

**From Resentment to Justice:
The Son of Mary As A First Century Hebrew Prophet Faithful to the Torah**

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Contextual Preface:

Recently, I joined other clergy of the BREAD organization for an over-night retreat. BREAD (acronym for Bringing Responsibility, Equality And Dignity) is our local Saul Alinsky-style interfaith social justice organization in Columbus OH, consisting of fifty congregations, magisterial Protestant, modern Evangelical, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, Anabaptist, Reform Jewish, Conservative Jewish and Unitarian Universalist. This clergy retreat was a first. We agreed to try a rather conventional approach, with response papers to scriptural texts found in both the Tanakh and the New, or Second Testament.

Our Lead Organizer asked me to present a short commentary on a social-justice-focused passage from Yerimiyahu /Jeremiah from the Hebrew scriptures. I refused, telling them that since I had taught Gospel criticism for many years at one of our seminaries, and had never studied Yerimiyahu at length, I preferred to take a shot at the slot on the syllabus which he had titled “Jesus as a Hebrew Prophet.” The Organizer accepted my offer, despite my fears that he might imagine a Unitarian Universalist to be controversial choice.

My fears about controversy increased on the night before I gave my paper. The local AME Zion minister, whom I have come to really admire, asked me, as we were going around introducing ourselves a bit, what Unitarian Universalism was about. In front of everyone else. “I honestly don’t know a thing about it,” he confessed. “And I know you are openly gay, so it must be rather different from my own tradition.”

I answered as best I could. When, however, I made it clear that while we might read the Western Scriptures in services now and then, (or more rarely, frequently,) we *rarely* appeal to them as a *divinely inspired authority*, I saw his eyebrows go up. I could tell he suddenly realized how *really* different our religious culture was from his own. And the next day, he knew, this unorthodox gay man was going to be giving a paper based precisely on a text, taken from Matthew, which the UU tradition, unlike the AME Zion tradition did not lift up as an example of God’s very word. Thus, although the conversation was actually quite cordial and certainly informative for everyone, I sensed that at least a few of the Christian clergy who *did* know something about the Unitarian Universalist tradition were growing a tad anxious about me reading my paper the next day. (The rabbis and cantors, of course, were mostly at ease.) I wondered if some of them were afraid that I might actually present, as fact,

some wildly unorthodox theories that have certainly breathed within Unitarian Universalist congregations, such as those found in Schonfield's *The Passover Plot*, Dowling's *Aquarian Gospel*, the Bloodline of Jesus theories so popular these last twenty years, or even the supposedly Humanist theories offered in the Prometheus Press book, Robert Scheaffer's *The Making of the Messiah*, which is crammed with "research" approaches that would ordinarily mortify any press concerned for its scholarly reputation. And, yes, all of these interpretations would certainly *justly* disgust my esteemed AME Zion colleague and many others as well.

Gladly, I don't think any of my interfaith colleagues even suspected that in my forty year study of the Gospels, I've gone way beyond that short list, and have read with critical eyes even the most wildly crackpot interpretations of Jesus in my attempt to approach the gospels openly. I am sure none of them suspected I had actually deigned to read John Allegro's truly eye-crossing book proclaiming that Jesus was merely a code word for the hallucinogenic effects of the *fly agaric* mushroom. Or that I had allowed myself to reel before Barbara Theiring's barren and bewildering suggestion that Jesus was a deranged Essene entrepreneur who survived his staged cross, got well due to Essene medical expertise, and married as often as possible thereafter. (Of course, our own Rev. A. Powell Davies suggested the Jesus/ Essene connection four decades ago in his *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, so the Australian diva cannot be credited entirely with impulsively fusing Scroll work with Gospel studies.) Furthermore, I researched the "Essene Gospel of Peace," a text much admired in my former home of Berkeley CA, which quoted "the earth is our mother" teachings of a mystical Jesus. To my surprise, I found out it had been written by the grandson of a Unitarian Bishop from Transylvania. Nor did they suspect that I read all the colorful and slant novels of the last hundred years, like *King Jesus* by Robert Graves, *The Lord Jesus* by Robert Payne, the *Gospel of Corax* by Paul Park, Sholom Asch's *The Nazarene*, Michael Moorcock's sci-fi punch in the face, *Behold the Man*, Nikos Kazantzakis's Manichaean reverie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and even the *Urantia Book*, which, though not technically a novel, is novelistic in its depiction of the life of Jesus. So if anyone among my Christian comrades suspected any such indiscriminate attitude on my part, their teeth would have been grinding, quite understandably, in anticipatory horror. Naturally, I found myself hoping that at least some of them had encountered Jacob Trapp's poetical *Word to Jesus*, Rev. Don Robinson's *Jesus, the Son of Joseph*, and Sophia Fahs' *Jesus the Carpenter's Son*, somewhere along the line, so they might not flinch too much when this Unitarian Universalist came to speak.

