

The Jesus Scandals by David Instone-Brewer (2012)

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Instone-Brewer, David. *The Jesus Scandals: Why He Shocked His Contemporaries (and Still Shocks Today)*. Oxford: Monarch Books, 2012.


This little book of 191 pages is subtitled, *Why he shocked his contemporaries (and still shocks today)*. “Why look for scandals?” he asks. His answer:

Scandals are our best guarantee of historical truth in the Gospels. When disgraceful, embarrassing and shocking details about Jesus are recorded by his friends and supporters, it is much harder to disbelieve them.¹

The book is divided into three sections: scandals in Jesus’ life; scandals among Jesus’ friends; and scandals in Jesus’ teaching. The first section opens with a chapter on his illegitimate birth. The author emphasises that being called the “son of Mary” was insulting to Jesus because a Jewish male would normally be named as the son of his father. This label was a way of saying no-one knew who his father was: Joseph denied he was the father. Moreover, everyone in Nazareth knew that Jesus was born less than nine months after his parent’s wedding. This approach makes for fresh readings of the gospels, as when Jesus speaking in the temple in John 8 is subject to the taunts of a heckler who openly questions his legitimacy.

The chapter on his shameful execution describes in detail why the cross was such a scandal to people in first century Palestine. He notes how centuries of treating the cross as a decoration in the church or as a piece of jewellery has made it respectable. It is hard for us to perceive just how disgusting a crucifixion was and how it disgraced

¹ David Instone-Brewer, *The Jesus Scandals: Why He Shocked His Contemporaries (and Still Shocks Today)* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2012), 11.



the victim, while killing him painfully and slowly. He points out that with this death, Jesus identified himself with the worst criminals of his time.

The second section begins with a chapter on the scandal of having female disciples like Mary Magdalene. More particularly, he takes his cue from Luke 8:2, that Jesus' exorcism of seven demons from Mary was 'an ancient description of mental illness'.² He argues that the western church conflated her with the "prostitute" of Luke 7:37-50 because it was easier for it to handle a reformed woman than one with the taint of mental illness.

The final section begins with a chapter on child abuse. The author argues that child sexual abuse is the target of Jesus' furious pronouncement in Matthew 18:6. He informs us that the Romans combined their immoral lifestyle and oppressive slavery in a particularly noxious way with their treatment of slave girls and boys as sex toys.

Jesus spoke out against this practice with more vehemence than anyone else of his day, and the Gospels record him speaking more stridently against this than anything else. Our society and the church have only recently learned to view this crime with as much seriousness as Jesus.³

The final chapter in this section, and of the book, is on eternal torment, Jesus' teaching on hell. He claims that Jesus taught more about hell than any other Jew of his time; 45 verses on hell, compared to 65 verses on love.⁴ He argues that Jesus' teachings were similar to common Jewish beliefs of the time, even to the point of using the imagery of the Jerusalem garbage dump, *Gehenna*, for hell. However, the scandal for Jewish hearers was that Jesus suggested that those who knew more about the will of God and failed to do it, would be punished more severely than those who did not know (Luke 12: 47-48). Finally, the author argues from the Greek words used, that the punishment in hell is torment followed by destruction. This is certainly an example of Jesus' teaching that still shocks today.

I have a few criticisms: in the chapter on second-rate disciples, the author has forgotten the attempt by James and John to corner the best seats in heaven: "They [the disciples] didn't care about their own reputation or greatness; they wanted only to tell the world about their rabbi Jesus".⁵

² Ibid., 82.

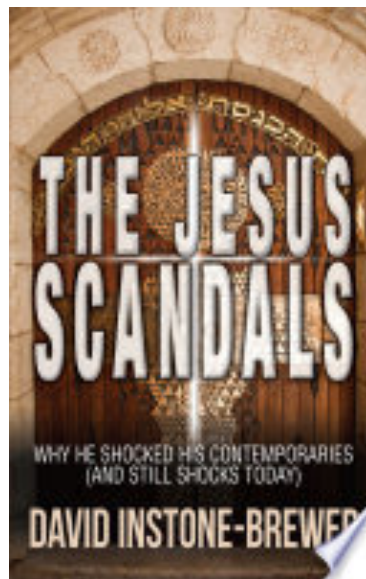
³ Ibid., 121.

⁴ Ibid., 179.

⁵ Ibid., 100.

In the chapter on embarrassing resurrection, he talks about the search for an ossuary inscribed with the names Joseph, Mary & Jesus.⁶ He seems to be unaware of the ossuary (ancient bone box) inscribed with the name: “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus”. This was the subject of the “forgery trial of the century” in Israel which ended in 2012 with a verdict that the inscription was “not forged”.

The author is a Senior Research Fellow at Tyndale House, Cambridge and a Baptist minister. As the blurb at the back says, the book can be read as a whole or as stand-alone chapters. It would be useful for fellowship groups looking for interesting discussion starters, as each chapter is quite short.



⁶ Ibid., 78.