

## A. Introduction

Today, I am going to try to present evidence that Jesus was a non-violent, social prophet. That is, Jesus had a political impact and agenda.

I will try to demonstrate that Jesus was a social prophet. By his teaching, healing, and example, he challenged the injustices of his time, including:

- An unfair *patriarchal society*
- An oppressive *peasant society*
- An exclusive *purity society*

For much of the last two centuries, scholars have denied that Jesus was political. However, over the 15 years, this has changed. Today, most historical Jesus scholars have come to recognize a strong sociopolitical dimension to the message and activity of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>



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Whether one sees Jesus as political largely depends on how one defines politics.

- If “**politics**” refers to “**things related to the government**”—seeking to change governmental policy or to gain a government power or to overthrow the government—then Jesus was not political.
- If “**politics**” refers to “**things related to society and social relationships**”—seeking to influence social values, customs, and practices—then Jesus was a political activist.

Jesus challenged the existing social order and advocated an alternative. Specifically, much of Jesus’ teaching and activity challenged three fundamental dimensions of ancient Palestinian society. It was a **patriarchal society**, a **peasant society**, and a **purity society**. Jesus took exception to each of these dimensions.

## B. Patriarchal Society

### 1. Patriarchal and androcentric society

A first perspective for seeing the politics of Jesus is provided by the awareness that ancient Palestinian Jewish society was a patriarchal and androcentric society.

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<sup>1</sup> Why has this changed? The major reason is the entry of sociological and anthropological models into the study of Jesus and ancient Palestine. For example, Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1966). Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of social Stratification* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984).

It was “**patriarchal**,” meaning that it was a hierarchical society with certain males ruling over other males and all women and children. Male ruled over all political and religious organizations, both within Palestine and throughout the Roman Empire.

It was “**androcentric**,” meaning that the literature and culture was viewed from a male point of view. Almost all written texts were written by males with a male perspective and bias.

For example, the Book of Proverbs provides many sayings about difficult wives, but there are no sayings about difficult husbands. Proverbs 31 talks about what to look for regarding an ideal wife, but there is no corresponding chapter about ideal husbands. The point is, Proverbs was written by men for men. In addition, male images of God dominate, laws were written from a male point of view, and males were assigned all the official religious positions.

## 2. Patriarchal family

The patriarchal structure of society was mirrored in the **patriarchal family**. The family was a microcosm of society.

In the ancient Jewish world of Jesus, the basic unit that lived together was the patriarchal family, which included all one’s relatives. At the top of each family was the male patriarch, usually the oldest male in the family. All members of the family were regarded as brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers to one another.

The family or group to which one belonged determined a person’s identity and status. Individualism was unknown. Belonging to an aristocratic family, gave individuals more power, more prestige, more honor than belonging to a peasant family. If one member had been given great honor, that honor was distributed to all the members. In this type of society, females were identified and had social status only in relationship to their father, husband, brothers, or sons.

In a patriarchal society, women were:

- Separated from men in most areas of life (e.g., eating only with family)
- Veiled in public (like traditional parts of the Middle East today)
- Restricted from full access to religious institutions (e.g., Temple)
- Not taught the Torah (not bright enough, might tempt a male teacher)

## 3. Roman Domination of Jewish Palestine

**Pompey (63 BC).** Rome took control of Palestine in 63 B.C. under General Pompey. He invaded from Syria, besieged and then took Jerusalem. After entering Jerusalem, Pompey went into the Holy of Holies and desecrated it in some way and subjugated the people, crucifying or enslaving large numbers of them. Obviously, not endearing himself to the Jewish people.

The political control for Palestine did not end with Pompey's invasion. There was constant fighting among rival Jewish factions both for and against Rome throughout Jesus' life and beyond.

**Antipater (55 BC).** By 55 BC, Rome had enough power to appoint a Jewish client king, Antipater, as the governor of Palestine. Rome ruled territories either indirectly through client kings, who mustered their own forces, or directly through Roman political and military commanders.

**Herod the Great (43 BC).** In 43 BC, his son Herod (Herod the Great) took over and ruled with an iron grip for 40 years. Herod built the Temple in Jerusalem, which set a record for overall size, and he built his palace, which was larger than any other in the ancient world until Nero built his in 64 AD. Herod also promoted Hellenistic (Greek) ideas and practices. He established gymnasia, stadia, and theaters to encourage cosmopolitan ways. In the Gentile regions that he ruled, Herod built Roman temples and encouraged the imperial cult.