So with some sense of wanting to put the best Unitarian Universalist foot forward possible, I presented them with a simpler version the following paper, beginning with the specific text I was asked to use as my springboard:

In Matthew's Gospel (5, v 17-18) you'll find these words, Jesus speaking:

Don't imagine I am trying to annul the Torah, or the Prophetic teachings! No, instead, I am trying to accomplish (or complete) them. For I assure you that even if all the earth and sky were to pass on, not one iota or even one serif from the Torah would pass on.

Whereas I think the author whom we now call Matthew is here referring to conflicts tattering the era when his gospel was being completed, (in the mid to late 80's of the first century,) I am also happy to accept his prophetic take on Jesus at face value. I read the life of the son of Mary as the life of a *navi*, a Hebrew prophet. In other words, his was a passionate attempt to take seriously in his own days the radical economic teachings of the Torah.

The Torah, for example, in the book Wayiqra/ Leviticus, has detailed provisions for both a span of time called a Sabbatical Year (*shabbath*), and for a double Sabbatical in the 49th and 50th year which is called a Jubilee (*yobel*.) These are largely found in what we now call chapter 25 of Leviticus. The Sabbatical Year was every seventh year of the calendar, and the Jubilee arrived after seven times seven Sabbatical years, plus one, i.e. the 50th year. During these years, the Torah's clear intent was to *deliberately equalize the economy* for all the inhabitants of the whole land. These special years insured that long-standing debts were cancelled, and all debt slaves (people, often whole families, who were paying off an impossible debt by working it off) were set free. Furthermore, all land impounded by acts that we might now call *eminent domain* or *confiscation for unpaid back taxes* returned to the original owners of that land 50 years earlier. For a whole two-year period, the seventh Sabbatical Year plus the great Jubilee, farmers were even supposed to extend the benefits of their own Sabbath rest to their very land, letting the earth of their fields remain fallow. Only stored grain, or gathered and hunted wild things, could be eaten during that time. This makes sense, because if followed carefully, to the final iota and serif, the Jubilee could have redrawn the farming boundaries drastically. There could be fights about which field belonged to which farmer at the eleventh hour. Better to let the fields be unplanted. (cf. Wayiqra/Leviticus chapters 25 and 27)

These Hebraic regulations (torah) were radical then, and they still sound radical now. (Interestingly, the great Athenian law-giver, Solon, was proposing *almost identical* radical economic reforms for his city in the same decades in which the Hebrew Torah was being edited in its final form. He called his idea *seisachtheia*, or the "shaking off of burdens," instead of the "great rest"/ *shabbath*) Recognizing that people are different, (or *diverse* we say today) the late 6th century BCE editor of the Torah seems to have recognized that some folks are *inherently* entrepreneurial and rather deft with finances, whereas others simply are not so made. So every fifty years, the

Jubilee addresses these inequities of the economy, that great gap between the “haves and the have-nots.” And it addresses the problem dramatically.

There is plenty of evidence in the gospels that Jesus favored this provision of the Torah. (Cf. especially *Jesus and The Non-Violent Revolution*, Andre Trocmé, and John Howard Yoder’s classic based on Trocmé’s hard-to-find tome, *The Politics of Jesus*. A brand new book, also called *The Politics of Jesus*, approaches the economic critique from a slightly different, but completely supportive model, and this is by the AME elder, Dr. Obery Hendricks. I highly recommend this book, since he comes at his critique within the centrist ecumenical traditions of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christianity)

The evidence is clear even when the words of Jesus are pared down to trembling essence-- “*ipssisima vox/verba*” --by the critical work of folks like Joachim Jeremias, John Dominic Crossan and the late Robert Funk. For example, embedded right in the middle of one of the prayer phrases fairly attributed to Jesus, (and which were all eventually gathered together on the implicit model of the Judean/Galilean liturgical *Kaddish* to make the so-called Lord’s Prayer) is the phrase, “Forgive us our debts, as we *herewith* forgive our debtors.” (for this necessary translation of the received Greek, cf. *New Testament Theology* Joachim Jeremias, as well as the commentary on the passage –Matt. 6: 13 and Luke 11:4a--Funk/Hoover’s translation of the Five Gospels.)

