

Die Offenbarung des Johannes
Johannes Weiss
The Princeton Theological Review 3:321-325. [1905]

In a treatise on the Apocalypse, issued as the third installment of the new Bousset-Gunkel series, one might naturally expect that great emphasis would be thrown on the derivation of the contents of the book from Babylonian or other Oriental sources, chiefly through oral tradition, over against the almost exclusively literary method of explaining its make-up which until recently prevailed. Bousset and Gunkel are the most prominent representatives of this new school of apocalyptic exposition. In the first installment of the new series Gunkel has, in his well-known bold and dazzling manner, blazed the path for the application of the new method to New Testament study. The treatise before us, while not in any way criticizing or discountenancing Gunkel's theory, purposely adheres to the old line of literary analysis. Weiss reminds us that, whatever the ultimate sources of the apocalyptic ideas, the book, in its entirety as a literary composition, demands explanation, and challenges us to loose its seals. He complains that it has become almost a vogue among recent writers on the Apocalypse to profess eagerly that nothing can be known regarding the literary sources of the book and the process of its construction. This wave of critical agnosticism, he is afraid, has been helpful to no one except to those who, on account of dogmatic prejudice, desire to uphold the unity of the Apocalypse. To make up for the neglect he offers a new divisive hypothesis, resembling in certain respects its predecessors, yet possessing certain new features. The oldest element is a Johannine Apocalypse, written by the so-called presbyter John before the year 70. This contained chaps. 1:4-6, 9-19; 2:7; 9; 12:7-12; 13:11-18; 14:14-20; 21:1-4; 22:3-5 and parts of v. 22 *seq.* With the exception of its prophecy of a millennium, this Johannine Apocalypse moved within the lines of the ordinary primitive Christian eschatology. In fact, the author makes agreement with the eschatological teaching of Jesus and Paul one of the canons for his reconstruction of this work. From the later component parts of our present Apocalypse it is distinguished by not attaching itself to definite contemporary events. It was not called forth by any universal persecution, and does not regard the Roman imperial power the great anti-Christian enemy of the Church. The latter is expected, as with Jesus and in 2 Thess., from among Judaism. The author was not, as the old Tübingen school used to represent the writer of the Apocalypse, a particularistic, narrow-minded, anti-Pauline Jewish Christian, but rather a Paulinist of the second generation. Chap. 2:14, 25, prove nothing against this, for the Book of Acts shows that in this later period the decree of the Apostolic Council was observed even in Pauline churches. "The teaching of Balaam" designates gnostic antinomianism, such as is condemned also in 1 John and 1 Peter. This gnosticism shielded itself behind misinterpreted Pauline formulas, but what John attacks is only the misinterpretation, not the Paulinism as such. Weiss takes occasion to dispute very energetically the thesis of Weizsäcker, as if Paul's work in Asia Minor had been entirely destroyed and a new structure of a totally different character, represented by the Johannine literature, raised on its ruins. This Johannine type of Christianity, he maintains, is simply Paulinism, toned down, to be sure, in accordance with the needs of a later generation, but nevertheless perfectly continuous with the work of Paul. Weiss further takes issue with the old Tübingen dogma, still embraced by many, that the author of the Apocalypse and the author of the Fourth Gospel cannot be identical. He believes with Bousset that the Apocalypse, both in its linguistic character and in the details of its subject-matter, shows numerous resemblances to the other Johannine writings. Nor does he attribute much weight to the argument that the attitude of the two writings toward the eschatological aspect of primitive Christianity is too radically different to admit of unity of authorship. Already in the Epistles John,

