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# *Geza Vermes and the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus*

## *A Review Essay on *Jesus in His Jewish Context**

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*Jesus in His Jewish Context.* By Geza Vermes. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003. 200 pages. \$19.00.

During the last few decades, the subject of the historical Jesus has once again moved into the center of scholarly studies among New Testament historians, exegetes, and theologians. In stark contrast to the movements of the nineteenth and mid-twentieth century, which exhibited very different concerns, the chief focus of the third quest for the historical Jesus is the Jewish background, setting, and context for Jesus' life and teachings. In addition to Jesus' teachings, the social sciences have supplied much of the backdrop regarding Jesus' surroundings.

### *Geza Vermes's Research on the Historical Jesus*

For more than thirty years, Geza Vermes has published works on the historical Jesus. In his latest volume, Vermes has updated the second of his trilogy of books on the subject. Professor Emeritus of Jewish Studies at Oxford University, Vermes has been one of the major authors in the last few decades to champion Jesus' Jewishness, a hallmark of the third quest for the historical Jesus. However, some commentators appear to be uneasy placing Vermes in the middle of this recent trend.

Vermes's *Jesus the Jew* (hereafter *JJ*), published in 1973, was a major effort by a historian and Dead Sea Scrolls authority to apply his trade to Jesus' career. His latest, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (hereafter *JJC*) replaces *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (hereafter *JWJ*), while *The Religion*

of *Jesus the Jew* (hereafter *RJJ*) is the last volume in the series.<sup>1</sup> Each was written “for both scholars and a general readership.”<sup>2</sup>

*JJC* is comprised of various essays on the topic, most of which are reproduced from the earlier *JWJ*. Chapters on Jesus the Jew, a historian’s reading of the Gospels, the Kingdom of God, Jesus and Christianity, two essays on Jewish Studies and the New Testament, as well as a chapter on the Son of Man are found in both texts. But in *JJC*, a new preface, two chapters on Josephus, two more chapters on the Dead Sea Scrolls, and an autobiographical essay (twelve total chapters) replace the old preface, two other essays on the Dead Sea Scrolls, and one on the Essenes in *JWJ* (ten total chapters).

Thus *JJC* remains a book of collected essays published elsewhere, and thereby exhibits the perennial problem with many such volumes. As a whole, the chapter topics are only loosely related. Some of the chapters appear to be less immediately applicable to the current state of studies strictly concerning Jesus. Of the newer essays in this edition, those regarding Josephus’s view of the Law (chapter 9) and insights from the Qumran documents on the sacrifice of Isaac (chapter 10) are more difficult to relate. True, as the title indicates, the book also concerns Jesus’ Jewish context. But one could conclude that these entries are perhaps explained better by the point mentioned above, that the original state of these essays was that of separately published documents. Other chapters (especially 8, 11–12) are much more relevant to studies of the historical Jesus, as we will mention below.

A further, serious issue concerns the publication dates of the essays. In *JWJ*, the original 1983 volume, each chapter was composed of works that were published during the previous ten years. But in *JJC* (published in 2003), the same essays appear outdated. Even the five new chapters were originally published between 1982 and 1999. Two of these essays appeared in the decade of the 1980s, while none is more recent than the last five years.

A few anachronistic examples further exasperate this problem. Chapter 7 still includes the words “The Present State” in the title, even though it was published in a substantially similar form about twenty-five years previously. Plus, “last year” (88)<sup>3</sup> is a reference to 1977 and “a few weeks ago” (89) apparently still refers to the mid-1970s. Even for the original 1983 edition, these matters would be troublesome. Unfortunately, besides containing some outdated essays, the text requires some further editing.

<sup>1</sup> Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1973); *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Vermes, *JJC*, vii.

<sup>3</sup> Undesignated pages listed in the text are taken from *JJC*.

