

The Politics of Jesus

By Mark Moore

This paper will argue two things. First, Jesus was a political figure. Second, his method of carrying out his politics is not only essential for the Church to follow but is propitious for carrying out broader social agendas as well. By political I mean a *public* individual who wields *power* over an identifiable group of *supporters* with the intention of carrying out a specific social *agenda*.¹

Jesus' Political Teachings

A survey of Jesus' teachings clearly indicate just how political he must have been.² First, his preaching centered on the Kingdom of God (cf. Mark 1:15; Matt 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:11). Not only is it Jesus' starting point, it permeates the whole of his ministry. There are one hundred and eighteen uses of the word 'kingdom' (βασιλεία) in the gospels, one hundred and six of which describe the Kingdom of God, found in sixty-seven separate contexts.³

It comes as a surprise, therefore, that almost exclusively Jesus uses this term.⁴ This is true not only during his ministry but in the history of Judaism preceding him. The precise phrase

¹ Three observations will help clarify my use of the term 'political.' First, the Greek word *politeuomai* (πολιτεύομαι), indicates living your life socially engaged (only used in Acts 23:1 and Philippians 1:27). Thus, politics in the ancient world did not necessitate governmental office but public influence. Second, the separation of church and state is a modern, unrealistic, and scripturally untenable presupposition of the western church anachronistically applied to Jesus. Osama Ben Laden and Jesus (both Middle-Eastern monotheists) would likely have the same attitude concerning the relationship of politics and religion. Third, most modern, western theologians have argued for the separation of the earthly and the spiritual, particularly after Constantine embraced Christianity as the state religion. However, the evidence below will clearly argue against such a dichotomy. The conflation of the two has had its problems, to be sure. However, 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 political agenda.

² There are a few passages that have been used to demonstrate that Jesus was not political. (1) Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). But surely he meant it was not operated by earthly principles not that it was not intended to be carried out on earth. For he had already told his disciples to pray 'Thy kingdom come . . . on earth' (Matt 6:10; cf. John 15:19; 17:16). (2) Jesus refused an earthly crown by Satan (Matt 4:8–10/Luke 4:5–8) and the crowds (John 6:15). However, since he was crucified with the title because of his verbal and enacted claims to royalty, it would appear that Jesus objected not to the title of 'king' but to the corrupt means of gaining power. (3) Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's (Mark 12:17). However, the relinquishing of a blasphemous coin may, in fact, be a revolutionary act as opposed to one that capitulates to governmental control.

³ The twelve passages that do not speak of the Kingdom of God are these: The Devil showed Jesus the kingdoms of the world (Matt 4:8; Luke 4:5); Every kingdom divided against itself will fall (Matt 12:25–26; Mark 3:24; Luke 11:17–18); Herod promised Salome up to half of his kingdom for her "choreography" (Mark 6:23); and a nominal text that says the Righteous shine like the sun in the Kingdom of the Father (Matt 13:43).

⁴ Only rarely will the kingdom be mentioned by others (e.g., Luke 14:15) or as a parenthetical comment by the evangelists (e.g., Mark 15:43 par.; Luke 19:11). Not only does the term "kingdom"

“Kingdom of God” (βασιλείαν θεοῦ) is never found in the canonical OT⁵ and in the apocrypha it is used only once (Wisdom of Solomon 10:10).⁶ The same can be said for the OT pseudepigrapha, Qumran, Philo, and Josephus.⁷ One must conclude that this heavy use of Kingdom of God was unique to Jesus’ ministry.

Furthermore, after Jesus, talk about the Kingdom of God quickly fell into disuse. Outside Paul (1 Thess 2:12; Gal 5:21; 1 Cor 4:20; 1 Cor 6:9–10 [2 times]; 1 Cor 15:24, 50; and Rom 14:17), and a few references in Revelation (Rev 1:9; 11:15; 12:10), the kingdom is seldom mentioned.⁸

The conclusion is clear. While the symbol of God’s reign is found in various places in the OT and other Jewish literature, its formulation as the immanent Kingdom of God in the gospel is unique and appears to be developed by Jesus (with due credit, of course, given to his predecessor, John the Baptist).

Given that Christianity, from the second century to the present, etherealized the Kingdom of God,⁹ any evidence of an earthly/political application of the kingdom in Jesus’ ministry has a strong likelihood of representing the historical Jesus. There are two reasons for this. First, a church undergoing persecution would hardly want to invent stories that suggested or could be misconstrued as evidence that they were political rebels.¹⁰ Second, preaching a political kingdom

appear far more in the gospels than in any other literature, only Jesus speaks of it in terms of ‘near’, ‘has come upon you’, ‘entering into it’, or ‘seeking it’, etc. Anthony E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History: The Bampton Lectures, 1980* (London: Duckworth, 1982), 85.

