

Jesus and Politics

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Abstract

Jesus and politics explores the circumstances by which His life and teachings were challenged by Jewish leaders and His disciples who misunderstood His messianic mission as a political leader. This article responds on these claims as they are found in the Gospels beginning at the time of His birth until the events of the passion narratives. So throughout the events of the temptation in the wilderness, in the dialogue with James and John, the feeding of the five thousands, His kingship entrance to Jerusalem during the last week of His ministry, in the dialogue with Jewish authorities and in the passion narratives, Jesus clearly demonstrated His mission as the suffering Messiah without any political agenda. The way Jesus presented Himself shows that indeed He was not a political leader but Savior of humanity.

Introduction

The Gospels teaches us that Jesus came to this world as the Messiah for redemption of humanity. Although Jesus Himself used occasionally the title Messiah, the title Son of Man showed that indeed he was the expected Messiah, the promised One, and as I was prophesied by the Law and the Prophets. Although these titles gives us an understanding of His Kingship, throughout His life and ministry He mainly focused on His mission as the servant suffering predicted by the prophet Isaiah. This paper has the purpose to explore circumstances when Jesus encountered situations and misunderstandings by which His messianic ministry might be misinterpreted as the having a political agenda on His mission sent by the Father.

It is difficult to define politics from New Testament perspective since from that era politics have had different connotations in the context of kingdoms, empires, and other systems of governance that were established by a different historical context which differs from the contemporary understanding of politics. So, in contemporary times, politics is related to governance of a country that exercises the use of power in running a country in a variety of political systems. The term politics in this paper is related to the political situation that Jesus encountered during His life and teaching ministry. So, it is important to ask the question, what was the political situation at the time of Jesus?

Palestine was under the dominion of Rome. The dominant culture of the country was Jewish although the Greek language was used in the intellectual society. Palestine was a place in which exchange of cultures such as Hebrew, Greek and Roman occurred. Jesus developed His ministry between two Roman emperors: Caesar Augustus and Tiberius Caesar (Luke 2:1; 3:1). Herod the Great was King when Jesus was born and after his death his son Herod Antipas inherited Galilee and Archelaus Judah. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea (Luke 3:1) during the passion narratives. And finally, In the time of Jesus there were also a group Jewish rebels who were fighting for the liberation from the Roman's dominion, the zealots. The following sections will explore circumstances by which politics is connected with the life and teaching of Jesus.

At the Birth of Jesus Christ and Politics

The first discussion begins during the birth of Jesus. The arrival of the visitors from the Easter Lands brought enmity against the just born Messiah. Matthew pointed out that it was the angel of the Lord who instructed Joseph to escape to Egypt (Matt 2:13). The reason for such an escape was due to the angel declaration. "For Herod is going to search for the child to kill him" (Matt 2:13b). In this first instance and guided by God

providence Jesus, the born Messiah, escaped death although Herod in his political ambition wanted to kill Jesus to continue in the throne. In this first demonstration, at the arrival of the Messiah, it was clear that He came with other purpose rather than a political one. As the angel of the Lord mentioned to Joseph: “you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). That was Jesus’ mission from the beginning of His appearance in Palestine. Unfortunately Herod looked the new born Messiah as his political opponent, he killed the boys under two years of age in an obsessive attempt to kill Jesus (Matt 2:16, 17).

This calamity the Jews had brought upon themselves. If they had been walking in faithfulness and humility before God, He would in a signal manner have made the wrath of the king harmless to them. But they had separated themselves from God by their sins, and had rejected the Holy Spirit, which was their only shield. They had not studied the Scriptures with a desire to conform to the will of God. They had searched for prophecies which could be interpreted to exalt themselves, and to show how God despised all other nations. It was their proud boast that the Messiah was to come as a king, conquering His enemies, and treading down the heathen in His wrath. Thus they had excited the hatred of their rulers. Through their misrepresentation of Christ’s mission, Satan had purposed to compass the destruction of the Savior; but instead of this, it returned upon their own heads.¹

The Temptations of Jesus and Politics

Second, Jesus temptations in the wilderness showed the devil’s insinuation when Jesus was asked to choose a political kingdom instead of a spiritual one. This time the devil itself came and offered Jesus the Kingdoms of the world. “Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow and worship me” (Matt 4:8, 9). The nature of such a temptation shows that Jesus could have changed His mission as the servant suffering for a political one. He was conscious that from an early revelation He was the One who “will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). As the gospel of Luke reveals, He was destined for salvation and redemption of Israel (Luke 2:25-38). What was the devil’s intention in this temptation? Jesus’ temptation was to take the world as a political ruler right then and in that sense hamper His mission. The devil’s intention implies that Jesus would go without carrying out his plan to save the world from sin. Satan, in this case, was trying to distort Jesus’ mission and sacrificial perspective by making Him a political ruler with power but not in accordance to God’s plan. As Ellen G. White mentioned,

