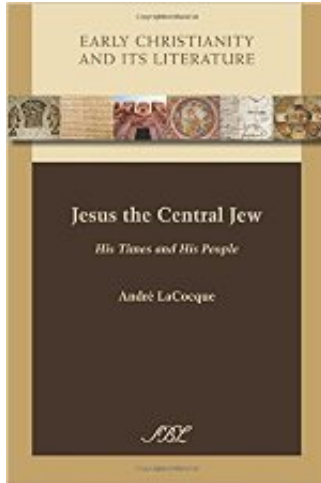




Jesus the Central Jew



Book review

David Fox Sandmel | 31.12.2017

André LaCocque:

Jesus the Central Jew: His Times and His People.

Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015

paperback xii + 337 pp. \$42.95

In this thoroughly researched and carefully argued book, LaCocque sets out to demonstrate that Jesus was “totally and unquestionably” a Jew (p. 8). In this regard, he uses the term “central” not in contrast to John Meier’s use of the term “marginal” but rather to complement it. For Meier, Jesus was marginal as a Gali-lean, and, more importantly, in his relationship both to Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and to the Roman imperial powers with whom he was in conflict and who were ultimately responsible for his execution. LaCocque sets out to demonstrate that “[s]piritually and religiously ... Jesus is the central Jew” (p. 2) and to show, quoting Martin Buber, “Jesus assuming his vocation as ‘appointed human centre’ of the kingdom of God” (p. 10).

To make his case, LaCocque focuses primarily on the Synoptic Gospels, which, if read carefully, he says provide a more reliable picture of the historical Jesus than either Paul or John, both of whom “draw their conclusions about the person of the Christ *after the fact*, that is, in the light of the resurrection” (p. 13; emphasis in original). By “historical,” LaCocque “insert[s] the Galilean Jesus into the particular history of his time. The historical Jesus is thus to be distinguished from the “‘true’ Jesus, which no one can ever retrieve” (p. 5). He shares with Flusser a “confidence in the authenticity of Matthew, Mark, and Luke regarding the sayings and doings of the historical Jesus” (p. 4). This is a position with which many will take issue, but having taken it, LaCocque draws a compelling portrait of his central Jew.

He does so by first addressing a series of topics about Jesus’ relationship to and understanding of the Judaism of his day. There are chapters devoted to “Jesus the Messiah,” “Jesus Son of Man / Son of God,” “Jesus as Healer,” “Jesus and Torah,” “Jesus and Moses,” and “Jesus and Israel.” LaCocque describes Jesus as deeply rooted in Judaism, even when he critiques it or attempts to reform it. After a chapter on Jesus’ use of parables, LaCocque devotes the subsequent chapters to the birth narratives, Jesus’ baptism, his self-consciousness, his betrayal, and his passion. There is a chapter on

the phrase *Ego Eimi* and one on “The Great Cry of Jesus on the Cross.” The penultimate chapter, before the conclusion (see below) treats the resurrection.

LaCocque makes frequent reference to rabbinic literature, though he does so with the requisite caution that these sources post-date the period of Jesus (some-times by centuries). Nonetheless, he occasionally makes statements about rabbinic practice or influence in the first century CE that are not, in my view, supportable. For example, he states that “Jesus himself is called ‘rabbi,’ which, for all practical purposes identifies him as belonging to the synagogal, not the priestly, form of Judaism” (p. 20). At that time, the term “rabbi” had a broad range of meanings, including “teacher” or “master,” but it was also a general title of respect for someone of means or stature. The connection of rabbis (in this case narrowly defined as those “ordained” in the rabbinic tradition) to the synagogue probably does not emerge until at least the third century. Similarly, he states that the Last Supper “follows ... the Seder ritual” and then makes a point about the fourth cup of wine (p. 51). The Seder ritual was developed by the rabbis to enable Jews to celebrate the Passover after the destruction of the Temple. Therefore, I am not nearly as confident as LaCocque that the details of the rabbinic Seder existed during the time of Jesus. Finally, he translates the term *mitzvoth* as “good deeds,” which fails to convey the fundamental significance of “divine commandment” (p. 27).

Some Christian readers may be challenged, if not shocked, by the harsh language of LaCocque’s conclusion. For example, as the early church became increasingly “pagan-Christian ... [i]t became instead of a Jewish sect, a standalone *religion* ... more indebted to Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus than to Mo-ses.” It was “unabashedly anti-Judaic, even anti-Semitic” (p. 274; emphasis in original). By the fourth century, “Jesus Christ became God himself ... a very serious disassociation from the Jewish way of thinking ... that borders on polytheism” (pp. 275-276). “The inevitable result is a mythologized Jesus with superhuman, divine powers, born of a perpetually asexual mother and a castrated father” (p. 277). In this transformation, “the main victim ... was Jesus, the central Jew.”

This is a book for the advanced New Testament student and scholars. It is replete with references to quite a broad range of primary and secondary literature—the index of passages cited alone is 37 pages—and in order to get the most out of the book, access to a good library or biblical software is highly recommended. Those who do so, whether they accept all of LaCocque’s assumptions or not, will be amply rewarded.

Editorial remarks

David Fox Sandmel is the Director of Interfaith Affairs at the Anti-Defamation League. Book review first published in *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, Vol 12, No 1, 2017. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>.