

# Jesus: Freedom-Fighter or Prince of Peace?

*(A Paper written from the Biblical angle)*

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## **The Mission of Jesus**

The New Testament hardly ever speaks of the person of Christ without at the same time speaking about His work. Even in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel the author connects his statement about the Logos with another statement that 'All Things were made by Him'. Therefore, we have to see first of all what His mission was. Luke describes it in recording an event which happened in Nazareth at the very outset of Jesus' ministry, in the following words:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

(Lk. 4:18f)

This is a free rendering of the LXX version of Isa. 61:1-2 and 58:6. Here the nature of Jesus' ministry is delineated in terms of the prophetic words. There is a significant difference here between Mark and Luke. Mark says that Jesus proclaimed the nearness of the Kingdom and the urgency of repentance and faith as acceptable response (Mk. 1:14-15). Luke on the other hand emphasizes that Jesus' preaching and teaching were concerned with the nature of the Kingdom (Lk. 4:43; 16:16).

The Isianic passage which Luke quotes originally expressed some post-exilic prophet's consciousness of mission. But the same passage underlines Jesus' reply to the emissaries from John the Baptist (Lk. 7:22; Mt. 11:5). So it shows that Jesus as well as the Evangelist may have interpreted it as referring to Jesus' mission. Jesus is the bearer of the good news for the dispossessed, the afflicted and the oppressed. The good news which Jesus brought is the good news of liberation and healing.

The good news is that, this in fact is what God is doing. Luke further shows that Jesus identified himself primarily with the socially, religiously and economically excluded people of his day (Lk. 15:1 etc.). The teaching and the healing ministry of Jesus heralded the coming

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of the 'acceptable year of the Lord' or the messianic age. So the message of Jesus was the message of liberation.

## Jesus and the State

If the message of Jesus was the message of liberation for those who are oppressed and are in captivity, we ought to see what his attitude was to the State or the Roman Empire which was keeping the Jewish nation under subjugation then resented by the Jews. We do not have any instance of Jesus coming face to face with the Roman rulers, except with Pilate, before whom he was produced for trial. But we have a few sayings which are considered to be authentic sayings of Jesus and which somewhat reveal his attitude to the State. We may examine some of them briefly:

1. The question about paying tax (Mk. 12:13-17): Jesus' reply was, 'Pay Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's'. It is clear that Jesus permitted tax to be paid. But what were the implications of this statement? Some have thought that Jesus assigned to the state a sphere of life in which it is supreme (political and economic order), while God dealt with the spiritual and religious aspects of the society. S. Kennard (in *Render to God*, 1950) on the other hand, interprets that Jesus contemptuously told the collaborationists to pay back (*apodote*: give it back) to Caesar what is his due, but the rest do not have to. This would mean that Jesus agreed with the views of Judas the Gaulonite.

But the clue to the correct interpretation is to be found in the words, 'and God what is God's'. The reign of God is universal. He is supreme even in Caesar's realm. Jesus reminded Pilate that his authority was given from above (Jn. 19:11). This shows that the attitude of Jesus was that the existing Government must be obeyed, but in a real conflict of loyalties, 'we must obey God, rather than men'.

Therefore, for Jesus, the State is nothing final. On the other hand, it has the right to demand what is necessary to its existence-but no more. Commenting on this Cullmann says, 'In the background we hear the challenge: if ever the state demands what belongs to God, if ever it hinders you in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, then resist it' (*The State in the N.T.*, p. 37)

2. Luke 22:35ff. offers a problem. Did Jesus command his disciples to fight with the sword after the manner of the Zealots?

Some N.T. scholars maintain that Jesus indeed asked them to get swords, but then quickly recognised this as a wrong turning. Robert Eisler (*The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist*, 1931), goes so far as to make Jesus a Zealot, and finds his chief support in this saying. Luke included this saying in the context of the passion narrative. It may or may not belong to this context, which makes it all the more difficult to interpret. But its answer is found in Matt. 26:52, where Jesus says 'All who take the sword shall perish by the sword'. This is to be taken as a condemnation of Zealotism. Jesus disapproved of the use of the sword by one of his disciples at the time of his arrest. So it may be

that we find in this verse (Lk. 22:35) the same 'tension' which is characteristic of Jesus' attitude towards the Roman State, that for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel, defensive sword-bearing may be necessary.

### **Jesus and the Zealots**

'Jesus' attitude is to be sought beyond any uncritical absolutising of the Roman State, and at the same time beyond any thoroughgoing political resistance to it' (Cullmann).