Christ’s mission could be fulfilled only through suffering. Before Him was a life of sorrow, hardship, and conflict, and an ignominious death. He must bear the sins of the whole world. He must endure separation from His Father’s love. Now the tempter offered to yield up the power had usurped. Christ might deliver Himself from the dreadful future by acknowledging the supremacy of Satan. But to do this was to yield the victory in the great controversy. It was in seeking to exalt himself above the Son of God that Satan had sinned in heaven. Should he prevail now, it would be the triumph of rebellion.²

When the tempter offered to Christ the kingdom and glory of the world, he was proposing that Christ should yield up the real kingship of the world, and hold dominion subject to Satan. This was the same dominion upon which the hopes of the Jews were set. They desired the kingdom of this world. If Christ had consented to offer them such a kingdom, they would gladly have received Him. But the curse of sin, with all its woe, rested upon it. Christ declared to the tempter, “Get thee behind Me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.”³

Thus, to express His complete opposition to Satan intention to worship him, “Jesus said to him “away from me, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only” (Matt 4:10). From the perspective of the great controversy acknowledged in the book of Revelation (Rev 12), it looks like Jesus was tempted to put aside His redemptive mission for a political one and being a ruler of a political government. However, Jesus taught that indeed He was the suffering Messiah (Isaiah 53) as the “righteous servant [who] will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities” (Isaiah 53:11).

Unfortunately His suffering mission was misunderstood even by His own disciples (Mark 10:35-45). It is important to know that Jesus understood His mission and taught in different circumstance about His sacrifice.

Jesus the Suffering Messiah and Politics

In a more explicit teaching Jesus showed His redemptive mission was addressed at Caesarea Philippi. As Matthew recorded “from that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Matt 16:21).⁴ Even though Jesus taught His salvific mission to His disciples; they were slow to understand the whole scope of his mission as the suffering servant (Isaiah 53:10-12). Two of His disciples asked Jesus to allow them to sit at His right and the other to His left in His glory (Mark 10:37). Jesus saw that they still did not understand His redemptive mission when he declared “You don’t know what are you asking” (Mark 10:38) because they were still thinking from a political perspective of His kingdom. They were asking for high government positions, but Jesus told them that the true greatness comes in serving others and being of a humble spirit (Mark 10:42-44). The climax of Jesus teachings comes when He mentioned the nature of His kingdom and His mission as the One who will redeem humanity. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). The disciples might have thought initially that Jesus’ life and power will save them from Roman domination but Jesus mentioned that His death will deliver them from sin. In Jesus agenda there was no room for establishment of a political kingdom. His kingdom was and is from another dimension that transcends the political understanding of the world. Pointing out to the early church, the apostle Peter later in his ministry reminded the church of such spiritual dimension, “to this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

The Lord’s Supper and Politics

From the gospels narratives, it could be inferred that the idea of a political kingdom was a real one among His disciples. It was just on the last encounter with them and during the Passover feast that Jesus taught them the nature of His kingdom and the way how they supposed to interpret it. So, during the Last Supper Jesus taught His disciples what was the model they supposed to follow?²⁴ A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.²⁵ Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors.²⁶ But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.²⁸ You are those who have stood by me in my trials.²⁹ And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me,³⁰ so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:24-30). Thus, in the leadership example of Jesus the greatest is the one who serves which was in contrast of the rulers attitude of the Jewish leaders. By application, Jesus’ disciples who exercise the function of leaders should follow the same principle that is the character and attitude of a servant leader.

The Feeding of Five Thousands and Politics

From a different perspective, the Gospel of John shows the difference between the political ambition of the Jewish leaders and the redemptive purpose of the Messiah found in the narrative of feeding the five thousand. It was after such a miraculous demonstration of power that the crowd thought that perhaps Jesus could be proclaimed as king. John mentioned “after the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come to the world” (John 6:14). They were asserting that Jesus was indeed the Prophet announced by Moses (Deut 18:15). The prophetic interpretation that the people understood was of a political ruler who might restore the nation of Israel instead of a Messiah who will function as a suffering servant. They focused in the human benefits of a new political order that was different from Roman domination. Jesus clearly understood their intention and misinterpretation of Moses prophetic anticipation. So, “Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself” (John 6:15). Obviously, He would have had support if He had wanted to overthrow the existing powers. But it was clear that Jesus did not wish to become and be involved as a political ruler of the society around Him.