Herod died in 4 BC and Palestine was divided by his three sons—Herod Antipas (Galilee and Perea), Philip (North East Galilee), and Arch-e-la-us (Samaria, Judea, and Idumaea). Archelaus could not handle the job and was replaced by Roman perfects and later by procurators.

**Pilate (24-36 AD).** Judea was a difficult place to govern, because of the social condition there and because of the desire for independence. Pilate became procurator of Judea around 24 AD and made several blunders that made governing Judea more difficult. One occasion, he brought Romans troops with military insignia bearing the image of the emperor into Jerusalem. When the Jews protested this "idolatry," Pilate surrounded them with troops and threatened to slaughter them. On another occasion, Pilate expropriated funds from the Temple treasury to build an aqueduct to bring water into Jerusalem. Since the funds were designed to support the Temple, there was a large Jewish protest, which Pilate put down with force. Finally, Pilate was removed from office in 36 AD by Rome after he sent cavalry and heavy infantry against a large crowd at Mount Geizim.

#### 4. Jesus and Patriarchal Power

In light of the patriarchal society in which Jesus lived, certain difficult and even familiar sayings of Jesus take on new meaning.

(a) **Mark 10:41-44.** 10:41 When the ten heard this [that James and John wanted to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus], the disciples began to be angry with James and John. 10:42 So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 10:43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 10:44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (NRSV).

This seems to be a clear statement against coveting hierarchical power.

(b) **Matt 5:38-41.** 5:38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 5:39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 5:40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your

coat, give your cloak as well; 5:41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. NRSV).

**(c) Luke 14:26.** Jesus said, “If any one come to me without hating his father, mother wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his or her own life, cannot be my disciple” (NRSV).

**How have Christians usually interpreted this?** Christians have often been perplexed about some of Jesus’ negative attitudes toward the family. Luke 14:26 has usually been understood to be hyperbole or exaggerated speech intended to mean that God must come first and family second.

**In view of the patriarchal society of ancient Palestine, how can we interpret it?** If Jesus’ statement can be seen, not as a comment on family, but on patriarchal family, things change. It becomes an invitation is to break with the patriarchal family—a break with a family system that mirrored the domination system of society as a whole. It is an invitation to replace group solidarity with the patriarchal family and replace it with the more basic solidarity with the non-hierarchical movement of Jesus.

**(d) Luke 11:27.** “While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!’ But he said to her, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it’.” (NRSV)

**Luke 8:21.** At one time in Jesus’ ministry, his mother and his brothers came to him, but they couldn’t reach him because the crowds surrounding him were so large. Someone told Jesus that his family was trying to reach him. In response, Jesus said, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (NRSV).

How have Christians interpreted this?

**In view of the patriarchal society of ancient Palestine, how can we interpret it?** First text: Jesus radically subverted the first-century value system kept women marginalized. In Luke 11:27, a woman shouts out to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you.” In the first century, that was high praise for Jesus’ mother. Jesus’ mother was given credit, using the only way the culture had permitted. A woman’s identity and value was viewed in terms of bearing male children and living her life through him.

In contrast, Jesus responds, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” (Lk 11:28). The vision and program of Jesus was a domination-free order. Jesus is denying that the identity and value of a woman comes from her embeddedness in a male, from the structures of patriarchy.

Second text: Jesus re-draws the lines of social solidarity. It is no longer the patriarchal family, but the all-inclusive family of God. Inclusion is based on self-selection, not DNA or family lineage.

**(e) Matt 23:9.** “And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven” (NRSV).

Patriarchy provides a helpful framework for understanding Matt 23:9. Abstracted from its social context and it seems to do with “titles” and correct speech.

However, in a patriarchal society, its meaning is clear and identical to the “anti-family” sayings—it is a subversion of patriarchy. It is using a male image of God as a way of subverting a male-dominated social order. Just as lordship to God means one is to have no other lords, so the fatherhood of God means one is to have no other fathers.

**(f) Luke 10:38-42.** 10:38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 10:39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 10:40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 10:41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 10:42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (NRSV)

**(f) Acts 22:3.** I am [Paul] a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today. (Some translations, like the NIV, obscure this Jewish idiom.)

In an era when Rabbis refused to teach women, Jesus was doing just that—teaching women. “To sit at the feet of someone” was to learn from someone, to be someone disciple. Paul claimed to be the disciple of Gamaliel, a very famous Rabbi of the first century. In the same way, Jesus was teaching Mary, who sat at his feet. Jesus was dismantling patriarchy, creating a society of equals.

