

PREFACE

One day there was a dispute in the school house [on the following matter]: As to a sword, knife, dagger, spear, hand-saw, and scythe—at what point in making them do they become susceptible to become unclean? It is when the process of manufacturing them has been completed [at which point they are deemed useful and therefore susceptible]. And when is the process of manufacturing them completed?

R. Yohanan said, “When one has tempered them in the crucible.”

R. Simeon b. Laqish said, “When one has furbished them in water.”

[R. Yohanan] said to him, “[Having been a thug before you studied Torah, you would know.] Never con a con-man” [*lit.*: a robber is an expert at robbery].

He said to him, “So what good did you [who drew me to Torah-study] ever do for me? When I was a robber, people called me, ‘my lord’ [*lit.*: rabbi], and now people call me ‘my lord.’”

He said to him, “I’ll tell you what good I’ve done for you, I brought you under the wings of the Presence of God.”

R. Yohanan was offended, and R. Simeon b. Laqish fell ill. . . .

R. Simeon b. Laqish died, and R. Yohanan was much distressed afterward. Rabbis said, “Who will go and restore his spirits? Let R. Eleazar b. Pedat go, because his traditions are well-honed.”

He went and took a seat before him. At every statement that R. Yohanan made, he comments, “There is a Tannaite teaching that sustains your view.”

He said to him, “Are you like the son of Laqisha? When I would state something, the son of Laqisha would raise questions against my position on twenty-four grounds, and I would find twenty-four solutions, and it naturally followed that the tradition was broadened, but you say to me merely, ‘There is a Tannaite teaching that sustains your view.’ Don’t I know that what I say is sound?”

So he went on tearing his clothes and weeping, “Where are you, son of Laqisha, where are you, son of Laqisha,” and he cried until his mind turned from him.

Rabbis asked mercy for him, and he died.

(*Bavli Baba Mesia* 84A/7:1 I.12)

The great Talmudic master, Yohanan, misses his contentious colleague unto death, and dies from an excess of affirmation of his views. In our context, he perished from receiving too many honorary degrees. He had the integrity not to believe the citations—or to crave the reassurance. He did not require them.

Scholarship and politics do not mix. The great scholars are rarely adept politicians. That is no accident. The authentic scholar values criticism. The true path of greatness in learning leads to contention above all else. That is not argument for the sake of contention to be sure, but argument in a pure spirit. It is intellectual confrontation for the sake of purifying truth and extending learning, broadening its scope and deepening its grasp. In that spirit—the spirit of Talmudic learning—we assemble in these pages to contend with principal parts of the scholarly heritage of George W.E. Nickelsburg. We propose to sift through his principal ideas and initiatives and to argue with him where in our view argument is called for.

So we come to reread his more important articles and encounter afresh some of his books, to criticize them and to attend to his response to the criticism. In these pages, he sets the agenda for scholarly debate, he does not dictate the outcome. We share his view, testing it against evidence, argument, alternative readings of matters. That is because, as in the story of Yohanan and Simeon b. Laqish, scholarship finds its nourishment in contention and conflict, not in compromise and conciliation. The great Rabbinic sages declare, “Let reason pierce the mountains,” and their counterparts in every academic culture in the tradition of Western philosophy and science concur.

This set of *Auseinandersetzungen*—no word in English does the job of expressing what we are about—carries forward the life of learning and debate that yields a rich harvest of scholarship. For nothing so sustains tough-minded learning, nothing so transforms information into knowledge, knowledge into truth and meaning, as do criticism and debate. These empower reason. They accord priority to logic and clear-thinking and accurate writing. In so doing, they transform scholarship from an exchange of opinion—accompanied by political negotiation as to what “our crowd” thinks worthy of affirmation—into a rigorous debate concerning reason, argument, and evidence. The particular heritage of intellectual tradition that sustains the Western academy, deriving as it does from the commitment to criticism and rationality characteristic of philosophy and Enlightenment, affords no option but to engage, debate and criticize, test and challenge, correct and revise—renew. These are the activities institutionalized in Mathematics and the Natural Sciences, but no less enduring in the living traditions of the academic Humanities and the Social Sciences.

What this book does—with few models or antecedents to guide the editors in their work—is pay tribute to a scholar through acts of engaged, critical scholarship. These essays do not set forth mere words of praise. They form actions of authentic tribute: empowering Nickelsburg to define the program of debate, not only episodically through scattered articles and books, but cogently and systematically through collected articles, reread as a group, and reviews of some of the more important books he has written. In each case, a specialist rereads an article reproduced in these pages and responds to it, and then Nickelsburg joins issue—a protracted engagement, spanning an entire intellectual career and many of its more important moments.

Nickelsburg's heritage not only deserves the rigors of academic praise in the form of contention, it also sustains them. On any list of scholars who over the past forty years have defined and cultivated the field of Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, Nickelsburg is included, at or near the top. But he is one among many. What makes him particular, and worth of the honor paid to him through criticism, is that he has defined a field for learned cultivation that before him had long lain fallow. Nickelsburg helped to re-found the field of Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphic studies, neglected from the years following the great work of R.H. Charles until its renewal with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. He did not do this alone; others of his age group joined in the work of renewal. Others helped to give the field a new beginning. But none doubts that Nickelsburg stands tall indeed.

Accordingly we come not to praise George W.E. Nickelsburg nor to celebrate him. Some of those in the present book—four in all—did that in the Festschrift organized by his students from the University of Iowa, entitled *For a Later Generation*.¹ Nor do we assemble to bury him. This is a landmark, not a grave stone. We wish him a full one hundred twenty years of hard and productive labor. Rather it is to accord him the respect that he has earned for his intellectual *oeuvre*: to engage with his ideas, to argue with him and once more to invite him to take up the challenges of criticism and reconstruction. In so

¹ Randal A. Argall, Beverly A. Bow, and Rodney A. Werline, eds., *For a Later Generation. The Transformation of Tradition in Israel, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* (Harrisburg, 2000: Trinity Press International).

doing, we situate him at the center of his field and seek a proportionate, balanced view of his position therein.

So this is no *Festschrift*, the personal tribute, through scholarship, of scholarly colleagues and students. It is something else, for which we have no known precedent, indeed, no name in English, only the borrowed German word used above. This we do who devote our lives to critical learning, who do our work to solve problems, ask questions, clarify, explain, rethink, analyze and synthesize learning in fresh ways. All of us, in collaboration with Nickelsburg and in engagement with his ideas, here take our place in the long line of learning that preserves and hands on the traditions that sustain culture. That is why there are not only schools and students, libraries and textbooks to record the known, but facilities for research and scholarly inquiry and lavish opportunities afforded us to test what we think we know, to renew knowledge.

Here we present the natural outcome of the academy: scholars in contention over truth.

The editors thank the contributors to this volume, who, as a group, cooperated to make the work easy. All those who originally undertook to participate in this venture kept their commitment and honored the deadline we set. We believe all of them have given us their best work, their most rigorous criticism—a wonderful tribute to George Nickelsburg. We also thank the editor of this series, a long-time friend and colleague, for including the project under his aegis. We further express appreciation to our editors at Brill for encouraging this novel enterprise and bringing it to fruition. No generation has been better served by its scholarly media than is this generation by Brill and its current editors and professional staff.

Finally, we offer this volume as a model, an alternative to the conventional *Festschrift*, however well intended. So we underscore: this is a new venture in scholarly debate. But we do not subject it to our copyright. Celebrating a career by critical engagement and on-going debate—that is an enterprise free for others to imitate and appropriate.

Let many colleagues now take up the experiment of *Auseinandersetzungen* with noteworthy scholars and their life's work.

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