

BOOK REVIEW

JEWISH SCHOLARSHIP AND JESUS

by BRAD YOUNG

Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1984. 341 pp.

Donald Hagner's¹ extensive research has provided an useful bibliographical tool. The book deals with many works by Jewish scholars concerning the life and teachings of Jesus; Hagner calls for a positive reevaluation of early Pharisaic teachings and warns New Testament scholars against anti-Semitism (pp. 171 ff., p. 276 f., p. 288 f.). Hagner's treatment is, moreover, much more than a review of books by Jews about Jesus, as he enters into the issues and analyzes the problems from his own perspective and, as G. Lindeskog notes in his foreword to the book, "One can say confidently that it cannot fail to arouse debate" (p. 11). Perhaps this review will be a part of the debate that no doubt will follow Hagner's contribution to understanding the Jesus of the gospels through the works of Jewish interpreters.

Unfortunately, one cannot help but describe Hagner's attempt to discuss research into the person of Jesus by modern Jewish scholars as a problematic study lacking in both depth and sensitivity. As the title of the book suggests, Hagner

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characterizes much of the work of Jewish scholars as an attempt to remove any Christological elements from the gospels or to minimize any personal claims Jesus made about himself, and thereby to welcome this censored Jesus back home as a Jewish teacher (cf. p. 26). It is impossible in a short review to discuss all of the methodological problems raised by his reactive survey, so I will restrict myself to a few summary observations.

One can justifiably question whether all the contributions by Jewish scholars are indeed intended to undermine the claims of Jesus, or even whether this modern research is aimed primarily at reclaiming Jesus as a Jewish teacher (cf. p. 284). The gospels and the New Testament provide early written sources for a very important era of Jewish history, throwing light on this formative period of Jewish thought that has significantly influenced later generations. No historian of the period can ignore the literature of the New Testament, any more than he can overlook Josephus, Philo, the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apocrypha or the Pseudepigrapha, as well as other epigraphic remains and contemporary sources. Though some have stated that there is a need to reclaim Jesus for Judaism, one cannot help but sense that Hagner has probably not fully understood the works of the Jewish authors whom he surveys.

The person of Jesus of Nazareth has challenged many great thinkers throughout history, so it was inevitable that scholars from among the Jewish people would also endeavor to contribute to a clearer understanding of this central historical figure, a quest that has naturally been intensified in wake of the anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism fostered in the name of the Church, with its disastrous results. As Hagner and others have pointed out, only in the modern period, following the Emancipation, have Jews enjoyed the security to pursue the quest for an understanding of the historical Jesus. Few would claim that all scholars involved in this pursuit have produced works devoid of polemics and apologetics. The members of the Synagogue have too often been compelled to view the Christ of the Church through the hatred and enmity of Christian treatment of Jews, and it must be pointed out that unsuccessful missionary activity has often fueled the rhetoric of Christian hatred for Jews (e.g., in the case of Martin Luther).

One of the main thrusts of Hagner's book is to suggest that Jewish scholars have tended to minimize Jesus' claims about himself — a tendency he attributes to Jewish biases. Hagner makes frequent references to the "Jewish scholars," who are considered to be reliable in their treatments of early Pharisaism and Judaism during the Second Temple period because of their Jewishness, yet for the same reason are assumed to be biased with regard to Jesus himself. He writes, "The contributions the Jewish scholars have made to the understanding of Jesus' teaching have been possible because of the Jewishness of these scholars. It is an irony that their Jewish perspective also hinders them from a true perception of

Jesus and his teaching” (p. 286). It can only be questioned whether Jewishness makes one an authority on Judaism, any more than being a Christian automatically makes one an authority on Christianity. Numerous Christian scholars have made significant contributions to Rabbinic studies in spite of their chromosome deficiency. For that matter, a Frenchman can also become an authority on Shakespeare. Hence, Hagner creates an artificial and misleading dichotomy between Jewish and non-Jewish scholarship. Indeed, the Jew Joseph Klausner never questioned Jesus’ messianic consciousness as did the Christian William Wrede. David Flusser has spoken about Jesus’ high self-awareness, and pointed out that Jesus identified himself with the Son of Man — the figure of the eschatological judge who will be a sign to his generation (Hagner mentions Flusser’s view of the Son of Man on p. 254).

Scientific study of the life of Jesus by different scholars not using the same methods will surely yield diverse results. Why should “the Jewish scholars” be criticized for not going far enough, when many non-Jewish scholars have arrived at similar conclusions? Any serious treatments of the life of Jesus must be far removed from the simplistic opposition of Jewish and Christian positions. Instead, one must deal with all the available original source material for elucidation of the period. In this respect, it seems that Thomas Walker’s book on the same subject showed a greater appreciation for the contribution of Jewish authors towards our understanding of Jesus, even though it is now dated.² In the opinion of the present writer, one cannot disregard the synoptic problem, philological studies, textual criticism, higher criticism and all the historical information about the environment in which Jesus operated.

