

## **The Attitude Of Jesus And The Early Church To The State As Indicated By The New Testament**

The people among whom Jesus lived were in no way neutral in their attitude to the Roman state to which they were subject. On the one hand the aristocratic Sadducees, who formed the majority party of the Sanhedrin - the puppet government installed by Rome to give an illusion of self-determination, were content to maintain the status quo.<sup>1</sup> On the other, the military nationalism of the Maccabees continued to re-emerge (cf. Acts 5:37) until it finally led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.<sup>2</sup> It was with this group of extreme revolutionaries, known as the Zealots, that Jesus has been associated since the birth of NT criticism.<sup>3</sup>

Several items of evidence have been advanced to support the claim that Jesus, if not actually a member of the Zealot party, had a sympathy with the cause of these anti-Roman rebels. Firstly, Jesus was executed on the grounds of political sedition as "King of the Jews".<sup>4</sup> The charge of being a royal pretender was not, however, the one for which Jesus was arrested (cf. John 11:45-53). At his trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin (Mark 14:53-66; Matt. 26:57-68; Luke 22:67-71; John 18:12, 13, 19) Jesus was condemned for blasphemy and declared to be worthy of death (Matt. 26:65-66; John 19:7). The Sanhedrin had no right under Roman rule to exercise the death penalty (John 18:31) without authorisation from the Governor,<sup>5</sup> and in order for that to have been given a charge of sedition was substituted for blasphemy.<sup>6</sup> The evidence of the Gospel accounts shows that this charge was not taken seriously by Pilate (Mark 15:2-15; Matt. 27:11-26; Luke 23:2, 3, 18-25; John 18:29-19:16). The fact that the authorities did not bother to round up the disciples, but allowed them to flee into the night lends further support to this view (Matt. 19:16; cf. John 18:36).<sup>7</sup> Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:29-38; John 12-15) is interpreted by some as a coronation march, followed by an assault on the Temple<sup>8</sup>. Such a view is an example of eisegesis, reading a preconceived idea into the text.<sup>9</sup> The 'assault' on the Temple is purely imaginary. Not only was the Temple area impregnable to anything less than a full-scale military assault, but the Roman garrison in the Antonia Fortress would have quickly intervened if anything of that kind had occurred (cf. 21:30-36).

The final argument used is that Jesus had among his disciples a Zealot, Simon (Luke 6:15). Richardson<sup>10</sup> and Donaldson<sup>11</sup> point out that there was no identifiable group known as the 'Zealots' until the Jewish War (66-73 CE.), and even then it was only one of several rival groups. While the Zealot ideal of the use of and suffering of violence was present before then<sup>12</sup>, the title given to Simon does not support the weight of argument built upon it.<sup>13</sup>

Two texts are used as a secondary argument to support the 'Zealot' theory: the command to procure a sword (Luke 22:26) and Jesus' statement that he had come to bring "Not peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). In its context the Lukan passage, in view of Jesus' later refusal to allow Peter to use his sword (22:50-51) is more likely, according to Marshall<sup>14</sup> and Morris<sup>15</sup> to be emphasising the necessity for suffering and self-sacrifice. Richardson explains it more simply as a provision for travel on dangerous roads in the course of preaching.<sup>16</sup> The Matthean passage describes the effect of Jesus' coming on mankind, not His purpose.<sup>17</sup>

Once these more difficult passages are dealt with Jesus' dealing with the State are seen in an almost completely positive light. He ministers to Centurion's servant (Luke 7:1-10) and instructs His followers to go the extra mile (Matt. 5:41) - clear reference to the Roman practice of conscripting workmen to carry loads (cf. Luke 23:26)<sup>18</sup>. The feeding of the 5 000 (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17; esp. John 6:5-13) aroused incorrect Messianic hopes in the hearts of many of those present<sup>19</sup>, but He refused to be made King by force (John 6:15; cf. Matt. 3:8-10; Luke 4:5-8)<sup>20</sup>. When given an opportunity to condemn the cruelty of the Roman Governor (Luke 13:1-4) He instead uses it to correct the false popular notion about suffering.<sup>21</sup>

Jesus' reply to the question concerning the paying of taxes to Caesar came as a result of a loaded question<sup>22</sup> from the Pharisees and the Herodians (Mark 12:13-17). His reply is one that is unmoved by nationalistic prejudice, asserting the duty to pay one's dues to the authorities without lessening the claims of God.<sup>23</sup>

In Acts we see opposition to the church coming not from the State, but from a religious source.<sup>24</sup> Luke portrays the authorities as "consistently sympathetic towards the Christians"<sup>25</sup> (17:5-9; 18:12-17; 19:23-41). Paul made use of his Roman citizenship on several occasions (16:37-39; 22:24-29)<sup>26</sup> and exercised his right to appeal to Caesar (25:10-12). In his epistles Paul did not oppose slavery (Eph. 6:5-9; cf. Col. 3:22-25; 1 Peter 3:18-20) as the whole fabric of society would have collapsed without it.<sup>27</sup>

Revelation 13 & 18 are often presented as contradicting earlier Apostolic instructions in Romans 13:1-7 (c.55 CE.<sup>28</sup>) and 1 Peter 2:13-14 (c.64-68 CE<sup>29</sup>). The presupposition behind this being that as Rome ceased to act righteously and punish wrongdoers (cf. Rom.13:4-5) the church began to oppose it. However, we do not find this development in the NT. In Romans 13:1<sup>30</sup> Paul urges the Roman Christians to submit to the ruling authorities and to pay taxes, an injunction that can only be taken to mean that as it possible to do so without compromising the Gospel they are to submit to government as a Divine institution. Taxes must be paid to prevent anarchy,<sup>31</sup> which would hinder the Gospel (13:6; cf. Mark 12:17). Paul does not consider the possibility of rebellion, because this was inconceivable to a Roman citizen<sup>32</sup>. Paul did not consider the State to be faultless, but its fallibility does not alter the fact that God has given them his authority to rule<sup>33</sup>. 1 Tim.2:1-3 and Titus 3:1 (c.63 CE<sup>34</sup>) indicate that his view did not change after his imprisonment in Rome.<sup>35</sup>