⁵ “The word ‘kingship’ or ‘kingdom’ (malkût) does occur at times in other contexts that make plain that the kingdom or rule belongs to God, but no set phrase is used: e.g., Pss 103:19 (‘his kingdom’); 145:11,12,13 (‘your kingdom’); 1 Chr 17:14 (‘my kingdom’). The related Hebrew word mēlûkâ is employed to state that the ‘kingship’ belongs to Yahweh in Obad 21 and Ps 22:29. Another Hebrew word, mamlākâ, is used to attribute ‘kingship’ or ‘kingly rule’ to Yahweh in 1 Chr 29:11 (‘to you, Yahweh, belongs kingship’). As for Aramaic equivalents, the Aramaic portions of the Book of Daniel are not abundant in examples either. The Aramaic word malkûtā (‘kingship,’ ‘kingly rule,’ ‘kingdom’) is used of God in the phrase ‘his kingdom’ in Dan 4:3 [English text, 3:33 in the Aramaic]; 4:34 [English text, 4:32 in the Aramaic]; and 7:27, while Dan 2:44 speaks of the ‘God of heaven’ establishing ‘a kingdom.’” John P. Meier, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, Vol. 2 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 243–44.

⁶ “‘Kingdom of Yahweh’ occurs once in the relatively late 1 Chronicles (1 Chr 28:5), where David speaks of Solomon sitting on the throne ‘of the kingdom of Yahweh’ (malkût Yahweh).” Meier, *Mentor*, 243.

⁷ Cf. 2 *Apoc. Bar.* 73; 3 *Apoc. Bar.* 11:2; *As. Mos.* 10; *Pss. Sol.* 17:4; 1QSb 3.5; *m. Ber.* 2.2, 5; *y. Ber.* 4a; 7b).

⁸ Although Acts has a good number of uses (Acts 1:3,6; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31).

⁹ Even Pauline literature spoke of the kingdom primarily in spiritual/ethical terms (cf. Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; Col 1:12–13) and eschatological terms (1 Cor 15:24, 50; 2 Thess 1:15; 2 Tim 4:1, 18).

¹⁰ This point is articulated well by Russell Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 65–69. This was clearly a problem in Acts 17:7 when

would be somewhat embarrassing since it did not develop along the popular lines of the concept and required constant explanation as to its “real meaning.” That being said, there are two related arguments for a political understanding of Jesus’ concept of the Kingdom of God. First, a Jewish person living in Jesus’ day, influenced by the OT and intertestamental literature and history, would naturally hear “Kingdom of God” as a theocratic political concept. If Jesus wanted to teach a merely spiritual reign of God, he would have to be quite clear and deliberate to eliminate politics from the discussion. He was not. This leads to the second half of the argument. Many gospel texts, counter to the tendency of the early church, include clear political ramifications of the Kingdom of God.

What exactly the kingdom would look like and who exactly should bring it about would be up for debate. Nevertheless, that God would actually reign over Israel was fundamental to Jewish faith. Praying for God’s kingdom to come is a request for a regime change (Matt 6:10; Luke 11:2).

Aside from Jesus’ preaching on the kingdom of God, there five other clear political claims. (1) Jesus acted as a divine judge of Israel,¹¹ even offering to forgive sins on God’s behalf (Mark 2:7–10; 5:21–24). (2) Many of Jesus’ parables were political.¹² (3) Jesus claimed to be the Messiah.¹³ (4) Jesus predicted both he and his disciples would carry a cross,¹⁴ which, of course, is tantamount to a revolutionary call to lay down one’s life in a Holy War. (5) Jesus threatened the destruction of the temple.¹⁵ These were well-remembered and were, in fact, the basis of the initial charge at his trial.¹⁶

Jesus’ Political Organization

Jesus’ mentor, **John the Baptist** was political both in his ministry and in his death. When he came announcing in the desert, “Prepare the way for the Lord,” that was a regal declaration

the Jews of Thessalonica opposed Paul and Jason with this accusation: “They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.”

¹¹ 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.

¹² For example, the parable of the Minas is based on the account of Herod’s disposition and exile (Luke 19:11–27). Or again, 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).

¹³ 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. He even the Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:8/Mark 2:28/Luke 6:5), which implied divinity beyond a human messianic figure.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Luke 13:34–35; 19:42–44; John 2:19–20; Matt 23:37–39 and Mark 13:1–37/Matt 24:1–51/Luke 21:5–36.

¹⁶ Mark 14:58/Matt 26:61; Mark 15:29/Matt 27:40; *Thom* 71; Acts 6:14.

(Mark 1:1-3) announcing a regime change. The desert, of course, was the place where prophets stirred up revolutions (cf. Josephus, *Wars* 2.259, 262; 7.438). The banks of the Jordan, specifically, recalled Joshua's triumphal march into the Promised Land (Joshua 4:13, 19). Before John ever opened his mouth, his real-estate spoke volumes, and each of the evangelists takes note (Matt 3:1; 11:7; Mark 1:4; Luke 1:80; 3:2; 7:24; John 1:23, 28). John's preaching of righteousness, his call for national repentance, and his ritual baptism, all on the historic point of entry to the nation, would have had significant political allusions and implications.

