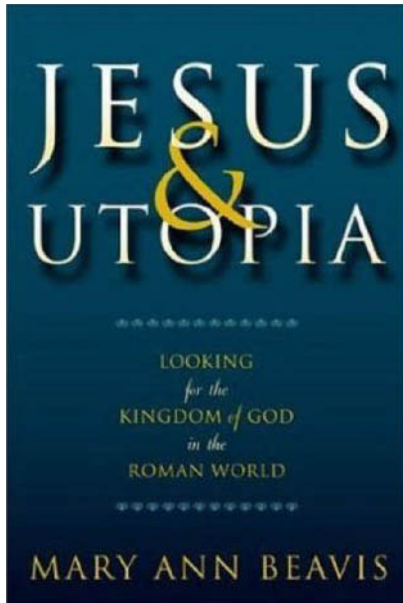


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Beavis, Mary Ann

Jesus and Utopia: Looking for the Kingdom of God in the Roman World

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In this study of the historical Jesus, Mary Ann Beavis conjoins for the first time “two bodies of inquiry: the study of the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus, and the study of ancient utopian literature” (2). She argues that “Jesus, living during a period when nationalism was out of vogue with many Jews, did not subscribe to a restorationist theology, but rather that he, and the movement to which he belonged, proclaimed the ancient myth of God as king of Israel and of the world, past, present, and future, in an antipolitical (although not apolitical) way” (5–6).

Chapter 1 focuses on various ancient, classical, and Hellenistic utopian traditions, such as mythological, fantastic, and paradisaical utopias (the golden age, the elysian fields, islands of the blessed, Atlantis, Hyperboreans, etc.) as well as political utopian models and works (Sparta; Solon; Aristophanes’ *Ecclesiazusai* or “women of the assembly”) that depict ideal city-states either to be enacted (Aristotle, Cicero) or to provide models to be emulated (Plato). Chapter 2 turns to “Biblical Utopias: From Eden to the Kingdom of God.” Beavis discusses myths of a primal paradise (Eden) and presentations of Israel as a utopia. Various traditions depicted Israel as an idealized space (the “promised land,” and “land of milk and honey”), whether an agrarian utopia (Lev 26:3–9), under united monarchy, or centered on Jerusalem, the ideal eschatological temple-state (Ezek 40–48). Torah was an

“ideal constitution” given through Moses, the “consummate lawgiver” (44–48), while “Dynamic-Theocratic Traditions” (48) presented Israel under God’s kingship. Chapter 3 examines accounts of three actual Jewish utopian communities: the Essenes, Therapeutae, and Pharisaic *havurah*. Beavis notes seventeen points of similarity between the Therapeutae and Iambulus’s account of the utopian Islands of the Sun (although some of the seventeen are not very convincing; e.g., nos. 5, 6, 10, 12) as well as significant points of difference.

After seventy pages of discussion (in a book whose main text comprises 108 pages), chapter 4 offers “an overview of the main lines of research on Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom” (71). The brief overview discusses translation and syntax; tradition history; future, realized, or inaugurated eschatology; concept, symbol, or metaphor; political interpretations of the kingdom; and feminist contributions that emphasize a *basileia* movement more than Jesus the exceptional “great man.” Generally, the twelve-page discussion is helpful, although the translation section is limited to a mention of “kingly rule,” “reign,” or “sovereignty” without any examination of the relative merits of each term or consideration of other options, such as “kin-dom” or “empire,” and the overall focus predominantly on sayings and not practices neglects an important development in more recent historical Jesus work. While the discussion usefully identifies different perspectives, Beavis seldom argues for a preferred reading, thereby missing an opportunity to prepare for the argument of chapter 5.

Chapter 5 begins, after an unnecessary rehearsal of chapters 1–3, with a discussion of Josephus’s description of the international community of Jewish people as a theocracy under God’s universal rule (*Ag. Ap.* 2.164–165). Beavis argues that Josephus sees God having granted rule over the Jews to Vespasian, but the law continued as a nonpolitical religious force creating an “invisible kingdom” akin to Jesus’ emphasis on the presence of the *basileia*. She then largely follows Doran Mendels in arguing against claims of a nationalistic and restorationist understanding of the kingdom (e.g., N. T. Wright), advocating that Jesus proclaimed an antipolitical (free of nationalistic and restorationist aspirations [94–96, 98]), comprehensive (rather than national particularity), and spiritual (not physical or political) kingdom. His proclamation occurred at a time that was a “low point in a decline of popular regard for Jewish kingship as a desirable political reality or source of spiritual leadership” (95). Jesus’ vision is not so much a utopian (“no place”) kingdom as a “pantopian” (“everywhere”) kingdom whose characteristics resemble many of those evident in Hellenistic utopias.

There is much of interest in this study. Beavis helpfully locates Jesus’ kingdom proclamation in a tradition of utopian visions, even if her claims of an “antipolitical” kingdom do not seem especially convincing to this reader. This is partly a matter of very limited argumentation in chapters 4 and 5. These two chapters are frustratingly brief,

with much material undeveloped or, as with sayings about a future kingdom, simply absent without consideration. It is also partly a matter of an inadequate adoption of an artificial religion/politics divide. The largely uncritical adoption of Mendels's analysis is a major weakness; the existence of numerous bandits, popular kingly pretenders, and messiah-type figures, including in the rebellion of 66–70 C.E., suggests that all is not as benign or monolithic regarding kingship traditions as Mendels/Beavis suggest. It is also a matter of lack of adequate definition. While Beavis takes care to define the term “utopian” (although without considering circumstances in which utopian visions emerge), the term “political” does not receive the same attention. It seems to be equated—inadequately—with nationalist, restorationist aspirations and without adequate exploration of how social structures are embedded in larger imperial structures. This inadequacy of definition is apparent when Beavis lists numerous practices of Jesus' utopian kingdom (99–102), such as a chosen community (rejecting the biological and patriarchal family), table fellowship, service, and healings, all of which can be seen to be “political” in contesting social structures and norms—households, rank and status, self-serving domination, food insecurity—of Rome's empire. Such contesting would hardly seem necessary if all was perceived to be well in the imperial world; the envisioning and practice of an alternative (utopian) world is a very political statement. The book's subtitle—*in the Roman World*—may be trendy, but analysis of the imperial world scarcely figures in the discussion. And Beavis's “antipolitical” reconstruction fails to offer any possible reason as to why Jesus and his movement would ever come to the attention of any authorities, let alone experience the very political act of crucifixion by a Roman governor and his elite provincial allies. All in all, this is an interesting contribution to the ongoing discussion.