

The Politics of Jesus

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Summary: The argument here is really quite simple. When Jesus claimed to be king, that had social-earthly implications not merely spiritual-ethereal ones. He intended (and intends) to be a real ruler over a sociologically identifiable group of people, namely 'Israel.' The reason (I would argue) that most have difficulty with a political Christ is because they object to him using earthly political methodologies to carry out God's agenda for this world. But if we grasp his politic of self-abnegation, his goals and methods both come into clear focus.

Definition of political: This is merely a provisional definition, by necessity. But two things should be said at this point. First, the word political comes from the Greek word πολιτεύομαι which means 'to live as a citizen' (Acts 23:1; Php 1:27). It had to do with social engagement. Second, here we are using the term in a more specific way to indicate public leadership involving at least four things: (a) a person who is public rather than private (i.e. people have access to his/her ideas), (b) a sociologically identifiable group of followers, (c) a social agenda, and (d) the exercise of power. Does this describe Jesus? The following postulates argue that it does.¹

1. The term "Kingdom of God" would normally have been understood as a political concept in Jesus' milieu. Jesus' use of it is unique. It is never found in the canonical OT and only once in the apocrypha (*Wis* 10:10); and seldom in other Jewish literature. *Never* is it presented as present!
2. The majority of Kingdom passages include either clear or suggestive political intimations. Of the 67 separate contexts in which 100+ uses of 'kingdom' occur, 18% have clear political meaning and another 48% are strongly suggestive of political content.
3. Both John's stage (the desert) and his costume (of Elijah) cast him in a political light. If baptism was his priority the Lake of Galilee would have been more convenient; had he wanted larger crowds, Jerusalem was better. What he wanted was to image a new entry into Israel at the Jordan.
4. John's political/eschatological preaching led to his arrest and execution by the highest Jewish authority in the land. Josephus' account is telling (*Ant.* 18.116–19), particularly in the context of his armies being destroyed as God's punishment for killing John.
5. For Jesus, exorcism and healings were evidence of the presence of the Kingdom of God (cf. Lk 11:20). This was a power-encounter, but a clash of Titan kingdoms, not exorcist vs. demons.
6. A socially-scientific sensitive reading of the Gospels demonstrates that Jesus' miraculous cures were threatening to social stability and hence caused him to be labeled a deviant and viewed as potentially politically dangerous. This is especially true against the background of magicians as socially disruptive in the Roman world of politics. Jesus was consistently labeled as a deviant magician in the second century apologetic literature.

¹ Four texts have been used to argue that Jesus was not political: John 18:36, my kingdom is not of this world; John 6:15, Jesus refused to be made king by the crowds at the feeding of the 5,000; Matt 4:8–10 (/Luke 4:5–8) recounts Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and his refusal to bow to Satan to receive the kingdoms of the world; Luke 12:13–21 tells of Jesus' refusal to arbitrate in an inheritance dispute. None of these texts argue against a political Christ but rather an improper method of achieving the kingdom. It is not, apparently, political power that Jesus rejects but the inappropriate means of achieving and exercising that power.

7. Jesus' designation of Twelve apostles was a political symbol which promised the Messianic fulfillment of the ingathering of the Diaspora and he as its king/viceroy. This is all the more striking given the loss of the Ten Northern Tribes. (One could consider here also the 72 evangelists in Judea, which matched the number of Moses' judges as the number of Sanhedrin members).
8. Jesus' meals declared the wrong sorts of people as acceptable to God. While not political, per se, it was seen as socially disruptive. Jesus was dismantling the boundaries of purity and largely ignoring the cleansing function of the Temple.
9. Jesus' forgiveness of those "outside" Israel's borders of purity was a symbolic act, which marked a new era (and leadership)—the exile was over and the Kingdom of God was being established.
10. Jesus' political actions are supported by political sayings that portrayed him as judge, king, savior, and shepherd, but one who would die in that very vocation. This is true of his judgment sayings, his claims to royalty (Matthew 25:31–46 is especially instructive). 'Heteroloquy' upsets the societal apple cart.
11. The Triumphal Entry was a symbolic act that Jesus performed to announce himself as king and the pilgrims who participated in it reciprocated both symbolically and verbally with regal acclamation. Entering the city on a donkey with a carpet of palm branches and shouts of 'Save now' during the Passover celebration is unambiguous political symbolism.
12. Jesus' 'Cursing of the Temple' attacked the central symbol of the nation; coming on the heels of the 'Triumphal Entry,' it must be seen as an announcement of a new regime. His citation of Jer 7:11 and Isa 56:7 was especially politically provocative.
13. The narratives of Jesus' betrayal and arrest describe a confrontation between the civil authorities and a political figure on the make.
14. The highest Roman political figure in Palestine sentenced Jesus to execution by crucifixion due to the charge that Jesus presented himself as the King of the Jews, which amounted to sedition.
15. The earliest historical accounts of Jesus after the gospels portrayed him as a political figure, executed for sedition.