In spite of these particular points, Vermes still provides much excellent background on select topics in historical Jesus studies. For instance, he begins, as many contemporary historical Jesus scholars do, with a list of generally agreed-upon historical facts (*JWJ*, 3–6, 19–20; *JJC*, 2–6, 18). Here Vermes extends the search with which he began his studies of Jesus (*JJ*, 17). In doing so, he makes the much-needed corrective that the Gospel writers can have their distinctive perspectives without precluding their capability to write history (*JWJ*, 19; *JJC*, 18, 126).

On another front, Vermes’s added chapter 8 in *JJC* (91–8) on the disputed Josephus statement about Jesus in *Antiquities* 18:63–4 provides a helpful overview and contrast of the general range of scholarly opinion. Vermes sides with the majority view that the main portion of Josephus’s citation is authentic, because it fits Josephus’s style, and is unlikely to have been fabricated by Christians, because it includes a primitive epithet that is found in both Christian and Jewish literature (92–3). In this conclusion, Josephus is “fairly sympathetic but ultimately detached” (96; see also 98).

Another additional essay in *JJC* (chapter 11), “The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years On,” provides a very helpful update on the number of original compositions (about 800, with 200 of these being Old Testament sources), along with thousands of fragments, among the scrolls. All Old Testament books “with the possible exception of Esther” are represented (115–16). These writings date from the end of the third century BC until about 70 AD (117). Also discussed are current studies on the relation of the scrolls to the Qumran community (118–19). Vermes informs us that the majority of scholars view the “teacher of righteousness” as a second-century BC Jewish figure (121). He also lists differences between Essene and early Christian eschatology (122–3).

Lastly, chapter 12 in *JJC* provides some very helpful and interesting autobiographical reflections on Vermes’s career. He maps some of his early years of research, as well as later lectures and publishing.

Vermes’s chief conclusion regarding Jesus is that he is neither the Christ/Messiah figure of Christian theology nor the Jewish “bogey-man” (126; see also 132). As Vermes has argued throughout his publications, Jesus is a Jewish holy man, not unlike Honi the Rain-maker or Jesus’ contemporary, Hanina ben Dosa. So it makes good sense to place Jesus in such company (127). Jesus is particularly distinguished from others by his preaching of “faith-trust” and repentance, as preparation for the coming Kingdom of God (129, see also 131).

Throughout his preaching and teaching, Jesus “also appears uniquely aware of his filial relation to the Father in heaven (*Abba*)” (129; see also 131). Finally, Jesus died “as a *potential* threat to law and order . . . and in

the authorities' judgement as such had to be eliminated for the common good." (130).

However, Vermes more surprisingly concludes that John and Paul perverted the Gospel picture of Jesus, changing him into an "other-worldly saviour figure" (126–7), although Vermes presents very few details as to how and where this occurred. He also believes that the synoptic titles for Jesus were reinterpreted in the early church. Still, remarkably, Jesus is "incomparably superior" to many other Jewish Holy Men (127).

So Vermes's writings exhibit what many texts do—both good research as well as objectionable statements. While we proceed to an interaction with some of the latter, it should not be forgotten that his volumes have also produced some fine examples of the former, too.

### *Interacting with Vermes's Treatment of the Historical Jesus*

That Paul and John are the culprits in perverting Jesus' message into that of a divine savior, with the synoptic message being further reinterpreted by the church, is a very difficult position to maintain, for more than one reason.<sup>4</sup> The synoptic Gospels use titles for Jesus in a manner that make it clear that he is not being viewed as simply a Jewish holy man.

For example, in the so-called early Q statement in Matthew 11:27 and Luke 10:21–2, Jesus, as the Son of the Father, claims unique, unparalleled knowledge of God. Via the principle of embarrassment, scholars usually conclude that Jesus also taught that he was the Son of the Father in Mark 13:32, for why else would the author record in the same statement that Jesus did not know the time of his own coming, unless Jesus truly taught this? Further, in his parable in Mark 12:1–12, Jesus portrayed himself as God's "beloved son" (12:6).

