

Jesus' Axial Critique of Mimetic Scapegoating

1. In an earlier video I explored how the life and teachings of Socrates can be understood in terms of a shift from oral and scribal to axial literate culture. In this video I look at how that same dynamic can shed light on the life and teachings of Jesus, especially his criticism of mimetic scapegoating characteristic of monarchical archaic religion.
2. Unlike Socrates, Jesus was likely not literate himself. As the son of a *technon*, traditionally translated as “carpenter” but literally referring to anyone in the construction trades, Jesus would have spent his young adult life before his baptism as a day laborer, (1) perhaps walking to work with his father to Sephoris, a new Hellenistic city being built by Herod at the time, five miles from Nazareth.
3. As we know from Jesus own stories, the life of a day laborer was at a subsistence level. A day’s earnings, one denarius, sufficed for a day’s food. Days one did not find work could be days one might not eat. Hence the line in Jesus prayer to his Father, to give us our daily bread. This also can shed fresh light on the parable of the vineyard. In paying those hired late in the day a full day’s wage, he was ensuring that they could eat that evening. On the other hand, the complaints of those hired earlier, express resentment that those hired later will also sleep on a full stomach despite having worked only a short time. As a day laborer himself, its not surprising whose side Jesus is on. The master of the vineyard is not being unfair, he is not really even being particularly generous, he is simply applying the golden rule.
4. Given his social location, the only way Jesus would have learned to read, and the only place where he would have had access to scrolls *to* read would have been in the local synagogue. However his learning to read for his Bar-mitzvah would have been merely ceremonial. The passages he would read aloud, were passages he was already very familiar with, the letters serving more as memory aids than communicating anything that Jesus did not already know. And, of course, he did not write anything down himself, while surely he would have wanted his teachings to be remembered after him. Indeed those who could read and write, the scribes, the temple priests and the Pharisees are always depicted as enemies of his Gospel.
5. Jesus teachings *were* written down, but only after his death, indeed only after the death of his immediate followers. They were written down to preserve oral memory. And so

the Gospels are not literate teachings or even literate history, but preservations of oral teachings, parables and aphorisms, as well as oral stories-- dramatic, evocative, wondrous stories of healings and exorcisms, as well as heated confrontations with the literate scribes, priests and Pharisees. Christianity is founded as a challenge not a champion of scribal culture.

6. Actually of course, its more complicated than that. While an oral prophet addressing an oral populace, Jesus was himself most influenced by those prophets of both Northern and Southern Kingdoms, Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah who *were* literate and *had* written down their prophesies condemning social scapegoating and mimetic sacrifice at both Bethel and Jerusalem. He was also steeped in the teachings of the Deuteronomic temple scribes who had sought to purify the Temple cult in the reign of Josiah and, a century later, to restore it after the Babylonian exile. This scribal school taught an axial inseparability of the love of God and love of neighbor. When Jesus himself is asked by a scribe, steeped in the law, for its highest commandment, he responds similarly: love of God and love of neighbor, Jesus answers the scribe, sums up both the Law and the Prophets.
7. Thus the teachings of Jesus, like those of Socrates, presents us with a hybrid between oral and literate sensibilities. Just as Socrates had favored lively dialogue over a mute text, Jesus proclaims the oral values of communal interdependence, and reciprocal recognition. Yet, he would also share Socrates' distrust of oral culture's honor/shame morality and its uncritical faith in public appearance. Also in common with Socrates and characteristic of axial literacy, Jesus locates the sacred less in outer public ritual than in "hidden" interior piety. We are not made for the Sabbath, the Sabbath is made for us. Social position or external circumstances such as illness or poverty do not make anyone either clean or unclean, its one's interior life that matters. The priests and scribes who oppose and will ultimately kill him, are "whitened sepulchers" beautiful on the outside but rotten within. God is still the august, almighty King, but he is even more the intimate, loving "*Abba*."
8. The logic of oral culture also sheds a telling light on Jesus teaching. He uses parables not to obscure his teachings (as Mark suspects) but precisely to make them accessible and memorable to his unlettered audience. Their characters are memorable, not by virtue of being gods and heroes but for being iconic stereotypes, confronting iconic, common

problems that his audience can readily identify with. So too, their endings subvert archaic cultural expectations by inverting its honor/shame logic. It's the last who will be first, its he who dies to self who will be saved, he who would be master, must be the slave of all.

