
FIRST THINGS

NO FRIEND IN JESUS

by
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January 2008

I cannot conceive an argument with John's Jesus," Jacob Neusner once wrote, "because eternal Israel in John is treated with unconcealed hatred." The Gospel of Matthew, on the other hand, was written for a Jewish audience, and the Jesus it portrays is someone with whom Neusner could imagine a conversation. And so, fifteen years ago, he wrote *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*. "In this book," he begins, "I explain in a very straightforward and unapologetic way why, if I had been in the Land of Israel in the first century, I would not have joined the circle of Jesus' disciples."

After writing the book, Neusner sent it to Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger to ask if he would consider praising it for a cover blurb. The cardinal readily agreed, to Neusner's great delight. And, no doubt to Neusner's even greater delight, Ratzinger—who had become Pope Benedict XVI—returned to the book again in 2007, devoting a good twenty pages of his bestselling book *Jesus of Nazareth* to discussing Neusner's work.

"More than other interpretations known to me," Benedict explains, "this respectful and frank dispute between a believing Jew and Jesus, the son of Abraham, has opened my eyes to the greatness of Jesus' words and to the choice that the gospel places before us." *Time* magazine promptly announced that the pope has a "favorite Rabbi." For *Haaretz*, an Israeli newspaper, Neusner is "second to the saints," because the only people quoted more in *Jesus of Nazareth* are the canonized. "A pope taking seriously what a Jew says—and says critically—about the New Testament," said Eugene Fisher, the liaison for Catholic-Jewish relations for American bishops. "Wow. This is new."

All of which may be true. But, in an article this year in the *Forward*, Neusner goes further, suggesting that their respective books represent not just an affectionate exchange but the future of interfaith dialogue. “Disputations,” Neusner argues, “went out of style when religions lost their confidence in the power of reason to establish theological truth.” But, with their books, he and Benedict have, Neusner suggests, found a new beginning: “What we have done is to revive the disputation as a medium of dialogue on theological truth. In this era of relativism and creeping secularism, it is an enterprise that, I believe, has the potential to strengthen Judaism and Christianity alike.”

Neusner is certainly correct that we cannot relativize or ignore the deep differences dividing Jews and Christians, and in this respect his instincts and intentions are admirable. The careful reader of *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, and Benedict’s response, will realize, however, that, even as Neusner attempts to delineate the differences between Judaism and Christianity, his book dilutes the deepest of those differences. The dialogue between Neusner and Benedict, rather than serving as an example of all that can be achieved by Jewish-Christian debate, is instead a reminder of the pitfalls in the endeavor.

In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict describes how, with *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, Neusner “takes his place among the crowds of Jesus’ disciples,” listening to the Sermon on the Mount. Neusner, Benedict continues, “speaks with Jesus himself. He is touched by the greatness and purity of what is said, and yet at the same time he is troubled by the ultimate incompatibility that he finds at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount.” Ultimately, Neusner rejects Jesus’ message, deciding that Jesus deviates from Judaism’s focus on sanctifying this world by turning his followers’ focus from Jewish law and ritual to himself. Essentially, Neusner argues, Jesus equates God’s will with his own, something that someone loyal to the Torah cannot accept.

A central passage for Neusner’s discussion is Jesus’ defense of his violations of the Sabbath:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck ears of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” He said to them, “Have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the son of man is lord of the Sabbath.”

Neusner notes that actions that are usually forbidden on the Sabbath, such as lighting fires, slaughtering, and cooking, were permitted in the Temple. Thus, Jesus' argument is that he has replaced the Temple: "His claim, then, concerns not whether or not the Sabbath is to be sanctified, but where and what is the Temple, the place where things are done on the Sabbath that elsewhere are not to be done at all. Not only so, but just as on the Sabbath it is permitted to place on the altar the food that is offered up to God, so Jesus' disciples are permitted to prepare their food on the Sabbath, again a stunning shift indeed."

Neusner argues that Jesus is not a liberal Jew seeking to ignore the rituals of the Torah; rather, he is claiming to be the dwelling place of the divine: "No wonder, then, that the son of man is lord of the Sabbath! The reason is not that he interprets the Sabbath restrictions in a liberal manner. . . . Jesus was not just another reforming rabbi, out to make life 'easier' for people. . . . No, the issue is not that the burden is light. . . . Jesus' claim to authority is at issue."

Neusner imagines himself conversing with a disciple of Jesus: "Is it really so that your master, the son of man, is lord of the Sabbath? Then—so I asked before, so I ask again—is your master God?" Again and again, Neusner returns to this question. Both Jesus and the rabbinic sages, he argues, agree that the essence of life is imitation of God. Jews believe that the holy life is achieved via observance of the Torah, the sanctification of the mundane world by adhering to its many minutiae. For Jesus' followers, their master is now the equivalent of God, of the Torah, and Jesus' instructions focus less on whether grain can be picked on the Sabbath and more on entering the Kingdom of Heaven. As such, the holy life must be defined by following him.

