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The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospel, Luke Timothy Johnson

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Book Reviews



Nahum M. Sarna, **On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel** (New York: Schocken Books, 1993) reviewed by Amy Bost Heneger.

Nahum M. Sarna is Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at Brandeis University. He, along with six other Jewish scholars, was chosen by the Jewish Publication Society to translate the third section of the Scriptures (our Old Testament) into modern English. Their translation was part of an ongoing project which began in 1955. Sarna's committee began their work by translating the book of Psalms. This work was the inspiration for his 1993 book, **On the Book of Psalms** (formerly titled **Songs of the Heart**).

Sarna places the Psalms within the context of other Old Testament literature by contrasting them with the Law and the Prophets. He explains that the Law and the Prophets record God's message as he reaches out to humanity. They are God's initiative and, upon receiving them, human beings have the freedom to accept or reject his word. The Psalms, on the other hand, are transcripts of "the human soul extending itself beyond its confining, sheltering, impermanent house of clay. . . striving for contact with the Ultimate Source of all life" (3). The Psalms are not "anthropotrophic" as the Torah is, nor do the Psalms communicate God's revelation. Rather

the Psalms are "theotrophic," and are words of the people's worship to God. Recognizing how the Psalms differ from the Law and the Prophets in genre, Sarna demonstrates how they complement each other. He contrasts the opening and closing of the Ten Commandments with those of the Psalms. The Ten Commandments begin with the statement "I am the Lord your God," and end with "your neighbor," emphasizing that the Torah is directed from God toward human beings. The Psalms, on the other hand, emphasize the direction from humans toward God, opening with the line "Happy is the one," and ending with "Hallelujah," that is, "Praise the Lord" (27).

There are two overriding characteristics that Sarna emphasizes in his treatment of the Psalms. The first is how the Psalms, as records of the human quest for God, reflect the diverse and changing moods of human beings and offer a "revealing portrayal of the human condition" (3). Sarna quotes Rabbi Yudan to say that "whatever David says in his book pertains to himself, to all Israel, and to all times" (4). As this statement suggests, the Psalms' first level of meaning concerns the soul-life of the individual, and the second level concerns the faith-life of the entire community. This is why the Psalms have always had a significant influence on Jewish and Christian worship services, and have been models of prayer and devotion for the individual as well as the congregation. The Psalms speak the words of the human heart. They transcend the boundaries of time and

culture, representing the sentiments of worshippers today as they did thousands of years ago.

The second characteristic that Sarna examines is their didactic function. The Psalms not only have intrinsic value but they also function to transform the reader. They were meant to be read again and again, and internalized, lifting the participant to a higher lever of piety and spirituality. The Psalms, therefore, Sarna claims, represent a “hope for piety.”

It is from these perspectives that Sarna examines ten psalms. His treatment of the first half of Psalm 19 is a good representation of his type of analysis. The first part of the psalm paints a picture of the heavens praising God, their maker. This picture of nature as created, pointing to the one true God, stands in opposition to the pervasive pagan idea that objects of nature were to be worshipped in their own right. Sarna goes into great detail explaining the polytheistic cultures surrounding Israel when this Psalm was written. Through the imagery of Psalm 19, the psalmist communicates a concept fundamental to the Jewish religion: that God wholly transcends nature, which testifies to his greatness (76).

Sarna goes on to discuss the change in motifs between the first part of the psalm and the second part. While the first part of the psalm sings of God’s glory in the creation, the second part praises the “law of the Lord.” It appears that the first and second sections of the psalm have little or no relation to each other. Sarna shows how the “cosmic motif” in the first part of the psalm subtly leads to the “excellence of Torah motif” in the second part of the psalm. The second section extols the excellence of the Torah by comparing it to the sun of the first section. The Torah’s purpose for the human being is like the sun’s purpose for the earth. As the sun is vital to support physical life, the Torah is vital for the spiritual life. As the sun signified permanence to the psalmist’s culture, so also God’s word is eternal. Sarna goes on to critically analyze the second half of the psalm, discussing the psalmist’s choice of words and explaining the cultural significance of the major concepts.

Sarna’s treatment of the Psalms is encouraging as well as enlightening. He speaks to a generation which, in his assessment, has moved away from a knowledge of the Scriptures. He grieves this loss and pleads with his readers to renew their knowledge of the ancient prayers of God’s people: to pray and learn from the “vast spiritual, moral, and intellectual treasures of the Psalter that our ancestors so reverently and fondly cherished” (4).

