

## **Windows on the World of Jesus**

Time Travel to Ancient Judea

Bruce J. Malina

ISBN: 0-664-25457-8 (alk. paper)

Read: 2010 February 22 - April 17

Reviewed: 2010 April 23.

Dr. Malina has an unique way of describing the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between the cultures of Jesus, that is first century Palestine, and of twentieth century America. He has people from this world move to that world and try to do business and maintain relationships and generally try to get along there. The issues and surprises they run into illuminate Gospel stories in passages that are otherwise puzzling to moderns.

He calls his brief chapters “Windows” and there are 61 of them in eight sections. At the end of the book there is a five page summary and overview of each of the 61 cases. The eight sections are:

- I. Honor and Shame
- II. General Interpersonal Behavior
- III. In-Group
- IV. Intra-Family Relations
- V. Out-Group
- VI. Loving-Kindness
- VII. Common Values
- VIII. Concept of Time

For each window, Malina starts out with a story something like this: An American businessman wants to open a branch in first century Judea and advertises for middle managers. ... Why did no one apply?

He will follow with an explanation, usually containing several lengthy citations from the Bible and other sacred literature, particularly the book of Sirach). In this case, there are few middle managers in first century Palestine. Most businesses are family businesses staffed by trusted family members. An outsider hired into the “middle” of that would be a strange thing indeed.

In the course of the lessons on various subjects, we see how misunderstandings between friends play differently in the two cultures, respect and familiarity, how things go right and wrong at parties, on moving day, when babies are born, when a project is overdue, and so forth.

Even usage such as “Judean” is discussed. First century Mediterranean Jews would not be thought of as racial “Jews.” They would have been geographically classified Judeans (or

Galileans, etc.) I also note that the term “Israelite” is obsolete today. Modern day, the term is “Israeli” which is more of a political citizenship designation than a religious group term.

Incidental to these lessons or “windows” I also picked up some interesting explanations for the behaviors of Jesus. For instance, in first century Judea, the Judeans would have lived around Jerusalem, but Jesus himself and most of his followers were Galilean. This explains why, when Jesus was on trial, people with Galilean accents, like Peter, were suspect in the crowd. At some level, Jesus’ in-group was Galilean, particularly those from his operational hometown of Capernaum. He would have been out-group to the Judeans, particularly those running the temple, thus the racial slur, “can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

I had not realized that Capernaum was Jesus’ base of operations either. A lot is said in church about Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. Jesus was born in Bethlehem and immediately left. He grew up in Nazareth but when he started teaching, left it behind. The temple and the center of government where he was tried and executed were in Jerusalem.

Of course, Jesus’ disciples were his in-group, and there were many levels of it: the three, Peter, James, and John; the twelve, the larger following and support group, the larger crowds, the supplicants, and so forth.

Views on sexual sins are quite different as well. Whereas modern Victorian Christians consider all sexuality to be sinful (“conceived in sin, born in sin,” etc.) the offense to the ancient Judeans was not the act but the violation of honor. A married woman was “embedded” in her husband and it was his duty to protect *his* honor by keeping her away from any but himself. Similarly, an unmarried woman was embedded in her father. In one of the first stories in the book, a brother avenges extramarital sex of his sister by killing her and is congratulated by his peers for preserving family honor. To modern Americans, life and death would be considered a higher value than the sexual transgression. We live and work with people in their errors, we do not kill them unless they are a danger to others, and usually not even then. Un-biblical or un-Judean?

Another set of difficulties is probed but not soothed in Malina’s discussions. Jesus, as an example, tells his followers (in places like Matthew 24) that some standing here would not see death before he came in power. At the same place he warns them to always be ready because only the Father, not even the Son, knows the exact day and hour. Of course, all those standing there that day are long gone and this gives us interpretive problems. Indeed, from the beginning of written history, people longed for the arrival of Messiah to straighten out this mess that we live in and ever since he came, they have longed for, and expected any minute now, his return to ... straighten out this mess that we find ourselves living in. The fact that this has gone on 2000 years without obvious fulfillment remains problematic.

So, for those who need to believe that the Bible is perfect in every way and Jesus was born knowing all knowledge about the universe and everything that will ever happen, this has to be explained away by saying things like, “Well, in the moment of death Christians (in good

standing) are greeted and caught up by Jesus, who they see in power.” While this may well happen, it is a clear stretch of the quote itself.

