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Book Review: Jesus, Gnosis & Dogma

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Problems of historical chronology and literary relationship are thorny issues in early Christian studies. Rarely does one read a work that is not controlled by a clear commitment to a particular reconstruction with its attending speculative conclusions. While in no wise claiming the mythical neutral ground of objectivity, Riemer Roukema proves himself a careful scholar, whose academic expertise, systematic analysis, and judicious judgment distinguish Jesus, Gnosis & Dogma as an important introduction to the conceptions of Jesus evidenced in the first four centuries of the Christian era.

Roukema, Professor of New Testament at the Protestant Theological University, Kampen, The Netherlands, has devoted his academic career to the study of the background and foreground of the NT with a special focus upon Gnosticism and early Christian history. An earlier monograph, Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity: An Introduction to Gnosticism (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), established Roukema’s voice in these academic disciplines. The present volume is considered by Roukema as a sequel to this earlier study.

From the outset, it is clear that a methodology grounded in historical analysis is critical to this work. Roukema’s distinction between what can be said about Jesus historically versus theologically shapes the entire enterprise. While the author acknowledges that even this nuance is debated and requires further definition in scholarly analysis, he takes occasion in his introduction to demonstrate how this distinction is important in several key areas of Gospel studies (e.g. Jesus’ baptism, Christ as “ransom,” the Gospel of Thomas, and Jesus’ announcement of God’s kingdom) and further illustrates how a failure to observe it may yield skewed results (i.e. Elaine Pagels’s Beyond Belief [New York: Random House, 2003]).

While not seeking to be comprehensive in his analysis, Roukema engages what he considers the most significant and representative voices of earliest Christianity related to the issues of (1) Jesus’ origin and identity (chap. 2); (2) Jesus’ teachings (chap. 3); and (3) Jesus’ death, resurrection, and exaltation (chap 4). For each topic, he considers the seven “authentic” Pauline letters, the four canonical Gospels, the Gospel of Thomas, Cerinthus and the Ophites, the Gospel of Judas, Theodotus, and the Tripartite Tractate. In some cases, where one or more of these sources is not entirely relevant to the subject at hand (e.g. Paul’s letters and Cerinthus on Jesus’ teachings), it is ignored. In other cases, where an additional source is particularly pertinent (e.g. the Gospel of Mary on Jesus’ teachings), it is added. Other significant resources (e.g. Apocryphon of John) are not considered because they are not highly concerned with the issues at hand or do not add significantly to what has already been uncovered in the selected materials.

Though some readers may disagree with his conclusions or find frustration with his admitted lack of completeness, most will find Roukema’s analysis systematic, fair, and informed. He provides brief conclusions for each topic within each chapter; however, a more synthetic picture is provided in chapter 5 with the posing of new questions for consideration. One of his most important conclusions is the secondary nature of Gnostic materials and conceptions (see pp. 86–87 and 115–18). While some Gnostic thought may be traceable to first-century ideas about Jesus and salvation, much of it is defined in reaction to the faith of the “catholic” church, which is decidedly more dependent upon OT and Jewish conceptions and revealed in the most ancient and original sources. In particular, Gnostic conceptions of androgyne (i.e. original male-female unity), salvation as self-knowledge, the inferiority of the Jewish God, Jesus’ affinity with the highest God, and the rejection of Jesus’ passion are reactionary and later developments often in correspondence with Platonic ideals. In this analysis, Roukema includes the Gospel
of Thomas, which, though some of its ideas may be traced to the historical Jesus and beliefs of some early Jewish Christians, betrays second-century developments.

With these foundational conclusions established, Roukema pursues answers to several crucial questions that arose in his textual analysis. The first relates to the fact that even the NT reveals that some Jewish believers held to simpler views of Jesus than those developed by the “canonical” and later Christian authors. Roukema provides a valuable analysis of the nature of Jewish Christianity in chapter 6, giving special consideration to the Ebionites, Nazarenes (or Nazorenes), and other groups as revealed in early Christian writings up to the Pseudo-Clementine writings. While primary sources are not extant, Roukema concludes that many Jewish-Christian conceptions go back to earliest Christianity, including a special emphasis upon Christ’s baptism, a distinction between Christ’s preexistence and divinity, and alternative conceptions of salvation.

Other questions and issues discussed by Roukema include, “Did Jesus Have a Secret Teaching?” (chap. 7), “Does Jesus as LORD and Son of God Fit into Early Judaism?” (chap. 8), and “Jesus and the Dogma of God’s Trinity” (chap. 9). With regard to secret teaching, Roukema admits that Jesus did reserve some teachings and interpretations for his closest disciples, that not all that he taught was codified in the NT, and that even some “catholic” teachings and practices developed from oral traditions; however, it cannot be concluded historically that the early Christian authors deliberately suppressed essentially different or deeper teachings that were exclusively revealed to individual disciples (e.g. Thomas, Judas, or Mary). What is clear from the NT data is that, while Jesus did reserve some teachings for his immediate disciples, they intentionally revealed these insights in the writings that they produced and these writings essentially agree in what they reveal about Jesus.