## C. Peasant Society

### 1. Economics and Class Stratification

#### a. Prosperity for the cities

Roman rule brought prosperity to Palestine. However, participation in Palestinian prosperity was unequal. The coastal cities and some of the towns of the Transjordan area received the major benefits of increased trade, leaving other towns behind. Furthermore, the countryside did not share equally with towns and cities, and except for Jerusalem, Judea did not fare well at all. Increasing trade and commerce led to an increasingly cosmopolitan society that more-and-more adopted Hellenistic ways.

#### b. Tithing and taxes

The Temple itself played an important role in urban prosperity in Jerusalem, both by attracting numerous pilgrims to the city and by receiving payments of the **Temple tax**. Rome had allowed the Temple to collect the half-shekel Temple tax (two days wage), which amounted to millions of drachmas (*denarii*) annually.

In addition to the Temple tax, there were **tithes** owed to the Temple. Designed for an agricultural society, each tithe was a certain percentage of the farmer's production. Taken together, the various tithes added up to slightly over 20 percent per year. These funds were used to maintain the Temple, the aqueduct, the city wall, and to provide for all that the city needed.

To this Jewish tax-tithe system, the Romans also imposed their own forms of taxes. The two with the greatest effect on farmers were the **land tax** (1 percent of its value) and **crop tax** (12 ½ percent of the produce). The combined tax-tithe level was about 35 percent and to this even more taxation was added in the form of **customs tax**, **toll**-road payments, **tribute** money paid to Rome, and **land-rent** paid to landowners.

The way Rome sold the privilege of collecting taxes also exacerbated the problem. Rome sold the privilege of collecting taxes to "**tax collectors**" who paid Rome a fixed amount and whose own profit depended on the percentage they added to the taxes.

The impact upon the Jewish social world was severe. The Jewish people were powerless to affect either the Roman or the Jewish tax system. On the one hand, Rome could force people to pay taxes; on the other hand, the Temple Priests could not. However, paying the Jewish taxes and tithes became a test of religious-national loyalty. Some small farmers could not pay the Romans taxes and lost their land, creating landless day laborers, widespread emigration, and a social class of robbers and beggars. Many could save their land only by not paying what the Torah required and, as a result, became non-observant Jews.

### c. The redistribution of land

The priests that served in the Temple benefited most directly from the wealth and tax money coming into the Temple, but the city of Jerusalem also shared in the influx of money for tax and from the money brought by the pilgrims who came for various annual festivals.

The influx of wealth into the cities, particularly Jerusalem, allowed the well-to-do buy large estates. Wealthy landowners bought out the peasant farmers, who could not pay the high level of land tax and produce tax. The absentee landlords, living in the cities and towns, also collected from 1/4 to 1/3 of the agricultural production as "rent." with the result that the wealth controlled more-and-more of the agricultural production. The tithe on agricultural produce, coupled with the well-to-do buying up the land, resulted in many being driven off traditional their small family farms or plots of land.

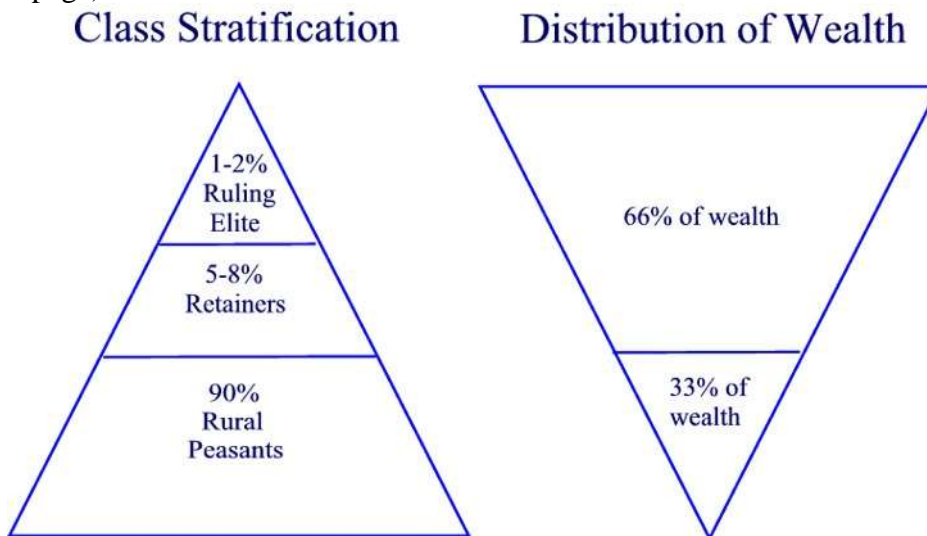
In addition, Herod and his sons regarded the whole countryside as at their own disposal and removed peasants at will. One scholar (Oakman) estimates the Herod's territory covered about 2.6 million acres, of which he himself owned enough to receive about 20 percent of the annual agricultural production in Palestine.

