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Lacocque, André

Le Livre de Ruth

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After having taught at various Protestant theological faculties in Europe, André Lacocque is now Professor Emeritus of Old Testament of the Chicago Theological Seminary. He is a prolific author who wrote a notable commentary on Daniel in the same series and is well-known for his gender studies, which explains his interest in the book of Ruth, which he approaches from a sociojuridical angle, emphasizing the “subversive” nature of the book, a term Lacocque owes to Jon Berquist (14). The author has dedicated his commentary on Ruth to his old friend Paul Ricoeur, with whom he wrote the hugely successful volume of essays *Penser la Bible* (1998), translated in English by David Pellauer under the title *Thinking Biblically* (for a review, see http://bookreviews.org/pdf/4064_3937.pdf). Meanwhile, the commentary on Ruth too has been edited in English by K. C. Hanson in the Continental Commentary series (Fortress, 2004).

Since Kirsten Nielsen has already reviewed the same work in an admirable way in *RBL* (http://bookreviews.org/pdf/4216_4146.pdf), I will avoid repetition and concentrate on some other issues worth noting. However, before raising a few points of criticism I want to make clear that I wholeheartedly agree with Kirsten Nielsen’s high esteem of this most original and well-written commentary.

Lacocque’s remarks about the composition of the book are rather terse. The main text is written in rhythmical prose, whatever that may be, and only Ruth 1:16–17 is poetry (17).

None of the proposals with regard to the structure of Ruth is discussed (for an overview, see my *The Structure of the Book of Ruth* [Pericope 2; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001], overlooked by Lacocque). Every chapter is preceded by a general introduction followed by a detailed commentary that is subdivided into smaller units. Thus we learn that Lacocque divides Ruth 1 into 1:1–5, 6–15, 16–18, and 19–22. This division differs both from what others have proposed and from the division found in ancient manuscripts. The same is the case with the other chapters of Ruth. One would like to learn the author's arguments for the paragraphing he adopts.

The literary genre of Ruth is the novella (18–25), a short story seeking to bring home the message that foreign women should be accepted in Israel. The main purpose of the book would be a fresh interpretation of the Torah in tacit opposition to the “legalistic” Deuteronomic and Priestly interpretation of the Torah and the ethnic purification under Ezra and Nehemiah (e.g., 12, 21, 26, 32, 36, 38). The genealogy at the end, though fictitious, is an integral part of the original work, which was probably written by a woman in the fifth century B.C. (21–22, 26–38). This presentation of the date and theology of Ruth does not differ much from what is commonly accepted nowadays. In my opinion, however, the structural arguments in favor of a slightly more complex redactional history of the book involving the later addition of both the genealogy and a few other passages are too strong to be brushed aside. Moreover, the symbolic background of the main characters, such as Naomi as a model of the old Zion and Ruth as the new Zion, recognized by several scholars on the basis of the evident parallels with Second Isaiah, should no doubt be taken into account when writing about the theology of the book (see my *Structure*, 218–33).

The Protestant Bible scholar Lacocque does not shrink back from his urge to connect the Old Testament with the New, but I must confess that sometimes the links he proposes are too far-fetched for me, such as when he connects the question “Who are you?” (Ruth 3:9, 16) with Jesus’ “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:5) (p. 15), or when the “weakness” of Ruth is compared with Jesus’ mission as the servant (Phil 2:6–8 [52]), or when the love of Boaz for the Moabitess is compared with Jesus’ adjuration to love one’s enemies (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35 [110]). On the other hand, the commentary is replete with references to Jewish exegetical literature, though D. R. G. Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth* (JSOTSup 2; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1977) is missing. From a methodical point of view, such a mixture of Jewish and Christian hermeneutics is problematic, in my opinion, and cannot be justified by a simple reference to John 4:22 (38).

Nevertheless, Lacocque’s commentary is a worthwhile addition to the literature about the book of Ruth. It rests on a solid base of wide-ranging reading and contains many new and refreshing insights. Though Lacocque is not the first to point out that the book of Ruth

interacts frequently with other parts of the Hebrew canon, his close reading brings many an additional intertextual link to the fore.