Roukema, Riemer

*Jesus, Gnosis and Dogma*


James F. McGrath
Butler University
Indianapolis, Indiana

Riemer Roukema’s *Jesus, Gnosis and Dogma* is an ambitious volume that seeks to disentangle the intertwined threads mentioned in the book’s title and investigate what history can and cannot answer regarding traditional Christian doctrinal views of Jesus and the variations on and alternatives to them found not only within Gnosticism but also other groups such as Jewish Christians.

The first chapter sets forth Roukema’s goals. He aims not only to trace the development of orthodox Christology (as well as of other views) but also to distinguish as clearly as possible what can be said **historically** about Jesus from that which can only be asserted **theologically** (3). Roukema immediately acknowledges the challenging character of such an undertaking, since impartiality and objectivity are elusive, with bias and subjectivity being factors not only for the historians of today but also for the ancient Christian authors from the first several centuries whose writings will be the focus of the book (4). History and theology may be distinguishable and need to be distinguished, but they are intertwined as far back as we go. Roukema outlines key criteria of authenticity used in the quest for the historical Jesus, and traces chronological developments across time through a variety of sources, interacting in the process with the treatment of them by major scholars such as Dunn, Meier, and Pagels. The latter’s preference for the Gospel of
Thomas is pointed to as an example of a theological preference that should not be allowed to color the historical evidence, which suggests that much in the Gospel of Thomas is historically secondary (13).

The next three chapters form a series, focusing on Jesus’ origin and identity, his teaching, and his death and resurrection, respectively. Chapter 2 begins with a brief mention of some basic information in Luke and the other Synoptics, then turns quickly to Paul and proceeds chronologically from there. Paul is considered to have viewed Jesus as preexistent. The evidence in the Gospel of Mark is understood to “identify” Jesus with “God the Lord” (28), although whether this identification means a close connection, a shared nature, or something else is not specified. The authenticity of every act and saying is not considered, since here Roukema is tracing the development of theological views of Jesus, not assessing their historicity (32). The Christology of the remaining Synoptic Gospels is surveyed, and of them Roukema writes, “In a more or less concealed manner, they refer to his heavenly origin and therefore his pre-existence with God” (39). Turning attention to the Gospel of John, Roukema argues that its expression of this view of Jesus is found to be much more emphatic. Roukema then returns to the relationship of history and theology and writes, “On a theological level, we can determine that Paul and the authors of the gospels thought of Jesus in this way, but that does not imply that they were right in their theological views. … [E]ven if one believes that the testimonies of the New Testament about Jesus as the Lord and as the pre-existent Son of God go back to his own life, it remains impossible to determine by historical means that he was truly so” (45). The chapter continues with a survey of the Gospel of Thomas and of later works reflecting a gnostic viewpoint and concludes that, while historical tools cannot determine whether the viewpoint found in the New Testament or in later gnostic works is correct, it can be shown that the formulation of a gnostic interpretation of Jesus is a secondary development beyond, based on, and at times running counter to the depiction of him in earlier sources.

Chapter 3 focuses on the teaching attributed to Jesus in the same range of sources as the previous chapters, drawing a similar conclusion to the previous one. While the theological development of Gnosticism is described as understandable in the context of its time, the earlier evidence for Jesus taking a positive view of the Jewish Scriptures excludes the possibility of his having held or taught the views found in later gnostic sources (87). Chapter 4 focuses on interpretations of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Roukema notes our historical uncertainty about what interpretation, if any, Jesus may have offered for his own future death. In surveying the sources, there is sometimes a tendency to flatten the evidence, so that, for instance, even after noting the lack of atonement theology in Luke-Acts, Roukema nevertheless sums up his treatment of that source by writing, “All in all it is clear that, according to Luke, Jesus’ death and resurrection have a redemptive effect” (97). But in other instances, the chapter offers very
interesting insights into the distinctive outlook of ancient sources. The best example is the treatment of the view that Simon of Cyrene rather than Jesus was crucified as resulting from a close reading of ambiguity in Mark 15:20-24 (109-10). The possibility that Thomas’ atonement-free outlook could have early roots is acknowledged, as is the inability of historical inquiry to evaluate Jesus’ resurrection and ascension as historical facts.