With regard to the Jewish orientation of conceptions of Jesus as LORD and Son of God, Roukema provides an excellent review of Jewish literature and concludes that Second Temple Judaism did feature an “inclusive monotheism” (Horbury) with admitted secondary divine powers and language that was likely foundational to early Christian conceptions. While this background does not preclude Christian innovation (Hurtado), the Jewish context in which Christianity was born does provide the theological and linguistic framework for exalted conceptions of Jesus. In chapter 10, Roukema discusses the development of Trinitarian dogma up through the first ecumenical council of Nicaea. A valuable historical overview of authors, teachers, and beliefs is developed, and special attention is given to the origin, development, and engagement of ideas. Roukema is fair and even empathetic in his analysis (e.g. with Arius, pp. 182–85), provides some interesting historical data (e.g. Constantine’s regard of the debate as unimportant), and offers a clear and concise conclusion: “Aside from the terms they used, they [i.e. the Nicene Creed’s authors] stood in an old Jewish tradition of ‘logos theology’” (p. 189).

Roukema ends his monograph with a review of what can and cannot be concluded historically and theologically from his analysis. While some Jewish Christian conceptions of Jesus were deemed too simplistic and Gnostic conceptions were rejected as too complex and dissonant with Jewish ideals, what became orthodoxy defined a middle ground between the two. Roukema points out several examples of discontinuity between Jesus and Gnosticism, particularly the severing of Jesus from his OT and Jewish backgrounds and the adoption of Platonic conceptions (e.g. higher and lower gods) that were out of sorts with Jesus’ identity. With regard to the development of Trinitarian dogma, Roukema admits the vast distance between the naive view of God’s Trinity in earliest Christianity and the exalted conceptions of the Nicene Creed. As church leaders responded to alternative beliefs and challenges, they utilized conceptual and philosophical tools that were unfamiliar to earlier Christian authors. Yet, Roukema defends these developments as understandable and justifiable, and he defines a “broken
continuity” (p. 195) between earliest Christianity and Nicaea. In the final analysis, Roukema embraces and recommends for the church a conception of Jesus that is not that of a Gnostic teacher and more than a Jewish rabbi; rather, he commends an image of Jesus as “Lord and God,” an understanding that is obviously theological but solidly based upon the most ancient traditions of the Christian faith.

In all, Jesus, Gnosis & Dogma is an excellent resource and is a delight to have available in English. The translation is clear and tight, with a small number of errors (e.g. the conjunction “en” is untranslated in “Moses en Elijah” [p. 136], and adoptionism is consistently misspelled “adoptianism”). Despite this, Roukema’s ability as a teacher shines through as difficult materials are summarized and explained clearly and concisely. A survey of the footnotes and bibliography reveals a good acquaintance with important works in English, German, Dutch, and French, a significant consideration given the breadth of the global conversation about the subjects discussed. I would commend this resource as a solid introduction for students engaging the written materials of earliest Christianity and their implications for the study of the NT, the historical Jesus, Christian origins, Gnosticism, and historical theology.

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In the introduction to Images of Salvation in the New Testament, Brenda Colijn asks a vital question: How do we avoid distorting the gospel? Her answer, “We must keep returning to the source, to the New Testament vision of what God has done in Christ and how we can participate in it” (p. 13). Due to the various controversies and modern cultural forces that have influenced Christians toward distorted conceptions of salvation, Colijn believes a return to the diverse images of salvation in the NT is needed. Images of Salvation in the New Testament is Colijn’s response to this need.

The book is divided into 13 chapters and a brief conclusion. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the book’s method, which will center on what Colijn has labeled an intersection of NT theology, literary criticism, and theological hermeneutics. Chapter 2 explores the images of covenant and inheritance. The image of covenant is traced through the OT, the NT in general, Paul, and Hebrews. Chapter 3 surveys the kingdom of God, which is described as one of the most comprehensive images of salvation in the NT. The Synoptic Gospels, where this image is most evident, receive the most attention. Colijn highlights the Synoptics’ emphasis on the kingdom of God as God’s restoration of his creation.

Chapter 4 considers the image of eternal life. Colijn explains eternal life as God’s solution to death, which came into the world through sin. Because eternal life is the central image of salvation in the Gospel of John, much of this chapter involves consideration of the Fourth Gospel. Chapter 5 discusses the concepts of regeneration and new birth. These two concepts are summarized as the activities of God in restoring the integrity of a creation that has been marred by sin (p. 103).

Chapter 6 explores the σωτηρία word group to argue that it has a much broader meaning than the typical equation of “salvation” by conservative Christians with conversion. She argues that σωτηρία does not simply mean the forgiveness of sins but extends to every dimension of life that was damaged by sin (p. 122). Chapter 7 discusses the images of redemption, ransom, and freedom. Christ redeems to set people free from sin,