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The title of Professor André LaCocque’s monograph, *Jesus the Central Jew*, is a benign allusion to John Meier’s ongoing project: *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (5 vols., 1991–). LaCocque, who is Professor Emeritus of Hebrew Bible, seeks to establish that Jesus’s religion, message, and self-understanding were all located at the center of Jewish identity and belief.

Apart from an introduction and conclusion, the monograph consists of sixteen chapters. These are of uneven length, frequently treat more topics than could be guessed from the chapter titles (for example, twelve pages on “Jesus and the Kingdom of God” and a short excursus on the parousia are included within ch. 5, “Jesus and Torah”), and are arranged in an order that is less than perspicuous. One might detect a loose structure of organization, whereby chapter 1 lays the foundation by discussing briefly the nature of the gospels, chapters 2–8 deal primarily with Jesus’s so-called public ministry, chapters 9–11 form an interlude picking up the diverse topics of the birth narratives, Jesus’s baptism, and his “self-consciousness,” and chapters 12–16 are devoted to Jesus’s trial, death, and alleged resurrection.

In the introduction and in chapter 1, “The Gospel as Retrospective,” LaCocque discusses the differences between the gospels’ portrayal of Jesus, on the one hand, and the historical
Chapter 2, “Jesus the Messiah,” deals with both ancient and later Jewish messianism and with the question of how Jesus might have related to this phenomenon. From there it is only a small step to the topic of chapter 3, “Jesus Son of Man/Son of God,” with LaCocque taking the position that Jesus used the former expression in order to avoid arrogance and self-centeredness as well as voice his proleptic messianism. In chapter 4, “Jesus as Healer,” LaCocque draws attention not only to the role of psychology in Jesus’s healings but also to the close connection between his healing ministry and his identity as a prophet. The extensive chapter 5, “Jesus and Torah,” contains detailed discussions of Jesus’s attitude towards legal issues such as divorce and impurity and, as mentioned above, a treatment of what he thought about the kingdom of God. This chapter ends with a detailed exposition of the parable of the good samaritan (which, incidentally, has been compellingly argued to derive from Luke rather than from Jesus by Meier in the latest installment of his A Marginal Jew series). Chapter 6, “Jesus and Moses,” is devoted to Mosaic typology in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and in the transfiguration episode. In chapter 7, “Jesus and Israel,” LaCocque addresses both Jesus’s dealings with other groups in contemporary Palestinian Judaism and his understanding of his own role in relation to Israel and the temple. Chapter 8, “Jesus Taught in Parables,” is a brief treatment of Jesus as parable-teller.

Upon this, in chapter 9, on “The Birth Narratives,” LaCocque explicates his view of Matthew’s and Luke’s introductory chapters as belonging to the midrashic genre. In the brief chapter 10, “Jesus’s Baptism,” he suggests that Jesus underwent John’s baptism as an expression of his belonging to a sinful people. The same perspective permeates chapter 11, “Jesus’s Self-consciousness,” in which LaCocque points out that Jesus’s view of his own special role cannot be separated from his view of Israel’s collective messianic calling.

The content of the final chapters is quite clear from the titles: “Jesus Is Betrayed” (ch. 12); “The Trial of Jesus and His Passion” (ch. 13); “Egō Eimi in the Mouth of Jesus” (ch. 14); “The Great Cry of Jesus on the Cross” (ch. 15); and “Jesus and the Resurrection” (ch. 16). LaCocque does not take the passion accounts at face value, but he also remarks that the presence of scriptural motives in these narratives does not in itself determine whether we are dealing with history or fiction. LaCocque also speculates that Jesus’s last cry could have been an utterance of God’s name. The book ends with a brief conclusion.
LaCocque’s extraordinary grasp of Jewish sources from different eras is what primarily lends merit to his book. In addition to referring extensively to the bodies of early postbiblical and rabbinic literature commonly considered in historical Jesus research, the author also highlights intriguing parallels between Jesus and later expressions of Judaism, such as the eighteenth-century Hasidim (55, 61). Aware of the potential anachronism inherent to such an approach (55), he employs it judiciously and arrives at a number of interesting proposals. I found especially helpful LaCocque’s discussion of Jesus’s baptism as an expression of his identification with the Jewish people. LaCocque acknowledges that the historicity of the baptism is likely by virtue of the so-called criterion of embarrassment but suggests that the embarrassing point lies not so much in the conflict between the baptism and the notion of Jesus’s personal sinlessness as in the baptism as an acknowledgement of Jesus’s complete Jewishness (195). This and similar suggestions are certainly worthy of further consideration.

If LaCocque’s ambition to restore Jesus’s thoroughly Jewish identity is unequivocal, his stance towards Christianity both ancient and modern is more ambiguous. Whereas the book’s back cover claims that “LaCocque writes not about Christianity or Christology,” this is precisely what the author seems to be doing in many places. The book ends by declaring “ignorance” and “confusion” to lie at the roots of several traditional Christian doctrines (276–77). LaCocque’s concerns about present-day Christianity are frequently voiced in language that borders on the homiletic (see, e.g., 30, 58, 81, 172 n. 8). On the other hand, he does not conform to the tendency of contemporary research to minimize Jesus’s “self-consciousness” and to view “high Christology” as a fairly late phenomenon. After discussing Mark 14:62—indeed, without any mention of the problems attached to the assumption that the scene accurately records the dialogue between the high priest and Jesus—he concludes that “it seems incontrovertible that, at the end of his ministry, and perhaps occasionally before, Jesus claimed to be the incarnation, or the presence (shekinah), of God’s being” (242). Furthermore, according to LaCocque, no person in history “has gone further … regarding the unconditionality of love, and the truth of the matter is, no one else can, because he paid the ultimate price for it” (95).

Many a scholar might want to take issue with the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of a study that leads to such conclusions. LaCocque states explicitly that his book is about the historical Jesus rather than the Jesus of the gospels (131) but seems simultaneously to downplay the distinctions between Jesus as remembered by the eyewitnesses, as narrated in the Synoptic tradition, and as reinterpreted in the later gospels (176). Despite the initial declaration of the author’s intent to use “restricted sources, namely, the Synoptic Gospels” (1), his argument frequently rests on episodes and dialogues from the Gospel of John that most scholars, for good reasons, deem to be mostly or entirely fictitious (see 41, 68–69, 98, 163, 220–21).
The book contains a few outright mistakes that should have been detected in the prepublication review and editing process. The allegation that Jesus “cannot have been born under King Herod who died in 4 BCE” (16 n. 3) is perplexing in view of LaCocque’s recognition of Jesus’s birthdate around 7 or 6 BCE on the previous page—and the unqualified claim in the same footnote that John 7:42 denies Jesus’s birth in Bethlehem and his Davidic lineage (also 190) is unwarranted. Much is made (59) of Jesus’s violating Pharisaic Sabbath halakah in Mark 2:1–12, but that episode is not set on a Sabbath, unlike the partly similar narration in John 5. LaCocque’s suggestion that the opponents in Matt 12:9–14 might well have been Sadducees (150) is invalidated by the text’s explicit designation of them as Pharisees. Besides, the picture of the Sadducees as a group that sought to prohibit all contact with non-Jews (148, 150) is not supported by the sources.

*Jesus the Central Jew* is, nonetheless, a monument of erudition. The book fits well within the current paradigm of research that stresses Jesus’s Jewish identity, and it should alert scholars to the usefulness of familiarizing oneself with the later developments of Jewish culture, religion, and theology. A more meticulous approach to the questions of sources and method in historical Jesus research would have added even further value.