The modern spiritualized translation, *sins*, (which already appears with Luke’s Greek version of the prayer,) and even the alternate English translation, *trespasses*, do not convey very well the hard-nose banking sense of the original Greek word, *opheliema*, which clearly refers to real monetary debts. By insisting on the clause “as we *herewith* forgive our debtors” the prayer hits the nail on the head by avoiding blame and opting for complete inclusion. It calls the poor to recognize themselves not as mere *victims* of those evil “haves” dominating the economic system of the day, but as part of the larger and more just economic system of G-d as proclaimed by the Torah, and which Jesus summed up in his famous political/spiritual phrase “*ho basileon ton theon*” “The Rule of G-d, or G-d’s Empire.” The poor peasants too had to forgive debts owed them, if the net of the Torah was to hold all the fish in the sea without breaking. In Matthew 18, you’ll find a story where Jesus illustrates this idea by speaking of a slave who was forgiven a debt equal to a few million dollars by a wealthy lender, but who then throttled another poor fellow for not paying back a mere hundred bucks promptly. No, said Jesus, to prevent the cheap escape of “woe is me” victimization, the Torah economic plan has to embrace everyone equally.

Now, as we moderns can probably easily imagine, people knowing about such a Torah provision would naturally worry about getting through the extra sabbatical year

at the time of the great Jubilee. “What are we going to eat?” they would naturally ask. “What are we going to wear?” Jesus counseled them not to fret. “Can any of you, by just fretting about it, add an hour to your lifespan?” (cf Matthew 6ff) Then Jesus reminded them of what the Torah suggested they would eat...wild things: the herbs of the field, the wild fowl. “Do not worry about what you shall eat and what you shall wear. The wild flowers do not sow or reap, do they? The wild birds don’t worry about what they are going to wear, do they?” (Luke 12:22-25) I can only guess that the implied call to a wilderness menu in the Torah’s demand for economic equalization may have originally been an attempt to help the then urbanized people to remember their mythic wandering roots in the wilderness of Tzin, and to focus again on the largess of G-d, (natural abundance...quail and tamarisk droppings, also known as *manna* –Aramaic for “what’s this?”) rather than their own farming skills.

On the other hand, Jesus rightly guessed, those who were *not* worried about what they were going to eat and drink because they had plenty in their larders would probably...and quite naturally...grow resentful and fearful as the Great Day of Reversal...G-d’s Rule, G-d’s Empire, spread across the earth. Some of them may have tried to find loopholes in the Torah, such as the famous *Qorban* (Mark 7:11.) The *Qorban* allowed that saved-up money dedicated to one’s parents or other family, could, during a time of crisis...or the Jubilee...be set apart as an offering to the Temple instead, thus making the strict keeping the Jubilee much more difficult. Because Jesus’ attitude toward his mother and family members in general doesn’t appear to have been particularly supportive, the present text mentioning the *Qorban* in Mark (and its parallel in Matthew) may have been created in their present form by gospel authors to reflect later conflicts between the post-70 CE followers of Jesus, and the rabbinical founders of modern day Judaism, which are often lambasted in the gospels as the "damnable" Pharisees. But nevertheless, it is true that such loopholes existed in the days of Jesus. And loopholes like that always seemed to benefit the centralized and collaborationist power-base of the Temple’s ranking priestly clans.

