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Book Review:

*Encounter with the New  
Testament: An Interdisciplinary  
Approach*

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009  
by

Russell Pregeant

Reviewer:

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This present volume<sup>1</sup> is an abridgement and updating of a previous work published by Pregeant in 1995. Pregeant establishes that one of the aims of the book is that it will be used in an academic setting, where one's study of the New Testament does not presuppose a particular

religious commitment (1). He offers a brief discussion of the origin and contents of the New Testament and of matters of translations, manuscripts, and textual criticism (2–6). This is followed by an overview of some ways of reading the Bible. In chapter 1, Pregeant explains the nature, strengths, and limitations of historical, theological and ideological, psychological, and literary approaches to the study of the New Testament and informs the reader that his own approach rests on the use of two methods: historical criticism and a moderate version of reader-response analysis (18). From this point on, the book is divided into four main parts: (1) "Before the New Testament"; (2) "The Gospels and Acts"; (3) "The Pauline Corpus"; and (4) "The General Letters and Revelation." In part 1, chapters 2–4, Pregeant offers a treatment of "the historical contexts within which Jesus lived, the early tradition was transmitted, and the writings finally emerged" (24).

"Christian Beginnings in Context" is the subject matter of chapter 2. Pregeant discusses some features of Hebrew monotheism and of Greek philosophy. He offers an overview of the story of ancient Israel; the rise of Hellenistic religion, philosophy, and culture; Israel's encounter with Hellenism; and the impact the latter made on postexilic Judaism (25–44). He also discusses the Roman imperial period during which Christianity emerged and shows how the Roman occupation of Palestine, the continuation of Jewish tradition, and Rome's adoption of many aspects of Hellenistic culture affected the emergence of Christianity (45–53). In chapter 3, "The Gospel, Jesus, and the Earliest Tradition," Pregeant

<sup>1</sup> This review was published by Review of Biblical Literature (*SBL* 5/ 2010).  
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addresses the relationship between the Gospels vis-à-vis the historical person of Jesus. He proposes that, to learn something about the actual person Jesus from the Gospels, one has to “distinguish between expressions of faith and the historical realities that lie behind those expressions” (58). For Pregeant, finding the “historical Jesus” is tantamount to recovering the earliest level of the Jesus tradition (60–61). To this effect, he discusses some criteria for identifying teaching in the Gospels that comes from the “historical Jesus” (61–82).

Chapter 4 focuses on “The Resurrection Faith and the Expanded Tradition.” Pregeant examines three types of resurrection accounts; discusses the origin, meaning, and expression of the resurrection faith; and offers a treatment on the process through which Jesus’ death came to be viewed as an atoning/redemptive event. He discusses the expansion process of the Jesus tradition and how this brought about the formation of orthodox Christology (85–96).

Pregeant concludes part 1 with a discussion of the “Sociology of the Jesus Movement” and a discussion of the relationship between “Christianity and the Social Order” (98–100). In parts 2–4, Pregeant approaches the canonical books as whole, integrated, literary works. Part 2 comprises chapters 5–8 and focuses on the Gospels and Acts. Pregeant devotes one chapter to each Gospel and treats Luke - Acts as a single two - volume work. He explains the difference between “narrative criticism” and “reader -response” criticism and locates his approach to reading the four Gospel narratives and Acts within the latter.

For each Gospel, Pregeant offers a brief treatment of authorship, date, and place of composition; points to look for in the narrative; and an example of reader - response at work in the way he approaches the text. In addition, he demonstrates how other approaches have been and can be applied to treat issues that arise from study of the Gospels and Acts. For example, in chapter 5 he discusses Mark and liberation, as well as free will, determinism, and the power of God (124–26).

Chapter 6 contains discussions of some aspects of a feminist reading of Matthew and of issues that arise from a postcolonial reading of the Gospel of Matthew (142–44). Chapter 7 addresses theological issues such as the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection and the rule of God and the hope of Israel, as well as how a deconstructionist reading of theme of poverty and riches functions in Luke -Acts (166–71). In chapter 8, Pregeant demonstrates an application of Bultmann’s existential

interpretation and of Jungian psychology to the Gospel of the John and offers a brief treatment on the Johannine Logos and ecological theology (186–90).

He concludes part 2 by discussing some issues that relate to the canon of the New Testament Part 3, chapters 9–13, is concerned with the Pauline corpus. First, Pregeant discusses some of the methodological issues, such as the relationship between the Paul's letters, the book of Acts, and the "historical" Paul; the authenticity of the letters; and chronologies of Paul's life. Then he uses a modified reader-response method in approaching the "authentic" letters and applies additional modifications in his treatment of the "disputed" letters. For each undisputed letter, chapters 9–11, Pregeant seeks to reconstruct the story behind it, offers points to look for, and provides notes on a reading of the letter from a reader-response perspective.

Chapter 12 deals with "Perspectives on Paul," where Paul's theology takes center stage. Chapter 13 deals with the "disputed" letters. There Pregeant follows a similar methodology, but he refrains from reconstructing the story behind the "disputed" letters because of the doubts around Pauline authorship (269). He concludes this section by showing how conflicting interpretations of Paul's writings have existed from early on. In part 4, chapters 14–15, Pregeant offers a very brief treatment on five writings that he considers to be on the margins of the canon because they appeared on one or more canonical lists: 1 Clement, Didache, Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas. In chapter 14 he treats Hebrews, James, 1–2 Peter, Jude, and 1–3 John using a similar methodology he applies for the "authentic" letters. Chapter 15 presents a similar but more extended treatment of the Revelation to John. He concludes the section by discussing the necessity of hermeneutics.

This is indeed an excellent introductory manual for the study of the New Testament. Pregeant presents a wide range of concepts in a clear and methodical fashion. He finds great balance in discussing different approaches to New Testament study, deals fairly with diverging opinions, and always clarifies his own position on an issue. The study questions at the end of each chapter offer an opportunity for review and further research of the concepts discussed and constitute a valuable tool for students and teachers. Pregeant's demonstration of the application and interaction of historical criticism and reader-response criticism to the New Testament is very helpful. A matter for discussion concerns the

aim of the book vis-à-vis Pregeant's moderate reader-response approach.

Pregeant intends this book to be used primarily in settings in which a student is able to encounter the New Testament with the freedom to decide what to make of the text and keep religious commitment secondary (1–2). If moderate reader-response criticism places some limits on what a New Testament text can mean as the “text gives directions to the reader” (16), how should one reconcile the guidance the text provides with the “connections” that individuals will and/or should make between the New Testament writings and their lives?

To what extent is it possible to encounter the New Testament and not be transformed by it? Elsewhere, Pregeant proposes that a genuine encounter with the New Testament cannot occur “without all owing it to engage us in a struggle for meaning and truth” (19). His stance is therefore potentially confusing. Further, by restricting the use primarily to an “academic” setting, the author potentially and unnecessarily limits the readership of a helpful introductory manual to the study of the New Testament. Perhaps the author could have done more to explain what he means by “academic.” These comments notwithstanding, Pregeant's *Encounter with the New Testament* is a valuable contribution to New Testament scholarship and will be a useful tool to students of the New Testament.