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William E. Arnal

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RELIGION IN CULTURE: STUDIES IN SOCIAL CONTEST AND CONSTRUCTION

The Symbolic Jesus

Historical Scholarship,
Judaism and the Construction
of Contemporary Identity



William Arnal



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William E. Arnal : The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity (Religion in Culture: Studies in Social Contest Construction) before purchasing it in

order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity* (Religion in Culture: Studies in Social Contest Construction):

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful. *The Quest of the Symbolic Jesus* By Loren Rosson III William Arnal has done a Schweitzer of sorts for the new millennium. In 1906 Schweitzer indicted first-quest scholars for making Jesus over in their self-images. Now, ninety-nine years later, Arnal is indicting third-quest scholars for making Jesus into a symbol of contemporary discourse. "Scholarship uses the figure of Jesus as a screen or symbol on which to project contemporary cultural debates," and the acrimony connected to the issue of Jesus' Jewishness masks hidden agendas. Arnal acknowledges agendas on both sides of the field -- from those championing a "Jewish Jesus" (Sanders, Fredriksen, Vermes, Allison, Meier, Wright) and those promoting a more "non-Jewish Jesus" (Funk, Crossan, Patterson, Horsley, Mack, Vaage). But the weight of accusation falls on the former group. Though my own sympathies lie with this group, Arnal isn't being unfair, just exposing agendas which have been less transparent than usual. The latter group have clear agendas which repeat the mistakes of the past, rewriting Jesus in order to validate liberal Christianity -- or dispense with the pesky religion once and for all. This is old news. The agendas of the former group are more difficult to get a handle on. But Arnal nails down these agendas with enviable acumen. Those aggressive about Jesus' Jewishness may be driven by: (1) -- the agenda to save one's scholarly soul from the legacy of German Lutherans. Sanders, Fredriksen, Vermes, etc. have paved the way to a new and distinctive Anglo-American scholarship, free of Bultmannian influence. (2) -- the intent to save one's political soul from any taint of the Holocaust. The Jewish Jesus approaches a stereotype of modern Jews, thereby reclaiming (or insulating) Christianity from complicity in the Shoah. (3) -- the need to keep one's religious sensibilities intact. A Jewish Jesus, ironically, helps maintain a distinctive Christian identity and can even reinforce supersessionism (in cases like Wright and Witherington). (4) -- the goal to preserve one's cultural identity in the face of postmodernism. A Jesus who believed in Torah, the temple, and purity is a formidable weapon against the erosion of social identities, in effect insisting upon cultural stability. However important these agendas are in themselves, the author (rightly) maintains that Jesus, as an historical figure, should have nothing to do with them. Arnal doesn't particularly like the "Jewish Jesus", which perhaps makes it easy for him to spot the agendas associated with it. I'm the opposite, and see through the likes of Crossan and Mack right away. So we learn from each other; no one is agenda-free. Reconstructions of Jesus need to be defended for the right reasons, in either case. This is a nifty book that, while containing objectionable inferences along the way, makes the reader ask the right questions for the right reasons, just as Schweitzer's classic did a century ago. But is Arnal right to conclude that the quest for the historical Jesus should again be abandoned? Of course not. We need the historical Jesus for history's sake. But he's right that Jesus isn't needed to justify covert agendas and make us feel secure about ourselves. 5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. The book to read about Jesus By The syzygos "Jesus" scholars get trotted out in front of the cameras because they're well known or attractive. But the old suspects are tired and their views are well known. This book is different. Not since *Whose Historical Jesus?*, which Arnal co-edited, has a book on Jesus been as fresh, as critically-engaged, and as informative. Read it if you want scholarship by one of the leading scholars of Christian origins today.

It is widely accepted that Jesus was a Jew. However, both Christian and New Testament scholarship have a strong anti-Jewish history. *The Symbolic Jesus* presents the controversies surrounding the Jewishness of Jesus. It examines the insistence among historical Jesus scholars that Jesus was a Jew and the ways this frames the figure of Jesus in ancient Christian literature. The book examines the anti-Jewish legacy of the past and more recent approaches to biblical scholarship. Contemporary identity issues - scholarly, political, religious and cultural - are shown to lie at the heart of the debate.

"Arnal skillfully argues that historical scholarship is always about the present. Yet Arnal is no debunker; he also argues that the contemporary implications of a scholar's work count neither for nor against its validity as historical scholarship. This book is concise, lucid and insightful. Highly recommended." - *Religious Studies About the Author* William Arnal is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada.