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JOHANNES WEISS: IN MEMORIAM

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The death of Johannes Weiss, Professor of New Testament Exegesis in the University of Heidelberg, which took place last August, is a loss to sound learning which ought not to pass uncommemorated, even in the midst of the clash of arms and of national rivalry; and when it was suggested to me that I should write on the subject for *The Harvard Theological Review*, I was very glad to do so. In some ways, it is true, I cannot regard myself as an altogether suitable person. I did not know Professor Weiss personally and I have not read all his numerous contributions to New Testament studies; so I shall not attempt any balanced estimate of his work. What I chiefly desire to do is to put on record the outstanding and permanent sense of respect and gratitude which all supporters of what Schweitzer calls "thorough-going eschatology" must feel towards the author of the *Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*.

Johannes Weiss was born at Kiel at the end of 1863, where his father, Bernhard Weiss, who is still alive in extreme old age, was himself Professor of New Testament Exegesis. In 1890 Johannes Weiss became Professor at Göttingen; in 1895 he moved to Marburg, and from 1908

was Professor in Heidelberg. He was thus less than fifty-one when he died; yet the article to his name in *Wer Ist's?* enumerates more than twenty separate works of his on New Testament subjects, all marked by the learning and the scientific method that we expect and find in the modern German professor.

But it will not be for his really remarkable industry that Johannes Weiss will be chiefly remembered. Nor again is it for special skill or tact in exegesis. Personally indeed I am very grateful for Weiss's study on the composition of *Acts* (published 1897), for it appeared at a time when the reconstruction and consideration of lost sources seemed almost the only occupation of the up-to-date New Testament investigator. Weiss of course recognized previously existing sources in *Acts* and regarded them as the most important element in the book. But he also saw that the final author or editor who gave *Acts* its present form, was no mechanical compiler, and therefore the first necessary step to the study of the book was not a reconstruction, however ingenious, of the sources, but an intelligent comprehension of the author's point of view, as revealed by his completed work. Put bluntly in this way, it sounds almost an obvious truism, but it did not seem quite so obvious in 1897; so that I am pleased to have the opportunity of expressing my debt to Weiss for what I learned from him on this subject.

What distinguished Johannes Weiss from his learned contemporaries was the clearness and vigor with which he set forth the difference between the Gospel Message announced by Jesus and modern religious aspirations for the amelioration of mankind. The essential point of his work is to be found in the first paragraph of the later (1900) edition of the *Predigt Jesu*. "As a pupil of Albrecht Ritschl," says Weiss, "I learnt the importance of the idea of the Kingdom of God, which is the centre

of his theology; and I am still of opinion that Ritschl's system, especially this central idea, is, when properly understood, the most suitable to awaken and sustain for our generation the sound and healthy religious life that we need. But I have long been troubled with a conviction that Ritschl's idea of the Kingdom of God and 'the Kingdom of God' in the Message of Jesus are two very different things."

Here, as I say, you have the essential point. The important thing is that Johannes Weiss was the first modern New Testament scholar of first-rate professorial rank to see it. To bring men into living contact with Jesus Christ is no doubt in all the centuries the chief aim of the Christian teacher, but during the nineteenth century this task had been attempted in a new way. It had seemed that the real Jesus had been hidden from sight under coverings of dogma and ecclesiastical tradition. Behind these trappings it was assumed that there existed not merely a human Personality, but one whose religion was freed from all external and particularistic elements. In the process of unwrapping, much of the traditional Figure had disappeared, for reasons of varied cogency; but it was found that what remained after critical analysis still invincibly belonged to its own time and place. The preaching of Jesus, of the reconstructed historical Jesus, still is occupied with Palestinian conditions of nineteen hundred years ago; the external and particularistic elements refuse to be eliminated. For a long while the remedy most in favor was to regard more and more of the traditional material as unhistorical and secondary. This was especially the case with what we are now accustomed to call the eschatological elements, that is, all that starts from the belief in the intervention of God to deliver His people in the near future. "Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the Kingdom of God

come in power"—that is only one of a whole series of sayings of Jesus which announce the near coming of a New Age.

Johannes Weiss ventured to sketch a portrait of Jesus in which these sayings, so far from being treated as unauthentic or explained away, are taken as the central nucleus of the Gospel Message. That is his great and lasting achievement.

The first edition of the *Predigt Jesu*, the edition of 1892, is in many ways the more impressive. It is a simple tract of 68 pages and does not attempt any detailed treatment of all the Gospel Sayings. But the central point is touched on page 17, when he declares that the decisive fact in the controversy whether the Kingdom of God was regarded by Jesus as present or future, is to be found in the phrase "Thy Kingdom Come." Whatever may be the case with this or that Saying of ambiguous interpretation, in the Lord's Prayer the Kingdom is regarded as future, and it is God, not man, whose work it will be to bring it in.

