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David Flusser on the Historical Jesus

David Flusser, *Jesus*, in collaboration

with R. Steven Notley, Jerusalem:

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2 plates.**

Stanislav Segert

The last book of David Flusser represents a synthesis of his previous and recent work. It is based on thorough research of direct sources within the New Testament and of its Jewish background. Many statements agree with prevailing views of New Testament scholars, in many important matters Flusser offers new, well substantiated ideas. Some of them are discussed here below

The first edition was published in 1997, the second edition, corrected and augmented, in 1998. In the the preface (13-17) dated in 1997 Flusser explains purpose and background of his new book entitled *Jesus*. This biography reflects the truism that Jesus was a Jew who wanted to remain within the Jewish faith, and also argues that the teaching of Jesus is based on contemporary Jewish faith. The new biography of Jesus is a thorough reworking of the previous book which appeared in German in 1968 and in English translation in 1969.

R. Steven Notley, a former student of Flusser, now Assistant Professor at Jerusalem University College, contributed the foreword (9-12). Notley assisted in revising the English previous version and also added some contributions. Notley appreciates Flusser's scholarship and his personal contact with Jesus message.

The biography of Jesus is presented in 12 chapters (18-177), supplementary studies are offered in chapters 13-20 (179-275).

At the end of the volume are useful additions: chronological table (277-279), bibliography (280-284), index of sources (285-299) and index of subjects (300-316).

The text is supplemented by illustrations, three in colors (after p. 112) and 33 black and white. They depict mostly the ancient milieu, places, remains of buildings, inscriptions, manuscripts. Also artworks for the Antiquity and from later periods are presented. Two scholars, Hermann Samuel Reimarus and Albert Schweitzer are introduced also by portrayals (109). And two maps (43, 252) provide orientation about Galilee and Jerusalem. A list of these valuable illustrations would be appreciated.

The first chapter (18-23) presents and evaluates the sources. The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are considered trustworthy, while that of John has less historical value. The three synoptic gospels, written about 70 A.D., are based on early documents written in Hebrew (21). Following the late R. L. Lindsey, Flusser considers Luke as presenting the original tradition. Original Hebrew sayings of Jesus have to be interpreted, even if they are behind the Greek text of the gospels (22). Flusser intends to appreciate Jesus demand for all embracing love as a realistic approach to the present world (23).

The ancestry of Jesus (24-36), especially the Davidic genealogy, is thoroughly analyzed. The Messiah – Christ – had to be descendant from King David; for this purpose the genealogies in gospels of Matthew and Luke were constructed (25). And these gospels also indicate David's Bethlehem as birthplace of Jesus; however, according to Flusser Jesus was probably born in Nazareth (27). Jesus was considered "wise man" by Josephus Flavius; Flusser considers Jesus Jewish education as superior to that of St. Paul (30).

Baptism (37-55) by John may be related to Essene rite. Jesus was probably baptized at the Lake of Gennesaret near Bethsaida, the home of Peter (43). John the Baptist was evaluated by Jesus as prophet preparing for the end of time.

In the chapter about law (56-80) Jesus is characterized as law-observant Jew, according to synoptic gospels. Jesus was based in non-sectarian Judaism, its philosophy and practice was that of Pharisees. He was influenced by Essenism only indirectly (71, cf. 78). The Pharisees opposed the Sadduceans who persecuted Christians.

For Jesus' teaching of love (81-92) similar previous and later Jewish sources are mentioned; Ecclesiasticus 27:30 – 28:7 is presented as a summary.

In ethics (93-103) the social overtone of Jesus is strong, it is similar to that of the Essenes. From their fringe Jesus took some ideas. He overcame the old customary morality by the concept of righteousness of God.

In consideration of kingdom of heaven (104-112) the religious consequences of the Roman rule over Israel are evaluated. The message of Jesus is eschatologically oriented, the kingdom of God is both present – "realized eschatology" – and future.

For the appellation of Jesus as the son (113-123) parallels concerning Jewish holy men are introduced: Hanina ben Dosa, Honi the "circle-drawer", Hannan the Hidden. These men addressing God as father performed miracles. To Jesus' words in Matthew 11:25-27 the parallel in Essene Thanksgiving Hymns (1QH) 2:9-10 is cited.

