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Review: Jesus in the Eyes of his Followers: Newly Discovered Manuscripts of the Old Christian Confessions

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Jesus in the Eyes of His Followers: Newly Discovered Manuscripts of the Old Christian Confessions, by Petr Pokorný. The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins Library 4. N. Richland Hills, TX: Bibal Press, 1998. Pp. x + 100. \$8.95.

This volume by Petr Pokorný presents a larger body of material than the slim book may first indicate. In *Jesus in the Eyes of His Followers*, Pokorný examines the success of a resurrection/exaltation Christology among the earliest followers of Jesus in light of the many divergent Christologies that apparently existed. His stated goal is “to investigate the full spectrum of Early Christian Christologies, as far as we can reconstruct them, to discuss the reasons why the resurrection/exaltation Christology attained the leading position, and to discover why some Christologies were integrated and others excluded” (p. 14). Impressively navigating his way through early Christian documents, Pokorný offers a fascinating, if not convincing, argument for the evolution of early Christologies into the single expression of the resurrection/exaltation type found in 1 Cor 15:3–5.

Pokorný divides his book into three chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study through four main subsections: (1) What is Christology? (2) 1 Cor 15:3b–5, (3) history of research, and (4) methodology. Chapter 2 examines the Synoptics and assorted other sources (e.g., Dead Sea Scrolls and Gnostic literature) for clues to the central emphasis of Jesus’ view of Christology. Pokorný focuses on three main areas: (1) Jesus’ proclamation, (2) Jesus as a prophet, and (3) Jesus as Messiah. Chapter 3 represents the christological developments of the early church. The subheadings include: (1) The Problem of a New Beginning, (2) Easter, (3) From Easter to Various Expressions, (4) Christology of Early Christian Literature, and (5) Christology of the Canon. Chapter 3 presents the conclusion of the book with an eclectic overview of the development of messianic ideas among early Christian groups.

Besides introducing the problem of Christology, ch. 1 also provides an overview of the thesis and the methodology of this study. Pokorný acknowledges that a discussion of Christology involves two main aspects: (1) a witness to the significance of Jesus and (2) an evaluation of that witness. The apex of christological development and witness among early Christians is Paul’s version in 1 Cor 15, and Pokorný examines this text in some detail. He includes a historical overview of Jesus studies, concluding ch. 1 with a description of his own methodology. Pokorný uses a literary method focusing primarily on the NT as the starting place for a study of Christology. He recognizes that a reconstruction of the history of the text is necessary to discover the function and the development of the ideas contained in it. Pokorný also discusses the “problem” of Easter. Simply stated, the experience of Easter (i.e., the resurrection of Jesus) is primarily known through the testimony of first-century Christians. As a result, the study of Christology requires us to take seriously the testimony of those we cannot interview. In the end, Pokorný must rely on the texts for his work and leave the veracity of testimonies to speculation. He recognizes that texts are all that remain of the original testimony, and even that is limited in scope. For this reason, Pokorný opens his investigation up to sources beyond the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and he uses these texts quite well.

In ch. 2, Pokorný examines selected texts using his criteria from ch. 1. Even though the Pauline materials were written first, he concludes that the Gospels are a better source of information for Jesus. Pokorný claims that the proclamation of Jesus focused primarily upon his unique pronouncement of the kingdom of God. Utilizing influences

as divergent as John the Baptist's Qumran-like apocalyptic thought and the idea of a reign of God in which the Jews would enjoy dominion over other nations, Jesus developed a vision of God's kingdom in which loving community is expressed among the faithful in the present and in which a future reign including the participation of all people is envisioned. According to Pokorný, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom reveals rhetorical "genius" (p. 34), which mitigates against a view of Jesus as simply a wisdom teacher or eschatological prophet. Pokorný recognizes that Jesus shares some characteristics with other prophetic individuals of his time (e.g., the Teacher of Righteousness and John the Baptist). Like them, Jesus performed symbolic actions designed to provoke people to action, especially with reference to items familiar to Jewish life (e.g., the Torah and the temple). Unlike them, Jesus probably never intended to step outside of Jewish piety to start another form of Judaism.