Dodd was able to show that John 6:14-15, the attempt to make Jesus king, fits into the turbulent conditions of pre-70 Palestine better than into any subsequent period. Along with John 11:48, which depicts the fear of the Sanhedrin that Jesus' large following would bring down the wrath of the Roman on Jerusalem, it suggests that John is more open than the Synoptic to depicting the political situation in Palestine before 70 CE and how Jesus would have appeared in that situation. Of course, this is not simply a historical interest but is always a part of John's christologically determined portrayal of Jesus and the world that rejected him⁵

The Triumphal Entry of Jesus and Politics

An important demonstration of His mission as the Messiah arrived at the last week of Jesus' ministry when He entered into Jerusalem riding on a donkey under the canopy of palm branches with crowds hailing Him as their king (John 12:12-15). According to Tenney, "the entry into Jerusalem was Jesus' announcement that his hour had come and that he was ready for action though not according to the expectation of the Jewish people. He did not come as a conqueror but as a messenger of peace. He rode on a donkey, not the steed of royalty, but that of a commoner on a business trip."⁶ To announce that He was indeed the Messiah He chose the Feast time when all Israel will be gathered in Jerusalem and a way of proclaiming His mission was unmistakable. However, the people who were praising God for giving them a king had the wrong idea about Jesus. They understood that Jesus would be a ruler who will return to Israel to its former glory. As John mentioned, even "His disciples did not understand all this" (John 12:16). It was only after Jesus' resurrection that the disciples understood the many prophecies that were misunderstood along the way of Jesus' teaching. So after Jesus' resurrection His words and actions took a new meaning for them and recognized that indeed the suffering Messiah died for redemption of humanity (Luke 24:25-27) and as predicted by the prophet Zechariah "See your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey" (Zech 9:9).⁷

Paying Taxes to Caesar and Politics

In another occasion, Jesus made a distinction about the nature of His kingdom on the question of paying taxes (Matt 22:15-22). Both the Pharisees and the Herodians came to Jesus with a question "it is right to pay taxes to Caesar or not" (Matt 22:17)? The Pharisees, a religious group, oppose the Roman occupation of Rome. The Herodians, a political party supported Herod Antipas and the policies instituted by Rome. So if Jesus agreed that it was right to pay taxes to Caesar, the Pharisees will accuse Him that He was opposing God. If Jesus said that taxes should not be paid, the Herodians would hand Him over to Herod on the charges of rebellion. However, Jesus' answer exposed their evil motives, "give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matt 22:21).⁸ Jesus avoided this trap by showing that we have dual citizenship. Citizens in nations require that we pay taxes for the benefits and services we receive. Citizenship in the kingdom of heaven requires that we pledge to God our primary commitment and obedience. Clearly enough Jesus did not allow the Herodians to charge Him with a political rebellion against Caesar. Even though Jesus did not involve Himself in the politics of His day, He did teach His disciples to respect governmental authorities. Regardless of the nation in which one resides, respect for that nation's leaders is part of the responsibility of a true Christian. Jesus abided by the established government continued even at the last days of His mission as the suffering servant.

The Passion Narratives and Politics

Finally, the clearest demonstration of Jesus' nature of His mission without any political agenda came at the passion narratives. He was confronted with trials by the High priests and the Sanhedrin that accused Him of blasphemy. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." "You have said so," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered" (Matt 26:63-65). In saying that He was the Son of Man, Jesus was claiming that He was the Messiah, as Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin understood. It was clear that Jesus understood His mission and nature of His sacrifice under interrogation of the religious leaders.

However, the Sanhedrin couldn't execute His death. It was necessary to have the Roman sentence and for this reason the religious leaders moved to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. So during the first early trials Jesus was accused on blasphemy, on the following trails under Pilate and Herod He was accused of many things including rebellion. "Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king" (Luke 23:1-2). The Jewish leaders had to fabricate new accusations against Jesus when they brought Him to Pilate. The charges of blasphemy would mean nothing to the Roman governor so they accused Jesus of tax evasion, treason, and rebellion.

As Pilate interrogates Jesus, it was evident that He was innocent of the accusations of the religious leaders (Luke 23:13-17). Pilate asked a very specific question "are you the king of the Jews"? (John 18:33). And Jesus answer showed that indeed His kingdom and mission was not an earthly political one. He mentioned to Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36) and Pilate replied "You are a king, then" (John 18:37). But what was the nature of His kingdom? He was testifying under Pilate that indeed He was King and His kingdom is not of this world. "Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth.

Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:37).⁹ Even though Jesus was born to be a king, He told Pilate that He wasn't involved in the politics of that age. He was the Messiah, the Son of Man that came with the purpose of salvation of humanity. This is why His kingdom is not from any political agenda but from a spiritual demonstration of power for the redemption of humanity from sin and death. Unfortunately the priests chose Caesar as their king. In a last effort to release Jesus Pilatus declared "Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews.¹⁵ But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered.¹⁶ Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified (John 18:14-16).

