

## Jacob Neusner on the Quest for the Historical Jesus

From every quarter of late, and by voices compelled by various agenda, the point is made that the understanding of Second Temple Judaism that has prevailed for centuries has been found wanting, that recent (re)readings of the literature born of that era have issued in a very different and much less censorious picture. To the degree that this reshaping of the Jewish mind and heart of 200 BC to AD 200 is accurate, it necessitates a recalibration of our understanding of the world into which Jesus was born, the culture to which He offered Himself as the Messiah/Son of God, and of the dynamics of the largely negative reaction which that offer produced.

A good friend (Marshall Wicks, who is resident professor at Word of Life Bible Institute in New York) recommended that, in the interest of staying somewhat abreast of that discussion, I read Jacob Neusner's book, *Rabbinic Literature & The New Testament: What We Cannot Know We Do Not Know*.<sup>1</sup> I found it a fascinating and instructive exercise. In the attempt to recover and rightly understand the literature which reflects (from a distance of *centuries*, it should be said) 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism, Neusner has been as involved as anyone in the Jewish world. With regard to the many rather bold and comprehensive claims to the effect that our vision of the world of pharisaic/rabbinical Judaism has been virtually remade, his has been a contrary voice. In fact, the book is a rather narrow, almost parochial, treatment of the issue; he is reacting to several specific critical assessments of his position. But Neusner's defense makes for some very helpful – and often intriguing – discussions relative to the broader issues at stake.

One of the fields of New Testament Study which has, in many of its varied iterations, based its “findings” largely upon a supposed re-reading of rabbinic literature is the “Quest for the Historical Jesus.” That exercise in high-sounding disbelief has been afoot for almost 200 years, and though it is relatively quiet at the moment, like a bad toothache, it will be back.

Neusner focuses on the Quest in a chapter entitled, “Who Needs the Historical Jesus?” His critique is rather narrow; he acknowledges that he is reacting specifically to three rather recent expressions of the Quest: Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel according to Mark* (1975), John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (1992), and John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (1992). But his critique, though not the most important I have ever read, is helpful and compelling – both as to the mentality which animates the Questers and the results which have been produced by the effort. And in terms of rhetoric, it is the more compelling because it is written by one uncolored by the theological persuasions and spiritual commitments of believing

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<sup>1</sup> Trinity Press International: Valley Forge, PA. 1994.

Christianity. Indeed, as I thought through Neusner's discussion of that issue, I was impressed that it was sufficiently profitable to warrant sharing his insights in a few particulars.

For the record, I would take the most careful and unyielding umbrage with much of what Neusner presupposes about the character of the four Gospels of the New Testament, and more basically about the confluence of objective history and biblical revelation. For instance, Neusner begins this discussion with this indictment of the way rabbinical literature is often used in NT Studies:

In my view, the narrowly historical reasons that compel New Testament scholars to take an interest in the rabbinic literature to begin with distort not only the character of that literature but also the task of New Testament study itself. The error that asking the historical question of religious writing commits is simple: it is to dismiss what the sources wish to discuss in favor of that about which they are, at best indifferent. The basis for the error is the confusion of historical study with the study of two entirely valid, free-standing disciplines: history of religion and theology. *To neither of those disciplines is historical fact relevant.*<sup>2</sup>

I reject that latter claim with reference to both the Gospels of the New Testament and to Christian theology as a concept. The relationship between genuine history and the Christian faith is analogous to that between the molecular formula H<sub>2</sub>O and the drink of refreshing water enjoyed by a runner after a grueling race; the runner does not often consciously contemplate that formula as he swallows the water – indeed, he may not even have knowledge of it, but if the formula were not an existential reality, the water would not be there to refresh him.

But again, even given the presuppositional dissonance that exists between Neusner's understanding of the Gospels and that of a believing Christian, his is a remarkably telling analysis of the movement to recover the “historical” Jesus. First of all, as to the *mentality* of the effort, Neusner characterizes the quest for the historical Jesus as “a secular agendum grounded in three premises.” The first premise is that “historical facts, unmediated by tradition, themselves bear theological consequence” – this mentality he regards as “the gift of the Reformation.”<sup>3</sup> The second premise (seemingly dissonant to the first) is that “historical facts must undergo a rigorous test of skepticism, the donation of the Enlightenment.” And the third is the entirely presuppositional persuasion that “historical facts cannot comprise supernatural events,” which he identifies as “the

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<sup>2</sup> 170. My emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Notice that Neusner is going to reject all three planks of the presuppositional construct which he insists undergirds and animates the Quest. I would embrace this first premise (as I understand it) and reject the final two. By the same token, I do not see that the three are necessarily interrelated in any way; he who says B and C does not have to say A, and he who says A does not have to say B or C.