while yet speaking of the Antichrist, appears to have in principle surmounted the eschatological standpoint of primitive Christianity. In his reminiscences of the Lord, which, according to Weiss, form the basis of the present Fourth Gospel, his religious outlook has been entirely changed from the future to the present. Here the Messianic age is represented as having arrived, the earthly life of the Lord is viewed as the fulfillment of the long-expected theophany. But not only does the author affirm the identity of authorship of the original Apocalypse, the Epistles and the original Gospel, he also maintains that there is a certain historical connection between the enlarged, re-edited Apocalypse of the time of Domitian (95 A.D.) and the enlarged, re-edited Gospel of from ten to twenty years later; the final redaction of the Gospel must be understood as an effort to transmute the eschatological piety of the Apocalypse, whose predictions of the immediate end had been falsified by the course of events, into a type of religion finding its satisfaction in the present. Thus the progress from the John of the original Apocalypse to the John of the original Gospel ("the reminiscences of the Lord") was repeated in the relation between the final editions of these two documents. Nor was this relation in the latter case one of pure contrast. In the final Apocalypse he already discovers a slight tendency to anticipate in spirit the outcome of the eschatological crisis, to view the developments as in principle accomplished, and thus to pass over into that timeless mode of contemplating religious experiences which is so characteristic of the Gospel. Unconsciously the Apocalyptic editor has thrown a delicate veil of allegory over the entire composition.

It will be seen from the above that Weiss attributes to John considerable more of the contents of the present Apocalypse than some of his predecessors, e.g., Spitta, whose conclusions he not seldom quotes with approval. For the two Jewish Apocalypses of Spitta one Jewish source is substituted. It contained chaps. 10; 11:1-13; 12:1-6, 14-17; 15-19; 21:4-27. It dated from the year 70, and in the Jewish war and the siege of Jerusalem the author recognized the beginning of the end. In it were incorporated older materials, in regard to the origin of which Weiss does not feel himself able to determine anything. We learn, however, that one component part, the Babylon-vision (in chap. 17), existed separately, and was composed during the reign of the sixth emperor (p. 10). The editor of the Jewish Apocalypse of the year 70, while incorporating this older document, combined with it the prediction of the beast, which he interpreted as destined to find its fulfillment in the appearance of *Nero redivivus*, who would come from the east with the kings as his allies and destroy Rome. Parts of this Jewish Apocalypse were, further, the account of the two witnesses, the story of the birth of the Messiah and of the persecution of the woman by the dragon, the Messiah's battle, the Jerusalem-vision. The editor's main contribution consisted in the vision of the bowls, which he composed in order to bind together the Babylon-vision and the Jerusalem-vision. We do not believe that the author has succeeded in making the unity of this complex of diverse materials, as he himself characterizes it, appear very plausible. Nor can we allow that the Jewish character of the pieces assigned to it has been demonstrated, either by him or by his predecessors, in any conclusive manner. The prediction that in the New Jerusalem there will be no temple is most easily understood as a Christian idea. The birth of the Messiah in heaven in chap. 12 ought not to have been counted by the author among the proofs of the Jewish origin of this representation on page 82, since on page 135 it is intimated that the location of the event in heaven is due to the final (Christian) redactor. In order to uphold the Jewish provenience, it is necessary to ascribe the explicit statement of 11:8b, "where also their Lord was crucified," to the same redactor. Neither the author of this piece nor the assumed editor of the Jewish Apocalypse cherished favorable expectations for Jerusalem, as Weiss himself acknowledges on p. 127. As to the meaning of the temple and the altar, the author endeavors, on p. 153, to show

how the final Christian editor could retain this representation and attach a suitable meaning to it, although the temple at that time lay in ruins. If he could do this, there is no necessity to assume that the words were ever meant in any other than a Christian sense. That the Jerusalem-vision is too general in its conception and the account of the Messiah's battle too vindictive in its spirit to be attributed to a Christian author, more particularly to the John of the original Apocalypse, these are highly subjective opinions, to which various persons will attach a varying degree of convincing force.