It was this systemic and institutionalized benefit to the Temple power-base which clearly contributed to Jesus’ prophetic, cold, and slow-motion act of overturning the tables of the money-changers in the Court of the Gentiles not long before his death. The tales of his trial, though largely novelistic/polemical in their present form, do still report the powerful accusation that Jesus actually spoke of “tearing down” the temple. Because the gospel writers’ placing of this accusation suggest that it was embarrassing to them, I’d say that Jesus at the very least preached that the oppressive Temple set-up of his day got more in the way of the Torah’s spirit than it fulfilled it. In this he may have self-consciously modeled himself on the prophet Yerimiyahu. The present gospels place a critical quotation from Yerimiyahu on the lips of Jesus when he is acting in the Temple, the famous reference to “den of thieves” or “robbers’ cave.” In Yerimiyahu, the Eternal speaking through the prophet, identifies

the crimes of these “thieves” as “injustice between people, and oppression of foreigners, widows and orphans,” precisely those most affected by the debt and taxing system centered in the Temple. And right after the passage about “thieves” in Yerimiyahu, the Eternal promises to demolish the present Temple utterly, the Temple in which the upper class “rest their confidence.” The prophet then underscores the threat, by reminding the people of the former Temple, the one at Shiloh, which crumbled into ruin. (Yerimiyahu/Jeremiah 7.) Because of these compelling connections, I have little problem, therefore, thinking of the reported Temple incident as generally historical. But I have to interpret his act against the temple as a typical, *but quite non-violent*, symbolic/ prophetic act, the well-planned and typical street-theater act beloved of the Hebrew prophets, like Isaiah dramatically taking off his clothes, or Jeremiah shattering an empty pot. Jesus’ act was not to “cleanse” the temple of those cheating money-changers, as I have too often heard modern traditionalist Christian preachers suggest. This strikes me as an all too typical anti-Semitic interpretation, you know, sweet Jesus meek and mild had a sudden righteous tantrum because of “those Jews” and their devilish greed for ill-gotten gain, which features as one of the most characteristic Christian calumnies against the Jewish people for the last 1000 years at least. But rather, the story, *as written*, describes no tantrum, but rather a prophetic call to undo the centralized power base and collaborationist institution which the Temple had become, especially under the leadership of the Hanan clan, represented in the Gospels by Yusuf Kaiapha. And instead, Jesus issued, quite literally, an enacted jeremiad (Yerimiyahu 7:11) calling the people back to the authentic purpose of the Temple site: prayer. Prayer for *all nations*, including, it seems clear, the colonial enemies, always peering over the courtyards from the high vantage of Marcus Antonius’ Barracks at the corner of the north-east corner of the Temple enclosure. (The tables of the money-changers completed a stone fence which kept “the uncircumcised” from the cultic worship center by signs threatening death to those who crossed the line. Thus, the wall had to be breached...in the only way possible.) The gold-roofed Temple for Jesus was not to be just a cultic shrine for Judeans, Galilean and Hellenistic/Hebraic pilgrims, but a place of peace, safety and devotion *for all*. If not at *least* that, why allow it to stand?

Now, because Jesus, as an itinerant peasant artisan, was apparently street-smart enough to know that Torah Jubilee provisions would likely spark deep resistance, he told many stories that address the crippling passion of resentment.

One of the most famous of these is the story of the two sons, (Luke 12:15) where, when the prodigal returns after having squandered the family fortune, the other son, who stayed at home is resentful and angry that he has been doing all the work while his brother has been jerking around. The poor who would benefit from the sabbatical and Jubilee provisions must have often been told, (indeed, as they are often told today for other reasons) they were simply not hardworking enough, and were just wasting

their lives on useless frivolity and drinking (drugs, we'd stress today) instead of good honest hard work. (And of course, Jesus himself, a member of the poorest working class, was accused of being exactly one of those fool reprobates..." There goes that pig and wino, a crony of tax-collectors and other apostates." (Luke 7:34)

And in the disturbing story of the laborers in the vineyard, (Matthew 20) the raw passions evoked by the Jubilee are plainly evident in the harsh resentment of the laborers who have worked all day, only to get paid the same amount as the people who worked just a couple of hours. "It's not fair," they are saying in effect to the unscrupulous plantation owner who hired them. "Our family invested well for all this money... for generations, no less. What do you mean we end up getting the same as all these Johnny-come-lately poor people?"

