

Jesus, Socialism, and “Judeo-topia”

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Kenneth L. Hanson,
University of Central Florida

Abstract: *This article addresses the contention commonly expressed among liberal theologians and commentators that the Jesus of history, to the extent that he may be identified, was essentially a social revolutionary, broadly sympathetic to what might be identified in contemporary terms as ideological “socialism.” It is often conceived that Jesus’ concern for the poor, the disenfranchised, and the underclass of Second Temple Judea endows him with a broad egalitarian ethic, making him akin to an ancient “redistributionist.” I will argue, however, that “socialism” did indeed exist in those days, in the form of the Dead Sea sect, and that the historical Jesus was profoundly opposed to the community of property it represented. For him, “social justice” was part of the embedded ethics of Judaism itself, divorced from the “redistributionist” theories of Marxist and neo-Marxist adherents. Whereas the Essene sectarians withdrew from what they called “the material wealth of wickedness,” Jesus admonished his disciples to pursue dealings out of economic contact with the world at large.*

Keywords: Historical Jesus, Socialism, Dead Sea Scrolls, Social Justice, Tzedakah

Jesus, Proto-Rabbi

It is a truism that almost every brand of religionist, philosopher, and moral commentator, not to mention political theorist, has attempted to lay claim to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, as if doing so lends unimpeachable stature to one’s cause or perspective. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Rogueries, absurdities and untruths were perpetrated upon the teachings of Jesus by a large band of dupes...”¹ As a result, it is arguably the case that much if not most of what is common knowledge with respect to the great Nazarene amounts to anachronistic stereotype. That, commingled with religious doctrine and dogma, leaves the serious scholar and researcher endeavoring to uncover even the slightest trace of the real man and his message, unvarnished by two millennia

¹ Jefferson, “Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association,” January 1, 1802.

of force-fitting him into one mold or another. Moreover, when occasional voices from the religious left chime in, justifying everything from social welfare, to woke egalitarianism, to outright Marxism under the guise of “liberation theology,” one wonders whether looking at Jesus through the simple lens of the Judaism of his day, albeit filtered through the teachings of the rabbinic sages, might shine a more reliable light on an ancient proto-rabbi, who was, at his core, a Galilean, an Israelite, and a piously observant Jew. Is it fair to assert, given what we know or think we know about the historical Jesus, that he might have been at least somewhat sympathetic to what today might be thought of as socialism? I will argue, however, that faithful Torah observance, the kind to which the historical Jesus certainly adhered, does not a woke socialist make.

The one thing we know with certainty about Jesus is that we know very little with certainty. That being the case, it is fair to ask why anyone would be inclined to turn history’s most celebrated Galilean into a dedicated socialist, or even a fellow “traveler” on Karl Marx’s utopian journey. Most likely such a perspective is gleaned from Jesus’ sensitivity, as recorded in the Christian Gospels, to the poor and downtrodden in tandem with his unrelenting attacks on the rich. Jesus is said to have declared to a certain “rich young ruler,” “Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Luke 18:22, NKJV). He is also credited with declaring: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24, NKJV). Not a few contemporary exegetes gleefully rely on such passages to cast Jesus in the role of Robin Hood.

Ayn Rand, noted for her spite for socialist/Marxist theory, was also known to have despised Jesus, since in her words: “Jesus (or perhaps His interpreters) gave men a code of altruism, that is, a code which told them that in order to save one’s soul, one must love or help or live for others.”² In her mind, Jesus, as any good socialist, promoted the collective over the interests of the individual. Or did he? Perhaps it was his interpreters who gave us this image. Perhaps Ayn Rand, like the Marxist theorists she abhorred, was inclined to filter Jesus through John’s Gospel, which declares that Jesus came, “that the world [not isolated individuals] through him might be saved” (John 3:17, KJV). That of course is John, which paints Jesus as a self-denying Greco-Hellenistic philosopher. The synoptic Gospels by contrast find room to depict a Jesus who was fully a product of the Jewish world of the pre-rabbinic Sages. Certainly Judaism, in antiquity as well as in the modern world, represents a collective, but

² Rand, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, 287.

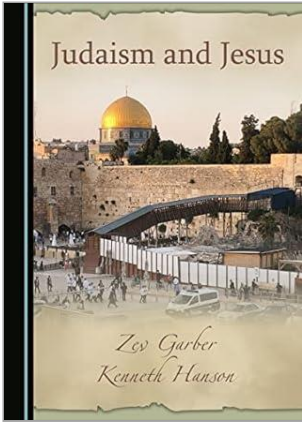
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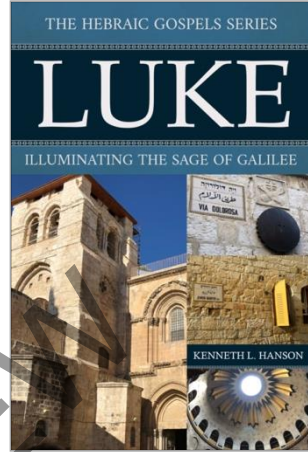
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenneth L. Hanson is an associate professor and coordinator of the University of Central Florida Judaic Studies Program. He earned a Ph.D. in Hebrew Studies from the University of Texas at Austin, in 1991. His many scholarly articles focus on the Second Jewish Commonwealth, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the historical Jesus and Jewish Christianity. He has also published several books of popular scholarship, including: *Dead Sea Scrolls: The Untold Story*, *Kabbalah: Three Thousand Years of Mystic Tradition*, and *Secrets from the Lost Bible*. He has been interviewed multiple times on nationally syndicated radio, and his research was featured on the History Channel documentary, “Banned from the Bible.” He teaches a wide range of Judaic Studies courses, including the Hebrew language, the Hebrew Bible, Jewish history and culture, and the history of the Holocaust.

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