

BOOK REVIEW

David Flusser with R. Steven Notley, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). 221 pp. Pbk. US\$20.00.

This work is a revised and updated version of David Flusser's 1968 work *Jesus in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* that was later translated into English as *Jesus* (Magnes Press, 1997). Flusser himself contributed to the revisions presented in this work, yet his former student R. Steven Nosley assisted in expanding and revising his material. Flusser notes that this revision has benefited from his extensive work on Jesus since the previous edition. As such, Flusser writes, *The Sage from Galilee* 'is not merely longer, but also significantly better than its German forerunner' (p. xvii). Flusser's portrait is unique within historical Jesus research in that he is a Jewish scholar approaching Jesus and the Gospels within their Jewish contexts. Coming from this perspective, Flusser offers a compelling presentation of Jesus in his contemporary milieu. At the same time, Flusser faces the dilemma of most historical Jesus research: the tendency to impose one's own view or perspective on Jesus (a point made long ago by Albert Schweitzer).

After a foreword and preface (by Notley and Flusser respectively) and an introduction by James H. Charlesworth, *The Sage from Galilee* is divided into eleven chapters with an epilogue. The first chapter, 'Sources', sets forth the foundation and method for Flusser's biographical sketch of Jesus. Here he makes two observations that are certainly divisive within wider historical Jesus scholarship. First, Flusser puts forward a theory (without much reasoning as to how he comes to this conclusion) that the Synoptic Gospels are based upon earlier documents originally written in Hebrew, translated into Greek, and passed through different phases of redaction (p. 3). Throughout the work, then, Flusser is able to draw upon the Hebrew when discussing Jesus' sayings. Secondly, Flusser argues that Luke's Gospel presents the most primitive tradition from which Mark and Matthew drew

(where Matthew departs from Mark, according to Flusser, he is preserving the earlier source that lies behind Luke). Thus, there is a priority on the Lukan material (alongside where Matthew's Gospel parallels Luke). Mark's Gospel, as well as John's, is used mainly where it can be shown to present an authentic account. There is not much in this section on why or how Flusser comes to these conclusions, however.

The second chapter, 'Ancestry', places Jesus firmly within his Jewish milieu. Flusser draws heavily from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew alongside the works of Josephus to portray the religious and sociological backdrop for Jesus and his ministry. However, as Flusser works with his sources, it is often difficult to tell how he affirms some aspects while denying others. Since the genealogies in Luke and Matthew, for example, reveal the intent to link Jesus as Messiah to David, they are considered unhistorical and unreliable. Similarly, the setting of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem reflects an intention to connect Jesus to Jewish messianic expectation. At the same time, Flusser seems to allow the account of Jesus being left behind in Jerusalem as a young boy (Lk. 2.22-24) and even the virgin birth to be historical. Flusser uses Josephus's reference to Jesus (*Ant.* 18.63-64) to identify him as a Jewish sage—which, according to Flusser, challenges the popular notion that Jesus was a simple peasant (here, he is responding to the view of J.D. Crossan). This chapter also investigates the tension between Jesus and his family (Lk. 8.21; Mt. 12.46-50; Mk 3.34-35)—noting that after Jesus' death his family became followers of his movement.

The next several chapters place Jesus' teaching and ministry within the context of Second Temple Judaism. In 'Baptism', Flusser connects Jesus with the preaching of John the Baptist—who shared the Essenes' view of baptism. Here Flusser brings out a unique dynamic that is given fuller articulation in the seventh chapter, 'Kingdom of Heaven': Jesus and John the Baptist held differing messianic views. Both believed that a new era had begun, however John (alongside the Essenes) understood this to include the final judgment and end of humanity. Jesus, on the other hand, identified a period after the kingdom of heaven as a type of transitional age before the last judgment (p. 85). According to Flusser, Jesus did not invent this eschatological timetable, but his teaching is the earliest evidence of it (he posits that Jesus adapted it from contemporary rabbinic thought).

