

## Book Review

**David Flusser with R. Steven Notley**, *The Sage of Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius*. Grand Rapids (MI) and Cambridge: William Eerdmans, 2007. 221 pp. 191. Paperback.

The book under review is a biography about Jesus, written based on Flusser's study of the life and teachings of Jesus Nazareth. David Flusser is one of the first Jewish authorities focusing on the understanding of the passages within the New Testament and early Christianity. Being Jewish, provides the author a unique perspective in grasping the essence of Jesus' words and acts. Like most Jesus research, it is impossible for Flusser to not impose his own view on Jesus. Nevertheless, the relevance of the book especially for Synoptic Gospels researchers is emphasized as Flusser followed the synoptic theory.

*The Sage of Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius* is composed of a foreword, a preface, an introduction, and eleven chapters with an epilogue. 'The Sources', the first chapter of the book describes the method and foundation that Flusser used in plotting Jesus' life. He indicated that the Synoptic Gospels are based on older documents in Hebrew, hence the author drawing from Hebrew on his discussion of Jesus' teachings (p. 3). He focuses not on the kerygmatic statements but on the scientific study of the three Synoptic Gospels. He prioritizes Luke as the basis instead of Mark and Matthew, for the former presents the most primitive tradition that the latter two derive from.

Chapter two, Ancestry, studies Jesus' name, birth, family, ministry, and religious and sociological background. Jesus being in the line of David's ancestry is contestable since being the Messiah which is translated to 'Son of David', is insufficient to indicate his direct ancestry to David. According to the author, the differences between the genealogies written by Matthew and Luke may indicate that it was only written to support the idea that the Messiah is a descendant of David (p. 7). The book stated that Jesus may have four brothers and many other sisters, with Him being the eldest (p.10) and after His death, His family resided with the apostles (p. 16). James, Jesus' brother, was killed due to his faith to the risen Christ.

The third chapter, 'Baptism', includes the interactions between Jesus and John, their common beliefs and how these beliefs differ. John may have at one point lived with the Essenes community and practiced the belief that sins are unclean and should be cleansed through water and repentance (p.19). Jesus was baptized by John, people followed too, and His ministry began in the area he was baptized (p. 23). John on the other hand did not found a ministry or sect and only baptized people. John believed that the apocalyptic prophecy to save the righteous will happen in the immediate future while Jesus believed that the righteous and evil coexist even while God's kingdom started to be realized (p. 28).

'Law', the fourth chapter, implies a Jesus portrayed as a "law-observant Jew" but where criticized in some instances by the Pharisees (p. 35). An example was when He healed a man on the day of Sabbath. The critics did not understand that Jesus manifested the "common Jewish principle to the attitude toward Sabbath and healing on it" (p. 40). The author also stated that the shift of Jesus' anonymous opponents to those that can be described like scribes and Pharisees is noticeable in His dialogues (p. 42).

The balance between Flusser's Jewish foundations and the direction he took using such foundations is evident in chapters like 'Love'. In this chapter, three points were highlighted, the

call of new morality, concept of the kingdom of heaven and interpretation of mutual love. These three main points are established even in early Judaism. In the chapter 'Son', Jesus as the Son of God is not interpreted narrow-mindedly as Him being an all-powerful offspring of a divine being, but as a miracle worker with higher self-awareness. During that time, God's miracle workers are 'described as that of a son to his father'(p.100).

In chapter 6, 'Ethics', the perspectives of other communities and Christ were compared. The Essenes separate themselves from sinful people which Jesus doesn't agree on. He said that "make friends for yourself from the wealth of unrighteousness..." (p. 68). Jesus perspective prevailed during modern times as Matthew said in his book, "Do not resist one who is evil" (p.71). The Galileans thought that people who have sinned the most are punished by disease and Jesus doesn't completely contradict this. However, He doesn't agree how people think of this issue as simplistic instead He said that if one is being punished by his sins then one must 'repent or perish!' (p.75).

Chapter 7, 'The Kingdom of Heaven', both cousins believed the beginning of a new era; John implying the end of humanity and the judgment day, while Jesus emphasizing the transitional age before the last judgment. Jesus indicated that the kingdom of heaven is not just a matter of God's kingship but mainly a movement that embraces everyone (p.81). In Judaism, the kingdom of heaven is only when God rules *de jure*, but Jesus said that it will be revealed to everyone *de facto* (p.87)

The eight chapter, "The Son", describes Jesus as the only son of God. A heavenly voice once called Hanina 'son' as he performed miracles, but Jesus as son is different (p. 97). As Peter suggested to Jesus that he shall build three huts for Him, Elijah and Moses, a heavenly voice spoke that Jesus is His Son (p.103). Jesus was already addressed as Son during His Baptism, but this only proclaimed Him as God's servant. It was only during His transfiguration that He was proclaimed as God's only Son who shall endure hardship and suffering for the sake of people's sins.

The Son of Man is the ninth chapter that describes different versions of Christ. One is how the people viewed Him as the risen or true prophet in John the Baptist's preaching (p.108). On another note, Matthew highlighted the fact the Jesus never used 'Messiah" to describe himself rather as "Son of Man" (p.109). Jesus used three meanings for the title "Son of Man". First, simply to state that He is a man. Second, as an euphemistic circumlocution and last as an eschatological figure (p. 111).

The tenth chapter on 'Jerusalem' describes Jesus' celebration of the Passover in the holy city as a display of His willingness to face death in connection to Herod's threat. Verses written in John and Thessalonians correlate as both speak of Jesus' death for the sake of the Jews and to gather the people to Himself (p.129).

'Death', the last chapter of the book focuses on the passion of Christ; how he suffered and died on the cross, and described what part each character played in the death of Christ. An example is the high priest who condemned Jesus when He said that the temple will fall (p. 143). Another is Pontius Pilate who was described as 'inflexible, stubborn and cruel' and a villain (p.145). Not all who witnessed were in agreement with the high priests. Some pitied the three crucified for they perceive them as victims of Roman occupation while Jesus' enemies are content (p. 159).

Flusser's image of Jesus is distinguishable as he is not confined with the historical research on Jesus unlike 'Life and Teachings of Jesus' written by Harvard University The Pluralism Project. He provides a refreshing view on Christian literature and effectively applies his learnings from classical Jewish materials in his interpretations. This creates a certain appeal to his impression of Jesus in his Second Temple milieu. Thus, his work plays a significant role in understanding Jesus in the realms of thoughts, practices and expectations of groups included in the Second Temple Judaism.

Despite the fresh perspective, the book is not without its flaws in terms of his justifications of his conclusions or ideas. This is evident in his prioritization of the Lukan materials over Matthew and other gospels, and the Hebrew translation of Gospels. It was indicated that Lukan materials are older and should be prioritized, but it leaves questions like the basis of this and whether the older text is more reliable. In addition, there are instances in which the basis of whether certain parts of the Gospel are historical or not isn't properly elaborated. Some passages are described as having an "authentic ring about it" (p.109), but is usually not supported by a rationale. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was deemed unhistorical and is often left out of the discussion, but explanation as to why is not indicated. As sole or main source for a study, I do not recommend this book. However, the Sage from Galilee still provides a unique perspective that may serve as supplementary material to other related studies. It is important to take note of the flaws though, for they may be too important. Nonetheless, this book will be helpful as a refreshing perspective when studying any topic of the theological spectrum.

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