The title "Son of Man" (124-133) was used by Jesus in three functions, one of them denoting the eschatological figure. This figure is indicated in Daniel 7:13 by Aramaic words. The Hebrew equivalent can be understood also as "son of Adam". In Judaism the Son of Man was frequently understood as Messiah (132).

In the chapter entitled "Jerusalem" (134-145) Jesus' activity in the Temple, the Last Supper and the arrest are described.

The death (146-174) was preceded by the interrogation in Sanhedrin and Pilate's freeing of Barabbas. It seems that no verdict was issued (166). Character and role of the prefect Pontius Pilate are analyzed with help of so-called Testimonium Flavianum (157) and of the inscription dedicating a building to emperor Tiberius, which was discovered in Caesarea in 1961 (158).

In the epilogue (175-177) Flusser explains how the tragedy of crucifixion was overcome by stressing the character of Christ. The tradition of Jesus was preserved by first disciples. Flusser hopes that in the future Church will stress more Jesus message.

In these twelve biographical chapters Flusser presents results of his quest for the historical Jesus and also some differing opinions. Substantial references to sources and to scholarly literature support the presentation.

Eight supplementary studies (179-275) provide further relevant material. Chapters 13-17 are reprints of previously published studies. Chapters 18 and 20 appeared for the first time in this volume. Chapter 19 on the topography and archaeology of the passion (251-257) was contributed by Magen Broshi.

"The House of David' on an Ossuary" (c. 13; 180-186). During the excavation conducted by Amos Kloner in 1971-1972 in Jerusalem, an inscription from the beginning of the 1st century B.C. was found. Flusser considers its language as Hebrew with an element of Aramaic. According to this inscription the descendants of David claimed this ancestry.

"Who is it that Struck You?" (c. 14; 187-194). This question known from Luke 22:63-64 has its origin in game attested already about 2000 B.C. on a picture in Egypt; this brutal game continued until the 20th century A.D., even Hitler played it in 1923 in the prison in Landsberg.

"... To Bury Caiaphas, Not to Praise Him" (c. 15; 195-206). The family surname *qy' / qyp'* appears on two ossuaries recently discovered in Jerusalem. The high priest Caiaphas delivered Jesus to Pilate and then persecuted Christians. Pharisees and Essenes disagreed with this attitude.

"What was the Original Meaning of *Ecce Homo*?" (c. 16; 207-220). This phrase in John's gospel 19:5, in English "Behold the Man!", should according to modern interpretation indicate that Pilate displayed Jesus as a person who was not a rebel against Rome. Like in John 19:14 Pilate expressed that he did not find any case against Jesus. These expressions

based on an older source are interpreted with references to similar attitudes, such as the inscription on the cross.

“The Crucified One and the Jews” (c. 17; 221-236). Sympathy to Jesus at the time of crucifixion is reported only in Luke’s gospel. It follows the older source while Mark revised the report and criticized the Jews.

“Additional Consideration: Jesus Weeps Over Jerusalem” (c. 18; 237-250). Jesus’ solidarity with his own Jewish people is preserved in Luke’s gospel, while Mark in the “Synoptic Apocalypse” (c. 13) places on the lips of Jesus the elect, i.e. his Christian followers.

“The Topography and Archeology of the Passion: A Reconstruction of the Via Dolorosa” by Magen Broshi (c. 19; 251-257). This chapter was contributed by the archeologist active in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. He presents especially results of recent archeological activity, in the following sites: Gethsemane, the House of Caiaphas, the Chamber of Hewn Stone, the Praetorium – the Herod’s palace, Golgotha-Calvary. Also the 1968 discovery of remains of a crucified man in a northern suburb of Jerusalem is mentioned.

“The Stages of Redemption History According to John the Baptist and Jesus” (c. 20; 258-275). John the Baptist belonged to the Essene spiritual world, Jesus ideas were shaped mainly by rabbinism. Jesus’ division of the history of salvation is tripartite: first “biblical”, ending with John the Baptist; then his own ministry, in which the kingdom of heaven was breaking through; the third with the coming of the Son of Man in the future. Jesus identified the kingdom of heaven with the rabbinical “Days of the Messiah”. According to Flusser the roots of Jesus’ messianic time-table lay in contemporary rabbinic thought (269). This is supported by the Book of Revelation, the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch and the Fourth Ezra. Jesus as the Messiah saw the messianic era as identical with the realization of the kingdom of heaven.

