

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Two Kingdoms, One Table—Jesus in Political Perspective

In the first century of the Common Era, two kingdoms were associated with Jesus of Nazareth.¹ Historically, he had proclaimed the Kingdom of God; to his followers posthumously, he would come into his own kingdom, the eternal kingdom of Jesus Christ. These two kingdoms had very different significance in regard to the meaning of Jesus' own historical activity and, later, in relationship to the political ethos of Christianity.

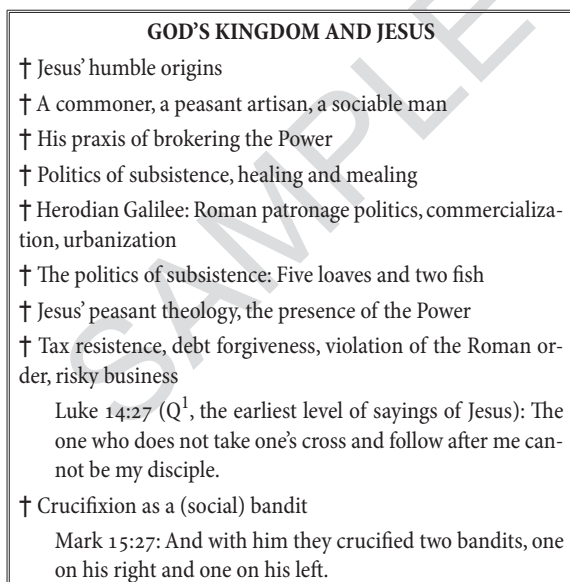
Imagine with me a triptych, that is, a three-paneled depiction of Jesus and his significance. This type of art often appears in churches; it sometimes hangs in university libraries or museum galleries. The first panel represented in Fig. 1.1, the one on the right under the aspect of God's Kingdom, presents Jesus' profound care and compassion for those in need, especially those who were sick and without food. The second panel, the one on the left under the aspect of the eternal kingdom of Jesus Christ, shows what happened to his politics in the development of Christianity. Finally, the last panel, the center panel, focuses our attention on his enduring table and political vision.

1. This chapter originated as a lecture: first delivered for a Lutheran Studies Conference "What Has God to Do With Caesar? Lutheran Perspectives on Political Life," Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Washington, 2012, then given as an Edgar Goodspeed Endowed Lecture, Denison University, Granville, Ohio, March 2014.

Panel One

So, panel one. Jesus was born during the earliest years of the Roman Principate, during the reign of the first Roman emperor Caesar Augustus (27 BCE—14 CE) and toward the end of the reign of the Roman client ruler Herod the Great (37–4 BCE). Jesus came into an agrarian world stressed by dramatic political changes—notably the integration of provincial areas into the Roman political-economic orbit, with consequent urbanization of eastern provincial areas, increase of patronage politics practiced by Roman elites, and commercialization of agrarian economic relations.

Figure 1.1: PANEL ONE



Critical scholarly argument makes clear that Jesus was likely born in Nazareth of Galilee. Nazareth was a very tiny village, near the Galilean city of Sepphoris. Our earliest witness Paul simply says “born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal 4:4), though Paul says hardly anything about the life of the historical Jesus.² Mark 6 implies that Nazareth was Jesus’ hometown, and Matt 21:11 and John 1:45 so identify him. The Sayings Gospel Q, the earliest substantial collection of material we have about Jesus, says nothing about his origins.

Moreover, Jesus’ peasant birth without secure paternity (the son of Mary! Mark 6:3) and his wanderings as a peasant artisan, indicate his very low social status and honor rating in the eyes of his contemporaries. In fact, the dishonorable origins and dishonorable end of Jesus posed a significant challenge to the apostolic generation and evangelists, who needed to link Jesus solidly to Israelite prophecy, invent genealogies, and write apologetic passion stories in order to rescue Jesus’ social status and honor. Paul shows the problem clearly in Gal 3:13; the Roman cross was a curse upon the memory of Jesus and a political liability for the earliest Christians. Theologically, Paul had to see that Jesus identified completely and wholly with the accursed of the earth, and Paul proclaimed that God had vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. The earliest identification of Jesus as the Christ stands in this vindication of Jesus’ honor by God.

Otherwise, he was a commoner, through and through. And his identification and sympathy with commoners—fishers, farmers, prostitutes, the demon-possessed, social outcasts—seems to have been an expression of his enormous compassion for little people. It was on their behalf that he began a praxis of healing and mealing that would also be an expression of his brokering or mediating of the Power, the Kingdom of God, on behalf of the have-nots. But in order to do this, he became very good at ingratiating himself with those who had, and his parables show his wide-ranging social experience (probably garnered through his travels to where work could be had) and his skill at being invited to meals with the haves. Zacchaeus, though fictional, stands as a typical recollection of both Jesus’ meal-ing and his wealing of “those without,” after Zacchaeus is persuaded to return the take from the farmed taxes.