Moreover, as the Son of Man, contrary to Vermes's interpretation (below), Jesus forgives sin, causing the Jewish teachers to declare that this was blasphemy (Mark 2:1–12). Arguably the major instance where Vermes underestimates Jesus' affirmation of his Deity occurs before the High Priest (Mark 14:61–4). Jesus answered that he was "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One." Then he affirmed that he was also the Son of Man, the one who would be seated as coregent on God's throne, and coming on the clouds (a clear designation in the Old Testament for God). The High Priest responded by tearing his clothes and declaring that Jesus had spoken blasphemy.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding Paul and Jesus, see David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

This last text, in particular, is a far cry from Jesus simply claiming to be a Jewish holy man. But Vermes prefers the report of what he believes is a noncommittal answer by Jesus, as in Matthew 26:64 (185n2), rather than the earlier and more critically-attested wording in the Markan account. Especially given recent scholarly research that has been published on this text,<sup>5</sup> Vermes's response seems to reflect both the dated nature of this essay, as well as his atypical critical methodology. But a last clincher is that even in the parallel texts that Vermes prefers (Matt. 26:64b; Luke 22:69), Jesus *still* makes the comments claiming God's prerogatives that lead to the declaration that he is guilty of blasphemy!

Moreover, numerous early creedal statements that clearly predate the writings of both John and Paul, but also the synoptic Gospels, indicate that Jesus was considered to be more than a Jewish holy man. In these early traditions, the doctrine of the earliest church was that Jesus was the Christ or Messiah (Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:3; Acts 2:31, 36; 3:18–20; 4:10; 10:36), Lord (Rom. 1:4; 10:9; 1 Cor. 11:23; Acts 2:36; 10:36), and Son of God (Rom. 1:3–4; Acts 13:32–3).

Since this higher view of Jesus is present both in the best-attested portions of the synoptic Gospels, as well as in the earlier pre-Pauline and pre-Johannine creedal sources, it cannot be blamed on later perversions or reinterpretations. We clearly have a path here from several pre-Gospel traditions, through the writings of Paul, and on to the synoptic Gospels and John. Vermes's protests to the contrary appear to follow more in the tradition of Hyam Maccoby,<sup>6</sup> a path that is generally rejected by the vast majority of scholars today for reasons such as these.<sup>7</sup>

In another interesting charge, Vermes states that the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament writings do not provide the best insight into the mindset of the Hasidic Jew, since the chief sources about Jesus are "extant only in a foreign language and an alien arrangement" (ix)! This is an odd comment, given that the Gospels were written closer to the life of Jesus than

<sup>5</sup> See especially Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge Against Jesus in Mark 14:53–65* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 106; citations are to the Baker edition. See also Craig A. Evans, "In What Sense 'Blasphemy'? Jesus before Caiaphas in Mark 14:61–64," *SBL Seminar Papers* 30 (1991): 215–34; N. T. Wright, "Looking Again for Jesus," *Stimulus* 4 (1994): 34–5; Ben Witherington, III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 258–61; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1994), 96.

<sup>6</sup> Hyam Z. Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986); Hyam Z. Maccoby, *Paul and Hellenism* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 20–2, 70–7, 172, 188. Cf. Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 284, 288.

were Vermes's major references to the Jewish holy men. In fact, some of these Jewish sources, however they are taken, are much later. For example, John Meier maintains that Vermes draws many of his rabbinic data from sources like the Mishnah, Tosefta, as well as the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, some of which are removed by centuries from Jewish texts.<sup>8</sup>

Vermes answers Meier's charges by saying that he made use of Jewish sources from all periods of Jewish thought, beginning with the Old Testament prophets. He then appeals to his readers to decide the verdict of this debate with Meier (viii–ix). But this still leaves us with Vermes's odd comment about the comparatively brief time between the Gospels and Jesus, as recognized by Vermes himself. Further, how the Greek language or the "alien arrangement" in the Gospels mitigates their earlier provenance is difficult to say!