Moreover, when Rome took direct control, they leased out lands to those best able to pay for them, that is, to the elites of the towns and cities.

**d. Class and Wealth**

This increased the class stratification.

(see next page)



Under the conditions of Roman occupation, two classes emerged:

<b>Urban class</b>	1 to 2 % were <b>urban ruling elites</b> = the ruler, traditional aristocracy, high government, religious official,  5-8 % were <b>urban retainers</b> = service class attached to the elites; middle and lower level government officials, the army, some of the priesthood, most scribes, urban merchants, servants of the elites
<b>Rural class</b>	90% were <b>rural peasants</b> = small land owners, fisherman, laborers, artisans, marginalized people (beggars, outcast, expendables)

**2. Resistance and Rebellion in Judea and Galilee <sup>2</sup>**

The Galilean and Judean people were prominent among people subjugated by Rome for their resistance and rebellion. There were extensive revolt against Roman rule among the people of Spain, Gaul, and North Africa, yet the Judeans and Galileans were the most adamant in asserting their independence and defending their traditional way of life.

**a. Repeated revolts**

Jewish Palestinians mounted repeated protests and revolts against the Romans and the client rulers (the Herodian kings and Jerusalem high priests).

<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and empire. The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress,2003)35-54.

### **(1) Guerrilla attacks against Herod the Great (40-4 BCE)**

When Herod was appointed “king of the Judeans” by the Roman Senate in 40 BCE, the Judeans and particularly the Galileans mounted repeated guerrilla battles against him from 40-37 BCE (*War* 1.314-30; *Ant.* 14.430-54).

### **(2) Judas son of Hezekiah (4 BCE)**

At the end of Herod’s repressive rule in 4 BCE, the Jerusalem populace mounted a sustained protest and revolts erupted in the countryside. In Galilee, Judas, son of Hezekiah, lead peasants from the surrounding villages in an attack on the Herodian fortress at Sepphoris. They seized the arsenal and they “took back” goods that had been seized from the villagers by Herodian officers staffing the fortress at Sepphoris (*War* 2.56; *Ant.* 17.271-72).

In the south, a shepherd named Athronges and his brothers led villagers in a successful guerilla war for three years (*War* 2. 60-65; *Ant.* 17.278-84).

### **(3) Jewish War (66- 73AD)**

After many decades of deteriorating economic conditions in Palestine and escalating political tensions between Judeans and Romans, widespread revolt erupted in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside in the summer of 66 AD. Peasants throughout Judea and Galilee revolted and they converged on Jerusalem. They attacked the leading high priests, aristocrats, and their mansions. They routed the Romans and sent them in retreat. The Romans laid siege to the city for three years and in 70 AD retook the city of Jerusalem, slaughtered the city’s defenders, and destroyed the Temple.

### **(4) Bar Kokhba revolt (132-135 AD)**

Despite the crushing defeat by the Romans in 70 AD, the Judean countryside again erupted in a prolonged revolt led by Simon bar Kokhba sixty years later (132-135 AD).

## **b. Protest, Resistance, and Terrorism**

### **(1) Qumran**

The Essenes, who occupied Qumran, left Jerusalem in protest over who was the high priest. The Essenes believed that the Jerusalem Temple had become corrupt and started a “new Exodus” out into the Judean desert to start a new covenant community. They anticipated a final war between themselves, the “sons of light,” and the “sons of darkness.”

### **(2) “The Fourth Philosophy”**

Josephus tells us about a group he calls the “fourth philosophy,” which was led by Judas of Gamal and Saddok the Pharisee (*War* 2.118). They insisted that since they owed exclusive loyalty to God as their Lord and master, they could not render up tribute to Caesar as lord. They

refused to call any man, “master.” Furthermore, they said that the tax assessment was slavery, pure and simple (*Ant.* 18.4-5, 23).

