



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2017.03.04

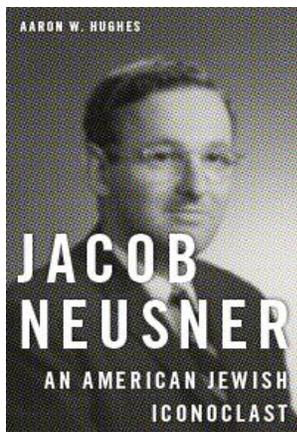
Aaron W. Hughes, *Jacob Neusner: An American Jewish Iconoclast*. New York: New York University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-4798-8585-5. Pp. 319. \$35.00. Hardcover.

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Aaron Hughes' book, *Jacob Neusner: An American Jewish Iconoclast* opens with the observation that:

Jacob Neusner is one of the most important scholars in the history of Judaism. He was instrumental in transforming the study of Judaism from an insular project, conducted by, and primarily of interest to, religious believers into a dynamic field of study at home in the secular setting of the modern university (1).¹



As Hughes' book appeared close to the time of Neusner's death on October 8, 2016 its highly laudatory evaluation of Neusner the person and scholar was cited in obituaries in the national press, such as in the New York Times and the Washington Post. Hughes' book well deserved this widespread notice, as Hughes did an excellent job of covering a career so enormous and diverse, effectively synthesizing numerous key moments and publications. His book abounds in insightful quotes from Neusner's work, guiding the reader to what is essential in the many pages Neusner published. At the same time, this book joins other appraisals of Jacob Neusner, all taking up the challenge of painting a likeness of this prolific scholar, with the many phases of his career and his nearly endless list of publications.²

¹ All "naked" references below to page numbers, in parentheses, without further elaboration, other than obvious dates, are to pages in the book under review.

² See Shaul Magid, "Is It Time to Take the Most Published Man in Human History Seriously? Reassessing Jacob Neusner" <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/211209/take-jacob-neusner-seriously>. Magid wrote this article before Neusner's death. For Magid's obituary of Neusner see <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/29528>. Compare Joshua Hammerman's "Looking Back at Jacob Neusner's Complicated Legacy," available at <http://forward.com/news/obituaries/358291/looking-back-at-jacob-neusners-complicated-legacy>. This obituary

This review will focus on two aspects of Hughes' account of Neusner's career, contributions, and place in scholarship: 1. How did Hughes balance his high estimation and praise of Neusner's distinctive role in American academia with a critical appreciation of the more problematic aspects of Neusner's life and work, a balance that is crucial for a meaningful biography? How can one be both an admiring and critical biographer? 2. What can one learn from Hughes' book about the harsh and mutually demeaning relationship between Neusner and Israeli scholars, which was the talk of the discipline on both sides of the Atlantic, and which lasted for decades?

Neusner's quarrels with others were almost as numerous as his books, as Hughes acknowledged with candor at the outset: Neusner was "cantankerous and controversial and he often garnered a great deal of animosity over his long career" (1). He attacked scholars who were once his mentors, closest colleagues, most fervent supporters, and from whom he admitted that he had learned the most, such as the Smiths, Morton of Columbia (192–197) and Jonathan Z. of the University of Chicago (108–109). As Hughes reported, Neusner also kept his lawyers busy, threatening to take legal action against those who angered him (e.g., 174, 191, 195–196). Hughes also narrated candidly the account of Neusner's troubles at Brown with Richard E. Cohen, even if they did Neusner little credit.³

It is therefore not much of a distinction to have been the object of Neusner's wrath at one time or other. Neusner, could be encouraging and generous, but also domineering, irascible, and damning in his relations with students (142) and colleagues.⁴ one attitude was often replaced by another, entirely opposite, in the blink of an eye. At the same time, this fact obligates full and candid disclosure by anyone who writes about Neusner to indicate his or her interactions with the man over the years. In my case, reviewing Hughes' book, this is especially delicate, as several pages in the book are devoted to me and to the aftermath of an incident in the 1980s in which I had a central part (182–188). I have no interest in rewinding the tape and relating my version of what took place then, defending at least my part in the mess that ensued.⁵ Not surprisingly, given the volatility of his personality, decades later, by around 2001, Neusner and I reached a real mutual appreciation, in which he encouraged my work and that of one of my students.⁶ It is in that spirit that I write this review.

begins: "Neusner, who died in October, was one of the giants who established Jewish studies in the 20th century, and a central figure in the history of critical scholarship on our holy texts. He was also my mentor and inspiration. And I still haven't forgiven him."

