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Jesus Christ Divided: Solving the Mystery of the New Testament

Michael LaFond
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LaFond's enthusiasm for his representation of Saint Paul is infectious; he lays out his ideas in the manner of a scholastic mystery.

Michael LaFond's fascinating, bold religious history *Jesus Christ Divided* reimagines Paul the Apostle's life and ministry.

Asserting that the New Testament's Pauline letters don't reflect a decades-long church-building project, but in fact describe a two-year successful proselytizing tour around the Mediterranean, this book suggests that Paul was so successful because he was able to persuade Jewish Christians in places like Rome and Corinth with his message via convincing rhetoric and support for Jesus. The book finds evidence of Paul's efforts in the New Testament—alongside trace evidence for the competing, more orthodox, less successful work of James's faction, also represented by Peter and Barnabas.

Focused on the short time period of Paul's work, in which his opposition was a single group "pursuing him around the Aegean Sea," the book builds its case through a close reading of Paul's letters. This limited material is supported by extrabiblical texts, including the Didache and noncanonical letters. A consideration of the proper order of the Pauline letters and their authenticity comes in; here, all of the letters attributed to Paul contribute to a full understanding of his work, which comes to seem less about a defined theology than they are about political opportunism.

In tracing Paul's life, the book takes a chronological approach, beginning with his Damascus conversion, through his time in Arabia, and on through his ministry. This is complemented by moves through his letters, which are paused to deliver commentary on the complex cultural structures of the early Jewish Christian period, highlighting the differences between groups like the Sadducees, Pharisees, and the Essenes. Extensive footnotes, appendixes, and notes further clarify the book's positions.

LaFond's enthusiasm is infectious. He lays out his ideas in the manner of a scholastic mystery, with clear notes about what James and his followers are up to: "James was doing what Jesus had not achieved; he was taking political power." Frequent pauses move beyond the specifics of the biblical criticism to set ideas in a larger context—to show how, for example, "James showed open hostility towards the rich …. insisted that faith alone will not save, and required the strictest adherence to the law." Paul's letters are also considered alongside the gospels to show how they reflect the same tensions seen between James and Paul. The result is a compelling text that ably makes its case: the time frame of Paul's work ought to be reconsidered.

Reconsidering Saint Paul as a great Jewish politician, *Jesus Christ Divided* is a compelling and complex religious text that posits a new way of understanding Paul's ministry in the early church.

JEREMIAH ROOD (November 2, 2021)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book and paid a small fee to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. Foreword Reviews and Clarion Reviews make no guarantee that the publisher will receive a

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