

Encounters with David Flusser

Surely everyone who has known David Flusser, and especially everyone fortunate enough to be his friend, has a store of anecdotes about him. Some of those old friends have volunteered a selection of their memories. They may serve as examples for many other colleagues, pupils and acquaintances, whose experiences, if collected, could alone fill many books.

Franz Mussner

Repeatedly in my life, I have encountered David Flusser. If I recall rightly, the first time was at the Protestant Academy (Evangelische Akademie) in Arnoldshain during a conference in 1966, when the issue was whether and in what sense “anti-Judaism” is to be found in the New Testament. Many papers were read; Flusser himself spoke about the Christian community after the Apostolic Council of Acts 15 (“Die Christenheit nach dem Apostelkonzil”).

I met Flusser again in Jerusalem while I was giving lectures at the Dormition Abbey. Flusser invited me to his home and I had the honor of enjoying his hospitality. We encountered each other again at a conference in the Catholic Academy in Munich, during which we had a number of conversations — Flusser as always with a fiery temperament — and strolled together through the English Garden to an exhibition in the House of German Art. The latest encounter again took place in Jerusalem, in Beit Shalom, when I had the honor to present my *Traktat über die Juden* (Munich, 1979) before Jewish scholars. It is now available in six languages, and the name “David Flusser” appears with due frequency.

Flusser was so kind as to contribute to my Festschrift *Kontinuität und Einheit* (Freiburg, Basel and Vienna, 1981), providing an article on Jesus’ saying “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34). His contribution was “dedicated in love” to me, which gave me particular joy. It ends with the sentence: “May God help us — the ancient People of God and the Church — to labor together on His work.”

As a Jewish New Testament scholar, David Flusser has shown through his whole life's work in an exemplary manner how one can collaborate "together on His work." For that, Flusser deserves the thanks of all who participate in the Jewish-Christian dialogue. May God requite him for it and bless his years!

Robert Lindsey

My first meeting with David Flusser took place in 1962. I had visited him because I was attempting to make a new translation of the Gospel of Mark into Hebrew. I supposed that he could help me make that translation.

From the first, we found much in common. Both had had long experience with classical Greek and Hebrew texts. Both were westerners, he from Europe and I from the United States. Both had lived for some years as semi-Israelis, immersed in the growing and changing culture of Israel itself. Both were deeply committed to the study of the Synoptic Gospels as the most important historical sources of the life of Jesus.

Flusser had long taken for granted the priority of Mark, that is, that both Matthew and Luke had used Mark's text as a source in addition to the famous "Q." Soon after we met, I came to the unexpected conclusion that although it was clear that Matthew and Luke had independently used an important Greek source like "Q," the evidence showed that Luke preceded Mark while Mark preceded Matthew. Thus the order of the Synoptic texts was first Luke, then Mark, and then Matthew.

Flusser had been studying some scholarly works known as those of the "redaction history" school. He had concluded that in some ways Mark's Gospel was more an illustrative text than an earlier one, therefore somewhat less similar to rabbinic sources than he had earlier expected. So he was prepared to consider seriously the evidence that I was suggesting, which pointed to an earlier text than Mark. Part of my argument had been that the Hebrew that seemed to stand behind these texts was easier to reconstruct from Luke than from Mark. In considering some of them, he concluded that Lukan texts were often more literally like the rabbinic Halakhah and more Hebraic linguistically than the parallels in Mark.

The two of us were thus locked into a common search for the earliest material on the life of Jesus found in the Synoptic Gospels. We became colleagues and intimate friends and this relationship was shared by our families as well. Flusser has always said about our respective wives, for instance, that, "the Holy One, blessed be He, clearly chose the best possible mates either of us could have found." He meant, of course, my wife Margaret and his wife Hanna.

Flusser's sense of humor and my appreciation of that humor has helped to keep us constantly searching for all that we can know about Jesus historically. He recognized that Jesus, too, had a marvelous sense of humor and what we can call a "laid back" certainty that the Kingdom of God movement, which he had come to inaugurate, would indeed become the powerful redemptive force growing always toward the final appearance of the Son of Man at the end of history. Clearly, Flusser's own gift of philological insight has contributed significantly to a better picture of the Gospel story and of Jesus himself.

Brad Young

In 1973 the greatest dream I possessed was to study under David Flusser at the Hebrew University. Having become acquainted with his rich contributions, I read everything he had written in languages that I understood.

My dream was realized in 1978 when I began to study at the Hebrew University in the Comparative Religions Department for my M.A. and later for my Ph.D. The joy of learning at the feet of Flusser proved to be greater than all my earlier hopes. Especially so when I was honored to become general editor of his book *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem, 1988), to teach a course with him in the department, and to work closely with him as his research assistant.

Personal experiences with Flusser have only increased my high evaluation of his rich creative genius as a scholar and my great esteem for him as a friend. The better I have come to know him on a personal level, the greater my appreciation has grown not only for a world renowned scholar but also a *Mensch* who is committed to high personal values and strong principles of integrity.

