

David Flusser on the Historical Jesus: An Interview with Roy Blizzard

Transcript

Blizzard: Professor Flusser, of all the many books that you have written, I think my favorite one is the book that you wrote on Jesus, just entitled *Jesus*. From your many years of research into the life and the words of Jesus, what kind of mental image do you have in your mind of Jesus?

Flusser: I think that the Jewish philosopher [Martin] Buber was right when he said that we can hear from the Gospels Jesus' own voice when we know how to hear and he made this movement [Flusser puts his hand to his ear] and he said once to me, "And therefore when we read the Gospels then we can hear his voice and recognize his personality." It is impossible to define Jesus' personality and Jesus' claims completely clearly because he is unique in the whole world. But one thing is clear: that he was both a Jewish teacher and a Jewish leader and that he is seen having a special contact between himself and God and that he thought that he will return as the savior. But there is a connection between his teaching and between his person because he is the center of the message of the Kingdom of Heaven. And so I think that, as Buber said, we can hear his voice and we can do it instinctively, but we can also do it in a far better way when we study the Gospels on the Jewish background, or even more when we see Jesus as being a part of Judaism of his days. It is not only important for the understanding of the words of Jesus and of his message and of the meaning of his person, but it is also important to study such Jewish sources which don't directly explain a special saying of Jesus. It means you have to see Jesus' person and Jesus' teaching in the Judaism of his days and as a part of Judaism. Even sometimes it happens that we can, with the help of Jesus' words, reconstruct Judaism of his days. So there is here a reciprocity.

Blizzard: Now this is interesting: You keep using the term "Judaism," and I know that you are one of the foremost scholars in the world today in the New Testament. You have an extensive background in the Greek text of the New Testament, and yet you use the term "Judaism" and when I think of Judaism I usually think of the Semitic background, and I know that you have also written extensively about the Semitic background of the Gospels. And that leads me to ask the question, as a Jew in the first century just what language did Jesus speak?

Flusser: It is very improbable—we don't speak of his omniscience—that he has spoken Greek. I know that there are also, even today, some scholars that think that he has spoken Greek. That is very improbable. He knew both languages of the Land: both Aramaic and Hebrew. But when he taught, he taught clearly only in Hebrew. For instance, the saying Kingdom of Heaven doesn't exist in Aramaic. All the parables in the rabbinic literature are in Hebrew. And when you have some words in Aramaic in the New Testament they are mostly...they are all as far as I see in Mark. I have my personal doubts if this was not done by Mark himself who was a Jew of the dispersion who wanted to make a kind of *couleur locale* and put the Aramaic—but even there the Aramaic is always translated. And my experience is that it is impossible to translate some of the words of Jesus into Aramaic. The mistake about the Aramaic background of the New Testament arose in the sixteenth century when for the first time the Syriac translation of the New Testament was brought to Antwerp then they decided—and even today there are such men—that this was the original language of Jesus. Only later another scholar four hundred years ago in Leiden in the

