

Robert Graves and The Nazarene Gospel Restored

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The writing of *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* arose out of the friendship between Robert Graves and Joshua Podro, which began in 1943 in Paignton. Joshua Podro was a successful Jewish businessman; he was the inventor of the newspaper-clipping agency. He was also an accomplished amateur scholar, who used his early Talmudic training to write learned historical works. He also built up a large library, including an extensive section of Judaica which was transferred some years after his death to the Leo Baeck College.

The correspondence between Robert Graves and Joshua Podro shows that their friendship and that of their families was very close and warm. They took part in family outings together. Podro's son Michael, now Professor of the History of Art at the University of Essex, remembers this period vividly.

When the two men first met, Graves was already at work on the first draft of his historical novel *King Jesus*, which was eventually published in 1946. There is a great contrast between the picture of Jesus in this novel and the later conception embodied in *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, as we shall see, and the difference must be attributed to the influence of Joshua Podro. Even at this stage of Graves's work on Jesus, however, the influence of Podro can be discerned, not so much in the portrayal of Jesus himself, as in the depiction of the Pharisees.

Robert Graves indeed, in the postscript to *King Jesus* expressed his "deep gratitude to my friend and neighbour Joshua Podro, who has helped me from the start with critical comment from the Hebrew-Aramaic side of the story." Though Graves had begun his work on the novel with a conception of the Pharisees as a rigid religious establishment, he changed this radically. Passages such as the following show Podro's influence:

Gentile Chrestians (i.e. Christians; Graves used the term "Chrestians" here in accordance with his interpretation of a passage in Suetonius) who quote Jesus as having made apparently damaging criticisms of the Mosaic Law are unaware that, as often as not, he was merely quoting with approval the critical remarks of Rabbi Hillel, the most revered of all Pharisaic doctors; and I would not have you ignorant that in certain remote Syrian villages where Judaic Chrestians and Jews still manage to live amicably side by

side, the Christians are admitted to worship in the synagogues and are reckoned as a subset of the Pharisees.

Here we have the germ of *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*; the perception that the original Jewish followers of Jesus, the Nazarenes, had a doctrine that was compatible with Pharisaic Judaism, and had little in common with the Christology, or Jesus-worship, of the Gentile Christian Church.

The glaring contradiction remaining in *King Jesus* is the gulf between Jesus himself and his followers in the Jerusalem Church. In *King Jesus*, the main preoccupation of Jesus is to combat the Goddess. His death is the revenge of the Goddess, whose reign he has challenged in the name of Jehovah, the patriarchal God. All this has disappeared in *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*. Instead, Jesus is simply an apocalyptic Jew, whose aim is to fulfil the prophecies of the *Old Testament* about the coming of a human liberating Messiah, and thereby release his people from slavery to Rome. His death comes about not in combat with the Goddess, but with the imperial power of Rome. From the personal point of view, the interesting question is: "What happened to Graves between the writing of *King Jesus* and *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, that is, between 1946 and 1954, that made him write, in collaboration with Podro, a book so sympathetic to those father-figures, the Jewish God and the Pharisees—a book that does not even mention that these father-figures are totally incompatible with his own life-ideal of devotion to the Goddess?"

I think that the answer to this question is that Graves became aware, through his friendship with Podro, of the responsibility of Christianity for antisemitism. Podro had written some important works on the history of Christian antisemitism. Graves, coming as he did from an ecclesiastical ancestry, and having an acute historical sense, took upon himself the guilt of the anti-Jewish Christian tradition, and resolved to make amends by providing an alternative to the picture of the Jews as deicides and Christ-killers, and also to the damaging Gospel caricature of the Pharisees, the reforming movement that inspired all later Judaism. The correspondence between Graves and Podro provides ample evidence of this motivation on Graves's part.