On the occasion of this Festschrift, some personal memories of him as a scholar and as a close friend should be permitted. Edmond Wilson's well-known description of Flusser as a somewhat eccentric genius, who translated the Dead Sea Scrolls from Hebrew into Greek to demonstrate their similarities to the New Testament, is not at all atypical of Flusser. I vividly remember asking him a question in his Synoptic Gospel seminar at the Hebrew University. It involved the relationship between a pseudo-Davidic psalm composed in Hebrew and the semitized Greek of the Magnificat and the Benedictus in Luke. Flusser came alive with excitement. He demonstrated the importance of comparative linguistic study by translating the Hebrew text of the psalm into Classical Greek. Then he showed the linguistic differences in Koine and in later Greek. His professional training as a classical philologist was always essential for his study of early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Once we were studying a midrashic text in the company of some noted talmudic scholars. One passage of the text seemed suspect to Flusser. He suggested that it had been interpolated from the Mekhilta. I sat in awe as we discovered that the passage was missing in better manuscripts of the midrash and did in fact appear in the Mekhilta.

Flusser is especially gifted in textual analysis. He possesses an unusual sensitivity to the thought of late antiquity, which enables him to penetrate the inner thinking of the authors of ancient texts. He is a scholar to the scholar. It is not infrequent for him to be sought out by colleagues for his rich insight. His work on the Dead Sea Scrolls has provided a generation of scholars with a greater understanding of the reading of the manuscripts and of the origins of Essene thought. His unique acumen for text-critical studies developed from his careful research of Greek and Latin classics and his highly acclaimed critical edition of *Josippon* (Jerusalem, 1978 and 1980), which was the fruit of many years of complex textual analysis.

While his scholarly accomplishments are internationally recognized, not everyone knows that Flusser is an animal lover. During one Sunday evening

seminar in his home, his son Johanan rescued a young kitten from danger, seeking Flusser's advice for the rescue operation. When Johanan brought the kitten into the room full of students, Flusser's eyes twinkled, but he did not interrupt his lecture. Sitting at the head of the table in his home office, he did not stop talking. The eager students were listening to him and reading the books of holy literature, which by this time were piled high on the table. Yet the little kitten felt gratitude for his escape. He quickly ran across the books, scurried up Flusser's stomach, and sniffed his nose affectionately. Flusser smiled.

Flusser loves dogs. His dog Klara was a very special pet, rescued from danger by Johanan on the eve of Yom Kippur. She possessed a very pleasing personality and I always enjoyed playing with her and petting her even while working on very serious academic questions. One of my favorite photographs of Flusser shows Klara licking him on the cheek. Flusser appreciates the story of Tobit in the Apocrypha, among other reasons, because of the dog who traveled with Tobias.

It was a sad day when Klara died. Yet I have come to love Flusser's more recent dog Cindy. She helped us at Magnes Press when we worked on corrections for his book, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, and took numerous rides in my car. I will always cherish the times we spent on holiday in Switzerland on the trains and in art museums. Cindy was very quiet in her carrier as Mrs. Flusser and I listened to Prof. Flusser sharing his vast knowledge of art in special art exhibits in Switzerland.

Flusser's keen-wittedness and his wide range of interests should not be surprising, given his academic achievements as a recipient of the coveted Israel Prize and his distinguished membership in the prestigious Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. His thirst for knowledge goes beyond his achievements in the study of Christian origins and Judaism in the Second Temple period. His brilliance is expressed not only in his pursuit of academic wisdom, but also in his colorful personality and sharp humor.

In order to read Don Quixote in the original, Flusser learned Spanish. He addressed a university audience in the language when Spain recognized the State of Israel and he went there with the Israeli delegation. During one tense moment, the Israelis were shown prized state portraits of Ferdinand and Isabella, the rulers who had expelled the Jews from Spain. Apparently, the Spanish hosts had forgotten the tragic past. Suddenly, they remembered the period of the Inquisition and the intense persecution of the Jewish people during those dark days of Spain's history. Everyone felt the intense pressure of silence. Flusser approached the portraits like an honored guest at the old court, bowed graciously to them and announced: "I have returned!" Everyone laughed in appreciation of Flusser's sensitivity and rich humor.

Flusser was always aware of the great importance of language study and the difficulty or near impossibility of accurate translation. This is especially true in the study of the Synoptic Gospels. He is a creative genius with a tremendous sense of humor. Once he told me that in 1938 he decided to learn all that he could about the Second Temple period. Yet his intellectual pursuits reach beyond his interests in his chosen discipline, since he is a recognized author-

ity in German studies, Greek and Latin classics as well as classical music and art. His keen sense of humor has always been a source of true enrichment. Flusser's sharp wit has often made me smile.

To a Christian living in Israel and studying at the Hebrew University, David Flusser was a great model of scholarly objectivity. He is devoted to his faith and is filled with an insatiable curiosity. I have prayed alongside him in the synagogue. Flusser possesses a powerful intensity for his work. He has noted that a good scholar must be concentrated (*merukkaz*). He loves people and realizes the importance of solid scholarly research for a proper understanding of early Judaism and the origins of Christianity. Christians and Jews join together when they read Flusser.