Netherlands discovered that the Syriac is not identical with the Aramaic of *Eretz Israel* or Palestine. But meanwhile, when we study not only the rabbinic literature but even the Dead Sea Scrolls, we see that from the time of the Maccabees the language of the Jews was Hebrew. Also the discovery of the so-called Ecclesiasticus or Ben Sira, one of the apocryphal books: it was written in Hebrew. So we see that even if Jesus said something in his time in Aramaic when he taught, it was evidently at the same moment translated into Hebrew, because from this time we have, with the exception of one man who came from Babylon, as far as I see really no sayings no teaching in Aramaic. Only later Aramaic became the important language. It is interesting also to see that Delitzsch, who translated so well the New Testament into Hebrew with the help of a Jewish scholar, that he thought that the language [of Jesus] was Hebrew. His disciple, the Swedish [Lutheran] Gustaf Dalman, in his *Words of Jesus*, thought again that it was Aramaic, but most of his examples are in Hebrew. So I know that it is far more agreeable to translate Jesus words in Aramaic [in the eyes] of modern scholars, than to accept the simple fact that Jesus has spoken Hebrew and that his teaching was in Hebrew. It doesn't mean that when he has gone to buy fish he hasn't spoken also Aramaic. All the Jewish prayers from his time, with one exception (the *Kaddish*), all are in Hebrew, and there are not even Aramaic words as in the Talmud the saying that you have to pray in Hebrew because the angels don't understand Aramaic. And when we find in the...ehhh...today, it is very easy to say that Aramaic was the language of Jesus when you don't know the sources. You get always churchmen, for instance it is written that Matthew has written his Gospel in Hebrew: when you translate the word Hebrew by Aramaic then by the same way you can translate the word English as being Dutch. This no man would do. I don't know why they decided the decision. As I said in the Maccabean time already in the writing of the second century before Christ we read that it is not true that the Jews speak Syriac (it means Aramaic) they speak another language (it means they speak and write in Hebrew) [Flusser refers her to the *Letter of Aristeas* §11]. That there are parts in Aramaic in the Old Testament: all these parts are from the time before the Maccabean revolt and they chose—because before the Aramaic was the natural language of the Persian empire—and later the Hebrew language was resuscitated and only later, some centuries after Jesus, the Aramaic became prevalent which is probably the consequence of the cultural crisis after the destruction of the Temple.

Blizzard: Now I know too that there are a lot of Bible colleges and seminaries in the United States who believe that Jesus actually spoke Greek and the Gospels were written in Greek, the whole New Testament for that matter. How did this Greek theory get started?

Flusser: This Greek theory: it is incomprehensible that it exists until today. I have heard from a Swedish scholar that he thought also that Jesus has spoken Greek. I understand this, because I know that it is not so easy for Gentiles to accept the thorough Jewishness of Jesus. Because then it would mean that they had received a foreign god and not their own ancient pagan gods. So they have to assimilate Jesus to the Greek gods. So they invent the idea that it was less Jewish and the tradition was Greek. It is completely impossible to think in this way especially about the first three Gospels, the so-called Synoptic Gospels. We can easily—more or less easily—discern what is the Hebrew wording behind, and where it was written in Greek. Because our Gospels were written, were composed or translated from Hebrew, and by redactional work were transformed into, for the Greek world. It seems to me to be relevant that when you study the Gospels then you can decide very often where a saying is more original and what was restyled in Greek. And very often you feel far better in the Hebrew form of a saying than in the later rewritten Greek form. And this is important because—it seems to me important—because this makes for

the possibility to reach good results in the Quest for the Historical Jesus. Very often—and I dare to say it—very often you see that only in such saying, such forms of a saying, where it is more Greek there is more tension between Jesus and his community and the Gentiles. It means the restoration [?] beginnings of this [?] development is the same thing. As far as you depart from the Hebrew background of the Gospels as far as you go farther from the Jewish origin of the Gospel and of the Jewishness of Jesus by this I would even say you betray Jesus himself.

[15:10-15:28 could be cut out]

Blizzard: You were talking about the Greek theory: how it was difficult for you to understand that anybody could come up with it in the first place and am I correct in understanding that the Greek theory basically had its origin in the German school that gave us higher biblical criticism about three hundred years ago?

