Critical and biblical

by Raymond C. Van Leeuwen in the November 18, 1998 issue

By Andre LaCocque and Paul Ricouer.Translated by David Pelauer, Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies. *(University of Chicago Press, 441 pp.)*

Old Testament scholar Andre LaCocque and philosopher Paul Ricoeur form a model cross-disciplinary team. The two French-Americans, longtime colleagues at the University of Chicago, conduct a friendly and forceful conversation about things that matter. They here offer a double reading of a number of Old Testament texts, moving from historical exegesis and textual trajectories (LaCocque) to historically informed philosophical interpretation (Ricoeur).

Their essays revisit an often-asked question: What does it mean for postbiblical people to read and think biblically? LaCocque and Ricoeur remind us that serious thought of any kind can neither ignore nor escape the issues raised by the marriage of Greco-Roman philosophy and biblical Christianity. Nor can reason ignore the biblical texts themselves. LaCocque and Ricoeur demonstrate that Old Testament texts still engender thought.

Two fine chapters juxtapose the law "thou shalt not kill" with the story of God's command that Abraham sacrifice his son, Isaac. The authors pull no punches. Like Kierkegaard, they insist that religion not be reduced to morality, and they explore the limits of law and the hidden reality of God. Ricoeur grapples biblically with Kant and the modern war between law derived from the self and that derived from outside the self--a conflict that pervades the consciousness of ethicists and ordinary folk alike. Seeking a "theology of love," he sees "loving obedience" as a way to preserve both human freedom and divine sovereignty. Here and elsewhere readers should be prepared to think not only biblically, but philosophically.

Though both authors read the texts as Christians, LaCocque makes extensive use of Jewish exegetical traditions and Ricoeur dialogues with thinkers like Rosenzweig and Levinas. Their choice of the Old Testament as a wellspring for thinking is itself important, given Christian tendencies to devalue the Hebrew Bible. Says Ricoeur,

"The efforts of Christian theology to dehellenize itself cannot take place apart from a certain rejudization [sic] of its ideas."

Though the book treats only eight biblical texts, the results are rich. Here is LaCocque on Psalm 22 ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"):

> The Psalmist is engaged in Yhwh's struggle against the forces of evil and destruction. She begs for justice, which is not only a social notion. To bring about justice is to restore shalom in all its aspects. . . . In contrast, the rich and the happy few are in no need of justice, therefore the "poor" look at them with mistrust, for they constantly skirt the danger of becoming complacent, callous, self-satisfied, and of eventually contributing to injustice by not fighting against it. . . . They need not ask for this day's bread.

Again, "Life is lived between the two poles of lament and praise. . . . Plea is accompanied by praise; praise, by plea. Plea without praise is despair, absence of hope; praise without plea is complacency, arrogance."

Ricoeur responds to Psalm 22 this way: "Prayer is the most primitive and original act of language that gives form to religious experience. . . . We might even risk saying that if there is a means by which religious experience lets itself be said beyond any theology, any speculation, it is through prayer." For readers of theology such a declaration gives pause. With rare exceptions, theologians do not think much about prayer.

In a literary-historical reading of the sensuous "Song of Songs," LaCocque discovers a fresh female voice in praise of eros and "subversive" of ordinary Israelite marital morality. For this subversive reading, Ricoeur chides him with gentle humor, pointing out that such readings are quite the rage now. Ricoeur himself plunges learnedly into the history of the allegorical readings that have dominated interpretations of this text for some 2,000 years. His efforts to distinguish the "nuptial metaphor" from the "erotic" are rather vague. But he convincingly makes the necessary but often ignored distinction between exegetical technique, which tries to capture the original meaning of the text, and the liturgical or devotional use of the Song to give language to otherwise ineffable aspects of the divine-human relation.

For Ricoeur the biggest change in the reading of the Song came not with the Reformation but with the cultural reevaluation of sexuality. From being merely tolerated, and then only within marriage, sexuality came to be regarded as a free-floating good in and of itself. This change accounts for the almost overwhelming triumph of the erotic reading of the Song.

One might argue, however, that some healthy aspects of this change began with the Reformation's renewed attempt to "think biblically." As Ricoeur's quotations suggest, allegory was often fueled by a quasi-gnostic anxiety about creation, including bodies. Here one wonders, with the Reformers, about the extent to which the marriage between Athens/Alexandria and Jerusalem led Christians to read scripture in ways counter to the biblical premise that creation is first of all good.

The treatment of the divine name in Exodus 3:14 ("I will be who I will be") also draws attention to the uneasy relation of Jerusalem to Athens, and of historical criticism to other types of thinking. Like most exegetes, LaCocque is reluctant to grant much philosophical weight to this puzzling usage of the Hebrew verb "to be, happen." (Oddly, his reading here seems not exegetical enough--theories about the meaning of the tetragrammaton per se do not constitute exegesis.) Ricoeur, however, pursues the fundamental Western question of Being and beings raised by Exodus 3:14.

In sum, this book offers wisdom and insight in a time when biblical reading and thinking are hotly disputed or ignored. It will stimulate healthy debate and hard questions.