These eight supplementary studies enrich the biography of Jesus presented in twelve preceding chapters. In both parts of the book Flusser deals with difficult problems which occupied scholarship, and offers relevant observations and substantiated solutions. His book on Jesus is both an important contribution to research and clear introduction to the origin of Christianity for broader public.

* * *

David Flusser presented in his book *Jesus* the evidence from the New Testament and from the Jewish background in unconventional manner, as indicated by arrangement and titles of chapters. Older and new theories are evaluated and new observations offered.

Flusser’s work is stimulating further study and also discussion of various topics. Here below only some points are shortly considered, with only few references to literature.

While most publications on Jesus are authored by Christian theologians, David Flusser attributes his approach to his education in classical studies and to his Jewish background (15).

According to S. Zeitlin quoted by J. Reumann,¹ Flusser's work on Jesus, stressing congruity with Judaism, could be considered that "by a Christian fundamentalist", if a reader would not know that Flusser teaches at Hebrew University. A Christian, even a priest, can be Professor at this University. If this reviewer can add his personal experience, he was teaching as Visiting Professor at Ben-Gurion University at Beersheva in Israel in 1985, as participant in the exchange program with the University of California, Los Angeles.

Gustav Flusser – he used this first name while living in Prague – studied classics at Charles University in Prague in late 1930s. This reviewer studied classics with the same professors a little later, in 1939 and 1945-1947. Thus he agrees with Flusser's methodological approach to texts.

Flusser did not want to write his book about Jesus from the "Jewish standpoint" (15). He studied as a Jew the various trends within ancient Judaism (15). Now more other scholars are attracted to this study by the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered since 1947, the roots of Christianity within Judaism are being researched.

In the preface (16) Flusser points to his contacts with Bohemian Brethren during his study in Prague, and later to his interest in their history. This reviewer who was active in the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren feels to be close to Flusser understanding of Christianity.

This reviewer remembers with gratitude discussions with Flusser, in Prague in early 1950s, when Flusser was teaching modern Hebrew – and also some other Jewish matters –, and in Jerusalem in 1964, as Flusser was his host and guide. In these friendly discussions various differences in interpretation of ancient texts, in their historical background, in their relevance for present time, were more exactly formulated and reciprocally evaluated. These discussions are also mentioned in the article "Osmdesát let profesora Davida Flussera" – with English summary "Professor David Flusser Octogenarian", in *Religio*.²

The first topic of discussion concerns the languages of sources. Flusser presents as result of his research the conclusion that the Synoptic Gospels are based on early documents written in Hebrew (21). He also believes that Jesus' teaching was in Hebrew (128). For this belief he points to the Hebrew *ben 'adam* "son of man" in the Testament of Abraham, where these words mean the son of Adam, Abel, appointed by God to be eschatological judge.

1 *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, Atlanta, Georgia 1989, 522.

2 *Religio* 5, 1997, 69-80.

In his book *The Language of Jesus* (Oslo 1954) H. Birkeland represents the same belief as Flusser concerning Hebrew. This reviewer used old and newly found texts for the confirmation of the usual theory about Aramaic as language of Jesus.³ This theory is based on Aramaic words in the Greek New Testament; they are listed in my *Altaramäische Grammatik*.⁴ The most relevant argument is the Aramaic version of Psalm 22:2 pronounced by Jesus according to Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46. Flusser considers this a creative invention (22, n. 4; 229, n. 14). He points to the quotation of Psalm 31:6 in Luke 23:46 as the standard confession of a dying Jew (173, n. 79).

Here and elsewhere the Luke's gospel is considered historically more reliable. In this Flusser follows R. L. Lindsey who supposed that Luke preserved the original tradition and wrote before Mark (21-22). Mark reworked the material and influenced Matthew. According to Flusser John's gospel is not historically reliable (197, 212-214), even as it is based on a Jewish-Christian source (210, n. 8; 212, n. 13).

The common theory about the priority of Mark's gospel can be supported by comparison with two other synoptic gospels and by linguistic observations. Both Matthew and Luke follow the sequence of Mark's narrative, and add sayings from their special source called Q, abbreviation of German "Quelle" – "source". The Aramaic model of Mark can be observed in Aramaic words within the Greek text and in Greek constructions imitating Aramaic phrases. This reviewer translated around 1960 Mark's gospel from Greek with respect to probable Aramaic background. This Czech translation seems to be fluent, simple and clear; J. B. Souček, Professor of New Testament at the Protestant School of Theology in Prague agreed in evaluating it with his former student.

