WILHELM BOUSSET'S COMMENTARY ON REVELATION AND HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE REVELATION OF JOHN

Pieter G. R. de Villiers

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the groundbreaking commentary of Bousset on the Revelation of John from a hermeneutical perspective. It does so by surveying its nature, contents and ideological leanings. It points out the positions against which he reacted and the perspectives that he developed, focussing especially on his historical and eschatological reading of the Revelation of John. It thus aims to point out the ongoing relevance of this work for present day research in terms of hermeneutical perspectives that were opened up by it.

1. Introduction

The Book of Revelation is often stereotyped as one of the most inaccessible texts in the NT. The fact is, however, that already from early times and especially since the Enlightenment, the book generated excellent commentaries on the field of Biblical Studies that provided illuminating information about the literary and the historical nature of the text.

Scholarship on Revelation developed slowly over a number of centuries, consolidating itself at the beginning of the 20th century with the appearance of several major commentaries. Within a matter of two decades, some major publications appeared in which pioneering and advanced scholarship on Revelation was made accessible to a wide readership. These commentaries set the tone for what was to be written and researched about Revelation in subsequent decades. The first among these early 20th century commentaries to appear was that of Bousset (1906). In the same year, Swete also wrote a

1 The 1911 revision is quoted in this essay.
major commentary. These were followed after the first world war by, amongst others, such well known publications as that of Beckwith in the United States (1919), Charles (1920) and Kiddle in the United Kingdom (1940), Zahn (1924–1926), Sickenberger (1926; cf. 1939 and 1946) and Lohmeyer (1953; cf. 1934–1935 and 1982) in Germany and Allo (1933) in a French context.

One of the most influential commentaries in scholarship generally and on Revelation specifically, was produced by the German NT scholar, Bousset ([1887]; cf. 1906). It grew through several editions over a period of ten years until the final text at the beginning of the 20th century in 1906.

Studied far beyond its original German context and often quoted, it is a commentary that stands firmly in the tradition of the historical approach to Biblical texts, as will be explained below. However, it is a commentary that revealed this scholarship as standing at the crossroads. It excelled in noting and analysing previous scholarship, pointing out its weaknesses and acknowledging its enduring contributions to the interpretation of Revelation. Most important is the way in which it contributed new perspectives. Some of these are well known. Bousset is generally acknowledged as initiator of the “History of Religion” approach to the NT, and his commentary is often read against this background. In promoting this approach, he redefined the historical reading decisively (cf. further below). Kümmel (1972, 230) described him as the most influential representative of the “History of Religion” approach to the NT—a reputation that is consistently and extensively associated with his name. In early responses to this commentary, this was also pointed out as a new development (Holtzmann 1897, 387).

A closer reading of his commentary, however, reveals that the commentary of Bousset addressed some other seminal issues. He

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2 These commentaries differ in quality, approach and nature quite extensively, but were published in influential series. I plan to discuss them in more detail elsewhere.
3 Amongst others because of the way it contributed to the “History of Religion” method.
4 The references in this essay are to the 1906 edition.
5 Holtzmann (1897, 385) notes how Bousset successfully worked through the maize of problems created by source critics.