

Reading Jesus As A Politician

By

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Abstract

While on earth Jesus' life was enigmatic and many times very controversial. He himself knew he had created assorted figures in the hearts of many people so much that he had to ask his disciples, who do people say I am? This question became necessary because he was seen from different view points as religious reformer, political revolutionist, social activist, etc. After two thousand years it is still difficult to find a suitable place that will accommodate all his many faces. While it is generally agreed he was a religious expert it is hardly understood that he was also a partisan politician. Many pious Christians will take exception to this assertion yet one cannot be a religious leader in the Jewish culture without being at the same time a political leader. Taking a hermeneutical approach this paper examines how the biblical texts, while creating the picture of a pious religious reformer, presented Jesus whose political activities give a modern Christian veritable grounds to exercise his political rights in a society where politics has turned a *dirty game*. It was this purpose that guided the paper to conclude that if Jesus was an African he would have been well involved in the political activities of his nation without still denting his piety.

Introduction

Biblical inscriptions present a very religious man called Jesus whose history dates about 2000 years in the Ancient Near East. He lived a simple, quiet yet controversial and enigmatic life. Some said he was a prophet, few said he was a King, others said he was a Rabbi; his disciples said he was God, the Messiah. Well, he died on the Roman cross for a purpose, he was convinced, he came. How do people read him today? Many pious Christians see so much good in Jesus to the point that it is considered sacrilegious to examine his political life. The problem is compounded when one considers the bane of politics in the present dispensation. In many African countries, for instance, politics has become a 'dirty game' as well as a 'do or die' affair. From this standpoint it becomes difficult to see Jesus as a politician. His religious life was so pronounced that people see the incompatibility of his religious life and political life. If Jesus was such a righteous man would he be willing to have any business with politics? Can one truly remove Jesus from the political dynamics of his day? If politics is a dirty game is it right to associate Jesus with politics? Can the followers of Jesus today have basis, in the life of Jesus, to be involved in politics in Africa?

A good number of Christians suggest that life that is not directly lived for the purpose of discipleship is not worth a Christian life. Life of discipleship here is defined as a life of self-denial, suffering and forsaking of the world.¹ “A forsaking of the world” itself has been variously interpreted as life that keeps away from individuals who are not members of one’s denominational affiliation, life that detests friendly interactions with persons who are not within the religious fold, etc.

The purpose of this paper is to examine politics from the perspective of the Jews, to what extent Jesus was involved in it and then establish the link between historical Jesus the contemporary African Christian in politics. This position will enable the paper to define the right attitude of the African Christian in the political dynamics of the contemporary society. Though the scope is so much on African political culture the paper will be functional in many parts of the world as modern Christianity seeks a definition of relationship between Christianity and politics in a world that is fast becoming humanistic. Politics in the Developed World is fraught with some practices just as it is in the Developing Nations. This, therefore, informed the scope.

In the Editorial, 22 September 2009, a Catholic Bishop was repudiated with the words, “For a religious leader to engage in partisan politics and become the spokesman of Buganda Kingdom is wrong.”² The same writer also added that a religious leader “should, instead, advocate the basic values of democracy which are fundamentally Christian values: justice, equality and accountability.” The present writer sees a big cleavage between Christianity and politics to a point where a Church leader should advocate the basic values of democracy and not to involve in politics. The beginning of confusion here is the need to advocate the basic values of democracy without involving in politics. What is ‘democracy’ and what is ‘politics’? How can a Christian advocate for basic values of democracy while staying aloof from politics? Jim Willis has set the stage for arguments by his response to “*The Santa Barbara Independent*”, a local weekly newspaper, which they titled [The Next Great Awakening?](#). In Willis’ words,

One of the questions the reporter asked was, ‘Do you think [Jesus](#) was a politician?’ Here is my answer: Of course not. But he had a vision of the [Kingdom of God](#) which was spiritual, personal, relational, social, economic, and yes, political, because it talked about allegiances and loyalties and authority, and if [Jesus](#) was Lord, Caesar was not.³

It would have been quite easy to tow the line of Jim Willis if he had not presented a conflicting report at the same time. Shortly after he had made the above statement he said,