### (3) Sicarii

In the 50s, Josephus reports that a different form of bandits emerged in Jerusalem. These were the *Sicarii*, named after their curved-bladed daggers. These “dagger-man” used assassinations and kidnappings. The first to be assassinated was Jonathan the high priests. After his death, there were numerous daily murders even in the Temple grounds.

Today we would call this terrorism—or, because it was in response to the brutal crucifixions used by the Romans governor, it might they might be called “freedom fighters.” (see *Ant* 20.164-65)

### (4) Popular Protests

For example, shortly after Pilate became governor, he sent a company of troops into Jerusalem carrying their standards with the images of their gods on them. The Romans often forced subject peoples to acknowledge or worship the army standards as a means of humiliation.

Outraged at this aggressive action that violated the Mosaic covenant, people from the countryside and from Jerusalem followed Pilate to Caesarea and fell prostrate around Pilate’s residence for five days. Pilate ordered his troops to surround the Judeans and threatened to kill them if they did not allow Caesar’s images in Jerusalem.

Josephus says: “Thereupon the Judeans... flung themselves in a body on the ground, extended their necks, and exclaimed that they were ready to die rather than to transgress the Law” (*War* 2. 169-74). Pilate relented.

### (5) Popular Prophetic and Messianic Movements

See handout from Murphy’s *Early Judaism*.

## 3. Jesus and Peasant Society

The peasant society of ancient Palestine puts many of Jesus saying about the poor in a different light. “The poor”—to whom the “good news” comes and who are pronounced “blessed”) are the economically oppressed class of a peasant society, just as the rich are the wealthy urban elites.

- Poverty and wealth are no longer spiritual metaphors, but concrete realities.
- Wealth is no longer the result of being an ambitious hardworking individual striving to get ahead; but the product of an oppressive social class.
- Poverty is not the result of failing to make use of one’s opportunities

<p><b>(a) Matt 6:24:</b> “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (NRSV).</p>
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If we hear this in the context of our social location—modern technological society, in which there is a large middle class and considerable possibility for upward mobility—then we are likely to think this is addressed to individuals how have a choice either to pursue wealth or serve God.

But the choice does not exist for peasants. Jesus' teaching is not advice to individuals, but an indictment of the rich urban elites—namely, you cannot be wealthy and serve God.

**(b) Mark 12:38-40.** 12:38 As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 12:39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 12:40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” (NRSV)

The scribes were part of the upper 10% of the population, who served the rulers of cities and regions. The phrase “devour widow's houses” could refer to the legal means of expropriation of homes due to debt.

**(c) Luke 4:18-19.** 4:18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 4:19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (NRSV)

The sermon is a “Jubilee proclamation.” In Jewish life, people worked a six-day work-cycle followed by a Sabbath rest. The Hebrew calendar didn't stop with the weekly cycle. It counted six work years and then celebrated the seventh as a year of rest. This seventh year was called a Sabbatical year. Scholars aren't sure if the Jubilee actually fell in the forty-ninth or fiftieth years; but either way, they year of Jubilee celebrated the end of the seventh seven-year people.

- Land was given a vacation in the seventh year. Crops weren't to be planted or harvested (Lev 25:2-7).
- Slaves were released on the seventh year (Deut 15:12-28).
- Debts were erased in the sabbatical year (Deut 15:1-6)
- On the fiftieth, or Jubilee year, great shake-ups occurred. Ownership of land was returned to the owners who had it at the beginning of the 50-year period (Let 25:10).

## D. Ancient Palestine: Purity Society

### 1. What is purity?

Purity is the condition of being free from physical, moral, or ritual contamination. The opposite of purity is defilement. Jesus lived in a social world where purity mattered; purity was a core social value. Purity and defilement structured Jesus' everyday world. Purity was therefore a political matter.

Purity codes were supposed to create a social world with clear boundaries. The inside of that world was holy; the world outside was defiled. Purity applied to places (the temple), times (the Sabbath, the high holy days), things (food, corpses, bodily fluids, human waste), and certain forms of behavior (eating unclean food, touching a corpse, wearing a garment made of two kinds of material, planting two kinds of seed in the same field, having intercourse during menstruation, homosexual intercourse, and many others). Defilement meant that one was prevented temporarily from participation in the temple cult and from social contact with those who were ritually clean.

