Jesus Talks Back

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In his “Forward” to the revised version of Jacob Neusner’s *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, Donald Akenson announces that this book “is destined to be a minor classic.”¹ His prediction proved correct when Pope Benedict XVI engaged the volume in his own study of Jesus of Nazareth.² Neusner’s book is a classic, and far more than this. Among the splendid aspects of this volume, three are especially notable for today’s conversation between Jews and Christians.

First, Neusner engages the Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel—the Jesus encountered in traditional Christian preaching and teaching. *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* takes the words of Matthew’s Gospel seriously. Here is no atomistic exegesis whereby the Gospel is picked apart to determine what the “historical Jesus” might have actually said or done, what came from Matthew’s sources both literary and oral, and what the evangelist added on the redactional level. Rather, Neusner reads the First Gospel as would a person in the pew and not a liberal scholar at the lectern. (Indeed, Professor Neusner I doubt would ever read anything as a “liberal”!)

At the same time, he refuses to allegorize or domesticate Jesus’ comments on family values, economic divestment, and moral perfection, or to regard them as unreachable goals that could be celebrated in the abstract while ignored in praxis. Thus he shows the Gospel, and its readers, lay or otherwise, the respect they deserve.

Second, Neusner explains why he chooses to follow the path of non-messianic, practicing Judaism. Within Christian circles, Jesus’ Jewish context is frequently misunderstood as ossified, militaristic, misogynist, xenophobic, elitist, racist, and otherwise guilty of whatever sins beset contemporary culture, while Jesus—even when his Jewish birth is acknowledged—remains fully unique and therefore divine. Neusner’s portrayal of a viable, vibrant Judaism of the first and subsequent centuries is a necessary correction.


Third, Neusner does not engage in the common move in Jewish/Christian dialogue that, in order to avoid the difficult questions of disagreement, seeks either to create a lowest-common denominator into which Jesus neatly fits or to dismiss the strong differences he finds with Jesus. He does not pull his punches, but neither does he engage in uninformed cavils (e.g., the claim that only uneducated Jews would have followed Jesus) or accusations that Jesus is, because he is not “lord,” either a liar or a lunatic.3

Because Neusner’s discussion with and about Jesus takes place more in terms of praxis and exegesis than of belief and eschatology, it is necessarily limited to the rational. Although Neusner also intends to “shed some light on why, while Christians believe in Jesus Christ and the good news of his rule in the kingdom of Heaven, Jews believe in the Torah of Moses and [they] form on earth and in their own flesh God’s kingdom of priests,”4 explaining belief in historical terms creates a category confusion. Both the theological concern for what people “believe” as well as the particulars of that belief system require nuance. To attempt to explain “why” someone believes something is probably best not placed in the hands of historians, even one as capable as Jacob Neusner.

According to Neusner, “Matthew claims in behalf of Jesus that his is a body of teachings of such obvious truth that all who hear them must confess the name of the one who said them” (9). This is not what Matthew claims or how belief functions. Belief, whether for Matthew or for anyone else, is not “obvious” to an outsider. When Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Peter responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (16:16). To call someone God’s “anointed” (Messiah, or Christ) would make sense in early Judaism; even Rabbi Aqiba famously proclaimed Bar Kokhba the messiah (Lamentations Rabbah 2.5; Y. Ta’anit 4.8, as did Isaiah (45.1) centuries before in reference to Cyrus of Persia.

Important for the question of belief is Jesus’ response to Peter’s confession, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven” (16:17). For Matthew—for the Gospel tradition as a whole—complete belief in Jesus as messiah, or divine, or even as the definitive teacher of Torah, does not come on the basis of his having made a compelling argument, or performed a miracle, or died on the cross, or even risen from the dead. As Matthew notes, even some of the disciples who witnessed the resurrected Jesus “doubted” (28:17).

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4 Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks*, p. 3.