They saw him as a political threat. If they saw him just as a private pietist, why would they worry? [If he was] helping people get their lives together, helping their marriages, making them better parents and make them go to less Roman orgies and drunken parties, why would that have been a threat to the ruling powers? They regarded him as a threat.⁴

If Pilate and the political personalities of that time saw Jesus as political threat, as Jim Willis has rightly observed, it is difficult to see how his actions were not political, except if Jim Willis wants to say that everybody misunderstood Jesus. The implication is that only Jesus understood himself. This is a position that is very unimaginable. Jesus spoke in parables, at times, but also spoke at other times in plane language. He surely meant to communicate, and in fact, he did. They understood him rightly and killed him for what he stood for. Some of the expositors of today may eventually be the ones that misunderstood Jesus and never the Jews or Pilate. Jim Willis initially said Jesus was not a politician but concluded that he was a political threat. Jesus is either a politician or he is not. Though Thomas Rosica successfully isolated some political facts about Jesus he still concluded that, Jesus was not a politician but had a keen sense of politics⁵, making useless of the political facts he had isolated.

Many African Christians have repudiated partisan politics on the grounds that politics is a dirty game and that Jesus will have nothing to do with politics. As a result of this politics have been abandoned to some unscrupulous persons who are ready to go any length, however devilish, to gain power not primarily for service but for other selfish purpose, including power and wealth.

Over the centuries the life and times of Jesus has been approached from various perspectives. As a result of various representations both in the Gospel narratives and the society some critical scholars, notably Rudolf Bultmann⁶ and other Form Critical Exegetes of his time, insist that the real or historical Jesus can no longer be discovered in the pages of the New Testament. The concern of Bultmann and other Form Critical Scholars was to establish the personality of Jesus from a modern critical approach that took very little cognisance of the ancient literary method. They read ancient writings from modern glasses. But true scholarship involves academic empathy and holistic contextualization. Until the biblical claims are approached from that perspective the modern scholar will continue to make series of unnecessary mistakes and a wrong representation of Biblical narratives. This paper therefore adopts a methodology of academic empathy in historical analysis of biblical texts.

Political lineage of Jesus

The genealogy of Jesus recorded in the two Synoptic Gospels traced the political history of Jesus. He was not the son of Levy, priestly history, though priest, he was. He was not the son of a prophet, though prophet, he was. He was of the Davidic Political Dynasty. His political dynasty is traceable not just to David, the ideal King of the Jews but to Judah the son of Jacob who had the sceptre by divine inheritance, Genesis 49:10. The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, and that is the standpoint on which the royal status of Jesus is established. It stands on a prophetic promise that predates the priestly dynasty of the Zaddokites. Yes, he is the Prince of Judah. David himself was anointed king because God remembered this promise to Judah. The mention of Shiloh⁷ in this text has been variously interpreted into a political standpoint for the Messiah more than the sceptre itself. Interestingly, God arranged it in such a way that Judah provided the first of the Judges in the

occupation of the Promised Land (Judges 3: 9 – 11). It was indeed a divine plan to showcase a Messianic dynasty. In this first practical ascendancy to the dynasty it was religious sin that led to a political ascendancy. Their religious problem was a political problem. The Judge was both a political as well as a religious leader. It was in this politico-religious family that produced the Messiah. God did not make a mistake. Jesus was indeed a Prince, and one par excellence. It was to David God spoke, while fulfilling it in Jesus the Messiah, “And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever” (II Sam 7: 16). Then the question was Jesus a King? You answer yes; then the second question, was he a politician? You answer no. So is a King not a politician? Is not this confusion? Can Jesus be a King without being a politician? Can he be a politician without being a partisan politician? Yes, you say His Kingdom was not of this world, but the world belonged to Him; the world was made by Him. It is not a balanced hermeneutics to interpret a verse in isolation of other texts. More points and texts will therefore be examined in the course of this research to establish the fact that Jesus was a real politician; yes, par excellence, and worthy of emulation. Jesus was a man of the people as well as of the Spirit. The scripture noted that he “increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man” (Luke 2:52).