The 8th century BCE prophets did not just deal with Torah provisions for economic justice, they lived in a very political and war-torn world. (How useful the French proverb "The more things change, the more they stay the same!") They expressed themselves strongly on that topic of war too, strongly warning those living in denial of the inevitability of the warfare, and its close ties to economic inequities they permitted. The prophets knew the vast empires of the day, Hatti, Assur and Khemet (Egypt) chose the Galilee, Samaria and Judah, for understandable geographic reasons, as the battlegrounds where they might fight their savage international conflicts. ("The more things change, etc.") The peasant artisan, Jesus, too, standing in the line of Hebrew prophets (whether consciously or not,) spoke out about war. Especially in his case, the *purveyors* of war. For example, he apparently lambasted Herod Antipas as "that fox." (Luke 13:32)

Why? The gospel writers, composing their take on history only a few decades after Nero Caesar's court cruelties had debased tales of royal families for good, tell the lurid story, based on an oft-told Roman legendary history, (cf Crossan) of a young Lolita who danced for a drooling king at his birthday party, causing him to execute a popular wild-brand named Yohanan who had openly criticized the Herodian dynasty out on the southern banks of the Jordan River.

But it seems a lot more likely that Herod Antipas was a devious "fox" because of his disastrous war, which Yohanan the Baptizer had already been criticizing, thus earning him a death sentence. (This death, despite the gospels' clear testimony, may have actually occurred slightly after the death of Jesus, and not before. The dating remains ambiguous.) Antipas, you see, had helped tax the people of the Galilee into the poverty Jesus was trying to address for two reasons. 1. To build two urban monuments to his own ego, the Hellenized armory-city, Sepphoris, and the extravagant resort town Tiberius, and 2. to support his futile war efforts against the King of Arabia (Nabatea), Harith IV. (Harith is actually mentioned in the Book of

Acts, but in the Hellenized form of Aretas.) Why did Harith declare war against Antipas, a war Antipas had to fight? Because Antipas had divorced his wife of many years (who just happened to be the daughter of Harith IV,) so he could take up a more satisfying political liaison with Herodias, wife of his half brother, also named Herod (Herodes Phillipos.) Because Herodias was Hasmonaean royalty, there were political motivations for this marriage, and if John criticized it, it would not have made Antipas happy at all...not on “moral” grounds, but on political grounds. His marital choice, (as well as two minor territorial disputes) plunged The Galilee and Perea (Antipas’ quarter-kingdom or *tetrarchy*) into the misery of wartime. The people were saddled with the taxes...and the losses. (cf. John Dominic Crossan’s *The Historical Jesus*.)

Jesus was probably referring to this war and its taxes in the odd pericope of Luke 14: 31-32, where he asks “And what king would go to war against another king, who did not first sit down and figure out whether he would be able, with a mere 10,000 soldiers, to fight off an enemy coming at him with over 20,000?” For Antipas, you see, lost the war completely, and his ill-prepared troops were wiped out. This, the well-known contemporary historian Josephus confirms, telling us that many Judeans were, in fact, convinced that Antipas lost the war *precisely* because he *had* executed John the Baptist at Machaerus, located in one of the very territories, sadly, whose ownership Antipas disputed with Harith.

The Galileans were also saddled with the torment of what we would now call “*eminent domain*,” and other acts of confiscation which high taxes created. Antipas used these outrageous taxes to maintain the new urbanized economy created by him at the same time he fought his war. The Galilee was once...even during the childhood of Jesus... a fertile agrarian area, with small family farms dividing up the landscape like a quilt, and with general prosperity, especially around the lake, where commercial fishing industries supplied even the table of Tiberius himself with salt-dried tilapia. But, when Jesus was a teenager, Antipas started construction of a brand new city by the lake and close to the nearby hot-springs, Tiberias (the only new city built within the whole Roman Empire in the First Century.) And only some 30 kilometers away, with its high walls, notable acropolis and Greek theater, was Sepphoris, which Antipas enlarged and Hellenized. Sepphoris, in fact, was only a relatively short walk from Nazareth, Jesus’ tiny home village. And if Jesus was indeed the *tekton* the Gospel of Mark says he is, that is, a “builder, framer, or stonemason,” he may certainly have plied his trade in Sepphoris, since the call for the building trades was hardly great in a mere hamlet of 30 families, and most peasants called “*tekton*” were itinerant, not settled. Both of these huge new cities benefited from all the taxes, & by the conniving confiscation of small family farms to be consolidated into great market-farms, which were planted to serve the food-needs of these huge cities. So once prosperous Galilean citizens were reduced to poverty

within just a few years, and a short time later, to destitution. Many became debt slaves. Some ended up living on the cash earned from banditry, or other forms of desperate trickery. So Jesus, imagining the benefits of the Jubilee on such corruption, begins to preach “How fortunate are those who are destitute now...for G-d’s Empire is for them.” (Luke 6: 20 /Q)

