



Pagola, José A.

Jesus: An Historical Approximation

Edited by Rafael Luciani; Translated by Margaret Wilde.

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

About the Author

José Antonio Pagola is a professor at St. Sebastian Seminary and at the Faculty of Theology of Northern Spain. He has served as rector of the diocesan seminary and is Vicar General of the same diocese. He has dedicated his life to Biblical studies and Christology and has done research on the historical Jesus for more than 30 year[s]. (From the inside front cover) *Jesus: An Historical Approximation* is the fruit of his years of research on the subject of the historical Jesus.

Background

The original Spanish edition of this book *Jesús. Aproximación histórica* (Madrid: PPC, 2007) caused quite a bit of controversy among Roman Catholics. One of his most vocal critics, Bishop Demetrio Fernández (Bishop of Tarazona) went so far as to say, "El 'Jesús' de Pagola no es el Jesús de la fe de la Iglesia."¹ Those are strong words to say the least! There was a common link among the various criticisms of his work, and that was the view that Pagola had separated the 'Jesus of history' from the 'Christ of faith' and thus presented a portrait of Jesus that did not align properly with the Church's teaching about him. Pagola defended himself against these charges by noting that he had not written a Christology, but rather a work that offered a historical investigation of Jesus. He claimed to have been well within the criteria set forth in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1994) and by using the standard canons of historical inquiry Pagola could only say so much, because history can only say so much. This is no way meant that Pagola rejected the Church's teaching about Jesus, but rather that he accepted it as a tenet of faith, not as the conclusion of historical investigation. Nonetheless, the Conferencia Episcopal Española's la Comisión Episcopal para la Doctrina de la Fe published a note of clarification² on the book which noted what it considered several

¹ <http://www.caminayven.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1161>

² Available online at <http://www.conferenciaepiscopal.es/doctrina/documentos/pagola.pdf>

methodological flaws. "This has led [Pagola] to prepare a new edition, revising the text and, above all, offering a more detailed presentation of [his] study and expanding the final chapter." (16) The edition under review here is the English translation of this revision edited by Rafael Luciani and translated by Margaret Wilde.

Summary

Given this background to the book it should come as no surprise that Pagola affirms and reaffirms his faith commitments many times over in the book's introduction. He's written this book because he wants people to know Jesus better, and not in vague or fuzzy terms, but in all the detail that scientific historical study can provide. He's again clear that his "study of the «historical Jesus» should not be confused with a study of the «Christ of faith» in whom we Christians believe." (17) But in answering the question of why such a study is necessary Pagola says, "The reason is simple. If we believe in Jesus as the Son of God incarnate in our own history, how can we not use all the methods available to us to understand better his historical dimension and his concrete human life? Our faith demands it." (17) Such study, according to Pagola, should awaken our admiration for Jesus and make concrete what otherwise might have been an abstract conception of him.

Pagola presents his study in an easy to read narrative style. His attention to detail is commendable, even if at times it can seem a bit tedious (especially with regard to geography and topography). He sketches a detailed portrait of the social, religious, and political setting in which Jesus was situated before ever moving on to his presentation of Jesus. Regular reference is made to archeological discoveries in the footnotes and Pagola has a knack for vividly describing the minutiae of the locations and activities he addresses, e.g., what houses were made out of, or what roads looked like, or what the average Jew in ancient Galilee would have done as a matter of regular course, etc.

When he comes to Jesus he presents him as a man of his times. As a kid Jesus was doing all the things that the other Jewish kids in his area of Israel were doing. But as an adult Jesus took on a special role and responsibility as an itinerant preacher, healer/exorcist, and prophet of the "reign of God" (Pagola's designation for 'kingdom of God'). Jesus' ministry, while rooted in Israel's tradition, was ultimately informed by his experience of the God whom he called Father. But Jesus was somewhat of a rebel as well. He debated with recognized authorities, disregarded established traditions, and surrounded himself with society's undesirables. Pagola sees Jesus' behavior as deliberate with the intention of announcing that the reign of God is open to everyone. Ultimately Jesus' activities would get him arrested and crucified because the Jewish authorities perceived him as acting against the temple and the Roman authorities perceived him as a threat to the empire. But the story doesn't end at the crucifixion. According to Jesus' followers God had raised him from the dead and exalted him.

Conclusion

Pagola's investigation is pretty standard as far as historical Jesus research goes. He doesn't go so far as to consider each reported healing/exorcism an actual miracle, but he acknowledges that those whom Jesus encountered believed them to have been miracles. Where Pagola's strength

lies is that he recognizes this and doesn't *a priori* rule out the possibility that their understanding was correct. He doesn't dispute the possibility of resurrection, but neither does he affirm that history can prove it actually happened. He's content to describe what Jesus' followers believed happened. I personally have an impossible time separating the 'Jesus of history' from the 'Christ of faith' because he's one and the same person. The same texts that I read to glean information about the 'historical Jesus' are the same texts that present information about the 'Christ of faith.' There is no inherent separation within the texts themselves and to read them in such a manner is to do, I think, violence to them. That said, I can understand the reaction of those who criticized the Spanish edition of this book, but at the same time, Pagola was only conforming to the standards of the field.

There are times, however, when Pagola has to resort to sheer speculation and conjecture, such as in his description of Jesus' childhood. The fact of the matter is that past the infancy narratives (wrongly described as "infancy gospels" on p. 55, n. 1) we have no information about Jesus' childhood, other than the scene from Luke's Gospel where the twelve year old Jesus stays in Jerusalem to listen and ask questions in the temple (Lk. 2:42-52). At the same time, Pagola's claim to have not written a Christology is somewhat undermined by chapter 15 "Exploring the Identity of Jesus" in which he examines the Christological titles: Lord, Messiah, and Son of God as well as different views of Jesus as High Priest and Incarnate Word of God. This is precisely the kind of data that formed the Christologies of yesteryear! In the end, Pagola's treatment of the historical Jesus is informative and easy to read (given the style with which he writes), but ultimately it's nothing new. For those just making their way into historical Jesus studies this would be a good place to start but the more advanced student will probably learn little.