

Was Jesus Primarily a Religious Prophet or Social Activist?

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Abstract: A response will be given with reference to Jesus' religious experience and his political activity. Prophet-teacher, or social reformer, or both? While it is preposterous to discount Jesus as neither, he is seen as being either one or another, or even both. Before delving into understanding Jesus' religious experience and political activity, it is vital to take a step back in time and see the world through the eyes of a first century Jew living under repressive Roman Occupation.

Key Words: Jesus Christ – social-religious identity; Jesus Christ – mission; 1st century Roman Palestine; 1st century Palestinian Judaism

Life was harsh and brutal for most ordinary Jews in the time of Jesus who himself has “grown up with stories of conquest and oppression,”¹ in a “setting of social unrest,” in Galilee – a region that had the “reputation... of being proud and rebellious.”² After suffering and toiling under a series of invasions “beginning with the Babylonians (539 BCE), then the Persians, and the Greeks” and now the Roman Occupation of Israel (63 BCE), there was mounting expectation with each succeeding generation, of a Messiah, God's own appointed King coming to lead Israel to victory over her enemies and establish God's glorious reign on earth. For a long time, the Jews had not had a prophet sent to them and they were eager to hear of God's word spoken amongst them again in history. Enactment of “all sorts of festivities, liturgies, and readings from sacred books” and pilgrimages to Jerusalem at Passover time serve to remind the Jews that God would soon be king and justice would bring an end to Roman paganism and their corrupt Jewish elite allies. “God's kingdom wasn't a state of mind, or a sense of inner peace. It was concrete, historical, real.”³

Religion and politics were intermeshed in Jewish worldview and cosmology, with one arm seeing the other in establishing a theocratic reign of God, however it may come about. Everything was seen and explained through the spectacles of religion and faith with the eschatological hope of an eventual, lasting reestablishment of God's Covenant through a Messiah. The periods of suffering under foreigners were endured as “punishments” for the nation's transgressions against the Mosaic Law, and systematic ‘purifications’ were gradually set up by various groups (e.g. Essenes, Pharisees, Zealots, etc.) to keep God's commandments in a prescribed way so as to hasten God's arrival. There was no separation between ‘Church’ and State the way we understand it today. Political activity had religious implications, and vice versa.

¹ G. Hall, “Jesus the Christ: A Christology Course,” <http://www.mcauley.acu.edu.au/staff/ghall/XTOLOGY.htm>, accessed 8 August 2002

² B. Hill, *Jesus the Christ: Contemporary Perspectives* (Mystic, CN: Twenty-Third Publications, 2002), 8.

³ N.T. Wright, ‘Jesus revisited’ in *Who was Jesus?* (London: SPCK, 1992), 94, 97.

With Jesus kicking off his public Ministry by proclaiming that “the time has come... the *Kingdom* of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mk.1:15), he would have given others the impression that he was a prophet sent by God, and that God has heard the cry of His People and “Israel was at last going to be redeemed, rescued from oppression.”⁴ Being more than a clone of the prophets of old, Jesus words and actions made him a man for all seasons, bringing hope not only to the Jew, but also to the Gentiles whom the former has rejected as being unfit for the Kingdom.

Hill notes that “there is little in Jesus teaching or actions that would indicate he ever advocated violent rebellion” like the Zealots,⁵ and that “Jesus was not a violent subversive, and yet, in the long run, his brand of non-violent resistance could be more subversive than that of the terrorist.”⁶ Having bypassed the established rabbinic schools and scribal academies, Jesus has his own unique but authoritative way of teaching that astonished, amazed, and challenged his audiences with numerous parables that incorporated hope, justice and liberation for both Jews and Gentiles alone who were oppressed and side-stepped by the Jewish authorities and unjust structures of the day. Jesus’ ‘anarchic’ individuality in his teaching style and openness to all who are ready to accept God’s word and repentance is what made him thread into the minefield of control that was laid down by the collaborating religious and political institutions.