Jesus was always conscious of his mission as the divine emissary, and kept himself free from being entangled with any party, especially the Zealots—the extreme nationalists. He had members of the Zealotic party among his disciples. Simon the Zealot was one and probably there were others also. But he also had a tax-collector as his disciple. The tax-collectors were considered as collaborationists with Rome, and so hated by the Zealots. But the fact that he had people belonging to these groups among his disciples shows his own non-committal to any one side. But Jesus' twofold attitude toward the state and toward the Zealots was really misunderstood. His entry into Jerusalem was taken by them as a demonstration of political messianism, with revolutionary intentions. The use of palm branches referred to the Maccabees' resistance movement, and must have encouraged the Zealots that all their hopes are now at last going to be realised in Jesus. This was a constant battle Jesus had to fight right from the beginning of his ministry, not to be understood as a political Messiah, but as the Suffering Servant of God. When they were in high hopes that Jesus is the Messiah-King, his words at the Last Supper came as a serious blow to their aspirations and disillusioned all the disciples.

However, Jesus was crucified by the Romans as a Zealot, who aimed at kingly authority, as Pilate's inscription on the Cross shows. This was the main accusation of the Jewish leaders also. The grounds of the verdict in the case of a death sentence had to be posted on the cross, and the 'titulus' (cf. Jn. 19:19) in this case stated a political crime, 'King of the Jews'. On no occasion did Jesus designate himself as the Messiah, nor did he deny it when on a few occasions this title was given to him. When Pilate asked him 'Are you the King of the Jews?' (Mk. 15:2), he replied 'You say so', which can be taken to mean 'yes'.

### **Jesus: Freedom-Fighter or Prince of Peace?**

We have seen that Jesus did not identify himself with the freedom fighters against the Roman Empire.

Then, was he the Prince of Peace? One of the last sayings of Jesus recorded by the Evangelists is 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you . . . ' (Jn 14:27) to a troubled and discouraged group of disciples. During his ministry also he has set many at peace, by his healing ministry. Being at peace, peace-making, being meek and the like, are exemplified in his teaching also (Mt. 5:5, 9 etc.).

Nevertheless he was not a passive but an active Prince of Peace. Those who accept him will enjoy the peace he gives. But their accep-

tance of Christ may amount to 'casting fire upon the earth', and creating division in families (Lk. 12:49-53). So also he did not spare the Scribes and the Pharisees, but condemned them as 'hypocrites and white-washed tombs'. Nor did he yield to the threat of Herod, and even referred to him as a fox (Lk. 13:32).

At this point the *Cleansing of the Temple* (Mk. 11:15-19 and para) must be considered. As Mark presents it, it is a messianic incident. In Calvin's words, 'He declared himself to be both King and High Priest, who presided over the Temple and worship of God'. But the messianic character of this incident may have been veiled. Otherwise it was good enough reason for the Romans to take action.

The scene was the Court of the Gentiles, which was separated from the holier part of the Temple by a high partition-wall. Yet it was also part of the Temple and was protected by certain regulations. But it is said to have had little sacred significance itself. One could not walk on it with dusty feet, it was not to be used as a thorough-fare and was forbidden for the sick. For the sake of convenience, the Temple authorities had allowed this place for the sacrificial animals to be sold and money to be changed. This must have brought some profit to the authorities, but was a very convenient arrangement for the pilgrims from far and near.

Jesus did not find fault with the use of the other part of the Temple, devoted to Jewish sacrifice and worship. But he charged the authorities with the desecration of the whole Temple, owing to the traffic they permitted in this outer court.

R. H. Lightfoot, (*The Gospel Message of St Mk*, 1950, p. 63) draws our attention to the fact that, according to all the Synoptists, Jesus appeals to the prophetic word in support of his actions, ('*My house shall be called a House of prayer*'), but only Mk goes on to complete the sentence as found in Isaiah (56:7), with the words, '*for all the nations*'.

In Isaiah this prophecy stands in the midst of promises which describes Yahweh's purposes for His own people the Jews and for all peoples. According to this the Jewish Temple would one day, when the messianic age arrived, become a house of prayer not only for the Jews but also for all the nations.

If this view is correct, then both the prophecy and the Lord's action are concerned with the *rights and privileges of Gentiles*.

## Conclusion

From this very brief survey, we see that Jesus was neither a freedom fighter nor a Prince of Peace in the way we use those terms today. He was (and is) beyond all these descriptions. He is not one who fights for freedom; but *He is the liberator* who offers life, indeed life abundant, by His own self-sacrifice.

The temptation He faced, whether to be a political Messiah or a Suffering Servant in the wilderness, He faced all through His ministry, and He chose to be the Suffering Servant. So by His self-sacrifice He has offered us freedom. If I have to make a choice and give Jesus

a designation, I would prefer to call Him *Freedom Giver*, rather than *Freedom Fighter*.

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