The main point to which Weiss directs his efforts is the elucidation of the historical situation and literary character of the final redactor of the book, who combined the Johannine Apocalypse with the Jewish collection of the year 70. This redactor is characterized as an interpreter of ancient prophecy, which he beheld fulfilled or fulfilling itself in his own time. His time was the time of Domitian, and the occasion for his work the collision between Christianity and the cult of the Caesars. He believed the end of all things to be immediately at hand. The apparently threatening demand that all Christians should worship the emperor and stigmatize themselves in acknowledgment of their religious allegiance to him, created in him the acute eschatological conviction that now the hour of the consummation had actually come. Weiss does not assume that a universal compulsion to this effect had been exercised, or was at the time likely to be exercised, by the supreme imperial power. But certain circles of imperialistic zealots in Asia Minor had imposed these idolatrous practices on themselves, and this led the redactor to fear that they would soon be imposed on all. Weiss believes that to the mind of the redactor the second beast of chap. 13 designates the provincial representatives of the imperial power, either the political authorities or the priests who had the cult of the emperor in charge, although originally, in the Johannine Apocalypse, the description had reference to the prophetic Antichrist from among the Jews as usually conceived in early Christian eschatology. Under the eighth king the editor understood Domitian, whom he regarded as *Nero redivivus*. He invited his readers to recognize Nero's name, on the principle of "*isopsephia*," in the numerical value of the characters of the name of the beast handed down by tradition. In making his combined sources bear this new interpretation the redactor used great freedom. We have not sufficient space even to enumerate all the passages where Weiss discovers his hand. He prefixed to the salutation of the Johannine Apocalypse the introductory verses 1:1-3. In the Epistles to the seven churches he added the closing refrains. In this connection Weiss falls into a curious inconsistency. He thinks the words "what the Spirit says" cannot be of John, because to the one who wrote them the Spirit was too much an objective principle; they do not fit in the mouth of one accustomed himself to be in the Spirit (p. 37). And yet the liberties which the redactor took with the work of John is excused on p. 39, on the ground that as a member of the Christian Church he knew himself to participate in the Spirit. In chapter 7 the redactor changed the entire meaning of the sealing of the 144,000, and of the vision of the great multitude in heaven. In the Johannine Apocalypse the former designated the remnant of the Jews which were to be saved, the latter the totality of the Christian Church (without regard to martyrdom). Out of this the redactor made that a select number of Christian ascetes (cf. 14:4) will be saved from martyrdom, but that the majority of Christians will, in the final persecution, have to lay down their lives. John took the names of the tribes literally; to the redactor they represent the spiritual Israel, the Church. The redactor further added to the three woes, which followed the seven seals in the Johannine Apocalypse, the contents of 8:6-12, and then made out of the whole the vision of the seven trumpets as a pendant to the seven seals and the seven bowls. Chap. 10:6, 7, is believed to be a seam in which the joining of the Johannine Apocalypse and the first great piece of

the Jewish Apocalypse is clearly perceptible. The eating of the little book in ver. 10 signifies that the redactor is here aware of incorporating another document. The words "thou must prophesy again," in ver. 11, also betray that these things have been prophesied before. In chap. 12 the story of the Messiah's birth and of the dragon's expulsion from heaven, the former Jewish, the latter Johannine, were brought into connection, by means of ver. 6 and 13. How in chap. 13 the tradition of the beast and the Johannine account of the prophetic Antichrist from among the Jews were welded together, so as to make of them two beasts, the imperial power and its provincial representatives, has been indicated above. The duplicating of the beast is a sign of compilation. In chap. 14:1-5 the redactor again changed the meaning of the 144,000 in the same sense as above. To John here also they meant simply the elite of Israel to be saved. Ver. 14-20, which in the Johannine Apocalypse described the climax of the advent of the Son of Man, he moved backward to this insignificant, obscure position, because of its sobriety and because he had in reserve, from the Jewish source, a picture of the end of a much more inspiring style. As the first half of the Jewish Apocalypse was inserted between chap. 9:21 and chap. 12:7-12, so the second half was inserted between chap. 14:20 and chap. 20:1-10.

