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Book Review: 'The Nazarene Gospel Restored' by Robert Graves and Joshua Podro

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Robert Graves and Joshua Podro:

THE NAZARENE GOSPEL RESTORED *

THE facile and elegant pen of Mr. Robert Graves, which gave us the delightful portrait of the Emperor Claudius in *I Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, has recently been at work, in collaboration with a Mr. Joshua Podro, on a monumental attack upon the historicity of the Gospels. This is not surprising to anyone who has followed Mr. Graves's anti-Christian bias through his other novels. His fictional biography of Christ, entitled *King Jesus*, was but a preparation for this new and professedly serious analysis of the origins of Christianity, and the hostility toward the Christian faith in *Count Belisarius* only foreshadowed the spirit behind the launching of his present broadside.

Briefly, the thesis Mr. Graves has put forth in *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* is that the four Gospels are hopelessly corrupted transformations of an original account of Jesus preserved by oral tradition in the Jewish Christian community at Jerusalem. According to the author, Greek converts to Christianity introduced all sorts of anti-Jewish and purely pagan notions into the canonical Gospels, so that what we have today is a grossly overpainted distortion of the true story of "Jesus the Nazarene." For Mr. Graves, Jesus is, of course, but an ordinary mortal who taught strictly Pharisaical doctrines still recognizable in a few passages of the New Testament. However, the allegedly fictional character of the Gospels has not deterred Mr. Graves from attempting to reconstruct "the authentic" narrative, and after going through the Gospels, as we have them, with his homemade pruning knife, he gives us, at the end of this massive—and expensive—volume, what he claims is the factual story of "Jesus the Nazarene."

In the introduction to his text, the never modest Mr. Graves has warned us in advance that none of the criticisms which will be leveled against his work are valid, chiefly because, to his way of thinking, they can spring only from "orthodoxy," which for him is the same thing as blind prejudice. Yet when the structure so elaborately erected by

* New York: Doubleday & Co., 1954.

Messrs. Graves and Podro is demolished by someone of the standing of William F. Albright, as it was in the *N. Y. Herald Tribune Book Review* of July 18, 1954, it is not very probable that many people will attribute the demolition to prejudice. Dr. Albright's fame as an unbiased biblical scholar can hardly be called in question, even by the authors of this book. *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* appears to be a work of enormous erudition embracing a variety of sources and painstakingly analyzed Gospel passages in the light of these sources. But here lies its greatest weakness for, as Dr. Albright pointed out, these sources (the Talmud, written 200-400 years after Christ; the apocryphal gospels, clearly legendary; and others) have not been "critically evaluated . . . but are treated as quarries from which to collect speculative building blocks." And once this has been said, no more need be written about the major part of this joint effort. One suspects that Mr. Graves feared this himself when he wrote that "reputable Christian apologists, finding our main theses hard to refute, will either leave them unanswered or else evade the issue by disputing minor points." No doubt the individual Gospel passages which he has submitted to his uncritical dissection constitute "minor points" when taken singly, but as a whole they represent the sum total of all his "main theses"; and just as each one falls short of critical acceptance, so must the whole.

However, for the sake of completeness, it is worth our while to examine some of Mr. Graves's "main theses" and see if they are so "hard to refute." I give here a list of some of the more pertinent ones: (1) The roots of Christianity are to be found in the prophecies of Jeremiah—p. 5. (2) Motives for the extensive distortion of facts by Gospel editors must be looked for in the bitter quarrels that, less than thirty years after the Crucifixion, divorced the Gentile churches from the Nazarene Church headed by James the Just—p. 11. (3) Jesus, an apocalyptic Pharisee whose message was neither unorthodox nor original, came by a series of accidents and misunderstandings to be posthumously worshiped as a heathen god, and was only then rejected by His own nation—p. 14. (4) The four canonical Gospels developed by accretion until about A.D. 130, and their text was not established even then, as is proved by important variants found in the fourth-century Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus—pp. 39-40. (5) Jesus regarded the Mosaic Law as immutable. He did not quarrel with the

Pharisees—pp. 793–794. (6) Jesus neither preached to the Gentiles, nor encouraged His apostles to do so, nor showed any concern for their fate—p. 795. (7) Catholic Christianity combines the Aramaic apostolic tradition with Paul's "heretical teaching" and with extraneous and alien religious theory derived largely from Alexandrian Gnostic philosophy by way of the Gospel according to St. John—p. 794.

