

www.Jesus

The World, Words and Wisdom of Jesus

Much has been written and spoken about Jesus but so often this has been filtered through the lens of scholarship or culture. Jesus has become many things to many people and sadly the real man from Nazareth has been obscured or even lost. We constantly need to pursue the quest for insights into the true Jesus as we engage with his world, words and wisdom.

Jesus was a Torah-observant Jew and if we are ever going to understand anything about him then we must set him in the matrix of first century Jewish life. He grew up in a Jewish family, attended synagogue on Sabbath, celebrated the Jewish festivals and walked the land of Israel. So much of what he said was coherent with Jewish thought and consistent with the teaching of contemporary rabbis. Yet he was unique. He lived in a context of social turmoil, political conflict and religious dissent.

Because of my mixed heritage, I had not been baptised as an infant. So when a number of girls from my year were being prepared for confirmation, I was not amongst them. Nevertheless, I can still recall the interest with which I viewed those fellow pupils for I wanted to see if they would change in any discernible way. I was anxious to know. Perhaps, even at that stage, the Lord was quickening within me an interest in spiritual things. I was to be bitterly disappointed however, and not a little disgusted, as I saw the group returning that evening and discussing the event as if it had been a purely social occasion which allowed them the opportunity of an afternoon's freedom and a good meal! I was profoundly grateful, even then, that I had not been part of the seemingly meaningless ritual.

The Fifth Gospel

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all give us perspectives on Jesus but there is a much neglected fifth gospel that casts a lot of light on his life and times. The land itself has been called the "fifth gospel" since it is so helpful in illuminating the story. To call it this is not to suggest that there is any inadequacy in the first four books of the New Testament but simply to highlight the "plane" truth that Jesus walked on our level. One of the things that makes the Christian faith unique is the emphasis that it places on geography. God's revelation of himself took place not only at specific times but in specific places. Some three hundred and fifty three different cities are named in the Hebrew Scriptures. Does any other religion place such an emphasis on geography in its holy writings? None of these locations were ever intended to become shrines, since God could not be confined to any one of them, but they serve to indicate that the transcendent deity who made everything is the God who literally comes down to earth. Places are important in the history of God's dealing with his people.

Is it not particularly striking that Jesus was baptised close to the lowest spot on the face of the earth? Even if you have never been to the Dead Sea you will probably know that it lies further below sea level

than any other spot on the planet. Not far from this location Jesus was baptised bespeaking the fact that God had literally “come down” among humanity. If God came down to earth, the Gospels also tell us that he “went up” to Jerusalem. Not until Roman times was there a ring road around Jerusalem. Viewed as the nose, the most prominent feature on the face of the earth, the navel, the centre of the universe, the iris at the centre of the eye of the world, the neck connecting heaven and earth, the city of Jerusalem was so elevated that everyone went up to it. Conversely, in one of his parables Jesus speaks of a man going “down” from Jerusalem to Jericho. This is not to be spiritualised as some preachers suggest but simply presented in a way that shows Jesus spoke as a man of his time. Such was the elevation of Jerusalem in terms of both geography and ideology that everyone went “up” to it and “came down” from it. Such indications of accuracy in the Gospels serve to destroy the suggestion that what we have in these accounts is nothing more than myth.

Mother Tongue

If Jesus’ motherland helps us set him in context, his mother tongue opens the doors to greater understanding of his message. Greek, Latin, Aramaic and Hebrew all contributed to the heady mix of languages in first century Israel. However, it is to Hebrew that we turn for the key to the teaching of Jesus. As a synagogue-going, Torah observer, our Lord thought in Hebraic categories. To understand Jesus, we need to go back to school with Israel. His vocabulary, as indeed most of the significant terms of our faith, was hammered out on the anvil of Israel. Terms like redemption, sacrifice, priesthood, covenant, servant and son have a family tree. Tracing their lineage takes us deep into the history of Israel.

