

37. Vermes, Geza, *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (Viking Compass 2001)

I just had to read this book by my friend Geza Vermes. My friend? Yes, in terms of it being his first book on the Dead Sea Scrolls that introduced me to that subject and dismayed me.

Dismayed me? Yes, these were not my sort of people. [This despite my favorable citations in the Van Luik piece, item # 36.] They were generally angry and judgmental and literalist in the extreme, I thought. Reminded me of the Book of Revelation which has similar anger and vengefulness in its tone, yet also some hauntingly beautiful, spiritual portions.

Reading more for this exercise showed me again that the more admirable starins in their writings deserve more attention than I had heretofore given.

The old book by Vermes that I read long ago and cited in item # 36 is not even listed in his own bibliography in this new book. There is a good reason for that, the partial cites from the Dead Sea Scrolls in that book have been replaced by his newer and more comprehensive work: *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Allen Lane/Penguin Press 1998).

What I found astonishing about *The Changing Faces of Jesus* is that it does just about the same thing as Crossan's book on the historical Jesus (item # 10), but it does it backwards and in half the pages and in a much more readable style. Crossan started with a list of sayings he thought were genuine quotes from Jesus, then goes from the lowest layer in the history to show that the additions over time take us from the Jesus of history to the Jesus of faith. Vermes starts with the latest characterization of Jesus, in the Gospel of John, and then dives down in history to show that the Gospel

of Mark gives the more reliable account of the history, the rest is added on over time. This is a conclusion diametrically opposed to Freke and Gandy's allegations that the descriptions of Paul and the Gospel of John are the more reliable descriptions of the real Jesus, and the other Gospels tells a nice but uninspired story. Bloom, of course, as seen above in item # 5, believes like Freke and Gandy that Jesus was the originator of Gnostic ideas in Christianity, so it is only a small stretch to go the rest of the way and thus conclude that the more Gnostic of the gospels is the more reliable, John. I don't recall Bloom making that leap. But Freke and Gandy were not the first to do so, I recall the Mormon scholar Hugh Nibley similarly saying that John probably is the more insightful Gospel in terms of fully understanding who Jesus was. But I have not been able to locate either the quote nor the logic behind that statement.

If you want to come away with a similar view of Jesus as you will get from Crossan, but with about a fourth the work (half off for length; half off for readability), then read Vermes. To illustrate the difference in readability: Crossan starts his book by showing who he thought the historical Jesus was by making a long list of sayings he thought came from Jesus. Vermes does something in this same vein at the very end of his book, but rather than list sayings to make his point, he does some creative imagineering, he describes a dream.

In this dream he brings the historical Jesus back and has him address people representing the different approaches to modern devotion to and belief in Jesus Christ. It is very tastefully done, funny to some extent, sure, but also reverent and thought-provoking at the same time. I really liked this book because it was the best of both worlds: it was easy to read and still made many technical historical points reflecting the latest scholarship. But . . .

Do I believe that Vermes' way of describing Christ is historically true or accurate? It certainly is a Christ supportable by the evidence. But I have a nagging suspicion it may be tainted some by the Western attitudes described by Jenkins (item # 22, last few paragraphs). The real Jesus, I have a feeling, is more like the one described by the Ebionites. Not quite the Pauline Jesus, but certainly more Cosmic and complicated than the very pleasant, nice and wise man described by Vermes.