

The Background of the Gospels: Or, Judaism in the Period Between the Old and New Testaments
William Fairweather
The Princeton Theological Review 8:320-321. [1910]

“The Background of the Gospels” means the background of the Gospel-history, not the background of the Gospels as literary documents, and it would, perhaps, have been better, for this reason, if the title had used the noun in the singular. Mr. Fairweather is the author of *From the Exile to the Advent*, one of the volumes of the “Bible Class Handbook” series. In the present work the latter part of the same period is dealt with, after a broader fashion, not for the sake of the external history as such, but in order to exhibit the development of Judaism as a spiritual movement. The influence of Bousset’s *Religion of Judaism* is clearly traceable in Fairweather’s point of view and manner of treatment. To him, as to Bousset, the central significance of the history of Judaism consists in this, that it means the transformation of a national-religion into a church-religion, and, in connection with this, the denationalizing of the religion in the deeper sense of a steady progress towards universalism. And he further agrees with Bousset in the opinion that this movement towards universal and spiritualized religion was arrested and, so far as Judaism itself is concerned, proved abortive. As was pointed out in our review of Bousset’s work some years ago, this construction rests on the acceptance of the current critical hypothesis regarding the post-exilic origin of the legal-churchly organization of Israel, and Fairweather’s version of it also presupposes this. In still another respect the author’s discussion leads him into the field of Old Testament criticism. By placing Daniel, most of the wisdom-writings, and parts of the prophetic literature and of the Psalms within the period dealt with, these become included among the sources and the phenomena of the history. Nor is this merely a question of chronology. Being classed with the other products of the Judaistic movement, these Old Testament pieces necessarily share in the judgment the writer passes upon this movement in its various phases and aspects. Thus we are told that in the ethical literature of the period “there was no sense of spiritual proportion tending to frame life into a moral unity” and that it “mechanically groups together numerical lists of otherwise unconnected things” (p. 18) and the reference is not merely to Sirach, but also to Proverbs. Even the Decalogue comes in for its share of criticism, together with Hillel, on account of the negative tenor of its rules (*ibid.*). From the point of view of an intensive particularism the sharp division in the Psalms between the poor and rich, oppressed and powerful, pious and godless, is censured (p. 19). Also the defect of the mystical piety in the Psalms is pointed out. It is said to have lacked inspirational force (p. 37, note 3). On p. 128 the literature of the wisdom books is said to bear “witness to the prevalence of the same sluggish, prostrate rationalistic spirit” (as had already shown itself in the days of Haggai and Zechariah). Nor does the author hesitate to suggest that the visionary method of prophecy was adopted by Ezekiel in dependence upon the Babylonian religion (p. 45). On the other hand it should be stated that wherever the author has occasion to speak of the teaching of Jesus there is a noteworthy absence of observations of this character. In discussing the two extremes of the hyper-apocalyptic and the hyper-spiritualizing interpretations of our Lord’s teaching, he strikes a happy mean and makes many excellent points. The whole section devoted to the Apocalypse literature may be considered not only the most interesting but also the best-executed part of the book. It is true here again the influence of Bousset is clearly perceptible, over against the Essenic derivation of the Apocalyptic writings (Wellhausen and Thomson) or the theory of their essentially Jewish, Pharisaic, scribal provenience (Porter, Hassé), or the view that they were of Jewish-Hellenistic origin (Friedländer) our author takes the stand that the probabilities point to an oriental origin. He works this out in the specific form given to it by Bousset, that the

Persian rather than the Babylonian, or the Persian through the Babylonian religion, is the source of this remarkable development in the Jewish eschatology and takes pains to uphold it against the criticism that has been passed upon Bousset's theory in various quarters. As a special point of detail agreement with Bousset we notice the suggestion on p. 277 that Daniel probably found a mysterious concrete picture of the Son of Man already to hand and made symbolic use of it.

The book is very readable and free from technical abstruseness, a result largely due to the collection of the notes dealing with detail-points into an appendix at the close of the book. An excellent bibliography is likewise appended, in which, however, the proof-reading of the German, French and Dutch titles should have been more careful (especially on p. 429.) Of typographical errors we have noticed: *seat* for *seal* on p. 61; *55* for *65* on p. 164; *patriotic* for *patristic* on p. 235; *religion* for *resurrection* on p. 259. In the note about the etymology of the name Essenes on p. 203 $\bar{\Pi}$ and $\bar{\Pi}$ stand for $\bar{\Pi}$.