
Alan Storkey’s book, Jesus and Politics, contains a plethora of historical data beginning with Herod the Great and ending with a chapter entitled, “Resurrection Politics.” This book, then, is a valuable resource detailing the cultural background to Jesus’ life and ministry by combining the data of Josephus with incidents from the New Testament. Procedurally, Storkey follows an outline of the life of Jesus and comments on Jesus’ relationship to the various political entities of his day. The middle of the book withdraws from this historical perspective and dishes up the meat of what a Christian political system should look like. These three chapters, “The Government of God,” “Jesus’ Political Principles,” and “Jesus’ Statecraft” can be read by themselves with benefit.

Because Storkey believes that Christians have retreated from politics and that the secular powers want to exclude Christianity from politics (298), he purposefully illustrates how every religious group portrayed in the New Testament, including Jesus and his disciples are “religiopolitical” (30). When reading the New Testament, we must avoid our Western cultural assumptions of the separation of politics and faith (37). Storkey demonstrates effectively that almost every action of Jesus can be interpreted politically. His birth challenged the security of Herod the Great’s kingship. After his baptism, the temptations Jesus faced have political consequences (77). The recognition of the government of God is Jesus’ central message (chapter 6). His teaching emphasizes service rather than the possession of power as an alternative way of approaching office (78). Jesus’ healing miracles demonstrate that “health and healing need to be a concern of the state” (81). The feeding of the five thousand with its focus on men and the regimentation into groups of fifty and one hundred proves that this incident was seen by the authorities as a potential uprising in the great Galilean Zealot tradition (86). Jesus as Messiah (98) will “bring down rulers” (Luke 1:52) and “rescue us from the hand of our enemies” (Luke 1:74). Against the apolitical interpretation of discipleship often adopted today, the disciples actually do see their position in political terms jockeying for position in Jesus’ cabinet (85). Jesus’ triumphal entry, the title of “King of the Jews,” the release of a revolutionary at his trial, and the death on a cross, more typical of Zealots, demonstrate that his kingdom challenged the governments of this world. Finally, Jesus’ resurrection and victory is “the political fulcrum of all of history” (280). Storkey certainly establishes the premise that Christians cannot read the New Testament with apolitical glasses.
Storkey points out in the introduction that Christianity has been curiously described by some as acquiescent to the civil powers while others claim that Christianity completely subverts the world order. Which model fits the narrative of the New Testament? Likewise, “Jesus has been portrayed as a revolutionary, an independence fighter, a socialist, or a conservative” (9). Which is correct? Storkey concludes that Jesus is a prophetic Messiah who avoids the Zealot revolutionary option but at the same time refuses to support the political establishment. Jesus was neither nationalistic (Pharisees), establishment oriented (Sadducees), revolutionary (Zealots), or withdrawn (Essenes). Jesus “stands independent of the political culture of his day, proclaiming another way” (54). The best metaphor or model seems to be the prophetic and eschatological. “Jesus’ actions do not seem to direct political events” nor is his “impact on world politics great” (113). The government of God “changes politics by conviction rather than control” (114). It establishes principles on how to rule and changes the character of rulers. It calls human government to be accountable to a higher power (118) and subverts all unjust institutions under the sovereignty of God (119). Storkey continually points out that “the agents of change are traditionally seen as conquest, technology, class dynamics, leadership, or political vision,” but the real change “is in the hearts and lives of those who willingly submit to God’s gentle way” (281). He emphasizes the motivation and worldview of the Christian community. The Christian political response “is not merely concerned with ethics” but “is fully political in its inner patterns of obedience and vision, shaped in Christian faith and principles.” This is certainly true, but I am not sure how helpful it is in creating a concrete Christian political strategy. Storkey does offer a whole list of exemplary leaders (284), but, interestingly, Jimmy Carter has made the list but not George W. Bush (184).

If the reader is seeking a book that converses with the various proposals of the academic community and employs their methodology, reading this book will be a disappointment. Storkey does not debate with the scholarly community over the interpretation of various events such as the Messianic Secret or Jesus’ self-identity as the Messiah (chapter 5). The book is written for educated laity. Furthermore, Storkey has a naïve understanding of hermeneutics, assuming that the gospel writers are reporting history “on a par with the idioms of newspapers” (292) and the disciples were “mere note-takers” (293). Rather than speaking of a Synoptic Problem, Storkey employs the phrase Synoptic Bonus (294) because the various gospel writers have interviewed different individuals to add to the variety in their stories. Storkey does not employ source criticism or attempt to discern the evangelist’s theology, apologetic, or redaction. This can be problematic in his interpretation of the gospel of John as well because he assumes for instance from John 2 that Jesus, early in his ministry, cleansed the temple to which he ties the coming of Nicodemus (48), but the connection of these events are certainly thematic rather than chronological. Certainly this methodology has some advantages. It recognizes that the focus of New Testament studies should not be authorial, but focus on the subject mat-
ter and real teacher, Jesus (293). Additionally, it concentrates on how the Scriptures can interpret us (291) rather than the exegete making historical judgments about the veracity of the text. Still, I doubt if the scholarly community will be influenced by this book; Storkey does not employ the common methods of exegesis such as redaction criticism.

This does not mean that Storkey arrives at wrong conclusions. The only detail of his historical analysis that I doubted was his connection of Judas the Galilean and Saddock the Pharisee (the Zealot movement) with Herod the Great’s death in 4 A.D. rather than with the census revolt of 6 (53). Did Storkey come to this conclusion because he does not want to deal with the historicity of the census portrayed in Luke 2? Unfortunately, it is difficult at times to determine where Storkey jumps from historical facts to opinion. He states that three astrologers visited Herod the Great before he killed perhaps twenty to forty infants (twenty three all speculation) in the same manner he describes the building projects and the violent acts of Herod as gathered from Josephus. At times, he writes devotionally, offering sermonic points on how Jesus is a different type of king for his people than Herod the Great (24-25), while most often he concentrates on disclosing the historical “facts.”

Some additional features that would improve the quality of this book include a chart of Herod’s complicated family and an index with relevant scriptural passages. Furthermore, I would have appreciated Storkey’s facing some of the controversial issues upon which contemporary Christians differ such as the just war theory (141f, 157) or an extended evaluation of the Constantinian change, neither of which find an entry in the index. Omitting these debates of interpretation results in Storkey’s book being applicable and edifying to many different traditions, but fails to educate the reader on the complicatedness and history of interpretation of these issues.

—Dean Deppe