So often words, like the money in our pockets, suffer from inflation. They no longer go as far as they used to. One such word is “Torah”. Modern translations of this word as “law” do it a serious injustice and lead to much misunderstanding. Law conjures up something cold, impersonal and external to us. Sadly it has become a bedfellow of legalism and projects a totally distorted image of a person’s relationship with God. However, with a little bit of probing into the family tree of the word we soon get a radically different perspective. Like virtually every word in the Hebrew language, Torah can be traced back to a verbal root. One of the striking features of the Lord’s mother tongue is that verbs lie at the root of every family tree. It is an active and dynamic language full of pictures rather than an abstract, merely conceptual language. The eardrum is like a canvas on which Hebrew paints vivid concrete pictures. Far back in the family line of Torah was a verb which was used by an archer. The verb described the action of giving direction to the arrow as it left the bow. With this picture before us it is not difficult to move from the idea of firing off an arrow to the concept of giving direction, guidance to something and from this to the domain of education or instruction where the teacher guides the student. Torah is not about imposing law but about giving instruction or guidance. God wanted the lives of his people to be on target. Strikingly, one of the Hebrew terms for sin means to miss the target and to this day an arrow that falls short of the target in archery is called a “sinner”. Sin is therefore not just about wilfully wrong behaviour but also covers the idea of a life that is falling short of its God-given target.

With this insight we can easily see why Jesus taught that he did not come to abolish but to fulfil Torah. The Torah was never other than a gift of grace, of which not a jot or tittle would pass away. In his person,

Jesus was not only the great re-interpreter of Torah but also the very embodiment of it.

A Rabbi among Rabbis

As a teacher of Torah, Jesus loved Deuteronomy particularly. It is not unreasonable to suggest that as a boy he would have started to commit the first five books of the Bible to memory. We could say that as a young Jewish man he would have been marinated in the text. That is apparent from his response to Satan at moments of great temptation when he responded by quoting the Scriptures directly. There is a sense in which he not only studied but also lived the text. Having given Israel a sacred text book, at the climax of redemptive revelation God gave the world a text person – a life that could be read. Jesus’ disciples would not only have studied with him but also studied him.

Such was the self awareness of Jesus that studying with him took precedence even over parents. This was the point that he was making in an often misunderstood passage where he said anyone who followed him must ‘hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters’ (Luke 14:26). Often English translations appear to make Jesus’ demand seem to contradict other passages of Scripture about parental respect, marital love and family responsibility. The word “hate” jars the modern reader. However, if the words of Jesus are translated back into his mother tongue then it becomes absolutely clear that he is not making others the object of the potential disciple’s hatred but simply putting everyone and everything else into second place after him. Essentially Jesus was saying that he wanted his disciples to prefer studying with him. This was such an imperative that naturally all else had to take second place. He was not contradicting other parts of the Scriptures but emphasising the new priorities of a kingdom member.

If we are to be disciples of Messiah then we need to set him in the context of his own world to understand him. Nonetheless, as we set Jesus in the matrix of Second Temple Jewish life we dare not confine him to that world. He was a rabbi but no mere rabbi. He was a sage but no mere sage. He never darkened a church door but he was the foundation of an expanding people of God. He never read a New Testament but he inaugurated the New Covenant. He never sang a Christian hymn but we are still singing to and about him in our worship. He never encountered a Protestant or a Roman Catholic but in him all earthly distinctions are transcended. He never left his homeland but we can meet him anywhere in the world today.

Desi Maxwell

Desi Maxwell was born in Northern Ireland and studied at the University of Ulster, before continuing his studies at Westminster and Princeton, in the USA. He ministered in Canada for four years, and then spent three years as the minister of a Presbyterian Church in Belfast. For the past twenty years he has been a lecturer at Belfast Bible College. Desi is a much-valued speaker at the FIEC annual conference and has just launched XPLORATIONS, a new teaching ministry to help people discover the richness of seeing the Bible through Hebrew eyes.