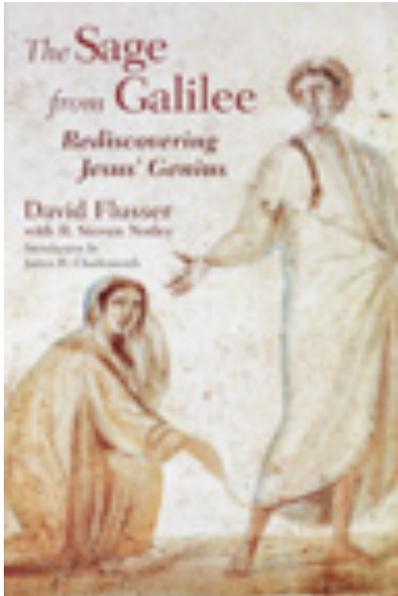


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**Flusser, David, with R. Steven Notley**

***The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius***

4th edition

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David Flusser's "biography" is arguably the most appreciative account of Jesus among Jewish interpreters. *The Sage from Galilee* is a new and enlarged edition of *Jesus*, first published in German as *Jesus in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* in 1968. Flusser himself did significant work on the revision, but it was edited and enlarged by Steven Notley.

Every attempt to give an account of the historical Jesus produces a carefully defined portrait. The definition is a consequence primarily of methodology and the perspectives of interpreters. Flusser objects against images of Jesus that derive from authorial perspectives, but of course the objection does not render him immune (e.g., supplying motivation when the text expresses none). Not only can readers detect the impact of Flusser's perspectives on his presentation of Jesus; his methodology is also idiosyncratic. With little account of the grounds supporting theory, he posits a core tradition originally written in Hebrew that lies behind Greek sources used by the Evangelists. This allows him to shed light on Jesus' sayings by commenting on the Hebrew. Further, Flusser accepts the priority of Luke, which was used but distorted by Mark, with the latter also exercising unfavorable influence on Matthew. Thus, Flusser's carefully defined Jesus is retrojected from Greek back to a Hebrew stratum and is predominantly Lukan.

Aside from a foreword by Notley, an introduction by James Charlesworth, and a preface by Flusser, the book consists of eleven relatively short chapters and a brief epilogue. Chapter 1, "The Sources," defends the possibility of writing a life of Jesus without dealing with the perennial problem of the fragmentary, episodic character of traditions about Jesus. Likewise, Flusser dispenses with the problem of the perspectives of faith from which the Gospels were written with the phrase "read critically, of course" (2). His critical reading enables him to value highly the historical reliability of the Synoptics. In spite of naming no criteria, he actually uses a criterion of similarity to the environment in presenting Jesus as a Jew of his own time, namely, a miracle worker and preacher of all-embracing love.

The second chapter, "Ancestry," traces Jesus back to Galilee, which Flusser even supports by Peter's Galilean speech in his denial of Jesus. The genealogies are obviously constructed by Matthew and Luke to demonstrate Jesus' Davidic descent and therefore render it uncertain. Similar uncertainty surrounds the dates for Jesus' ministry or the geographical scheme of his activity, but Jesus was likely baptized in 28/29 and died in 30 C.E. Curiously, in a book about the historical Jesus, Flusser allows room even for virginal conception: "If one accepts the virgin birth as historical..." (10). He also accepts the story of Jesus at age twelve in the temple by associating it with similar stories of precocious Jewish youths, ancient and modern. His use of Josephus warrants including Jesus among the Jewish sages of his time. Jewish custom for sages dictated teaching one's son a trade, hence, Jesus' association with carpentry ranks him as a tradesman rather than a manual worker. Jesus' association with his family is in tension with regard for people who do God's will. Still, family members became a part of his movement after his death.

Chapter 3, entitled "Baptism," associates Jesus not only with John the Baptizer but also with the Essenes, whose views on baptism John shared. Ecstatic experiences in the Jewish environment support an incident in which a heavenly voice announced Isa 42:1 to Jesus at his baptism. The Essenes, John, and Jesus shared an apocalyptic eschatology, but, unlike John, Jesus did not anticipate the coming of the Son of Man in final judgment in the imminent future. Rather, he adopted a rabbinic (*sic*) view of the present kingdom of heaven. Jesus' claim that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him (Luke 4:18-21) and the Beatitudes fit into a prophetic role for Jesus. But Jesus' distinct task kept him from being a disciple of John.

The fourth chapter, on "Law," plays Jesus as faithful to the law off against Paul with his freedom from the law, without asking whether this is the historical Paul or not. The controversy over picking and rubbing grain on the Sabbath is no exception to Jesus' fidelity to the law in that it conforms to a Galilean rabbinic tradition. Because "straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel" "sounds like a proverb" (38), it may not be original

with Jesus. True, Jesus values moral issues above ritual ones, but his controversies about law have parallels in the Jewish environment and therefore have nothing to do with abrogating the law. In his debates, Jesus is close to Pharisees (although his actual interlocutors may be indeterminate) and distanced from Sadducees (supported by Gamaliel's advice in Acts 5). Further, Jesus had a poor opinion of non-Jews and was anti-imperialistic. When Flusser avers that the only stories of Jesus healing Gentiles is the Syro-Phoenician woman and the servant of the centurion, one is left to wonder what to make of the Gerasene demoniac.