Then Jesus uplifts the injustices in the social world of his day by such images as can be found in the strange folk-tale of Lazarus and “Dives” (Luke 16: 19ff) being divided by a “ wide gulf. ” (The gulf between rich and poor has not diminished much in two thousand years.) And the need for “street-smarts” and “hustling” to live in such a world is well expressed in Jesus’ strange story found in the same 16th chapter of Luke, the one about the accountant who tried to maintain his family by embezzling, and when caught, simply found another way to cheat. The people who heard this story must have nodded or even laughed, since it well described the absurd predicaments of many of their friends...or in their own lives. (For more study of the agrarian, economic and changing fortunes of the territory of The Galilee, read *Excavating Jesus* by Crossan/Reed and *Archeology and the Galilean Jesus* by Jonathan Reed. Hendrick’s new book on the Politics of Jesus also does a good job of articulating this economic horror story.)

But, among those in need, many were simply too hungry to be clever. To these the Hebrew prophet Jesus added the beatitude “How fortunate are the famished!” ” In other words, Jesus was upholding the promise of a complete reversal of fortune rooted in the Jubilee. Tears would turn into laughter; hunger would turn into fulfillment.

There will be a lot of resistance to this vision of justice for all, Jesus is saying, but we can do it. Like the woman described in the parable in Luke 18, who begged and begged an unjust judge to favor her case. Eventually, he just gave in, if for no better reason than she wore him to a frazzle.

Jesus does not seem to condemn her technique. The good news, he said, (prefiguring Gandhi) is that your opponent does not have to be just in order for you to get justice from him or her. Despair, believing that your enemy has all the power and that you have none, is not an option. Justice is not won by those who have demoted themselves to victims, but by those who enter the fray as equals in the spirit and demand justice.

He sums up this teaching in his brilliant scold “Love your enemies!” i.e. the Romans. This was a message few fully appreciated until the times of Gandhi, Dolci or King.

The prophet Jesus rooted his vision of equality lifted in the Torah which he saw as sufficient, like the prophets before him, (especially his beloved Jeremiah, who used

the teaching of the Torah as the sure authority and ground for his own critiques of the powers of his era.) The five loaves, i.e. the five books of the Torah, are enough, Jesus said, to feed everyone, just like the five smooth stones of David were enough to fell the malicious giant. (However, well-told stories being multi-layered, note that the twin feeding stories in both Matthew and Mark also serve to mock the self-proclaimed authority of the "12 apostles" --only 12 baskets of *crumbs* are left over. And also the famous 7 deacons are mocked in a similar manner...after the seven loaves of the Noachite Laws, the Torah of the Gentiles, are broken, only seven baskets of *crumbs* are left...which is not high praise for the authority of the deaconate. Furthermore, the Johanne feeding story says that Passover was near, suggesting that actually feeding the hungry is the new concrete form of the ancient liberation story.)

But, insists Yeshu ha-Navi, Jesus the prophet, WE are the ones who have to accomplish the work of the prophets in our own day. We are not simply to go about building new and fancier monuments to them. (Luke 17:47) For those who stone the prophets eventually raise monuments to them, if only to assuage their guilt and dismiss their own accountability.

