

GEZA VERMES

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Geza Vermes was a pioneering and prolific scholar who had a decisive impact both on the study of the Dead Sea scrolls and on the study of Jesus, two fields which aroused wide public interest in the second half of the twentieth century, not least through his powerful advocacy. With some justification, he himself viewed his scholarly achievements as a product of his eventful life, which he documented in an autobiography, *Providential Accidents*, which was published in 1998, at the age of 74.



GEZA VERMES

Vermes was born in Mako, a small town in southern Hungary, in 1924.¹ His father, Ernő, was a journalist and poet, seventeen years older than his mother, Terézia, who was a schoolteacher. Both parents came from liberal, middle-class Jewish families who had assimilated into Hungarian society. Vermes was an only child, but the extended family, particularly on his mother's side, stayed close and supportive. He excelled at schoolwork, showing a particular aptitude for learning languages; in school, these were German, French and Latin in addition to Hungarian, and it was only later in life that he encountered Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages central to his scholarship, and English, the language in which he wrote almost all of his books.

Ernő Vermes had applied formally in the early twentieth century to be registered as belonging to no denomination and, although he declared himself Jewish again in 1923 in order to have a synagogue wedding with Geza's mother to conform with the wishes of his bride's grandmother, he had no interest in Judaism or any other religion. In June 1931, he quietly converted to Roman Catholicism, along with his wife and child, for the purely practical reason that this would open up more opportunities for his son. Geza was just under 7 at the time of his baptism. His mother became a devout Catholic, praying daily and frequently attending Mass.

The nature of Vermes' own commitment to Christianity at this time is more difficult to fathom, since for him Catholicism became simply part of his childhood identity. He described the ceremony in which he was ordained as a priest in his 20s as moving and meaningful, but he disliked 'the syrupy taste of nineteenth-century spirituality' and he does not appear to have undergone any soul-searching when he 'imperceptibly grew out of' Christianity in his 40s. He seems to have seen his career within the Church less as a religious vocation than as a means to an education.²

The threats to that education began when he was 14, with a series of measures enacted by the Hungarian government in 1938 and 1939 to restrict Jewish participation in the universities and professions. Since only Jews who had converted before 1919 were identified as Christian, the Vermes family fell within these restrictions. Ernő was deprived of his job as a journalist, and the family survived on a monthly allowance from Terézia's wealthy relations. With the imposition in 1941 of a third series of anti-Jewish laws by which Jewish identity was defined on the basis of race rather than religion, it became clear that Vermes would have no chance of admission to a university when he graduated from the gymnasium in Gyula (where the family now lived) in

¹ We have made extensive use of the account in G. Vermes, *Providential Accidents: an Autobiography* (London, 1998), particularly in discussing Vermes' life and work before his academic career in England, which began in the late 1950s. We would like to thank Margaret Vermes for reading the memoir and offering some valuable insights and information.

² Vermes, *Providential Accidents*, pp. 15, 55, 170.

the summer of 1942. He opted instead for the six-year curriculum in philosophy and theology which would train him as a Catholic priest. In his autobiography, he is hazy about his motivation beyond the urge to continue his studies, noting that he was unaware at the time of great theological issues and that he had never been given a Bible. His rejection by the Jesuits, which he attributed in retrospect to their refusal to accept Jewish converts, may also have owed something to this lack of clear motivation. He was accepted instead to enter the theological college in Szatmár (Satu Mare).

The training in philosophy and apologetics provided (in Latin) in Szatmár between 1942 and 1944 was uninspiring, but seclusion in the seminary enabled Vermes to escape the fate of the vast majority of Hungarian Jews, including his parents, when mass deportations of Jews to the east began in the spring of 1944. For the rest of that year, he was moved from place to place by his superiors in the diocese, protected by Fathers of the Salesian order and later by Dominicans, and staying for some of the time in the senior seminary in Nagyvárád. Eventually he found himself in the Central Seminary in Budapest at the time of its liberation by Russian troops on Christmas Eve 1944.

After a brief return to Gyula in an abortive search for news about his parents, Vermes returned to his theological studies in the Nagyvárád seminary. In his autobiography he traces the origin of his future scholarship to the time he spent helping to restore order to the library of Geza Folmann, the Professor of Scripture in the college, which had been wrecked by soldiers of the Red Army. It was the first time he had seen a Hebrew Bible, and he was filled with ‘an irresistible urge to learn Hebrew’. How much this urge owed to recent traumatic events cannot be known.³

By the end of the academic year in July, Vermes had become clear in his own mind that he was not cut out to be a diocesan priest. After a second, abortive, attempt to join the Dominicans, he obtained permission from the church authorities in Gyula to register as a student in the theological faculty in the University of Budapest and begin the study of Hebrew, only to be recalled to Nagyvárád after a few weeks for a second year of theological training in the seminary. The recall did not work. He remained unsettled and determined to move somewhere new, away from a home which no longer felt like home.

The order of Notre-Dame de Sion had been established in the mid-nineteenth century by Théodore and Alphonse Ratisbonne, Alsatian Jews who had converted to Catholicism. They had founded a congregation of nuns to pray for the conversion of the Jews, and had established a small coterie of priests, the Fathers of Notre-Dame de Sion, to serve as the nuns’ chaplains. By the mid-twentieth century these original aims were largely forgotten and most of the Fathers were devoted to work in parishes or

³Vermes, *Providential Accidents*, p. 43.

schools. For Vermes, the attraction of the Congregation was both their openness to converts from Judaism and the location of their communities abroad, in France, Belgium and Jerusalem. His application to study in the seminary of the Fathers of Sion in Louvain was successful, and, after an exceptionally hazardous journey across Europe without proper documentation, he arrived in the seminary in October 1946. After a year of spiritual training as a novice, he embarked on serious academic study in the Jesuit college in Louvain, taking first dogmatic theology and church history, and finally, from October 1948, Hebrew Bible.

Vermes' main teacher of Old Testament was Gustave Lambert, who had trained in Rome at the Pontifical Biblical Institute and insisted on detailed exposition of biblical texts against the background of the historical reality of the ancient Near East. Lambert was devoted to critical scholarship but inhibited in publishing by the restrictions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which remained very conservative. Under his guidance Vermes chose to write a dissertation for the Licence in Theology on the Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55), with a focus on philological, literary and theological issues in the first song (Isaiah 42:1–4).

The Licence was granted in December 1950, and all seemed set for Vermes to expand the dissertation into a doctoral thesis over the next two years, concurrently with a Licence in Oriental Languages and History from the Institut Orientaliste at Louvain University. These plans were blown off course by the news coming from Jerusalem of the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls.

The first scrolls had been found in Qumran in the spring of 1947, but early reports in the newspapers were confused and it was only when Lambert showed his class a transcription of part of the Isaiah scroll in autumn 1948 that Vermes became hooked on the idea that these ancient manuscripts could revolutionise study of the Bible. With support from Lambert, he wrote his first scholarly article, with the title 'Nouvelles lumières sur la Bible et sur le Judaïsme'. It drew attention to the variants from the traditional Masoretic text of Isaiah to be found in the Qumran scroll and was published in *Cahiers Sioniens*, the journal of the Fathers of Notre-Dame de Sion, in August 1949.⁴ The excitement generated by the scrolls was shared by Lambert, and Vermes was permitted to abandon his proposed doctoral thesis on the Servant Songs in order to write on the historical framework of the Dead Sea scrolls.

