

André LACOCQUE, Professor Emeritus of Hebrew Bible at Chicago Theological Seminary, died peacefully surrounded by his family on January 28, 2022.

Born in Liège, Belgium in 1927, as a teenager during World War II, and a member of a small Protestant community (Église Protestante Unie de Belgique; 1 to 2% of Catholic Belgium), he was deeply marked by the Shoah (the “catastrophe”) that afflicted the similarly small Jewish minority community in Belgium. With the German occupation in 1940 (when he was 13), the synagogues (including that of Liège) were desecrated, and soon all 65,000 to 70,000 Jews were ordered to be deported – at first to camps in south of France, to Gurs, then to death camps (primarily Auschwitz). But less than half of the Jews were deported. Why? Because most of them were hidden and saved by their neighbors in Belgium, including by the Protestants and their pastors, among whom André LaCocque’s father.

This experience deeply marked the young teenager, André LaCocque, as he again and again emphasized some 80 years later when presenting and discussing his book, *Jesus the Central Jew: His Times and His People* (2015). He and his family had Jewish friends and neighbors. Why were they so harshly persecuted by the Nazis? Why many disappeared (45% died in death camps)? This question haunted André LaCocque’s father so much so that, following the guidance of Jewish friends whom he contributed to hide, he plunged into a study of the Jewish faith, and even though he was a pastor, he converted to Judaism – subsequently “making *Aliyah*,” the formal immigration of Jews to Israel, where he remained until his death.

As André repeatedly said, this event oriented his entire scholarly life. His father pressured him to follow suit and to convert to Judaism. But he resisted his pressure, because of the person of Jesus. But he did not do so lightly. Remaining a Christian against his father’s wish was a decision based upon in-depth studies of the biblical and Jewish tradition in which Jesus the Jew was rooted. So, he studied *Jewish Literature* (becoming proficient in Hebrew and Aramaic in all their forms in the Hebrew Bible, Midrash, Talmud, along with Greek), first at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1951-53 and 1961-62) and the Rabbinic School of Paris, all the while studying at the University of Strasbourg for his PhD in Jewish Literature (1957), then for his ThD in Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (1961), even as he was beginning to teach at the Faculté Protestante Universitaire de Bruxelles (Belgium), where he was professor from 1957 to 1968.

André LaCocque’s response to the Shoah is first found in his initial book, *Pérennité d’Israël: croire - penser – espérer* (1964), which emphasizes the permanence of Israel based upon its faith, thought, and hope. With *Le devenir de Dieu: Commentaire biblique* (1967; *The Becoming of God: A Biblical Commentary*, on Exodus 1-4), LaCocque sets up what will be the complex framework for all his works in biblical studies. On the one hand, this book presents an erudite, verse by verse *exegesis* of these four chapters of Exodus – in this case making use of archaeology, epigraphy, textual and historical criticism (including references to 14<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Egyptian literature). In it LaCocque often cites modern *critical exegetical* commentaries of Exodus. This sophisticated analysis seeks to uncover what the text referred to in its original context and what it meant – as is commonly done in critical exegesis. But soon (often without warning) LaCocque’s comments change direction, quoting and referring to interpretations of these chapters in Josephus, midrash (Midrash Rabbah, etc.), Targum, Talmud, Rashi, etc.; that is,

in traditional Jewish interpretations of Exodus through the centuries. From this perspective, the book of Exodus presents the history in which God and Israel/humans interact; a history in which humans need God and God need humans (“[l’histoire] dans laquelle l’homme a besoin de Dieu et Dieu a besoin de l’homme,” 10]. In so doing, he goes back to the roots of the Midrashic and Talmudic Jewish understanding of God, not as a “God who is” (the Greek view), but as a “God who becomes” together with God’s people. “Dieu n’est pas, mais il devient” – as the Jewish philosopher Léon Brunschvicq taught at the Sorbonne until 1940 [when he took refuge in southern France, but not without leaving traces of his teaching at the Rabbinic School of Paris, in which LaCocque studied] – an understanding of God comparable to the one strikingly presented by Henry Slonimsky in his 1956 essay “The Philosophy Implicit in the Midrash” (one of the first things that LaCocque made me read). This is the God of Jesus, as he will emphasize later.

In short, from the beginning, LaCocque was bringing together “exegesis” and “philosophy” – or more precisely “exegesis” and “*hermeneutic*” (Ricoeur’s term), i.e., the meaning of the text for the believers/rabbis/Jews/Christians as readers in their particular contexts. This was the twofold ground upon which he built his remarkable and prolific research and publications.

In the fall of 1966, as *Le devenir de Dieu* was just being published, André LaCocque (together with his wife, Claire, and their children, Pierre-Emmanuel, Michel, and Elisabeth) arrived for a first year of teaching at Chicago Theological Seminary; this was during a sabbatical from the Faculté Protestante Universitaire de Bruxelles, to which he returned during 1967-68 before being permanently appointed at CTS in 1968. During 1966-67, the CTS New Testament scholar Otto Betz and LaCocque struck a deep friendship built on similar scholarly orientations. While for LaCocque the academic study of the Hebrew Bible should only be done in light of its reception in the Jewish tradition, for Betz the New Testament should only be interpreted in light of the Judaism of its time – especially apocalyptic Judaism and the Dead Sea Scrolls. During that year, LaCocque and Betz envisioned an original teaching and research center, that they established as part of CTS Doctorate of Religion program a Center of Jewish-Christian Studies, with the participation of scholars from the Oriental Institute [University of Chicago] and the nearby Spertus College of Judaica in Chicago [a center broadened in 2010 into the present Center for *Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Studies*].