Flusser: I think that today there is a famous German scholar who exaggerates the Greek influence upon ancient Judaism in order to make ancient Judaism more Greek and today they have their support in the archives of Bar Kochba, of the Jewish pseudo-Messiah, where you have letters in Greek and in Aramaic and in Hebrew and so they think they can renew this strange story. But what I wanted to say is that in order to understand the New Testament and especially the Gospels you have to know thoroughly the Greek spoken in the time of Jesus. Some...because even the Greek is not the Classical Greek it is a kind of lower popular Greek. Both the Jews in the Diaspora and the early Christians have written literary works in such a Greek in which no normal author has spoken, no normal pagan author has written. It shows that it was a very popular Greek. I will give you an example: you know the word balistics. Balistics is from the Greek word βάλλω (*ballō*)—it means “to throw.” But in the Hellenistic lower Greek *ballō* means “to put.” Therefore when you translate wrongly the word *ballō* or balistic not as “to put,” then you misunderstand even the Hebrew background. And as to the Hebrew this will be a task of very extensive scholarship to see...you have to learn the development of the Hebrew in the time of Jesus. Because you have the biblical Hebrew, the Hebrew of the prayers, you have more ancient Hebrew, and for instance the main books written in the rabbinic literature are—even if they are Hebrew—are in a later Hebrew than the Hebrew of Jesus. I can personally recognize a saying of a Jewish rabbi if it is from the first or second century or if it is from the fourth or fifth century. So the study of the Hebrew background of the Gospels helps us also for the study of the language of Jesus time. It is even possible that the Hebrew which is behind the Gospels is a mixture or a kind of synthesis between the biblical Hebrew and the high Hebrew of his days. It means sometimes the rabbinic Hebrew helps, sometimes even the Dead Sea Scrolls help, sometimes the biblical Hebrew helps. So we have here a translation and elaboration of Hebrew documents which were written from the time for which we have not very much material, especially because the Dead Sea...so-called, the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, are written in a pseudo-high Hebrew which was not written normally. So we have here to mobilize all our spiritual forces and all all our knowledge even to reconstruct or to see what is behind a word or two words of Jesus. That in the case of Jesus it is important to do such a work we know because Jesus’ words are a hidden treasure which you have, therefore, to bring from the earth.

Blizzard: Amen! Let me just ask you this question. Now this reflects my own personal feeling: would you go so far as to say with me that without a knowledge of Greek and that without a knowledge of Hebrew that it's almost impossible for the individual to understand the words of Jesus as we have them recorded....

Flusser: That is completely clear because, for instance, I remember that once I had only to translate for my Hebrew speaking students a very important saying of Jesus about the Kingdom which is taken by violence as it is very often translated, but in the moment when I translated it I succeeded to see what were the Hebrew...because I had to translate it it hasn't taken the translation more than two or three seconds because I had not time—half a minute, less than this—I had to say it to my students in Hebrew. In the moment when I retranslated it in Hebrew in order that my students who don't speak fluently Greek, it is clear not fluently, but I could speak fluently Hebrew because they were born in the Hebrew language as Jesus was, then I translated the saying about the Kingdom of Heaven and it was only after having translated it I could understand what it means and then, only, the research began. I have to warn those who want to work in this field that retranslation doesn't mean a tentative reconstruction but it means primarily a retranslation that you can only do when you know living Hebrew and when you can be certain between your Hebrew, modern Hebrew, and the Hebrew of the time of Jesus. It doesn't mean that I reconstruct as an archaeologist a building which is in ruins and then I put up the columns again. I simply translated in Hebrew and I can see [whether] this word can be translated in Hebrew or not. For instance a very small thing of the Gospel of St. John where it is written, about I think Nathaniel, that he is truly an Israelite [John 1:47]. Yes? And I saw that this word “truly,” ἀληθῶς (*alēthōs*) cannot be Hebrew. But later on I have seen that in the Hebrew of this time לְאִמִּיתוֹ (*le'amitō*), that means “truly,” “to the truth,” that is used as “truly Alexandrian” and so on so I could discover that the saying, “truly Israel,” about Nathaniel is really Hebrew. And so I have to think it over, not to make monkey business to reconstruct, it means to go through the Greek text in order to see what is behind, not to invent a Hebrew text which would be in Hebrew. I met once a very paradoxical case, a scholar, a French scholar I think, occupied himself only with the Dead Sea Scrolls so he “retranslated” the Gospels made in the supposed style of the Dead Sea Scrolls and then he corrected the text and changed the letters and so on, and it was a Hebrew which is both far more impossible than the impossible Hebrew of the men from Qumran. Then I said to him—and he was not clever enough that he recognized that it was an ironical answer—I said, “You are happy you can make the reconstruction of the Gospel from the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls because you know *only* the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls.” I'm in the happy situation that I know *all* the Hebrew of this time. Though it doesn't mean that you have to reconstruct it, but that you have to retranslate it, to put it in the original place, and this is what I try to do and it means often wrestling with the problem sometimes you can find solutions which you have to correct, as for instance with the “truly Israelite,” and you also to decide you have to know the Greek, but when you find the meaning, when you find the meaning by linguistic analysis, when you find the wording by linguistic analysis, then without your own will the new meaning becomes clear. For instance, you have this saying “poor in spirit.” In Greek it is poor with the dative οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι (*oi ptōchoi tō pnevmati*) or poor hearers [Matt. 5:2]. Now it became clear from the Dead Sea Scrolls that exists as a self-designation of the Essenes. Now I knew the Hebrew and I even know from what verse in Isaiah it was taken (I think chapter 60). But then I had to see what it means, then I have understood that it means “the poor who have the gift of the Holy Spirit.” So I have seen, with the help of the Dead Sea Scrolls, so I have seen that there is no contradiction between Luke, who speaks only about the poor, and and the poor in spirit, which means the poor who have the Holy Spirit. Then only later I began to think about the Greek form. What it means that it is in Greek, poor to spirit? Then I learn the popular Greek and I have seen that such He-