The second edition of the *Predigt Jesu* appeared in 1900 as a book of 214 pages. In a sense it is an *Auseinandersetzung* with opponents of the former edition of eight years previously. And to a certain extent it suffers as an artistic production; it is less of a tract, less calculated to convince heedless Liberals of the strength of the eschatological view. But I do not think it was written for that purpose; indeed it is hardly a work of controversy at all. It reads to me like a work written to express the author's considered opinions, written to clear his own views by expressing them in black and white. And therefore it is full of wise sayings, which reward those who will read it carefully with their New Testament in their hands, to see (like the Bereans of old) whether these things be so. I cannot better conclude this imperfect but grateful tribute to the memory of a regretted

fellow-worker than by giving a few extracts from this second edition of Weiss's *Predigt Jesu*:

1. That now and then Jesus should have recognized signs of the present working of God's power, so that for the enlightened eye the Kingdom of God might in moments of insight be spoken of as present, is not surprising. That springs from the very nature of religion. "No active religion can permanently live on hope alone, just as on the other hand an element of hope must always be present in religion" (page 99).

2. Does not the parable of the seed growing secretly (Mk. 4 26 ff.) imply a present Kingdom, gradually developing? No, says Weiss: "The parable is an exhortation to patient waiting; it does not give an answer to the theological question, 'How does the Kingdom of God come?' but to the burning, impatient cry, 'When will it come? Can we not do something to make it come more quickly?'" And Weiss goes on to suggest that it has the same reference as Matt. 11 12 (according to his interpretation of that dark saying), that is, that it is directed against the *Βίαιοι*, the violent Zealots who wish to force the Kingdom (page 85).

3. Weiss has also a wise caution called out by the difficult thought of Mk. 10 5; for it is difficult, though the wording is so familiar. He says: "To be a child is just one of the things that cannot be willed and striven for—it is a gift of God. A man either has a childlike nature or he has not. To be deliberately childlike (*gewollte Kindlichkeit*) is the most unchildlike parody" (page 133).

4. That the summing up of the Law into love to God and one's neighbor is not directly eschatological is acknowledged by Weiss, but he points out at the same time that the Gospel tradition itself does not claim this as a point at issue between our Lord and the teaching of the Scribes (page 137). I must also draw attention to his excellent remarks on "Render unto Caesar," though I

can hardly imagine that the interpretation which Weiss rejects has often been seriously taught (page 125).

5. However this may be, in dealing with Lk. 14 26 Weiss has to touch a problem which is serious for all modern Christians in all countries. "Among the things which may hinder a man from coming into the Kingdom of God, Jesus included the ties of family life. On this subject we find some of His most uncompromising and to us least sympathetic utterances" (page 142). It would take too long to quote Weiss's remarks in full upon this most important topic. But it is clear how much better an account the thoroughgoing eschatologist can give of the command to forsake home and parents and children, than can be done by one who has to turn the ethics of our Gospels into rules for a permanent and evolutionist civilization. "These heroic words [about hating one's father and mother and one's own life] can only be understood from the point of view that all things of this world, however high and divine they may be in themselves, have lost their value now that the world itself is perishing and the Judgment is imminent" (page 143).

6. I conclude with a longer quotation: "We must seriously consider whether the Messianic and Eschatological elements were really only a temporary and unessential factor in the preaching of Jesus, which does not affect its kernel. Did He take up the work of the Baptist in order presently to follow His own path, or was He really the inaugurator of a Messianic movement? Was His preaching of the Kingdom of God only the accidental form into which He pours as into old bottles the new wine of another vintage, or was He seriously in earnest when He announces the Kingdom of God as a new epoch in the world? Was He only an ethical and religious reformer, who accepted the part of Prophet and Messiah only as an accommodation, or

was He really convinced that He was standing at the decisive parting of the ages and that He had been chosen by God to be the bearer of salvation? The answer to these questions will be given by the whole of this investigation of ours. But at least we can say this beforehand, that our best and oldest tradition declares over and over again that Jesus understood the movement which He initiated to be Messianic in the fullest sense of the word, and that He held Himself to be the Chosen of God, the One who was more than a Prophet. Simply to set all this mass of tradition aside, or to interpret it as we please by getting rid of all that is Messianic, is a highly arbitrary proceeding, which is not to be excused merely because it cannot be plausibly attempted without ingenuity and a thorough acquaintance with the sources" (pages 64, 65).

Once more, let me express my gratitude to Johannes Weiss. His name will not be forgotten by students of the rise of Christianity, either in Britain or in Germany.