9. Further axial in character is Jesus' scathing critique of the mimetic desire characteristic of scribal culture's urban, "civilized" life and the mimetic violence it spawns. He called upon his audience and followers to resist the temptation to imitate the desires of others for worldly goods. Rather than seek to accumulate wealth, we should give away what we do not really need to those who do. So too Jesus makes an axial call to transcend tribal boundaries and embrace the stranger. For Jesus, a meaningful life is not something we have to compete for. We need only have eyes that can see, and ears that can hear, to live lives that are holy because we live them in service to all of God's children.
10. Particularly significant is his radicalization of the prophetic critique of mimetic religious sacrifice. The prophet Hosea proclaims that God desires mercy, not sacrifice; personal familiarity with him, over burnt offerings. (Hos 6:6). Jesus takes this one step further: he identifies with the victim of mimetic sacrifice. Rather than joining in the shaming, shunning, exiling and execution of scapegoats, Jesus proclaims them blessed, children of God. He proclaims that those on the margins of society, those looked down on as poor and those dismissed as possessed, those shunned as sick and those condemned as sinners, that they are closer to God, than those reputed to be blessed due to their social reputation, social power and economic wealth.
11. Jesus (1) calls us not (2) to avenge the victims of violence by (3) imitating the violence of the perpetrators, (4,5,6) but to mimetically take on the (7) suffering of the victim. Compassion, suffering with those who suffer, turns our attention from the perpetrator towards the victim, evoking not righteous rage but (8) feelings of solidarity and (9) acts of generosity. In this way mimetic suffering does not merely restore what social order was present before the offense but builds greater social solidarity in its wake, thereby building an even better society. (10) Evil is less punished than redeemed, creating a space not only for mercy towards victims, but (11) even forgiveness for the perpetrators of evil. Society is less cleansed than healed, the marginal not shunned but embraced by those in the mainstream. The social order becomes sacred to yet more of its members,

and society is transformed into an ever closer imitation of its ideal, (12) a truly just kingdom, the Kingdom of God.

12. I wonder whether Jesus' preferential option for his society's scapegoats may also have been due in part to his own having lived the life of a social scapegoat. I have already alluded to his poor, low class roots. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" asks one he invites to follow him. But the very story of his birth suggests an even greater public shame. (1) Two of the four Gospels report that Mary, his mother, became pregnant with Jesus before her marriage to Joseph. Now we are assured that God himself is the Father of Jesus, and that an angel was sent to Joseph to reassure him that Mary had not shamed him by being unfaithful. But we hear nothing of angels rushing off to inform all of the young couple's family and neighbors. Everyone in Nazareth would have known that Jesus was born too early.
13. And so growing up in a small rural village, everyone would have taken him to be illegitimate, and perhaps then have treated him as unclean, a scapegoat. We have the shocked reaction when Jesus announces his mission at his local synagogue. Is this not Mary's son? Is he not the son of the construction worker? (1) They turn against him, immediately expel him from the synagogue for his shameless identification of himself as the long prophesied Messiah, some even going so far as to seek to stone him then and there.
14. I suggest, then, that Jesus' opposition to mimetic scapegoating was personal. He knew only too well what it was like to be scapegoated. He proclaimed a new Israel, an anti-Israel, one might say, peopled by all the scapegoats of Jewish society—the hungry and the thirsty, the stranger and the sick, those possessed and the dispossessed, the imprisoned.
15. His mission would culminate in a dramatic prophetic act, condemning the temple itself as unclean, whose commerce in sacrificial animals and money, changing profane for sacred, temple coin, had turned God's temple into a noisy bazaar, Jeremiah's "den of thieves."
16. I suggest that Jesus' point was precisely to force his arrest. Being brought before the high priest Jesus could speak truth to power, and call upon the religious authorities to repent and confess that the Kingdom of God is indeed at hand in the movement he had instigated. However the response of the high priest was not to rend his garments in

contrition, but to rend them in outrage. It was not the money changers, but Jesus who had desecrated the temple. And so Jesus ends up executed, shamed, brought down to nothing. His followers would soon turn the death of Jesus on its head. He was indeed a sacrificial scapegoat, but a scapegoat in the line of Isaiah's suffering servant, who took upon himself the sins of his people only to restore their communion with God. (1) They will invoke Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb of God, (2) whose blood washes them clean.

17. They even create a new sacred ritual to symbolically re-enact the sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus sacrifice, they proclaim, is the "last" sacrifice, for it is an "eternal" sacrifice that restores humanity's connection to the sacred. In the Eucharist at the moment of consecration the priest presiding "in the person of Christ" proclaims the raised bread to be his very body; the wine, his very blood, ritually re-enacting Jesus' sacrifice to put an end to all mimetic sacrifice of vulnerable scapegoats, all those least who are in truth the greatest in the Kingdom of God.