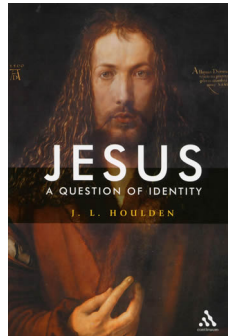


○ REVIEW OF J. L. HOULDEN, *JESUS: A QUESTION OF IDENTITY*

(NEW YORK; CONTINUUM, 2006)

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J.L. Houlden's brief volume on Jesus is written primarily for the lay-person who wants an introduction to the historical, theological, and cultural influences that have surrounded the understanding(s) of Jesus of Nazareth. Assuming both an internal and external standpoint, which are Houlden's terms for the viewpoint of the Christian and non-Christian respectively, he notes the tendency of those who believe in and think about Jesus to remake the first century Galilean in their own image. He closes the first introductory chapter questioning whether we can ever 'identify the 'truth' concerning Jesus.'

In Chapter 2, Houlden begins his chronological inquiry into the way Jesus was understood by the Apostle Paul (chapter 2) and the Gospel writers (chapter 3). He begins by contrasting the difference between modern and ancient persons in terms of their primary interests when it comes to understanding a person, in this case, Jesus. While modern people are primarily concerned with events, then beliefs, the ancients were first concerned with beliefs, then events. Indeed, 'the earliest observable Christianity and the earliest statements about Jesus are in the form of belief rather than history in the modern sense (11).'

Chapter 3 addresses the four Gospels. Early in this chapter, Houlden notes that these gospels are narrative expressions of belief in Jesus on two levels – history and beliefs of his followers. Yet he is quick to clarify that by historical he means a narrative interpretation concerning events in the life of Jesus. In the Ancient Mediterranean, a high degree of freedom in retelling historical events was granted the author. From this rather general overview on the nature of the Gospels, Houlden moves to summarize some of the central terms used by the Evangelists that help indicate their (and their communities) beliefs about Jesus. Of particular interest here is the chronological progression from Mark through John (the common scholarly consensus) and the development of understandings about Jesus revealed in the terms each Evangelist uses.

In Chapter 4 Houlden moves from the question of early belief in Jesus to '[w]hat lay behind the beliefs that so quickly arose?' He mentions briefly three sources of historical information about Jesus: Gospels, First Century Mediterranean culture, and Greco-Roman literature. Each of these three sources contributes to what Houlden calls various 'profiles of Jesus.' Houlden is careful to note that all historical reports are actually interpretations of some historical events, rendering exact knowledge of what happened in the past difficult, if not impossible. He ends the chapter, however, acknowledging that we do have access to some historical knowledge, especially in relation to events attested by multiple sources. Such an approach to examining the Gospels offers a style of belief that moves beyond the question 'Who is Jesus?' to 'What did he stand for?'

Having discussed belief in Jesus among the earliest Christ-followers and attempts to examine Jesus historically, Houlden reminds the reader in Chapter 5 that, for the ancients, there was no division between history and belief, as there is for us. Chapter 5 is his attempt to help us put these two, seemingly disparate spheres together. His method for such a fusion is to ask, how could this person Jesus have come to be thought of as God in the first century Mediterranean culture? Houlden focuses primarily, if not solely, on Jewish monotheism as the atmosphere in which devotion to Jesus emerged. By citing examples of mediators of the divine in Jewish thought, he suggests that reverence for Jesus as such a mediator merged into worship as the first Christ-followers began to point out distinctions between themselves and their Jewish cousins.

Once commitment and devotion were established, the need for explanation arose. In Chapter 6, Houlden explores the second century development of explanations of the divine-human nature of Jesus. He argues that in the second century, Christianity had moved from the Jewish culture into the Greco-Roman. Having briefly described three major aspects of Greco-Roman culture (religion as salvation, Platonist perceptions, and the chain of being), Houlden focuses in on two major questions dealt with in this period: how can Jesus be seen as divine without making nonsense of the claim to monotheism and how can one conceptualize Jesus, as God, in human form? The first question was the topic addressed in the Nicene Creed while the latter was addressed in the Chalcedonian definition.

Houlden is careful to point out, however, in Chapter 7, that the composition of the Creeds did not obliterate variant beliefs about Jesus. Indeed, he correctly asserts that some of those early variant beliefs persist until the present day. Likewise, however, the Creedal formulas remain with us. In this chapter, Houlden briefly addresses the shift in Medieval thinking about Jesus from the victorious savior of the world to the 'Jesus who loves us.' Such 'emotive realism' stressed the relational aspect of the risen Christ to the individual believer and, it seems, became one impetus for the reformation that was to come.

This individualism is seen most forcefully in the autonomy of the human and of knowledge that developed during and after the Reformation and the Enlightenment. In Chapter Eight, Houlden discusses how the two primary aspects of Jesus research, history and faith, have always been a part of the Christian tradition. Here he introduces the major works on historical Jesus of Schweitzer and Strauss, and the monumental work of Baur on diversity in early Christianity, noting chiefly their treatment of historical knowledge. Houlden also discusses those who were less interested in history and more in the abstract theological perspective. Those who viewed Jesus, with various emphases, as 'the historical instance of eternally valid spiritual realities' such as Kant and Tillich are compared with various other modes of understanding Jesus' nature, such as the exemplar and kenotic theories. This is perhaps the most challenging chapter in the book,

simply because of the enormous amount of information Houlden attempts to communicate therein.

In the final chapter, Houlden moves toward conclusion by suggesting that any serious study of Jesus must stand on the shoulders of history and faith, and in some way, must attempt to fit these aspects together. Though, he concedes, reconciliation of history and faith is unlikely. Yet, he concludes by suggesting that the Gospel of John may show us the way forward; that of relating the stories of Jesus in a meaningful way that ultimately has practical effect upon the hearer's life.

My major point of critique lies in Chapters Seven and Eight. After Houlden leaves the New Testament and early Church, he takes on so much material that navigating these chapters can be very difficult. His attempt to cover medieval approaches to belief in Jesus in ten pages, for example, creates a serious gap between the formation of the Creeds and the age of science and reason. Likewise, Chapter Eight comes across like a shotgun approach: he scattered historical Jesus research throughout while trying to maintain the structure of contrasts between history and faith.

The final chapter also leaves something to be desired. After this brief overview of the history of Jesus research, I had hoped for a robust conclusion citing recent studies like those of N.T. Wright or James D.G. Dunn, as well as some projection for future studies. Instead, Houlden reaffirms the need to hold history and faith together in tension while looking for the practical effect of Jesus in the individual's life; a rather weak ending for an otherwise good book.

In spite of these criticisms, *Jesus: A Question of Identity* has many strengths. Its highly readable style and lack of scholarly jargon, along with its reasonably short chapters, make it pleasurable to read. This book would be ideal for an adult education class or an undergraduate course on the study of Jesus.