Another theme in Flusser's presentation of Jesus is the balance between the Jewish foundations for his teaching and ministry and the unique direction in which he takes those foundations. Thus, for example, in the chapter 'Love', Flusser points to the revolutionary elements in Jesus' preaching. These were expressed in three points: a radical interpretation of the commandment of mutual love, a call for new morality, and the concept of the kingdom of heaven. Flusser shows how these were already established in early Judaism (attributed to Hillel and Sirach). Another example is found in the chapter 'The Son', which places Jesus as a miracle worker among other such men in Second Temple Judaism (including Abba Hilkia and Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa). It was common, according to Flusser, for the relationship of these miracle workers to God to be 'described as that of a son to his father' (p. 100). However, Jesus displayed a higher self-awareness—understanding his 'divine sonship as unique and decisive' (p. 101).

In the chapter 'Jerusalem', Flusser understands Jesus' pilgrimage to the holy city as being in order to celebrate the Passover but also to willingly face his death in response to the threat of Herod. Jesus, according to Flusser, 'did not want to die in Galilee...he would die in Jerusalem' (p. 117). Once there, Jesus initiated conflict with the Temple and its high priests, winning over a crowd who already hated the Sadducees. Flusser acknowledges some later redaction concerning Jesus' prediction of the Temple's destruction, but allows for a certain historical precedent for this tradition. Others in the first century, he notes, anticipated such an event and were vocal in foreseeing the fall of the Temple (pp. 122-23). The next chapter, on Jesus' death, follows the Lukan material closely and disregards Mark's presentation of an official assembly of the Sanhedrin condemning Jesus. Rather, Jesus was brought overnight to the home of the high priest, answered before the Temple elders, and eventually was handed over to the Romans. The details of Jesus' crucifixion in Flusser's presentation are supplemented with parallels of other Roman crucifixions of Jews.

There is a certain appeal in Flusser's portrait of Jesus in his Second Temple milieu. His work is refreshing in that the author seems to be working unhindered by many of the confines of historical Jesus research of the past century. Flusser demonstrates a thorough awareness of relevant classical and Jewish sources as well as a fresh perspective on the Christian literature. His Jesus is completely at home in the Jewish background of this period, drawing many of his ideas from

contemporary Jewish thought and practice. Undoubtedly, this work is a strong contribution to the more recent trend in historical Jesus scholarship that places Jesus within the thoughts, practices, and expectations of the various groups within Second Temple Judaism.

Flusser's work, however, is not without its problems. As mentioned above, the author works from a standpoint of Lukan priority and the view that the Gospels were translated from Hebrew. However, there is little or no discussion of how Flusser reaches these conclusions, so that they remain dubious in their application. Further, there is often no elaboration on how Flusser can present certain material from the Gospels as historical and other parts not. Statements that a certain passage has an 'authentic ring about it' (p. 109) rarely are supported by any criteria or rationale for such a decision. So, for example, Flusser states that he is 'convinced that there are reliable reports' that the crucified Jesus appeared to hundreds of people as attested in 1 Cor. 15.3-8 (p. 144), yet we are left in the dark as to how he came to be convinced. In other instances, Flusser is content abandoning certain material—such as Jesus' birth in Bethlehem—since it supports an identifiable agenda on behalf of its authors. Why this is deemed unhistorical and other accounts are considered historical—including the virgin birth (which might also have an identifiable agenda)—is often left out of the discussion.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Sage from Galilee* offers a refreshing portrait of the historical Jesus that will serve as a welcome supplement to other studies on the subject. Many readers—wherever they fall on the theological spectrum—will become frustrated with Flusser's lack of methodology and criteria for authenticity. Flusser writes with a large arsenal of classic and Jewish sources that draws out the appropriate background for the Gospels' presentation of Jesus. This Jesus is both a product of and an innovator within his Jewish milieu.

Bryan R. Dyer
McMaster Divinity College