Benedict is delighted with Neusner's interpretation. "The issue that is really at the heart of the debate," writes the pope, "is thus finally laid bare. Jesus understands himself as the Torah—as the word of God in person." For Benedict, this is perhaps most evident in another passage in Matthew. When Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are waiting to speak with him, he responds, stretching out his hands, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother." Israel comprises a family structure centered on observance of the Torah, while Jesus is announcing that now everything ought to be centered on himself: "This restructuring of the social order finds its basis and its justification in Jesus' claim that he, with his community of disciples, forms the origin

and center of a new Israel.”

This is the heart of the agreement between Neusner and Benedict. Both agree that Jesus’ words can be interpreted only as asserting his divinity. Jesus’ argument is not that he is a reformer but something more. The pope writes that Neusner gives Matthew a “Christological” interpretation, in that he understands Jesus is not just rejecting Judaism but rather equating himself with the divine. “We come to the same conclusion as in our earlier analysis of the commandment to keep the Sabbath. The Christological (theological) argument and the social argument are inextricably entwined. If Jesus is God, then he is entitled and able to handle the Torah as he does. On that condition alone does he have the right to interpret the Mosaic order of divine commands.”

And how does Neusner see himself as responding to this man who puts himself in place of the Torah, who accords himself the authority of the Almighty? He politely voices his disagreement, arguing for the eternity of the Torah and insisting that the Torah addresses all Jews together and makes no special differentiation between a Jesus of Nazareth or a Jacob Neusner. At the same time, Benedict writes that Neusner “is constantly moved by the greatness of Jesus; again and again he talks with him.” When Neusner asserts that Jesus is mistaken, it is “only with great respect and reverence.” Again and again, Jesus and Neusner agree to disagree and part amicably. Even as Neusner feels that Jesus’ arguments are profoundly misguided, at the same time he depicts himself telling Jesus that “I honor you and wish you well.”

Benedict is touched by these sorts of exchange. Neusner, he writes, “accepts the otherness of Jesus’ message, and takes his leave free of any rancor; this parting, accomplished in the rigor of truth, is ever mindful of the reconciling power of love.”

But it is passages such as these that make Neusner’s book problematic. For the moment that one person in an argument claims to be God, dialogue and debate become impossible. When someone asserts divinity, his interlocutor has only two options: Believe, obey, and worship, or back away slowly. As such, Neusner’s friendly dialogue with Jesus amounts to what Matthew Scully, in a 1993 review of the book in *National Review*, called a “polite hedge.” Faced with a man who insists he is the equivalent of the Lord, one cannot disagree “with respect and reverence,” one cannot challenge the man’s claim while remaining “moved” by his greatness. “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great

moral teacher,” C.S. Lewis famously wrote. “He would either be a lunatic—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. . . . But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Or, as Benedict himself puts it: “Jesus’ teaching is not the product of human learning, of whatever kind. It originates from immediate contact with the Father, from ‘face-to-face’ dialogue—from the vision of the one who rests close to the Father’s heart. It is the Son’s word. Without this inner grounding, the pope continues, his teaching would be pure presumption. That is just what the learned men of Jesus’ time judged it to be.”

And that, of course, is exactly how Jews must judge it to be today. Jews know that Deuteronomy warns us to beware a prophet who will attempt to lead us astray from all that Moses instructed. Jews have, moreover, known in our history many false messiahs, endowed with extraordinary charisma who announced that they were our savior with authority to abrogate the Torah. And, above all, we remember the Almighty’s admonition: “Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of form on the day that the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire.” Jews believe that the Torah tells us that the Incarnation is incompatible with all that God has taught us about who he is. Christians embrace the concept of the Incarnation; but, from the Jewish perspective, a human God is the equivalent of a four-sided triangle. The hard truth is that when it comes to the choice facing Christians and Jews, there is no way of splitting the difference: Is Jesus who he claims to be, is he someone worthy of worship, or is he someone with whom even friendship is not worthwhile? Christians answer this question differently than Jews, but Neusner refuses to make this choice.

We are now able to understand why Christians should be so genuinely pleased with *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*. Neusner, an esteemed academic and observant Jew, has indicated that Jesus is a man for whom he can have an abiding affection, one whom he can intellectually respect. In fact, Neusner writes that he and Jesus are “friends”; he tells Jesus “I honor you and wish you well.” And, as the pope notes, Neusner, “an attentive listener” to Jesus’ words, is “constantly moved by the greatness of Jesus.” But Neusner also admits that Jesus claims to be God. And, if Jesus claims such a thing, then, as C.S. Lewis taught us, he can only be a liar, a lunatic, or God. Surely Neusner would not have respect for a liar; surely he could not befriend a lunatic.