As it happened in 1966-67, I was studying for a year at CTS as a Fulbright scholar in preparation for my minor in “Jewish studies and the New Testament” at the University of Geneva. Naturally, I was eagerly following all the seminars offered by Betz, LaCocque, and their colleagues... who graciously invited me to finish my doctorate in their nascent program. And so, I, Daniel Patte, became LaCocque’s first doctoral student. And today, as a Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies, New Testament and Christianity at Vanderbilt University, it is my honor to write these words in remembrance of my rabbi/teacher.

With the establishment of the Center of Jewish-Christian Studies, André LaCocque as its director was in a position to develop his far-ranging scholarly contributions, as his long list of publications (below) shows. He continued to practice *exegesis* (see his exegetical commentaries both in French and English in renowned series on the books of *Daniel*, *Ruth*, and *Zechariah*). But from the beginning he felt unduly constrained in this kind of scholarship, both while writing and

of course while teaching. Even in his “historical critical studies” – emphasizing the archaeology of the biblical texts, their original meanings – LaCocque cannot refrain from constantly referring to the reception of the biblical texts, primarily the receptions by rabbis and the Jewish community through the centuries.

Find below a list of LaCocque’s books (excluding his many articles). Each would be worth particular comments for their contributions it makes both to the exegesis and the (Jewish) hermeneutic of a particular book of the Hebrew Bible. It is enough here to say a few words about two of these which are well representative of LaCocque’s amazing contributions.

First, regarding *Thinking Biblically* (1998), we need to note that this collaborative work was the fruit of a deep and fruitful dialogue and friendship with Paul Ricoeur (which began when Ricoeur was appointed as University of Chicago, 1971, where he taught until 1991, and lasted until his death in 2005). Indeed, their wives, Simone Ricoeur and Claire LaCocque, were also involved in this dialogue and friendship until Simone’s death (1998). Ricoeur wrote prefaces for several of LaCocque’s books. Ultimately, they wrote together *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (French [Aline Patte, translation of LaCocque’s contribution] *Penser la Bible*, 1998). This is an extraordinary book in which they emphasize the distinctiveness of their respective discipline (historical critical biblical scholarship and philosophical hermeneutic) only to underscore the extent to which Ricoeur carefully based his hermeneutical interpretation on a careful critical exegesis of the biblical text and the extent to which LaCocque was not satisfied with his critical exegetical interpretation of the biblical text as long as it did not account for its relationship with the hermeneutical readings in the Jewish tradition in all of its forms. This overlapping of their concerns led to a remarkable dialogue and an extraordinary contribution to the study of key texts of the Hebrew Bible from Genesis and Exodus 20, to the Song of Songs. As soon as one reads it, one can understand why this book won the prestigious University of Chicago Gordon J. Laing Prize (1999), and that it was translated into eight languages (in addition to French and English).

Second, *Jesus the Central Jew* (2015; French, 2018) is also noteworthy. As he emphasized in his excellent presentations of this book (see recordings of them on YouTube),<sup>1</sup> this book comes back to the roots of his academic work, namely his father’s pressure on him as a teenager to convert to Judaism. After a life of study of Jewish thought and Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, he could answer his father: there is no need to convert to Judaism, because Jesus was a Jew, indeed “a central Jew.” This book contributes to the quest for the historical Jesus, but in a very distinct way. Instead of identifying in the gospels the features which are *unlike the Judaism of his time* (which according to New Testament scholar such as Norman Perrin and most of the participants to “Jesus seminar”... since accordingly such traditional Jewish features were simply projected on Jesus by the gospel writers and the early church), LaCocque squarely affirms that *Jesus was a Jew of his time* (indeed “the central Jew” of his time). Then from this perspective in the synoptic Gospels, what represents/reflects the historical Jesus is what can be shown to be found in the Judaism of the first century CE, and should be understood in terms of these Jewish traditions. Thus by this book, LaCocque fundamentally challenges New Testament scholars specialized in the traditional modern researches on the historical Jesus. And yet this book is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tngrbWUM9U> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3Loi3BOAIM>

published by the Society of Biblical Literature, which sponsors these researches, because one cannot ignore André LaCocque's wide ranging scholarship not only on the Hebrew Bible but also on Judaism, as represented by the long list of his publications.

*La pérennité d'Israël* (1966)

*Le devenir de Dieu: Commentaire biblique* (1967)

*Le livre de Daniel: Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament 15b* (1976)

*The Book of Daniel* (1979)

*But as for me: the question of election in the life of God's people today* (1979)

*The Jonah Complex* (with Pierre Emmanuel Lacocque) (1981)

*Zacharie 9-14* (in *Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament*; 11c; 1981).

*Daniel et son temps: recherches sur le mouvement apocalyptique juif au IIe siècle avant Jésus-Christ* (1983)

*The feminine unconventional: four subversive figures in Israel's tradition* (1990)

*Jonah* (1990)

*Jonah: a psycho-religious approach to the prophet* (with Pierre Emmanuel LaCocque) (1990)

*Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (with Paul Ricoeur, and David Pellauer, translation) 1998.

[University of Chicago Gordon J. Laing Prize, 1999] translated in nine languages including French, *Penser la Bible* (1998, Aline Patte, translation of LaCocque's English contribution).

*Romance, she wrote: a hermeneutical essay on the Song of songs* (1998)

*Le livre de Ruth* (2004)

*Ruth: A Continental Commentary* (2004)

*The Trial of Innocence: Adam, Eve, and the Yahwist* (2006)

*Esther Regina: a Bakhtinian reading* (2008)

*The Captivity of Innocence* (2010)

*Jesus the Central Jew: His Times and His People (SBL Early Christianity and Its Literature Book 15)* (2015; French edition 2018)

*Work and Creativity: A Philosophical Study from Creation to Postmodernity* (2019)

*Onslaught against Innocence: Cain, Abel, and the Yahwist* (2021)

*The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (2021)