³ Cohen's accusations against Neusner were not trivial. If Neusner took Cohen's fellowship check out of Cohen's mailbox and also graded Cohen inappropriately these were not small matters. Hughes noted that Cohen's complaints were ratified by the Faculty Executive Committee in 1988, and Neusner was reprimanded in writing for "harassment of a graduate student" (173–174). The chair of the Faculty Executive Committee wrote Neusner that his "behavior was disgraceful, violating faculty member decorum" (174).

⁴ Neusner's feud with the late Edward Beiser (1942–2009) has several aspects. Beiser was a celebrated teacher, whose courses were considered a foundational experience and almost required for anyone at Brown who had intellectual aspirations. See the obituary by Jeff Shesol at <http://www.brownalumnimagazine.com/content/view/2391/40/>. In addition, as Hughes acknowledged (135–136), Beiser and Neusner were in competition for the role of "father figure" to the Jewish students on campus: both professors invited students to their homes for Shabbat dinners (134).

⁵ However, one minor error about me needs correction. I was not "an Israeli scholar then teaching at McMaster University in Canada" (182) when I gave the talk in Israel, which then led to the article that provoked Neusner; I was a Professor at McMaster, then on sabbatical in Israel, who later immigrated to Israel.

⁶ I supervised Dr. Hillel Newman, whose degree was awarded "with distinction." Newman elected to leave the world of the Academy and join the Israel Foreign Service, where he served as consul in Boston. Neusner's son was his

Hughes announced at the outset that he did not intend to minimize Neusner by telling jokes about how much he wrote,⁷ or how difficult he could be. He did not intend to engage in muckraking or innuendo. Rather, following the difficult route demanded of a serious academic intellectual biographer, Hughes spent much time with Neusner, spoke with his friends and family, and engaged in serious research in Neusner's archives and published writings. Hughes also talked with many of Neusner's students and colleagues (ix–x). His goal was to tell Neusner's story as someone who redefined the academic study of Judaism and then changed the larger frame of religious studies by “forcing that field's categories to include postbiblical Judaism.” Ultimately, in the broadest sense, Hughes presented Neusner's life and career as an account of “American Jews who came of age in the second half of the twentieth century” (ix). It was the story of how American Jews tried to make sense of the world in the aftermath of transformational events such as the near extermination of European Jews in World War II and the creation of the State of Israel (6). As such, Hughes came to see Neusner as much more than a scholar of Rabbinic Judaism and to define his legacy not so much in that field, but more as a social commentator and post-Holocaust theologian (x). For these reasons, Hughes concluded, Neusner should be included “in the pantheon of great American Jewish thinkers” (7, 272).

But, one must note, this path has its dangers. Overreliance on conversations with the subject, his family and friends, coupled with extensive research in the subject's own archives can yield a one-sided portrait emphasizing the legacy—too congenial to the subject and making it very difficult to be both admiring and critical. As I related above, at the beginning of this essay, Hughes wrote about Neusner with candor. Nevertheless, in the end, this book is an “authorized” biography, as Hughes himself indicated, writing that Neusner “authorized the present biography” (268).

I find the problematic consequences of these circumstances most prominent in Hughes' discussion of the numerous errors of misunderstanding the basic sources of which Neusner was accused throughout his career.⁸ This criticism was already levelled at Neusner's first major book, *A Life of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai* (63–64), again on his later big translation projects (148), and then was expressed most notably in Lieberman's posthumously published review of the first volume of Neusner's translation of the Yerushalmi (189–197). Hughes acknowledged that:

many previous reviews of Neusner's work had accentuated what they perceived to be sloppiness and poor translations that did not properly understand the nuances of the text in question, let alone the literal level of the Aramaic or Hebrew original (189).

neighbor there. When Jacob Neusner visited he met Newman and encouraged him to be confident in the value of his thesis for the academic community and publish it. It then appeared as H. Newman, *Proximity to Power and Jewish Sectarian Groups of the Ancient Period: A Review of Lifestyle, Values, and Halakha in the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Qumran* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

⁷ But cf. one exception (287–288, n. 19). However, the joke is repeated there as a point that disgusted Neusner and infuriated him.