It is possible that Matthew used some Hebrew sources. This could be supported by testimony of Papias, quoted by Eusebius. Of course, by the Greek term *Hebraios* both non-Greek languages used by Jews could be indicated, Hebrew and Aramaic.

In Luke's gospel the original sources in Semitic languages or perhaps already translated into Greek were used for a book written according Greek literary patterns, as it is visible already in the prologue.

For John's gospel some use of Hebrew sources may be supposed. A Hebrew model can be observed in 1:3, from the Essene Rule of the Community (1QS XI:11).

3 Cf. S. Segert, "Zur Verbreitung des Aramäischen in Palästina zur Zeit Jesu", *Archiv Orientalní* 25, 1957, 21-37.

4 S. Segert, *Altaramäische Grammatik mit Bibliographie, Chrestomathie und Glossar*, Leipzig 1975, 4th ed. 1990, 519.

As concerns the chronological sequence of the gospel, these observations concerning languages may be used, in relation to the Christian branches in which the gospel were produced. The dating is still discussed; some general observations concerning fixing of oral traditions in written documents can be applied.

John's gospel most probably originated in a branch consisting of former Essenes. Another part of this Essene "fringe" – to use Flusser's term – moved at the beginning of Christian era to southern Mesopotamia and developed into the Mandaean religious community. John's gospel was probably composed before 70 A.D., to give to the branch a safe basis.

As the witnesses of event and speeches were dying, it was necessary to preserve their testimonies in written form. And religious communities needed common written documents for their further activities.

If John's gospel was the first one, it could stimulate the writing of gospels in other Christian groups. Mark's gospel could serve various groups. Matthew's gospel with its references to the Old Testament had probably its origin among Jewish Christians. And Luke's gospel was useful for Gentile Christians well acquainted with Greek language and culture.

According to Flusser the Jesus portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels is the historical Jesus, while the term "kerygmatic Christ" may be related to John's gospel (cf. 20). The characterization of this gospel as "kerygmatic" can explain preference of these functions against probably historical evidence. According to John 9:14-16 Jesus healed the blind man with mud on sabbath; sabbath is not mentioned in Mark 8:22-26, since Jesus respected the law (cf. 62). John puts the driving the merchants out of the temple at the beginning of Jesus' activity, 2:13-17, while according to Mark 11:15-17 this happened only at the last visit of Jesus in Jerusalem; the timing in John was perhaps caused by some symbolic reason.⁵

Historical reports in three synoptic gospels and kerygmatic messages in John's gospel differ even in the date of Jesus' death, and the relation of it to the sacrificing of Passover lamb. According to synoptic gospels the Last Supper was a paschal meal (142), thus this report in Mark 14:12 points to the fourteenth day of the month Nisan.⁶ According to John's gospel 19:14 the day of the Preparation of Passover was the day in which Jesus was crucified. Thus this day is the same in which the lamb was sacrificed, the fourteenth of Nisan. According to synoptic gospels the date is the fifteenth of Nisan. The sequence of events in synoptic gospels points to such dating. In 1 Corinthians 5:7 apostle Paul calls Christ our paschal lamb which has

5 Cf. J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, Peabody, Massachusetts 1998, paragraph 600, p. 351.

6 Cf. *ibid.* para. 606, p. 355.

been sacrificed. It is possible that John similarly indicated the same day for lamb and Jesus. As Flusser evaluates highly Bohemian Brethren (16), it can be mentioned, that they were following Jesus, their lamb.

Newly discovered Essene manuscripts gave Flusser opportunity to relate this religious community to Jesus (cf. 71, 97-98, 117). Some of Essene motifs could come to Jesus through John the Baptist (117). In general Jesus was closer to non-sectarian Judaism, the philosophy and practice of it was that of the Pharisees (71).

The relation of the Essene text on Melchizedek (11Q13) to the Epistle to Hebrews is mentioned by Flusser (130, n. 21). However, the theory that this epistle was addressed to Essenes is not mentioned.⁷

Flusser's properly conservative attitude toward ancient documents can be observed in his evaluation of the Testimonium Flavianum, the alleged report on Jesus in Josephus' *Antiquities* 18:63-64 (157). Flusser quotes the statement from the 10th century Arabic history by Agapius, discovered by S. Pines and published by him in 1971.