brew constructions are translated with the adjective and the substantive in this form of dative. So for instance, in this case, to make it shorter and to make it more understandable for the poor hearers. It is clear that those who want to make a theology from the Greek *ptōchoi pnevmati* poor in spirit, are wrong. Because this a way how they translated the Hebrew composed...What is name?...*status constructus*...very often even in the Greek Bible. Though you cannot say that they became poor by the spirit and so on, or what you would learn from the Greek wording. You have to know that it was verbally translated, then when you know from the Dead Sea Scrolls what this poor in spirit in the Dead Sea Scrolls means, then you can find that the poor in spirit means not the *proletariat*, but it means those who are poor and have Holy Spirit. This you can do only when you know the Hebrew background. And it is forbidden, as far as I see—especially in the Synoptic Gospels—to make theology from the Greek wording when you cannot recognize the Hebrew wording which is behind it because it is important to know that the sayings of Jesus were translated by equivalence. It means the Hebrew word was always as far it was possible mostly translated by a Greek word and too heavy Greek words were not put there. Therefore when you read for instance the word flesh it is the translation of the Hebrew word בָּשָׂר (*basar*), then through all the translations the original theological meaning of the Hebrew word starts from the beginning until our King James Version or even, sometimes, in the Revised Standard Version. Therefore, I warn as far as it is permitted to me, the readers [not] to use the New Testament in the New English Bible. These men knew Greek but didn't know the original language. So they translated the Greek without knowing what is behind it. These were English classical scholars, and I don't know how they translated the poor in spirit, but I am completely sure that they translated it wrongly because they didn't thought, the did a verbal translation of this...of a Hebrew saying. What would you do if...when you discovered once the King James Version, the Authorized Version, and you drew consequences from the English of the time of James I and you would interpret King James Version according to the writings of Shakespeare? I think that it would completely....

[Here the tape came to an end and had to be replaced. The interview resumes with Flusser restating part of the discussion that happened before the tape ended.]

I want to warn the readers [not] to read some of the new translations of the Bible, for instance the New Testament in the New English Bible, where they started from a knowledge of Greek and they didn't understand the Hebrew background. And so a strange mixture between a modern preacher and an ancient pagan Greek came into existence. For instance, when you see here in this...the beginning of the first beatitude: "How blest are those who know their need of God." What it means, what is written here, are the poor who have the Holy Spirit, who have a contrite heart, and ask God. What it means to have "the need of God"? Where is the spirit? I think it is a kind of holy forgery that we read here.