Thus, it is highly questionable whether Hagner’s categorization of the “Jewish scholars” as opposed to Christian scholarship will contribute to a more objective approach either to the study of Jewish sources or to the *Leben Jesu Forschung*. Nevertheless, just because a researcher is Jewish does not automatically make him an authority either on Pharisaism or on Judaism. Neither does genetic chemistry have anything to do with a proclivity towards either objective or subjective research. One doubts whether one could find common ground for agreement between Klausner and Samuel Sandmel, even though both were Jewish. Though Hagner does treat individual scholars separately, he often makes generalizations that misrepresent the Jews as having some kind of a united front to protect their own vested interests. Objectivity is an illusory academic characteristic. Does a scholar’s pedigree or religious affiliation necessarily limit his ability to analyze the evidence? One might ask whether Claude G. Montefiore’s Jesus, who in many ways resembles a reformed rabbinic teacher, is

2. T. Walker, *Jewish Views of Jesus* (London, 1931), p. 117.

closer to the historical Jesus than Hagner's perception of Jesus, who more closely approximates an American evangelical. It should be borne in mind that some authors have been straightforward enough to warn the reader of their own limits of objectivity, and the readers of such a work must take this into consideration. The pursuit of objectivity on the part of scholars is an admirable and indispensable trait, but it is doubtful whether its goal is ever fully achieved.

Hagner does admit that what he designates as "radical" liberal scholarship has been far more pessimistic regarding the historicity of the Gospel narratives than many of the studies done by Jewish students of the gospels (p. 76). Nevertheless, he dismisses the use of redaction or source criticism of the texts as subjective; the Jews are said to accept that part of the text that fits their positions, explaining away anything that contradicts their views by questionable methods of exegesis (pp. 81–82, p. 199). Hagner has obvious difficulties with higher criticism. However, it does not seem appropriate to fault scholarly results based upon a different methodology and then claim that these were reached *because* of Jewish presuppositions. Hagner may not agree with the consequences of research based upon New Testament hermeneutical principles that he does not accept, even if this methodology pervades a great deal of contemporary biblical interpretations. However, it hardly seems justified to claim that "the Jews" have applied these principles merely to prove their case. If Hagner rejects higher criticism, he should discuss it in another context, treating of methodology rather than of so-called Jewish biases. One might point out that some apologetic tendencies can be detected in Hagner's own work.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in Hagner's treatment is his lack of familiarity with early Jewish literature in general, and with Rabbinic texts in particular. This of course makes it impossible for him to utilize many of the primary sources for his research, which provided the foundation for many of the secondary treatments which he criticizes.³ While he attempts to represent accurately the views of the scholars in his survey and frequently quotes them directly, he often merely presents his own view to counter their biased positions, without any fresh analysis of the evidence itself (*Ibid.*).

In addition, he draws a somewhat artificial distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism (p. 288–292), defining anti-Semitism in the sense of racial hatred. It would seem that very little, if anything, in the New Testament could be said to teach hatred against the Jews as a race. According to Hagner, the case is entirely different in regard to anti-Judaism, which he perceives to be embedded in the New Testament. However, to claim that there is an anti-Judaism inherent in the

3. See especially the chapter entitled, "The Authority of Jesus: His Relationship to the Law," pp. 87–132.

teachings of Christianity is indeed highly questionable (i.e. Matt. 23:2–3). Thus, while Hagner denies that anti-Semitism appears in the New Testament, he does point to an anti-Judaism, but his position on anti-Judaism in the teachings of Jesus does *not* seem to have an historical basis and would be challenged by numerous authorities. It is impossible to treat this whole question adequately here, but let it suffice to note that, as a student of the New Testament, the present author must take issue with Hagner's statement, "This 'anti-Judaism' is a necessary component in any form of Christianity that seeks to be true to the New Testament" (p. 290). Would Jesus' approach have been considered heretical anti-Judaism to the Jews of his time? Flusser observed, concerning the situation during the Second Temple period, "Even though he [Jesus] gave his own personal bent on Jewish ideas, selected from among them, purged and reinterpreted them, I cannot honestly find a single word of Jesus that could seriously exasperate a well-intentioned Jew."⁴ Moreover, one must note the innate danger of this approach to the gospels (cf. p. 290), because thus perceived anti-Judaism provided the seeds of mistrust and misunderstanding based on ignorance which blossomed into virulent anti-Semitism and had far-reaching, disastrous ramifications, not only for the Jewish people but also for Jesus' uncompromising message of love.

The task confronting gospel research is formidable. The figure of the gospels has challenged modern scholarly endeavors with a quest to rediscover the life, the teachings and the person of the historical Jesus. For the Christian who desires to achieve a greater understanding of Jesus, works of polemics and apologetics are of little value. Moreover, modern scientific study has at least provided the opportunity for Jewish and Christian scholars to work together as partners in mutual respect and acceptance for the benefit of all. This opportunity has never been fully exploited, and religious affiliation by no means need form a line of demarcation in academic pursuits. Sensitive, careful research based on the factual evidence of linguistics, Jewish literature, archaeological discoveries, pseudepigraphic studies, and all the resources that can contribute to a better understanding of Jesus are essential and must be utilized. How else can Jesus' uniqueness in the context of ancient Judaism be fully appreciated? Hagner has restricted his understanding of Jesus and produced an apologetic work which does not contribute to a greater understanding of the sources, because of its failure to treat all of the evidence. He fails to grasp the significance of the contributions of Jewish writers who have sought to interpret the historical evidence for a greater understanding of Jesus' life. In view of the great task facing gospel scholars, Hagner's book appears to be more of a digression than a contribution to that quest.

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4. D. Flusser, in the foreword to C. Thoma, *A Christian Theology of Judaism* (New York, 1980), p. 16.