

Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was. By Gerhard Lohfink. Translated by Linda M. Maloney. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012. xiv + 391 pages. \$39.95.
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Gerhard Lohfink masterfully fuses historical-critical and theological exegesis to both apologetic and catechetical ends. The apologetic: he renews the project of the “New Quest of the Historical Jesus” (1953–85), which took as its goal to secure the continuity between Jesus’ earthly ministry and New Testament Christology, and he expands its reach to include as well the classical Christological dogma of Chalcedon. In marked contrast to the New Quest, however, he locates Jesus completely within and in no way in contrast to the religion of Israel. If this emphasis on Jesus’ Jewishness serves to place Lohfink within the current Third Quest, he parts company with such leading figures in that enterprise as John P. Meier on the issue of method. Lohfink criticizes the manner in which, he believes, Enlightenment presuppositions limit and distort the practice of the historical method, and he insists that only a theological exegesis that trusts the Evangelists can prove adequate to discerning, as Pope Benedict XVI put it, “the only real historical Jesus.”

The subtitle of the book reflects its two parts. What Jesus wanted was to gather Israel into the eschatological people of God constituted by acceptance of the reign of God whose arrival he proclaimed and enacted. Throughout this section Lohfink writes with an eye on the church today as he insists on the concreteness of the reign of God as establishing a new social reality in which an ethic of service is paramount, justice a passionate concern, and relations familial. God’s reign thus inaugurates a silent revolution transformative of the political order. Notable in this section is Lohfink’s treatment of Jesus’ miracles. Critiquing Enlightenment skepticism, at the same time he invokes an analogy with the theology of grace that allows him to embrace natural explanations for Jesus’ healings and exorcisms—the latter involved psychosomatic mental illnesses—while simultaneously recognizing the same phenomena as wholly products of divine agency. He takes the same approach to the Resurrection appearances, in which God used the disciples’ “human productive imaginative power” to produce visions in which the risen Lord was manifest. How this approach would apply to the empty tomb, which Lohfink also affirms, is less clear.

Lohfink finds the Passion narratives particularly helpful in disclosing who Jesus was. Previously reticent with regard to his messianic status because of misguided zealot expectations, with his royal entrance into Jerusalem Jesus implicitly laid claim to the title and went on to exercise his royal responsibility with the temple action the next day. He finally explicitly accepted the title in his trial before the Sanhedrin, where he also identified himself with the

eschatological Son of Man and evoked a charge of blasphemy. Throughout this account Lohfink's option to trust the Evangelists in matters historical comes to the fore; his review of Jesus' final Passover meal and the events of Jesus' last day follows closely the Markan narrative. In this context he proffers a novel argument that the soteriological interpretation of Jesus' death originates with Jesus himself. Faced with Israel's failure to respond to the crisis of the arrival of the reign of God, Jesus offers himself as the covenantal sacrifice for Israel through which God issues the definitive decree of salvation that becomes historical in the ongoing life of the eschatological community. That community, regathered in response to the Resurrection appearances in Galilee and the empty tomb in Jerusalem, lived in intense expectation of the parousia. This expectation was not mistaken but should at all times characterize the church, which lives in the tension between God's "already" and humankind's "not yet." That tension in turn generates the sending, the mission of the church to the world by which the election of Israel becomes a blessing for all nations.

Who then was Jesus? More important than the issue of titles is Jesus' sovereign claim to bring the time of salvation, a claim enacted when he both spoke and acted in the place of God and which the New Testament acknowledges in specifically Jewish ways. Thus the Resurrection is the eschatological demonstration of who Jesus always was, a confession that the New Testament also draws on the protological themes of wisdom and the preexistent Torah to articulate. Having thus countered the deification thesis according to which the New Testament raised a Jewish prophet to divine status, Lohfink concludes by contrasting the reign of God inaugurated by Jesus with utopian faith in progress and human perfectibility.

This important book raises anew the complex fundamental-theological issue of the relationships among faith, belief, and historical reason. Without wholly endorsing Lohfink's position, one may find bracing the challenge he offers to several truisms of contemporary historical exegesis. Further, he teases out the intertextuality among the Old Testament, Jesus, and the New Testament with dazzling finesse. His construction of the eschatological community intended by Jesus invites ecclesiological discussion. Most significantly, he rebuffs supersessionism with a portrait of Jesus as an authoritative and critical interpreter of Torah. Finally, his sensitivity to the theology of the Evangelists provides a resource for Christian spirituality. This is a book worth engaging.

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