As a Christian, I know of no other individual who has done more to help me understand the life and teachings of Jesus. Careful textual study of the words of Jesus is highly valued by Flusser. I was pleased to dedicate to him my book, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables* (New York, 1989). On the occasion of this Festschrift in his honor, I am very happy to express my deep appreciation for his immeasurable contributions to the world community of scholars, but especially for what I have learned from his writings, his lectures and his outstanding example.

Flusser reminds me of the words of Johanan ben Zakkai, who described his finest disciple as an ever-flowing stream. Many times, listening to Flusser's creative genius and rich intellect, I have felt as if standing before a mighty rushing river. Many times, too, I have been able to drink from those fresh waters. In the words of the rabbis, he asks the right questions and answers them honestly (*sboel ka-inyan u-meshiv ka-halakhah*). On my most recent visit to Jerusalem, I was again challenged by this remarkable scholar and friend as we studied together. My highest hope today is that he will continue his fruitful work, that it will gain even wider recognition in the international community of scholars, and that many more will have the privilege of sitting at the feet of Prof. David Flusser.

Malcolm Lowe

Recently, I was surprised to receive an unusual request. Permission was wanted for a paper of mine, "Aristotle on Kinds of Thinking," from *Phronesis* 28 (1983), to appear in a forthcoming anthology on Aristotle's psychology. It reminded me that when I came to Israel in 1970, my field of scholarly interest was Greek philosophy.

A series of providential accidents brought me to New Testament studies and to acquaintance with David Flusser. One day, back in 1972, I noticed a letter in the *Jerusalem Post* demanding that "Christians should admit that the cause of antisemitism was what the Gospels say about the Jews." Without thinking much about it, and certainly without anticipating the consequences, I sent in a letter of my own, pointing out that the first three Gospels hardly use the term "the Jews" at all. The Gospel of John, I said, supposedly does use it frequently, but there it actually means "the Judeans," so this Gospel, too, in fact speaks little of "the Jews." (It was a conclusion which I had come to casually, saw nothing

remarkable in, and had never mentioned to anyone.) So, I concluded, that theory of the origins of antisemitism seemed clearly inadequate.

Some time after my letter appeared in print, I received via the *Jerusalem Post* a letter from a Mr. Ben-Haim in Eilat. He told me that he shared my opinion about the Gospel of John, but few scholars did, so he would appreciate hearing my reasons. It was the first of numerous letters from him, demanding my view of one verse or another. Having always been of a helpful disposition, I tried to answer each time, eventually feeling obliged to examine every occurrence of the Greek term concerned (*hoi Ioudaioi*) in the Gospels.

At this point I was advised by Prof. Pines of blessed memory to consult his old friend Prof. Flusser, together with some elementary advice about how to approach this formidable character. How formidable he was I soon discovered. Having brought him my by now quite lengthy manuscript, I ventured a few days later to phone and ask for his reactions. He answered emphatically: "I am ill and I shall be ill for the next two weeks!"

It was one of the ways in which he dealt with the many troublesome, and sometimes strange or even obnoxious, individuals who made their way to demand an audience with Flusser for their opinions. At that time, he was not merely being visited by a stream of distinguished scholars from abroad. Every crank who arrived in the country with some new theory about Jesus, and seeking to have it confirmed by Jews, was automatically directed by the Foreign Ministry to Flusser. No wonder he had developed a range of subterfuges for conserving a few moments of time for his own work.

Once I did begin to meet Flusser, however, things began to go famously. My manuscript developed into the article "Who Were the *Ioudaioi*?"; it appeared, with the recommendations of Pines and Flusser, in *Novum Testamentum* 18 (1976). It was the first of several studies in which I was to enjoy the inestimable, indeed indispensable, assistance of Flusser. An example was my short article "From the Parable of the Vineyard to a Pre-Synoptic Source" in *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982). It was born, and effectively completed, in a five-minute discussion between us at the end of a meeting of the weekly seminar at his home.

More complicated by far, however, was the history of our major joint paper "Evidence Corroborating a Modified Proto-Matthean Synoptic Theory" in *New Testament Studies* 29 (1983). My study of the Parable of the Vineyard and other parallels in the Synoptic Gospels had led me to surmise that the Hebrew original of these Gospels was similar in overall structure to the Gospel of Matthew, making the "Q" hypothesis superfluous. The Greek Gospel of Matthew found in the New Testament, however, was not a straightforward translation of the Hebrew original. There were two interfering factors: an influence of Mark's Gospel (M-revisions) and some editorial remarks of an anti-Jewish character (AJ-revisions). Luke's Gospel could be of assistance in identifying the changes effected by those factors and eliminating them. Yet where those factors were absent, the text of Matthew was generally more reliable than that of Luke.

I found that Flusser had been coming to similar conclusions, but starting from other passages in the Synoptic Gospels. We decided to write a joint article, pooling our findings. With great enthusiasm, I wrote my parts of the article,

but month after month went by and Flusser still could not find time to write his. On the basis of our continual discussions, however, it was clear what he intended to argue. Eventually, we agreed that I would write his parts of the paper, too, based on his oral remarks.