The work of the prophets has to do with turning the world upside-down, and restoring some economic equity at the welcome table, both justice and justness. By taking on students in such number, Jesus was clearly suggesting that the work of the prophets has to be our present work to complete too. And, like King Jr. who was a prophet long after him, Jesus insisted on dealing with the inequities of society without violence, and with compassion fused to cold anger, calling for honest community building before ritual relationship. And like the prophets before him, Jesus used symbolic events and stories to convey the truth, so that the people might come together in joined strength before daring to confront the powers keeping all privilege to themselves. The truth which the typical peasant resister, Jesus, was trying to convey, a truth rooted deep in the Torah, was an *economic* spiritual truth, and it's put most simply in his aphorism: "You cannot serve both God and mammon," or in modern English, "your investments." (Luke 16:13.) Mammon is *mamonas* in Aramaic. Contrary to blather offered in some Sunday schools, Mammon was never some ancient devil deity, but rather, a rich word rooted in the same meaning cluster that gives us the Hebrew/Aramaic word Amen. It means something like a cross between *wealth, profits, trust fund, investment property* in Aramaic) cf. Douglas E. Oakman The Radical Jesus in Biblical Theology Bulletin, Fall of 2004) And I described the son of Mary as a "typical" peasant resister because of the remarkable work of James C. Scott in his 1992 book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* where he documents over a thousand years of similar resistance movements against unfair and corrupt peasant taxation.

The death of the Galilean peasant Yesu' bar Maryam sometime in the later tenure of Pontius Pilatus, the Praefectus Iudaea, (26-36 CE) is rife with social and economic strata at its core: there's the accusation that Jesus wanted the political/financial/collaborationist Temple of the day torn down, and perhaps replaced with something wiser and more Torah based. There is the snappy question and answer session about taxation and Caesar in which Jesus scores a bulls-eye against the collaborationist approach. And there is the very sarcastic *titulus* which hung around his neck as he bore the beam of his cross to the quarry at the crossroads where the stakes were fixed: it read, according to all four gospels "ho basileus ton ioudaion" which translates "The Judean Emperor," a clearly political charge. And one, it seems reasonable to assume, which was based on the reported substance of his teaching about the Empire of G-d being a just contrast with the unjust Empire of Caesar, the Roman Son of God and Savior. The later theology of Christendom, translating his cruel death into a neo-Maccabean martyrdom on behalf of others, begins to feel almost desperate to me, an end-run around the demand for economic justice here on earth, and not after death in some other realm where there is neither vine, or fig tree with shade, under which one might keep a lovely sabbatical rest. And even the ancient radical Christian snub "Jesus is Lord," i.e. "Jesus is the *Real* Emperor," has now become a post-Nicene bumper-sticker that utterly guts the political forcefulness of those words. It reduces the phrase into a baffling affirmation which confuses the son of Mary with the capricious and often rather petty Fate-like God of the neo-Calvinism which dominates conservative religious culture in this our modern United States.

No, the life of Jesus was far more a political and economic protest and call to resistance than it was a reformation of Hebrew theology. When he called for people to give up their undergarments as well as their cloak to the tax-man, leaving them naked in the streets, he was preaching resistance, not meekness. When he suggested walking an extra mile with the soldier who press-gangs you, a soldier who's own military law allows him the privilege of only enforcing one mile, he was preaching resistance, not meekness. And when he says "When anyone (i.e. a soldier or owner) slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other as well!" he is not preaching submission... shame on those who preach that!... but a clear demand for everyone to be treated equally and justly, regardless of station, class, or wealth, and not merely back-handed like a slave or private. (cf. *The Powers That Be*/Walter Wink; & *the Politics of Jesus*/Hendriks)

The call to equality of opportunity is the work of a prophet. The criticism of economic systems of taxation and warfare that create a split-level society is the work of a prophet. The demand to dismantle the powers that oppress is the work of a prophet. A traditional Hebrew prophet.

Thus, I maintain that the son of Maryam of Nazareth, after first doffing my hat to his ordinary human life of loving and learning and very real mortality, is best understood, via the light of critically-understood received scriptures, and modern sociological analysis of the ancient world, as a Hebrew prophet. And this, whether he actually used that word of himself or no.

And in conclusion, since I first gave this paper to clergy gathered to study economic social justice work through a biblical lens, I affirm the call to continue this same prophetic work in our own day. This, whether we count ourselves as children of the Hebrew tradition or not. This, whether we make mistakes and stumble in that work or not. This, even though we too love, learn and are mortal. Our work too, I believe, is to undo our resentment against the powers that be, moving from social justice as charity to social justice as the deliberate dismantling of the machinery of social injustice and therefore, to unleash our work for a world more just.