Malina does not move me away from my suspicion that Jesus thought he would be back a lot sooner than has actually turned out to be the case. He said himself that even he didn't know the day or the hour. Indeed, some standing there that day were indeed living when Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D., but Jesus did not arrive on the clouds to straighten out the mess that day, at least not on the public record. Given history since then, it seems unlikely that he arrived privately either, except for the casualties.

This leaves me thinking that Jesus must have been pretty certain that what he was saying would come to pass, but made an error.

Of course, most of our other religious training does not allow Jesus to ever be in error, or even merely uninformed. But there it is. All those standing there that day are dead now and we're still waiting for Jesus to come in power, and believing that it is imminent. After all, things are so bad....

Loving-Kindness is the idea of doing anything possible, regardless of personal inconvenience, for someone in the in-group to whom one is obligated. A person exists within a family and in-group culture and behaves as if he owes everything to them. Don't we often behave in this way to some degree, even though the obligation is not so firmly embedded in our culture? When a friend is moving, don't we generally give them the weekend to help out even if there were other "things to do?"

This does improve my understanding of all the cases in the Bible where God is said to show loving-kindness toward his people.

The modern concept of time would be totally foreign to first century Judeans as well as members of virtually any other culture or era, including many today. We like to create a mechanical device that ticks off our lives with greatest precision afforded by physics then enslave ourselves to it in every facet of life great and small. Of course, without the mechanical device, this would not be possible. People's perception of time came from the slowly moving sun, moon, and stars during the days and weeks. The calendar was equally difficult to follow, kept not by every individual in their pocket but by careful observers at religious centers such as the temple.

Under these circumstances, what does it mean to be "punctual?" It means what it should mean. To be "on time" is to be there when the important person is there. Recall the ten virgins waiting on the bridegroom? They didn't know when the party would begin. It was their job to wait. The party began when the bridegroom got there. Whoever was there when that happened was "on time," whoever was not, was not.

Due to this lack of timed mechanization, the people lived more in the present and the present was much broader than it is for us. They had little notion of the future. While we live mostly in the future, with our plans and goals, they understood life to be so uncertain that the future was not to be trusted or dealt with much. Problems were faced by referring to the past, not planning for the future. Borrowing money at interest to do a project somewhere in the future would be a foreign concept.

It is through this “broad present” that Malina explains that Jesus’ prediction of his return not literally coming true before all contemporary listeners were dead would not have been a problem or paradox for them then. I did not follow the discussion on that point, however, despite trying. Maybe I was rushed to keep an important appointment....

One thing I noted in the juxtaposition of twentieth century Americans with first century Judeans was that, though we claim to have values otherwise (anti-nepotism laws, as an example) we actually function in many of the same ways. The meeting really starts when the important person gets there, regardless of what the clock says. We all have in-groups and out-groups, families, neighbors, friends and enemies. We all have ideas of loyalty and trust in varying degrees across our relationships. Americans are less prone to lifetime, predefined relationships. Perhaps on matters of honor and shame (and timekeeping) are the two groups most distinct. For instance, Americans today typically do not think of a spouse as “embedded.” Indeed, Jesus taught radically that adultery was a sin against the adulterer’s partner whether man *or* woman. From the windows that deal with this subject, it seems that this would have been a novel concept. Why, after all, was the “woman caught in adultery” not accompanied by her accomplice in crime when she was thrown before Jesus?

On the subject of shame it seemed to me that the Judean culture had merely codified existing natural feelings within people who were acculturated in this way. This would explain much in both cultures.

Viann, who was doing research for a paper in one of her PhD classes (something like ‘faith in health care practice’), came across this book and recommended that I read through it, knowing that I read the Bible all the time and have lively debates about it. She also said (a fair criticism) that the “windows” tend to repeat each other a lot. In retrospect, it seems more like a reference book than a narrative. Maybe I’ll copy the five page summary at the end and keep it with my Bible.

The Windows have been illuminating. Some of what I have learned has snuck into my daily expositions on pages from the Bible as I’m wrapping up the six year series by passing through the Gospels again. Understanding about Jesus’ in-group’ and how he was supposed to interact with in-group and out-group enables the Gospel accounts make more sense.