The article was immediately accepted by *New Testament Studies*, but this was not the end of its travails. It marked a change in Flusser's view of the Synoptic question and a departure from his earlier identity of views with Robert Lindsey, although both of us acknowledged our continuing debt to Lindsey. This "heresy" was too much for some Lindsey loyalists, who dropped the article, as it were, into the Genizah, never discussing it and never mentioning it in bibliographies. It is reminiscent of those pious church historians who gloss over the misdemeanors of great saints....

The article nevertheless had some impact on a kind of Synoptic circus that was subsequently staged in Jerusalem. Representatives of various schools of thought from many countries came to debate and seek (completely in vain) to change each other's opinions on the Synoptic question. Flusser was not a participant, having been disqualified on some technicality (he had failed to answer some letter before some specified date). I remember that the late Pierre Benoit expressed to me his great satisfaction over this outcome, not realizing, it seems, how closely I worked with Flusser.

I, however, was generously awarded the status of silent "observer" of the proceedings. Each evening, consequently, I would report to Flusser on the day's discussions; the next day, I would exploit the coffee breaks and recesses to deliver his reactions. The rules forbade me, as an "observer," to say a word during the official sessions or even during informal working groups. On some evenings, little groups of scholars came along to Flusser's home as well. Someone unkindly recalled the night visits of Nicodemus.

Unlike his colleague Benoit, M.-E. Boismard had a great regard for Flusser, who in turn valued Boismard's Synopsis of the Gospels, terming it the best available arrangement of the texts. In his address to the conference, Boismard repeatedly quoted "Flusser," meaning our joint paper. Afterwards he explained to me that he had expected to see Flusser at the conference and had wanted to express his respect and esteem for Flusser's work. It was a complete surprise for him to discover that Flusser was absent but that the co-author was present and listening.

Having discovered so much mutual regard, Flusser, Boismard and I decided to meet on a regular basis and exchange views on the Synoptic question. We were encouraged in this, too, by William Farmer and others at the conference. The language of our deliberations would be French, which Flusser has spoken excellently since his childhood holidays in France.

The first tripartite session was a great success, not least because Klara, Flusser's dog, took an immediate liking to Boismard. This was most unusual; generally newcomers had to make several visits before Klara stopped receiving them with loud and prolonged barking. On some occasions, she would become completely hysterical over a newcomer, barking without end until the person left the house. As he struggled to expound his views (I do not remember a

“her” of this kind) against the din, we would mostly agree with Klara that this was someone who should not return.

To much regret, the plan to hold further summit meetings did not materialize. I went to Germany for three months; Boismard had an operation; Flusser's absences from the country culminated in a two-year sabbatical in Switzerland. Klara grew weak and died.

I got to know Klara well. Living at that time only a few minutes' walk from Flusser's house, I was often asked to take her out during absences of the Flussers from Jerusalem. She took an almost fixed route on her twice-daily walks, including courtesy calls on two old boy-friends, the fathers of her two litters.

Flusser often remarked that he and I agreed on everything, except for some particulars of our attitude to dogs. This was, however, not just because I come from two families of British dog owners. Flusser would discuss everything with Klara during their walks; it helped him to clarify the ideas in his next publication. According to Johanan, his younger son, one night Flusser was sitting in the Rose Garden and loudly commented: “Klara, what fine legs you have.” Some passers-by were astonished and shocked, supposing that the distinguished professor was having a secret tryst with an invisible lady friend!

Once when the Flussers went abroad for a lengthy period, they asked me to be, so to speak, *in loco parentis* for Johanan, who had recently begun his military service and would be living alone in their flat. It seemed an unnecessary measure, whose main consequence was that I enjoyed excellent Friday-night meals cooked by Johanan, until a mini-crisis developed.

Johanan is a great animal lover and had already populated his parents' home with a variety of creatures. One day at his army base, a stray bitch with puppies bit one of the personnel; justly, as he thought. To protect this canine family from reprisals, he and some friends transported it to the kennels of the Society for the Protection of Animals. For this purpose, Johanan was required to register himself formally as the owner of the dogs.

To his indignation, shortly afterwards he received a summons to appear in court on the charge of being the owner of a dog that, through negligence, had attacked and bitten someone. He came home furious with the intention of sending the court a letter full of noble protestations such as “Is it a crime to do good?”

With difficulty, I dissuaded him, pointing out that this was the best way not only to be convicted but to suffer a higher penalty for having aroused the court's ire. Instead, I got him to write a letter describing the exact order of events, while emphasizing both at the beginning and at the end that the bite took place when the dog was neither in his ownership nor in his possession. For if the prosecution could not establish that he held any responsibility for the dog at time of the incident, the case must collapse. Sure enough, a letter came back announcing that the charges had been dropped.

Johanan and I also collaborated on a Great Project that was supposed to be kept a secret from his father, namely, the campaign by Flusser's friends to get him awarded the Israel Prize. Our responsibility was to up-date an old curriculum vitae procured from the university. In particular, we had to augment the bibliography from a cupboard full of miscellaneous offprints jumbled to-

gether, all in the guise of merely trying to restore a little order to Flusser's study.

