

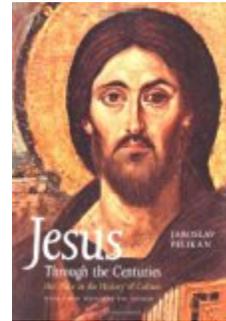
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jaroslav Pelikan. *Jesus Through The Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*. New Haven and London, England: Yale University Press, 1999. xxi + 270 pp. \$14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-07987-6.

Reviewed by Keith Harper (Associate Professor of Church History. Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary)

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Jesus Through the Centuries, for the Twenty-first Century

Jesus of Nazareth once asked, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?” (Matthew 22:42). It was a probing question that did not allow for neutrality. That same question still carries a penetrating sense of urgency and Jaroslav Pelikan’s *Jesus Through The Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* offers insight into the various ways that people over the past twenty centuries have addressed this issue.

Doubtless, *Jesus Through the Centuries* is a most unusual book. Originally published in 1985, this book quickly achieved an enviable status. Pelikan captures the complexities of an intriguing and enormously important historical figure, no mean feat in itself, and shows readers how each generation interprets the life and message of Jesus Christ in their own unique way. He first presented the thoughts, impressions and observations that became *Jesus Through the Centuries* in the William Clyde DeVane Lectures at Yale University. This setting led him to believe that his work offered something to a general audience as well as academic specialists, and he was right. Happily, Yale University Press agreed to reissue this masterpiece for a new, twenty-first century audience.

Pelikan’s work provides eighteen cultural images of Jesus over the past two thousand years that explore an ironic facet of Christianity. The writer of Hebrews proclaimed, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8) and Jesus himself often preached on unity. Yet, historical, theological and cultural inter-

pretations of Jesus depict a Christ that is eclectic and diversified, not homogeneous and static. For instance, Constantine’s Jesus was a conquering king while most first century believers saw him as a “rabbi,” unlike any other. Pelikan addressed this difficulty by choosing “The Beautiful, The True and The Good,” as a framework to keep his differing, often conflicting, images of Christ from becoming too divergent. Consequently, Jesus the “Cosmic Christ” who compels humanity to question their universe paves the way for Jesus “The Teacher of Common Sense.” At the same time, Jesus “The Son of Man” empathizes with humanity’s sufferings and exhibits his transcendent love for humanity, both as Jesus “Christ Crucified” and Jesus “The Bridegroom of the Soul.” Thus, as amazing as it might seem, the historical Jesus forges a common link for a host of unlikely fellows ranging from the Apostle Peter and Tertullian to David Hume and Thomas Jefferson.

Jaroslav Pelikan’s name is held in the highest regard by Church historians, and rightfully so. His works are always thoughtful and written in clear, graceful prose. In *Jesus Through the Centuries* he resists the temptation to merely describe Jesus at random points over the past two millennia. Pelikan’s Jesus has not somehow managed to survive the ages. Rather, this panoramic view of Church history portrays a Jesus who has thrived through the ages and continues to do so. Yet, in describing Christ over time, Pelikan also gives readers a glimpse into his own soul. In the book’s preface he says, “I think I have always

wanted to write this book” (p. xv). Readers everywhere should be glad he did. This book is a masterful union of heart with mind that reflects Jaroslav Pelikan’s vast erudition and personal piety. Moreover, one suspects that of all his books *Jesus Through the Centuries* may be his personal favorite. It has sold over 100,000 copies and was his first of his many works translated into Slavic languages.

Finally, reading this book should leave readers with at least two impressions. On the one hand, it is refreshing to read a work that was obviously a labor of love for the author. Jaroslav Pelikan is more than an author; he is

a craftsman who knows his craft well. On the other hand, this book may leave thoughtful readers more than a bit miffed at professional academics. If Pelikan can produce a readable, entertaining work on such a far-ranging, difficult topic, one can only wonder why *Jesus Through the Centuries* is an “exception” to general academic publishing norms and not the rule.

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