Blizzard: Would you say that's true of many of the English texts, that rather than being translations, they're more commentaries by someone...?

Flusser: Yes, but commentaries of men who don't know what is there. As for instance, what I already said, when you read a biblical translation of the King James Version, you would comment it from the contemporary play-writers, then you wouldn't understand what it is [means]. This is a language of a translation very often and it is done verbally, then you have to see what is behind it. But the most terrible thing is that when a man reads this then he doesn't know what it is [means]. Then he receives it as the words of God and he feels that he has a need for his pastors

but he doesn't see his need for God. But this happens also...sometimes...once I heard in Germany a passage and I didn't recognize...in mass...in...on Sunday...I didn't recognize what it is. Only after the service I asked what they read now as the text of the Gospels. Then only when they indicated to me what it is then I could see the new translation. This means that they have, these men have the key of the knowledge, but doesn't give to the others to enter into the knowledge.

Blizzard: Let me ask you this Professor: You've written many articles that have dealt with rediscovering the Hebrew words of Jesus. Just how can a knowledge of the Hebrew background of the Gospel text help not only to recover the actual words of Jesus in the New Testament, but also assist us in understanding those words, especially those that relate to what Jesus had to say about himself?

Flusser: That is very clear the tendency of sometimes...the tendency, the trend in modern scholarship is to divide between Jesus and Judaism on one side and on the other side...on the other hand to divide Jesus from Christianity. Jesus is for them only from the moment he is dead. And then you study the background...the Hebrew background of the New Testament—of the Gospels—then it is completely, for instance, impossible not to see in the small thanksgiving psalm of Jesus, “I thank you father...” [Luke 10:21] and so on, when he speaks about his sonship, you cannot eliminate from philological and Hebrew points of view, you cannot eliminate this saying from the sayings of Jesus especially when you know in this case the Dead Sea Scrolls where you have very similar language and a very similar self-awareness. And it is not only the Hebrew background, but also the Hebrew thinking of this time that the...Jesus was not the only man who had a high self-awareness, but this could exist in the Judaism of his time and you could rediscover his leading task in the economy of the world. I want to quote a saying of a modest Jewish sage [Hillel] who lived before Jesus, and said “If I am here, all is here. If I am not here, what is here?” You would find it in the New Testament, then surely this would be denied from Jesus, it would be explained as the exalted Lord after the crucifixion, or the kind of Johannine theology. But the saying was said by a simple Jewish sage who died some years before the incarnation. So even the study of the Hebrew background of the sayings of Jesus, which means also the study of the Hebrew way, the Jewish way of thinking of this time, it forbids to us to destroy the unity of the...between the high self-awareness of Jesus and his teaching. This makes also on the other hand to us impossible not to see how Jesus expressed his moral and ethical message to others through the forms of the rabbinic exegesis and of the rabbinic thought. Sometimes we...I myself am astonished when I discover a new place where, which can for instance comment the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus himself was not only embedded in Judaism but he had also as all great thinkers—and I don't want to compare him with anyone, but humanly spoken when I say it—he had the right to chose from the Jewish thought and Jewish sayings from his own time in order to form his own Gospel of Kingdom of Heaven. Once I have written that I could compose a whole Gospel of the sayings of Jews without there would be any saying of Jesus. So near is Jesus to their sayings, but I also said that I could compose this Gospel of non-Jesus material only because I have the Gospel of Jesus. When you study the thinking of Socrates to whom Jesus very often was compared you have to know the Greek philosophy of his time. But at the same time you have to know from what material Socrates has built his own philosophy. So it is with the self-awareness of Jesus and his moral teaching. This is very important for our work because in our work all the study is not only a mere philological or linguistic play or theological or historical play. It seems

to me, especially for today, that the world is in a great danger. The purified Judaism of Jesus is one of the few hopes...probably the only hope to live in our world.

