

Jesus as Social Prophet

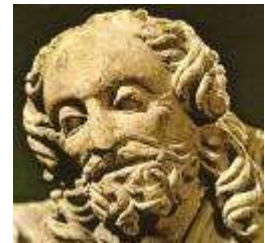
Jesus not only challenged the politics of purity, but advocated the politics of compassion.

~ Marcus Borg

Of all the figures in his tradition, Jesus was most like the classical prophets of Israel.

Their role as **messengers of God** flowed out of intense **experiences of the Spirit**, vivid in the Spirit-filled tradition of Israel.

Especially characteristic was their passionate and critical involvement in the historical life of their people in their own day.



The prophets were:

- Voices of religious social protest against the royal theology
- God-intoxicated spirit persons
- Bearers of the dream of God: a world of justice and compassion
- Concerned with:
 - the immediate present of their people
 - the immediate future flowing out of the present

A threefold pattern marked the message of the prophets:

1. Indictment
2. Threat
3. Call to change



Evidence that Jesus was a social prophet is found in texts reporting:

- Conflicts with Pharisees committed to the purity system

- Anti-temple sayings and actions
- Anti-purity sayings and actions
- Forgiveness of sins apart from the temple and purity system

Jesus indicts and challenges the peasant, purity, and patriarchal domination systems.

Indictment and challenge

Purity sayings

“It’s not what goes into a person from the outside that can defile; rather it’s what comes out of the person that defiles.” (Mark 7:15, SV)



To say purity is what’s on the inside is a profoundly politically subversive statement.

“Blessed are the pure in heart...” (Mat. 5:8, NRSV)

To say purity is a matter of the heart is to deny that purity is a matter of observing the purity system.

Healings

“As the sun was setting, all those who had people sick with various diseases brought them to him. He would lay his hands on each one of them and cure them.” (Luke 4:40, SV)

Jesus violated the purity system in his healings by touching those the purity system considered unclean.



“Friend, your sins are forgiven you.” (from [Luke 5:17-25](#), NRSV)

He subverted the boundaries, healed and forgave sins outside the purity system.

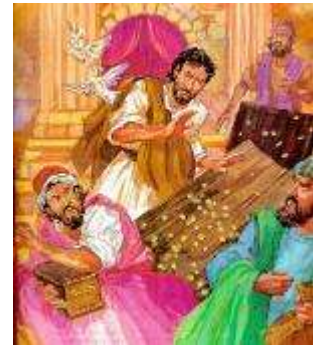
Relationships with women

Jesus subverts some of the most sacred taboos of his time by:

- Speaking with women
- Affirming Mary's role as a disciple when questioned by Martha
- Defending the woman who entered an all-male banquet and washed Jesus' feet
- Welcoming women as members of his itinerant group

Temple sayings and action

“Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple....” (Mark 11:15-16, NRSV)



- Jesus' action in the temple is an anti-purity act
- Money changers and sellers were serving the ruling elites, facilitating payment of taxes and system of purity through sacrifice
- Jesus' action protested against the temple as the center of an economically and politically oppressive domination system

Common table fellowship



Jesus is accused of eating with “tax collectors and sinners.”

In purity society, eating was a political act, who you ate with mattered.

Jesus' open table fellowship was subversive and illustrated an alternative wisdom.

Jesus **challenged** social/political understandings of his society system and **advocated** an alternative social vision.

Politics of Compassion



Jesus taught a politics of compassion:

“Be compassionate in the way your Father is compassionate.” (Luke 6:36, SV)

Jesus’ alternative vision echoes and subverts the purity system:

- Echoes the ideological justification of the purity system
- “Be holy as God is holy” - holiness was understood to mean purity
- “Be pure as God is pure” - dominant cultural paradigm of the time
- “Be compassionate as God is compassionate” - echoes that paradigm with a radical substitution of terms
- “Compassion” comes from the word meaning “womb” - life-giving, encompassing, embracing

The [Good Samaritan](#) parable illustrates the politics of compassion:



- The priest and the Levite passed by the wounded man because of purity boundaries: death was unclean
- The practice of purity interfered with the practice of compassion
- The Samaritan, considered impure by the purity system, was the one who acted with compassion

A politics of **purity** creates radical sharp social boundaries.

A politics of **compassion** dissolves sharp boundaries, is egalitarian and inclusive.

<http://www.aportraitofjesus.org/prophet.shtml> accessed Jan2014