The topic was in many ways unsuitable for a doctoral dissertation, not least because the material to be analysed kept increasing with great rapidity, with new Qumran texts released in 1950 and 1951 by both E. L. Sukenik and Millar Burrows. Vermes was undaunted and in September 1950 published a substantial article in

⁴G. Vermes, 'Nouvelles lumières sur la Bible et sur le Judaïsme', *Cahiers Sioniens*, 3 (1949), 224–33.

Cahiers Sioniens on four Thanksgiving Hymns (*Hodayot*).⁵ In hindsight he believed that his arguments in this study, which dated the Hymns to 70–90 CE on literary grounds, were wrong, but the article served a purpose in giving him visibility within the fraternity of scholars working on the scrolls. In the spring of 1951 he cemented his reputation within this community by publishing a paper which criticised some of the arguments put forward by André Dupont-Sommer of the Sorbonne about the identity of the Qumran sectarians. Vermes adopted with enthusiasm Dupont-Sommer's identification of the sect with the Essenes mentioned in Greek and Latin texts but he took issue with Dupont-Sommer's attempts to foist upon the sectarian scrolls ideas, such as the deification of the Teacher of Righteousness, which appeared to make the scrolls more significant for understanding the history of Christianity but could not be justified from any of the texts published up to that time.⁶

Vermes was able to benefit in completing his dissertation from advice and information from many of those most closely engaged in the editing of the scrolls and from the continuing excavation of Qumran by Father Roland de Vaux. By the end of March 1952 the thesis was complete. Taking into account all the published information about the scrolls and a good deal that was not yet in the public domain, the thesis contained a fresh analysis of the Qumran Hymns and the Habakkuk Commentary and presented arguments for placing the formative stage of the Qumran Sect in the mid-second century BCE, near the beginning of Hasmonaean rule in Judaea. Acceptance of the thesis by the Jesuit examiners was delayed by a requirement to add a section on theology, but the delay was brief, since it proved straightforward to add a chapter on doctrine in the scrolls and a critique of Dupont-Sommer. The doctorate was duly awarded on 27 June 1952, and Vermes was allowed by his superiors in the Fathers of Sion to pay an extended visit to Israel and Jordan in the autumn of 1952 to see the site of Qumran and to view first-hand the fragments of scrolls from Cave 1, which were being assembled like jigsaw puzzles in the École Biblique in Jerusalem, before he took up a new post in Paris, in the central establishment of the Fathers, in January 1953.

The main formal role of the Fathers in Paris was to carry out religious services in the chapel of the Sisters of Sion, but this left plenty of time for Vermes to revise the thesis for publication in September. It also left time for participation in the production of *Cahiers Sioniens*, which had been launched by the Paris house of Notre-Dame de Sion in 1947 and, under the editorship of Paul Démann, another Hungarian Jewish convert, had become devoted less to the Fathers' traditional concern to pray for the conversion of the Jews than to tackling the roots of Christian anti-Judaism in the

⁵G. Vermes, 'La secte juive de la Nouvelle Alliance d'après les Hymnes récemment découverts', *Cahiers Sioniens*, 4 (1950), 178–202.

⁶G. Vermes, 'A propos des "Aperçus préliminaires sur les manuscrites de la Mer Morte" de M. A. Dupont-Sommer', *Cahiers Sioniens*, 5 (1951), 58–69.

spirit of the Seelisberg Conference on Anti-Semitism, held in Switzerland in August 1947. The *Cahiers* had provided a convenient vehicle for Vermes' articles on the scrolls while he was a student and he now joined the editorial team. Démann had a crusading zeal in tackling antisemitism which provoked some serious clashes with the Church authorities. Vermes was happy to be associated with Démann's campaign to compel the Catholic Church to acknowledge its religious antisemitism and to tackle the injustices it had caused, but he was very much a junior partner in the project and by 1955 resentful that he was not given a more central role in the management of the journal. He described Démann, who was much older, as an 'elder brother', with 'limitless self-confidence', but Vermes had spent his childhood in a family where the finances of publication of his father's newspaper must have been a constant concern, and his marginalisation clearly rankled.

In intellectual terms, the strongest influence on Vermes in these first Paris years (1953 to 1955) was the third member of the editorial team which produced the *Cahiers*. Renée Bloch, a French convert from Judaism who had studied theology at the Institut Catholique, and Semitic languages and biblical exegesis at the Sorbonne and the École des Hautes Études, had been a friend of Démann since 1948, and she had already been collaborating with him for some years before Vermes arrived in Paris in 1953. Her work on rabbinic Bible interpretation, and especially on the Aramaic Targums, prefigured much of Vermes' own work in this area in the 1960s and 1970s. Vermes was devastated when she died in July 1955 when the El Al flight she was on, from Paris to Tel Aviv, was shot down over Bulgaria.

The death of Renée Bloch came just after Vermes had undergone an operation for appendicitis that left him in need of recuperation, first in the French Alps and then in England. The trip to England was to have momentous consequences. Vermes took up a standing invitation from a visit the previous year to stay with Adam Curle, at the time a professor of education and psychology at Exeter University, his wife Pamela and their two teenage daughters in their house in Devon. Almost immediately after his arrival he and Pam fell in love. After a few days of dilemma Vermes returned to Paris. Pam was constitutionally inclined to openness, verging on bluntness, and Adam was a professional in the resolution of conflict (eventually being appointed the first Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford), so their instinct was to solve the problem of what to do next by meeting and talking things through. Vermes returned to Devon in January 1956, only to collapse with a perforated duodenal ulcer, which necessitated a long convalescence nursed by Pam, in the course of which Adam left to take up a fellowship in South-East Asia, leaving open the possibility that Pam might follow later. She did not; and, after a year of agonising about the impact of his decision on his friends, especially Démann, and on Pam's family, in March 1957 Vermes left Paris and moved to England to live with her in Ottery St Mary.

Leaving the priesthood and the Fathers of Zion does not seem to have been a major consideration during these deliberations. Production of the *Cahiers* was in any case stymied by the breakdown of Démann following the death of Renée Bloch. Vermes' two-year project, begun in autumn 1955, for the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, on the history of Jewish interpretation of Genesis using the recent publication by Yadin and Avigad of part of the Aramaic Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran, was completed. The problem in England was both social disapproval from the neighbours and a shortage of employment. Vermes wrote numerous letters to scholars in England to ask about academic vacancies. It does not seem to have occurred to him to seek employment of any other kind. The desire to pursue an academic life had been fixed early, possibly by the end of secondary school. If he had not found an academic job in the UK by 1957 he would probably have sought one in France or the United States. Once in his youth, an uncle, who owned a large clothing store in Budapest, suggested he should consider becoming a tailor, as that was a profession always in demand. Vermes had no manual skills and he knew it. The avuncular advice, though doubtless kindly meant, may have strengthened his resolve to plough his own furrow.

The success of this letter-writing campaign was due to an intervention by Paul Kahle, a Lutheran biblical scholar, then living in retirement near Oxford. Kahle picked up from his former student Matthew Black, Professor of Bible at St Andrews, that there was an opening for a temporary lectureship in divinity at King's College in Newcastle (renamed from 1963 the University of Newcastle upon Tyne). The post required lectures in Old Testament and biblical history. Vermes was interviewed in July and teaching by September. The teaching was aimed at general arts students and schoolteachers, so the level was not high, and Vermes' concerns about teaching in English proved unfounded.