Blizzard: Very good. Very good. Can we say that Jesus not only gives us a higher ethical standard in his sayings, but that he views himself as having not just an extraordinary mission, but as he uses these terms “Father,” אבי שבשמים (*'avi shebashamayim*), “My Father which is in heaven,” and various other things he says about himself, that he is declaring to the people, “I am the Messiah of God, follow after me”?

Flusser: I think it is so, I would only no use the word “Messiah,” because he didn’t use it. Also in the Jewish prayers the word “Messiah” doesn’t appear. He had some small difficulties, smaller than the New Testament scholars today, to speak openly about his future dignity before he has fulfilled his task. But one thing is sure, that he saw a special...he saw...his task as a special task, namely the proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven and the gathering of those who accept his message. In this he is in the center quoting a saying of the same Hillel, that “who doesn’t collect disperses.” Therefore he has seen himself in the center of the message of the realization of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. He wanted to save Jerusalem from destruction. He has seen himself in a special way as a son of God and, as far as I understand it, he hoped once to be revealed as the savior. And this is clear. You can only when you artificially dissect the Semitic, or Hebrew, background of the Gospel and when you decide completely according to your own pseudo-historic taste...if you dissect it then you can discern between Jesus who was—according to this opinion—a simple...kind of simpleton a postmaster of Capernaum, and between the Lord of the faith. Jesus is the...should be...a cornerstone of the Christian faith, but he is also a stone in the building of Judaism of his time. And it is not a very easy task both for the Jews and for the Gentiles to acknowledge this...to...the Jesus of the Church should be the Jesus the Jew. I never wanted to write about Jesus the Jew because it is a truism. I also don’t like when [I] appear as a Jewish expertise [expert] or such thing because I think that you all can learn if you are from Jewish or non-Jewish origin what I have learned. As a child I didn’t know it, but I have learned it. Therefore if you have a good will, an open heart then you can learn it if are you a Jew or non-Jew. I remember that before many years ago I have seen it in New York that you have not to be Jewish to eat Levi’s bread. And I think that also not to be Jewish to discover the Hebrew and Jewish background of the New Testament.

Blizzard: Don’t you think that in doing that that it takes special devotion a devotion to study that Hebrew is the key, study is the key, but our listeners should probably understand something else that has to do with the whole Jewish background of the subject that is at hand, that in Judaism not only in Jesus’ day but to this day study, and especially the study of Torah, or the word of God, was considered to be one of the highest forms of worship.

Flusser: The highest form of the worship. The only possibility to understand when you learn the Torah for its own purpose. This is what you have to do. And it is therefore not...it is therefore comprehensible that I have written now a small study that will be published about the saying of Jesus “When two or three assemble for my own sake, then I am in the midst of them.” This means that the study is...the study with love. In the study of all these things the Hebrew background, the living Judaism the study of this is a work for the Kingdom...for the realization of the

Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore you have to...the only obstacles are intellectual. If your heart is open and if you see how important is this task, yes, and then you can do it also yourself. The difficulty is you have to know not only the New Testament, you have not only to know Hebrew, and to know the parallels in the rabbinic literature, but you have to know the whole Judaism of antiquity. That means the study of the Hebrew background of Jesus—and also of Paul and the Book of Revelation—means a renewal of the study of ancient Jewish thought.

Blizzard: Professor, it's been most enlightening, most enjoyable. It's been a great honor and I know that our listeners have been blessed, enlightened. Can we leave them with this final word. That the most important thing that they can do for themselves if they really want to understand the Bible, the foundations of their faith, and if they want to understand in particular the words of Jesus is to study.

Flusser: Yes. Yes to study both Judaism and the words of Jesus and it will help to us to bring more peace to the world in the name of the prince of the peace.

Blizzard: Thank you professor, it's been a great pleasure. A great honor.