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Luke Timothy Johnson. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospel*. Harper: San Francisco, 1996. Reviewed by Christopher Roy Hutson.

Just as the sound and fury generated by the Jesus Seminar bring the debate over the historical Jesus to a new crescendo, Luke Timothy Johnson steps in to challenge the basic assumptions of liberal and conservative interpreters and issues a call for recentering the entire debate from history to theology. In a lively, engaging style (sans notes) Johnson charts a map through recent studies published by both serious historians and sensationalizing dilettantes. Mincing no words, he characterizes the various reconstructions of “who Jesus really was” as often idiosyncratic, ideologically driven, historically irresponsible, or, in short, “pure flim-flam.”

The first three chapters criticize the current discussion. Chapter One is an exposé of the Jesus Seminar, a ten-year-old research project led by Robert W. Funk and John Dominic Crossan, best known for using colored marbles to vote on the authenticity of each of the Jesus sayings in the New Testament and in the apocryphal gospels. Johnson chastises the Jesus Seminar as a small, self-selected group who are more ingenious at manipulating the media than at handling historical evidence.

Chapter Two reviews a series of representative books by members of the Jesus Seminar and by other scholarly and amateur historians who are in sympathy with the Seminar’s perspective. He finds that these books, though widely touted, are more cultural critique than responsible historical analysis.

Chapter Three challenges the common assumption that “the real Jesus” is ascertainable through history. Although Johnson fully appreciates the value of historical scholarship, he denies that the historical-critical method is the sum and substance of critical biblical scholarship.

Chapter Four is pivotal, a straightforward description of the limitations of history. Johnson defines “history” as “a mode of knowing. It is an interpretive activity. The stuff with which history works is human events in time and space, various kinds of records of such experiences. . . , and the effort to make sense of, or interpret, such experience” (82). Thus, for Johnson “history” is not identical with “what happened in the past,” since so many physical details of life are ignored or forgotten and since so much of the reality of human existence is not empirically measurable. Johnson is impatient with histori-

ans who ignore the limits of history. In so doing, he argues, they leap from inadequate evidence to unwarranted conclusions about “who Jesus really was”; they selectively ignore important NT (first-century) evidence and overemphasize extracanonical (second-century and later) sources; they force the data into models predicted by contemporary anthropology; and they thus manipulate the data in service of their own ideological concerns.

The last two chapters are constructive. Chapter Five reviews the evidence, both biblical and extra-biblical, for what we know about the Jesus of history, which turns out to be quite a lot. What we do *not* know from historical research is the central tenet of Christianity, namely the resurrection, since such an event is by definition “nonhistorical” (not open to empirical investigation). Nevertheless, such a nonhistorical event *can* have verifiable historical effects. “Insistence on reducing the resurrection to something ‘historical’ amounts to a form of epistemological imperialism,” Johnson concludes, “an effort to deny a realm of reality beyond the critic’s control. That, however, is not even good history. It is instead an ideological commitment to a view of the world that insists on material explanations being the only reasonable explanations, that reduces everything to a flat plane where not even genius, much less the divine, can be taken into account” (140).

Chapter Six sketches the story of Jesus as found in the NT gospels, which, says Johnson, may disagree in some historical details but agree on the “pattern” and “meaning” of Jesus’ life. As he puts it,

Their fundamental focus is not on Jesus’ wondrous deeds nor on his wise words. Their shared focus is on the *character* of his life and death. They all reveal the same *pattern* of radical obedience to God and selfless love toward other people. . . This interpretation of Jesus and of discipleship in all four Gospels is given by the shape of the narratives themselves, by connections established within and by means of the story (157-8).

The last point is in defense of Johnson’s preference for reading the narratives whole, as opposed to those who analyze texts into small component pieces and then rearrange those pieces into stories of their own creation.

Finally, an epilogue examines the complementary roles of academy and church. Johnson is himself a committed academic (professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Emory University) and a believer (Roman Catholic). Among his summary statements, he reasserts that “If the ex-

pression *the real Jesus* is used at all, it should not refer to a historically reconstructed Jesus. Such a Jesus is not ‘real’ in any sense, except as a product of scholarly imagination. The Christians’ claim to experience the ‘real Jesus’ in the present, on the basis of religious experiences and convictions, can be challenged on a number of fronts (religious, theological, moral), but not historically” (167). Still, Johnson argues that scholars can legitimately analyze the texts of the NT along four lines: (1) anthropological—as human communication; (2) historical—arising out of and addressed to particular historical situations; (3) literary—whole texts as deliberate compositions; and (4) religious—produced out of religious experiences and convictions and for members of religious communities. “To read these compositions in terms simply of the historical information they provide,” Johnson writes, “is to miss the most important and most explicit insight they offer the reader, namely, how the experience of the powerful transforming power of God that came through the crucified Messiah Jesus created not only a new understanding of who Jesus was but, simultaneously, a new understanding of God and God’s way with the world” (173-4).