Writing in English was another matter, but this was more than compensated for by the efforts of Pam, who dedicated herself to the task of editing Vermes' English for the rest of her life. Her sense of good, clear English writing style was impeccable, she was uninhibited in rewriting anything she found clumsy or obscure, and she had little else to do in Newcastle other than support Vermes. With her editorial and secretarial help, he threw himself into research, publishing articles on Jewish Bible exegesis in 1958 in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, *New Testament Studies* and *Vetus Testamentum*, and in the summer of 1959 he completed a volume of collected essays which were to be published by Brill as *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* in 1961.⁷ This was the first book by Vermes on a topic unrelated to the Dead Sea scrolls to attract notice from Israeli scholars, with a lengthy and favourable review by

⁷G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (Leiden, 1961; 2nd edn, 1973).

Joseph Heinemann in *Tarbiz*.⁸ In the summer of 1961 he attended (with Pam) the World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem for what proved to be the first and only time: he was to visit Israel on occasion in later years, but he did not make much of an impact on Israeli scholarship more broadly.

That Vermes was not writing as intensively on the scrolls during his years in Newcastle as he had in Paris can be attributed to the slowdown in publication of new documents by those entrusted with their editing (among whom he was not included), but his profile as a scrolls scholar remained high through the appearance of his translation of André Dupont-Sommer's introductory book on *The Essene Writings from Qumran* (for which most of the work was undertaken by Pam).⁹ Pam's efforts, particularly in rendering poetic passages, were also a major element in the success of the translation of the scrolls commissioned by Penguin in March 1960 and published in 1962 as *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, but the enduring popularity of the volume owed much to its affordability as a mass-market paperback and the presentation of the texts, with a judicious balance of hypothesis (to make sense of obscurities and lacunae) and honest presentation of texts which remain hard to comprehend.

Such prolific publications are evidence that Vermes was too ambitious to remain indefinitely in Newcastle, even though he was promoted to a senior lectureship in 1964 and the university library in Durham provided access to all the resources he needed. He made various efforts to move elsewhere. It was not by chance that he happened to be reading the vacancies column of *The Times* in February 1965 and noticed an advertisement for the Readership in Jewish Studies in Oxford, which had been vacated by Cecil Roth the previous year. The application was sent on 9 March. Two weeks later a letter arrived to inform him that the electoral board for the Readership had decided to offer him the post.

Quite why the post was offered at such speed and without interview is hard to know, although it is clear that the appointment had the strong support of Godfrey Driver, who was a member of the electoral board and a powerful figure in the Faculty of Oriental Studies in Oxford, and who had known Vermes since they met at a congress of Orientalists in Cambridge in 1954. Driver was all too aware of the prickly relationship of Cecil Roth with many of his colleagues, and it may have helped that Vermes had proved able to disagree without rancour with Driver's theories about the Zealot origins of the scrolls at a public lecture given by the latter in Durham the previous year. Whatever the reasons for the choice, the appointment provoked considerable hostility from those who had favoured other candidates, notably David Patterson,

⁸J. Heinemann, 'Review of G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*', *Tarbiz*, 35 (1965–6), 84–94 (in Hebrew).

⁹A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Essene Writings from Qumran*, trans. G. Vermes (Oxford, 1961).

who had been appointed to the Cowley Lectureship in Postbiblical Hebrew in 1956, and Raphael Loewe, a formidable scholar who had been teaching Hebrew at University College London since 1961. Both were better placed than Vermes to take on the role Cecil Roth had adopted—of looking after Jewish students—and some were outraged that a post for which the funding had been raised by the Jewish community in the 1930s (when Cecil Roth was appointed) should now be filled by an ‘ex-priest’. Vermes was evidently upset by this hostility and the references to his previous career in the Church. He stressed in his autobiography the efforts he made, in the years following his appointment to Oxford, to establish in public what he called his ‘Jewish credentials’—although he was, to say the least, ambivalent about being labelled by others as a ‘Jewish historian’, since for him history was objective and should transcend confessionalism.

Vermes’ life in what he described as ‘the wonderland of Oxford’ followed a trajectory more familiar to academics than the complicated history which preceded it. He settled with Pam and various dogs in a house in Boars Hill where Pam could indulge her passion for gardening and the countryside. He threw himself into college life as a Fellow of the newly founded Iffley College, which metamorphosed within a year into Wolfson College under the presidency of Isaiah Berlin.

In 1971 he took over the editorship of the *Journal of Jewish Studies*, which had been left vacant through the tragic suicide of Joseph Weiss of University College London in September 1969. The appointment (initially by Jewish Chronicle Publications, the owners of the *Journal of Jewish Studies*, and then by the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, to which ownership was transferred in 1976) was another source of friction with Raphael Loewe, who had edited the journal along with Weiss from 1966 to 1970 and might reasonably have expected to inherit the editorship. In practice, Vermes proved to be a superb editor, ensuring prompt and efficient publication of the journal for the rest of his life, in later years in conjunction with a co-editor.

Of other academic projects undertaken upon arrival in Oxford, the most ambitious was the wholesale revision and updating of the classic work of Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*. The load was lightened by the recruitment of Fergus Millar as collaborator on all three volumes and by contributions from graduate students and former graduate students, but it still took twenty years, with the second part of the final volume published in 1987.

According to his own account, Vermes’ decision to branch out into research on the historical Jesus was an offshoot of his turn to the New Testament as a source for Jewish history in the revision of Schürer. He had shown no interest in his earlier theological studies in the source criticism characteristic of scholarship on the Gospels or in the exposition of theological doctrine in the Letters of Paul. An influential article

in the mid-1960s on the meaning of the phrase ‘son of man’ in the Gospels was essentially a philological exercise—a highly technical piece, strictly for the *cognoscenti*.¹⁰ It gave little hint of what was to come—a full-blown popular book on *Jesus the Jew* which was to make Vermes a public figure from the moment of its publication in 1973. It is, perhaps, more plausible to attribute this dramatic new turn in his scholarly interests to the very practical effect of a telephone call from a literary agent in January 1968, with the promise of a contract and a substantial advance from the publishers, W. H. Allen, for a book on Jesus.

On the basis of this contract, Vermes set to work with enthusiasm in 1968, presenting some of the material in various American universities in early 1971 during a sabbatical stay at Brown University, where he replaced Jacob Neusner for a semester, only to have the manuscript turned down by W. H. Allen when they received a first draft, on the grounds that the book would not sell. With the help of the journalist Colin Cross, who had interviewed him for the *Observer* and had greater confidence it would find a market, Vermes took it to new agents, who negotiated a contract with the publishers Collins. The title of the book was changed from *Jesus and Christianity*, first to *Jesus and his Jewish Background*, and finally to *Jesus the Jew*.