The Political Messiah

The obvious mistake that has been made over the centuries of biblical scholarship is the laceration of political ascendancy from the eschatological Messiah of the Jews. Unfortunately this is a hermeneutical imbalance. It should be clearly noted that it was the socio-political unrest and dissatisfaction that led to the idea of Jewish Messiah. Their religious problem was a cultural problem. Their cultural problem was their socio-political problem. It was practically impossible to separate religious life from political life. The priestly dynasty of the Zaddokites was religious and political. The High Priest was both political and religious head. It was the political servitude of the ages that led to the expectation of the Messiah. The Messiah was expected to deliver the Jews from slavery. Political slavery was religious slavery. Religious slavery was socio-ethical slavery. The Messiah was required to save the Jews from this mess. The only two times the word Messiah is used in the Old Testament, were in connection with political standpoint. “Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times” (Daniel 9: 25). Here the apposition, ‘the Prince’ buttresses the position of the research. In the event of Philip and Nathaniel recorded in John 1: 43 – 51 it was the political Messiah that these Jews expressed and Jesus did not deny it. He rather said ‘You shall see greater things than these.’ If Jesus ever accepted to be the Promised Messiah, then He was a political Messiah. He will be a Messiah that has no biblical foundation the day He ceases to be the Messiah of the Jews and He also ceases to be the Messiah of the New Testament. It should be noted that Jesus never denied he was the Messiah; his problem with the Jews was on the approach they felt he should adopt. Even in his miracles he did not

adopt the approach of the traditional healers and miracle workers. Jesus' approach was different in everything he does. Should one then say he was not religious because he did not adopt the religious approach of the Jews? He had his special style of doing his things. As a Rabbi he was different; his priesthood was different; as a prophet he was different; as a King he was different. He did not come to fight the Roman Government as the Jews expected. He came to fight the root of political slavery. This was embedded in the self alienation from God, Who in turn abandoned them to political slavery. The moment they were delivered from their evil practices they will be delivered from foreign domination. He was really a politician, though outside the conventional understanding.

Life and Times of Jesus as a Partisan Politician

At the commencement of His ministry in Luke 4: 18 Jesus declared "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." It should be clearly noted that the 'poor' mentioned in this text as well as the 'captives', 'the blind' and 'the oppressed' are all victims of socio-political system. At his birth innocent children were slaughtered for political reasons by Herod. He was a political threat. L. Michael White has rightly noted;

We have to remember that it was known that Jesus was executed as a political criminal and the gospel traditions themselves preserved this tradition of Pilate questioning Jesus. "Are you a king? Are you King of the Jews?" Now whether or not Pilate ever really asked that question of Jesus directly it does appear to be the case ... that Jesus claimed to be a king.⁸

As a Prince he was a partisan politician. Yes, he could not have been an ordinary politician because to be a revolutionary Prince, as seen from Luke 4:18, he needed to take his stand with the oppressed and, in fact, the social outcast. He wielded much power which was strong enough to pull down the political hegemony of the time. It is true that his method was quite different from the method of his contemporaries. Of course he was different. Yet, it does not rule out the fact that he was a partisan politician. He had political followers just as the revolutionary partisan politicians; see the cases of Theudas and Judas the Galilean (Acts 5: 36 – 37). Some say his followers were religious, but what was religious and what was politics? See the question they asked him in Acts 1: 6 "Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?" For three years some of us still claim that this band of Jewish Galileans followed Jesus without knowing what they were doing. Even his reply to their question in Acts 1: 6 did not remove politics from the scene. He only reminded them that God's time is the best. If Jesus was such a quiet and non-partisan politician as some Christians will present him why should he become a political target the point where the Jury wants his execution? Luke 13: 31 - 32 reads;

At that very hour some Pharisees came, and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' And he said to them, 'Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.

