

QUEST 52

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The Politics of Jesus

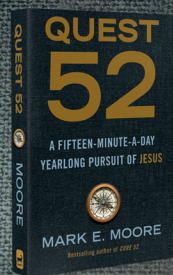
By Mark E. Moore, Ph.D.

Summary: The argument here is really quite simple. When Jesus claimed to be king, that had social-earthly implications not merely spiritual-ethereal ones. He intended (and intends) to be a real ruler over a sociologically identifiable group of people, namely 'Israel.' The reason (I would argue) that most have difficulty with a political Christ is because they object to him using earthly political methodologies to carry out God's agenda for this world. But if we grasp his politic of self-abnegation, his goals and methods both come into clear focus.

Definition of political: This is merely a provisional definition, by necessity. But two things should be said at this point. First, the word political comes from the Greek word *πολιτεύομαι* which means 'to live as a citizen' (Acts 23:1; Php 1:27). It had to do with social engagement. Second, here we are using the term in a more specific way to indicate public leadership involving at least four things: (a) a person who is public rather than private (i.e., people have access to his/her ideas), (b) a sociologically identifiable group of followers, (c) a social agenda, and (d) the exercise of power. Does this describe Jesus? The following postulates argue that it does.¹

1. The term "Kingdom of God" would normally have been understood as a political concept in Jesus' milieu. Jesus' use of it is unique. It is never found in the canonical OT and only once in the apocrypha (Wis 10:10), and seldom in other Jewish literature. Never is it presented as present!
2. Most Kingdom passages include either clear or suggestive political intimations. Of the 67 separate contexts in which 100+ uses of 'kingdom' occur, 18% have clear political meaning and another 48% are strongly suggestive of political content.
3. Both John's stage (the desert) and his costume (of Elijah) cast him in a political light. If baptism was his priority the Lake of Galilee would have been more convenient; had he wanted larger crowds, Jerusalem was better. What he wanted was to image a new entry into Israel at the Jordan.
4. John's political/eschatological preaching led to his arrest and execution by the highest Jewish authority in the land. Josephus' account is telling (Ant. 18.116–19), particularly in the context of his armies being destroyed as God's punishment for killing John.
5. For Jesus, exorcism and healings were evidence of the presence of the Kingdom of God (cf. Lk 11:20). This was a power-encounter, but a clash of Titan kingdoms, not exorcist vs. demons.
6. A socially scientific sensitive reading of the Gospels demonstrates that Jesus' miraculous cures were threatening to social stability and hence caused him to be labeled a deviant and viewed as

¹ Four texts have been used to argue that Jesus was not political: John 18:36, my kingdom is not of this world; John 6:15, Jesus refused to be made king by the crowds at the feeding of the 5,000; Matt 4:8–10 (/Luke 4:5–8) recounts Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and his refusal to bow to Satan to receive the kingdoms of the world; Luke 12:13–21 tells of Jesus' refusal to arbitrate in an inheritance dispute. None of these texts argue against a political Christ but rather an improper method of achieving the kingdom. It is not, apparently, political power that Jesus rejects but the inappropriate means of achieving and exercising that power.



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- potentially politically dangerous. This is especially true against the background of magicians as socially disruptive in the Roman world of politics. Jesus was consistently labeled as a deviant magician in the second century apologetic literature.
7. Jesus' designation of Twelve apostles was a political symbol which promised the Messianic fulfillment of the ingathering of the Diaspora and he as its king/viceroy. This is all the more striking given the loss of the Ten Northern Tribes. (One could consider here also the 72 evangelists in Judea, which matched the number of Moses' judges as the number of Sanhedrin members).
 8. Jesus' meals declared the wrong sorts of people as acceptable to God. While not political, per se, it was socially disruptive. Jesus was dismantling the boundaries of purity and largely ignoring the cleansing function of the Temple.
 9. Jesus' forgiveness of those "outside" Israel's borders of purity was a symbolic act, which marked a new era (and leadership)—the exile was over, and the Kingdom of God was being established.
 10. Jesus' political actions are supported by political sayings that portrayed him as judge, king, savior, and shepherd, but one who would die in that very vocation. This is true of his judgment sayings, his claims to royalty (Matthew 25:31–46 is especially instructive). 'Heterology' upsets the societal apple cart.
 11. The Triumphal Entry was a symbolic act that Jesus performed to announce himself as king and the pilgrims who participated in it reciprocated both symbolically and verbally with regal acclamation. Entering the city on a donkey with a carpet of palm branches and shouts of 'Save now' during the Passover celebration is unambiguous political symbolism.
 12. Jesus' 'Cursing of the Temple' attacked the central symbol of the nation; coming on the heels of the 'Triumphal Entry,' it must be an announcement of a new regime. His citation of Jer 7:11 and Isa 56:7 was especially politically provocative.
 13. The narratives of Jesus' betrayal and arrest describe a confrontation between the civil authorities and a political figure on the make.
 14. The highest Roman political figure in Palestine sentenced Jesus to execution by crucifixion due to the charge that Jesus presented himself as the King of the Jews, which amounted to sedition.
 15. The earliest historical accounts of Jesus after the gospels portrayed him as a political figure, executed for sedition.

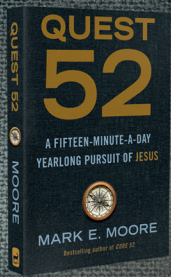
Conclusions:

Jesus was political

Jesus' politics were ambiguous (this may even partially explain Mark's injunctions to silence).

Jesus' politics involved self-abnegation; this can be seen most clearly in Mark 10:35–45.

Jesus' politics (based on Mark 10:35–45): All the kingdoms of this world operate with two political tools—violence and propaganda. There are no other tools. Jesus' however, replaced them with indiscriminate love and truth. The goal of earthly politics is manipulation. The goal of Jesus' politics is service. NOTE: Jesus did not rebuke James and John for their quest to be great. He, in fact, gave them the methodology to achieve it—humility (not some post-Freudian self-perception, but a



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Biblical model of service to those beneath you). If individual Christians as well as organizational churches would adopt this politic, Jesus said it would make us great. The only question left is “Does it work?” Perhaps we should as Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Václav Havel, or the Minjung of Korea