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The Political Aims of Jesus

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On a topic central to his work since his *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (Mellen Press, 1986), Douglas Oakman presents the goals and methods he deems most likely to produce an accurate portrait of the historical Jesus and shares his conclusions. He urges readers to put Jesus' political and material aims at the center of their considerations, rather than avoid the question by portraying him as a cynic, a wisdom teacher, or an apocalyptic figure. With Reimarus and some of his followers, he thinks that Jesus' aims were different from those of the post-Easter disciples who obscured them as otherworldly and eventually placed his person at the center of a Greco-Roman cult. He argues that continued progress in our social-scientific understanding of the political economy of Roman Galilee, together with advances in the current quest for the historical Jesus, warrant a second look and critical revision of Reimarus' understanding of Jesus as a revolutionary.

The book consists of five tightly argued main chapters, a few concluding pages on the usefulness of revisiting Reimarus' ideas and integrating them in a presentation of Jesus' politics to today's audience, three appendices, a short glossary, a substantial bibliography, and three useful indices.

The first chapter begins by describing the powerful effects Reimarus had on subsequent research on the historical Jesus. His prefiguration of historical criticism, his notion that Jesus' messianic portrayal and appeal to divine kingdom had to be understood within the common Judaism of the time, and his argument that the early post-Easter community had turned a temporal savior into a spiritual one were to cause this research to expand into many directions. Oakman surveys the positions of the most important scholars in the three major moments of the quest for the historical Jesus. He notes the impact the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Qumran had on our views of Judean apocalyptic and messianic expectations. Oakman then argues that his thesis follows the Reimarus idea of separating Jesus from the subsequent movement, by using a method that takes into account the results of recent scholarship in Mediterranean studies, historical and literary criticism, and social-scientific method.
In the second chapter, Oakman presents this method. He argues that the use of comparative political science and models, including recent advances in “big history,” helps avoid anachronistic and ethnocentric views. He advocates the use of models in the study of this agrarian civilization so as to form not only plausible historical hypotheses but as conceptual aids that help to avoid naïve interpretations of the overwhelming factual information. He reviews the large sociological literature on the topic since Max Weber. Agrarian societies were shaped by tribute, structured by patronage and clientele, and their brokers. Conversely, the politics of peasantry were shaped by the need for land, its own value system, military pressure, and subjection to elites. Peculiar conditions of the Roman agrarian empire were the development of tenancy because of the concentration of property in the hands of elites, a relatively important commercial sector, and developed monetization. The chapter ends with considerations about the difficulty for peasants to engage in open political revolt because of the overwhelming power of the state and their resort to covert forms of resistance.

The third chapter analyzes the political, social, and economic milieu of Judea and Galilee in Jesus’ time, with the help of the most recent findings of archaeology and Josephus. High taxation levels, increasing building activities, speculative agriculture, and large estates, appear to go together with the continuous expansion of the tenancy system since the Hellenistic period. The main beneficiaries were the royal families connected to the empire's leadership, local elites and military officers. Jesus is presented as a peasant artisan, theologian, broker of the kingdom of God and contrasted with the representatives of the imperial and local elites.

The fourth chapter continues the theme of Jesus as subversive power broker who was concerned with the here and now of his society rather than an apocalyptic kingdom to come. It examines Jesus’ subversive practice in regard to money and debts. In particular, it looks in detail at the functions of money in ancient society and
the various strata of the Jesus tradition. It argues that his opposition to Mammon, his table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners, his prayer, the centrality of passover, and his stories regarding tax resistance and relief, were all marks of political goals that consisted not so much of redistribution of land as of the abolition of property under divine eminent domain, egalitarianism, and debt forgiveness. These activities led to his political execution.

Chapter five turns to the transformation of Jesus into Christ by an emerging urban christianity. His Greco-Roman followers centered Jesus’ message on his resurrection and otherworldly aims while his political concerns were accommodated or disappeared. In particular, Oakman argues that an eschatological interpretation that was not part of Jesus’ worldview then appeared in the writings of Paul and the second layer of the Q document, as well as in Mark. In a second, post-70 C.E., layer of interpretation, this eschatology became a cosmic mythology, especially in the Pauline tradition. The canonical evangelists also, Oakman proposes, ended up erasing much of Jesus’ political role, exculpating the Roman authorities, shifting the blame to Judean elites, and laboring to show that the early Christian movement was no political threat.

This compact, readable, up-to-date book will be of great interest to any readers wishing to form their own opinions on the historical Jesus. It is an excellent introduction to the use of sociological models and the scholarly literature on the historical Jesus. It rightfully reminds us of Reimarus’ importance and the need to return to his disquieting questions. Among those questions –this is only one example– is the fundamental one regarding Jesus’ sense of history. If our earliest sources in Q and Mark agree that Jesus’ story started with John the Baptist’s message, which was framed apocalyptically, the presentation of an un-apocalyptic Jesus needs to explain how and why he abandoned this view of the world. The author confronts this objection squarely, pp. 81 and 119, yet does not convince the present reader. A discussion of this crucial point might lead to a consideration of the variety of uses to which coded apocalyptic language was put, including the covert resistance
the author associates with tributary peasantry, rather than simply otherworldly concerns.