The prize was awarded to Flusser. As a sequel, there recently came into my hands a copy of that curriculum vitae, with parts of it recognizably in my handwriting despite the repeated photocopying that rendered individual words illegible. It forms the kernel of the Flusser bibliography in this volume.

Flusser was not beyond hiding behind the back of Johanan. Once his seminar was in full swing when he received a phone call from a journalist asking for his opinion about the appointment of a former Jew to high office in a church. First, that an Israeli newspaper was so excited about a converted Jew who had "made good." Second, the journalist, who addressed him as "Professor Plosser," had wrongly vocalized the Hebrew spelling of his name and obviously had never heard of him before.

In response to the journalist's questions, therefore, Flusser entertained us all with a hilarious pretense of being the eccentric and incomprehensible "Professor Plosser," leaving his interrogator totally bewildered. Then he put the phone down, picked it up again and, speaking in his normal voice, apologized profusely for the behavior of his young son, who, he said, had a bad habit of playing tricks over the telephone!

Anyone who knows Flusser, of course, will have had many opportunities to admire his histrionic talents. The high point may have been a dramatization of Hanukkah on Israel Television, when Flusser gave a masterly performance as Antiochus Epiphanes, explaining that he was merely trying to encourage his barbarous Jewish subjects to become a little more civilized. Like so many others, he was "trying to save Israel from itself." Phillip Gillon, the television critic of the *Jerusalem Post*, headlined his review "A Star Is Born."

Recalling his seminars, I am now prepared to reveal one of the greatest secrets about Flusser. Many have complained that it was impossible for them to have a conversation with him. They could not get a word in edgewise and sat for two or three hours while Flusser alone spoke.

Actually, the problem was theirs, not his. Flusser conducts conversations on the basis of two entirely logical, and for that matter most hospitable, principles. First, once he has begun to discourse on any topic, he ignores any attempt to interrupt him before he has explained the matter in all its relevant details, presented in due order. Second, if he has finished one topic and sees that his guest has nothing to say in reply, he immediately begins upon another topic, to be discussed at similar length, in order to save his guest the embarrassment of being left speechless.

The secret, therefore, is to spot the exact moment when Flusser has finished a given disquisition. Then you may add your comments, raise objections, or even give a speech of your own.

Even armed with such knowledge, however, you may encounter some other obstacles. Every student who has attended his seminars knows that he is instinctively well-disposed toward Catholics, Bohemian Brethren, Dutch and Swedes. On the other hand, he can become apprehensive with other Protestants, Germans, women and any students who, like himself, wear a *kippah*. Not that he is a misogynist. Rather, as he once remarked to me: "It will take more

generations before women overcome the habits that they acquired during the centuries of their enslavement to men.”

Nor is his reaction to *kippot* irrational. Two observant Jewish friends once told me how they persisted in attending his university classes on Christianity despite a barrage of seemingly hostile comments to which they were subjected. Eventually they asked him why he did this. He replied that he did not want his instruction to be any kind of encouragement to them to leave their religion.

With Germans, his first question is whether they come from beyond the *limes*. Unfortunately, today’s education is such that many do not understand the question. (It refers to the ancient boundary of the Roman Empire in Germany.)

As an Anglican, I had the advantage of being, as Flusser put it, not *haereticus* but merely *schismaticus*. I hardly need mention that Flusser not merely switches readily between Hebrew, German and English, according to the topic under discussion, but may also launch into whole sentences of Latin or Greek. It belongs to one of his favorite teaching methods: speaking as if you were already a full-fledged scholar, even if you are far from being so. For then, every time you hear an unfamiliar name, concept or term, you will know that it is something that you should go and learn. Moreover, if you dare to ask him, he will courteously explain it himself.

On meeting Anglicans, Flusser had the same stock comment. This, he would say, was an incomprehensible kind of Christian that claimed to be both Protestant and Catholic; they had had one theologian, Hooker, four hundred years ago, but had since stopped trying to explain themselves. At last I persuaded him to read the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. This raised his opinion of Anglicanism, since he found nothing to his distaste except the repudiation of the concept of Purgatory. While admitting, as Article XXII says, that this “Romish Doctrine” was “grounded on no warranty of Scripture,” he felt sympathy for its intention to offer sinners another chance.

That Flusser truly has no prejudices is shown by the example of my wife Petra, who is Protestant, a woman and from Berlin — far beyond the *limes*. The first time I mentioned her name, as a rather new acquaintance, he prophetically exclaimed: “What a nice young lady, what a nice young lady — why doesn’t she marry?” At our wedding some years later, Johanan volunteered to be a photographer. We subsequently received an album of pictures, which Flusser inscribed, again prophetically: “Super hanc Petram aedificet Deus domum fidelem, et portae inferi non praevalerunt adversus eam” (cf. Mt. 16:18).

From all the above examples, one may see how Flusser is not merely a scholar whose work continues to bear good fruits, year after year, at an age when others have long chosen to rest on their laurels. Nor is he merely, in addition, the ever-brilliant conversationalist and humorist. He is a man whose perception and wisdom are constantly manifest in relation to his family, his friends, his students and all the visitors who continue to seek him out. May he long continue to be an example and a beacon to us all.

