Theology

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Christ at the Center: The Early Christian Era, by Lisa D. Maugans Driver (Westminster John Knox, 2009), 259 pp. $29.95 'pbk'.

Chronologically the first book in The Westminster History of Christian Thought series, Christ at the Center is written like a textbook or study guide, replete with Questions for Discussion and Suggested Further Reading that follow each chapter. It is also filled with shaded text boxes that define terms, introduce texts and characters, or quote creeds. Yet what separates this book more fundamentally from other books on the early Church is its presentation of Christian doctrine more broadly conceived. Rather than presenting only a succession of disputes with heretics and the decisions of ecumenical councils, Maugans Driver includes substantial discussions of Scripture, liturgy, asceticism, and Christian identity.

The first of Christ at the Center's three parts covers the Second Temple Period and is the weakest. It begins with a cursory survey of Old Testament history that seeks to present the Messianic expectations fulfilled in Jesus. In the interests of making this material more readable and the connections between Old and New Testaments more obvious, this first chapter should not have been allowed to stand on its own. Rather, its contents could perhaps have been incorporated into the relevant sections of the following two chapters on Jesus and his disciples. Thus, space could be freed up to expand the single chapter on Christology with which the book culminates. Important figures in the Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries such as Leo the Great and the Cappadocian Fathers are either not mentioned at all or only in passing.

In order to make of Christ at the Center a more coherent narrative with a unified argument, Christology could have been put at the center of the book. This is meant not only structurally—Christology is mostly discussed at the beginning and end of the book—but more fundamentally, since the Christological dimensions of early Christian thought could have been brought out more clearly in each chapter. This would complement Maugans Driver's thematic approach to the subject. Moreover, instead of making the conversion of Constantine the pivot of the second and third parts of the book, the Council of Nicaea could have been the Christological centerpiece of the
Despite these criticisms of the book's structure, *Christ at the Center* does contain clear expositions of early Christian thought. Particularly compelling is the sustained description of the rule of faith as the key to interpreting Scripture (97-101). There is also a spirited defence of Origen's biblical hermeneutics against modern historical criticism (109-110). Maugans Driver shows a sympathetic understanding of monastic life. 'Being “alone” or “withdrawing” referred less to an anti-social outlook or geographical distance,' she writes, 'than to a distance of the heart from cultural norms which often distorted the pursuit of human flourishing' (181). Moreover, she shows that the Christological debates were not merely a matter of words, but about the nature of salvation (220-224). *Christ at the Center* is, at times, an engaging and insightful read that promises a new and fresh approach to the history of early Christian thought.