

Consensus

Volume 34
Issue 1 *Theology and Context(s)*

Article 18

2012

The Political Aims of Jesus

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Recommended Citation

Cole-Arnal, Oscar (2012) "The Political Aims of Jesus," *Consensus*: Vol. 34: Iss. 1, Article 18.
DOI: 10.51644/ZK108642
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol34/iss1/18>

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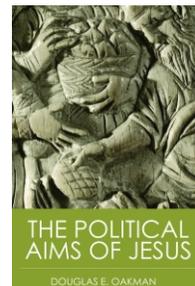
Book Review

The Political Aims of Jesus

Douglas E. Oakman

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012

Since I have found Douglas Oakman's previous works on the social setting for historical Jesus studies absolutely fundamental both academically and for a personally more grounded faith, his own contribution to the genre *The Political Aims of Jesus* had me chafing at the bit to get it hot off the press. I had expected it and wanted it to be the pinnacle experience of Historical Jesus studies reaching the very mountain top on the backs of that plethora of previous scholars in the Third Quest, notably John Dominic Crossan and William Herzog II. Consequently, as I read this work, I found it initially tough slogging. The soaring rhetoric I wanted describing the very Historical Jesus in whom I believe was not to be found in the book in just the way I wanted.



In spite of both my earlier presuppositions and desires, Doug Oakman cut through these and challenged me to the core. While I read and digested the material in *The Political Aims of Jesus*, I became caught up in its challenges to me both academically and personally. In short, he accomplished in this dialogue with me even more than I had hoped or imagined--- just exactly what both solid scholarship and radical faith are commissioned to accomplish. Academically Oakman demanded of me a persistent and constant attention to details (text, coins, history, economics, social class, etc.) no matter where these would lead me. As well he challenges every sacred icon (both mine and others) that refuse to stand up to his relentless digging and sifting of the data. Did he have a passionate reconstruction of the historical Jesus before he put together this fine piece of work? I did and wanted Doug to confirm it, namely the radical peasant from Nazareth who organized a resistance movement against imperial Rome and its sycophant clients, all in the name of that covenant egalitarianism inaugurated by a God who liberates slaves (Exodus). Did *The Political Aims of Jesus* do that for me?

Did Doug Oakman render back to me the Jesus in whom I had come to believe via much scholarship and personal wrestling? Well, **YES and NO to YES with NO.**

YES! In this fine work I re-discovered as I do again and again, sometimes daily, in both scholarship and personal commitment, that Galilean upstart, that marginalized Galilean of poor and questionable birth, that egalitarian anti-imperial radical committed to "broker" constant access to "the Power" for those cast aside over against the god(s) of Roman power and their colonized/native sycophants. And, yes, I read loudly and clearly, that unlike our Enlightenment convenient separation of religion and politics, Oakman closed the gap clearly in his portrayal of Jesus and his context (right down to tiny detail). Thank you for that! 2

NO! There stand two chief areas where a sit-down over coffee and intense brotherly discussion with Doug* would be, for me, most valuable. I would probe two of his major points passionately: 1). first of all his distinction between “Jesus GROUP” (which he links with the historical Jesus) and the “Jesus MOVEMENT” which he relegates to the post execution of Jesus. 2). Secondly I would wrestle with him over the notion of Jesus’ rather easy flow between well-to-do folk and the impoverished and marginalized, chiefly at the table of party/meal fellowship. It is not the table part I challenge but rather the author’s class analysis that concerns me here.

YES with NO! My (yes, passionate) disagreements with *The Political Aims of Jesus* in no way undermines the quality of this fine book. Any work of scholarship in such a passionate field which generates both excellence and debate is “a pearl of great price.” This fine study has rocked me, angered me, empowered me, challenged me and humbled me. After all, did not Schweitzer show us that all of our historical Jesus(es) fulfill our own needs and visions? And, surprise of surprises, the very places where I disagree with the author are those loci where he challenges my own “historical Jesus.” Hmmm!

Having said all this, does *The Political Aims of Jesus* stand alone at the mountaintop, climbing on the backs of other notables (Crossan/Reed and Herzog)? My judgment is “no.” Instead, and better yet I think, *The Political Aims of Jesus* shares the mountaintop with the other two--- a troika of those who shape my scholarship and faith activism. Dom Crossan gives me that gripping literary (almost poetic prose) which inspires and entertains. Bill Herzog (*Parables as Subversive Speech*) brought me to that liberationist “pedagogue of the oppressed” like none other, and Doug Oakman provides the detailed glue and dogged scholarship that gives gritty, daily flesh and blood to a Galilean life to whom I falteringly pledge alliance. I heard Dom Crossan once say (re: Leviticus 25) something like this: “You’ve heard ‘the devil is in the details’; let me tell you, ‘God is in the details’.” Doug Oakman’s *The Political Aims of Jesus* proves that statement in spades.**

* I use Doug, Dom and Bill out of deep respect and the blessing of personal conversations. Life and dedication have always meant more to me than titles and formality.

** An Appeal to Doug: I believe firmly that we need an excellent book on “Christology” and its development. In your “Revising Reimarus” appendix I see the seeds of such a work. Please bring it to harvest (20, 60 & 100-fold)! Go, Doug, Go!

Your brother of coal-mining origins...

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