Consider also his dress. The skins of animals girded with a leather belt had become a sort of "costume" for prophets. Thus, when John dons the attire it appears that he is mimicking Elijah (Matt 3:4; Mark 1:6).¹⁷ That is most interesting considering that Elijah too was a prophet who got in trouble by a wicked woman! The bottom line is that John was beheaded because of political intrigue (Matt 14:1–12) which Josephus makes even more obvious than the gospels (*Ant.* 18.116–19).

Establishing **Twelve Apostles** has significant political implications as well (Mark 3:14–15). This was a blatant, enacted claim, to call the Diaspora community back to Israel (which was the Messiah's most important role). Considering that only two of the twelve tribes survived the exile, this would be a miraculous feat. One might also note that Jesus sent out **70/72 preachers** in imitation of the number of Sanhedrin members (Luke 10:1–16). Hence, Jesus had his cabinet and his judiciary. No wonder Herod sought an interview with him (Luke 13:31–35).

Jesus' Political Actions

Jesus' actions were even more politically inflammatory than his words or his 'organization'. There were five political actions that most irritated the leaders of Jesus' day. First, **Jesus' miraculous cures** were portrayed as evidence of the in-breaking Kingdom of God (Matt 10:7–8; Luke 9:1–2). They were presented as tangible promises of God's renewal of Israel. As such, they were offensive to the current leaders of Israel who attempted to reinterpret them by labeling Jesus a deviant—a socio-political category.¹⁸ Guijarro puts it succinctly,

By casting out the demons and restoring people to society, Jesus threatened a social order in which demon possession was an escape valve. The puzzling reaction to his exorcisms from his own family, as well as from the people, the scribes, and Herod Antipas, suggests that the social reintegration of demoniacs had societal and political connotations for Jesus and for his contemporaries that are opaque to us.¹⁹

¹⁷ Hartmut Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran: On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1998), Translation of *Die Essener, Qumran, Johannes der Täufer und Jesus* (Freiburg: Herder, 1993), 216.

¹⁸ Paul Hollenbach, "Jesus, Demoniacs, and Public Authorities: A Socio-Historical Study," *JAAR* 49/4 (1981): 567–88.

¹⁹ Santiago Guijarro, "The Politics of Exorcism," in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. W. Stegemann, et. al.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 172. Similarly Hollenbach, "Demoniacs," 583 adds, "It was all right to have numerous demoniacs of various kinds filling various niches of the social system, and it was all right for professional exorcists to ply their art; but it was not all right for an unauthorized exorcist to make so much over demon possession and demoniacs that he identified their

The problem (which is quite foreign to modern, Western cultures), is two-fold. First, Jesus was reintegrating people into the social system who were supposed to be excluded from full fellowship in Israel. Secondly, he did so without passing through the appropriate channels.²⁰

During his lifetime Jesus was labeled a deceiver (obviously against the backdrop of Deut. 13:5; cf. Matt 27:63; John 7:12, 25–27, 40, 47; also Luke 23:2, 5, 14) and demon possessed (Mark 3:22; Matt 9:34; 10:25; 12:24; Luke 11:15; John 8:48–49; 10:20–21).²¹ These same accusations continued throughout the next three centuries (cf. Origin, *Contra Celsus* 1:28, 2:32, 48–49; 8:41; Justin, *Dialogue* 69.7; *Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin* 43a; *Tosefta Hullin* 2:22–24; and *Acts of Thomas* 96). Jesus was labeled a magician (μάγος) and a deceiver (λαοπλάνος).²² Stanton has traced the use of these terms (cf. Acts 13:6–12 [cf. Rev 16:13–14]; Philo *Spec. Leg.* 1.315, *Vit. Mos.* 1.277; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.169–72; *J.W.* 2.261–63), and has shown that they were stock polemic against social figures (particularly Jesus), deemed to be disturbing to the social order.²³ “There was thus no period in the history of the empire in which the magician was not considered an enemy of society, subject at the least to exile, more often to death.”²⁴

healing with God’s saving presence and led a widespread exorcising mission that attracted a large following, thereby challenging the prevailing social system and its underlying value system.”

²⁰ As Hollenbach, *Demoniacs*, 582 notes, “Only when one overstepped the limits set by the ruling powers did conflicts occur and the ruling person or group act to reinstitute the acceptable order of things, either by persuasion (as in the case of the Gerasene demoniac) or by force (as in the case of Herod and Jesus).”

²¹ Since exorcism was the most common form of “magic” practiced among the Jews of the first century, and since magicians were often charged with being demon possessed, the accusations that Jesus cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub is tantamount to a saying he is demon-possessed. Cf. Graham Stanton, “Jesus of Nazareth: A Magician and False Prophet Who Deceived God’s People?” in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (ed. by Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 166, 178 (see also N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 440). Interestingly, Jesus predecessor, John the Baptist, was also charged with being demon-possessed (Matt 11:18; Luke 7:33).