We can be very grateful to Mr. Graves and his collaborator for having given such importance to the prophecies of Jeremiah, for it makes the task of those who disagree with them so much easier. The book of Jeremiah is indeed of paramount importance in any study of Jesus and His doctrine. A close study of this great prophet will reveal a remarkable parallel of spirit and career with that of Christ, and it is no coincidence that when He asked His disciples whom men said He was, they answered: "Some say Jeremiah" (Mt 16:14). But it is the very similarity between Jesus and Jeremiah, the evident influence that the latter had upon the former, and the reflection of it in the life and words of Jesus, which make it impossible for Him not to have recognized His call to fulfill the most striking of all Jeremiah's prophecies—the prophecy of the end of the Mosaic Law and the giving of a new Law, one that would be written in the hearts of men (Jer 31:31–34). On Mr. Graves' own admission, Jesus "as the King-Messiah had to follow a rule of conduct laid down by the prophets" (p. 794). This being so, it is strange to hear him asserting the immutability of the Mosaic Law in the eyes of Christ. It is not merely Christian but Jewish theology as well which teaches that with the coming of the Messiah comes also the revelation of a new Law. (See, for instance, Julius Greenstone, *The Messiah Idea in Jewish History*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1906, p. 100.) And Jesus certainly did consider Himself the Messiah, as even Messrs. Graves and Podro will allow. The statement of Jesus to the Samaritan woman that "the hour is coming when neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, will you worship the Father" (Jn 4:21) is in perfect harmony with the prophecy of Jeremiah that "in those days they shall say no more: the ark of the covenant of the Lord; neither shall it come to mind; neither shall they make mention of it; neither shall they miss it; neither shall it be made any more" (Jer 3:16). Yet it was precisely this sort of statement that aroused Jewish officialdom against both men and that explains, so very simply, their respective fates. The great lengths to

which our authors go to "prove" that no friction existed between Jesus and the Pharisees could as well be extended to the history of Jeremiah, and with equally distorted results.

Neither is it possible for Jesus, who embraced so completely the words and works of Jeremiah, to have been, as our authors assert, utterly unconcerned about the fate of the Gentiles. Jeremiah predicted the conversion of the Gentiles at the very moment he foretold the disappearance of the Ark of the Covenant and its future unimportance (Jer 3:16-17). And elsewhere he painted a picture of the Gentiles confessing the emptiness of their idols and accepting the satisfying fullness of the true God (Jer 16:19). In agreeing, then, with Messrs. Graves and Podro that the roots of the Christian faith and way are to be found in the prophecies of Jeremiah, indeed more than they realize, we have been able to refute not only their first thesis but also, in principle, two of the others, the fifth and the sixth.

The second and third theses listed above are very closely related to one another and underlying both is the assumption that the doctrine of the "Nazarene" church differed substantially from that of the Gentile churches established by Paul and other Hellenized missionaries. "Bitter quarrels" and a series of "accidents and misunderstandings" changed the primitive "Nazarene" gospel to the speculative Greek theology taught by the Church today. This is what our authors say. Fortunately, this particular period of Church history and the problems it presents have but recently been subjected to the searching scholarship of the late Gregory Dix. There is no need to repeat here what I have recorded elsewhere in this volume about his findings. Suffice it to say that instead of "bitter quarrels" there was but a bitter realization on the part of the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem that their brothers in the flesh were not to follow them in recognizing Jesus as the Messiah; and that once this realization dawned upon them, they freely, if reluctantly, acknowledged the lead of the Gentile churches. "Accidents and misunderstandings" there must have been, but they were not, as our authors assert, relative to Christian belief in the person of Jesus. The true content of Jewish doctrine about the Messiah awaited translation into Greek forms of thought, but the Jew who recognized in the Messiah the awaited manifestation of God's personal activity in a world to be renewed did not believe a different article of faith from the Greek who recognized in Jesus the Messiah the only and truly begotten

Son of God. As Dom Dix so wisely points out, the Jewish mind was interested in the deeds of God, His action in history; it did not ask metaphysical questions. The Greek mind did. But this certainly gives no excuse for calling the precise metaphysical formulation of the nature of the Messiah, corresponding to the Greek mentality, a distortion.

