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Sage of Galilee

This is a book review of *The Sage from Galilee Rediscovering Jesus' Genius* by David Flusser. The English version was originally published in 1968. Nearly 30 years later it would be updated with the help of Dr. Notley. The original book came when Flusser had just started and the second book came after Flusser had finished and had grown in wisdom. These new insights led to a practically new piece of literature.

David Flusser was a Jewish professor of Dr. Notley at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He was Israel's foremost scholar of Jesus, early Christianity and Second Temple Judaism who mastered the classical sources. He used the Dead Sea Scrolls, historical inquiry and recent archaeological discoveries to shape his opinions. Flusser taught how language, culture, history and physical setting are important in understanding the Gospel. Flusser was engaging, emotional, theatrical, dramatic, passionate and always learning. He felt that Jesus' teachings should be applied to how we live our lives.

I will show how Jesus displayed his genius. He compares to other sages of his time, at times agreeing or disagreeing with them. Jesus used parables to highlight his points. Carpenters were regarded as particularly learned. Jesus was not just a naive, amiable, simple, manual workman.

Jesus was an observant Jew who followed the law. "Jesus had no desire to oppose the Law of Moses. He only wanted to expose the rigidity of the bigots" p. 39. Judaism believes in rewarding the just and punishing the wicked. He used the criticisms to make teaching moments, and even knew how to create such moments. Jesus shows that there is a difference between moral purity and ritual purity. Flusser says, "strict observation of ritual purity can encourage moral laxity" p. 37.

Jesus' replies to the pharisees were not as revolutionary as one might think they were for that time. Jesus, the Talmud and the Essenes are all critical of the Pharisees. They all call the Pharisees hypocrites because they do not practice what they preach. The Pharisees forced the Gentile who converted to Judaism to follow the entirety of the Law of Moses. Only some Pharisees were hypocritical. Jesus also uses them as a high model of righteousness, since they were known for their piety. "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." Matt 5:20. We might think this is an easy thing to do since the Pharisees are seen as hypocritical, but that is far from the truth. Jesus said their righteousness was not enough to enter heaven. The scribes of the time said almost the same thing that Jesus did about the Sabbath. They said, "The Sabbath has been handed over to you, not you to the Sabbath." p. 38. The only example of Jesus breaking Jewish law was the plucking of heads of grain on the Sabbath (Luke 6:1-5). An early Greek translator may have erroneously added the detail of plucking the head of grain, which was forbidden on the Sabbath. Washing of hands before eating was a recommendation not a requirement. So, Jesus nor the people around him break any laws by not washing their hands before a meal. He says it is "not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth this defiles a man" (Matt. 15:11).

John the Baptist viewed baptism as a sign that the soul was already cleansed because of right behavior, and that baptism did not pardon one's sins. John thought no one can be baptized unless they

repented of their sins. Repentance leads to forgiveness of sins, which is only possible through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus showed love to non-Jews. Jesus said some problems with the Gentiles are that since they do not follow Jewish law, they do not love their neighbor. There are only two occasions of Jesus healing non-Jews. This only came after they insisted. They were the Syro-Phoenician woman and the centurion. Jesus had never seen faith like theirs and was moved to heal their needs. Jesus "was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). This was the will of the heavenly Father. However, Jesus knew that had Jesus come for the Gentiles and showed them his works, they would have repented first before the Jews. He uses the Parable of the Good Samaritan to show how we should show love with mercy. We should go above and beyond to live righteously, by showing love to both our fellow Jews and non-Jews.

"Revolution broke through at three points: the radical interpretation of the commandment of mutual love, the call for a new morality, and the idea of the kingdom of heaven." Jesus was the only person in the New Testament to say that we should "Love your enemies!" (Matt. 5:44). "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." Lev. 19:18. Our love for the Lord is evidenced in how much we love our neighbor. pg. 56-57. Jesus sets a high standard for his disciples to aspire to. Jesus does not lower the bar just so that anyone can meet it. Jesus said to love our enemies. He said this at a time when Rome was one of the most merciless countries in history. Jesus saw the Golden Rule as a summary of the Torah.

A Jewish scribe named Antigonos of Socho said, "Be not like slaves who serve their master for the sake of reward, but like slaves who serve their master with no eye on any reward; and may the fear of heaven be among you" p. 55. Jesus says the Romans concern themselves with leading others. Jesus said that the best leader is one who serves. "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:37-38). We are like our neighbors because we share both good and bad characteristics. In no way are we better than them. Jesus also quoted (Deut. 6:5) and (Lev. 19:18). "According to a later traditional Jewish saying, three classes of sinners are consigned to hell for all eternity: the adulterer, he who publicly puts his neighbor to shame, and he who insults his neighbor" p. 64.

Jesus' ethical teachings have a lot in common with the Essenes. "For both the Essenes and Jesus, poverty, humility, purity, and unsophisticated simplicity of heart were the essential religious virtues." The Essenes had common ownership and favored poverty. They lived apart from the rest of society and hated materialism. The Essenes said to repay evil with good. He thought we should love people and become friends with the unrighteous. Jesus also did not want us to be materialistic. The first three beatitudes of Jesus: "the meek," the poor in spirit," and "those who mourn," correspond to Essene belief. In Luke 6:24-26, Jesus says woe on the "rich," the "satiated," and "those who laugh" p. 69. A physician goes to those who are sick, so Jesus came for the unrighteousness sinners. Jesus says the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16). It does not matter when in life we repent and believe in God, but just as long as we do so before we die, then we will see the kingdom of heaven.

This book is very useful in understanding Jesus from a historical standpoint. Flusser is a historical scholar and not a theologian. It was interesting seeing Jesus from a Jewish perspective. We should

understand Jesus from this historical context but also from a faith context. Flusser wants the church to focus more on Jesus' message. Flusser says Mark distorted the true story. I would have liked more proof of this. It is a challenging read, but the reader will obtain new insights into the life of Jesus. I would like to see the book updated a third time with the even newer research on the historical Jesus. I would recommend everyone to read this book.

Flusser, David, et al. *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering JESUS' Genius / David Flusser with R. STEVEN Notley ; with an Introduction by James H. Charlesworth*. William B. Eerdmans, 2007.