After establishing Jesus' prophetic status, Pokorný examines Jesus' messianic credentials. Pokorný claims that Jesus "did not derive his teaching and activity from a commonly known and widely accepted concept of messianity" (p. 44). He also finds no evidence that Jesus understood himself as a Messiah who would die for his cause. In fact, Pokorný claims that Jesus' self-understanding cannot be fully reconstructed, even though something of Jesus' awareness of his mission can be discovered. Jesus apparently reinterpreted key elements of concepts regarding the Davidic Messiah and the Son of Man. Although Jesus appropriated portions of these ideas, Pokorný doubts that Jesus expected to be either the violent, vengeful heir of David or the heavenly figure of the Son of Man. The texts reveal Jesus as a very human person who understood himself as a catalyst to bring about eschatological change. Jesus gradually became aware of his "divine mission" (p. 52), but he did not finally realize his union with God until Gethsemane and the cross, where he realized that his earthly ministry had failed to establish God's kingdom. At this point Jesus gave up his plans to God and looked for a divine fulfillment (p. 52). Although some may question this reading of the texts, the strength of Pokorný's presentation is in the breadth of canonical and noncanonical materials used.

Chapter 3 considers how early Christians understood Christology. Pokorný acknowledges that the starting point of this investigation is Easter (i.e., the resurrection). This single circumstance causes Jesus to stand out from others who started movements (the Teacher of Righteousness and John the Baptist). How did the early Christians arrive at a resurrection/exaltation form of Christology? Pokorný approaches the problem by examining the forms of Christology found within the texts. The early Christian understanding of Christ represents a kind of evolution through several expressions, including those that gave special importance to Jesus' sacrificial death, to Son of Man ideas, and to wisdom Christology. Resurrection/exaltation Christology combines aspects of these into "a system consisting of various different elements (subsystems) which in different ways reflects one mighty impulse" (p. 58). This impulse is set into motion by the resurrection of Jesus, an event or experience that is primarily conveyed through testimony. According to Pokorný, the individual resurrection of Jesus represented a new understanding of resurrection within the religious climate of the first century. That is, Jesus' resurrection is not part of the general eschatological resurrection of all people but is interpreted as a precursor to that general resurrection. This understanding creates a "telescopic eschatology" in which the final age has begun with Jesus' resurrection, but awaits its complete

fulfillment (general resurrection) in the future. Indeed, Jesus' resurrection is understood in just such an apocalyptic manner by Paul and the early Christians.

From this foundation, Pokorný builds his overview of the christological system that resulted in the establishment of a resurrection/exaltation Christology. Noting that the Easter experience finds its root in the enthusiastic soil of apocalyptic eschatological expectation, Pokorný reassembles the framework of Christologies upon which the resurrection/exaltation version hangs. The enthusiastic response to the Easter event ultimately gave way to reflection and discussion regarding the implications of the event, which resulted in a verbalization of those implications via christological titles. Pokorný discusses some of these titles, closing with an examination of the passion narrative. He concludes that the passion story "undoubtedly represents a Christology different from that of Jesus' sacrificial death as well as from the Christology of resurrection" (p. 73). Pokorný then reviews the Christologies of early Christian literature, including Paul's writings and the Gospels. Simply stated, Pokorný finds that each subsequent writer reinterpreted the christological formula to best suit the needs of the readers. He concludes this chapter with a discussion of the Christology of the canon. The formation of the Christian canon supported the resurrection/exaltation Christology by including texts that in some ways supported that particular version. Other Christologies are evident in the NT texts as well, but the limited canon effectively ensconced the resurrection/exaltation Christology by preserving the texts that appear to fit best with that view. The others were left to history for scholars to debate. Although some may find his discussion sketchy in places, his arguments are clear and in many cases quite convincing. This well-written little volume will prove useful to any student of Jesus studies and could be used in either a popular or an academic setting.

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Christian Origins and the Language of the Kingdom of God, by Michael L. Humphries. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. Pp. ix + 99. \$32.50 (cloth).

In *Christian Origins and the Language of the Kingdom of God*, Michael Humphries presents the reader with an outstanding example of myth as a social formative act. Myth-making—to borrow a term from Burton Mack, from whom Humphries draws heavily—is an ongoing process of negotiation. Various sects and splinter factions jockey for position as it were and contend for authority and dominance, inclusion or exclusion, through the use of language. Groups do not appear suddenly *ex nihilo*; rather, groups gradually emerge in diverse but related forms as they come to define themselves in relation to other groups in their particular locality. Christianity is no different and therefore should be studied not as something founded on the teachings of a single individual but as a process of social bargaining based on the manipulation of language in the service of group goals.

Humphries begins by illustrating the underlying post-Enlightenment assumption that drives so much of traditional NT scholarship, namely, that the essence or funda-