No, He could not have been such a quiet non-partisan politician. He must have made political waves. If he was just preaching "repent or perish" message and healing the sick, obviously no political personality will think he is a threat. If his birth was misunderstood for political affront what about his activities? Why should Herod seek to kill him? Not even his reply to this threat showed non-partisan politics. By calling Herod a 'fox' was enough evidence of partisan politics. Jesus gathered the commoners as followers for political reasons. The Jewish political hegemony was aware of the inherent dangers. Kenneth Collins may not have agreed with the political status of Jesus but he still makes salient points that even strengthen the position of this research. According to him, "The Roman occupation was theologically unpalatable to the Jews, particularly the lower classes, who saw their theocratic government subordinated to a pagan, idolatrous empire; however, the upper classes were very much aware of its benefits."⁹ It was the lower class that caused the political turmoil and never the higher class that was benefiting from the pagan hegemony. It was the commoners, the lower class, that joined the zealots in political clashes with the ruling class each time there was a political confusion. The Priestly aristocrats had no business to protest. They benefited so much from the political rule of the pagans. Jesus recruited them as followers for both political reasons which, of course, went hand in hand with religious reasons. The priestly aristocrats joined the Roman Government to subjugate the lower class. The publicans were particularly guilty in this case. FAQ Maintainer advanced the point for some other theological purpose but that furnishes the research with points; "Finally, politically, we know that some Jewish leaders (who were appointed by Roman Government) may have seen Jesus as a political threat. However, the threat was more to the Romans, and the Jewish leaders may have been pressured to silence him."¹⁰ The life and times of Jesus was a political threat both to the Jewish leaders and the Roman government. Pilate may have condemned him for fear of the Jews who threatened that he would not be a friend to Caesar (John 19:12). But in itself is dying for political reasons. If Pilate had not been politically threatened, perhaps, he may not have condemned him. The fact remains that Jesus was condemned for political reasons. The fairness of the judgment may be determined, only after considering the constitutional provisions that formed the basis of the judgment.

Jewish Politics at the Time of Jesus

The greatest mistake we make when we consider a Christian's participation in politics today is on the legal constitution and culture which we define the participation. We judge Jesus from our legal constitution and culture instead of judging him from Jewish and Roman culture where he

actually belonged. Doing a balanced exegesis requires that the exegete understands the culture of the author and audience he was addressing. Scholars will agree to this but will fail to apply the same when it comes to reading Jesus as a politician. The second problem is reading the first century culture from modern perspective instead of reading it from that ancient perspective. In this many of the modern exegetes fail.

In the world and culture of the Jews when Jesus was born theocracy was in vogue among the Jews. The culture of the Jews was their religion, and their religion was their politics. Religion and politics were inseparable. The High Priest was as religious leader as well as a political leader. Every religious leader among the Jews was also a political leader. It was not therefore possible to be a political leader without being a religious leader. If Jesus was a religious leader then he was a political leader. In fact, as a Rabbi he had followers. These followers were disciples who carried out his religious mission. Religious mission had invariably a justifiable political undertone. God was the ultimate King of the Jews. He was King *de facto* in the politics of the Jews. The High Priest ruled on behalf of God. The rightness of the actions of the High Priest as a representative of God may have contradicted from the principles of God, but that does not remove the fact that he was there for God. The Laws of Moses that formed Constitutional requirements for politics among the Jews was believed to come from God. Jesus himself followed the same legal Constitution, therefore should be judged from the same Constitution. He should be judged from Mosaic Constitution because he did not lay it aside. In fact, he said he came to fulfil it and not to abolish it (Matthew 5: 17).

The next point why he has to be judged by the Mosaic Law is that it was the legal Constitution of his nation. If he was a member of the Jewish nation then he has to be judged by the national constitution. In fact, this strengthens the historicity of Jesus as a first century Palestinian who treaded the sinful soil of Palestine yet remained sinless. If he operated a constitution that was different from his culture then the basis will not be there to judge his sinlessness. The Jewish politics was as corrupt as the Nigerian politics, when judged from that first century perspective. It could be called a dirty game. That even informed the Cleansing of the Temple recorded in John. Corruption was prevalent among the religio-political elites. If Gamaliel, *a teacher of the Law held in respect by all the people* (that is, a teacher of the Scriptures highly respected by the Jews) as recorded in Acts of the Apostles was not a politician what was he doing in the political Council of the Jews? In fact, it was his political position that saved the disciples in the Council. If Theudas, a revolutionary religious leader among Jews, was not a political revolutionist, by virtue of his religious activism, why was he slain? What was he doing with four hundred men? Just taking them to God? Is it not the same King, *de facto*, of the Jews? Was he not slain for political and religious reasons? Judas of Galilee rose up after Theudas and many people also followed him. He perished and all those who followed him also dispersed. What type of hermeneutics are we applying when we remove Jesus from the political dynamics of his day? Jesus was a politician and he died for the principles he believed in.