The only alternative at the point of a direct conflict between the State and the commands of God was to refuse and humbly pay the penalty.<sup>36</sup> The same theme of suffering for righteousness is found in 1 Peter 3:13-14. 1 Peter 3:13-17 presents the same argument, written in a time of active persecution, and is, if anything, repeated with greater emphasis.<sup>37</sup> While Revelation 13:13-17 & 17 present the State (For John the Beast of Rev.13 was Rome, cf.17:9-10<sup>38</sup>) as opposed to Christ and the Church, it is noteworthy that it is God who overthrows the powers of the world in response to the prayers of the saints not as a result of a revolution instigated by the Believers (6:6-10; 8:3-5; 16:17-19; 18:8).

Overall NT emphasises the Divine institution of human government, and the responsibility of believers to obey it as far as it is possible to do so while still obeying the Law of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Richardson, *The Political Christ*. (London: SCM, 1973) 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> A.M. Hunter, *The Fifth Evangelist*. (London: SCM, 1980), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Richardson, 41.

<sup>4</sup> T.L. Donaldson, 'Zealot', *ISBE*, Vol. 4, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1179.

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<sup>5</sup> C. Bigg, 'A Critical And Exegetical Commentary on The Epistles of St. Peter And St. Jude' *ICC*. (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1978) 25; G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1960), 32.

<sup>6</sup> Richardson, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Donaldson, 1179.

<sup>8</sup> Donaldson, 1179.

<sup>9</sup> Hunter, 82: "The key to this action is to be found in Zech.9:9f. Centuries before the prophet had predicted that one day there should come to Zion a King, riding upon an ass, to show that his authority rested not upon military force, but on his call from God to inaugurate a reign of universal peace".

<sup>10</sup> Richardson, 42.

<sup>11</sup> Donaldson, 1176.

<sup>12</sup> Donaldson, 1176.

<sup>13</sup> Donaldson, 1179.

<sup>14</sup> I.H. Marshall, 'The Gospel of Luke', *NIGTC*. (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1989), 825.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, L. 'Luke', *TNTC*. (Leicester: IVP, 1989), 338.

<sup>16</sup> Richardson, 48.

<sup>17</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1983) 131.

<sup>18</sup> F.V. Filson, 'The Gospel According To Matthew', *HNTC*. (Massachusetts: Hendricksen, 1960), 89-90.

<sup>19</sup> Hunter, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Richardson, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Richardson, 46.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce, 216.

<sup>23</sup> Richardson, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Richardson, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Frend, W.H.C. *The Rise of Christianity*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 109.

<sup>26</sup> "...in Greece the Jewish Law was held in scanty reverence. Any disturbance came immediately before a Gentile magistrate, whose sole care was for the maintenance of order. A High official, like Gallio, would not at this time dream of going into points of theology; the only question he would ask would be, who began the brawl, and the answer might be anything but satisfactory to the ruler of the synagogue. But at Philippi, and again in Ephesus we catch sight of one result of the new faith that led instantly to serious trouble., and was fraught with evil consequences in the future. Nearly every way in which a man gained his living in the Graeco-Roman world was connected with idolatry, but the law insisted that every man should be allowed to gain his living without interference. At Philippi Paul and Silas were flogged and imprisoned for stopping the trade of some men who kept a slave-girl to tell fortunes, and it is curious to notice that these rogues were the first to formulate their real crime of the Christian missionary. They charged the apostles not with disloyalty to Caesar, but with "teaching customs which it is not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans". They had seen at a glance with the keen eye of a disappointed salesman, that heathenism and Christianity were two incompatible lives". Bigg, 26-27.

<sup>27</sup> Richardson, 73.

<sup>28</sup> L. Morris, *The Epistle To The Romans*. (Leicester: IVP/Eerdmans, 1988) 7.

<sup>29</sup> P.H. Davids, 'I Peter', *NICNT*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 10.

<sup>30</sup> Oscar Cullman (*The State & The NT* [London: 1957]) has taken up Dibelius's view that the 'powers' of Romans 13:1 refer to both civil authorities and to heavenly forces standing behind them. There are good reasons for rejecting this view, the strongest argument against it being that "The angelic beings in the NT are never regarded as servants of God, but as enemies defeated by Christ (Col. 2:15). Again references in this chapter [Romans 13] to 'God's servants'; to 'the sword', and to taxes surely point to humans, not spirit being." (cited by Morris, Romans, 460.). P.T. O'Brien gives a more detailed refutation of Cullman's other points. See 'Principalities & Powers', D.A. Carson, ed. *Biblical Interpretation And The Church*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 117-119.

<sup>31</sup> N.T. Wright, 'The New Testament & The State', *Themelios*, Vol.16(1), (1990): 16.

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- <sup>32</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle Of Paul To The Romans*. (London: Fontana Books, 1970), 210.
- <sup>33</sup> Morris, *Romans*, 459-460.
- <sup>34</sup> D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 651.
- <sup>35</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, 'A Critical & Exegetical Commentary On The Epistle To The Romans', *ICC*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 371. Richardson, 80.
- <sup>36</sup> Richardson, 77.
- <sup>37</sup> Cranfield, 371.
- <sup>38</sup> Mounce, R. 'Revelation', *NICNT*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 251.