## **2. How do people become impure or defiled?**

People could become defiled in many ways. Many forms of impurity were routine, easily dealt with, and not considered either reprehensible or sinful. Sexual intercourse, for example, because it involves the emission of semen, made men unclean; menstruation and childbirth made women unclean. In many cases, all that was required to become clean again was the passage of time, usually combined with ritual bathing. In other cases, sacrifice in the temple was also required. Defilement was also associated with more or less permanent conditions. Some people were unclean because of a questionable ancestry, others because of birth defects or chronic physical conditions. In Jewish tradition (Mishna), members of certain occupational groups were impure, and some of these distinctions seem to have gone back to the time of Jesus. The normal bodily processes of women seem to render them unclean more frequently than men.

There is reason to think that defilement was attached by association to the poor. Although one could be rich and ignore purity codes, purity seems to have been the ideology of the wealthy. Poverty itself was not defiling, of course. However, the routine observance of purity laws was difficult for peasants. Temple sacrifice was difficult or impossible for peasants living at a distance from Jerusalem. Recent archaeological evidence suggests that (ritual) bath pools were common in the houses of the wealthy; peasants probably had little access to such pools.

## **3. The purity codes**

The purity codes were formulated and promoted by the temple authorities, by the scribes, and by such groups as the Pharisees and Essenes.

In the social world of Jesus, purity was centered in the temple and temple elites. It was fundamental to temple theology, according to which the “holy of holies” in the temple was the dwelling place of God on earth, the place of greatest purity and the geographical center of purity. From it radiated outward concentric circles of decreasing degrees of purity. Moreover, the temple was the only place where sacrifices for certain kinds of sins and impurities could be offered. In an important sense, temple theology claimed for the temple a monopoly on access to God.

The temple was presided over by the high priest and chief priests. They were an economic elite as well. Together with their extended families and other aristocratic families who were frequently linked to them by marriage, they comprised one to two percent of the population, and to them flowed one half to two thirds of the agricultural production of peasants, extracted

through taxes, tithes, and rent for land. The temple elites were thus not only the religious elites, but also the economic and political elites of the society.

Moreover, the elaboration of purity laws beyond what is found in the Pentateuch was done by scribes who were “retainers” of the temple elites. Central to this elaboration was a text from the purity code in the book of Leviticus: “You (Israel) shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev 19:2). “Holy” was understood to mean separation from everything impure.

Purity was also central to the Pharisees and Essenes. The Pharisees were committed to extending priestly purity to the Jewish population in general. The Essenes were committed to observing even more rigorous standards of purity in their communal life; indeed, this commitment was primarily responsible for their virtual withdrawal from mainstream society. Both Pharisees and Essenes were scribal movements; their elaboration and extension of purity depended upon the exegesis of literate scribes. The emphasis on purity is not to be equated with Judaism as a whole, but was the result of reading the Jewish scriptures in a particular way. The purity society in which Jesus lived was the product of a scribal elaboration that saw and interpreted the Jewish tradition through the lens of purity. Purity was part of a religious ideology legitimating the social position of the temple elites.

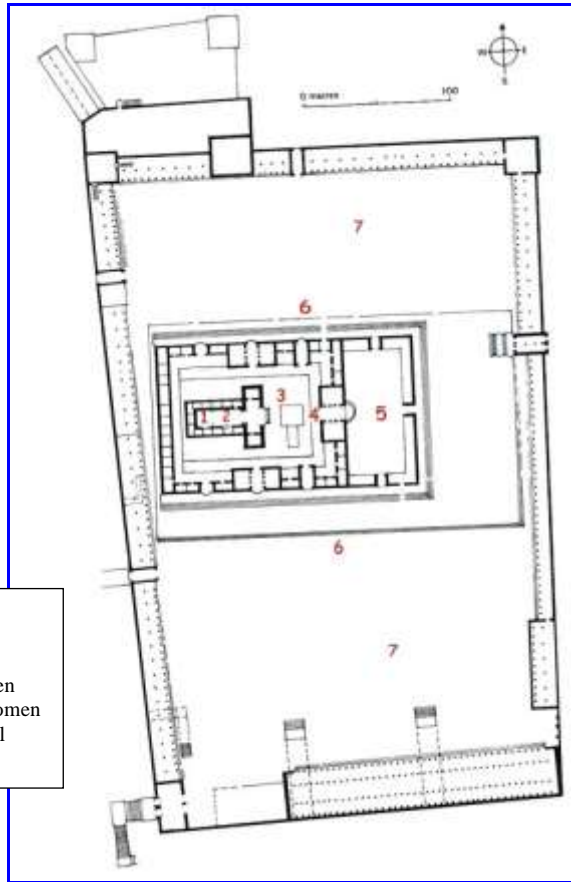
#### **4. The Temple: The Center of Power and Purity**

In the time of Jesus, purity—the condition of being free from physical, moral, or ritual contamination—was at the heart of Judaism.

