

# Jesus and Politics

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**Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers**, Alan Storkey, Baker Academic 2005 (0-8010-2784-5), 336 pp., pb \$16.50

This new contribution by Alan Storkey bristles with insights and challenges for Christians living in the context of the postmodern West (particularly Western Europe [especially the UK] and the United States). He begins with the observation that 'the history of Christianity in relation to politics is odd. On the one hand, it seems subversive' (p. 7). Citing the Magnificat, Constantine and Solzhenitsyn, Storkey recognizes that 'there is something about the Christian faith that has unsettled political systems' – although, he notes, 'it is not clear what it is' (p. 7). This 'subversive' quality is only part of the story, however. 'At the same time, Christianity seems acquiescent' (p. 8). History is replete with examples of subservient or cozy relationships Christians have often maintained with political power structures. How shall we understand these two impulses? Storkey's goal is to understand Christian politics – ultimately, he is more interested in a normative approach than a merely descriptive exercise – by attempting 'to look as directly as we can at the political content of Jesus' life and teaching' (p. 8).

Storkey's 'focus is Jesus' politics', by which 'we mean all the business of the state – rule, law, nationhood, power, justice, taxation, statehood, international relations, war, and government economic policy – all of which have been part of human life down through the centuries' (p. 10). Storkey recognizes that Jesus may 'not seem political' inasmuch as 'he did not have an army, collect taxes, or wear royal robes, except in his final trial' (p. 10). Still, 'Jesus is feared by the major political parties and makes comments on all kinds of political issues. . . . In this wider sense – legitimate rule, law, power, justice, parties, conflict, popularity, welfare, and taxation', Storkey finds 'more than enough material on Jesus' politics to fill a substantial book' (p. 10).

Broadly speaking, the book is structured in terms of the narrative arc of the Gospel accounts, exploring in ranging prose a wide variety of texts. After sketching the historico-political context of Jesus' life and ministry in the first two chapters (Chapter 1, 'King Herod the Great'; Chapter 2, 'Jesus' Political Arena'), Storkey examines a number of

political issues and their implications in 'Jesus and John the Baptist' (Chapter 3) and 'Jesus and Herod Antipas' (Chapter 4). Toward the middle of the book, Storkey explores Jesus' messiahship (Chapter 5) and the Reign/Kingdom of God ('The Government of God', as the author describes it; Chapter 6). In chapters 7 and 8, the strongest section of the book, Storkey discusses 'Jesus' Political Principles' and 'Jesus' Statecraft'. Drawing upon his vast and up-to-date knowledge of world history and politics, Storkey is able to make strikingly pointed and compelling comments regarding Jesus' contemporary political relevance (the Bush and Blair administrations, for example, both receive significant comment). Chapters 9 and 10 then consider 'Jesus as World Ruler' and 'Jesus and Taxation'. Finally, Storkey rejoins the Gospel narratives as Jesus moves through the final week of his life, his death and the resurrection (Chapter 11, 'The Journey to Jerusalem'; Chapter 12, 'Jerusalem and the Cross'; Chapter 13, 'Resurrection Politics').

The book has a number of strengths, the first of which is its sustained and knowledgeable focus on politics from a biblical perspective. The thorough attention Storkey gives to these texts and issues is critical and all-too-rare in contemporary Christian political discourse. Second, the book's analysis of Jesus' political principles (especially chs 7 and 8) – and their potential implications for modern politics – merit thoughtful and careful reflection in Christian communities today. Teachers and preachers will find much here worthy of reflection and discussion. Relatedly, and perhaps most significantly, Storkey effectively shows that following Jesus' politics today would require radical changes in our practices, both as individuals and as nation-states. Most fundamentally, human hearts must undergo conversion and change before Jesus' politics can become a living reality in our communities. At the same time, Storkey points out that changed hearts will make a difference in wider society. Christians cannot pretend that Jesus' politics can remain an individual prerogative; rather, it has an inherently communal character.