From the standpoint of New Testament scholarship, *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* belongs to what is called the Tübingen school founded by F.C. Baur. This school of thought builds on the insight that the early Christian Church was split into two warring factions, the Jerusalem Church (sometimes called the Petrine Church) and the Pauline, or

Gentile, Church. Paul and Peter, on this view, were not friends and colleagues, as they are portrayed in orthodox Christian tradition (and, somewhat equivocally, in the canonical work, the book of Acts), but leaders of two irreconcilable factions. The evidence for this comes from the New Testament itself (though veiled and disguised), especially Galatians, and also from extra-Testamental works and fragments, in particular those related to the Ebionites, the Jewish-Christian movement stemming from the Jerusalem Church. The Jewish-Christians of the Jerusalem Church, on this view, regarded themselves as part of the general Jewish community, not as a new religion. They saw Jesus as a human Messiah of the Jewish type, who never claimed divinity. He had been brought back to life by a miracle of God, and would soon return to resume his prophetic and kingly mission of inaugurating the messianic period of earthly peace and prosperity prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Pauline Church on the other hand, had turned Jesus from a Jewish messiah into a Hellenistic saviour-god, substituting mystical identification with the death of the god for the Jewish belief in the revelation on Mount Sinai. The latter part of the theory was developed in particular by what is called the History of Religions school, of which the leaders were Richard Reizenstein, Wilhelm Bousset and Rudolf Bultmann.

Both the Tübingen theory and the History of Religions theory met with strong opposition and were generally held to be discredited. Part of the opposition to *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* arose from the indignant conviction that Graves and Podro were reverting to dangerous theories that had been safely scotched.

In more recent times, however, both theories have received support again. The formidable scholar S.G.F. Brandon, author of *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* brought much new evidence to bear to show that the split between Paul and Peter was an historical fact. I myself, in *Revolution in Judaea*, argued that Jesus was a Pharisee rebel against Rome, and in *The Mythmaker*, that Paul, not Jesus, was the founder of Christianity as a separate religion. In *Paul and Hellenism*, I argued that Paul's Christology was derived from pagan mystery-religion and Gnosticism. While Brandon gave no acknowledgment to Graves and Podro, I have acknowledged that my work owes much to theirs, as well as to the earlier works of the Tübingen school, and indeed also to Brandon. In addition, the very recent book by Michael Goulder, *A Tale of Two Missions*, announces itself as the revival of the Tübingen theory.

It may be asked to what extent Graves and Podro took into account previous scholarly work on the New Testament. Here we are concerned really with Graves himself, for he took responsibility for the classical side of the enterprise, including the Greek text of the New Testament, while Podro functioned as the Jewish expert, bringing to bear an excellent knowledge of the rabbinic writings, the Mishnah and Tosefta, and the two Talmuds and the Midrashim. Graves, we know, was an excellent Greek scholar, but did he read deeply in the New Testament scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? The answer is "Yes", but Graves himself does not engage in detailed argument with other scholars. *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, contains little of the usual scholarly apparatus, such as footnotes, bibliography or indices, apart from an index of quotations. Original sources (such as Talmud, Early Fathers, apocryphal gospels) are cited very fully, but Graves dismisses other scholars' views very briefly. One can sympathise with his reluctance to become involved in long, boring exchanges, but in fact this has made it easier for scholars to dismiss Graves's work as amateurish.

Graves described his method in his historical studies as "analeptic", by which he meant that he used his intuition. The method might also be described as "pseudepigraphic", in that he sank himself into the character of some ancient person by a sort of self-hypnosis, so that he seemed almost to be remembering the events, rather than describing them. Thus when writing about Claudius, he became Claudius. This pseudepigraphic method has played a part in much great literature, from the book of Daniel to the Zohar. It may very well lead to important discoveries in the study of history. Graves thought that his reconstructions of past events would persuade not by the usual methods of scholarly argument but by the impact of an immediate credibility. The reader would cry out, "Yes, I'm sure that's exactly how it was!"