Jesus the Jew aroused wide interest and was translated into nine languages—Spanish, French, Japanese, Italian, Portuguese, German, Hungarian, Dutch and Polish. It was, on the whole, reviewed sympathetically and respectfully by Jews and Christians alike, though many New Testament experts had reservations about it. It was in tune with the times, and with the increasingly liberal attitude of Christians towards Jews since Pope Paul VI had promulgated *Nostra Aetate* in 1965. And it was this book that, more than any other, embedded in the minds of the educated public, Jews as well as Christians, the idea that Jesus belonged to Judaism as well as to Christianity. Further books and articles by Vermes followed—*Jesus and the World of Judaism* (1983), a revised version of the Riddell Memorial Lectures given at Newcastle in 1981; *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (1993), which attempted to flesh out the teaching of Jesus; *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (2000); *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus* (2003); *Jesus: Nativity, Passion, Resurrection* (2010); and *Christian Beginnings: From Nazareth to Nicaea (AD 30–325)* (2012). But it was *Jesus the Jew* that received the most attention and critical acclaim. This was a pity, because some of the later pieces round out Vermes’ picture of Jesus and quietly tweak his position in response to criticism. That they were increasingly ignored in the scholarly literature was due in no small measure to the way in which they were presented. They became less and less burdened with the technical apparatus of scholarship—the detailed responses to criticism, the footnotes

¹⁰G. Vermes, ‘The use of *bar nash/bar nasha* in Jewish Aramaic’, in M. Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 310–28.

that key the work into current debates that are seen as the hallmark of academic research—and when Vermes shifted ground he didn't always signal it. But there was progression in his thinking on Jesus right to the end, and his portrait of the Galilean Jewish holy man whom Christianity claims as its founder did not receive its finishing touches till *Christian Beginnings*.¹¹

That Vermes was able to spend only little time on the Dead Sea scrolls while he was in post in Oxford (from 1965 to 1991) was not by choice but a result of the glacial speed at which the remaining scrolls were published. As a result, most of his graduate students were set to work on the Aramaic Targumim and other works of biblical exegesis, applying and refining the techniques he himself had begun to employ in Paris in the 1950s. The coherence of his approach to the history of Jewish Bible exegesis was further illuminated by the publication in 1975 of a collection of essays, mostly but not all in this area, under the generic title *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies*.¹²

Retirement from his university post in 1991 coincided with the excitement of finally receiving an invitation from the Israel Antiquities Authority to join the international team of Dead Sea scrolls editors and prepare the official edition of some important fragments, but the life he had carved out for himself with Pam on Boars Hill came to an end with her death from cancer in 1993. In 1995 he remarried, adopting the young son of his new wife Margaret, a family friend. Margaret's training was as a biochemist, but she threw her energy into supporting his work, not least in the management of the *Journal of Jewish Studies*, and it was in no small measure due to her support and care that his retirement was exceptionally productive, with a long string of books on the scrolls and on Jesus, and frequent incursions into the public arena, which he greatly enjoyed.

In his autobiography, *Providential Accidents*, an early product of this retirement (published in 1998), Vermes showed himself well aware that his scholarly achievements could be divided into different areas, but he was less sensitive to the differing qualities of his contributions to the various fields than his readers were likely to be. His work on the scrolls and on Jewish Bible interpretation was pioneering; his scholarship in the revision of Schürer was conscientious and thorough; his studies of the historical Jesus were full of insights, and created a portrait of a Jewish Jesus which is now regarded as a classic of its kind, but which failed to fully persuade many New

¹¹ G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: a Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London, 1973); G. Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London, 1983); G. Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (London, 1993); G. Vermes, *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (London, 2000); G. Vermes, *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus* (London, 2003); G. Vermes, *Jesus: Nativity, Passion, Resurrection* (London, 2010); G. Vermes, *Christian Beginnings: from Nazareth to Nicaea (AD 30–325)* (London, 2012). G. Vermes, *The Real Jesus: Then and Now* (Minneapolis, MN, 2010) contains a collection of popular articles.

¹² G. Vermes, *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden, 1975).

Testament experts. In retrospect, it, and indeed the whole 'Third Quest' for the historical Jesus which it heralded, can be seen as the high point of modernism, before the onslaught of postmodern approaches.

The impact of Vermes' studies on the Dead Sea scrolls had already begun with his doctorate on the Dead Sea Sect, for which he tentatively proposed a Maccabean origin, with Jonathan, the brother of Judah Maccabee, as a plausible candidate for the 'wicked priest' mentioned in the texts. This was a brilliant suggestion, which was widely accepted and became the academic 'orthodoxy'. So widely accepted is the Maccabean hypothesis nowadays that it is hard to remember how novel it was in the early 1950s. This was before Khirbet Qumran had been dug, or carbon-14 dating had been applied to the scrolls. Some were arguing for a later origin for the sect, in the Roman period, and identifying them with the Zealots, or even the Christians. One distinguished American Jewish scholar even claimed they were medieval.

When the doctorate was published in 1952, it contained not only Vermes' historical arguments about the origins of the Dead Sea Sect, but also translations of the main texts published to date.¹³ This was the beginning of Vermes' lifelong association with the translation of the scrolls. The translations in *Discovery* formed the basis of his *Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, published by Penguin in 1962, which offered a version of all the major manuscripts published to date, together with an accessible introduction. Penguin were at first, it seems, uncertain what to do with the manuscript, and consulted F. F. Bruce at Manchester, one of the leading Bible scholars in England at the time, as to the quality of the work. Bruce's advocacy ensured its publication. It proved an enormous publishing success of which Vermes was immensely proud; it went through successive editions and expansions as new scrolls were published and was reissued as *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* in 1997, and again, as a Penguin Classic, in 2004. It became the most widely used of the English versions of the scrolls, with over half a million copies sold. It was the version to which the general educated public turned, and it did much to popularise the Dead Sea discoveries. If one compares it with its competitors it has a clear edge. It tends to be more readable and accessible, with many felicitous turns of phrase. Vermes went for the sense, and was happy in places to paraphrase to get the meaning across.¹⁴

From a scholarly perspective, his translation was clearly based on a close and sensitive reading of the originals. Scrolls experts, with the originals before them, could guess at how he had solved critical textual and philological problems, and had filled in

¹³G. Vermes, *Les manuscrits du désert de Juda* (Tournai, 1953). An English translation was published in New York in 1956 by the same publisher (Desclee), with the title *Discovery in the Judean Desert*.

¹⁴G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Harmondsworth, 1962); G. Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London, 1997).

lacunae, but he seldom formally published his reasons. Some of his students in the late 1960s discussed the possibility of working through the *Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, producing a set of glosses which reconstructed its underlying text and philological reasoning, and then presenting this to him for him to check its accuracy. But nothing came of this idea and, indeed, it is doubtful if he would have been all that bothered to work through it. The fact is that, although he had a sound philological training, he was not particularly interested in philology per se.

Though he had been one of the pioneers of Qumran research, Vermes was not appointed to the original editorial team tasked with producing the official editions in the Discoveries in the Judaean Desert series. This rankled. He had made his home in England, and so was regarded as an 'English' scholar. But he was an incomer, and an outsider. The 'kingmakers' in England at the time were G. R. Driver of Oxford and H. H. Rowley of Manchester, and when they were approached to suggest two British members of the publication team they proposed in turn Preben Wernberg-Møller, John Allegro, John Emerton and John Strugnell, though only Allegro and Strugnell actually served. Allegro's appointment was a disaster. Though he was energetic, and published his allotted texts with commendable speed, the editions were poor and drew forth a savage review from one of the other members of the team, John Strugnell; so savage that Strugnell decided to publish it in Latin. Vermes was clearly more competent than either Allegro or Anderson, but he was on the outside looking in.