Thus by choosing a heathen ruler, the Jewish nation had withdrawn from the theocracy. They had rejected God as their king. Henceforth they had no deliverer. They had no king but Caesar. To this the priests and teachers had led the people. For this, with the fearful results that followed, they were responsible. A nation's sin and a nation's ruin were due to the religious leaders.¹⁰

After Jesus' resurrection in the way to Emmaus He "opened their minds" so they could understand the purpose of His mission found in the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:45, 46). That was the mission of Jesus and the mission entrusted to the Christian church independent from any political agenda.

Therefore, the attitude of Jesus centered in accomplishing His mission according to the will of the Father, and an attitude that did not agree with the political expectation during His life and ministry, neither was His intention to release Judah from the dominion of Roman Empire. Although Jesus was accused by the priests and Pilate of rebellion, there is not any argument in the Gospel that suggests that He had a political agenda for the liberation from the Roman Empire. His agenda was another one, the redemption of humanity. A demonstration of such attitude it is found in Calvary when Jesus mentioned ""Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). The same principles that He taught at the Sermon of the Mount now He practiced at the last moment of His sacrifice.¹¹

The Disciples of Jesus and Politics

So what a Christian should do? The mission of a Christian is to be an ambassador of Jesus Christ—an advance emissary of His Kingdom, His coming government. Ambassadors of governments today are expected to not involve themselves in the politics or governmental systems of other nations. Instead, they submit to the government and laws of the nation in which they live. Christians do the same as long as the local laws do not conflict with the laws of God (Acts 5:29; 2 Cor 5:17-20). If Christians are going to follow Jesus' example, they won't get involved in the politics of this world but on the expectation and manifestation of His Kingdom coming in Glory (Matt 24:30-31). Even though Christians are not involved in politics they are involved in helping to serve the needs of the community in which they live. An expression of those who inherited the

kingdom of God, Jesus mentioned to His disciples to care for the needed by providing hope, care and basic existential needs for those who suffer (Matt 25:31-46).

Some has argued that Jesus in His first appearing at the Synagogue of Nazareth had a political agenda for liberation of the oppressed (Luke 4:16-30). A careful study shows that Jesus is quoting the messianic promise of Isaiah 61:1-2. Isaiah pictured the deliverance of Israel from the exile in Babylon as a year of Jubilee when all debts are cancelled, all slaves are freed, and all property returned to their owners (Leviticus 25). But the release from Babylonian exile has not brought the fulfillment of what the people had expected; they were still conquered and oppressed people. In that context, Isaiah was referring to a future messianic age that agreed with Jesus declaration "today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:20). So Jesus was proclaiming that He was the fulfillment of this prophecy as the Messiah who has come to deliver them from the bondage of sin.

But when Jesus announced, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears," they were suddenly recalled to think of themselves, and of the claims of Him who had been addressing them. They, Israelites, children of Abraham, had been represented as in bondage. They had been addressed as prisoners to be delivered from the power of evil; as in darkness, and needing the light of truth. Their pride was offended, and their fears were roused. The words of Jesus indicated that His work for them was to be altogether different from what they desired. Their deeds might be investigated too closely. Notwithstanding their exactness in outward ceremonies, they shrank from inspection by those clear, searching eyes.¹²

What a contrast of Jesus teaching and the teaching of the scribes. "Jesus had said nothing of delivering them from the Romans. They had heard of His miracles, and had hoped that His power would be exercised for their advantage, but they had seen no indication of such purpose."¹³

Conclusion

Therefore, after brief exploring the gospels by which Jesus was mistakenly perceived as a political leader, the gospel clearly teaches that Jesus came as the suffering Messiah, the One who will redeem Israel and humanity from sin. Jesus kingdom was a different one of the expectation of the Jewish leaders. Certainly this was the kingdom that Jesus came to inaugurate when He proclaimed "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). And after His resurrection, He declared a great commission that states ¹⁸"Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20).

As a way of conclusion, a short survey of the early church also suggests that the primary task of the apostles and disciples was the proclamation of the Gospel, including the teaching of Jesus and His kingdom. They continued the development of the church mission in the context of the existing political system of the Roman Empire. During the experience of Pentecost the mission of the apostles was confirmed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in proclaiming about Jesus as Lord and Savior. Luke also suggest that the early church was devoted to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, rituals and prayers (Acts 2:42-47). It was Peter and John who testified at the Sanhedrin, "judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God" (Acts 4:19). Therefore, as disciples of Jesus, we are responsible to be good citizens and abide to the laws of the country and making sure that they are not against the principles of the Scripture and the teaching of Jesus. Any opportunity for being engaged in politics in a contemporary perspective, modern disciples should have discretion and follow the principles and guidelines of the Scriptures and church policy.

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