Chapter 5 is a brief one, recapping what proceeded and presenting what will be the focal points in the remaining chapters. Chapter 6 examines the phenomenon of Jewish Christianity and discusses whether the sorts of views found in later Jewish Christian literature such as the Pseudo-Clementines might go back to the earliest period in the history of the Christian movement. Chapter 7 considers whether Jesus had a secret teaching. While several New Testament and extracanonical works make reference to such private instruction, these texts also record that teaching, making it unlikely that any of them refer to an esoteric teaching not recorded in the piece of literature that referred to it (137). Thus Roukema concludes that the popular notion that the church suppressed the true teaching of Jesus, which was passed on by “heretics,” “is fiction and has no historical foundation” (144). Chapter 8 examines whether exalted christological statements found in early Christian texts could fit within the framework of early Judaism. Considering Philo, Targums, and other Jewish literature such as Ezekiel the Tragedian and the Prayer of Joseph, and interacting with scholars such as Larry Hurtado and Daniel Boyarin, Roukema draws the conclusion that early Christology would not have seemed out of place in early Judaism. Chapter 9 builds on the preceding chapter, beginning with the claim that “Judaism knew a plurality in the one God and left room to other heavenly figures besides God, so that the exalted conceptions which were made of Jesus were not completely unfamiliar to contemporaneous Judaism” (164). The chapter then proceeds to consider a number of developments in the way Christians related Christology and monotheism, including adoptionism (spelled “Adoptianism” in the book), modalism, Origenism, Arianism, and the Nicene formulation. The chapter concludes by recognizing that the “orthodox” view of Jesus cannot persuade all Christians (188) and asks instead whether the Nicene Creed offers “a proper interpretation” of what is said about Jesus in the New Testament (189). Roukema believes that it does, although he acknowledges that historical study cannot answer the question of how this view of Jesus compares to Jesus’ own self-understanding. The final chapter offers an overview and seeks to bring together the threads running through the book, concluding with a doxology.

Although the attempt to distinguish between what can be said historically and theologically is of crucial importance, at times I felt that matters were significantly more complex that Roukema indicated. The evidence is surveyed with questions raised by later Christian doctrine, or at least other Christian texts, already in mind, and this often colors
the interpretation of evidence in precisely the way that Roukema warns of the potential for theological preference to influence historical judgments. If one reads the Gospel of Luke, for instance, asking whether there are any hints at Jesus having a preexistent heavenly origin, then one may indeed find some. If, however, one asks what a reader would have understood if the reader did not have those questions in mind, then the matter of preexistence will simply never come up for the reader of Luke, and the same may be said likewise for the other Synoptics. Since Roukema’s express aim was to distinguish the historical and the theological, even if they could not always be separated, then it must be noted that a survey that brings topics from systematic theology or later confessions into the picture and allows them to set the agenda is a theological survey, not only in the sense of a survey of New Testament authors’ theologies, but also in the sense that it is a survey of them through a particular theological lens.

Of course, the entanglement of theology and history is the very reason Roukema wrote, and it was perhaps inevitable that such a volume should not only present the problem but at times illustrate it. Roukema regularly does an admirable job of not merely acknowledging but highlighting the fact that doctrinal statements to which he subscribes are matters of theological choice and not something susceptible to historical demonstration.

There were other aspects of the book that were problematic, and if they are somewhat minor, they nevertheless detract from the volume’s overall effectiveness. The reference to Jesus having “swept clean” the temple’s outer court shows a lack of awareness of the size of the structure (62), and the discussion of the Secret Gospel of Mark features several inaccuracies, including the claim that no one other than Smith ever saw it and that it has recently been “irrefutably demonstrated” to be a falsification, when in fact it is not the case that everyone finds Stephen Carlson’s treatment persuasive, much less the final word on the subject (137–38). The statement that Jesus’ use of “son of man” necessarily implies a consciousness of having preexisted in heaven (194) shows a lack of awareness of the range of meaning of the underlying Aramaic phrase.

This book may be useful for students in a conservative theological setting coming to the historical study of Christology for the first time, since it will begin to introduce a number of key concepts and issues, without overwhelming them with challenging material and perspectives at their first encounter. Those working with students from a different background or from diverse prior experiences will probably find the book less suited to their needs. While Roukema’s attempt to tackle an important and difficult topic is to be appreciated, many will feel that the several gems of insight found within the book do not counterbalance the problems with it. Nevertheless, where there are shortcomings, to at least some extent these reflect the difficulty of bringing together topics, methods and
areas of expertise as diverse as historical criticism, New Testament studies, patristics, Gnosticism, and systematic theology and seeking to distinguish them clearly while at the same time allowing them to interact constructively. Roukema’s effort to do precisely that is to be appreciated.