²² The difference between the two categories (dissident and deceiver) is partly due to the Roman providence of the earlier accusations and the Jewish providence of the later. But part of the difference is that there is little difference between calling someone a magician, a false-prophet, and a rebel since often it was through signs, wonders, or prophecies that people were led to follow a false messianic claimant (cf. Matt 7:15–23; 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22; Acts 13:6; Rev 16:13; 19:20; Josephus *Ant.* 20.97; 20.160–66 and 10 and *Wars* 6.312; Suet. *Vesp.* 4.5; Tac., *Hist.* 5.13). “Domitian’s expulsion of philosophers and astrologers from Rome is simply one instance of a general recognition that such teachers might be significant politically,” (Cf. W. Horbury, “Christ as Brigand in Ancient Anti-Christian Polemic,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* [ed. E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], 187).

²³ Graham Stanton, “Jesus of Nazareth: A Magician and False Prophet Who Deceived God’s People?” in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 164–180. See also Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978), 45–67. Ramsay MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order: Treason, Unrest, and Alienation in the Empire* (Cambridge,

The second political action that got Jesus in trouble was **eating with ‘sinners’**, thus destroying the accepted cultural codes of ritual purity. Stories of Jesus’ meals are found in more than a dozen places in every strata of gospel tradition.²⁵ Since meals were social tools for establishing and maintaining status within a group,²⁶ one was obliged to eat with his/her kinship

MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), devotes an extensive chapter to both prophets and magicians, showing (a) the two categories were often confused and conflated (Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.27, 32; 12.22; Tertullian, *De Idol.* 9; *Apol.* 35), (b) both were dangerous to the Roman order because they stirred up the populous, especially in hopes for a new emperor. For this very reason Augustus (at age 74 in 11 C.E.) banned divination. In 12 B.C.E. he burned more than two thousand books of prophecy (Suet., *Aug.* 31.1), after which their private ownership was forbidden (Tac. *Ann.* 6.12), and under Tiberius the Sibylline oracles were carefully checked. “Accordingly, first in 33 B.C. by action of the aedile Agrippa, later by senatorial decree, and after 52 by imperial edict, the city or all Italy was repeatedly cleared of *mathematici, Chaldaei, astrologi, magi, γοητες*, or however they were called, perhaps ten times over the period 33 B.C. to A.D. 93, and possibly once more under Marcus Aurelius. These were temporary measures called forth by particular circumstances. In 33 B.C., wars with Antony impended, in A.D. 68–70, four emperors came and went; in 16, 52, 89, and 175, plots or pretenders used astrology to unsettle the populace,” (MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order*, 132). Even so, the insatiable appetite of the Mediterranean world for magic and prophecy insured a constant flow of the arts. But this clearly demonstrates that for Jesus to be cast in the light of a prophet or magician had dangerous political implications for his followers, especially given that Jews were considered by the Romans as especially given to noxious superstitions (Tacitus., *Hist.* 5.13.: “Prodigies had occurred, which this nation, prone to superstition, but hating all religious rites, did not deem it lawful to expiate by offering and sacrifice.” “*Evenerant prodigia, quae neque hostiis neque votis piare fas habet gens superstitioni obnoxia, religionibus adversa.*”)

²⁴ MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order*, 125.

²⁵ More than a dozen meals of Jesus are mentioned in the gospels and are found in every strata: with sinners (Luke 15:1–2); and tax collectors, Levi (Matt 9:9–13/Mark 2:14–17/Luke 5:27–32) and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10); but not with family (Mark 3:20–21); with women, wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11); Mary and Martha (2x, Luke 10:38–42 and Matt 26:6–13/Mark 14:3–9/John 12:1–8); with crowds, feeding 5,000 (Matt 14:13–21/Mark 6:32–44/Luke 9:10–17/John 6:1–13); feeding 4,000 (Matt 15:37/Mark 8:8); with Pharisees, Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50); unnamed Pharisee (Luke 14:1–14); unwashed hands (2x, Matt 15:1–20/Mark 7:1–23; and Luke 11:37–52); and with his disciples, washing the disciples’ feet (John 13:1–17); Last Supper (Matt 26:17–29/Mark 14:12–25/Luke 22:7–20); post-resurrection in Emmaus (Mark 16:12–13/Lk 24:13–32), in the upper room (Mark 16:14/Luke 24:36–43/John 20:19–25); and by the lake (John 21:12–13). In addition, meals are often used as sermon illustrations especially in Matthew and Luke (e.g. Matt 11:18–19; 15:20; 22:2–14 [/ Luke 7:33–34]; 24:38 [/ Luke 17:27–28]; 25:1–13; Luke 10:7; 11:5–12; 12:36; 13:26; 14:16–24; 17:8; John 6:25–59). To this multiple attestation might be added double dissimilarity as an argument for the authenticity of the gospel tradition of Jesus’ inclusion at table. Neither Jews nor Christians (nor the broader Greco-Roman world for that matter), practiced indiscriminant inclusion at table. (While Christians were known for ethnic inclusion, there is no record of ‘sinners’ having open access to table fellowship).