It lies beyond our power to enter upon a detailed criticism of this analysis. The author himself observes, and from his standpoint perhaps justly, that a reconstruction like this, based on what he calls "Nachempfindung" of the contents, cannot be refuted by isolated objections, but only by substituting for it an equally comprehensive interpretation of the book, which shall be superior by reason of a more complete entering into its spirit and by better taste. It goes without saying that we are not prepared to furnish such a refutation, even if we could place the same implicit confidence as the author does in his principle of "Nachempfindung" as an instrument for critical analysis. We must content ourselves with a few desultory remarks. In the first place, it seems to us that Weiss has not succeeded in making the freedom with which the redactor is assumed to have dealt with the Johannine material psychologically conceivable. How a writer, who so repeatedly had to change former (partially unfulfilled) predictions into something quite different from their original meaning, could retain any confidence in his own, we do not understand. It is especially difficult to believe that he could have written the solemn injunction of chap. 22:18, 19 ("I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto them, God shall add unto him the plagues which are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and out of the holy city"), after having both in spirit and letter in numerous instances committed the sin here denounced. What Weiss offers in explanation of this, viz., that the redactor firmly believed his work to be the absolutely final Apocalypse, so that what applied to it did not apply to former issues, does not help much, because the very point difficult to believe is how the redactor, in view of the disappointment of former expectations which throughout his work of editing must have strongly impressed him, could still cherish this naive confidence in his own finality. In the second place, in our opinion, Bernhard Weiss and Zahn have convincingly shown that the whole conception of a *Nero redivivus* was of comparatively late non-Christian origin, that it arose only after the lapse of time had rendered belief in the return of the living fugitive Nero impossible, that consequently there is no ground to assume its existence at the time of the writing of the Apocalypse. The author has done nothing to meet this serious objection, although it bears equally much against his form of the Nero-hypothesis as against its earlier formulations. Thirdly, the author's hypothesis does not succeed in making the whole an intelligible composition. Granting him all freedom in dealing with the distribution of the material at will, he still frequently professes himself unable to tell us how the redactor conceived of

the movement of events. This applies even to the fundamental question of what was to the redactor past, present and future (cf. pp. 150-154). The great problem of the sequence of the scenes of the Apocalypse is even here far from solved, notwithstanding the ingenuity expended upon it. Side by side with this result, which the author seeks in no wise to disguise, we may place the favorable judgment pronounced by him on the work of the editor as it lies before us in the present book: "The editor has created a work which in its richness and the variety of its scenes, in dramatic tension and progress of action, seeks its equal. He has succeeded, above all, to pervade the whole with a uniform sentiment and a fervor of spirit by which even at the present day every susceptible reader feels himself carried away." Will it not require more than the arguments hitherto adduced to convince us that a book so confessedly homogeneous in its parts and so artistic in its structure is not also a unit in its origin? Finally, a peculiar difficulty arises for the author from the statement of Irenaeus, that John continued to live until the reign of Trajan. This involves nothing less than that the editor ventured to take the work of John, while the latter was still living, and by combining it with the Jewish Apocalypse and otherwise manipulating it, to make out of it a totally new composition. That this could be done under the eyes of the venerable disciple and in a circle where his writings possessed the highest authority seems to us utterly incredible. Weiss himself is fully aware of this difficulty. With commendable candor he suggests that he could easily have avoided it by calling in question the correctness of the Irenaeus tradition, but did not feel at liberty to resort to such a violent measure.

It is a merit of all attempts to analyze a text into its alleged component parts that it compels both the analyst and his readers to inspect the contents more minutely and painstakingly than is otherwise apt to be the case. In this respect the modern critical treatment of the Biblical writings has yielded a rich harvest, quite irrespective of the soundness or unsoundness of its main contentions. And in this respect we believe that the treatise before us has a value which will remain, even if all its critical positions should be overthrown. The study of it gives one a better acquaintance with and a warmer love for the Apocalypse.