Just as new wine is poured into new wineskin (Mk 2:22), Jesus “performed deeds signifying” a “new reality of reconciliation,” both personal and social, between God and humanity.⁷ Unlike the Zealots who advocated violence against the enemies of Israel, Jesus was not a violent revolutionary in the modern perception of it. His revolution is a ‘silent,’ non-violent one of showing the loving, just and forgiving face of God. Never before have people “heard that God was loving and forgiving” as so “vividly dramatized” in the “words and actions of Jesus.” Jesus’ message was radical in challenging “the prevailing consciousness of his time.” He freely “offered salvation to those who had heretofore little hope of it, and predicted dire consequences for those who righteously thought of themselves as ‘saved.’ He was a harsh critic of oppression and injustice that he observed around him, and was a courageous advocate for the poor and the outcast” which included those who has no voice in society like women, the diseased and the disabled.⁸

While the Jewish authorities like the Sanhedrin, Sadducees and Pharisees fear the eroding support they had over people and the decline of rigorous traditions they have institutionalised, the Romans would have been worried or nervous about Jesus’ unpredictability in both his preachings of a “kingdom” that would rival Caesar’s and his alarming following who could suddenly rise against the Empire. Moreover, Jesus was disrupting the system of collaboration that they had with the Jewish elite through the aristocratic Sadducees and Herod Antipas.⁹ It was only a matter of time that Jesus that Jesus would have head-on clashes with the status quo. If it was not religiously revolutionary enough use parables to convey the acceptance of Gentiles into God’s Kingdom, while “subverting Israel’s national institutions, and/or the fiercely held agendas of certain pressure groups, was asking for trouble.”¹⁰

⁴ Wright, *Who was Jesus?*, 97.

⁵ Hill, *Jesus the Christ*, 9.

⁶ Hill, *Jesus the Christ*, 175.

⁷ J. Sobrino, *Christianity at the Crossroads: A Latin American View* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 209-210.

⁸ Hill, *Jesus the Christ*, 66.

⁹ Hill, *Jesus the Christ*, 176, 182-184.

¹⁰ Wright, *Who was Jesus?*, 99.

Jesus' religious experience that flowed out in his controversial exorcisms, miraculous healings of the blind, deaf, lame and forgiveness of sins as if he himself was God, notwithstanding his disregard for the Sabbath ritual observances when faced with a more important good, was solidly grounded in his Abba experience as a Son of a loving God who "accepts and loves all people unconditionally."¹¹ Through his calls to conversion (Mk.1:15) and his poetic teaching, paradoxes and hyperboles, Jesus extends the freedom of God's love to all open to a change of heart. Through example, Jesus taught humility, compassion, love, self-sacrifice and the observance of the spirit of the Mosaic Law instead of its mere letter. His marvellous weaving of God's message of liberation was 'political' insofar as it allows others to question and challenge the religio-political establishment that ultimately led him to his death on the Roman cross as a criminal.

All in all, Jesus' Ministry was not exclusively religious or political in terms that we attribute to them today. With religion and politics intertwined in a world far different from modern times, it can be concluded that Jesus was primarily a religious prophet whose actions may be interpreted to be social activism shrouded with religiosity. Jesus did not directly challenge the occupying Roman Empire purely as a social activist, but he did challenge the religio-political injustices that emanated from it, in line with how former prophets would take social and moral transgressions to task. Jesus challenges the religious authorities like no other and spoke of the Reign of God unlike any has ever heard. His heralding of God's eschatological Kingdom was couched in religious imagery and language; his actions in healings, exorcisms and miracles attest to religious, prophetic inroads into humanity, a Kingdom more powerfully dissimilar to any earthly political one, a borderless Kingdom that lives and breathes amongst the living as it is filled with a Spirit that transcends human rivalries.

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¹¹ Hill, *Jesus the Christ*, 72.