Chapter 5, "Love," bases Jesus' "revolution" on his radical interpretation of mutual love, a call for a new morality, and the idea of the kingdom of heaven, all of which were already attested (e.g., Sirach and Hillel). Because human beings do not belong exclusively to the categories of good and evil, Jesus advocated showing mercy to all, including enemies—a momentous innovation.

The next chapter is appropriately focused on "Ethics." Jesus' ethical teaching amounts to a social protest similar to the Essenes but without their ideological and economic separation from society. His social protest is a matter of serving God rather than possessions, with a preference for social outcasts and the oppressed.

The third leg of Jesus' revolution is developed in the following chapter on "The Kingdom of Heaven." For Jesus, serving God rather than mammon is anti-Roman but no basis for revolt. Flusser argues against the view that Pilate correctly saw Jesus as a political agitator. I agree that there is little basis for conceiving of Jesus as promoting armed revolt, but his advocacy of an alternative to the empire was likely as politically threatening to the status quo as the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Flusser contrasts Jesus with the Zealots without raising the question of their historical existence as a party in the time of Jesus. Flusser also locates Jesus' teaching on the kingdom in a Jewish environment that viewed foreign oppression as a consequence of Israel's sin. In this regard, Jesus did not advocate God's kingdom on the basis of thoroughgoing eschatology; rather, his expectation of the future emerged from his understanding of God. Moreover, he is the only Jewish teacher of his time known to have preached that the new age of salvation had already dawned. In this connection, Flusser also has a positive evaluation of Jesus' messianic awareness, that is, his recognition of God's kingdom as a dynamic power already evident in his mission rather than a reality yet to come.

Chapter 8 then discusses "The Son." This title reflects a relationship with God as Abba attested in other Jewish miracle workers contemporary with Jesus, Honi and Hanan. I demur a bit with Flusser's conclusion that such a relationship between son and father is "typical," when only these three cases are cited. Flusser attributes to Jesus the extension of

such a relationship to believers, citing Matthew's address in the Lord's prayer: "our Father." (Why is this the proof-text, when Luke reads only *pater*?) On the basis of the (presumed) historicity of the transfiguration, Flusser asserts Jesus' identification as "Son." Flusser shows that the Gospels reflect a clash with the temple elite at the core of the conflict that led to his death. It is no leap of faith to conclude that Jesus had premonitions of his death, but he himself reflects no notion of his death as an atoning sacrifice.

Chapter 9 unfolds under the title "The Son of Man." This discussion presents Jesus again as Son of God, not only as a miracle worker but also as a prophet. For Flusser, sayings about the son of man as one who is active in the present reflect Aramaic or Hebrew for a human being. Those referring to the coming son of man are authentic, but it is difficult to show the identification of Jesus with the heavenly Son of Man. But Flusser does accept Jeremias's determination of Luke 9:44 as an authentic passion prediction.

"Jerusalem" is the title of chapter 10. Flusser holds that with knowledge that his life was in danger from Herod Antipas, Jesus decided to die in Jerusalem. Mark's account of the abandonment of Jesus by his disciples is a distortion, and Luke's view of Jesus being accompanied by his own is not only accurate but also related to Jesus' deep concern for Jerusalem, reflected both in lament and in allusions to Jerusalem's future redemption. In Jerusalem, Jesus found strong support in crowds whose antipathy to the Sadducean priestly elite was palpable.

Chapter 12 bears the simple title "Death." Flusser draws a parallel between the death of Jesus and the execution of James under Annas, which for Pharisees involved an illegal assembly and for which they had him deposed. Luke's presumably more original version portrays a similar meeting in the high priest's house at night, not a Sanhedrin, and the similar account in John is to be trusted. Flusser gives a sketch of Pilate as ruthless but whitewashed in the Gospels and presents the crucifixion as collaboration of some priestly elite with Pilate, but of course not the collaboration of the Jewish people. Many of the details of Jesus' crucifixion are paralleled in other cases of Jews before the Romans. Flusser even expresses his conviction "that there are reliable reports that the Crucified One" appeared to those attested in 1 Cor 15:5-8 (144).

I am personally moved by the tenor of Flusser's book. It evokes remarkably the mutual love he found at the heart of Jesus' teaching, and if Christian readers can reciprocate, Flusser's demeanor should go a long way in facilitating positive relations between Jews and Christians. Perhaps even more broadly, it should go a long way toward peacemaking globally. On the one hand, the book reflects broad knowledge of antiquity. But most students of the historical Jesus will find the book rather deficient in the contemporary context. The book does little to appropriate developments in historiography from the

perspectivalism of the New Quest to the postmodern constructivism of Third Questers and beyond. There appears no awareness of what history is beyond whether something really happened or not. To be sure, appropriateness of traditions about Jesus to his Galilean environment is crucial for the historical Jesus, but is there not something more? Further, there is no appropriation of cultural anthropology and sociology. In short, the methodology remains static, and new materials from Qumran and some new philological insights hardly meet the deficiencies in the present academic environment. This revision is only a slight gain over the original.