⁸ Along the same lines, Neusner supposedly read critically every word written by his students, to make sure that they did not make mistakes that would reflect badly on him (144). See however, R. Kimelman, “Gary G. Porton, *The Traditions of R. Ishmael*,” *AJS Newsletter* 24 (1979): 26–27 & 30, where Kimelman noted gross mistakes in Porton's book. See also Porton's extensive reply, *AJS Newsletter* 27 (1980) 15–16 and Kimelman's apologetic concession, *ibid.*, that his review “only pointed out some mistranslations which could easily be rectified in a future edition.”

Lieberman's review was utterly devastating, noting that at the beginning of his career Neusner was aware of his ignorance of the original languages in which Rabbinic sources were written and therefore relied on responsible English translations, such as the Soncino version. Now, however, Neusner believed he could do the translations himself, but this was beyond his abilities or his command of the sources as evidenced by the numerous errors Lieberman found in the Yerushalmi translation. Lieberman therefore concluded that the proper place for Neusner's translation was in the "wastebasket" (190). Effectively, for many, Lieberman's review threw Neusner's entire lifelong long project into doubt (189).⁹

How did Neusner respond to these criticisms? According to Hughes, Neusner regularly was grateful to his critics, thanking them for pointing out inaccuracies, and assuring his readers that he had taken account of critical reviews. Neusner often did this in subsequent editions of the works that had been criticized. Hughes recounted that Neusner once told him: "I take my critics more seriously than they take themselves" (104–105). Concerning Lieberman's review, Neusner followed this usual practice, incorporating Lieberman's criticisms in the Appendix to the final volume of his translation of the Yerushalmi (191). But, in addition, Neusner responded to Lieberman's review by attacking its author—for example: "Lieberman teaches us nothing about what we should do, but only how we should undertake the work at hand...[Lieberman's work] fails systematically and conscientiously to accomplish the tasks of serious research (192)." Neusner saw Lieberman as following a dead-end; Neusner therefore preferred to pursue his own approach, based on a "critical methodology."

In one sense Neusner was right: Lieberman belonged to an older generation of scholarship both chronologically and in terms of approach, with at least one foot still in the world of the Yeshiva (45). There was value to Neusner's "critical methodology" as opposed to Lieberman's. Yet, perhaps as a result of his overly one-sided engagement with his subject, in an "authorized" biography, Hughes never asked a crucial question: what is the contribution of a "critical methodology" if practiced by someone whose analysis and translation of the primary sources on which that methodology should be based is "sloppy" and marred by "poor translations that did not properly understand the nuances of the text in question, let alone the literal level of the Aramaic or Hebrew original?" As valuable as the "critical" methodology may be, one must wonder whether the results are based on quicksand if the primary sources analyzed through the lenses of that "critical" method are not properly understood.

Let me specify my critique of Hughes. I would not conclude that these flaws justify relegating all of Neusner's books to the dumpster (preferably for recycling). Despite the imperfections to which critics like Lieberman pointed, I find much merit in what Neusner had to say about the world of the Rabbis, but this is a paradox that requires explanation and clarification. The research Hughes undertook led him to conclude that Neusner's life and career were rife with paradoxes (7), but I fear that the bias inherent in that endeavor, when writing an "authorized" biography, blinded Hughes to the important paradox originating in the gap between inadequate command of the sources and impressive larger insights based on those same sources, which Hughes claimed that Neusner achieved. The closest Hughes came to dealing with this issue was his repeated observation of the importance of the insights Neusner achieved as an outsider, who saw things which were not

⁹ This was certainly the case for Morton Smith, as reflected in the account of his remarks reported in *BAR* (195) on the meeting Smith disturbed by handing out copies of Lieberman's review.

evident to the insiders (e.g., 275). Yet, Hughes ignored the fact that Neusner did not recognize what an outsider should—the need to be in constant conversation with the great scholars who had immersed their lives as insiders in the texts he studied in order to be sure that there were no egregious errors of ignorance to detract from his important and creative insights as an outsider.

iii

After the opening sentences of the book, quoted at the beginning of this review, Hughes elaborated:

Neusner’s vision was motivated by the desire to make the study of Judaism respectable and inclusive. It was not to be an insider’s club, as it was in the traditional Jewish seminary, but an academic and intellectual endeavor that simultaneously informed and was informed by rigorous theoretical and methodological frameworks that were external to the tradition (2).

