

Was Jesus Political?

In this lesson we will make an extended argument that Jesus intended to be a real king. He was born as a king and died as one. Furthermore, in between his birth and death, both his followers and his enemies understood him that way.

I. Kingly at his birth

1. **Baby Jesus**, announced as a new king being born, stood in direct opposition to both the kingship of Herod and the imperial rule of Caesar. Furthermore, he was announced as “savior” and one who would bring “peace.” Both of these had already been applied to Caesar Augustus who had received divine honors around the empire as the Savior who had brought *Pax Romana*. (Later he was acclaimed “savior of the world” by the Samaritans [Jn 4:42], another title given to Caesar Augustus). The slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem is both precautionary and punishment for harboring his adversary.
2. **Herod**, who was an Edomite, often came into sharp conflict with his subjects, the Jews. He was a client-king, more interested in serving Rome (and himself), than serving his subjects. He was actually inaugurated in the Roman Forum and emerged from the Senate house between Augustus and Antony. Together they made a sacrifice and then celebrated at a banquet thrown by Antony (see pp. 41-43). He instituted a police state in Israel, which included loyalty oaths, surveillance, informers, secret police, imprisonment, torture, and brutal retaliation against dissent.
3. **The Magi** were a caste of the highest-ranking political/religious advisers and/or officers of the Median and later Persian imperial courts. This area of Mesopotamia continued to foster some of the sharpest opposition to Rome’s Eastern expansion. Furthermore, the Magi were often instrumental in predicting and establishing new kingships. This is clearly seen in the story of Tiridates who initiated Nero into their cult (Pliny, *Natural History* 30.6.17).
4. **The Star** may not have merely represented the birth of a king, but perhaps, in its Palestinian setting, also the harbinger of bloodshed from rebellion (e.g. *War* 6.289, 298-99).
5. **Bethlehem** was King David’s hometown. It is appropriate that the Messiah would be born here (cf. Lk 1:31-32; 2:11)

II. Kingly during his life

1. It was the basic message of early Preaching. John the Baptist (Mt 3:2; *Mk 1:15*); Jesus (Mt 4:17; Lk 4:43; 8:1; *Acts 1:3*), often accompanied by healings (Mt 4:23; 9:35; Mk 1:39; Lk 8:1; 9:11), and the Apostles (Lk 9:2), also often accompanied by healings (Mt 10:7). As well as all those that preach Jesus’ message (Mt 13:19, 52; 24:14; Lk 9:60; 10:9; 16:16; *Acts 8:12*); especially Paul (*Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31*).
2. Pharisees warned Jesus about Herod’s assassination plot (cf. Lk 13:31-33)
3. Establishing 12 Apostles has clear political implications (cf. Mk 3:14-15). Furthermore, the 72 preachers would create a political stir (cf. Lk 10:1-16).
4. Because of the feeding of the 5,000, the people believed he was the prophet and wanted to make him king by force (Jn 6:15).
5. Peter’s declaration of Jesus as Christ is clearly political. It implied either a king, a high priest, or both (cf. Mt 16:16; Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20).
6. James and John ask for chief seats (cf. Mt 20:20-21; Mk 10:35-45).

III. Kingly at his death

1. The triumphal entry, with garments and a donkey, and "Hosanna" is a regal claim (cf. Mt 21:1-11; Mk 11:1-11; Lk 19:28-44).
2. The cursing of the temple -- particularly the context of Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, which Jesus quotes, is taking regal prerogative (cf. Mt 21:12-17; Mk 11:12-19; Lk 19:45-48; Jn 2:13-22).
3. Jesus was apprehended as if he were leading a rebellion (cf. Mt 26:47-56; Mk 14:43-52; Lk 22:47-53).
4. Jesus was charged with claiming to be king of the Jews (cf. Mt 26:63; 27:37; Mk 14:61; Lk 22:67). And Jesus appeared before the Governor Pilate on charges of sedition (cf. Mt 27:2-11; Mk 15:1-15; Lk 23:1-5, 13-24), as well as before Herod as a usurper to the king (Lk 23:8-12).
5. Jesus was crucified as a rebel, between two others (cf. Mt 27:35-36).

The sign over his head read, "This is Jesus, King of the Jews" (Mt 27:37; Mk 15:26; Lk 23:38; Jn 19:19)