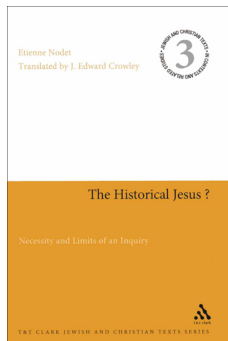


○ **REVIEW OF ÉTIENNE NODET, O.P., *THE HISTORICAL JESUS: NECESSITY AND LIMITS OF AN INQUIRY***
 (LONDON AND NEW YORK: T & T CLARK, 2008)

Richard Walsh, Methodist College



The key word in this offering on the historical Jesus is the subtitle's 'limits'. For Nodet, these 'limits' are not simply present historians and a putative past, but are more specifically the Jewish background of the historical Jesus on one hand and Christian worship on the other hand. The latter is most important and Nodet's acknowledged starting point, as a priest and a member of the *École biblique de Jérusalem*. In brief, Nodet posits the historical Jesus that explains the continuing 'forms' of Christian worship. To clear the ground for this Jesus, he lambastes the 'Protestant suspicion' that the historical Jesus necessarily differs from the Church's Christ and offers a critique of the Two-Source Hypothesis. Nodet also employs the criterion of dissimilarity unusually and theologically (although Nodet does not use the phrase). Bultmann famously argued that the most certain historical Jesus was to be found in those elements in the sayings tradition which were different both from Judaism and from Christianity. By contrast, Nodet finds the historical Jesus in that which makes him distinctive from Judaism yet native to the Church. Not surprisingly, this distinctive Jesus is the creedal Christ. To cement his point, Nodet rejects historians' common focus on Jesus's teaching, claiming that Jesus's teaching belongs within Judaism and would be congenial to the movement led by James in Jerusalem.

Nodet begins with blatant affirmations of Christian theology. The Bible is an icon. The Gospels bury their commentators. The historicity of Abraham (and Jesus as well, although Nodet does not say so, perhaps because Nodet believes him also present in ritual) depends upon scripture, not vice versa. Inspired scripture is divine speech actualised and is rightly read in communities ritually trained to do so. Tradition is a discourse and a world view that allows important details – e.g. the historical Jesus – to be remembered. The community (Church) structured by such tradition best preserves it. Church tradition is the best avenue to the historical Jesus. In fact, it is the historical Jesus, because the Word becomes flesh in the Eucharist. Nodet explains, but does not argue, these points.

His first two chapters, however, do argue that the Christian rites of baptism and the Eucharist stem from Jewish precursors, which Jesus transformed. In the process, he also argues that Galilee was a Pharisaic province (which justifies the work's inclusion in Charlesworth's *Jewish and Christian Texts in Contexts* series). In addition to John's baptism, the practices of the Essenes are most significant to Nodet, who argues that a baptismal education that concluded with a communal meal called 'Purity' created the Essene community. The meal included bread and wine, remembered the first fruits of Pentecost(s), and looked forward to a new kingdom. In a subsequent chapter, Nodet also argues that Jesus's last meal with his disciples was a similar meal, not a Passover celebration. Not incidentally, the Essenes also believed that their new members received the Holy Spirit – i.e. the ability to read scripture rightly – upon their baptism. The most significant scriptural traditions – for the Essenes, John the Baptist, and Jesus – are those about Joshua/Jesus's ritual entry into the land/kingdom.

Nodet so melds the practices of the Essenes and those of early Christianity that one begins to wonder how significant Jesus is. Perhaps, he is not that important, for Nodet admits that Jesus's teaching is Jewish and claims in conclusion that the deeds and words of Jesus remain in the shadows. The Christ of the creed is an altogether different matter, for its tenets distinguish the Christian community from the Essenes (and from James's followers), and Nodet, as noted above, ultimately argues that the historical Jesus is that confessed Christ.

In chapter three, Nodet argues that the gospels support the creed, pointing particularly to the preaching of the resurrection, which separates the apostles' preaching from the public life of Jesus. He further claims that (Protestant) studies which accept the Two-Source Hypothesis do not grasp the historical nature of the creed because that hypothesis breaks up the posterity of Jesus into (too many) branches. For Nodet, the agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark and the difficulty of explaining the re-Judaising tendencies of Matthew and John count decisively against the hypothesis. Of course, that the

Two-Source Hypothesis supports liberal theology, the Protestant suspicion that the historical Jesus differed from the Church, and the Protestant desire to meet Jesus in Galilee also counts against the hypothesis. Finding no solution to the Synoptic Problem, Nodet concentrates on the 'final' form of the gospels and argues that John is the best historical source because of its Jewish aura, because of its treatment of the passion, and because it 'rightly' notes the debate that the incarnation caused in Jewish circles.

The historical Jesus, then, is the Jesus of the creed, the Jesus of divine and human origin and of passion and resurrection (chapter four). Beyond the creed, Nodet avers the historical nature of John's baptism of Jesus, which separates Jesus from his family and allows him to enter the scriptural tradition (about Joshua). Jesus's pre-passion life climaxes with the non-paschal, Essene-like supper. In effect, then, Jesus's life, like the Essene rites, recapitulates Joshua's arrival in the Promised Land, which represents entry into the kingdom and provides an exemplary journey from baptism to the Eucharist. The latter makes the historical Jesus a model of and for the (Catholic) Christian. For Nodet, the historical Jesus is divine. The divinity is most evident in the resurrection and in Jesus's reversal of purity laws. With Jesus, it is not the unclean, but the clean/holy that is contagious. This reversal ushers in either chaos or a new creation. For Nodet, the resurrection preaching is that new creation.

If this is true, one wonders why one would bother with history. Nodet senses this question hovering on the edge of his work and concludes with some reflections on the point. First, he makes the standard (biblical theology) claim that history separates Christianity from other religions' mythologies. Second, he avers that a focus on history prevents idolatry by reminding historians of their human limits. Finally, he suggests that history is a quest to understand the gospels. These answers are not overly persuasive. Critics have thoroughly refuted the first. The third justifies, at best, personal vocational choices. The way that Nodet pursues history, however, suggests another important reason for history. His attempt to locate Jesus in ancient Judaism provides a post-Holocaust analogy to what Nodet claims happened in early Christianity. Where early Christians worked to humanise the divine Jesus Christ, Nodet's work humanises the Church's creedal Christ as a first-century Jew (in harmony with the work of others associated with Charlesworth). Of course, it also deifies the object of the Church's confession. Whether that prevents idolatry is, one supposes, a matter of theological confession. In sum, the justifications for history sound more like the work of mythology than history (cf. the critique of Jesus research in Arnal's *Symbolic Jesus*). If Nodet's work arrives at history, it is *Heilsgeschichte*, not *Historie*. That is, Nodet goes a step beyond Martin Kähler. Accordingly, Nodet rightly and honestly says that he finds icons, not anecdotes, in the

Gospels. All of this makes Nodet's work a far better explication of the theological nature of historical criticism than any postmodern critique of the method. It also nicely illustrates the vacuous nature of 'Jesus' (see Arnal again). Bultmann once said that the end of his historical research led him as far back as he could go in the sayings tradition and that he chose to call those teachings 'Jesus's without any way of being certain that the reconstruction was actually the historical Jesus. Nodet's research leads him instead to the creed, which he chooses to call 'Jesus' and, perhaps more importantly, to far more certainty than Bultmann ever claimed.