As a result, Neusner differed from the “more technical approach found in academic settings, particularly in Israel, such as at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem,” and found the American Rabbinical seminaries—most especially the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where he himself had studied—to be intellectually barren (3). He refused to ghettoize Judaism (6). The study of Judaism that he promoted found its place in the American humanities, in the world of the university, where the holy books of Judaism would find their voice loudly and widely heard, proclaiming their answers to “urgent questions of humanity” (4).

Hughes was well aware that Neusner’s universalist approach to the study of Judaism had an antecedent (perhaps he would call it a pre-history) in nineteenth century Germany, which Hughes summarized briefly (9–10).¹⁰ That effort did not succeed. It was scholarship in the service of inclusion, intended to legitimize emancipation. Its two objectives were:

to show non-Jews that Judaism was a religion in light of critics like Immanuel Kant who had argued that it was not; and.... To show Jews that their tradition was, when properly understood, a spiritually and esthetically edifying religion, just as they imagined Protestant Christianity, their lodestar to be (10).

However, these efforts to integrate the study of Judaism into the world of the university failed. Hughes therefore concluded that the goal of “normalizing” the study of Judaism “would have to wait for another time and another place to be realized” (10).

Nevertheless, Jewish scholarship in Germany merits a second and deeper look. The German experience should not be so easily dismissed. In particular, I want to indicate the ideals set forth

¹⁰ Hughes has written a full-fledged monograph on *The Study of Judaism: Authenticity, Identity, Scholarship* (New York: SUNY Press, 2014), 9–13 and 39–76. Despite the more extensive treatment there, the focus on the earlier study of Judaism in Germany remained on apologetics and did not recognize that there was one important attempt to break out of the ethnic mode of scholarship in Germany of the 1920s worthy of notice. Many of Hughes’ complaints about the current state of Jewish Studies, which are prominent in that volume are also summarized briefly in A. Hughes, “Jewish Studies is Too Jewish,” *The Chronicle Review* (March 28, 2014): B4–B5.

by Eugen Täubler (1879-1953),¹¹ put into practice by him in his own scholarly career and in the *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* which he founded.¹² In 1922–1925, Täubler was appointed in Zurich, and then in 1925–1933 as Professor of Ancient History at Heidelberg. His achievements were recognized by his election to the Heidelberg Academy of Science in 1929. After the rise of the Nazis, Täubler resigned his position in Heidelberg. He eventually reached the United States and taught at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. He refused to return to Heidelberg after the war, despite frustrating conditions at Hebrew Union College, and died in Cincinnati on August 13, 1953, a year before Neusner entered the Jewish Theological Seminary. Täubler's most important contribution to Jewish History was conceptual. On the basis of his training as a historian of antiquity, in no small measure thanks to the example of Eduard Meyer of Berlin (1855–1930),¹³ Täubler insisted that Jewish History (in the diaspora in particular) must be seen as part of the general history of the places and times in which Jews lived. Jewish History in Germany, for example, was part of German History. The embeddedness of Jews in their local culture was fundamental, not incidental. At the same time, according to Täubler, there was an inner element that made Jewish life special, different from that of their fellow Germans, of which a Jewish historian had to take account. In contemporary terms, Jewish culture in Germany was a sub-culture, an integral but different part of the larger whole.