²⁶ Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” *Daedalus* 101 (1972): 61–81 and Jerome H. Neyrey, “Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: The Case of Meals and Table Fellowship,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (ed. Jerome Neyrey; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 364–68.

group on normal occasions and on special occasions (banquets and festal meals), only with one's social peers.²⁷

As a result, Jesus was socially subversive through his open commensality. Fraternizing with tax collectors and 'sinners' was not viewed as compassion but an irresponsible eradication of boundaries of holiness and purity.²⁸ In fact, Jesus was welcoming to table the very ones the priests were to exclude from the showbread (cf. Lev. 21:17-23 and Luke 14:13, 21).²⁹ This was so offensive, in fact, that Karris suggests Jesus was killed because of the way he ate.³⁰

Third, **Jesus entered Jerusalem** like a victorious king. The Entry entailed at least four regal symbols. First, it took place on the *Mount of Olives*. This was, according to 2 Sam 15:30, the route of David's exodus from the city and according to Zech 14:4, the route of God's return to rout of all Israel's enemies. Jesus chose a location thick with regal eschatology.³¹ Second, the 'virgin' *donkey* was well chosen for a number of reasons. It portrayed the coronation of Solomon, the first heir to David's throne (1 Kgs 1:33; cf. Judg 5:10).³² Perhaps more importantly, it pointed to Zech 9:9, the foundational prophecy for this event (with due credit to

²⁷ This kind of exclusion is expressed in both the Qumran community, reserving meals only for full members after two-years (1 QS 6.16–17), and the Christian community in excluding non-Christians from the Eucharist (*Did.* 9.5). Even in 1 Corinthians 5:11 Paul orders the excommunicant to be excluded from table fellowship.

²⁸ Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York/Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1984) and Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966). She argues that the human body is used as an image of the larger society and what happens in terms of personal purity are not merely personal and private but rather reflects a corporate body politic. While it is argued here that Jesus did offend boundaries of purity, I'm not suggesting that he abrogated the idea of ritual purity in *toto* nor that he was somehow a modern liberal rather than a first-century Jew with the cultural practices that entailed [taking to heart the warning rightly sounded by Paula Fredriksen, "Did Jesus Oppose the Purity Laws," *BR* 11 (June 1995): 18–25, 42–47.]

²⁹ "The sons of Aaron who are forbidden to offer the bread of God are: blind, lame, mutilated face, limb too long, injured foot, injured hand, hunchback, dwarf, defect in sight, itching disease, scabs, crushed testicles, any blemish (see Lev 21:17-23). The covenanters at Qumran, near the Dead Sea, listed the following folk as those forbidden entry to the messianic banquet: afflicted in flesh, crushed in feet or hands, lame, blind, deaf, dumb, defective eyesight, senility (1 QSa ii 5-22). . . . Luke seems to have been responsible for adding 'the poor' to the list of pariahs in Luke 14:13, 21," Robert J. Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 61-62.

³⁰ Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian*, 70.

³¹ This is not to say that the Triumphal Entry is based on either of those passages (as Gundry rightly warns [see Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 633]). It is merely to say that this Mountain had both a literary and historical connection to Messianic kingship.

³² The donkey in the Ancient Near East was a symbol of royal transport. See George M. A. Hanfmann, "The Donkey and King," *HTR* 78 (1985): 421-26. This symbol was well known enough that Sasson could say, "When Christ entered Jerusalem on a donkey the population as well as the authorities knew how to read the symbolism" (Jack M. Sasson, "The Thoughts of Zimri-Lim," *BA* 47/2 [1984]: 119).

Isa 62:11, of course). While this allusion was temporarily wasted on his disciples (John 12:16), Jesus apparently appreciated and appropriated Zechariah in his ministry.³³ Finally, the donkey is a symbol of peace. This would send a particularly important message during Jesus' coronation as to the kind of king he intended to be.³⁴ The third and fourth symbols of the Entry were the *branches* (cf. Rev 7:9; 1 Macc 13:51; 2 Macc 10:6-7)³⁵ and *cloaks* (cf. 2 Kgs 9:13) strewn across the animal and its path. The first two symbols from Jesus claim, "I am a king." The second two symbols from the crowd reply, "We agree".³⁶

Fourth, **Jesus' action in the Temple** (Matt 21:12-17; Mark 11:12-19; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:12-22) is, perhaps, his most important political gesture and the likely cause of his death.³⁷ Calling oneself a prophet would raise not a few eye-brows; symbolically enacting a coronation would put the authorities on alert; but accosting the central symbol of the nation was a short-cut to an ugly political confrontation.³⁸

³³ It is striking that Matthew and John (an odd combination for sure), recall this text in tandem. Since it is unlikely that John was textually dependent on Matthew, my assumption is that there is a third source which lies behind this citation. Given that Jesus' ministry reflected a great deal of Zechariah's prophecy (See Clay Ham, *Zechariah in Matthew's Gospel: Jesus as Coming King and Rejected Shepherd* [PhD Diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary School of Theology, 2003]), I consider the person of Jesus the most likely source.