Marcel Dubois

When I arrived in Jerusalem in 1962, I often heard Brother Bruno and Brother Jacques, who received me at St. Isaiah House, speak with admiration and sympathy of a certain Dr. David Flusser. They had heard his lectures at the university, met him during colloquia, and regarded him as one of the closest friends of our recently established Dominican community in the western part of Jerusalem.

I lost no time in making his acquaintance. It was the period of the Second Vatican Council, and we would meet at innumerable ecumenical gatherings, organized for the reception of the Catholic personalities who passed through Jerusalem. It was hard to overlook him: his astounding knowledge of the Christian tradition and of the history of the Church, the non-conformist frankness and the explosive humor of his remarks, attracted attention. How could one not be struck by this scholar of the Hebrew University, who was capable of finding his way through the labyrinth of the different Christian denominations and talking to their representatives in a great variety of languages? Who could forget seeing him confront, in Latin, groups of Catholic bishops who came to Jerusalem as pilgrims?

Throughout those years, at any important event that touched upon the life of the Church or the relations between the Vatican and Israel, we could be sure to be called on the phone by Dr. Flusser, anxious to hear our reactions and impatient to let us know his own. He followed with great attention the debates of the Council; he also worried about what must be called the crises of occidental theology.

On certain occasions, he submitted to us the text of letters — in Latin — which he wanted to be forwarded to the Pope. They might be concerned with the preparatory texts of the “Document on the Jews” or with the message of the Pope to President Franjijeh after the attack of the Israeli army on Beirut airport. One will remember that this operation, which, by the way, caused no casualties, was a retaliation for the Mahaneh Yehudah outrage, which claimed eleven innocent victims from Jerusalem’s civilian population. I particularly remember the perplexed and agonized telephone call on the eve of the Pope’s journey to Israel, on January 5, 1964; his commenting with a certain sadness on the discourse of Paul I at Nazareth; and also his enthusiastic appeal immediately after the publication of the declaration of the French Bishops on Passover Eve of 1973.

Even if I had never heard his lectures, I soon had occasion to meet him more personally in the various institutions of public research and dialogue that had been founded in Jerusalem during the late 1960s, or at the international meetings where we formed part of the Israeli delegation. Flusser became one of the most popular and sought-after speakers of the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel and one of the most assiduous contributors to its journal *Immanuel*. It was mainly in this framework that I had occasion to hear him and to collaborate with him.

To tell the truth, even if I had not had the privilege of meeting Flusser in Jerusalem, his name would not have been unknown to me, for during that

period he became one of the Jewish scholars most highly appreciated by the Christian intellectuals of Europe and America. The address that he delivered in 1968 at the annual colloquium of the French Catholic intellectuals on "Who is Jesus?" made him known to a large public. His book on Jesus, published that same year in German, was quickly translated into English, French, Dutch, Italian, Swedish and Spanish. Subsequently, *Immanuel* 5 (Summer 1975) published the fifty-nine theses in which Flusser summed up his historical and theological vision of the relations between Judaism and Christianity.

The interest with which his works were received shows that they were the answer to an expectation and confirmed a prediction. Thus it is not surprising that Flusser has become one of the most listened-to speakers of all those who, in both the Christian and Jewish worlds, take an interest in the historical person of Jesus and in the Jewish origins of the Christian faith.

The central issues of his research are well known: How, in the face of the emergence of Jesus Christ, did the rupture between the diverse streams of the Jewish tradition and the (often manifold) stream of the Christian tradition come about? What were the causes, conditions, forms and consequences of the breach between Judaism and the Church (or churches)? To these diverse questions, in which, from the very beginning, the controversy between Jews and Christians could be summed up, Flusser's work attests to a new context and at the same time to a new viewpoint. The personality and the doctrine of Jesus are evidently the center of the problem. Flusser's two-fold merit is that he had the courage to tackle it and to propose a fresh approach to it.

For centuries, in the Talmud and later Jewish literature, there was a silence that in fact concealed a wish to forget, as well as an uneasiness or disapproval. Yet during the last hundred years, Jewish writers began anew to take account of the Gospels. The first of these, Joseph Salvador, Montefiore and Kaufmann, were wise men with liberal tendencies. In our time other voices, more and more numerous and well-informed, started to make themselves heard: historians and philosophers such as Klausner, Buber and Schalom Ben-Chorin, or writers such as Edmond Fleg, Shalom Ash and Jules Isaac.

Nonetheless, those attempts remained personal and somewhat isolated enterprises. Flusser's work is an innovation. It is simultaneously the sign and the fruit of that renewal of Jewish studies whose vitality has been singularly strengthened, above all in Israel, thanks to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and to the progress of talmudic studies. As is well known, Flusser works in close collaboration with Prof. Shmuel Safrai, a specialist in the period of the Second Temple; he belongs to the Department of Comparative Religion established at the Hebrew University by Prof. Zwi Werblowsky; and he has the immediate benefit of the continual discoveries made in recent decades by the archaeologists and historians of that university.