The fourth and seventh theses listed above also belong together, since they concern themselves with textual criticism. Unfortunately for our authors, the statement that the canonical Gospels did not reach their present form until the middle of the second century must be greeted with a sad sigh. Such wishful thinking was part and parcel of the mental baggage of "higher critics" fifty or seventy-five years ago, but today it is not well received by anyone with standing. In *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946, p. 297), Dr. Albright concludes, after a careful evaluation of all the available evidence and the critical theories based upon it, that the Gospels reached their present form "not later than about 80 A.D." The recently discovered Egerton Papyrus and The Rylands Papyrus 457, both dating from the middle of the second century, solidly confirm—small as they are—such a date. What Messrs. Graves and Podro call "the important variants" in the Codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus can be seen in any critical edition of the Greek text, and it can safely be said that no one who comes to them fresh, with an unprejudiced mind, will consider them sufficient to warrant even the suspicion of a justification for this thesis. For these variant readings consist chiefly in unimportant omissions; they are not—as the wording of our authors would lead the general reader to believe—positive details which lack support elsewhere among the early manuscripts. In fact, it is real irony to hear these two codices, so universally acknowledged as witnesses to the integrity of the present text of the New Testament, called forth as witnesses to its corruption!

The further assumption that what we have in the Fourth Gospel is "Greek" and "Gnostic" is also contradicted by the most recent views and finds. Even if Goodenough is not correct in thinking that John is the most primitive of the Gospels, certainly all agree today that John is clearly Aramaic in thought and expression; and Dom Dupont has lately demonstrated in his *Essais sur la christologie de saint Jean* (Bruges: Abbaye de St. André, 1951) that the basic ideas in John,

such as Word, Life, Light, far from being "piracies" from Greek philosophy or Gnostic mysticism, are rooted developments of Old Testament themes entirely independent of extraneous influence.

And then there is what Messrs. Graves and Podro like to call the "heretical teaching of Paul." Nothing whatever in the portrait they painted of the Apostle even resembles history; it is simply a caricature. But for a moment we must turn our attention to the most novel of all their conjectures about him. It is the assertion that Paul was really a Greek named Solon who had adopted Judaism and was subsequently, on the road to Damascus, *frightened* into becoming a Christian by his meeting with a Jesus who had not really died on the cross. If Paul's Jewish faith had been the choice of an opportunist, as Messrs. Graves and Podro would have it, then it would have shown up where the subconscious reveals itself. Yet in his letters, the man who writes about the flesh and its role in life is a Jew through and through, not a Greek. A Greek, even when a convert to Christian belief, would subconsciously play down the lower tendencies of the body. The Greek regarded the body as a beautiful instrument of pleasure. Once baptized, he ceased to treat his body as an instrument of *uncontrolled* pleasure, but he never ceased to praise its merits. Paul, however, brought up under the Law which—quite unlike Greek practice—never stops surrounding the body with regulations, limitations, and punishments for their violations; brought up further to regard the display of the naked body as something shameful rather than beautiful, constantly reflects this state of mind throughout his writings. It is not that the Jew dishonored his body, or despised it, for, if a Pharisee, he believed in its eventual resurrection, but he realized its potency for self-destruction. The Greek looked outside of fallen nature, to evil Fates, for the causes of destruction. This was an important psychological difference and one, among others, that distinctly characterizes Paul as a Jew.

That there are problems in the New Testament no one denies, but they are, with very few exceptions, not the ones Messrs. Graves and Podro have imagined. True, the book evidences a great deal of hard work on the part of this unusual team of a clever historical novelist and a scholarly Jew. But we feel that the publishers have shown considerable wisdom in their flyleaf description of it as a piece of "historical imagination." And we can only agree with H. John McLachlan, writing in the *Hibbert Journal* of April 1954, who called it, in the

words of Stuart Piggott, "a mixture of real fact, misunderstood fact, pure supposition, and a reckless jumping to exciting conclusions." Yet a question remains. What made Mr. Graves write this book? Could it be that he wished to change the story of Jesus because he finds the story as it is too demanding? Why was he so eager to play the "restorer"? Could it be that he is afraid to meet the true Restorer?

J. EDGAR BRUNS