If the birth of Jesus created a political turmoil and throughout his life there were series of affronts from political figures that culminated in a political assassination and we still want to extricate Jesus from the political dynamics of his time, then something is really wrong with our hermeneutics. Everybody could not have misunderstood him; his actions and pronouncements speak too loudly his political inclinations. Again, he could not have been a religious revolutionist in a theocratic state without being a political revolutionist. It is not possible because both go hand in hand, or rather, both are the same.

Was Jesus a Democrat or a Republican? Was he an American? Was he a Peoples' Democratic Party member of Nigeria? Was he a Nigerian? He does not need to be any of these because he did not live in any of these cultures. He should be judged from the culture he belonged if one wants to do a proper exegetical application of the New Testament. Even if he lives in the modern time to form his own political party the important thing is that he is a partisan politician.

My Kingdom is not of this World

The response of Jesus to Pilate at crucifixion as recorded in John 18:36, "My kingdom is not of this world" has become a text grossly misunderstood by those who preach "non-partisan politics." If Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, by the way these preachers interpret it, why did Jesus have anything to do with the political kingdom of both the Jews and the Romans? [Andrew Sandlin](#) has a good interpretation of the text "He did not mean that his kingdom was not designed to pervade the world. He meant that its *source* was heavenly, not earthly."¹¹ Unfortunately, Sandlin still fell into the same temptation of applying the text from the opposite side by concluding that the kingdom which Jesus preached was not a political kingdom. Is there any kingdom that is not political? If yes, why call it kingdom? Why not call it something that has no business with reign, government, or political parlance? When Jesus said in John 16: 33, "be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" did he mean only spiritual assault? Are Christians merely spiritual without being physical? Can a Christian share in a spiritual kingdom without first sharing in a physical kingdom? "My kingdom is not of this world" should be interpreted, "the source of my rule is not from human beings." Jesus is Lord over all the earth. The kingdoms of this world must be judged by the structure that Jesus put in place. Judgment is both spiritual and physical. Another hermeneutical blunder some theologians commit is the idea of declaring every biblical idea to be spiritual. Some events are spiritually designed while some are physically designed. Even many of those ones that are spiritually designed have physical base. It is practically difficult for one to successfully interpret a scripture to remove Jesus from politics without contradicting oneself at a point. For example, Bill Haymin remarked of Jesus thus, "He refused to play power politics. Instead, he challenged the political and religious belief systems of his day."¹² Haymin could not see that challenging of the political system of the day cannot be done successfully outside politics. How come Jesus refused to play power politics yet he could challenge political system? This is a contradiction.

When interpreting John 18:36 it is proper to consider other texts and to give interpretation that will take into cognizance the harmony to biblical doctrines. Isolating this text and reading it as a celestial event that has no business with the world is not the best for Christianity. Jesus meant that his right to rule is not a function of earthly or human manipulation. His right to rule the Kingdom of the world is a divine appointment. He cannot be coerced into it from human politicking. Yet it is the same human geo-political kingdom, represented in Daniel that he rules. How and when the consummation of this Kingdom is expected is a divine function devoid of human effort. This is basically what he meant when he said his kingdom is not of this world. Human beings, in the first place, belong to the world. To get to the celestial or more blissful place one need first and foremost to be a physical human being. To belong to the celestial kingdom we must first belong to the kingdom of the world. When he comes back to judge the world, it is not a spiritual world he is coming to judge; it is not a spiritual world he is bringing. It is a physical world where the human beings would be transformed into a body that enables them to live eternal life and live righteously. He makes all things new by transforming all things.