In short, Flusser's work is interesting because it embraces two aspects. It is that of a scholar who knows all the methods of modern exegesis. And it is that of a man of faith asking himself about Jesus of Nazareth and about the first Christian community in the light of the religious tradition of Judaism.

This is not the place to analyze and draw up a balance of all the problems on which Flusser's approach and method throw a new light. I shall not dwell,

therefore, on his great contribution to the Synoptic question. Nor shall I comment on his work on the attitude of Jesus, then of the diverse factions of the Christian community, to the Torah, as well as on the causes of Christian anti-Jewish attitudes during the various epochs of the life of the Church. Here I shall limit myself only to the point that appears to me most decisive, which I shall call the "theological realism" to which his approach leads.

What appears to me to be the most important advantage of the method employed by Flusser lies in his undertaking to rediscover Jesus himself, as he appeared to his contemporaries. Flusser explains how Jesus could understand himself, in his Jewish consciousness, to be a preordained child, a prophet and a messenger of God.

In order to understand Jesus of Nazareth, Flusser's interpretation of the Gospels largely and principally appeals to the oral tradition of Judaism. In contrast to an exegesis of the New Testament that is too facile, but very widespread, Flusser is convinced that Jesus does not take us away from the Jewish tradition. He goes out from it and he leads to it. Establishing a connection between the writings of the New Testament and the Jewish literature of the period, Flusser places Jesus in the framework of his life — the Land of Israel and the People of Israel.

The results of this approach are quite revolutionary, since they fundamentally undermine the conclusions of the method called "form criticism" (*Formgeschichte*). The latter claimed to want to explore the living tradition, the "message" (*kerygma*) of the evangelists. Nevertheless, the researchers who used this method were guided by the thesis that the evangelists were in the first place writers who invented the "good news," and not just witnesses or recorders. The tradition that they created was, therefore, rather that of the church in the seventh decade of the mainly Greek communities than that of the original Jewish Christian community in the second and third decades in Jerusalem.

Flusser is not influenced by such prior assumptions. He suggests the systematic use of the data of the oral tradition that we have. Through the New Testament writings, he seeks the oral tradition whose origins go back to the contemporary Jewish chronicles and which therefore constitute special evidence of the historical personality of Jesus. In brief, instead of connecting the Synoptic "message" with the creative activity of the Christian community only, he researches the Jewish sources and sees the writers of the "message" as witnesses and editors rather than as story-tellers. In this way he achieves great accuracy and comes to clearer conclusions than those arrived at by Dibelius, Bultmann and other inventors of the method of form criticism.

His manner of reading the New Testament in the light of contemporary Jewish tradition enables Flusser to emphasize, with certainty and tranquillity, the common foundations and the lines of continuity that unite Judaism and Christianity. A summary of his conclusions was presented in those "fifty-nine theses on the emergence of Christianity from Judaism." He affirmed that it is possible to establish the place of Jesus in the Jewish streams of that period; that Jesus' critique of the Pharisees differs in no way from their self-criticism (thesis 2); that Jesus did not invent the concept of a split divinity and that God is the God

of Israel (thesis 3); and that Christianity and Judaism are actually one faith (thesis 50).

Such convictions, however, do not lead Flusser to a simplistic solution. On the contrary, he opposes any intermixture and any syncretism. Based on the common foundations and the lines of continuity that he uncovered through his approach, Flusser emphasizes the differences and divergences. He is very much aware of the breach between Judaism and Christianity as it existed from the beginning and points out what is essential in this historic confrontation as well as what is less essential; what exists in the faith itself and what stems from social and sociological circumstances.

By this method, he invites the reader to recognize the various forms that antisemitism has assumed in different historic contexts and epochs. He rightly claims that the idealistic philosophy of the past three generations estranged Christian thinking from Jewish thought even farther than it was distant from it through the cognition of the medieval Fathers of the Church. Likewise, he correctly notes that the conceptual world of an anti-Jewish Christian who lived in the Middle Ages was closer to the Jewish way of thinking than the conceptual world of many Christians of the present time (thesis 50).

These theses, though paradoxical, help us discern everything that attracts Flusser to the theology of the Middle Ages. He admits this himself and likes to refer to it. One day he declared to us, half in earnest and half in jest: "If I were a Christian, I would be a Dominican. Not the kind of Dominican as he is today, but like a theologian of the thirteenth century." From such dicta, rather than from his writings and conversations with diverse interlocutors, there emerge the independence and self-confidence that distinguish Flusser as a Jewish scholar whose openness to dialogue is based upon his conviction of his own identity, an identity originating from his tradition and faith.

In this respect, Flusser is the most popular — because the most picturesque and colorful — figure in the current dialogue between Jews and Christians. He does not conceal his preferences or reservations, his enthusiasms or allergies; but in order to express them, he brings into play his irresistible talent for humor and comedy. This is not to everybody's taste, yet in many cases his wittiness helps to mitigate the discord. In the area of "after-dinner speeches" (*Tischreden*), one could produce an anthology of Flusser's responses, or quite simply a chronicle of his daily adventures. It would not be difficult to discern therein the lines of force of his theology.