³⁴ Oscar Cullmann, *Jesus and the Revolutionaries* (trans. Gareth Putnam; New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 43 and Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 494.

³⁵ Mastin argues that (a) Palm Branches were royal images and (b) although normally associated with Tabernacles (*m. Suk.* 3-4) and Dedication they would not be out of place here at Passover. See B. A. Mastin, "The Date of the Triumphal Entry," *NTS* 16 (1969-70): 76-82; See also W. R. Farmer, "The Palm Branches in John 12, 13," *JTS* 3 (1952): 62-66. As a point of fact, palm branches also represented Jewish nationalism and were one of the images of choice imprinted on their coins. Interestingly, Luke leaves out this Jewish detail.

³⁶ This, of course, was the second time a large crowd acclaimed him king (cf. John 6:15).

³⁷ After Jeremiah threatened the Temple's destruction (Jer 6-7) he was threatened with death (Jer 26:1-19). Sabbeus and Theodosius were executed for supporting a rival Temple in Egypt (Josephus, *Ant* 13.79). Among the Essenes, an attempt was made on the 'Teacher of Righteousness' by the 'Wicked Priest' because of his criticism of the Temple (1 QpHab XI, 4-8; cf. 1 QpHab IX, 9f.; 4QPs 37 4, 8f). And Jesus, Son of Ananias was brought before the Roman procurator because of his prophecy against the temple (Josephus, *Wars* 6.300ff.). For this collection of references I am grateful to Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 463. Also relevant is the temple protest at Tabernacles against Alexander Jannaeus which ended in a massacre (Josephus, *Ant* 13.372-73) and the execution of the young men who tore down Herod's golden eagle (Josephus, *Wars* 1.648-55; *Ant* 17.149-67).

³⁸ The temple was not merely a central symbol, it was also a political enclave, military fortress, and national treasury. Neill Hamilton thus asserts, "Without the authority of the Sanhedrin or Roman procurator such sovereign interference in the economic affairs of the temple must have been taken as a direct claim to be king," in "Temple Cleansing and Temple Bank," *JBL* 83/4 (1964): 365-72.

Jesus is acting as a political figure announcing the destruction (not cleansing) of the Temple. His actions appear not merely to be those of a prophet predicting punishment, but a leader attempting to enact reform.³⁹ If he is ushering in the kingdom with a new regime of leadership then the announcement carries devastating implications for the current, corrupt political leaders and institutions.⁴⁰ Everything surrounding this text points in that direction—Jesus was not trying to reform the Temple but was threatening its destruction.⁴¹

Furthermore, the two OT citations of Jesus threaten destruction. Isaiah 56:7 is a rather happy text, predicting a time when the YHWH will open his temple to all people, not only the Eunuchs who had heretofore been excluded, but to all the nations once so despised. But Jesus juxtaposes that text with Jer 7:11, an austere threat against those trusting in the Temple to keep God's wrath at bay. Jeremiah, some seven hundred years before Jesus, stood in this very place and pronounced, "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'" Jesus repeats the warning, "If you don't repent, God will destroy his own Temple."⁴²

What is telling in the two incidents of the 'Triumphal Entry' and 'Cursing of the Temple' is that Jesus' major roles of king and prophet are brought together in climactic, enacted symbolism. Here we see the role of Jesus heightened. First, the kingdom announcement, like never before, is embodied in him as an individual. Second, he is no longer subtle or tentative about his role as Messiah, King, and Judge,⁴³ though they are all marked by a self-abnegation that radically redefines them from common coin. He is no mere prophet. He stands in the tradition of the prophets and on their shoulders to be sure; but he is clearly more. "There can be no doubt," says Harvey, "that Jesus did in fact act and speak as a prophet. And yet it is equally clear that his followers never felt this to be an adequate description of him."⁴⁴

³⁹ Wright, *Victory*, 491–92 (cf. 2 Sam 7:12–14; Zech 6:12–15).

⁴⁰ H. Betz, "Jesus and the Purity of the Temple," *JBL* 116/3 (1997): 455–72 and J. M. Dawsey, "Confrontation in the Temple," *PRSt* 11 (1984): 153–65.

⁴¹ Herman C. Waetjen, *The Reordering of Power* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1989), 182; Wright, *Victory*, 428; Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 300; and E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress; London: SCM, 1985), 70, 90; C. A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *CBQ* 51 (1989): 237–70.

