A SCRIBE OF ALL SIGNS OF WISDOM: REFLECTIONS ON GEORGE W.E. NICKELSBURG IN PERSPECTIVE

Matthias Henze
Rice University

The scholarly oeuvre of George W.E. Nickelsburg is shaped by a remarkable degree of consistency. His 1967 dissertation, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism*, subsequently published in 1972, marked the beginning of what would become a lifelong exploration of the literary and social diversity of Second Temple Judaism. Nickelsburg’s interests, it is well known, lie primarily with the Old Testament apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, with sapiential and apocalyptic literature, and with the fragments from Qumran. The principal aim of his scholarship has always been to underscore the remarkable variety of early Judaism and to point to the significance that diversity has had for the emergence of Christianity. When in 1981 Nickelsburg published his *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah*, he helped the study of Second Temple Jewish literature become an academic field in its own right by giving it a richly informative and eminently reliable introduction. In a way the dissertation and the introduction also indicated the direction much of his subsequent scholarship would take, since his oeuvre has to a large degree been, and continues to be, a further systematic exploration of the texts and issues discussed already in these early works.

Now, over thirty years later, this consistent effort is bearing further fruit. With the publication of three major works during the last three years the tectonic plates are moving into position. In 2001 Nickelsburg published his formidable and already authoritative commentary on 1 Enoch, a text, which, as he explains in the preface...
to the volume, has captured his imagination for three decades. Then, in 2003, two more books combining a total of over 1,000 pages followed. Though different in form, they are related in theme and purpose and are equally ambitious. In the first, Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins, Nickelsburg offers a concise analysis of the theological contours of early Judaism. He explains at the outset that since the 1950s “a revolution” in our understanding of ancient Judaism has been set in motion, triggered by the discovery of the Qumran scrolls, by refined methodologies borrowed from literary studies and the social sciences that make scholars more self-conscious about what it is they are doing, and by Christian reflections on the Holocaust, all of which led to the collapse of old Christian stereotypes of Judaism that previously had dominated scholarly perception. The book’s five chapters follow traditional categories of the discipline: Scripture and Tradition; Torah and the Righteous Life; God’s Activity in Behalf of Humanity; Agents of God’s Activity; and Eschatology. Nickelsburg deliberately chose traditional categories in order to demonstrate how these need to be redefined in light of the recent changes in the field. Each chapter begins with a discussion of contemporary research on early Judaism, and then moves on to lay out the implications these new insights have for our understanding of Christian origins. In the end Nickelsburg seeks to provoke—above all his New Testament colleagues, it would appear—by arguing that the central corollary of the emerging new picture of Judaism is the need to reassess our theories about the emergence of Christianity. The need to redefine

---

6 This impression is reinforced by a comment made in a different context about the ripple effect the changes in the understanding of the Greco-Roman literature ought to have on the field. “Ripples, however, do not always follow their predetermined path, either because they meet with counterforces or because they run up against the inertia of stationary objects. For reasons too complex to analyze here, much New Testament scholarship has had a love-hate, attraction-avoidance relationship with the modern study of early Judaism—drawing deeply from it at times and blissfully ignoring or even actively resisting it at other times.” In “Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Early Judaism: Some Points for Discussion,” in J. Neusner and A.J. Avery-Peck, eds., George W.E. Nickelsburg in Perspective: An Ongoing Dialogue of Learning (Leiden, 2003), p. 267.