The Real Jesus is important, because it shows that the most radical “liberal” and the most radical “conservative” interpreters fail on precisely the same grounds: they subordinate theology to history. On the one hand, ideological revisionists (Johnson’s primary target) argue that the story of “the real Jesus” was suppressed or corrupted by Paul and/or other retrogressive influences in early Christianity, and that historical analysis can recover the pristine image of Jesus and so restore pure Christianity. But Johnson argues that such critics deny the theological affirmation of early Christianity that the four-fold gospel narrative is the normative presentation of Jesus for the Church.

On the other hand, Evangelicals (the primary target of the Jesus Seminar and other ideological revisionists) take pains to deny historical discrepancies among the gospels (was Jesus crucified on Friday as reflected in the synoptics or on Thursday as reflected in John?), asserting the historicity of all details of the NT story, including the miracles, which are not, by definition, even subject to historical investigation. Against them Johnson argues that they have sold their theological birthright for a pottage of historical analysis. He asserts that Christian faith is not grounded in the historicity of the details of Jesus’ life in the first century, but in the experience of the living Jesus as Lord in the present. The assumption that faith cannot be valid unless the details of Jesus’ life are proven by historical analysis suggests that

only a Christianity grounded in Enlightenment assumptions about the supremacy of empirical evidence can be valid, and it gives short shrift to the experience of the living Jesus within the ongoing community of faith.

In sum, Johnson challenges us to rethink not only what we know about the Jesus of history, but also especially what we know about the Jesus who is Lord.

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William H. Willimon, *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized*. Eerdmans 1994. Reviewed by Mark Manassee.

Willimon's latest book, ***The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized*** is meant to be a sequel to ***Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized***. This writing is prefaced by an account of one of Willimon's congregational efforts with regard to evangelism and church growth. The congregation decided to invite the neighborhood to the church assembly through a door-knocking campaign. However, two older women misread their door-knocking route and ended up in a housing project in the home of Verleen. Verleen was a woman with many difficulties, and she accepted the invitation to attend church services. Willimon chronicles the intrusiveness of both God and Verleen in the life of his congregation, as a result of her presence among them.

This story sets the stage for thoughtful observations about God, preaching, and evangelism through a series of actual sermons which he preached. This modeling by Willimon is especially helpful to clarify what he is saying as well as to observe his struggle to put into practice what he is teaching.

For churches struggling to do evangelism and reflecting upon evangelism's theological underpinnings, Willimon's writing is particularly chal-

lenging. He asserts, "Evangelism is a gracious, unmanageable, messy by-product of the intrusions of God. . . . Evangelism is a matter of addressing those who live by narratives other than the gospel, and those people are usually outsiders but sometimes insiders." Willimon is indebted to Walter Brueggemann's book, ***Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism***. One would do well to read these two works concurrently.

Willimon criticizes evangelistic preaching for trying too hard to bridge the gap between the gospel and the modern listener. He contends that preaching has been compromised by efforts to get a hearing. The gospel expects transformation, and it takes a miracle to be truly heard. "Atheism is the conviction that the presence and power of God are unessential to the work of ministry, that we can find the right technique, the proper approach, and the appropriate attitude and therefore will not need God to validate our ministry."

Willimon sees the attempt to begin with people's "felt needs" or "where they are" as turning the gospel into a helpful resource for people to get what they want rather than a challenge to their basic assumptions. The gospel seeks to create a peculiar experience that we would not have had before we came in contact with it.

Two points of criticism may be directed against Willimon. First, although Willimon criticizes using the "point of contact" with the listener's experience in a sermon, he, in fact, seems to have a "point of contact" with the listeners in most of his sermons. Common language has to be at least a starting point for communicating the gospel.

Second, although the subtitle of the book is ***Preaching to the Unbaptized***, one wishes Willimon had directed more of his sermons and examples toward the unbaptized/unchurched. He seems to focus much of his attention on re-evangelizing the baptized, which he covered in his previous volume.

Nevertheless, this book is a practical and fitting work that expands the theme he began in ***Resident Aliens***: the importance of the church as a counterculture of transformed people who worship a living, active and intrusive God.

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