And the geographic center of purity the Jerusalem Temple, since it was very dwelling place of God on earth.



was  
the



- 1. Holy of Holies
- 2. Holy Place
- 3. Court of Priests
- 4. Court of Jewish men
- 5. Court of Jewish women
- 6. The separation wall
- 7. Court of Gentiles

A close look at the very structure of the Temple confirms the importance of purity or holiness for Israel. This is evident in the series of barriers or concentric circles that protected the innermost sanctuary of the Temple from contamination.

### **Mishnah Kelim 1.6-9**

**6. There are ten degrees of holiness. The land of Israel is holier than any other land ...**

**7. The walled cities [of the land of Israel] are still more holy, in that they must send forth the lepers from their midst ...**

**8. Within the wall [of Jerusalem] is still more holy, for there [only] they may eat the Lesser Holy Things and the Second Tithe. The Temple Mount is still more holy, for no man or woman that has a flux, no menstruant, and no woman after childbirth may enter therein. The Rampart is still more holy, for not Gentiles and none that have contracted uncleanness form a corpse may enter therein. The court of the Women is still more holy, for none that had immersed himself the selfsame day [because of uncleanness] may enter therein ... The Court of the Israelites is still more holy, for none whose atonement is yet incomplete may enter therein... The Court of the Priests is still more holy, for Israelites may not enter therein save only when they must perform the laying on of hands, slaughtering and waving.**

**9. Between the Porch and the Altar is still more holy, for none that has a blemish or whose hair is unloosed may enter there. The Sanctuary is still more holy, for none may enter therein with hands and feet unwashed. The Holy of Holies is still more holy, for none may enter therein save only the High Priest at the time of the [Temple] service (Danby's translation).**

## **5. Jesus and Purity: Two Views**

### **a. Borg: Jesus Opposed Purity Laws<sup>3</sup>**

Borg argues that there are two competing Jewish worldviews.

(1) One Jewish worldview is rooted in *holiness* and in Lev 19:2—“Be holy as God is holy” (cf. Matt 5:48). This is a world of sharp social boundaries “between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.”<sup>4</sup> It is a politics of purity. It creates and maintains a political and social system of exclusion (outside the purity system) and domination (by those inside the

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) 50-61. Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus*. With a forward by N.T.Wright (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Borg 1994: 52.

purity system).

(2) Another Jewish worldview is rooted in *compassion* and Exod 34:6—“The LORD, the LORD, a God *merciful*<sup>5</sup> and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (cf. Lk 6:36). Jesus held this view. Jesus subverted the purity codes. When he and his disciples fail to observe the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28), he is infringing the rules. When he touches a bier (Luke 7:11-17) or a leper (Mark 1:40-45), he is violating purity. When he eats with toll collectors and sinners (Mark 2:15-17), he is demonstrating against the restrictions of the purity codes. Jesus embraced the politics of compassion and opposed the politics of purity. Compassion, not purity, is the dominant quality of God.

### **b. Fredriksen: Jesus Embraced the Purity Laws**<sup>6</sup>

Fredriksen argues that the term “impurity” can refer to two different types:

(1) The first type of impurity has no moral content or implication, but rather expressed a specific, objective, contagious state: Scholars often refer to this as “ritual” or ‘levitical’ impurity.”<sup>7</sup> Most people, under normal circumstances, would be ritually impure, which prevented them from access to the Temple. The remedy was washing and waiting, which generally removed such impurity.

(2) The second type of impurity was “moral.” Choosing to sin made one morally impure. The remedy was repentance and atonement.