All Israeli TV viewers are familiar with Flusser's spectacular sudden bursts of fury in the course of memorable programs about the Pharisees, the Second Temple, Christian missionaries, the election of the Pope, or any other phenomenon in the life of the Church. A good many Christian pilgrims have been upset by the frankness of his responses on the Gospel and the loyalty of his regard for Jesus.

The chronicles of St. Isaiah House would enable us to add to such an anthology quite a few juicy, funny or moving details. Pitiless against hasty compromises or doctrinal muddles, he often had occasion to sum up for us, in inimitable form, theological debates that he had attended, or to describe the protagonists by impersonations of highest comedy. Returning one day from a

colloquium in Vienna, he spoke to us in Latin like an Austrian Jesuit “who believed he was modern in returning to Arianism.” On another occasion, when he had received a French parliamentarian who was as pretentious as ignorant of religious matters, he gave us a mime of the dialogue; one could have believed that he was a partisan of the Radical Party.

Nor were the Dominicans spared. One evening, the Interfaith Committee of Jerusalem (Brith Shalom) had given a reception to a Dominican who was well-known in Rome. Unfortunately, it has to be admitted that the contents of his address were rather vague, meaning rather poor. Returning home after the meeting, Flusser said to me, half in fun and half in sorrow: “I believe we have to pray for the Order of St. Dominic.” This was not only a joke reflecting the disappointment of the moment, but an expression of real concern and anxiety.

We have had occasion to take part in this fun and games and to encourage it. One story on this subject has become part of the folklore of St. Isaiah House. As already intimated, it happens sometimes that Flusser speaks Latin to us on the phone or at social occasions “so that the heretics should not understand!” Accordingly, one day we decided to send him, in Latin, a fake telegram from the Vatican. It was on the occasion of the Christian festival of St. John the Baptist. One must know that Flusser had named his son Johanan after that New Testament figure, for whom he had a deep regard. We composed the text, supposedly emanating from the relevant Vatican official: “On St. John the Baptist’s Day, His Holiness the Pope is sending you, your son, your family, your country his wishes for peace and his blessing. Cicogniani.”

I no longer know why we forgot to dispatch it. Several days later, however, there was a reception at the American Institute of Holy Land Studies on Mt. Zion to mark the visit to Jerusalem of the British Association for New Testament Studies. Noticing me from afar in the crowd, Flusser came to me and said loudly: “You have forgotten me this week!”

It was easy for me to answer his complaint by telling him of our plan. I recited to him, in Latin, the text of the undischpatched telegram. He started laughing and told me: “Ah, this reminds me of something that happened to me several years ago. One night, when the whole house was asleep, the telephone rang. I jumped out of bed, grabbed the receiver, and heard a voice saying to me in French: ‘Professor Flusser.’ — ‘Yes.’ — ‘This is Jesus Christ speaking to you.’ Well, I am so eagerly awaiting the Parousia that it took me several seconds until I realized that Jesus Christ, if he were to telephone Professor Flusser today in Jerusalem, would do so not in French but in Hebrew.”

Certainly, not everybody appreciates this kind of humor, nor, above all, this unexpected and explosive manner of conversation. Some people reproach Flusser for intentionally playing the clown and misusing the comic style; they fail to see how serious he is even when he seems to be most frivolous. Others fear the unforeseeable character of his interventions. One may regret, for example, that for fear of a scandal he was not called upon for a certain French TV broadcast about Jesus, which was prepared in Jerusalem.

It is true that, like every commentator too often invited to speak and rarely so impolite as to refuse, Flusser is not always up to his own standard. Sometimes, I have been disappointed by some speech to which he had come unpre-

pared. I sometimes find it hard to follow his logic in conversations where I have the impression of witnessing an incoherent series of ingenious explosions between which I have difficulty in discerning a connection. Above all, however, should one not see in this apparent diffuseness the mark of a real courage and of an immense capacity?

Flusser is so convinced of the urgency of his discoveries, and so open to meeting people, that he is ready to receive anybody who is on the quest for truth, even those who come to beg him for money. One day when I was visiting him, I saw him interrupt a rather passionate conversation to give a few coins to a pauper who knocked at his door. For years, he even allowed one well-known Jerusalem crank, who survived by soliciting contributions for an imaginary peace mission, to claim that Flusser was a partner in the enterprise. The fairest explanation is certainly that which was given to me one day by Prof. Werblowsky, who had the rather uncomfortable task of being his senior at the university: "Marcel, if there exists an evidence of 'pneuma' at the university, this can only be David Flusser!"

In any case, this is what everybody who has met him will always remember about him: a man whose evidence confirms the method, whose conviction countersigns the thought. Flusser, in this respect, is certainly one of the artisans and heralds of the progress achieved over these past years in the loyal and truthful meeting of Jews and Christians, without compromises and illusions, especially in Israel.

"My master and your God." This is how he speaks to us about Jesus. It is certainly Flusser who has most been helping us to understand that, if Jesus of Nazareth is a stumbling block between Jews and Christians, his person reunites us the moment when it schismatizes us, because he is a son of the Jewish people.

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