Of course, the method will succeed only when backed by profound historical knowledge. Even so, the results cannot be verified and established unless painstaking enquiry is applied to them, and they are put into scholarly form. Graves himself was unwilling to engage in such pedantic work, fearing no doubt that it would impair his intuition. His work, therefore, has to be regarded as a mine of insights, stimulating further work. Sometimes the insight turns out to be a dud, but far more frequently it turns out to be a brilliant clue to an enigma.

An example of his intuitive yet rational method is his treatment of the incident of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Graves has

already come to the conclusion that many of the incidents in the Gospels have to be "despiritualised" in order to arrive at their historical meaning. The Pauline Church has depoliticised Jesus, in its editing of the Gospels, in order to make him acceptable to Rome. The Pauline Church wishes to avoid all awareness of Jesus as a claimant to the Jewish throne. So various incidents which actually form part of the ritual of enthronement of a Near Eastern king are given a purely spiritual meaning. The baptism, by which Jesus, like Solomon, was endowed with the title of "son of God", was really part of his enthronement. Even the miracle of the loaves and fishes can be understood as the coronation ritual in which the newly enthroned king feeds his subjects, an action symbolic of his role as general provider. Similarly, Jesus set out on a tour of his new kingdom. Graves backed up these insights by referring to recent anthropological work on Near Eastern coronation rites; he was willing to refer to scholarly work as long as it did not involve him in boring arguments.

The least convincing part of Graves's reconstruction, in my view, is his picture of Jesus engineering his own death, out of his desire to fulfil certain prophecies of Zechariah. Also his idea that Jesus survived his crucifixion, appearing later in Rome, seems to me unnecessary and insufficiently supported. The part of Graves's work that has had the greatest influence on me has been his portrayal of Paul as a kind of inspired charlatan. It is a very negative view, which has provoked great resentment. It is perfectly acceptable to say negative things about Paul, as long as one attributes them to the lingering influence of his Pharisaic training. But Graves, on the contrary, argued that Paul was not a Pharisee at all, but only pretended to be. He based this on solid documentary evidence, i.e. certain fragments of Ebionite writings that survived Paulinist censorship. I have written two books taking off from this insight about Paul (*The Mythmaker* and *Paul and Hellenism*) and none of my other books aroused such anger.

However intuitive his method, Graves worked from a base of thorough knowledge of his sources. This was proved by the case of the libel action which Graves and Podro took out against the *Times Literary Supplement*. A hostile anonymous review was followed by a correspondence in which the reviewer accused Graves of deliberately falsifying the Greek of a New Testament text. Graves was able to show that his textual scholarship was far superior to that of the reviewer, who had failed to take into account some important textual variations. The *TLS* eventually published an apology and the libel action was

never taken to court.

The Nazarene Gospel Restored remains a mine of insights which any New Testament scholar would do well to read and re-read. It is one of those works that have had a seminal influence which too often has not been openly acknowledged out of fear of academic ridicule. Many a scholar has made a career out of just one of the intuitions which Graves threw off so abundantly.

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On His Centenary: To Robert Graves

Lois Severini

O poet of poets, worker, walker, swimmer, laurel-browed, black-cloaked, pockets full of buttons and bibelots, where are you now, heaven or hell?

Or did you do your time in purgatory, a decade of living oblivion before that strong body gave up the ghost.

No. Not for you Heaven and Hell and the Circles between. No crucifix on your coffin. And no reunion with Virgil.

Does the White Goddess fill your cup? Bring you bright oranges, white lemon blossom, the first figs?

Is Laura there? No, not Petrarch's. You know, the other one. And is it arcadian?

Or just ... dust.

The church bell still clangs. Village women still judge, stone faced, from the doorways.

But now they are permed, their granddaughters, bikinied. Franco is dead. Long live our beloved Poet.

Your Muses have dispersed, but worshippers blanket the Cala, swim in your bath, a school of minnows feeding on fame.

*Tour buses ply the mountain roads. 'And there is the Poet's house.'
'And there. There on the top of the hill is the Poet's grave.'*