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Jacob Neusner and the Scholarship
on Ancient Judaism

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Jacob Neusner and the Scholarship on Ancient Judaism
(ed. Yaron Z. Eliav)

INTRODUCTION

YARON Z. ELIAV, *University of Michigan*

The following three papers were first presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held in Boston, MA, from November 21-25, 2008, in a session titled, "Jacob Neusner and the Scholarship on Ancient Judaism." Hosted by the Program Unit on the History and Literature of Early Rabbinic Judaism, the session was part of a multi-year endeavor meant to discuss the various scholarly factors – one may also call them schools or intellectual forces – that have shaped our field in the last few generations. We chose to begin with Jacob Neusner.

The three papers cover different aspects of Neusner's repertoire; David Goodblatt discusses his historical work, whereas Steven Fraade and Judith Hauptman focus on his studies of rabbinic texts, the former on his reading strategies and the so-called "documentary approach," and the latter on his over-all methodologies for analyzing and translating ancient literature. A fourth presenter, Bruce Chilton, who spoke about Neusner's achievements in the study of theology and comparative religion, declined our invitation to offer his paper in printed form.

Jacob Neusner's scholarly career to date extends over 45 years. Much has changed during this time in the various fields with which he has engaged – rabbinics, Jewish history of late antiquity, religion, theology, comparative religion, literary criticism, and intellectual history, to name only the most prominent. Many feel that Neusner's work has played a pivotal role in the change that has occurred over the last generation and a half; some people claim that his scholarship initiated and even created this change; more than a few have even used the term "revolution" to describe his work. Yet, despite the vastness of his work, and perhaps because of it, very few have attempted to carry out a broad analysis and evaluation of his contributions, or tried to place them within the wider scholarly context of the time. We attempt here to remedy this lacuna, or at least to begin doing so.

The invitation to the various contributors who follow was very explicit in demarcating the lines of this forum – we will be discussing here the scholarship, not the man. Each paper will deal with a different facet of Neusner's work, focusing mainly on his contribution to the study of history and rabbinic literature, but at the same time also addressing issues of culture and religion. The result, I believe, is an intriguing variety of

perspectives, that both complicate and illuminate our perceptions of a scholar who has himself illuminated so much of our world.

NEUSNER AND THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL AND BABYLONIA

DAVID GOODBLATT, *University of California, San Diego*

I want to begin by thanking the organizers of this session, though not for inviting me to speak. That invitation put me in an uncomfortable situation. As some are aware, I received my Ph.D. under the direction of Jacob Neusner. In fact, I believe this was the first doctoral degree he directed. In light of this and much subsequent history I was hesitant to accept the assignment. Instead, I thought someone less personally involved with Neusner could address the topic with greater objectivity. Or, at least, such a person would be less open to suspicions of special pleading in one direction or the other. Be that as it may, I did want to commend the organizers for including the topic of Jewish History as one of the areas where Neusner's contributions should be assessed. Including the history of the Jews is problematic for a variety of reasons. To begin with, the impetus for this session was Neusner's role in the study of rabbinic literature. So it is understandable and appropriate that the session would feature such topics as "Neusner's Methodological Contributions to the Study of Rabbinic Texts" and "Neusner as Reader of the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Halakhic Midrashim." And given his uninterrupted interests in religion and many publications of theological content, a paper on "Jacob Neusner and the Study of Comparative Religion and Theology" is equally apropos. In contrast to these subjects, however, Jewish History has not been at the center of Neusner's focus.

The limited attention Neusner paid to Jewish History can be documented. In preparation for this paper I reviewed the 624 books by Neusner listed on the University of California's online union catalogue (known as "Melville"). In only 9 instances did the word "history" combine with "Jews." The nine instances include the five volumes of *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* and the four volumes of a collection edited by Neusner and Green on the *History of the Jews* from the second century BCE through the seventh century CE.¹ Note that the only "history of the

¹ See J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (5 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1965-70); J. Neusner with W.S. Green (eds.), *History of the Jews in the second and first centuries B.C.* (New York: Garland, 1990); idem (eds.), *History of the Jews in the first century of the Common Era* (New York: Garland, 1990); J. Neusner (ed.), *History of the Jews in the second*