Täubler wrote relatively few full-fledged academic studies of the Jews in antiquity. Much of his energy was devoted to the study of the Jews in Germany from the Middle Ages and afterwards. Nevertheless, one essay on the Jews of antiquity is well known, Täubler's study of the geo-political place of the Jewish state in the Hellenistic and Roman world.¹⁴ The point of departure of this essay was the geographical and geo-political place of Palestine between Ptolemies and Seleucids and the consequences of this fact for Ptolemaic and Seleucid rule, culminating in the persecutions of Antiochus IV and the rise of the Maccabean state. Jewish History, for Täubler, was no longer ethnocentric or ideologically driven. It was now a normal part of the history of antiquity. Täubler intended that his results for antiquity would be repeated in numerous individual research efforts carried out at the *Akademie*. Jewish Studies would then become a full-fledged academic discipline, meeting the standards of its analogous fields in the larger academic world. It would be taken out of the hands of the theologians and move out of the confines of the ghetto.¹⁵

The overlap between the ideals and practice proclaimed by Täubler and Neusner is notable. Both sought to take Jewish Studies out of the ghetto and into the wider world of the University where they would participate according to the comprehensive standards of the university and then be acknowledged as full members of the larger intellectual community. Täubler himself wrote little,

¹¹ The summary of Täubler's life and career to follow are based on E. Täubler, "Curriculum Vitae," *Aufsätze zur Problematik jüdischer Geschichtsschreibung 1908-1950* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977): 59–60.

¹² For the announcement of intentions, see E. Täubler, "Das Forschungs-Institut für die Wissenschaft des Judentums Organisation und Arbeitsplan," *Aufsätze*, 32–43. For the history of this project, see further D. Myers, "The Fall and Rise of Jewish Historicism: The Evolution of the *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 63 (1992): 107–144.

¹³ On Meyer see W. M. Calder III - A. Demandt (eds.), *Eduard Meyer: Leben und Leistung eines Universalhistorikers* (Leiden: Brill, 1990).

¹⁴ E. Täubler, "Die weltpolitische Stellung des jüdischen Staates in der hellenistisch-römischen Zeit," *Tyche, Historische Studien* (1926): 116–136. On this article and its significance, see Y. Baer, "Eugen Täubler: The Man, The Teacher and the Scholar," *Zion* 19 (5714): 72 [Hebrew].

¹⁵ S. Stern-Täubler, "Eugen Täubler and the 'Wissenschaft des Judentums,'" *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute* 3 (1958): 49.

and nothing on Rabbinics, but I am convinced that Neusner would have found little to dispute in the basic approach Täubler took to the Ptolemaic, Seleucid, and Hasmonean eras. To be sure, Täubler's efforts never came to full fruition, due, of course, to the disruptions of the Nazi era. Täubler and Neusner were not contemporaries, with Täubler a generation and more older than Neusner. Nevertheless, I want to present them as an example of what Robert Merton has dubbed "simultaneous discoveries."¹⁶ Each man saw the need for a fundamental transformation in the ways in which the Jews were studied and called for the same changes for the same reasons. Each man's discovery does not detract from the other. In fact, the comparison with Täubler can serve as more than a mere historiographic footnote, indeed as a source of praise for Neusner. Täubler shows that the problem of the isolation of Jewish Studies to an intellectual ghetto had already been identified in the 1920s. The path to break out of that ghetto and to join the larger intellectual community had been illuminated in studies written back then that could serve as a model. Yet, the weight of inertia in the field was so great that there were few who recognized the difficulty or chose to adopt the new model for their work. Too many scholars were content to proceed in accordance with the old paradigms.¹⁷ It required a scholar of Neusner's brilliance, determination, and combativeness to turn the tide in the study of the Mishnah and Talmud more than half a century later in the USA and in an American context, creating an "American" approach to the study of the Jews.

iv

The task of an intellectual biographer is to correlate life experience and academic/intellectual achievement—to find and illuminate the links between one and the other. Hughes does this admirably in the book, discussing in detail the phases of Neusner's career and the work produced in each phase, showing how one sheds light on the other. I offer two examples, beginning with the Dartmouth years and the connection with Jonathan Z. Smith:

At Dartmouth, Neusner articulated his approach to religious history: The study of religion is accordingly a secular and this worldly study. It is about understanding the social worlds that communities create for themselves and attempting to explain the relationship between such worlds and the ideas they hold. Much of this conceptualization Neusner articulated in conversation with (Jonathan Z.) Smith at a formative moment of his career and then continuously throughout his career (108).

It was in accordance with this guiding principle that Neusner later wrote: *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah*, "a work which he considers to be one of his most important" (151), in which he emphasized the importance of understanding the significance of the Mishnah in context, in comparison with other expressions of Judaism at the time—the New Testament and the apocryphal books of Baruch and Ezra. Only in this manner would the message of the Mishnah, its meaning for its time and place be fully heard (153). This message "celebrated the power of man to form intention, willfully to make the world with full deliberation." And all this, despite "the condition

¹⁶ R. Merton, "Multiple Discoveries in Science," *On Social Structure and Science*, edited by P. Szotompka (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 305-317.