Conclusions:

1. Jesus was political
2. Jesus' politics were ambiguous (this may even partially explain Mark's injunctions to silence).
3. Jesus' politics involved self-abnegation, this can be seen most clearly in Mark 10:35–45.

Jesus' politics (based on Mark 10:35–45): All the kingdoms of this world operate with two political tools—violence and propaganda. There are no other tools. Jesus' however, replaced them with indiscriminate love and truth. The goal of earthly politics is manipulation. The goal of Jesus' politics is service. NOTE: Jesus did not rebuke James and John for their quest to be great. He, in fact, gave them the methodology to achieve it—humility (not some post-Freudian self-perception, but a Biblical model of service to those beneath you). If individual Christians as well as organizational churches would adopt this politic, Jesus said it would make us great. The only question left is "Does it work?" Perhaps we should as Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Václav Havel, or the Minjung of Korea.

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I. A provisional definition of political

A. Corrections

1. The Greek word *politeuomai* (politeuovomai), indicates living your life socially engaged (only used in Acts 23:1 and Php 1:27). Thus politics does not necessitate governmental entities but citizenry.
2. Separation of church and state is a modern, unrealistic, and scripturally untenable presupposition of the western church anachronistically applied to Jesus. It is as likely that Jesus would separate politics from religion as would Ben Laden (both Middle-Eastern monotheists).
3. Most theologians have argued for the separation of the earthly and the spiritual, particularly after Constantine embraced Christianity as the state religion. The evidence below will clearly argue against such a dichotomy. The conflation of the two has had its problems, to be sure. But I will argue that these problems are not caused by the conflation of religion and politics, but by the adoption and embrace by Christianity of the earthly rather than Christological conception of carrying out our social agenda.

B. Essential Characteristics

1. Social Agenda—a corporate program for a specific people group
2. Public Figure—a person who openly presents his/her ideas and goals
3. Identifiable Followers—a collection of individuals who support the agenda and leader
4. Uses Power—has some way of enforcing the agenda

II. Jesus' Politics

A. Teachings

1. His primary preaching was about the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15)
2. Questionable sayings
 - a. Purchase up a sword (Luke 22:36)
 - b. Give to Caesar (Mark 12:17)
3. Clear political sayings
 - a. Praying for God's kingdom to come is a request for a regime change (Matt 6:10; Luke 11:2).
 - b. Sayings of Judgment (Matt 11:20–24/Luke 10:13–15; Matt 12:39–45/Luke 11:24–26, 39–32; Luke 13:1–9; Matt 23:1–35; Luke 11:37–52; Luke 13:34–35; 19:41–44; Matt 23:37–39; Matt 24:1–51/Mark 13:1–37/Luke 21:5–36).
 - c. Many of Jesus' parables were socially aware, the parables of the Minas was downright political, based on events of Herod (Luke 19:11–27) and Jesus identified himself as the eschatological king and shepherd (Matt 25:31–46, see also Matt 26:31/Mark 14:27, cf. Zech 13:7; John 10:1–18). He also identified himself as the son of a king (Matt 22:1–15 cf. Luke 14:16–24).

- d. Jesus claimed to be the Messiah (Matt 16:20; Matt 22:41-46/Mark 12:35-40/Luke 20:41-47; Matt 23:10; Mark 14:61-62/Matt 26:63-64/Luke 22:67; Luke 24:26, 43; John 17:3). Furthermore, Jesus claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:8/Mark 2:28/Luke 6:5).
 - e. Jesus predicted both he and his disciples would carry a cross (Matt 10:38; Mark 8:34/Matt 16:24/Luke 9:23; Luke 14:26-27; cf. Luke 12:4, 11, 51-53; 17:33; 21:12-17; John 12:25; Gospel of Thomas 55:2b).
 - f. Jesus threatened the destruction of the temple -- this was the charge at his trial (Matt 24:1-35; Mark 13:1-31; Luke 21:5-36).
- B. His Organization
- 1. His mentor, John the Baptist was political
 - a. "Prepare the way for the Lord" is a regal declaration (Mark 1:1-3)
 - b. Herod beheaded John for sedition and suspected Jesus of the same (Matt 14:1-12).
 - 2. Establishing 12 Apostles has clear political implications (Mark 3:14-15)
 - 3. The 70/72 preachers would create a political stir (Luke 10:1-16) as an imitation of the Sanhedrin.
- C. His Actions
- 1. Healings and exorcisms were visual signs of the in breaking of God's kingdom (Matt 10:7-8; Luke 9:1-2).
 - 2. Jesus ate with 'sinners' thus destroying the accepted cultural codes of ritual purity. They are found in more than a dozen places in every strata of gospel tradition.
 - 3. The triumphal entry, with garments and a donkey, and "Hosannah" (Matt 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44).
 - 4. The cursing of the temple -- particularly the context of the 2 OT quotes (Matt 21:12-17; Mark 11:12-19; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:12-22).
 - 5. Jesus was betrayed by one of his chief associates, arrested by the Chief Priest, and given over to the Governor Pilate on charges of sedition (Matt 27:2-11; Mark 15:1-15; Luke 23:1-5, 13-24). He also appeared before Herod as a usurper to the king (Luke 23:8-12). Finally, Jesus was crucified as a rebel, between two others (Matt 27:35-36) with a sign above his head that read "king of the Jews"
- III. Other's Views of Jesus
- A. Birth Narratives
- 1. Jesus means, "Yahweh Saves" (Matt 1:21; Luke 1:31)
 - 2. Jesus would be a political ruler on David's throne (Luke 1:32-33)
 - 3. Zechariah's song is a celebration of political liberation (Luke 1:67-79).
 - 4. The messiah/king was born in King David's hometown (Luke 2:11)
 - 5. Genealogies were legal records for property and leadership accession (Matt 1:1-18; Luke 3:23-37).
 - 6. Magi were envoys from the Eastern province sent to congratulate the new king (Matt 2:1-6).
 - 7. Stars were portents of divinely installed rulers (Matt 2:2, 7-8).
- B. During Jesus' ministry
- 1. Nathanael calls Jesus the "King of Israel" (John 1:49)