⁴² The verbal parallels between Jeremiah 7, Isaiah 56, and 1 Kings 8 (alien/foreigners; house; called by my name), may well indicated that Jesus has Solomon's original dedication of the temple in mind when he brings these two texts together. See Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (WBC 34b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 178–79.

⁴³ Jesus' actions in the temple point toward kingly authority on the precedent of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:4), Josiah (2 Kgs 22:3–23:25), and Judas Maccabeus (1 Mac 4:36–60; 2 Mac 10:1–8); see Richard H. Hiers, "Purification of the Temple: Preparation for the Kingdom of God," *JBL* 90 (1970): 82–90; Gundry, *Mark*, 642.

⁴⁴ Harvey, *Constraints of History*, 135. After the resurrection Jesus is never referred to as a prophet. Once he made his regal declaration, it seems to have trumped any lesser claims.

Fifth, 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”. Every bit of this is irreducibly political.

The fact that the Chief Priest wanted Jesus arrested in an out-of-the-way place and not during the feast indicates that Jesus was a popular public figure (cf. Luke 19:47-48; Mark 12:12/Matt 21:46/Luke 20:19; Mark 14:1/Matt 26:2-5/Luke 22:1-2, 6). The fact that Judas was accompanied by a substantial armed contingent indicates that there was a good possibility that his supporters would resort to arms if Jesus were arrested.⁴⁵ In fact, had Jesus not aborted Peter’s misguided attempt, it could easily have escalated into just such a melee. The narratives of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest describe a confrontation between the civil authorities and a political figure on the make.

Pilate was the *praefectus Iudaeae* who governed the Roman province of Judaea with near absolute authority from 26–36 C.E. According to the Biblical narrative, Jesus was handed over to Pilate for capital punishment that had apparently been stripped from the Jewish leaders (John 18:31; cf. jSanh i.18a, vii.24b).⁴⁶ Just what the jurisprudence was has been hotly contested,⁴⁷ but it is certain that Jesus was executed by Roman crucifixion under the authority of Pilate (cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Josephus, *Ant* 18:116–119).⁴⁸ What kind of charge gets a person executed under a Roman governor? Certainly there could be several, but the one on the table—that Jesus stirred the crowds by claiming to be king—is more than sufficient to elicit a death sentence.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ John describes it as a ‘company’ of soldiers (John 18:3). Normally that would represent six hundred Roman soldiers. While some will chalk this up to pious embellishment, it does cohere with Paul’s surreptitious evacuation from Jerusalem some thirty-five years later under guard of four-hundred and seventy soldiers (Acts 23:23). Furthermore, Pilate’s participation in the arrest of Jesus would help explain the early morning trial as well as his wife’s dream. There really is nothing incredible in the detail of a large armed contingent coming to capture Jesus at night, particularly after the Triumphal Entry and Cursing of the Temple.

⁴⁶ Paul Winter’s arguments that Jews did practice capital punishment up until the destruction of Jerusalem are based primarily on the evidence of Stephen’s execution (Acts 7) and Paul’s persecution (Acts 8:1–4; 26:10), neither of which represents standard jurisprudence nor perhaps, even legal action (“The Trial of Jesus as a Rebel against Rome,” *JQ* 16 (1968): 31–37). His arguments are effectively countered by Brown, *Death*, I:364–72.

⁴⁷ Overstreet argues that while Pilate acted immorally, he was still well within his legal rights. Cf. Larry Overstreet, “Roman Law and the Trial of Christ,” *BSac* 135 (1978): 323–32.

⁴⁸ The *Acta Pilati* surely represents something of reality, even if it is wholly created *ex eventu*. See G. W. H. Lampe, “The Trial of Jesus in the *Acta Pilati*,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (eds. Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 173–82.

⁴⁹ Ernst Bammel, “The *Titulus*,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (eds. Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 357. Morna D. Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant: The Influence of the Servant Concept of Deutero-Isaiah in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1959), 88, points out that according to the passion narratives the only charges Jesus responded to were Pilate’s inquiry about his Messiahship and Pilate’s interrogation about him claiming to be king. This is

Lest one wonders why a ‘pacifistic Christ’ would be deemed a threat to Rome, Crossan reminds us that Viriathus of Spain in the 140’s -130’s B.C.E. went from shepherd to hunter to bandit to general. Then Tacfarinas of North Africa in the 20’s C.E. went from shepherd to soldier to bandit to general. Finally Maximinus of Thrace in the 230’s C.E. went from shepherd to bandit to soldier to emperor. Clearly such ‘commoners’ could and did gain power. And thus they had to be taken seriously!⁵⁰