The problem was exacerbated by the fact that, after an initial flurry of activity in the 1950s, publication ground almost to a halt. The reasons for this were manifold. The Six-Day War of 1967 had made ownership of the scrolls a sensitive issue for the Israelis, who now had them under their control. The team of editors was too small to handle all the work. The academic interests of some of its members had shifted to other areas of research, and they basically lost interest. Some had personal and health problems. Some exploited the fact that they were sitting on an academic goldmine and used it to attract able doctoral students to whom they subcontracted fragments which had been assigned to them to edit. This resulted in some fine work, such as Carol Newsom's edition of the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (1985: a text originally assigned to Strugnell), but this exploitation of the scrolls was resented by established scholars who were denied access. The last straw for Vermes was when the Israel Antiquities Authority gifted a complete set of the black-and-white photographs of the scrolls to the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, of which Vermes was a governor, but embargoed scholarly access to them. All the unpublished material was housed in a building Vermes frequented, but he was not allowed to see it!

The failure to publish the unpublished fragments blew up into what Vermes, with journalistic flair, dubbed 'the academic scandal of the twentieth century', but finally, in 1991, the scrolls were 'liberated' (to use another of his favourite terms). He and

others could at last officially consult photographs of all the material. The Israel Antiquities Authority appointed Emanuel Tov, the Judah Magnes Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, as the new editor-in-chief, and he set about with energy and diplomacy to reorganise and expand the editorial team. Vermes was brought in and given a ‘plum’ assignment—to edit the Cave 4 fragments of the Community Rule (4QSerekh ha-Yahad). Philip Alexander of Manchester was appointed to work with him. This was a shrewd move. Alexander had been Vermes’ first doctoral student to finish at Oxford, and had remained close to him. He could be relied on to do all the routine textual and philological work needed to bring the work to completion. The collaboration was a happy one. Alexander recalls with amusement how when both of them were in Jerusalem in 1997 for a conference to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Dead Sea scrolls, he ‘kidnapped’ a somewhat reluctant Vermes, put him in a taxi and whisked him across Jerusalem to the Rockefeller Museum where he had arranged for them both to examine the originals of the 4QS manuscripts, to verify readings and complete the physical descriptions. As they walked into the building, which Vermes had not visited since the 1950s, he remarked on how little the lobby area had changed. When they got into the secure room where the manuscripts had been laid out, Vermes was like a ‘bee in a flower-bed’, flitting delightfully from manuscript to manuscript. His erstwhile student had to ‘tick him off’ and sternly exhort him to concentrate on the matter in hand.

The edition of the Cave 4 fragments appeared as *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert XXVI* in 1998.¹⁵ It was a sign of how relaxed and respectful the relationship was between the two editors that Vermes was happy that his collaborator should publicly disagree with him on the fundamental question of the redaction history of the Community Rule. Vermes took the view that the Herodian copies from Cave 4 actually reflected an earlier phase of the Community’s history than those in the late Hasmonean copy from Cave 1. This view was actually widely adopted, and argued for at length by the Finnish scholar Sarianna Metso. Alexander, on the other hand, argued that palaeographic dating of the manuscripts, given that they were dealing with versions of the Community’s rulebook, was likely to reflect the current state of the Community, and so the state of play reflected in the Hasmonean copy is likely to be earlier than that reflected in the Herodian copies. A key difference between the versions was the presence in 1QS of numerous references to the importance in the Community hierarchy of ‘the Sons of Zadok’, and their conspicuous absence from 4QS. Vermes argued that the ‘Sons of Zadok’ took over the Community in the Herodian period, whereas Alexander argued that they were there from the beginning but had died out by Herodian times.

¹⁵P. S. Alexander and G. Vermes, *Qumran Cave 4: XIX, Serekh ha-Yahad and Two Related Texts* (Oxford, 1998).

Both views are presented side by side in the introduction to the *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* edition.

Vermes reported with some glee and approval how Roland de Vaux in 1952 publicly confessed ‘Je me suis trompé ...’ about the dating of the Qumran site in light of new archaeological finds, but he himself does not seem to have changed his own mind about any of his early hypotheses despite the mass of new material published in the sixty years during which he worked on the scrolls. As other theories came and went, he tended to be more or less dismissive, secure in the knowledge that his own theories now had widespread support among the growing body of scrolls specialists, who tended to read the scrolls in light of each other, as if they constituted a coherent library rather than disparate texts hidden in caves for safekeeping.

Though Vermes deeply resented his exclusion from the editorial team officially tasked to edit the Dead Sea scrolls it actually did him something of a favour, in that it helped him to avoid the trap of becoming a narrow scrolls specialist. He was propelled into other areas of early Jewish literature and thought, particularly early Jewish Bible interpretation. His interest in Midrash had already been piqued in Paris by the work of Renée Bloch, and he had plans to collaborate with her before her untimely death, but it was not until the late 1950s that he began to make a significant contribution to the field through a number of papers which formed the basis of *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*. Two aspects of the field caught his interest—the early Aramaic versions of the Bible known as Targums, and a collection of retellings of portions of the Bible for which he promoted the catchy title ‘Rewritten Bible’. This included texts such as the Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran, Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, the Book of Jubilees, and the long biblical sections of Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews*.

Christian scholarly interest in the Targums goes back to the sixteenth century, but the modern phase of research began with the publication in the 1930s by Paul Kahle of fragments from the Cairo Genizah of the so-called Palestinian Targum. The subject got a further boost in 1956 when the Spanish biblical scholar Alexandre Díez Macho announced that he had found a complete text of the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch in the Vatican Library, miscatalogued as an entirely different Targum—the already well-known Targum Onqelos. Díez Macho produced a sumptuous edition of the manuscript (known as Codex Neofiti 1) and, with the help of a circle of largely Spanish doctoral students, explored every aspect of its text, language and history. Vermes threw himself with a will into this burgeoning field and produced his own crop of doctoral students on Targum.

He was typically cautious on the matter of dating but tended to go with the drift of the research at the time, which generally argued for the antiquity of the Palestinian Targum, even over against Onqelos. Indicative of his approach was his article

‘Haggadah in the Onkelos Targum’, in which he showed that Targum Onqelos was not such a literal Targum as was generally supposed but contained many allusive *aggadot*—compressed narrative expansions of the biblical text spelled out more fully in the Palestinian Targums or elsewhere in early Jewish Bible commentary.¹⁶ The implication was clear: Targum Onqelos had been abbreviated from a fuller Targum, such as the Palestinian Targum, to bring it into closer alignment with the Hebrew text. The argument is characteristically subtle, and the phenomenon to which he drew attention demands an explanation, but he did not really address the problem that Onqelos is in an earlier form of Aramaic than the expansive Palestinian Targums, and so it is hard to see how the latter, as we have them, could be the direct ancestor of the former.

Vermes’ approach to the Rewritten Bible texts focused on a motif, which could be a biblical figure (such as Abraham), a specific biblical story (such as the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22), or a given biblical verse or concept. The method was to trace the motif through all the relevant literature, starting with its reinterpretation within the Bible itself (so-called ‘inner biblical exegesis’), through Second Temple literature, New Testament, and classic rabbinic Midrash into medieval Jewish texts, and try and establish how the tradition had evolved in response to internal pressures (such as the move towards greater clarification) or external stimuli (such as polemics against rival interpretations or historical events). The fundamental aim was to demonstrate that it was possible to write a history of Aggadah, just as much as a history of Halakhah. The history was in part established by the internal logic of the development, where one might be able to argue that a given state of the tradition most likely pre-dated or post-dated another state of it on developmental grounds. Absolute dates could be supplied with reference, where possible, to the dates of the documents in which the particular form of the tradition was found, or to the external events which it seemed to reflect. The approach was not fundamentally new. It shared key elements with redaction- and tradition-historical criticism, which were well-established tools in the study both of the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels, and it was compatible with folklore approaches to early Jewish narratives (first developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), and with the more recently fashionable reception history of the Bible.