2. Biblical translations in this volume mostly follow the NRSV; on occasion, the translations are my own.

The “politics of Jesus” in my account, then, have to do centrally with what all peasants worry about—subsistence, daily and annually—and finessing the threats to subsistence. Peasants everywhere work the land and consume its produce. Who is a peasant? One who opens the front door and sees the entire year’s food-supply in the yard and the fields. The harvest will not come easily, and the entire peasant family will participate in the daily and annual work-routines. Surplus adult peasant children, without secure access to their own land, will “hire out” or engage in other productive activities like the building trade or fishing. With preindustrial conditions of production, food storage is a problem and secure subsistence difficult to come by. Natural disasters like drought or pestilence are well known in biblical traditions (e.g., Joel); but equally important were predatory social relations.

Urbanization and commercialization of agrarian relations put much stress upon peasantry: absentee landlords owning large estates drive traditional peasants into tenancy or off the land altogether; commercialization leads to the production of agrarian products that do not serve the peasant family’s daily or annual food needs.

The five loaves and two fish in the gospels are close to the daily subsistence needs of a family.³ Tax collectors abound as elites seek a share in the peasantry’s so-called surplus. Landlords living afar off, controlling large estates, lose touch with the conditions in the villages. Taxes and rents, unable to be paid, lead to paper indebtedness. Subsistence becomes ever-more insecure. It was conditions like these that the political praxis of Jesus came to address. It is conditions like these that are encountered in many of Jesus’ parables, the best evidence we have for Jesus’ political concerns.

Jesus surely participated in the John-the-Baptizer movement for awhile, just how long cannot be said. Without a doubt, Jesus was baptized by John. Yet, the gospels indicate an uneasy relationship between Jesus and the Baptist Movement. I argue that Jesus rejected John’s vision of a Judgmental God and end-of-the world expectation in favor of living in the midst of normal social relations. Jesus’ God was Compassionate and Merciful by contrast. Peasant theology, and Jesus held peasant values close to heart, is immediate and concrete.

3. See Hamel, *Poverty and Charity*, 39.

Jesus went back to his artisan work, traveling to where there was significant building activity—for instance, Sepphoris, Tiberias, Capernaum, Jerusalem, Caesarea Philippi, the Decapolis cities, the Phoenician coastlands. The gospels show this travel as a “religious ministry,” but this is a retrojection. On those travels, Jesus showed himself to be socially gregarious and an excellent networker (again, the parables attest this). He began to “broker” between the haves and the have-nots. We see this praxis mirrored in stories such as the healing of Jairus’s daughter in Mark 5 or Luke’s account of Jesus at dinner with Simon the Pharisee and the woman of the city in Luke 7. Jesus’ self-understanding comes to embrace a notion that brokering the Power of God heals and redistributes the necessities of life. Jesus apparently tied this praxis or brokering activity to meal settings and tables, and associated the liberation story of Israel with this activity—the Passover meal inviting all who are hungry to come and eat. He said, after all (Luke 11:20), “if by the finger of God I cast out the demons [thus alluding to the Exodus], then the Kingdom of God is in your very midst!” His political values moreover came to expression in the second table of his prayer—in the bid for daily bread, debt release, and rescue from courts that served only the creditors.

At some point, Jesus began to promote release of taxes and rents, while eating with tax collectors and those in debt (the “sinners”), under the claim that the Power (the ever-present Kingdom of God) granted rights of eminent domain over the necessary goods of the earth. Active tax-resistance expressed the effective healing and meal that Jesus desired; the story of the so-called Dishonest Manager, held up as exemplary by Jesus, brings this clandestine activity up to the surface. This activity came to the notice of the authorities, probably through informers like Judas Iscariot, and Jesus came to be on the run. He was safe in public places, but when asked about the payment of the Roman tax, he dissembled. The early second-century Roman jurist Julius Paulus indicates the consequences for disturbing the new Roman Order, the Peace of Augustus, or *Pax Romana*: “The authors of sedition and tumult, or those who stir up the people, shall, according to their rank, either be crucified, thrown to wild beasts, or deported to an island.” And even more tellingly “anyone

who counterfeits gold or silver money, or washes, melts, scrapes, spoils, or adulterates any coin bearing the impression of the face of the Emperor, or refuses to accept it, . . . shall, if of superior rank, be deported to an island, and if of inferior station, be sentenced to the mines, or punished capitally. Slaves if manumitted after the crime has been perpetrated, shall be crucified.”⁴