This final point is undoubtedly the most obvious and can be stated succinctly: Jesus was executed by crucifixion, a particular form of punishment reserved for the worst criminals such as rebellion, treason, and military desertion.⁵¹ Had Jesus not been viewed as a political threat, it is inexplicable why he was executed in such a way. Moreover, it became the centerpiece of the Christian message, even though it would cause immense embarrassment (cf. 1 Cor 1:17–31), not to mention no little danger to the early Christians.⁵² Notably, the accusation that Jesus died as a political rebel continued in the first two centuries of the church (see Josephus, *Ant.* 18.63; Mara bar Serapion; Pliny the Younger, Letter #96; Suetonius, *Lives* 2:51; Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Lucian of Samosata, *Death of Pergrinus*, 13).⁵³

telling in terms of what Jesus deemed worthy of response and it coheres with the accepted historical facts of Jesus’ Triumphal Entry, Cursing of the Temple, crucifixion and *titulus*. Interestingly, Jesus’ regal claims were all enacted rather than spoken. All the verbal confessions that Jesus claimed to be king (in the gospels) were on the lips of his enemies (cf. Eduardo Pasten, “*He Aquí Vuestro Rey*” [*Jn 19, 14*]: *Estudio Exegético-Teológico de la Realeza de Jesús en el Evangelio de Juan* [Santiago, Chile: Universidad Católica, 1992], 198-99).

As an aside, this is portrayed quite clearly in the Lukan account, which is surprising. As J. B. Tyson, says in “The Lukan Version of the Trial of Jesus,” *NovT* 3/4 (1959): 255, “But in Luke the charge of treason and treasonous teaching is clear from the beginning. The best argument for the authenticity of this charge is the fact that the Church and Luke, in particular, attempted to portray the ministry of Jesus and the Christian movement as non-political.”

⁵⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 172.

⁵¹ For full details on crimes deserving crucifixion, see Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977 [1976]), 34 & 76; see also Wright, *Victory*, 543 and K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1998), 93.

⁵² Warren Carter, “Toward an Imperial-Critical Reading of Matthew’s Gospel,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 37 (1998): 297. Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 18 says, “This means that for Paul and his contemporaries the cross of Jesus was not a didactic, symbolic or speculative element but a very specific and highly offensive matter which imposed a burden on the earliest Christian missionary preaching.”

⁵³ For an expansion of the present list see Ernst Bammel, “Jesus as a Political Agent in a version of the Josippon,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (ed. E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 197-203. By way of contrast, see M. Hengel, “Christological Titles in Early Christianity,” in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 425–48.

It is clear that Jesus spoke and acted as a political figure and that others shared this evaluation of him. For example, Matthew and Luke wrote birth narratives that were full of political intimations.⁵⁴ During Jesus' ministry a number of groups and individuals spoke of Jesus as a political figure.⁵⁵ Finally, in the book of Acts, the church continued to be in the center of political controversy, even though Luke persistently shows that Christians are not a political threat.⁵⁶ Christians were arrested ten times, fled a city six times, killed twice, beaten five times, death plots six times, stood trial eleven times and had to claim citizenship twice. From Acts 1:6 when the disciples asked if Jesus was establishing the kingdom through Acts 17:7, when Christians were accused of "defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus," Christians continued Jesus' political legacy.

Conclusions

In Mark 10:32–45 Jesus clearly laid out his political agenda: to rule through self-sacrificial service. It is not only what he modeled on the cross, it is his call to every disciple. There was *nothing* like this in the ancient world and very little like it in the modern world. Worldly politics are carried out by two tools: violence and propaganda. Whether the particular

⁵⁴ This is all the more significant considering that scholars count these texts among some of the later additions to the gospel narratives, yet, they were added during a time when Christians would have been down-playing any potential political threats due to impending persecution. But here are some of the clearest political points of the 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).

⁵⁵ (1) Nicodemus 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 10:47-54). (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).

⁵⁶ In Acts there were 36 political confrontations in 22 chapters before the following political rulers: Chief Priests (4:5-22), the whole Sanhedrin (5:17-42; 22:30-23:10), King Herod Agrippa 1 & 2 (12:1-4; 25:23-26:32), a political advisor to a proconsul (13:6-12), civic leaders in Antioch and Iconium (13:50; 14:1-6), local businessmen and city magistrates of Philippi (16:19-24), a mob in Thessalonica, Ephesus, and Jerusalem (17:5-9; 19:23-41; 21:28ff), the Areopagus in Athens (17:19), Proconsuls Serigus Paulus of Cyprus and Gallio in Corinth (13:7; 18:12-17), Silversmith union of Ephesus (19:23-41), Governors Felix and Festus (24; 25), Claudius Caesar and Nero (18:2; 25:11).

social structure is communism, monarchy, republic, democracy or any other, these are the two tools that political leaders have at their disposal. Neither of these tools is evil in and of itself and at times both seem to be necessary in carrying out earthly politics.

Jesus appears to have replaced these two tools with love and truth. 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.⁵⁷ 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.

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. It is my challenge to you to think about adopting Jesus’ political methodology of indiscriminate love and truth. What if he is right?

⁵⁷ Marius Reiser, “Love of Enemies in the Context of Antiquity” *NTS* 47/4 (2001): 411–27.