present of nineteenth-century German historical learning," and which he specifies as the notion that "exactly how things were cannot include rising from the dead."<sup>4</sup>

Again, this is how Neusner characterizes the spirit which has animated the Quest for the historical Jesus, and he criticizes the construct primarily for its (supposedly) mistaken notion that genuine factual history has any significant relevance to the studies of the Gospels. (His words: "These premises set a standard of historicity that religious writings such as the Gospels cannot and should not attempt to meet."<sup>5</sup>) Though I would certainly argue that the mentality of the Quest was fundamentally and fatally flawed at a presuppositional level, I do not agree with this specific plank of Neusner's criticism:

The quest for the historical Jesus commences with the denial of the facticity of the Gospels in favor of their (sometime, somewhere) historicity. So beginning with the quest of the historical Jesus – from the "Lives of Jesus" movement in the middle of the nineteenth century forward – theological issues were laid before the tribunal of secular history, and theologians thought to sort out historical facts to settle theological questions.<sup>6</sup>

Given the inextricable connection the Scriptures themselves make between historical "mighty acts of God"<sup>7</sup> (event revelation) and the record/interpretation of those acts in the pages of Scripture (word revelation), and given my conviction concerning the character of that Scriptural record, I am confident that when "theological issues" (in this case, the historicity of the Gospel records) are honestly and without damning prejudice brought to "the tribunal of secular history," both the theological and the historical enterprises will be well served.

And yet, there is this point to be made in Neusner's criticism of the mentality of the Quest: that effort, as chronicled by both friend and foe, reveals a manifest prejudice on the part of the Questers, a prejudice (I would argue) at once ignoble and crippling. As he writes, "the historical objectivity and rationality to which those who go off in quest of the facts behind the faith lay claim" seem dubious "even at the outset." Neusner defends this global indictment of the Quest with the rather mundane observation that "while in historical studies it is rare for the nationality or religion of a scholar to find a legitimate place in the evaluation of results, in this field whether a scholar is Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, or secular invariably plays a role."<sup>8</sup> While there is much which I reject in Neusner's critique at this point, his acknowledgement of the defining bias which is consistently brought to the supposedly academic and objective

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<sup>4</sup> 170.

<sup>5</sup> 170.

<sup>6</sup> 170.

<sup>7</sup> Ps 106:2; 145:4, 12; Deut 31:1-22.

<sup>8</sup> 171.

effort is telling, the more so because he brings no Christian predispositions to the discussion.

An aside. It will be replied that those who reject the Quest in favor of a belief in the historicity and authority of the Gospel records also bring a bias to the question. But Bible believers have never denied that; the Questers do. I would affirm that the presuppositions of the Bible believer are superior to those of the anti-supernaturalist, primarily in that they provide the only epistemological construct within which all the testable data of life are rendered coherent (the transcendent argument!). The bias of the Questers, on the other hand, seems designed to enable them to come to the conclusions they desire, regardless how incoherent or incongruous those conclusions. Perhaps the point at which the bias of the Quest mentality is most obvious is the fact that in order to extract a residuum of historical reality from the Gospel records, those admittedly early narratives (i. e., the four Gospels) are subjected to analysis within a historical context derived from a gullible, non-critical, and often self-serving consideration of much later and much less historically reliable documents (i.e., rabbinical literature). Neusner develops that comparison with candor.

Yet, for the study of biography in antiquity, before the church fathers with their voluminous writings well preserved, we have few figures nearly so well documented as is Jesus. Take Judaism, for instance. Not a single rabbi represented in Talmudic literature is given anything like a biography, let alone four of them. . . . All rabbis' statements are reworked into documents representing a consensus of their framers. Excluding only a handful, [namely] those who flourished at the end of the second century and are represented in the Mishnah ca. 200, not a single rabbi of antiquity is attested in a document that (we suppose) reached closure within so close a span of time after his death as is Jesus by the Gospels. . . . By contrast, New Testament scholars searching for the historical Jesus happily introduce as fact sayings in the names of figures assumed to have flourished in the first century, even though those sayings occur in documents that reached closure anywhere from two hundred to a thousand years later. Culbertson, cited above,<sup>9</sup> believes about the inerrancy of the Talmud when it comes to citing rabbis what he denies about the inerrancy of the Gospels when it comes to citing Jesus. Not only so, but New Testament scholars happily treat as fact concerning the first century any available pastiche of what Judaism said or did or taught or practiced, formed of sherds and remnants in writings over a period of thousand years, even though these same scholars pounce with glee upon the slightest hint of anachronism, apologetic harmonization . . . , or other intellectual gaffes [in the NT Gospels].<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Here Neusner cites Philip L. Culbertson, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28 (1991).

