

DAVID FLUSSER'S COLLECTED STUDIES AND ESSAYS

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דוד פלוסר יהדות ומקורות הנצרות: מחקרים ומסות. תל-אביב: ספריית פועלים – הרצאת הקיבוץ הארצי השומר הצעיר, תשל"ט. 486 עמ'

David Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity; Studies and Essays*, Tel-Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, HaKibbutz HaArzi-HaShomer HaZair, 1979, 486 p.

The collection of essays and articles of an individual, especially a collection of some thirty odd years of work, might have become a disconnected accumulation of works written throughout the years, but the abundance of essays written by David Flusser has enabled the writer to choose an impressive lists of works, all somehow connected to one central theme. Hopefully there will be a following volume centered around some other related topics.

The topic having been well trodden, on the one hand, but nonetheless still a polemical one on the other, it is rather important to define the reading public of such a volume. Recognizing that the publication is in Hebrew, the book was obviously written with Hebrew readers in Israel in mind. The second article: "The Literary relation of the three Gospels" (p. 28ff.) was written especially for the present volume. It includes some basic information on the issue, assuming such a need among Israeli readers.¹ This is not the first time that the author approaches this same reading public, as can be seen from the context of the book. The introduction: "Christianity in the eyes of a Jew" (p. 13ff.) was first published in *Keshet beAnan* 38 (1976), a journal for current Jewish issues in Israel. One cannot ignore the strong personal and polemical tone of the essay which attempts to define the meaning of faith both in Judaism and Christianity. Nevertheless, for the author this is the first step, as well as the culmination of a long and sincere effort to try to understand early Christianity as it emerged from Judaism.

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1. David Flusser, "The literary relation between the three Gospels," *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity*, p. 28ff.

It was this very same sense of fairness, and respect for history as it actually occurred that prompted the author to write his study on the trial of Jesus in 1969. The essay as it stands in its present form has been revised along with another article on the same subject published a few years later in *Judaism*.² What is even more important, is that it was revised according to the author's rapidly developing conviction concerning the importance of the Lucan version of the Gospel for tracing the Jewish background and sources prevalent in the Gospel's stories, and teachings.³ In spite of all the changes the article's original reasoning has been retained; the author has reservations concerning the latest Hebrew work on this subject by Israeli Supreme Court Justice Haim Cohn. As has been mentioned previously, it is not a question of a few details, but rather a basic demand for historical accuracy – to follow the facts as closely as faithfully as possible. Moreover, it is imperative to curb any design or prejudice whether in 'favour' of Judeo-Christian relations, or against them. The trial of Jesus, and the various episodes connected with it, should be understood within their own historical context. It is important to consider the 'power play' in the Temple, the site of the so-called 'High Priests' party, and other parties and groups in Jerusalem, as well as the strength and character of the Roman governor, as perceived in the New Testament, and other contemporary sources. On no account should a mistakenly 'guilty conscience' whether Jewish or Christian be allowed to interpret the fact without applying pertinent philological and historical data.

The present collection ends with two articles that are related to our primary theme, that is Jewish sources and origins of the first strata of Christianity. Though they are very different in nature, both articles fall into this general category, namely, the so-called Jewish-Christian dialogue, where a slightly polemical atmosphere is evident. The first one, was written in honour of Y. Baer, in Hebrew, being addressed to Hebrew readers. The other, which is the concluding article of this volume was published in *Immanuel*, in order to reach a non-Hebrew and Christian reading public.⁴ In a collection such as this one, these studies seem to complement one another, and together stress the complexity of the issue. They illuminate the deep and varied debt that early Christianity owes to Judaism – regardless of the developing estrangement.

Beginning the collection and concluding it with articles taken from the context of both Jewish and Christian aspects of the mutual dialogue, gives a certain framework. But as was previously stated, the author is more concerned with the truth, hidden and preserved within the sources, than with his readers. That is the reason why this present volume includes articles, that were originally meant for a different reading

2. David Flusser, "A literary approach to the Trial of Jesus", *Judaism* 20:1 (Winter, 1971), pp. 32-36.

3. This question is discussed at length in a previous essay, see fn. 1.

4. David Flusser, "The Jewish Origin of Christianity", *Yitzhak F. Baer Jubilee Volume* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, Historical Society of Israel, 1960, pp. 75-98; Idem, "Theses on the Emergence of Christianity from Judaism", *Immanuel* 5 (Summer 1975), pp. 74-84.

public. A greater interest lies in rising above, or penetrating beyond the question of our present dialogue, and of attempting to comprehend the true sense of events, and their written sources.

