

David Instone-Brewer, **The Jesus Scandals: Why He Shocked His Contemporaries (And Still Shocks Today)**. (Oxford/ Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2012). 184 pp. + 'Further Reading' and Index.

Jesus scandalized his contemporaries, and his recorded words still bring people to the brink of shock. That, in its most basic form, is Instone-Brewer's (from hence I-B) thesis.

He develops his theme in three Parts (thus both identifying him as a Preacher and a fan of symphonic music with its (generally speaking) three movements). Part One discusses 'Scandals in Jesus' Life', Part Two 'Scandals Among Jesus' Friends', and Part Three, 'Scandals in Jesus' Teaching'.

Each part is festooned with fascinating and well written vignettes from the Gospels; events and words and deeds which scandalized his contemporaries and which scandalize moderns too. So, for instance, in Part One, he talks about Jesus' birth (his legitimacy), his miracles, Temple scams, Suicide, and Jesus' execution. I-B points out how each of these and several other bits from Jesus' life can be seen as scandalous and why they would have been viewed thusly in his day. Each section is fairly brief, easily read in just a short 'coffee break' and each concludes with a very short series of endnotes.

I-B is clearly very well versed in first century Jewish culture and society. He knows the sources and he uses them deftly. And he cleverly illustrates each section with a story or tale from modern life, thus seamlessly connecting past and present. So, for example, when he discusses 'Alcohol Abuse' (pp. 38ff) he begins with a story about the death of a young man because of alcoholism. Using that as a 'springboard' he launches into a description of Jesus' relationship to 'the cup'. It really is a quite lovely procedure (and quite preacherly too).

But there are problems with this lovely book. First, I-B's use of the Mishnah and Talmudic materials to substantiate and illuminate first century practices is an issue. How useful are the descriptions in those late Rabbinic materials for 'life on the ground' in First Century Palestine?

Second, I-B uses 'Jehovah' to transliterate the clamor of the crowd on the occasion of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (in discussing 'disruptive worship')(p. 46) –

... Ana Yehovah hoshi'ah-na'...

This is a regrettable anachronism. Or are we to believe that I-B believes that the people of Jerusalem around 30 A.D. actually knew and used the word 'Jehovah'? Certainly they would NOT have said Yahweh- but surely Adonai. He even acknowledges in an endnote

We do not know how exactly they pronounced 'Yehovah' (p. 48).

I think it safe to say, they wouldn't have pronounced it at all.

Third, in his discussion of suicide, I-B adopts the now proven historically inaccurate tale of the mass suicide at Masada (p. 61). The belief that the Zealots on Masada killed themselves has been proven false. Reams of work – both archaeological and textual- have been done on the subject.

Fourth, his use of the Talmud to 'reconstruct' what he titles the 'Censored Arrest Warrant' of Jesus (pp. 65ff) raises the same issue as mentioned in general earlier in this review. The use of materials from centuries after the events they describe is problematic. There may, it's true, be genuinely authentic historical materials in 'younger' sources but that has to be carefully established and shouldn't be simply accepted. And yet that seems to be exactly what I-B does at this juncture. He appears to presume that the Talmudic source is authentically reflective of early first century facts. Further, that his reconstruction of Jesus' arrest warrant is based on only one manuscript raises red flags.

But those four problems shrink to insignificance in light of the insights and exegetical gems I-B proffers. For instance, his discussion of Child Abuse (in Part Three) is eye-opening indeed.

I-B here observes that Matthew 18:6 / Mark 9:42 have a particular sin in mind when they put the word *skandalizo* in Jesus' mouth (though I-B would assert that it is Jesus' own word). He notes that

All kinds of sexual sins and temptations were referred to using the word 'stumble' (p. 118).

And what sin is referred to by that word here? Child molestation!

His language might be euphemistic (there was a child present!), but the implication is obvious. Jesus is talking about child sex abuse, which he hated with more ferocity than he expressed for any other sin (p. 119).

I-B goes on to discuss how Rome brought the vile practice of child molestation to Palestine and also remarks that

Judaism wasn't totally free of such vices... There was a rule, for example, that unmarried men were not allowed to teach children unaccompanied ... (p. 121).

And then the preacher pulls the trigger and makes the modern application:

If only the church had adopted that rule! (ibid.).

Ironically, the title of the volume, 'The Jesus Scandals' now takes on a new shade of meaning which it formerly did not possess. Doubtless that shade is unintended but I-B's explanation of 'skandalizo' may well plant the seed which produces the plant which produces the shade of a meaning he clearly could never have intended.

The volume ends with a very short selection of 'Further Readings' (p. 185). In all it's a brilliant and contemporary and useful volume this. Readers are introduced to a Jesus they may not know and students of the first century are given insight into practices and procedures which may well (and may well not) have been 'how things really were.

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