¹⁷ One Täubler disciple, who took his methodological prescriptions to heart and realized them in his research, albeit not concerning the Rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud, was S. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (1967-1993). For Goitein's obituary, in memory of Täubler see S(hlomo) G(oitein), "Eugen Täubler ז"ל," *Haaretz* (October 13, 1953): 2 [Hebrew].

of Israel, defeated and helpless, yet in its Land: without power, yet holy; lacking all focus, in no particular place, certainly without Jerusalem, yet separate from the nations” (155).

It was no accident that in reviewing the manuscript of this work for the University of Chicago Press Jonathan Z. Smith praised the book as “one of the most important and exciting books in the field of religious studies in decades.... Note that I have written ‘in the field of religious studies,’ for it would be a mistake to treat this work as one confined to Judaica” (151). This put Neusner at odds with the dominant paradigm then practiced in the Jewish Theological Seminary and in Israeli universities, and Neusner spared few words in criticizing what had been done by others, such as George Foot Moore and Ephraim E. Urbach (153). If Jonathan Z. Smith had called Neusner’s book a “Copernican revolution” (151), Neusner now effectively compared Moore (a bit unfairly, as he had written long before Neusner) and Urbach to practitioners clinging to Ptolemaic astronomy well after (he, in the role of) Copernicus had showed a new and better way. In particular, Neusner found the learning in Israeli universities dull and intellectually moribund. He was critical of a system with servile students and dogmatic teachers that produced little (49).

Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah was widely reviewed but often criticized as a misguided work of eisegesis, with Neusner imposing on the Mishnah his own categories (often loosely derived from Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*). Neusner was accused of not following his own admonition to read the Mishnah on its own terms: his book was theology after Auschwitz, with little to do with antiquity (156–59). And yet, the present is the inevitable foundation on which we base the questions asked of the past. This is true of all historical effort.¹⁸ Therefore, in Neusner’s defense, I would maintain that perhaps the present in which he lived allowed him to see aspects of the Mishnah hidden to others who had not shared that experience to the same degree. The merits of the book as revealing an important aspect of ancient Jewish experience remain and testify to the importance of the Dartmouth years.

My second example comes from Neusner’s twilight years, when he was honored all over the world as a scholar of “religious studies” and appointed Professor of the History and Theology of Judaism at Bard, now in extended conversation with Bruce Chilton (1949-), scholar of the New Testament and early Christianity. In this context, Neusner endeavored to draw the diverse pieces of his contributions together into a “theology” of what we call Rabbinic Judaism (234–37). In a previous time and place Neusner had insisted on a documentary approach—each Rabbinic source needed to be studied on its own—each one constituted a “Judaism,” with a vocabulary and a problematic of its own, into which nothing from outside that document should be brought in the attempt to understand it (145). At that point he was criticized by others, most notably E. P. Sanders, for a fragmentation that made no sense in the real world.¹⁹ Of course, one should not homogenize sources or allow the later ones to be the absolute guide in understanding the earlier ones, as was done in the world of the Yeshiva. Of course, each document should be allowed to speak for itself. However, did that mean that each document was hermetically sealed off from all other documents, as Neusner argued? Did the Rabbis of the Mishnah never have any biblically based ideas in mind

¹⁸ The classical and controversial statement of this position is E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (2d ed.; Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1987).

¹⁹ E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law, From Jesus to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990) 326–28. Sanders’ discussion of Neusner was important because it was written by a New Testament scholar, who spoke to other New Testament scholars in their own terms, who, according to Sanders, picked up ideas from Neusner in a vacuum, unaided by critical evaluation, which Sanders intended to correct *ibid*, 309.

when they recited the Shema, even if these Biblical notions were not explicitly mentioned in the Mishnah? Did *mAvot* shed no light on the values behind the Mishnah? These were the sorts of questions Sanders asked.

