Bruce Chilton, Anthony Le Donne, and Jacob Neusner, eds.

Soundings in the Religion of Jesus: Perspectives and Methods in Jewish and Christian Scholarship


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The present volume, dedicated to the memory of Alan Segal (1945–2011), is intriguing even if only because of its declared aim to allow “historical study to serve interfaith dialogue” (the title of Anthony Le Donne’s introduction, 1–7, here 1), by asking the question “Can a consideration of Jesus’ Jewishness benefit Jewish-Christian dialogue?” (Adele Reinhartz’s formulation, xv). Thus it positions itself critically with regard to “classical” historical-critical scholarship that sought to read the sources without any aims (except for establishing historical truth) and certainly without any preconceived notions influencing the process. Le Donne and the others contributing to this volume wish to take a different approach: to declare their aims and prejudices and to study how they interact in scholarship; as Le Donne puts it, “my point is that the closest we can come to reading the narratives of Jesus ‘objectively’ is when we acknowledge our prejudices, including those related to our religious heritage.” (2) To be sure, this approach also includes a willingness “to follow our research to conclusions that have not been pre-scripted by our faith communities.” (2) While such remarks can be regarded as commonplaces in broader hermeneutical discussions current in the humanities, it is still refreshing to see how they are being related to research into the historical Jesus, especially in connection with the declared aim of studying the historical Jesus in such a way that it furthers Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Given the way in which the volume has been put together, it reviews itself to some extent. That is to say: the contributions by Dunn, Levine, and Chilton and Neusner all reflect on the preceding papers and evaluate them. Especially Dunn’s contribution, which discusses each essay, is helpful in this respect. Levine’s contribution has a stronger hermeneutical focus (including the valuable observation that autobiographical information provided by an author to contextualize a paper is very often not precisely the information that one would have needed, 186); somewhat oddly, Chilton and Neusner lay out a methodological framework for the work undertaken in the volume, but they do so post festum, it seems, even if their argument for a combination of generative and systematic perspectives is largely convincing. With most of Dunn’s remarks I can agree here, which boils down to the observation that few of the first six essays (an exception is Senior’s contribution) is really convincing, and often the research is methodologically flawed or even somewhat dated. This agrees with my experience as a reader. This was different in Reinhartz’s foreword and Le Donne’s introduction, which contain, as was already indicated, hermeneutically and historiographically valuable insights. Also, the persuasiveness of the essays changes quite abruptly with the third set of essays, which deal with Jesus research in relation to German National Socialism. Le Donne offers new insight into Schweitzer’s
work, Winter sheds new light on especially Bultmann’s treatment of the historical Jesus in relation to National Socialist ideology, and Theissen provides both a historical reflection and a methodological outline.

After reading the volume, the feeling remains that it might have been more fruitful to read it back to front, that is, starting with the matter of method and history of scholarship and on that basis interpreting the texts. Also, the wish emerges to have a number of issues clarified more precisely. For example, what does it mean to speak of the religion of Jesus (see the volume’s title) in a first-century setting? How and for what are the terms “Christian” and “Jewish” used precisely? Does it, for example, make sense to speak of Matthew as a Christian (and not as Jewish), as Senior seems to do (94–95), while at the same time wishing to place Matthew within Judaism? If one speaks of the need for Christianity to learn to say “mother Judaism” and to respect the fifth commandment (Winter, 142), would it not be necessary to be more precise? One would have to say “mother Second Temple Judaism” and to acknowledge that it is the mother both of later rabbinic Judaism and later Christianity. Both the terms “Judaism” and “Christianity” and the related adjectives are often used in imprecise ways in the book, which leads to a (seeming) identification, or at least very strong association of first-century people, groups, and phenomena with the two religions, Judaism and Christianity, that exist today. This is historically inaccurate and also unhelpful for the task that the volume wishes to tackle: to study the historical Jesus in the service of Jewish-Christian dialogue. Also, what “Christian” means in this context might need some further thought: the essays covering the history of research, including those on German National Socialism, focus virtually exclusively on Protestant theologians; for me, it raises the question of what became of Catholic scholarship and, Dunn having mentioned Orthodoxy (and John Chrysostom’s anti-Semitism) on 170, whether an exclusive focus on Western Europe and National Socialism in these matters does not help to obscure serious problems elsewhere in the Christian spectrum.

All in all, however, the volume is worthwhile reading, especially because of the perspective it offers on the past one hundred years of historical Jesus research and the methodological and hermeneutical issues it raises. Doing history with a declared aim, of which an account is given and for which responsibility is taken, has begun to make its way into historical Jesus research as well—and that is to be welcomed.