Oakman, Douglas E.

The Political Aims of Jesus


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Ever since the days of his doctoral work, the outcome of which was published as Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day (1986), Douglas Oakman has concentrated his research efforts on the task of gaining a more profound understanding of how the historical Jesus’ activities and sayings relate to first-century Galilean taxation policies and the impact of these policies on the peasant class. His latest contribution in this regard is The Political Aims of Jesus. The title pays homage to Hermann Samuel Reimarus, whose portrait adorns one of the first pages of the volume, and to his epoch-making Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger (1778). Oakman sympathizes with Reimarus’s view of a Jesus whose aims were intrinsically political, only to be quickly spiritualized and depoliticized after his death, but he notes that social-scientific research and recent progress in historical Jesus studies necessitate a reevaluation and modification of some of the points that Reimarus made.

Oakman begins by reviewing historical Jesus scholarship from Reimarus via the classic studies of Schweitzer, Wrede, Käsemann, and others up to the recent works of Crossan, Horsley, and Meier, with special attention to how different scholars have paid attention to Jesus’ political message—or failed to do so. His overview leads him to conclude that, whereas many have indeed touched on the topic, “their views remain still a bit too diffuse
or off the mark regarding Jesus’ political agenda in first-century Galilean context” (15). One problem, according to Oakman, is that all previous studies tend to depict Jesus as the prophetic leader of a movement; another shortcoming is their failure to view him from the perspective of peasant culture in Herodian Galilee. Accordingly, there is much more to be said, and Oakman sets out to do so with the help of a method that is based on the conviction that the parables and the earliest stratum of Q provide the best source material. This material will be assessed from a rhetorical point of view, placed within a peasant context, and interpreted through the lens of social-scientific theory.

The second chapter introduces the theoretical framework to be deployed in the study. Oakman uses social-scientific models of power relationships in agrarian societies in order to understand the political conflicts between the ruling elite and peasant villagers in first-century Galilee. The monetization and commercialization of local economies, excessive taxation, increasing debts on the part of tenant farmers, and social unrest are seen to exist in a vicious circle that, as Oakman convincingly points out, could not easily be broken through collective revolt. Instead, the pressured conditions of peasants under debt and heavy taxation would have induced more subtle strategies of resistance, such as tax evasion by various means, such as being dishonest about one’s produce and family size. As is demonstrated further on in the book, this sociopolitical context forms a plausible backdrop of several of Jesus’ parables.

Jesus comes to the center of the stage in the third and fourth chapters. Jesus was a peasant child who found a trade as a simple craftsman. Being a “peasant theologian,” Jesus was not concerned with apocalyptic imagination or the interpretation of Scripture but with immediate and concrete needs. He spoke metaphorically of the presence of God as Father and King. God’s kingdom (or “the Power,” as is Oakman’s preferred term) meant for Jesus both that God is the ultimate patron and that peasants have the right to own their land and its produce. By socializing with the destitute as well as with the society’s upper strata, Jesus became a broker of the Power, one who worked to replace the Herodian patronage of exploitation with another patronage that favored the poor. After a detailed section on the functions of money in Gospel traditions, Oakman turns to some of Jesus’ parables and shows their concern with peasants struggling under the unfair conditions of a monetized agrarian society. He furthermore suggests that the “sinners” who famously joined in Jesus’ meals were debtors and that the point of arranging meals where both debtors and tax collectors participated may have been to negotiate between the two groups and thus to broker tax relief. The concern for debt cancellation is also evidenced, Oakman argues, by the plea for forgiveness of debts (not sins!) in the prayer of Jesus. In fact, all of the earliest Q material can be read as expressive of Jesus’ tax resistance (105–9). With such a subversive political agenda, which at times was overtly expressed, it is not surprising that Jesus was finally executed as a bandit, as a practitioner of sedition.
The gradual replacement of Jesus’ political program with early Christian religion is traced in the fifth chapter. His original message of tax relief and debt cancellation gave way, according to Oakman, to two levels of “interpretation.” The first level, evidenced by Q², Paul, and Mark, interprets Jesus within an eschatological, apocalyptic framework; the second level, represented by the deuto-Pauline and Pastoral letters, again replaces eschatology with a cosmic mythology in which Jesus attains quasi-divine status. Jesus is depoliticized and his legacy almost entirely repressed or forgotten. Oakman sums up, in the sixth and final chapter, at which points his reconstruction agrees with or differs from that of Reimarus. Especially noteworthy here is Oakman’s conclusion that Jesus was in no way the leader of any messianic movement. The book concludes with a “Postscientific Postscript” that draws out the study’s implications for contemporary thought and action and three appendices.

I learned a lot about the social context of early first-century Galilee from reading this book, but I find most of its arguments and claims about the historical Jesus unpersuasive. No doubt the fundamental reason for this is Oakman’s complete rejection of any influence of “Judean apocalyptic expectations” on Jesus. Whereas he holds that “a persuasive body of recent scholarship has undermined this position (decisively, in my opinion) through more precise analysis of the early Jesus traditions” (71), I think the exact opposite to be the case: the nonapocalyptic Jesus seems to me a peculiar construct that is being embraced only by a minority of North American scholars and that has been refuted many times, perhaps most definitively in Dale Allison’s Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History (2010). Oakman’s insistence that Jesus’ message was devoid of any eschatological aspects and dealt solely with this-worldly concerns is dependent on a number of exegetical and historical positions that I—with the vast majority of scholars, I dare say—find highly unlikely: for example, that Jesus’ view of God differed essentially from John the Baptist’s (81, 146), that the prayer “deliver us from [the] evil [one]” is a plea not to be forced to face an evil judge in court (100), that there was no group of the Twelve in Jesus’ lifetime (145–46), that Jesus’ campaign against taxation policies can explain the crucifixion (111), and that upon the death of Jesus all his followers (except the author of Revelation) replaced his political aims with spiritualized and apocalyptic notions that evince no continuity at all with the historical Jesus (119–29). It is also prompted by a conviction that “[p]easants are oriented to the very day, ‘daily bread,’ usually not more than to the next harvest, and rarely to some distant or future utopia” (76), which is a statement that at the very least needs some qualification.

Oakman places much confidence in the stratification of Q, claiming that the wisdom aphorisms of Q¹ provide the best access to the historical Jesus, with later compositional layers obscuring the original picture by interpreting Jesus in prophetic and apocalyptic terms. While such a scenario is possible, the assertion that “Q¹ seems too close to Jesus’
worldly wisdom and political praxis to be called an interpretation” (71) can hardly stand up against the insights represented by a recent wave of publications on social memory in historical Jesus research. For example, the reasoning in Anthony Le Donne’s *Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?* (2011) cautions strongly against the notion of the “uninterpreted past” being available through any source, however pristine its origin.

In the end, the merit of Oakman’s book is to have highlighted a topic neglected by many Jesus scholars, including myself. Issues of tenancy, taxation, and debts are recurrent in the Gospel tradition, and it is not implausible that Jesus’ view of the kingdom grew partly out of them. On the other hand, Jesus’ stance toward these issues has to be integrated within a broader reconstruction that allows for multiple dimensions: wisdom and apocalypticism, “worldly” politics and transcendent belief, subtle resistance and revolutionary messianism. One must be careful not to project the dichotomies seemingly taken for granted in a present-day liberal Protestant setting onto the thought world of first-century popular Judaism. The result of a more nuanced approach might not be a Jesus who “shines like a beacon out of the murky past” (137), but at least a historically credible Jesus.