This Testimonium is important for the detailed evaluation of the role of Pontius Pilate in condemning Jesus (cf. 157-158, 210; cf. index, 312). Flusser points to Pilate's dedication to the Roman emperor Tiberius, and to Pilate's dislike of Jews and Judaism.

Flusser also mentions that Pilate is named in Apostles' Creed (115, 172, n. 78). In the tradition transmitted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:4 Pilate is not named. A question may be asked whether the insertion of the name of the prefect of Judea was not meant as indication of time, comparable to that of Kyrenios – Quirinius – governing Syria, in Luke 2:2. Exact chronology stresses the historical reality of events.

The last chapter of Flusser's book (258-275) dealing with eschatology with attention to Messiah would deserve a special study. Three different systems are clearly presented in a table (272): bipartite, tripartite, and that of Jesus in between. Flusser adds new insights into the research on messianism and eschatology induced by the new evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The terminology in Flusser's book is exact. He uses the terms "anti-Jewish" (225, n. 7; 236, n. 7) and "anti-Judaism" (236) for the attitude of early Christians. Only once the often misused term "anti-Semitic" is used, concerning the unrest in Alexandria in the year 117 A.D.

For Jewish Christianity the Jesus' role as teacher and Messiah was more important than the risen Lord. The crucified and risen Christ became the heart

7 Scholars promoting this theory are listed in my paper "Hebrew Essenes – Aramaic Christians", in: Z. J. Kapera (ed.), *Mogilany 1995*, Kraków 1998, 169-184: 175-176.

of preaching in Hellenistic Christian congregations (20). This is also visible in Paul's letters.

In later times the religion of Jesus himself, expressed in his message, became important for small Christian groups, such as Mennonites; Flusser dedicated this book to them (177; cf. 5). This reviewer does not know Mennonite teaching and practice, he is not able to evaluate this supposed importance of message of Jesus. As concerns Bohemian Brethren in the past and in the present time, they devote appropriate attention to Jesus' message in their preaching and teaching. This is being done in respect to Jesus' divine authority.

In his book Flusser explains the Jewish background of Jesus' personality and teaching, very clearly concerning the double commandment of love in Matthew 22:35-40 (88-90).

According to Flusser the early Church overcame the tragedy of Jesus' crucifixion by stressing the divine character of Christ and cosmic significance of his task (175). Also for this relevant Jewish roots can be found. They are well known in New Testament references to the Old Testament, concerning the suffering of God's servant in Isaiah c. 53 and resurrection on the third day in Hosea 6:2.

Early Christians had access to texts composed later than the Old Testament, to apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. References to them in Flusser's book are listed in the index (295-296). Messiah has been identified with Abel in the Testament of Abraham and with Enoch according to so-called I Enoch book (130). Messianic era to come is described in the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch (270), also the renewed Temple.

During half century since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls many relations of these mostly Essene texts to the New Testament were found and researched. The references to these texts are also listed in the index (296-297). Flusser points to the Essene text on Melchizedek, who as eschatological priest will judge men and spirits at the end of time (130-131). The eschatological Temple is described in the Essene Temple Scroll (270-271).

Old Testament pseudepigrapha were no more used by Jews, as Christians were more and more taking from them support for their belief. They also translated some pseudepigrapha and thus preserved them, while the Hebrew originals were no more transmitted and preserved by Jews.

Like Jesus' activities and message the christological development (cf. 176) was also based on Jewish religious ideas. Flusser rejects rightly the dichotomy between the "historical" Jesus and "kerygmatic" Christ (15). This approach may be supported by further study of Jewish roots of the Christian kerygma.

Documents from the beginning of Christian era show the plurality of Jewish religious groups and subgroups. This situation may be compared to

present Jewish communities in America: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist.

Pseudepigrapha and Dead Sea Scrolls are available also in translations; Czech translations are not yet complete. Pseudepigrapha appear in the series edited by Z. Soušek in Prague, under the title *Knihy tajemství a moudrosti* (I 1995; II 1998; III is being prepared). Translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls is being prepared to be published by OIKOYMENH in Prague.

Those who will seek more illumination will find it in the collection of 41 Flusser's article, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, published in 1988 in Jerusalem.

David Flusser in his book entitled *Jesus* brought his person and message closer to modern readers while he used his profound knowledge of Jewish sources. This book is a significant contribution to scholarship and to mutual understanding of Jewish and Christian religious heritage.