But it had some weaknesses, of which Vermes himself became increasingly aware. The traditions strung together into the history were often decontextualised, that is to say they were lifted out of the documentary contexts in which they are now found and interpreted in relation to each other, with little attention being paid to the meaning of a given tradition in its primary literary setting or to the literary integrity of its sources. This issue became critical through the work of Jacob Neusner. In the heyday of their

¹⁶G. Vermes, ‘Haggadah in the Onkelos Targum’, *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 8 (1963), 159–69.

friendship in the 1970s and 1980s Neusner rather deferred to Vermes on the matter of Midrash and Targum. Neusner was concerned with Halakhic sources, but increasingly he began to turn his attention to the Midrashim and apply to them the same sort of structural analysis he had applied to Mishnah and Tosefta. He argued that far from being loose anthologies of discrete traditions, which could be quarried in the way that Vermes had done, they were more tightly structured works with an overarching argument, and this demanded at least a refinement of Vermes' approach.

Another problem was a tendency to pre-date traditions. One of the most celebrated of Vermes' studies of Jewish Bible interpretation was his history of the early Jewish reception of the account of the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22—the Aqedah.¹⁷ This story had deep significance for Judaism, and Vermes argued that it had deep significance for early Christianity as well. He was convinced that it was more important for Christian understanding of the work of Christ than the Suffering Servant Songs in Isaiah. The trouble was that some of the crucial elements of the tradition on which he relied to make the case for the Aqedah's influence on Christology were attested only in later Jewish sources, and the question was raised as to whether *they* might have been influenced by Christology, and not the other way round. Could Jewish appropriation of Christology be a ploy by Jews to build up Isaac as a redeemer of Israel, in opposition to Christ? Some scholars even denied that there was a pre-Christian theology of the Aqedah. But that was a step too far, as Vermes pointed out, citing a Pseudo-Jubilees fragment from Qumran (4Q225) which showed a development of the biblical story anticipating later tradition. It also ignored the fact that some sort of sacramental theology seems to be alluded to already in Genesis 22. The debate illustrated how entangled Jewish and Christian Bible interpretation were down into late antiquity and beyond—a complexity that Vermes had not fully taken into account.

Scripture and Tradition was hugely influential, particularly among New Testament scholars. In the 1960s and 1970s it became the first port of call for many students of the New Testament newly awakened to the importance of the Jewish matrix of the New Testament interpretation of the Old. What it showed them was that there was a method and a rationale behind early Jewish Bible exegesis. It was not arbitrary and fanciful. It was rule-bound and the rules could be worked out. Vermes' essays became models for numerous other studies of biblical motifs, which proliferated from the 1960s onwards, and which did much to open up the world of early Jewish Midrash to scholarship. They heralded the emergence of Reception History as a viable method in the study of the Bible, and even had an impact on literary criticism, as literary critics of the stature of Frank Kermode and Harold Bloom began to see 'Jewish Midrash' as a paradigm for a certain type of dynamic and creative reading of a 'canonic' text. But

¹⁷ Vermes, 'Redemption and Genesis xxii', in his *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, pp. 193–227.

the approach had its limitations, as Vermes himself became increasingly aware. Already in 1961, George Vajda, whose seminars Vermes had briefly attended during his time in Paris, had noted with characteristic acuity: 'Without doubt [Vermes'] method is fertile, although the details of the results are not always certain.'¹⁸

Vermes' confidence in his treatment of writings in Hebrew and Aramaic was bolstered both by the lack of competing rabbinic scholars in Oxford and by the support of Sebastian Brock, with whom he worked closely from Brock's arrival in Oxford in the early 1970s. He learned much from having to teach Mishnah to a succession of undergraduates, though for a time after he arrived David Patterson, whose expertise lay in modern Hebrew literature, taught Bere'shit Rabbah, as well as Rashi—possibly a hangover from the time of Cecil Roth. Vermes learned much also from Jacob Neusner, who pioneered, during the 1970s and 1980s, a distinctive, critical approach to rabbinic texts very different from traditional Yeshivah learning. He was acutely aware that he had come quite late in life to the study of Greek and was somewhat intimidated by the strength of Classical Studies at Oxford, preferring to hand over the teaching of Greek Jewish texts such as Philo and Josephus to graduate students who had been trained in Classics, although he did not hesitate to make good use of these texts in his own studies of Bible interpretation.

The revision of Schürer's *History* was a very different project which required an immense input of precise scholarship in order to produce an objective work to serve colleagues and students for generations to come. Schürer's *History* had gone through various editions in German between 1874 and 1909, and an English translation of the second German edition was still being sold and used up to the late 1930s. The clarity of Schürer's presentation of the political, religious and literary history of the Jews, and his comprehensive coverage of the evidence, remained unmatched in the twentieth century, and the publishers of the English edition, T. & T. Clark of Edinburgh, persuaded Matthew Black at St Andrews to take on the task of updating it. Black began work in 1964 but by 1965 realised he needed help and asked Vermes to join him. Vermes agreed, provided that Fergus Millar be co-opted to cover the ancient history. The fraught process by which Vermes and Millar, having undergone all the effort to produce the first volume (with the assistance of Pam as literary editor), persuaded the publishers that their names alone should appear as editors, and the return of Matthew Black as a rather ineffectual co-editor for Volume 2, only to be removed for Volume 3, is told in detail in *Providential Accidents*. Bringing in Martin Goodman, who had

¹⁸ In *Providential Accidents*, p. 144, Vermes cited these comments (from a review of *Scripture and Tradition* published in the *Revue des Études Juives*), stating that 'above all I treasured the praises mingled with criticism' of 'my revered master from Paris'.

been a student of both Vermes and Millar, as co-editor to revise the sections on Jewish literature in Greek in the third volume was more straightforward.

At Vermes' instigation, the updating of Schürer's text, which had originally been imagined as the production of a separate supplementary volume, took instead the form of a revision of Schürer's original text and extensive notes without any indication for the reader what was original and what was new.¹⁹ All out-of-date material was excised and a vast amount of new material, comprising more than fifty years of discovery, was added at appropriate places. The process required an odd mixture of arrogance and humility, since the editors needed to write as if they had the authority of Schürer but the extent of their own original contributions was largely disguised. In practice, the intention to keep Schürer's original structure, which had proved so beneficial to students for so long, proved hard to maintain throughout the three volumes, and Volume 3, in particular, underwent some considerable adjustment, not least to accommodate the extensive new evidence of the Dead Sea scrolls. Volume 2, which covered Jewish religion, was the least successful: Schürer's text was altered to eliminate some of the more egregious anti-Jewish sentiments of the original, but too much of the structure continued to reflect Schürer's interest in Judaism as background to the New Testament, and the sections on the Pharisees were composed at a time when Vermes was much under the influence of voluminous works on the Pharisees and the Mishnah published by Jacob Neusner in the 1970s.

