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Ruth: A Continental Commentary, by André LaCocque.

I have long been a fan of André LaCocque's work, and this commentary is no exception. Originally written in French for the CAT series, this English version (translated by K.C. Hanson, with the assistance of LaCocque) takes its place in the Continental Commentary series. What is immediately striking about LaCocque's commentary on Ruth is its overt advocacy for a particular orientation to and reading of Ruth. Most commentaries are more restrained, allowing the commentary form to constrain the author's preferred interpretation. LaCocque's commentary, then, is more than a survey of the existing state of scholarship, though it does provide a detailed and comprehensive account of current scholarship. What I particularly appreciated is the inclusion by LaCocque of many of the more marginal readings of Ruth, though he did miss some African ones.

The particular orientation LaCocque advocates is that Ruth is to be read as subversive literature. He repeats this point again and again in his excellent "Introduction," where he catalogues the many and varied ways in which the book of Ruth is subversive. For example, he argues that "[a] book such as Ruth is subversive by definition: it insists on the role of women in the Israelite community; on the Moabite origin of its central heroine and of her illustrious descendant, David; as well as on a liberal interpretation of the Torah" (p. 26). While the first of these subversions is important to LaCocque's particular reading of Ruth, it is the remaining three subversions that are central.

LaCocque argues that Ruth is a hermeneutical contribution to the power struggle of the Second Temple community within which the dominant religio-political position was that of the ethno-orthodox scribes, who legitimated their authority through a conservative and controlling exegesis of the Torah. Ruth enters this polarized and contested social site with a novella which subverts this dominant position by demonstrating a counter-exegesis of the Torah, in which the Torah is characterised by a *hesed* that redeems rather than a power that controls.

LaCocque's advocacy of a particular reading, however, does not prevent him from engaging with the many other readings the remarkable book of Ruth has evoked. LaCocque locates himself carefully within the existing scholarly literature, both within and beyond biblical scholarship, and dialogues with it in detail. Indeed, I found I appreciated other readings more fully precisely because LaCocque engaged with them so carefully in order to make his own position clear. The "Introduction," though a little disorienting in its reiterative construction, does provide an excellent overview of Ruth scholarship, not in the form of a catalogue of accomplishments, but in the form of an extended engagement with a particular interpretive position. This was refreshing and partially redeemed the commentary form for me.

One of the fruits of the death of the author, albeit as LaCocque says a "greatly exaggerated" "death" (p. 14), is that it has given a new generation of biblical scholars the opportunity to actually read the biblical text. The socio-historical questions which gave birth to our discipline were shaped by close and careful readings of the text. But for most of its existence as a modern discipline, socio-historical reconstruction has determined our reading of the text. Postmodern literary critics have, at the very least, returned the text to us, and while some may go no further than close and careful readings of the text, others do move from literary engagement to socio-historical engagement, but this time with their own questions alongside those they have inherited from the discipline. LaCocque's commentary likewise begins with his own attempt to make sense of Ruth as text, a quest which leads him, as it has led others, behind the text to the world that may have produced it, the post-Nehemiah Second Temple setting.

Another significant feature of LaCocque's commentary is his sensitivity to contemporary society and the issues it confronts. Throughout the commentary LaCocque is profoundly aware of "the other," both within the book of Ruth and within our world. Indeed, here and in his other work he allows his present socio-political commitments to shape his reading practice, and for this I commend him. Most biblical scholars hide theirs behind exaggerated claims of neutrality and objectivity. The struggle of women for gender justice, the struggle of exiles and refugees for a place of belonging and acceptance, the struggle of the hungry for food security, the struggle of ethnic minorities for redemptive community, and even our individual socio-psychological struggles to be more human shape LaCocque's interpretive agenda. LaCocque brings these and other contemporary horizons into an encounter with both the biblical text and its possible socio-historical contexts, and finds "a lesson for the modern reader." "It consists in rediscovering that the essence of the Torah is love. When the Law is not interpreted according to the amplification principle that love dictates [i.e., an interpretation that surpasses the letter, that goes beyond what is prescribed], it is stifled and dies" (p. 25).

LaCocque also brings the book of Ruth into dialogue with other biblical texts. As I have indicated, his central argument is that Ruth is a "socio-legal commentary" on the Torah (p. 2). In this view, "many important details of the book are explained by earlier biblical texts underlying them" (pp. 1-2). And while the fundamental texts Ruth re-interprets (or re-activates in the case of Genesis, I would argue) are those of the Torah, the Ruth novella also interacts with many other texts, including other novellas of the same period. LaCocque draws our attention to a range of insightful similarities and differences between them, among which the following is worth quoting.

"In the other novellas of the Second Temple era, the Judean is located in the Diaspora and delivers the country of his or her exile as well as its king, which is the case of the Egyptian pharaoh with Joseph, or the king of Nineveh with Jonah, or again the king of Persia with Esther, to say nothing of the kings of Babylon in contact with Daniel the sage. Ruth represents the inverse position: the foreigner is located in the 'diaspora' in Judah and it is in contact with the foreigner that the Judean realizes himself! If this is not a biting response to the Ezra and Nehemiah of the fifth century, one could hardly imagine a better one. (p. 32)"

In the book of Ruth it is Boaz who signifies the implied audience. "He represents the reader of the fifth century B.C.E." LaCocque's argument is that the Ruth novella "is told to disorient and to reorient him toward a new view and life." But for this to happen, for Boaz to recognize that "the force is in him," as his name indicates, "it is necessary that he encounters Ruth the Moabite" (p. 32).

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