Introduction: The Gospels in First Century Judaea

On August 29, 2013 twelve Jewish and Christian scholars convened at the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian in New York City to mark the inauguration of Nyack College’s graduate program in Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins. The new program offers students a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of Second Temple Judaism and the New Testament. These papers by archaeologists, historians, linguists, and scholars of religious studies exemplify the program’s combined focus on historical geography, ancient languages and religious literature in the study of the New Testament.

Each contributor selected a passage from the four Gospels and demonstrated how her or his discipline might bring new understanding to the saying or narrative in question. Their contributions in this volume are ordered according to the order in which they appear in the canonical Gospels.

Lawrence Schiffman (New York University) underscores the importance of Jewish purity laws regarding women, if we are to understand the plight of the woman with the issue of blood (Matt 9:20–22). He presents varying halakhot in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the opinions of Israel’s Sages found in Tannaitic literature concerning a woman in various states of religious impurity. His study is an attempt to determine more clearly the situation of the woman and what she seeks from Jesus.

Next, two faculty from the New York City campus of Nyack College investigate Gospel texts in light of Second Temple Jewish thought. Jeffrey P. García (Nyack College) examines Jesus’ instructions concerning charity in light of the halakhic requirements of benevolence in the Mishnah and Tosefta. As he notes, while there is considerable attention given to comparisons between Jesus’ instruction and Jewish legal matters, little attention has been given to Jesus’ imperative to care for the poor as part of Jewish halakhah.

David Emanuel (Nyack College) examines Jesus’ citation of Psalm 8:2 in his rebuke to the temple authorities in defense of the cry of the crowds, “Hosanna to the son of David” (Matt 21:15–16). He looks at Jesus’ use of the verse as part of the history of Jewish interpretation—from the verse’s translation in the Greek Bible and Aramaic Targums to its midrashic use by Tannaitic Sages. Rather than a simplistic typological or fulfillment aim, Emanuel concludes that the verse has been creatively adopted to allude to non-biblical rabbinic traditions regarding the infants praising God when the Reed Sea was parted. These underlying ideas reflect contemporary hopes for national redemption, which were palpable in the closing decades of the Second Temple.
Alexandria Frisch (Ursinus College) challenges the popular interpretation of the metaphors in the Matt 24:28: “Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.” She notes that the Greek term that is often rendered “vultures”, should instead be read “eagles”. As such, the image of the birds of prey gathered is not to suggest that they are gathered to consume their carrion. Something else is intended. To discover the meaning of the enigmatic saying, she traces the influence of the animal imagery of Daniel and its interpretation in first century Jewish literature with some surprising and compelling results.

Serge Ruzer (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) explores the presentation of the opening of Mark’s Gospel in light of similar aspects describing the penitent supplicant for ritual immersion in the Community Rule (1QS 4:15–23) and the vision of Ben Zoma regarding the ritual immersion of the messiah recounted in Gen. Rab. 2:4. He suggests the possibility that we may witness in Mark “an early trajectory of a broader Jewish tradition about how the inception of messianic redemption should look.”

Eric M. Meyers (Duke University) served as a director for the archaeological excavation of Sepphoris, which was the capital of the Galilee during Jesus’ early life. Meyers’ presentation demonstrates that the Sepphoris excavations shed much needed light on the cultural life in Galilee in the first century. Until recently it was an accepted fact that “Galilee was more Hellenized and cosmopolitan and not as Jewish as we now know it to have been.” In addition, Meyers suggests that the long-standing close relationship between Sepphoris and members of the Herodian dynasty may have contributed to the silence in the Gospels about a visit by Jesus there.

Claudia Setzer (Manhattan College) attends to two accounts of marginalized women. They are the description of a Syrophoenician woman who approached Jesus at a meal (Mark 7:24–30), and Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well at Sycar (John 4). Setzer examines the stories within the wider societal ambivalence about food and drink, the presence of male “foils”, and the use of gender to amplify the intersection of ethnicity and family status.

Invariably New Testament scholarship has read Jesus’ statement about the bridegroom being taken away in Luke 5:33–35 and its parallels to be another passion prediction. Accordingly the bridegroom is read as a metaphor for the messiah. This is in spite of the fact that the bridegroom is never used to signify the messiah in early Jewish literature. R. Steven Notley (Nyack College) explores other possible points of reference and concludes that Jesus’ words are, in fact, an allusion to an oft-cited passage from Jeremiah 7:34 that is consistently employed to express concern about the nation’s future and the impending danger for the Second Temple. When read in this light, Jesus’ words reflect both contemporary concerns and modes of expression.