Characteristic of the revised Schürer is a frequent admission, after the evidence on a particular point has been presented, that the result is inconclusive. Vermes' books and articles on Jesus, by contrast, put forward a distinctive set of conclusions with vigour, clarity and no apparent inhibitions. *Jesus the Jew* was widely read and influential. It caught and in part inspired a new direction in Jesus research which began to emerge in the late 1970s—a turn away from earlier scepticism towards the possibility of recovering anything historically certain about Jesus of Nazareth from the Jesus Christ of faith, the Jesus presented by the Gospels and the early Church. Vermes was convinced it could be done, and set out to prove it. He became, in the words of James Dunn, the 'John the Baptist' of the so-called 'Third Quest' for the historical Jesus. The final title of the book was inspired because it encapsulated so much of its argument.²⁰

Mainstream Christianity had never denied that Jesus was Jewish by descent and heritage, and Christian scholars, save on the lunatic fringe of the Aryan Jesus

¹⁹E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.—A.D. 135)*, a new English version revised and edited by G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black and M. Goodman, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1973–87).

²⁰See n. 11.

movement, had followed suit. At least since John Lightfoot in the seventeenth century they had used Talmud and Midrash profitably to illuminate the Gospels. There had been Jewish scholars earlier than Vermes, such as Claude Montefiore and Joseph Klausner, who had presented a Jewish Jesus. Where Vermes differed was in the controlling power he gave the 'Jewish background' in recovering the Jesus of history. Christian scholarship, while acknowledging that Jesus was born and raised in late Second Temple period Palestinian Judaism, tended, explicitly or implicitly, to stress how he transformed and transcended it. Jesus was contextualised in Judaism in order, in the end, to set him over against Judaism. There was an underlying supersessionist thrust to the analysis. For Vermes, however, the closer the Jesus of the Gospels could be brought to the Judaism of his time and his place the closer we would be to the Jesus of history. First-century Palestinian, and specifically Galilean, Judaism, was to be the yardstick of authenticity in the Gospels. Where prevailing New Testament scholarship started with the text of the Gospels to form its agenda of questions and then made forays into the Jewish hinterland to find or not find possible answers, Vermes wanted first to command the hinterland and then move inwards to the Gospels and consider the questions which that move raised—a centripetal as opposed to a centrifugal strategy which, he believed, significantly changed the terms of the debate. This idea lies behind the subtitle of *Jesus the Jew—A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*. The alternative, centrifugal approach inevitably resulted in smuggling in modern theological concerns which misdirected the quest.

A neat example of this approach in action was Vermes' very first substantial contribution to Jesus research—the essay on the expression 'son of man' in the Gospels. First given as a paper to an Oxford seminar in 1965, it was published in a reworked version as an appendix to Matthew Black's *Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* two years later.²¹ In the Aramaic of Jesus, Vermes argued, the term *bar nash/bar nasha* simply meant a human being, but in certain circumstances could be used as a circumlocution for the first person pronoun 'I': rather than refer to himself directly as 'I' a speaker could, for various reasons, choose to refer to himself obliquely as 'the son of man'. Vermes argued there were cases where this circumlocutory idiom was still clear in Jesus' sayings in the Gospels, whereas in other cases 'son of man', under the influence of Daniel 7, seems to be used as a title for a messianic figure who would bring redemption at the end of days. He reasonably argued that the sayings where the Aramaic idiom is still preserved have a higher chance of being authentic than the others. The latter are most obviously explained as having arisen in a Greek-speaking environment where the Aramaic idiom was not understood.

²¹ Vermes, 'The use of *bar nash/bar nasha* in Jewish Aramaic'.

Vermes argued that Jesus belonged to what he called ‘charismatic Judaism’—a form of late Second Temple period Judaism attested particularly in Galilee. The star example of this movement was Hanina ben Dosa—a first-century Galilean holy man, who, like Jesus, performed miracles of healing; who was seen as having a specially intimate relationship with God, expressed by being referred to as a ‘son of God’; and who lived a life of simple piety, which was little constrained by the minutiae of the law. Vermes’ portrait of Hanina was masterly. He squeezed out of the evidence every parallel with Jesus that he could, and there were many. But there was a problem which some reviewers quickly saw. It is that we only know of Hanina from much later rabbinic tradition: the earliest references to him are in the Mishnah, some 170 years after the time of Jesus. How far can we rely on such material to reconstruct a Galilean charismatic movement in the first half of the first century of the current era? And it is clear, as several rabbinic experts pointed out, that the picture of Hanina in rabbinic literature develops and complicates over time, some of the richest and, for Vermes’ purposes, the most pertinent traditions being found in the Babylonian Talmud. In *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (2000) he has clearly felt the force of this argument and shies away from taking the Hanina traditions as straightforwardly historical. Rather, he tends to treat them as ‘typological’—Jesus is of the same type of holy man as Hanina in the Talmud, or, indeed, Elijah as depicted in the Bible—while leaving somewhat hanging in the air how deeply such a type was rooted in history. But this begs an obvious question: what if the rabbinic Hanina is being assimilated to the Jesus of the Gospels? We would then have a re-run of the Aqedah problem. This possibility is much more thinkable today than it was even in the late 1990s. The influence of Christianity on the development of rabbinic Judaism is now widely accepted by experts in the field. The richness of the Babylonian Jewish traditions about Hanina is particularly tantalising, given the claim by some scholars that Babylonian Judaism had a particular interest in Jesus. The assimilation of Hanina to Jesus could have served a polemical purpose. Jews were, in effect, saying: ‘There is nothing distinctive about Jesus: we have holy men just like him, who had a specially intimate relationship with God as father, and because of that relationship were able to perform equally impressive miracles of healing.’ And so the intriguing possibility emerges that the essential argument of *Jesus the Jew* was anticipated in Babylonia some fifteen hundred years ago—but for polemical ends. This is all highly speculative, but the basic point remains that the positivist-historical approach to the Talmudic sources displayed in *Jesus the Jew* was too simplistic, and it seems from *Changing Faces* that Vermes recognised this.

A persistent drumbeat in the criticism of Vermes’ work on Jesus was his inattention to ‘methodology’. It is certainly true that temperamentally he was not drawn to long, abstract philosophical discussions of method. He was known on occasion to refer

dismissively to ‘what our transatlantic cousins call “methodology”’.²² His academic formation should also be borne in mind. He was fundamentally shaped by the French tradition of scholarship, modulated by British pragmatism. Methodology is, to put it rather simplistically, an offshoot of the German nineteenth-century *wissenschaftlich* approach to the humanities, which gained a footing first in the United States before being embraced in Britain. It was probably not till the 1990s that a methodological chapter became de rigueur in a British doctorate. One got on with the job and let the results speak for themselves. But it would be a mistake to see Vermes as having no methodology or as being methodologically naïve. On one occasion after a lecture in Groningen, he was pressed by an earnest German doctoral student to define his methodology. An exchange followed in which Vermes signally failed to state a methodology in the abstract. Finally he said with a hint of exasperation, ‘Look, I’ve baked you a cake. If you like it, well and good, but if you don’t, I’m not sure there is much I can do about it!’ The comment did not go down well in the learned continental audience, but it expressed, provocatively, a fundamental point about his approach. He deeply trusted his intuitions. He wrote in his autobiography that ‘I ought to declare that throughout my life my intuitions have almost always been correct’, and much of his depiction of Jesus comes across as intuitive, albeit a deeply informed intuition.²³

Much of Vermes’ own account of his scholarship revolves around people he met rather than the books he read. He liked to think of himself as part of a network of scholars and he expended considerable effort in the establishment, first (in 1975), of the British Association for Jewish Studies and, second (in 1981), of the European Association for Jewish Studies (although he generally shunned huge conferences such as the World Congress of Jewish Studies and the meetings of the Society for Biblical Literature). On the one hand, he was immensely loyal to his friends and his former research students, who were treated essentially as honorary children—he liked the notion that he was founding a dynasty. On the other, he could be prickly when criticised and tended to take academic disagreements personally, so that his autobiography contains quite a few sideswipes at those who had crossed him, without much concern for tact. Underlying all these academic relationships was his own self-perception as an intellectual warrior in the vanguard of a campaign to establish the truth about the scrolls and about Jesus.

