

## Book Reviews

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*Jesus the Central Jew: His Times and His People.* By André LaCocque. Atlanta: SBL, 2015. Pp. xii + 337. \$37.60.

Professor Emeritus of the Hebrew Bible at the Chicago Theological Seminary and founding Director of its Center for Jewish Studies, LaCocque has used his admirable knowledge of rabbinic and other ancient sources to argue that the historical Jesus is, in the words he quotes from Martin Buber, “the most Jewish of all Jews” (1). To be sure, the readers of the New Testament “meet the historical Jesus through the medium of how he was seen by the disciples and the evangelists” (3); “there is no Jesus in history in isolation from his interpreters” (176). Nevertheless, L. is confident that he knows enough to “demonstrate that Jesus was totally and unquestionably a Jew. He lived as a Jew, thought as a Jew, debated as a Jew, acted as a Jew, and died as a Jew. He was not a Jew marginally, but centrally.” L. sets himself to “go ever deeper into the soul of the historical Jesus” (4). He pictures Jesus as aiming at a transfigured Judaism and not the establishment of a new religion. Some would rightly query the reconstruction of Jesus’s self-consciousness at the time of his being baptized by John. This is not, however, to deny conclusions L. reaches about Jesus’s sense of his own authority and reinterpretation of messiahship.

In constructing his portrait of Jesus, L. dismisses the apocryphal gospels as a “corruption of the life and teaching of Jesus” (177, n. 25). He draws primarily on the Synoptic Gospels, where we find Jesus taught by the Scriptures rather than taught by God, as in John’s Gospel. Nevertheless, L. uses John’s Gospel to argue for a transformation of Jesus’s attitudes toward non-Jews and to establish Jesus’s “apolitical” stance. He pronounces “correct” the identification of “the temple and Jesus’s body” (221) made by John 2:21. He introduces John in a careful reconstruction of the trial of Jesus, and disagrees with John Meier’s “scepticism as to who was present” at that trial “and could report what had occurred there” (239, n. 2). He argues that Jesus was in fact condemned for blasphemy.

On the basis of John 7:42, L. queries whether Jesus was born in Bethlehem and was of the Davidic line. Yet many Johannine commentators understand the passage in a Johannine, ironical sense that actually supports a birth in Bethlehem and Davidic descent. Add too the Davidic descent attested by the early witness of Romans 1:3, which L. cites but without noting its relevance to the question of Jesus being “son of

David" (31, n. 60). Apropos of Paul, L. holds that the apostle "introduced a 'vertical' speculation about the Christ's pre-existence and deification 'in heaven' (his apotheosis)" (13). The work of Larry Hurtado (never mentioned by L.) and others has seriously (many would say convincingly) challenged this thesis about the making of a *theios anēr*, as well as the merely human interpretation of Philippians 2:6.

L. understands the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke to be simply midrash, which "were never intended to be read literally" (191). Yet they contain many elements that can or should, at least also, be read literally: for instance, the names of Mary and Joseph, Jesus being of the house of David, his relationship with John the Baptist, and his being born in Bethlehem. L. takes the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke to be evidently based on the LXX version of Isaiah 7:14. But it is only Matthew who cites this text, the first of his ten fulfillment formulas. In the subsequent cases the evangelist looks for an appropriate biblical text to illuminate some event he reports. In other words, he moves from event to text, rather than creating some "event" out of the biblical texts. One can reasonably hold that, after receiving from an oral or written tradition an account of the virginal conception, he looks for a suitable text to illuminate the tradition, and finds such a text in Isaiah 7:14 (LXX).

For good measure, L. also looks for non-Jewish stories about gods being involved in the conception of historical persons like Pythagoras and Plato and mythical figures like Bacchus. But, as has been pointed out long ago, these alleged parallels to the virginal conception accounts in Matthew and Luke are weak. In any case there is no hard evidence of first-century Christians, like the first and third evangelist, borrowing from Greco-Roman mythology. L. can cite only Origen in the early third century in support of his position (186).