2. The Samaritans called Jesus "Savior of the World," the kind of title given to Caesar Augustus (John 4:42)
 3. Herodians and Pharisees plot Jesus' death (Mark 12:13).
 4. Because of the feeding, the people believed he was the prophet and wanted to make him king by force (John 6:15)
 5. Peter's declaration of Jesus as Christ is clearly political (Matt 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20).
 6. Pharisees warned Jesus about Herod's assassination plot (Luke 13:31-33)
 7. The Sanhedrin determined that one man must die for the nation (John 11:47-54)
 8. James and John ask for chief seats (Matt 20:20-21; Mark 10:35-45).
 9. The chief priests questioned Jesus' right to curse the temple (Matt 21:23; Mark 11:28; Luke 20:2)
 10. Question by Pharisees and Herodians about the legality of Roman taxes (Matt 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26).
 11. The Sadducees question about resurrection had political ramifications (Matt 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-39).
 12. The Chief Priests plotted Jesus' arrest and execution and feared a riot over him (Matt 26:3-5; Mark 14:1-2; Luke 22:1-2).
 13. Jesus was apprehended as if he were leading a rebellion (Matt 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-52; Luke 22:47-53).
 14. Jesus was charged with claiming to be king of the Jews (Matt 27:11, 37).
- C. The book of Acts suggests political life of the church
1. Acts 1:6, The disciples still apparently expected a political kingdom to be set up. Jesus did not deny it's coming but told them they could not know the details.
 2. Acts 17:7, The Thessalonians said of Paul and Silas, "They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."
 3. In Acts there were 36 political confrontations in 22 chapters:
 - a. They included the following political rulers:
 - i. Chief Priests (4:5-22),
 - ii. The whole Sanhedrin (5:17-42; 22:30-23:10)
 - iii. King Herod Agrippa 1 & 2 (12:1-4; 25:23-26:32)
 - iv. A political advisor to a proconsul (13:6-12)
 - v. Civic leaders in Antioch and Iconium (13:50; 14:1-6)
 - vi. Local businessmen and city magistrates of Philippi (16:19-24)
 - vii. A mob in Thessalonica, Ephesus, and Jerusalem (17:5-9; 19:23-41; 21:28ff)
 - viii. The Areopagus in Athens (17:19)
 - ix. Proconsuls Serigus Paulus of Cyprus and Gallio in Corinth (13:7; 18:12-17)
 - x. Silversmith union of Ephesus (19:23-41)
 - xi. Governors Felix and Festus (24; 25)
 - xii. Perhaps Claudius Caesar and Nero (18:2; 25:11)

- b. Christians were arrested 10 times, fled a city 6 times, killed twice, beaten 5 times, death plots 6 times, stood trial 11 times and had to claim citizenship twice.

IV. The Politics of Jesus as illustrated by Mark 10:32–45

- A. Worldly politics is carried out by two tools: violence and propaganda.
 - 1. Whether the particular social structure is communism, monarchy, republic, democracy or any other, these are the two tools that political leaders have at their disposal.
 - 2. Neither of these tools are evil in and of themselves and at times both seem to be necessary in carrying out earthly politics.
- B. Jesus appears to have replaced these two tools with love and truth.
 - 1. Indiscriminate Love: The most striking thing Jesus said politically was 'love your enemy' (Matt 5:44). Such a thing was unheard of in the ancient world, particularly due to the shame/honor social context of the Mediterranean.
 - 2. Truth: While Christian doctrine can become propaganda, what Jesus was doing was qualitatively different. He was not coercing individuals but warning, inviting, and transforming them. Moreover, he never presented his teachings in a self-serving, deceptive, or embellished way.
- C. This way of doing politics has been successfully adopted by a number of groups and individuals for positive social reconstruction including, but not limited to, Mother Teresa, Václav Havel, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Minjung of Korea.