From the early 1970s, Vermes insisted that he wrote as a Jew. When, as a small child before his conversion to Christianity, he had been taken to synagogue a few

²²In *Providential Accidents*, p. 219, Vermes referred to ‘dissenting voices in the confraternity of transatlantic New Testament scholars’ and responded robustly to criticism (characterised as ‘pompous (not to say asinine)’ by referring to his article ‘Jewish literature and New Testament exegesis: reflections on methodology’, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 33 (1982), 361–76.

²³Vermes, *Providential Accidents*, p. 72.

times by members of his mother's family it had meant nothing to him, and when, as a theology student in Szatmár, he saw the Satmar Hasidim, who constituted about a fifth of the population of the city, he found them fascinating but alien. But both he and Pam felt a need for religion of some kind and they resorted to what he described as 'personal, internal prayer and spirituality without accompanying social manifestations ... Someone called it prayer in the upper room.' It was a kind of Pietism. He was not inclined to embrace Judaism in its conventional form, since his religion had become that of the 'still small voice' of an existential God. In practical terms, this involved becoming a member of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London, but not in order to attend services. It did not go unnoticed that the Jesus who emerged from his studies shared notable characteristics with Vermes himself, most notably in the rejection of organised religious hierarchy in favour of a direct personal piety. This was not just a result of taking seriously the Jewishness of Jesus, since the prodigiously learned David Flusser, who had been writing in Hebrew about Jesus as a Jew since the 1950s, was able to classify Jesus as a Pharisee. Vermes felt a deep affinity to Jesus as he understood him and saw the distortion of his person and message perpetrated by the Church as a grave historical injustice which needed to be put right.

Vermes had a clear sense of his place in history. As his friend Fergus Millar remarked, *Providential Accidents* is not without a certain sense of self-satisfaction, even in the title. Vermes' public persona as a sage was helped by his impressive appearance in later years—tall, with grizzled beard and a distinctive foreign lilt to his faultless English. In lectures and seminars his delivery was very slow, with long pauses for deliberation. He revealed in his autobiography that a similar technique had enable him to pass a maths exam as a child when he had learned the answer to the start of the problem but not the end. His face was very expressive, sometimes unintentionally. A disconcerted student who asked what he had said to cause Vermes to grimace was reassured by him that this was just what he looked like when he was thinking. As a result he came over well on television and participated in a number of programmes on the scrolls and on Jesus, although he learned, somewhat ruefully, to be cautious about the capacity of film producers to edit his contributions to make him look sinister: one picture of him looking out through the barred windows of the Jacobean manor house of the Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Yarnton as Emanuel Tov, just appointed as editor-in-chief of the Dead Sea scrolls, arrived in a limousine provided by the BBC, contrived to make them both look like the main perpetrators of the 'conspiracy' to prevent access to the scrolls, which they were in fact working hard to bring to an end.

Vermes much enjoyed the recognition brought by his role as a public figure. His interview on *Desert Island Discs* in June 2000 was a matter of particular pride. The one disc he opted to take to his desert island was Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, and his

deeply felt comments on the recitative ‘Now from the sixth hour’ led to a cameo appearance some months later on *Songs of Praise*. His opening choice of disc, ‘It ain’t necessarily so’ from Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, was used to introduce him at the 2011 Budapest conference on ‘Rewritten Bible after Fifty Years’, at which he was the key-note speaker. He took delight in positive reviews of his books—a well-attended talk in Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham in the late 1980s, advertised as Vermes on ‘Jesus the Jew’, turned out to be largely an analysis of reactions to his book *Jesus the Jew* in the general press as well as in scholarly journals. Popular acclaim encouraged the production of more books which could be guaranteed a reading public because of his reputation. He enjoyed the fact that the format of the series of studies on the nativity, passion and resurrection of Jesus, in which an essentially historical commentary was appended to large sections of the New Testament, ensured not only that much of each book was already written as soon as he had selected the passages on which he wished to comment, but that he was able to show his colleagues the proposed cover of one of the books before he had actually written a word.

In part, the prolific output of his later years, with ten books published between his eightieth birthday in 2004 and his death nine years later, may be traced back to the commercial journalistic interests he inherited from his father, who had written volumes of local history in Hungary in the hope that local notables would buy copies to see their names in print. He himself recalled with some amusement that as a 12-year-old he used to listen to scratchy broadcasts of the Berlin Olympics of 1936 and then write up a short sports column for his father’s newspaper. It was the first time he had appeared in print! He was certainly much more aware than many academics that the fruits of his typewriter had monetary value. He saw payment as a mark of respect for his profession as a writer. Once he was told that a publisher could produce a translation of one of his works only if he himself could find a subsidy to help defray the costs; Vermes was outraged and withdrew from the contract. The knowledge that there would be a market for anything he wrote on early Christianity must have been the primary impulse behind the composition of *Who’s Who in the Age of Jesus* (2005) and *The True Herod* (published posthumously in 2014), although the book on *Christian Beginnings* (2013) had rather more intellectual heft as a statement of the implications of identifying Jesus as a Jew for the development of Christian ideas in quite different directions down to the fourth century and the Council of Nicaea.

But much of this productivity can also be ascribed to the workaholic instincts to which Vermes freely admitted. Every day there was always a book to complete or an article to write or the journal to edit. In his initial entry in *Who’s Who*, he gave his hobby as correcting proofs. Colleagues would find that he tended to have a clear idea of deadlines as a way to keep projects moving. Fergus Millar appended a cheerful note to the publication of his inaugural lecture as Camden Professor in Oxford in the

Journal of Jewish Studies in 1987 that he had not intended publication but over the previous twenty years he had ‘got into the habit of following Geza Vermes’ suggestions; and ... it seems too late to stop now’.²⁴

All this work elicited honours of which Vermes was justifiably proud. Election to the Academy in 1985 was followed by a personal chair and a DLitt in 1989. Honorary doctorates from Edinburgh, Durham and Sheffield followed, as also from the Central European University in Budapest. The United States House of Representatives honoured him with a vote of congratulation ‘for inspiring and educating the world’. Vermes’ sense of wonder that he had been able to consort with the great and the good, from English peers to Jordanian royalty, shines through his autobiography. From Mako to Boars Hill, and finally to a quiet rural English churchyard at Sunningwell, close to his beloved home at Westwood Cottage, was a remarkable journey. Vermes was one of those immigrants to England who have repaid its welcome by enriching its intellectual and cultural life. He was justly proud of his achievements.

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²⁴F. Millar, ‘Empire, community and culture in the Roman Near East: Greeks, Syrians, Jews and Arabs’, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 38 (1987), 143, note 1.