<sup>10</sup> 177, fn. 5.

Thus, in the effort to bring a supposedly “critical” spirit to the scrutiny of the Gospel narratives, the Questers measure those Gospels against a body of literature which they access in startlingly un-critical fashion, simply because by so doing they find evidence for the thesis they are trying to prove. This point – that rabbinical literature is used by NT students in a manifestly non-critical way – Neusner makes again and again throughout this book. Indeed, it is the point he is making in the title’s tag-line: What we cannot show, we do not know.

Finally as to mentality, Neusner is amazed that the Christian faith (broadly defined, to be sure) has provided the incubator in which the Quest – a manifest expression of unbelief – was initially conceived and is perpetually nurtured. “I cannot point to another religion besides Christianity that has entertained in the intellectual centers of the faith a systematic exercise in learning commencing with unfaith.”<sup>11</sup> To be sure, Neusner’s conception of “faith” is wanting here; he is accepting the Kantian distinction, pervasive today, which insists that only “lower storey” truth-claims (science, objective history) are objectively true for everyone, while “upper storey” truth-claims (faith, morality) can be “true” only in some non-objective, functional sense – they are true for the individual to the degree that they “work” for that individual. But with all that, Neusner’s point is instructive. Other belief systems have critics, those who reject that system in all of its parts and work to deter potential adherents and to dissuade practicing disciples. Whether or not those disbelievers were ever followers of the religion they attack, they stand publicly and self-consciously *outside* that religion in their attempts to deny the validity and integrity of the defining elements of that set of beliefs. But not so with the Quest. Having presuppositionally denied all that is central and precious to historic Christianity, they insist that in fact they are only purveying a superior conception of the very faith for which they have demonstrated such destructive disregard. It puts one in mind of the fellow who insisted that he had for sale the very hatchet used by George Washington to chop down the cherry tree – the very same hatchet! But on more careful interrogation, he allowed that the hatchet had had six new heads and seven new handles! An iteration of the Christian faith which begins with the presupposition of “unfaith” (to use Neusner’s term) and proceeds to deny all of the central truth-claims of that religion is the same religion only in this sense – it is the same hatchet, but with six new heads and seven new handles.

But it is Neusner’s assessment of the *achievements* of the Quest that is the more telling. As he surveys the nigh two centuries of the effort to recover the historical Jesus, Neusner comes (by my reading of the chapter) to four conclusions worthy of remark – the more worthy perhaps because they issue from one of this generation’s most erudite students of the corpus of rabbinic literature.

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<sup>11</sup> 171.

First, it is Neusner’s persuasion that *there is very little, if anything, to be learned about the historical Jesus from the Quest.*

Nor can anyone claim that out of the quest for the historical Jesus has come determinative truth, vastly enriching the intellectual resources of the faith. Clearly, we understand the Gospels differently from the way they were understood before the enterprise got underway in nineteenth-century evangelical Lutheran Germany.

But whether or not we know Jesus better than we did because we now know who he really was and what he really did – as distinct from what the faithful have known all along – remains open to doubt. As a matter of historical fact, the results of the quest have produced nothing short of chaos...As many as are the scholars who have written lives of Jesus, so many are the Jesuses whom we know now but did not know before the quest began. In general, a review of the upshot of the quest for the historical Jesus yields the simple observation, which every history of the quest for the historical Jesus has yielded..., that each generation gets the Jesus that it wants; pretty much every scholar comes up with the historical Jesus that suits his or her taste and judgment.<sup>12</sup>

This last observation (that each Quest scholar seems to have discovered the historical Jesus while standing in front of a full-length mirror) has often been made. Neusner sets it against his contention that “the quest for the historical Jesus forms a brief chapter in Christian theology of our own times. That field of learning supplies data for the history of Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – that alone – and, as we now know that quest, precious little information of high consequence about the first century.”<sup>13</sup>

Second, Neusner contends that *the claim of many Quest scholars that key to their reinvention of Jesus is the body of historical information gleaned from their study of early rabbinical literature is bogus – indeed, twice bogus.*

On the one hand, that narrow effort is flawed by its commitment to a methodology of *unbelief* unguided and unhindered by any recognizable protocols. As Neusner states concerning the intersection of rabbinical studies with various efforts of the Quest, “Ours is, after all, not a theological task; but if we make it so, then other rules, besides those of skepticism, doubt, and militant unbelief, must operate. It is the simple fact that people may say whatever they wish about ‘the Jesus of history,’ *there being no appeal to a common court of evidence, method, argument, rational exchange of opinions; if anything goes, then nothing can go right.*”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 171-72.

