

*Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity.* By Jacob Neusner. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984, 112 pp. *Jesus and the World of Judaism.* By Geza Vermes. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984, 197 pp.

These two books represent the continued multiplication of literature examining the numerous intersections between the beginnings of Christianity and the Judaism of the period.

The first, written by a professor at Brown University who is undoubtedly the most prolific Jewish scholar of Judaism in this generation, is intended to serve as an introductory text for courses on the beginning of Christianity—not so much designed to describe that beginning as to describe the Jewish world of the land of Israel into which Jesus was born. The book does not so much address the sweeping historical and social settings that characterize standard texts of this sort as it deals with five topics that are generally included in any course syllabus dealing with the general subject. The first chapter is the most general and surveys the place of the temple, the relation between Herod and the Roman rule, economic life and education, social classes, and the main religious sects. The second chapter idealizes three types of piety in the Judaism of the age: sage, priest and messiah. By “sage” Neusner means to include the scribe or wise man concerned to develop wise regulation for society, regulation based on Torah and faithfulness to God. The “priest” ties religious life and aspiration to the temple and its cult. By “messiah” Neusner does not so much mean to refer to a variety of messianic pretenders as to the expectation of those Jews who anticipated salvation by some sort of apocalyptic denouement centering on a messianic figure. The third chapter discusses the Pharisees, and the fourth examines the figure of Hillel, studied in the detailed way characteristic of Neusner in order to show how flimsy the sources are when we try to construct anything like a modern biography of this famous rabbi and near contemporary of Jesus. This is designed to show us how critical study of other

ancient figures in first-century Palestine (as the land later came to be called) serves as a model and in some way confirms the historical skepticism in which we must engage as we study Jesus. The last chapter examines the impact of the destruction of the temple on Judaism, in particular the theological response of Yohanan ben Zakkai. The book ends with a moving "Final Word."

Like everything Neusner writes (or at least everything I have read—I cannot pretend to read all he writes), the book is lucid and sympathetic. It includes many extraordinarily suggestive parallels and comparisons and is certainly stimulating to specialists as well as to students just entering the field. Nevertheless readers should be aware that Neusner's position on many points is not shared by many of his colleagues, both Christian and Jewish. For instance, his essay on the Pharisees, based on his three-volume *magnum opus*, is considerably more skeptical of the sources than many others allow. His Pharisees are supremely focused on questions of ritual wholeness and the extension of that cultic purity into the sanctification needed for everyday life. Ultimately he argues that their concern and the concern of Christians for salvation are ultimately so different that they are dealing with mutually exclusive categories; and so "there really is no debate between Christian and Jew on the character of the Pharisees, and no apologetic is needed. Understanding supersedes dispute, respect for the deepest concern of the other takes the place of the need to justify and defend oneself. An issue between the Pharisees as we know them in rabbinical writings and the Christian critics of the Pharisees as we know their views in sayings assigned to Jesus is a simple question of how salvation is to be attained. That question endures, although in this very different century of ours the old bitterness is gone and a new sense of shared humility before God flourishes" (p. 61). The gentleness and humility are admirable, but one cannot help feeling that certain crucial issues are being ducked. Or again, in the detailed source-critical and form-critical study of the texts that describe Hillel, I am instantly drawn to comparisons with Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Tradition*. The same mental agility is found here—along with the same tendency to pile speculation on speculation and to depend on too many disjunctions. For example, in his treatment of Hillel's alleged ordaining of the *prozbul*, Neusner finds an irreconcilable conflict between the justification for Hillel's action in his exegesis of Scripture and the justification of his action in the needs of his contemporary society—and on that basis he develops a source-critical analysis that results in a sublime skepticism as to how Hillel was involved, if at all. I confess I remain unpersuaded that the initial disjunction is valid, and so the ensuing source criticism is similarly suspect.

The second book is rather different in intent and level. The Jewish scholar Vermes has brought together the ten chapters of this book from material already published. Some of the chapters have been only lightly revised, others somewhat more so. Vermes rather engagingly tells us that the title of the book was chosen by the publishers: He himself would have preferred something like *Jesus Within the World of Judaism* since his entire approach demands that we interpret Jesus within the maelstrom of first-century Judaism.

The first chapter, "Jesus the Jew," sums up the thesis of his rather important book by the same title. The next three chapters need to be read together under the general rubric "The Gospel of Jesus the Jew." The first of these is "A Historian's Reading of the Gospels," in which there is just a bit too much self-protestation that his approach is likely to be less biased than that of others, whether Jew or Christian. The next is "The Father and His Kingdom," in which Jesus' authentic teaching revolves primarily on those passages in which Jesus presents himself as devoted to his heavenly Father. The third is "Jesus and Christianity," in which a contrast is drawn between Christianity as outlined by Paul and the teaching of Jesus as reconstructed by Vermes. There is no discussion of the famous work by J. G. Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, or of the book by Ridderbos, *Paul and Jesus*, or of more specialized treatments along the same line. Chapter 5 rather movingly (and correctly) stresses the importance of Jewish studies in mature NT interpretation. The same theme is further developed in chap. 6, which focuses a little more on questions of

methodology. This chapter usefully criticizes Str-B and Kittel, and even some of the recent work of Fitzmyer. Among its more useful arguments is that the “sectors likely to benefit most from comparison with Jewish sources are those of religious concepts and motifs” (p. 81) instead of mere word studies and the like. Chapter 7 restates Vermes’ well-known position on the “Son of Man” debate. The final three chapters represent his latest views on the impact of QL on the study of the OT and NT and on Jewish historiography. The book has wide usefulness for specialists both in NT and in Jewish studies.

D. A. Carson