Even as Neusner argues that Jesus is mistaken about his divinity and authority, it follows from much that Neusner has written that Jesus must be God.

In a telling passage, the pope hints that Neusner's book supports Christianity's claim that the New Testament is everything it claims to be, everything Jews deny that it is. For if a Jew can read Jesus' words with "reverence," if a rabbi can have a true dialogue with the Jesus of the Gospel of Matthew, then the gospel is obviously the words of the Living God, and Jesus is exactly who he claimed to be. Though Neusner would never see it that way, Benedict nevertheless found in Neusner's engagement of Christian texts the ultimate indication that they are the word of God: "The rabbi's dialogue with Jesus shows that faith in the word of God in the Holy Scriptures creates a contemporaneous bond across the age: Setting out from Scripture, the rabbi can enter into the 'today' of Jesus, just as Jesus, setting out from Scripture, can enter into our 'today.'"

I do not begrudge Benedict his happiness. How could he not rejoice in the significance of a prominent Jew approaching Jesus in such an admiring manner? How could this gifted and sophisticated theologian not see the significance of Neusner's words? How could Benedict not make Neusner's book—in which a rabbi recognizes that Jesus puts himself in God's place and still retains his admiration for Jesus—a centerpiece of his own book on Jesus?

But, for Jews, Neusner approaches Jesus in the wrong way, for Jesus is not someone with whom we can have this sort of "dialogue." If we deny his divinity, then we can respond with nothing short of shock and dismay when we read the words of a man who puts himself in the place of God. Thus, in his admirable attempt to distinguish between Judaism and Christianity, Neusner elides the most important difference of all.

Neusner notes that, unlike certain other Jewish scholars who have come before him, he refuses to see Jesus as a rabbi, a colleague of the fathers of rabbinic Judaism. "Christianity," he notes, "does not believe in a Galilean miracle worker, nor does Christianity worship a rabbi." As such, Neusner writes in his preface, to honor Jesus with such an appellation is "demeaning and dishonest." He is absolutely correct. But to find a "friend" in Jesus even as Jesus claims divinity, to deny his claim to be God but at the same time to "wish [him] well," to reject the assertions Jesus makes while at the same time praising his "virtue" and "wisdom," is demeaning to both Judaism and Christianity, because it still obfuscates the choice with which Lewis

confronts us.

What, then, should be the foundation of Jewish-Christian engagement? Neusner finds it unthinkable that Jews and Christians should have nothing to say to each other. “There is more to Judaism in its meeting with Christianity,” he argues, “than a mere no.” He is right, and he is also correct that Jews, living “in the free climate of American religion,” should engage their fellow citizens in this “mostly Christian country.” But the most fruitful dialogue should not, contra Neusner, focus on the nuts and bolts of our relation to Jesus but rather on what traditional Jews and Christians have in common.

In fact, the most important subject of dialogue between Jews and Christians has been presented to us by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, right before he became Pope Benedict XVI. In a homily given before the College of Cardinals convened to pick the next pope, Ratzinger reflected on the Church’s responsibility in the modern age: “The small boat of thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves—thrown from one extreme to the other: from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism. . . . Having a clear faith, based on the creed of the Church, is often labeled today as a fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, which is letting oneself be tossed and ‘swept along by every wind of teaching,’ looks like the only attitude (acceptable) to today’s standards. We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.”

Benedict’s words ought to resonate with the religious Jew. For even as Jews and Christians profoundly disagree about the truth, they are united in the belief that there is a truth to be sought. Moreover, Orthodox Jews and Christians share a belief in a traditional ethics that is seen today as old-fashioned and outmoded. There is much about the Church today and its leadership that I find troubling. In its attitude toward world affairs, in its statements about Israel and Palestinians, and on the war in Iraq, the Vatican often expresses an overly pacifistic European perspective. But, in an age that Benedict correctly describes as one of “relativism and creeping secularism,” one in which Orthodox Jews are often derided as fundamentalists because of their views regarding religious truth, sexuality, and medical ethics, a Jew who reads Ratzinger’s homily cannot help feeling that he has an ally in Pope Benedict XVI.

Does truth as traditionally understood still exist? Traditional Jews, like Catholics, know the answer to the question. In the end, this is what unites Jews and Christians. Because they believe in truth, traditional Jews cannot and will not find a friend in Jesus—but because they do believe in truth, they can find a friend in followers of Jesus such as Benedict. A friendship founded on our mutual resistance to relativism is one that can unite us despite our theological differences. That will have to do until our debate over Jesus is resolved by God himself.

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