Neusner's new "theological" goal was to articulate how the parts he had separated earlier, and for which he was criticized, now came together as a whole. Judaism was not a random set of opinions from different times and places. Inherent in all the diverse pieces was a "reasoned discourse about God and God's self-manifestation in the Torah" (239), which he now set to discover. Theological categories such as faith, revelation, and Israel, which he had once dismissed as foreign to the spirit of the ancient documents and as "imports" (from Pauline Christianity and Protestant Theology in general), as in his critique of Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*,²⁰ now became a central focus of his activity as Professor of the History and Theology of Judaism at Bard.

v

Neusner's difficult relations with Israeli scholars and their disapproval of his work is one of the recurrent themes in Hughes' book (19, 49, 151, 182–188, 252–254). In his discussion of this issue there is an important aspect which Hughes did not recognize that I wish to emphasize, because I would argue that it also helps explain the ultimate happier outcome which Hughes narrated.

Neusner and the Israelis had built such a high and thick wall between themselves that neither side was willing to see what it had in common with the other side and only saw what they found unfavorable. Two parallel incidents illustrate this sensitive matter. *Neusner gave a talk at McMaster in 1978/79. In the discussion afterwards, I noted the work of the Israeli scholar Jonah Frankel (1928–2012) who had questioned the simplistic use of Rabbinic midrash for writing history and insisted that these sources needed to be viewed first and foremost as literature. Frankel had set this point out in a ground-breaking article that appeared as "Hermeneutical Questions in Research on the Aggadic Story," Tarbiz 47 (5738=1978) 139–172 [Hebrew]. It seemed to me that Frankel was pointing in a direction that overlapped with Neusner's insistence on seeing Rabbinic texts in their proper literary (144–148) perspective,²¹ and I asked Neusner what he thought of this overlap, which I thought he would find both interesting and encouraging. My anticipation was naïve. My question was greeted with a torrent of abuse, and I was criticized as arrogant, impertinent, and insulting.²²*

²⁰ J. Neusner, "Comparing Judaisms," *History of Religions* 18 (1978): 180. Despite their disagreements, see also Neusner's vigorous praise for Sanders for his powerful defense of Judaism against its German critics, with Sanders systematically attacking the German caricature of Judaism at the time of Jesus. J. Neusner, "Debunking the German Anti-Judaic Caricature," *National Jewish Post and Opinion* 69, 8 (October 16, 2002): 8–9, 15.

²¹ For Neusner, this question arose when he published his "biographical" book on Yohannan ben Zakkai. Brevard Childs (1923–2007) asked him: "Is it possible that you are doing history too soon, and you might be asking the wrong questions (110)?" This encounter, as Neusner acknowledged, was crucial in his turn to the literary analysis of Rabbinic sources, first expressed in *Development of a Legend: Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yohannan ben Zakkai* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

²² I follow here the practice adopted in my biography of Elias Bickerman and print all oral recollections in italics, as acknowledgement of the special nature of these memories, which are reshaped every time they are retold.

My Bar Ilan colleague, Professor Adiel Schremer had an equivalent experience on the opposite side of the fence. I narrate Schremer's story with his kind permission:

Schremer delivered a lecture in March of 2000 in memory of the Israeli historian Gedaliah Alon (1901–1950), at which he noted the growing overlap between the literary approach to Rabbinic sources taken by Israeli scholars, led by Jonah Frankel, and Jacob Neusner. Frankel, who was present, exploded in anger, insisting, how can you associate me with Neusner, an “am ha-aretz”? For Frankel, his stance was serious and well founded, while Neusner's merely reflected the attitude of an unlearned person to sources that required serious treatment.

These anecdotes point to a deeper issue that goes well beyond personal recollections of a memorable moment in one's past. Neusner and his Israeli counterparts were struggling with similar dilemmas, finding analogous answers in trying to understand the significance of the need for prior literary analysis of Rabbinic texts before one invoked them as a basis for history. However, relations and communications between the two sides were still so poor that neither side could see what it had in common with the other or recognize the merit of what was being done by counterparts across the ocean.