Excluding the opening and concluding articles, the rest of the volume is organized in a chronological fashion, including most of the articles written by the author on the life and teachings of Jesus, John the Baptist, Josephus Flavius on both John the Baptist and Jesus, and the relevance of the Qumran findings for baptism and early Christianity. There are three articles which specifically discuss the life of Jesus: Jesus' ministry and death; his healing activities and the Last Supper; and the article mentioned heretofore concerning the trial between the Jews and the Romans. Six articles are devoted to the teachings of Jesus, all of which were rewritten in light of new findings since their initial publication. Two new studies of major proportions have been published for the first time in this collection — namely, the laborious and lengthy article on the parables of Jesus vis-a-vis the existing parables in Jewish Rabbinic literature, and the essay on "Two Ways."

The following articles move on from the first strata of Christianity, to the second and third generations; the possible Essene literary source of the idea of twelve apostles (p. 283); midrashic influences found in later New Testament writings (p. 305); the influence of the Dead Sea scrolls on Pauline theology (p. 213); and the teachings and theology of Paul (p. 359). The last three articles are devoted to even later developments: relations between the two Christian communities, the attitude of Christianity to the State, and its own authority. The last discusses problems of salvation in early Christian communities.

Even though one can see the theme behind this impressive list, by definition, we do not have a comprehensive history, or literary unity. It is not within the scope of this short survey to point out the salient features of each individual study. We will have to be content with pointing out one or two focal issues. It has already been mentioned, that most of the essays revolve around the relationship of early Christianity, and Jesus himself with contemporary Jewish surroundings. The list of subjects assumes this fact. The author is interested in all aspects of this specific connection or dependence of Christian thought and development on its Jewish environment. Many books and essays have been written by both Jews and Christians in the last few decades concerning this issue. One can find quite a long list, in the index of this very book, even though the author was not interested in compiling a complete bibliography. As we have mentioned previously, some of the author's criticisms of previous books do not concern any given detail but rather the basic approach. Flusser once defined his approach in a personal conversation with this writer as "an immanent respect for life, whether past or present."

This would be the opportunity to point out an additional aspect. There is no novelty in referring to Jewish sources vis-a-vis the New Testament. There are many works which have attempted to draw attention to equivalents in both bodies of literature. Our author is not interested in the equivalents as such, but rather in certain aspects,

where, by utilizing all possible contemporary sources a better understanding of people, their way of life, ideology, literature, and faith can be gained. It is not the question of Jewish-Christian relations, but rather the entire period of the Second Temple, and its complexity, that draws his attention. Each and every article and essay, tries to point out a question that has been better understood through comparison. The author is not interested in proving or disproving the superiority of either the Christian sources or the Rabbinical ones, but rather to better understand the dynamics of this very complex period.

We will have to be satisfied with one example from the present volume. Like many of his articles, that on the parables tries to draw our attention to similarities between the New Testament and other literary sources of the same period. Here as in many other essays, the author contradicts previous attempts to deal with the topic. On the one hand, he does not believe that a simple listing of all possible parables can provide a better and truer understanding of either group of sources. On the other hand, he does not want to deny the high literary quality of Jesus' parables. Nevertheless he argues that a meticulous and minute examination of this literary form in all Jewish-Rabbinic literature, and the New Testament illuminates the genre as a whole. He proceeds to do so,⁵ concluding that the parables of Jesus must be understood within the general literary genre. As regards time and level of literary development, they belong to the early stage of this genre. But when we deal with a literary genre which has a moral and ideological message, it must be understood as being an integral part of a whole framework. He concludes that the social message of the parables is predominant, as it is in all early rabbinical parables. Jesus' parables are of high quality, but one must perceive them in their environment. As such, they constitute a literary form in Jewish literature and the ideology of the Second Commonwealth.

We may conclude by saying that the prime motivation of the author's research and study is to fully understand the various aspects of the period. But like everybody else, he gets involved in modern issues concerning the field, such as Jewish-Christian dialogue, and relations in the present. It takes considerable effort to redirect interest back to the immanent questions, and to avoid the pitfalls of personal interpretations to the complex past and its true meaning.

Immanuel 10 (Spring 1980)

5. The author is presently writing a book on the same subject, to be published in German.