

October Book Recommendation Summary

Summary by Dan Brent, M.Div.

Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus

Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg; Zondervan, 2009, \$21.99

The effort of this book is to “find a way to fine-tune our hearing so that we could develop first-century Jewish ears!” (p.13) The authors want to take us with them as they endeavor to recapture the cultural and religious background in which Jesus taught. They want us to see the gospels from the perspective of Jesus’ original audience.

Jesus took the role of a rabbi. Rabbis were never paid. Of the religious groups active in first century Israel – Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, and Pharisees – the teaching of Jesus came closest to that of the Pharisees. This in spite of the frequent condemnations he levied against their hypocrisy.

“Like other rabbis, Jesus walked the land, taught in parables, engaged in debates, interpreted scriptures, and raised up disciples.” (p.30) Debate, in fact, was the accepted and popular method for teaching and clarifying points. But Jesus was “not merely telling us but showing us what human beings, created in God’s image, were meant to become.” (p.32) “A rabbi’s greatest goal was to raise up disciples who would carry on his teaching.” (p.33)

The Jews knew their God as “Shepherd of Israel” so “When Jesus called himself a ‘shepherd’ in John 10, he was hinting at his identity as a messianic king, the future ruler of God’s kingdom.” (p.46) The authors point out that the most potent messianic prophesy is in Daniel where the prophet sees “one like a son of man” – human yet much more. So, they say, when Jesus refers to himself as “Son of Man”, “his audience would know exactly what he was saying” about his messianic identity. (p.48)

In Jesus’ day, the disciples of a rabbi – his “talmid” – would accompany the teacher on all his travels and tasks. This took Peter and the others into places that would have surprised a faithful Jew, places like into the homes of tax collectors. A talmidim was expected to be at the service of the master. How startling then for them to experience Jesus washing their feet at that last supper. This, of course, was part of their continuing education. “God’s goal isn’t simply to fill the world with people who believe the right things. It is to fill the world with people who shine with the brilliance of Christ.” (p.64)

The book tells the story of someone watching two groups of sheep converging and mingling in Palestine while their shepherds talked. When the shepherds parted, the sheep simply sorted themselves out according to the sound of the voice they recognized! After an experience like that, you hear “I know mine and mine know me” with a whole new understanding.

Jewish religion was a community affair. Beyond the shared sacred books and feasts, students of Jewish faith found partners, “haverim”, to help them digest the movement of

God among them. Jesus appeared to endorse the idea. “Where two of three come together in my name, there am I with them.” “Of course Jesus did have times of solitude.” But “most of his ministry was spent living side by side with his faithful talmidim, traveling with, them on foot from town to town, camping out everywhere they went. Many an evening would have been spent sharing a meal with strangers.” (p.72)

First century Palestine had a very religious culture and Jesus, in most ways, fit into that comfortably. He no doubt wore phylacteries or “tefillin” – small leather pouches containing scripture. His criticism of the Pharisees on that issue would not have been that they wore tefillin but that they did so ostentatiously to show their superior holiness. The young Jesus would have heard Joseph daily praying the Amidah, the series of blessings which echo in the Lord’s Prayer. It was a culture whose “scripture reveals a God neither distant nor uncaring but one intensely interested in the world he has made.” (p.86) The culture was in “the habit of blessing God many times a day” for his gifts. This gives understand to Jesus’ astonishment that the nine cured Jewish lepers did not return to publicly bless God.

The book explains – in text and in an appendix – the seven main feasts of Israel. The greatest is, of course, Passover to remind them of their liberation from Egypt. Two others encouraged trips to Jerusalem to celebrate in the temple. One was Pentecost, celebrated fifty days after Passover and commemorating God’s giving the law to Moses on Sinai. The other is the feast of Tabernacles in the fall to celebrate harvest. Two more spring feasts are Unleavened Bread (attending to our need to abandon pride and sin) and Firstfruits (celebrating the early barley harvest). Two additional fall feasts are Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah or New Year) and Atonement (Yom Kippur), the only day on which the high priest could enter the Holy Place. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the coming of his Spirit, gave new meaning to each of those feasts. “From the mountaintop view that the feasts provide, you see far back into remote time, to the dawn of creation, and then far forward into the future when Christ will come again,” the authors note. (p.126)

The Jewish culture of Jesus’ time was focused on God both in the daily life of the Jews and in their national feast days. So the task of Jesus was not to persuade an irreligious people that God mattered. Jesus’ work was to emphasize the hope and love that permeate the gospel message and to rekindle their enthusiasm for the presence of God in their lives. Jeremiah spoke for the Lord: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.”