The Christian in Politics

There is nothing absolutely wrong in a Christian participating in partisan politics of his country. Yes, this is because Jesus participated actively in the politics of his time and performed his civic duties. If he was a modern man it follows that he would still participate effectively. Effective participation requires that the Christian could join a political party, where the Constitution requires it. The Christian should also live above board just as Jesus did, in spite of the corruption in the politics of the Jews. The problem of the modern Christian is not the overwhelming level of corruption in the society but the overwhelming magnitude of sin and self-centredness in the Christian. Many of the stable Christians who should have joined in politics have been so confused by the naïve pastors/ preachers who tell them that politics is not for people like them. So, the nominal Christian who is not interested in the preaching of the pastor/ preacher joins in politics only to represent Christianity negatively. Yes, he was unfaithful while in the church, how do Christians expect him to represent Christianity positively. Until balanced hermeneutical principles are applied in this matter, Christianity will continue to suffer setbacks in the political dynamics of the society. Christians are talking about social justice. They expect those without moral principles or respect for justice to give them social justice. What a conflict of thought and doctrine?

Jesus Politics and “African Insurance”

Politics in some parts of Africa like Nigeria has gone very far into what is politically called “African Insurance”. African Insurance is a method of diabolic fortification of the politician so that he resists gun shots and attacks. Diabolic fortification is not as simple as one may consider the word. It is a very high level of witchcraft involvement. Many times it requires the sacrifice of many human beings, and

sometimes very close relations. The question then is whether Jesus will get involved in this high level of witchcraft. But another big mistake one makes is the denial of spiritual powers. If there are negative powers it is also true that there are positive powers. If Satan's power is negative then Jesus' power is positive. If a negative politician knows how to "cook" himself in a negative power the Christian politician should know how to "cook" himself in Jesus' power. A Christian who is so deeply rooted in Jesus' power should not go into politics that has gone very sophisticated in diabolic manipulations. From all that is known about Jesus, it is very clear that He would have resisted his opponents and still succeeded by the power of the Almighty God. Is Satan's power stronger than that of God? The problem is not that Satan's power is strong; the problem is that those Christians who were supposed to go into politics by the power of God have abandoned it to nominal Christians who have no business being there in the name of God. The problem is all lack of balanced hermeneutical principles. The theologians who are supposed to guide the church have turned the other way.

Conclusion

The more Christians stay away from politics the more they make the society slide into the hands of men and women who do not fear God. The more the responsible people keep away from politics the more the less responsible people occupy key positions on governance. The same irresponsible people are the ones that decide the fate of the Christians in the society. So, at the end the Christian who thinks it is unbiblical to participate in politics is the one that losses. If Jesus was a politician in a corrupt society of the Jews of his day why is it a problem for the Christian today? What the Christian requires is to understand the rightness of Christian participation in politics from the perspective of Jesus' participation in the politics of his time. When this is well understood the next stage will be to discuss ways of getting into a messed system as found in the Third World countries. Running away from the mess worsens the situation. The paper does not recommend a blind participation in the political dynamics just to satisfy the need to join in politics. The rate of degeneration is high and the level is unimaginable. Yet, the Christian is to blame for the negative sophistication. He is the light and must allow himself to shine in dark places. He is the salt and must allow himself to season the meal.

Endnotes

¹ Thomas Rosica, Affirmation, Identity and Purpose of Jesus' Mission — A Biblical Reflection for the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time B <http://saltandlighttv.org/blog/?p=6616#more-6616>

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³Jim Willis, www.independent.com/news/2008/feb/28/progressive-evangelical-talks-god-politics-enlight

⁴ibid

⁵Rosica, Loc. Cit

⁶ Rudolf Bultmann,

⁷J. Woodhead, "Shiloh" New Bible Dictionary (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2003) p. 1094

⁸L. Michael White, *Loyalty to Christ VS Loyalty to Caesar*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/kingdoms.html>, From Jesus to Christ, Browsed, September 1, 2009

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¹⁰<http://www.faqs.org/faqs/judaism/FAQ/09-Antisemitism/section-10.html>

¹¹ Andrew Sandlin, www.natreformassn.org/

¹² Bill Haymin, Jesus and Politics: Do They Mix Like Oil and Water?
<http://www.streetprophets.com/storyonly/2008/7/22/11229/0727>