Storkey's analysis and recommendations are non-partisan; he makes it clear that Jesus' politics has never been fully embodied in any given political body or party. At the same time, he is refreshingly forthright and specific as he identifies instances in which Jesus' political values have not been taken to heart in the political arena (e.g. recent wars, militarism, regressive tax policies, economic assumptions and orthodoxies, materialism and consumerism). Some of the concrete examples Storkey uses may (rightly!) make readers uncomfortable as they compare their own behaviours and perspectives with Jesus' own politics. By way of illustration, Storkey has no patience for the not-so-subtle ways in which Western Christianity has adopted and baptized structural injustices in the economic and consumer spheres; the issue comes up again and again in his commentary. As he points out ways in which Jesus'

perspectives have been misappropriated, he often comes up with memorable turns-of-phrase (e.g. 'the new Christian Right bottles a political faith in the carbon dioxide of American capitalism and nationalism'; p. 284). In the end, Storkey's English perspective on American politics may well make it easier for readers in the United States to hear and digest his message since he does not come to the table with a typical partisan political perspective (i.e. Republican, Democrat, etc.). What he has to say about American Christians and our political context (again, especially in chs 7 and 8) definitely merits a hearing (and action).

Despite these strengths, the book has a number of odd qualities that, for some readers, may detract from its overall force or usefulness. For example, Storkey eschews redaction- and narrative-critical methodologies, which means that some biblical specialists (including this reviewer) will find his textual analysis a bit naïve and homiletic. Essentially, he attempts to harmonize all four Gospel accounts together (e.g. Storkey assumes that there were two temple cleansings [rather than one] because the Synoptic and Johannine versions are different, not merely in placement but in detail and aim).

In a lengthy appendix, Storkey explains that he understands the character of the Gospel materials as 'reporting', which 'is not literary in its focus. [Reporting's] meaning does not dwell in the *text* like novel or poem, but drives to its subject' (p. 294). That is, '[r]eporting removes the focus from the text itself to what the reporting is about. Usually, too, it demotes authorial significance' (p. 292). In effect, Storkey has little interest in the Gospels as texts arising from particular contexts and with potential literary intent (however unattainable such specifics may ultimately be for readers today). More often than not, he takes Gospel statements at face value, often giving the impression that little debate exists regarding a particular literary or historical datum. In assessing Jesus' apparent prediction of the destruction of the Temple (Luke 19:42–4), Storkey's approach leads to what seems to be a circular argument: 'Some say this uncanny prophecy must have been added later, but this will not do because it fits the whole narrative' (p. 242). Could not one make the argument that it 'fits the whole narrative' because that is what Luke had in mind (redactionally)?

While Storkey's historico-political and cultural observations often result in compellingly prophetic and relevant insights that should not be overlooked, his approach to the Gospel texts reflects a reasoned but ultimately unsatisfying hermeneutic. A more traditional historical- or narrative-critical approach would probably yield much the same results regarding Jesus' politics – especially since Storkey ends up focusing largely on the contemporary implications of Jesus' principles and values. It is difficult to see how such insights would be lost through use of a more 'critical' methodological approach.

Storkey demonstrates familiarity with biblical scholarship, even if it is not his primary field of specialization. At the same time, however, the identity of his biblical dialogue partners is not always clear. *Jesus and Politics* provides some significant exegetical detail but relatively limited endnotes, giving the impression that Storkey is only occasionally drawing on the work of biblical specialists. Moreover, a few of his references may seem outdated (e.g., Storkey cites Alfred Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [1883; 3rd ed.; 2 vols. In 1; London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1906] with some regularity).

Such characteristics make *Jesus and Politics* something of an uneven, if suggestive, contribution. Though biblical scholars may not find much here that is entirely new, the book does make some prophetically significant observations that should be taken seriously in contemporary Christian discourse.