As mentioned, Vermes's Son of Man essay was published about twenty-five years previously. As a result, what Vermes had termed the present state of the issue suffers at an important juncture by being quite out-of-date. Vermes holds that whether in Daniel, 4 Ezra, or 1 Enoch, the phrase "the son of man" is not used as a title (88).

Besides the contrary data mentioned above from Jesus' trial, throughout his chapter Vermes contrasts philologists and historians with theologians, frequently noting the differences in their approaches and conclusions. But he seldom, if ever, differentiates between the scholars he cites. For example, while Norman Perrin is complimented as a philologist, Joachim Jeremias, Oscar Cullmann, Heinz Eduard Tödt, and Ferdinand Hahn, as well as Rudolf Bultmann (84; see also 127), with whom Vermes disagrees (82–7), apparently do not qualify as philologists, at least of the same caliber. Other than their agreement or disagreement with Vermes, the distinction is sometimes blurred.

Still, Vermes notes the wide range of views on this topic (81–2), and acknowledges that the majority of both theologians (87) and New Testament exegetes (88–9) disagrees with him. We have already sampled Vermes's conclusions, as he differentiates himself from the scholarly status quo. He seems to prefer a reading in Matthew over the parallel in Mark 14:61–4, even though the latter is earlier and generally taken by scholars to be more authoritative, while the crucial portion of the text in Matthew even *agrees* with Mark anyway! Additionally, Vermes ignores the latest research on Jesus' trial before the high priest and his company.

Items such as these have apparently contributed over the years to the occasional uneasiness that has been expressed by some New Testament scholars regarding several of Vermes's conclusions. Aware of this, Vermes

<sup>8</sup> John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 3, *Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 16n21.

begins in the preface of *JJC* by responding to some of this criticism, specifically his debate with John Meier. Vermes notes Meier's complaint that he employs an unsophisticated methodology (vi–x, 133). He responds similarly to Bruce Chilton's complaint (x). Later, he addresses comments in a similar vein to Joseph Fitzmyer (84–5).

Vermes addresses two of Meier's objections to his work—his lack of a methodology as well as using rabbinic sources in a noncritical manner (vii). In all fairness, we have seen that Vermes qualifies his methodological statements in a manner that provides a decent explanation of his previous comments (vii–x).

Another unmentioned item is Meier's additional criticism that Vermes misuses critical criterion as they are applied to the study of the Gospels. For example, Vermes refers to reports found in all the synoptic Gospels as if this indicates three different sources instead of just one (Mark), as held by most critical scholars (*RJJ*, 18). As Meier points out, Matthew and Luke are usually thought not to be independent sources, but to have used Mark's account.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the give and take on these critical issues will be viewed differently by evaluators, depending on the backgrounds and perspectives of each scholar. However, one other small point grows a bit bothersome the more it arises. Vermes responds several times to his detractors by saying that he only meant a particular comment in a "jocular" or "lighthearted" manner. But it happens enough that one wonders why others are so frequently missing the joke!<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

Vermes is to be commended especially for beginning his research and writing during a time when the Jewishness of Jesus was only infrequently recognized by scholars. Many of his insights have continued to place Jesus firmly in his own background, rather than being interpreted as a Hellenistic thinker whose teachings were little known and almost entirely changed. Here, as Vermes points out, he disagrees with Bultmann and company (127; see also 84).

This trend has continued in the decades since Vermes's first volume on this subject, as the central theme of the third quest for the historical Jesus. Chief among Vermes's accomplishments, then, is to insist that Jesus be

<sup>9</sup> Meier, *Companions and Competitors*, 16n21.

<sup>10</sup> In *JJC* alone, these remarks are made to John Meier (vii, and again on 133), to Joseph Fitzmyer (85), and to an unnamed "American Bible expert" (128).

understood and interpreted as a Jewish teacher, placed within his own historical background.

Still, in several items like those mentioned above regarding Vermes's dismissal of the early New Testament teachings on Jesus' person and the altering of the message by later Christian writers, there is still a gap between his work and the majority of recent New Testament scholars. It is left to others to determine whether my criticisms here are justified.