Frank exchange on Jesus

Richard Harries finds a healthy openness about differences

_Sounds in the Religion of Jesus: Perspectives and methods in Jewish and Christian scholarship_ by Bruce Chilton, Anthony Le Donne, and Jacob Neusner, editors
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JESUS was a Jew, and can only be understood within the Jewish context of his time. That truth, so long ignored, is now taken for granted by all scholars of the New Testament. When Geza Vermes wrote his famous book _Jesus the Jew_ in 1983, he assumed that objective scholarship would show us the truth of Jesus. What differentiates this book, written by distinguished Jewish and Christian scholars, is an awareness that scholarship is never as objective as we think it is; for we bring our religious assumptions to bear, and, furthermore, there is a proper loyalty to the religious community of which we are a part.

A basic assumption behind this book is that good scholarly work on the historical Jesus can contribute to the wider issue of Jewish-Christian relations. So, as well as discussions of particular passages in the New Testament, there are essays on New Testament interpretation in the periods from the Reformations onwards, including the Nazi period, and a setting out of Jewish and Christian truth-claims. A further assumption of the book is that a generative approach to the scriptures must be taken, so that we see Jewish scriptures as unfolding from the first to the seventh century, not as something static, and similarly with the New Testament. For example, it is with this in mind that Joel Lohr argues that Matthew 25.31-46 is best seen against the background of Jewish ideas of judgement at the end of the first century, as well as Matthew’s understanding of the mission to the Gentiles. This is a story specifically about the judgement of the Gentiles (not the whole world), with an ethical criterion similar to the Jewish idea that they will be judged by the Noahide code.

It would be good to have more books of this kind focusing on particular texts, Jewish as well as Christian. It would be helpful if they could distinguish historic anti-Judaism from anti-Semitism more sharply than this book does. From a Christian point of view, one issue that remains to be discussed, as Dunn argues, is how developed views of Jesus (the Christ of faith) can be fitted into the Jewish context of the time, and how, if they can, this might contribute to constructive Jewish-Christian dialogue.

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