Nevertheless, this background helps explain the eventual lowering of the barriers and mutual acknowledgment between Neusner and Israeli scholars that Hughes described. Neusner and Israeli scholars, particularly the younger generation of Israeli scholars, began to recognize the value of each other's work. Neusner found that Israeli scholars “not only knew his name, but appreciated his scholarship” (254), as he came to value the work done by a new generation of Israeli scholars (253). What was once impossible on both sides of the ocean was now becoming a reality (254). The collective themes and issues in studying the Jewish past—especially the world of the Rabbis and particularly the implications of literary analysis for historical study of their texts—are now present front and center in Israeli scholarship, with Neusner's role prominently mentioned in a place of honor, while Israeli scholarship now figures large in the work of distinguished American academics.²³ One likely cause of this outcome was Israeli students pursuing degrees and/or post-doctoral appointments abroad,²⁴ in conjunction with sabbatical years spent by Americans in Israel. Scholarship is now practiced in a global context.

Hughes concluded his book with a consideration of what might be Neusner's legacy (265–77), a topic which he noted that Neusner himself had been unwilling to discuss (263). Given the sheer volume of Neusner's publications and correspondence, any missing piece is worthy of attention, but in the end it is not surprising that this piece on the long-term meaning of Neusner's work is

²³ For one example among many, see A. Tropper, *Rewriting Ancient Jewish History: The History of the Jews in Roman Times and the New Historical Method* (London: Routledge, 2016) in which Neusner's work has a prominent place and is often cited. On the American side of the ocean see for example, J. L. Rubenstein's discussion of the history of scholarship on the question of Rabbinic storytelling, including evaluations of the merits and possible flaws in the approaches of Neusner and Frankel, J. L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Studies: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 3–15.

²⁴ Indeed, a post-doctoral appointment abroad, where Israelis are exposed to the demands of a more diverse intellectual discourse, has become a virtual necessity for a full-time position here, even in the most traditional fields of Jewish Studies.

missing. Was he ever willing to concede that his work was done, that it was time to sum up, and that he had nothing new more to say (175, 269)?

For Hughes, at the very least, the foundational piece of the ultimate jig-saw puzzle he would construct, to be placed at the very center and around which all the other pieces were to be organized, was Neusner's insistence on the study of Judaism in the context of the secular university, with the tools appropriate to that context, which would/could take Jewish Studies out of the ghetto. This setting, for Neusner, had real long-term benefits that far exceeded those he found wanting in other settings. As paradoxical as it might seem, the secular university would "save" Judaism as no other institution could, since it would train knowledgeable Jews with a real attachment to their tradition. Accordingly, Neusner was fierce in his defense of Jewish Studies in the secular university against interference and threats, especially those from the established community. As such, Jewish Studies as Neusner conceived it could serve as a model for other ethnic studies.

This secular setting also enabled Neusner to reflect on topics which had bedeviled Jews ever since the enlightenment, especially what was the relationship between the universal and particular in Jewish life, or how to negotiate the intersection between Judaism and modernity, now in the American Jewish scene of the second half of the 20th century. For these reasons, the Jewish example studied by Neusner could be relevant far beyond the Jewish tradition and could be a model for other faiths struggling with the perils of modernity. This was Neusner's legacy as a theologian.

Ultimately, Hughes conceded, all this was in danger of being lost, buried in the vast number of Neusner's books, written by one of the most published figures in history, so that the most important aspects of his message might be submerged in a mountain of paper so great that no one would ever be able to read and digest it (272). As noted at the outset of this review, Hughes guided his reader through that mass of material, summarizing and synthesizing what he found important in Neusner's life and career in his book. It is in that spirit that I conclude this essay with a comment that I heard from Professor Aviezer Ravitzky of the Hebrew University, who was a Visiting Professor at Brown in 1984 and one of the Israeli scholars on the board of Neusner's *Annual of Rabbinic Judaism* (253).

When Neusner began his career God should have told him: 'Jack, you may only publish five books. Every line you publish today means that you will have one fewer line available to publish in the future. Therefore, choose carefully what you decide to write. Weigh every word.'

This may sound like devastating criticism of Neusner's copious books. It is therefore important to recount the end of Ravitzky's assessment:

If God had limited Jack this way those five books, distilled from all the others, would have each been a masterpiece!²⁵

²⁵ I thank Elisheva Baumgarten, Rita Baumgarten, David Kazhdan, Adiel Schremer, and Steven Wilf for comments on drafts of this review. As always, responsibility for the contents is all mine. I sometimes wish one were obligated to accept good advice.