L. also queries John Meier's "radical," historical doubts regarding Mark 7, arguing that, despite various layers of tradition, we can conclude that Jesus shared the vision of the prophet Zechariah. Purity codes were not set aside, but people were to be cleansed of their impurity. Likewise L. makes a case that the repeated warnings coming from Jesus about his tragic destiny could be historically authentic and not mere *vaticinia ex eventu*. He defends the historicity of Jesus's healing activity, and questions Meier's claim that "the Synoptic stories of healing on the Sabbath are not authentic, while the Johannine stories of healing are authentic but not their setting during the Sabbath" (59).

L. holds that the evangelists' inventiveness in reporting the words of Jesus has been "vastly exaggerated" (175, n. 18). In particular, he defends the authenticity of the Son of Man sayings, which belong to the inchoate Messianic consciousness of Jesus. He explains that "Jesus's passion, to the extent that he was Messiah or Son of Man, was shocking and scandalous, but it was not outside the Jewish concept of messiahship" (33; see 35). Many question this claim. Where is the notion of a  $\beta$  to be found in pre-Christian Judaism? It is not enough to claim a general background for messianic suffering in Psalms 22, 31, and 69 and assert (on later, rabbinic evidence) that "suffering associated with the messianic event is common to both Judaism and Christianity" (236; see 236, n. 53).

There are some minor editing errors (e.g., *textōn* for *tektōn* [17]), and some problems with diction: "Jeremiah stands off" (12, n. 6); "conclusions were retrofitted"

(13); “to speak with him by in Aramaic” (16); the king “receives unction” (23); “a gapping element of his story” (61); “Jesus abides to a transcendental torah” (76); “to the authenticity of this logion militate” (95); “we know as little to the development” (175, n. 18); the “utopist character” (238, n. 59).

At the end L. assures his readers that the resurrection of Jesus is only a theological “postulate, which is to be proclaimed” (269). But how could Paul or anyone proclaim the Resurrection unless they held it to be factual? Sadly L. quickly dismisses as “mythologized” ideology the Jesus of early Christian creeds. But he is surely right in regretting the way in which Christians too often came to define their identity apart from and even in opposition to their Jewish parentage (274).

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*The Kingdom According to Luke and Acts: A Social, Literary, and Theological Introduction.*  
 By Karl Allen Kuhn. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015. Pp. xxiv + 312.  
 \$28.99.

Kuhn’s book aims at introducing readers to Luke–Acts by focusing on Luke’s call to welcome the Good News of Jesus and the Kingdom of God. From the outset, K. identifies three features of the Good News in Luke–Acts which guide his investigation: (1) the Good News shatters established patterns and turns the world upside down; (2) it has social and political impacts, forcing one to set aside the post-Enlightenment tendency to separate politics from religion; and (3) the proclamation of the Good News elicits a whole spectrum of reactions, from furious mobs that attempt to lynch the proclaimers of the Good News to songs of joy at the expectation of the ending of a nightmare. The investigation itself focuses on the historical, social, literary, and rhetorical features of Luke–Acts. The dominant approach of the work is social-scientific; literary and rhetorical approaches are subsumed under this category.

The first part of the volume describes the political, social, economic, and religious character of the first-century Mediterranean world. It provides outstanding summaries of current knowledge of the social structures and living conditions of people at that time. It also clearly explains the various understandings of the Kingdom of God from ancient Israel to the beginning of the Common Era. In addition, it describes the social location of the evangelist. Interestingly, K. views the “we” passages of Acts of the Apostles (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16) as an indication that Luke was Paul’s companion at some point. He does not consider that this could be a literary device as it was suggested rather convincingly in W. S. Campbell’s *The “We” Passages in the Acts of the Apostles: the Narrator as Narrative Character* (2007). The second part, which comprises nearly half of the volume, explains how Luke uses various techniques to draw in the minds and hearts of the audience. Among such techniques are literary forms, parallel structures, characters’ speeches, conflicts, narrative suspense, contrast, reversal, and paradox. The book provides examples for each of these aspects.