisprudence, had introduced Schlatter to the missions to Jews in Basel, where he spoke at an annual meeting of Die Freunde Israels in 1882. Recognising in the course of this day “that we do not at all know the Jews”, Schlatter decided to gain knowledge of the Jews, telling himself:

You must go into the Jewish literature; Philo and the apocalyptics (whom I knew) are not enough; Judaism, to which the New Testament stood in fruitful fellowship and heated struggle, was the Palestinian one, Pharisaism, which you must get to know on the basis of its own testimonies.

Schlatter notes that in this he stood alone, since it was common to only describe Judaism on the basis of the text available in Greek, “even though Judaism itself had rejected this literature”. Finding the rabbinical literature aesthetically unattractive and challenging to the logical capacities of the reader, Schlatter nevertheless believed that the New Testament historian needed first-hand knowledge of it, since


4 Ibid., 120.