

Was Jesus a revolutionary?

The literary and cultural theorist Professor Terry Eagleton, whilst addressing a recent lecture at Chichester Cathedral, posed the question, ‘Was Jesus a revolutionary?’ Two interesting points emerged from this. Firstly, if Jesus’ agenda was indeed to bring about political or social change, then why were his disciples not also rounded up to suffer the same fate as their leader? Recent New Testament sociological scholarship has shed further light on Jesus’ environment and the way in which this affected his ministry. Jesus emerged out of a Palestinian Jewish society steeped in violence. He countered this uniquely with his commandment, ‘love your enemy’. Indeed, in response to aggression, he preached forgiveness ‘not seven but seventy-seven times’. Furthermore, he practised what he preached by embracing as his disciples a tax collector and a zealot.

Secondly, Eagleton referred to Jesus as a ‘pleb’. Given the recent derogatory connotation of the word with respect to the dialogue between the politician and the policeman outside number ten, this argument did much to raise my hackles. However, the Universal Dictionary defines the word ‘pleb’ as ‘a person of the lower classes’. This definition is of course in total accord with the writings of the Gospel evangelists with respect to Jesus’ birth and upbringing. However, the Gospels also refer to Jesus as Rabbi or teacher so the question also arises as to how he gained his education. The answer would seem to lie in the central Galilean city of Sepphoris. This up and coming Roman influenced city was a mere 3.7 miles north-west of Nazareth. Here, Joseph’s skills as a carpenter may well have been



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needed in the city’s expansion plans and would naturally have included Jesus as his apprentice carpenter. Most significantly, Sepphoris was a multi-cultural, racial and religious centre for Greek and Rabbinical learning at this time. It is entirely possible therefore that Jesus’ education stemmed from this seat of learning. The deep penetrating questions that he asked his disciples, as described in the Gospel texts, provides supportive evidence that Jesus was indeed influenced by philosophy. Perhaps the best example is recorded in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus asks the question, “who do the people say that I am?”. The response is that “some people say John the Baptist, some Elijah and some a prophet”. But here is the point: Jesus then asks, “who do YOU say that I am?”. The question was designed to make the disciples think deeply not only about their own belief system but also about the mindset that lay behind their philosophy. An awesome question.

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Were some of the people near the mark then, in answering this question by naming Jesus as another John the Baptist? Certainly, the influence of John the Baptist on Jesus' ministry cannot be overestimated. However, John clearly proclaimed a message of fiery judgement that was about to descend on sinful Israel. Israel's only protection would be through inner repentance, concrete reform of one's exterior life and acceptance of a once for all baptism administered by John himself. John's baptismal ritual was not done in a context of personal salvation or piety, but rather as a call to national revival. Since Jesus submitted to John's baptism voluntarily, he most likely endorsed John's mission to reform Israel. At the same time though, was Jesus setting the pattern of repentance, forgiveness and community formation? This was central to the practice of the Jewish and Gentile New Testament Church. Certainly, there is no evidence from the Gospels to support the argument that Jesus foresaw fiery vengeance on sinful Israel. On the contrary, his message was one of piety and peace. Besides, Jesus' ministry differed from that of John in three significant ways. Firstly, whereas John was isolated in the wilderness, Jesus wandered over considerable areas of the country, calling people out of their homes. Secondly, unlike John who neither ate or drank, Jesus not only did so but furthermore rejected ritual fasting. Thirdly, whereas for John, repentance and baptism were the only means of salvation from judgement, Jesus did not practise baptism. Rather, he focused on a God who delights more in 'one penitent sinner than in ninety-nine just men'.

Was Jesus then a revolutionary prophet who echoed the Old Testament prophets? We know from the Gospels that he followed on from John the Baptist, he called himself a prophet and came towards the wicked of Israel. His choice of twelve disciples were symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel and he shared a final Passover meal with his disciples. Let us take a look at the criteria under which the Rabbinical teaching, particularly that of a pure Pharisaic Judaism, would have been taught during the time of Jesus. Top of the list would be that good works demonstrate true faithfulness and were representative of obedience to God from which flowed the potential to increase reward in heaven. Clearly, Jesus taught and acted within these parameters. Did he thus intend a theological compatibility between the criteria of pure Jewish orthodox practice and Christian grace and love? At the same time, Jesus was all too aware of the prevailing cultural climate of social oppression, materialism and Imperial domination. His consistent reference to the Kingdom of God is key here. This is because it evoked an ideal vision of world political and religious power if it were God instead of Caesar sitting on the Imperial throne. This vision could indeed suggest a political motivation. However, I think it most likely that Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom of God was intended to be understood as a human initiative which would gradually permeate through society. It was an initiative that was organised through Old Testament action but which was, however, inspired by love. At the same time, Jesus practised revolutionary action in that he shared meals with tax collectors and associated with women of ill repute. To this extent then, he challenged the Jewish norm of non-association with those who were not pure, holy and righteous. By calling into question the politics of holiness he was identifying disparagingly with the élite who dominated it. It is most likely therefore that Jesus intended to show that the impure, unholy and wicked of his world nevertheless merited acceptance in the Kingdom of God.

In agreement then with Eagleton, Jesus was not a revolutionary in the political sense even though he suffered the Roman method of execution for political prisoners. Nevertheless, he brought about revolutionary change, the consequence of which was the emergence of the Church.

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