

Freeing Jesus

Chapter 2: Teacher

You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am.

—John 13:13

“Although Christians call Jesus by many names, those who knew him best mostly called him ‘teacher.’ Of the ninety or so times Jesus is addressed directly in the New Testament, roughly sixty refer to him as ‘teacher,’ ‘rabbi,’ ‘great one,’ or ‘master’ (as in the British sense of ‘schoolmaster’). In the gospels, the preponderance of action that occurs is Jesus teaching. He teaches at the Temple, on a hillside, by a lake, in a field, by a campfire, at a dinner table, while at a wedding, and in the center of the city. He teaches, individuals, his disciples, large crowds, small groups, his friends, and his foes.”

“Jesus was born teacher and a born-again one, and he was still teaching on the night before he was arrested and even while being tortured by the Romans. He lived and died a teacher.”

“The word typically translated ‘teacher’ was the title ‘rabbi’ or ‘rabbouni,’ a fairly new—and even revolutionary—term in the first century. The word ‘rabbi’ did not mean Jewish clergyperson, as it does today, nor did the title appear in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, it was just coming into use during Jesus’s time for one whose teachings bore spiritual authority—a sage, a storyteller, an insightful interpreter of the Law, or a particularly wise elder.”

According to Amy Jill-Levine and Marc Brettler, Jesus was the “earliest person in literature to bear the title ‘Rabbi.’” In her book, *The Misunderstood Jew*, Amy-Jill Levine reminds us that in the Christian tradition Jesus must “be more than just a really fine Jewish teacher. But he must be a Jewish teacher as well.”

“To be a rabbi in the first century was to be a teacher who was crafting a new approach to Hebrew texts, traditions, and interpretations. And, sadly, both Christians and Jews have forgotten how completely innovative and challenging Jesus was as a rabbi.”

Diana came to understand “that Jesus was indeed my rabbi. He had been for a long time. Follow his teachings—the rules and commands—listen to the stories, embrace the word, and live his wisdom. Rabbi Jesus shows the way.

The difference between the “rules” of the church and the “rules” of Jesus. Growing up Diana began to notice that the Methodist church rules weren’t the same as the rules articulated by Jesus and that the Methodist rules weren’t usually followed except one day a week. “I began to wonder if the same was true for Jesus’s rules about love and doing nice things for others. Did grown-ups keep rules in church and play by a different set the rest of the week. There wasn’t much following of the Methodist rules, and I began to notice that following Jesus’s rules was sort of rare too.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus places himself in the line of authoritative voices in the Hebrew tradition (such as Moses) and, as most of Jesus’s first hearers would have understood, restates the written Torah in the context of current situation. The Law of Moses was “aimed at an Israel whose people would prosper in their own land, and Jesus’s directed at an Israel whose people were oppressed by Rome in an occupied land.”

“As a teacher, Jesus is not contradicting Moses or demeaning other Jewish teachers. He is offering his interpretation of the law, teachings that surprised his followers with their originality and insight. To understand Jesus as a teacher in this sense—even if one does not consider him divine—is to remember that teachers, even those with great authority, teach within a long line of communal interpretation, something that Jesus himself would have known. Jesus does not replace. Jesus reimagines and expands, inviting an alternative and often innovative reading of Jewish tradition.”

Looking back it was pretty clear to Diana that the churches she attended were not fundamentalist and did not take the Bible literally. But, she also notes that “we did not really know who we were (other than something called ‘Methodists’) or how to engage questions about the Bible. Because of this lack of clarity, all the churches of my childhood reflected a more general understanding of the Bible as a book literally written by God and delivered from heaven to a surprised people below.”

“Understanding the Bible is key to understanding Jesus. The writings of the Hebrew Bible formed him as teacher, and the writings of the New Testament contain his teachings and the earliest Christian interpretations of those teachings.”

“Over the years I have wrestled with scripture...and settled into an understanding of the Bible as a collection of inspired and extraordinary texts that rehearse the spiritual experiences of two ancient faith communities—Jews and Christians—and all the tensions, conflicts, and struggles within and between them.”

Questions for Discussion

What do you think of the idea that Jesus is a teacher? How do you understand this notion and what does it mean to you? Do you think of Jesus as your teacher? Why or why not?

Diana describes Jesus as teacher who was crafting a new approach to Hebrew texts, traditions, and interpretations; a teacher who was challenging and innovative. How does this compare to your understanding of a teacher?

What do you think it means to follow the rules and commands of Jesus? How do you do this and what difference does it make in your life? Do you find following the teachings of Jesus confusing or difficult?

Diana says that understanding the Bible key to understanding Jesus. What do you think of this idea? How do you understand the Bible and how does this shape your understanding of Jesus and your and relationship to him?

What did you learn?

What questions do you have?