Fredriksen implicitly charges scholars like Borg with confusing the two types of impurity. In addition, scholars such as Borg are *revisioning* ancient Judaism to make the problems of ancient Judaism look like the problems of our day. In this way, Jesus become immediately relevant to us. Fredriksen writes:

“Such a Jesus—caring, staunchly egalitarian, antinationalist—is immediately, comfortably relevant to our own concerns. . . . he battles the some social ills that bedevil thoughtful people in the modern West: economic inequality, racial and national prejudice, even sexism.”<sup>8</sup>

Fredriksen also writes:

“The effort of tolerance so needful for living in a plural society leads us to repudiate the drawing of moral lines and social boundaries; but it is the essence of impurity to draw sharp lines. . . . This may be why some NT scholars recoil from a Jesus at home in the world of his

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<sup>5</sup> *Racham* (רחם); Pi “have compassion”; n.m. “womb.”

<sup>6</sup> Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews. A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*. New York: Vintage, 1999) 197-214. Paula Fredriksen, “Go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded” (Mk 1:44): *Jesus, Purity, and the Christian Study of Judaism*. <http://bu.edu/religion/faculty/fredriksen/purity.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Fredriksen, 1999: 197.

<sup>8</sup> Fredriksen, 1999: 200.

contemporaries, a world where leprosy and death defile, where ash and water make clean, where one approaches the altar of God with purifications, offerings, and awe. Unlike Philo, or Josephus, or Hillel, or Shammai, Jesus bears the burden of being required to make immediate sense to us. It's a lot to demand of someone living in the first century; too much, in fact. A Jesus who rejects his own religious culture turns out to be a twentieth-century person consumed in ancient garb—a modern secular liberal offended by impurity's sharp lines."<sup>9</sup>

### c. Jesus and Purity: The Evidence

**(1) Mark 1:40-44.** 1:40 A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." 1:41 Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" 1:42 Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 1:43 After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 1:44 saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." (NRSV)

This episode stands as an uncomplicated affirmation of Leviticus 14:1-32. As Mark has it, Jesus invokes an elaborate ceremony of purification. The purification was spread over eight days and involved examination by the priest, washing, complete shaving, sacrifice of various animals, and the offering of other elements. The details are unknown to modern readers, but Mark's Jewish audience would have been familiar, public knowledge.

**(2) Mark 7:1-5, 18-23.** 7:1 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 7:2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 7:3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 7:4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 7:5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" (NRSV)

7:18 He said to them [the disciples], "Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, 7:19 since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 7:20 And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. 7:21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 7:22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 7:23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." (NRSV)

Jesus criticizes Pharisaic extensions of the codes. Mark interprets him as refuting the food laws (ritual impurity), but heightens the importance of moral living (moral purity). Fredriksen believes that when Jesus does not belabor some controversy with Jewish contemporaries, he is presented as Law-observant.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Fredriksen, "Go, show yourself."

<sup>10</sup> Fredriksen, 1999:204.

**(3) Mark 8:22-26.** 8:22 They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. 8:23 He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" 8:24 And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." 8:25 Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 8:26 Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village."  
(NRSV)

What does this text reveal about Jesus' view of purity laws, if any?

**(4) Luke 7:11-20.** 7:11 Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 7:12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. 7:13 When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." 7:14 Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" 7:15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.  
(NRSV)

According to Borg, such stories of Jesus healing shatter the purity boundaries of his social world. Here Jesus touched the bier (coffin) of a dead man. Elsewhere he is described as touching lepers, the dead, and a hemorrhaging woman. He enters graveyards inhabited by a man with a "legion" of unclean spirits who lived in the vicinity of pigs.

**(5) Luke 5:29-30.** 5:29 Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. 5:30 The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (NRSV)

Table fellowship—sharing a meal with somebody—had great significance in Jesus' social world. It was not a casual act. Sharing a meal represented mutual acceptance. Rules surrounding meals were deeply embedded in the purity system. The rules governed not only what one ate, but also who one ate with.

**(6) Matt 5:23-24.** 5:23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 5:24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (NRSV)

The underlying assumption is that Jesus accepted the importance of offering sacrifices in the Temple. Not only that, one needed to be in a state of purity in order to enter the Temple and approach the altar. Would this worshiper have disregarded laws of purity, while observing the laws of sacrifice?

## E. Summary & Conclusion

Jesus was a non-violent, social prophet. By his teaching, healing, and example, Jesus challenged the injustices of his time:

- *Jesus challenged social and political injustices.* He objected to the unfair *patriarchal system* that suppressed some men and all women. And he did not resort to violence to oppose such domination systems.
- *Jesus challenged economic injustices.* He stood with *peasants* and called for economic reform. He did not use violence.
- *Jesus challenged religious injustices.* He overturned the *purity system*, which excluded people based on category or type.

Jesus was a social prophet of his time.