<sup>13</sup> 182.

<sup>14</sup> 174-75. My emphasis.

And again, Neusner insists that the claim is bogus because in fact rabbinic literature has little to teach us concerning the Jesus of history, however conceived. “If people want to know precisely who was the Jesus of history and exactly what he said, as distinct from what the Gospels . . . tell about Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, then I do not think the rabbinic literature will prove ubiquitously relevant to their work (though here and there, on an episodic and anecdotal basis, they may find some interesting bits of information).”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the Introduction to the book is entitled “What Do I Have to Know about Rabbinic Literature to Study the New Testament?”, and early on in that discussion Neusner says, “I have also been astonished that people did not know the answer to the question this chapter raises, which is ‘not a whole lot.’”<sup>16</sup> Later on he makes this telling confession: “To be sure, there are things to be learned from rabbinic literature for NT studies. But every time I have tried to make a contribution, I wondered whether, in the end, it was worth the effort; the work was much, the result uncertain. My reading of the documents of rabbinic Judaism concerned the history of the formation of that Judaism, and, in general, I had long since concluded that that Judaism, with roots in the first century, reached the form in which we now know it only much later on. The first century does not form the principal arena of those documents or, therefore, of my studies.”<sup>17</sup>

Third, Neusner makes the unremarkable but instructive observation that *the conclusions drawn by a given Quester will generate notice and notoriety to the degree that those conclusions are scandalous.*

People can make a great name for themselves by saying whatever they want to about ‘the historical Jesus,’ making the front page of the *New York Times* if what they say is sufficiently shocking, therefore newsworthy. Announce that Jesus was precisely what the Gospels say he was – and still is – and even in churches some will yawn. But suggest to the world that he may have been a homosexual magician, as the late Morton Smith did, and your day is made. In no other field of study, whether claiming historical objectivity or glorying in utter subjectivity (as in current literary criticism), can solecism pass for scholarship, and out-and-out fiction win a hearing as a new fact.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, and most importantly, Jacob Neusner, practicing Jew and perhaps the most expert and influential voice in the study of rabbinic literature alive today, observes that (to my mind) the most damning criticism to be laid against the various purported findings of the quest for the historical Jesus is this: *each of them leaves us with absolutely*

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<sup>15</sup> 183.

<sup>16</sup> 2.

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<sup>18</sup> 173.

*no explanation for Christianity.* That is, in the deliberate attempt to make *Jesus* unspectacular, the Questers make *Christianity* inexplicable.

The issue of Christianity is not the historical Jesus, it is why Christianity; not who was, but who and what is Jesus Christ. Christianity begins on the first Easter, because it is with the resurrection, not the crucifixion, that that religion commenced its history. At that moment in its faith, the historical Jesus becomes Christ the Lord.

But little that is said about the 'historical Jesus' accounts for Christianity, only for some improvements of "Judaism" (variously portrayed, to be sure). Most of the results, like those of Sanders, make us wonder why anyone should have found surprising or remarkable a perfectly routine set of teachings, pretty much at home in Sanders's conflationary Judaism and the counterparts drawn by others. The question is not only: why crucify a Mediterranean peasant, a Galilean wonder-worker, a marginal Jew, a Pharisaic 'rabbi,' or any of the other this-worldly, essentially secular and naturalized Jesuses of history? It is, more to the point: why should such an agreeable but on the whole unexceptional figure have risen from the dead? Why the empty tomb? If any of these pictures of the historical Jesus told the whole story, then how can anyone make sense of Paul? *By excluding to begin with all that is the transcendent and supernatural in the Gospels, none of the proposed historical Jesuses explains the advent of Christianity, but only a trivial reform movement in Judaism, such as Christianity never was. Beginning where they do, the diverse historical Jesuses expose a single flaw: each answers peripheral questions, and all ignore the critical and urgent one.*"<sup>19</sup>

Neusner sees that inability to answer the "critical and urgent" question as to who Jesus is as the flaw which renders futile the various expressions of the quest for the historical Jesus. As to the efficacy of the Quest, I would agree. But I wonder if there is more at stake. Perhaps that inability of the Quest to make sense of Christianity – or the concomitant reality that the conclusions of the Quest uniformly render Christianity incoherent and largely irrelevant – is the animating motive of those efforts, the *raison d'être* which renders those efforts worth the effort to the Quester and to his disciples.

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<sup>19</sup> 183-84.