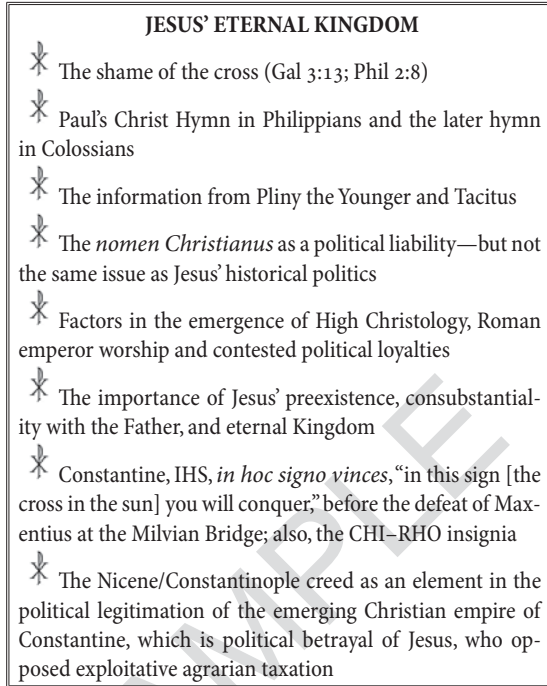
One of the earliest sayings of Jesus reckoned with the dangers of this political brokering praxis, this brokering between haves and have-nots in the name of the Power. In the saying preserved in the Sayings Source Q, which otherwise never mentions Jesus' death, we see the Crux of Jesus' political praxis: Jesus said, “The one who does not take one's cross and follow after me cannot be my disciple.” According to Mark, Jesus was crucified between two bandits. And in the eyes of the elites, he was a thief.

Panel Two

Now we pass to the panel in Fig. 1.2. The shame of the cross has already been mentioned. In a very early hymn, preserved in Paul's Philippian letter, this memory is clearly expressed: “[Jesus] humiliated himself, staying obedient all the way to death, even death on a cross.” This early Christ Hymn is of interest to us now in tracing what became of the memory of Jesus' political praxis in the name of the Power, the Kingdom of God. In short, the early Christian memory suppressed knowledge of Jesus' historical praxis, which in the eyes of the Roman Order led justly to the cross, and replaced that political memory with the dramatic story of Jesus' incarnation, his emptying or *kenōsis*, and after humiliation his exaltation to have his own eternal kingdom. Ironically, this eternal kingdom came to serve the needs of centralized agrarian power and taxation, so that the Constantinian Order of the era of the Nicene and Constantinopolitan Creeds would in one important respect betray the memory of Jesus. How did this come to pass, and how do we know?

4. Julius Paulus, *Opinions* 5.22.1; 5.25.1; see Scott, *The Civil Law*.

Figure 1.2: PANEL TWO



It is useful to compare the Christ Hymn of Paul's day in the Philippian letter, written to a group of Christ-followers in Europe (Macedonia) and surely a reflection of ideas in Syrian Antioch if not Jerusalem, with the later Christ Hymn preserved in Colossians. I take Colossians to be an epistle written in Paul's name to address later circumstances in Asia Minor or ancient Turkey.

Christ Hymn, Philippians 2:5–11 (Europe)	Christ Hymn, Colossians 1:13–20 (Asia Minor)
Christ Jesus who, though he was ① <i>in the image [form] of God</i>, ② <i>did not regard “being like God” [equality with God] as something to be stolen [exploited]</i>, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore ③ <i>God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name [i.e., Kyrios]</i>, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (NRSV modified) ①②③ are missing in this earlier hymn (ca. 55 CE); for Paul, ① Jesus is the New Adam, who is perfectly human as God originally wanted (Gen 1:26–27; 1 Cor 15:21–22, 45–49; Rom 5:15–19; 8:29); ② who did not take the path of Adam (Gen 3:5); ③ and who consequently receives the highest honor in the New Creation. The kingdom remains God's kingdom. See also, 1 Cor 15:3–8, 20–28; Rom 1:3–4.	He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into ③ <i>the kingdom of his beloved Son</i>, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the ① <i>image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.</i> He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For ② <i>in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell</i>, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (NRSV) ①②③ developments in christology (ca. 100 CE): ① John 1:1–3; compare 1 Cor 8:6; 15:20–21; Rev 1:5; ② Col 2:9; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet 1:1; Ignatius Eph. 18:2; ③ Eph 5:5; 2 Tim 4:1, 18; 2 Pet 1:11.
Roman/Apostles' Creed (West, ca. 200 CE)—2d art. ① Preexistence and creative role not mentioned And in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord, ② No mention of consubstantiality with God the Father Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried, on the third day rose again from the dead, ascended to heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, whence He will come to judge the living and the dead ③ No mention of an eternal kingdom of Jesus	Nicene/Constantinopolitan Creed (East, Nicaea 325 CE & Chalcedon 451 CE)—2d art. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, ①② <i>the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into existence</i>, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, ③ <i>of Whose kingdom there will be no end</i>

Creed texts taken from Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*.

These two hymns differ in at least three important respects. First, the Colossian Hymn asserts Jesus' preexistence, "the first-born of all creation" (a phrase that will cause problems for Athanasius and Nicaea) and "in him everything was created." Second, Colossians 1 speaks of "the kingdom of [God's] beloved son." Third, Colossians speaks in two separate places of the "deity that dwells in Jesus Christ bodily" (Col 1:19; 2:9). In the Philippians Hymn, no preexistence is mentioned; Jesus' exalted status is simply that of the New Adam with the "name above every name," that is, *Kyrios* or Lord; and no mention is made of Jesus' kingdom (in fact, 1 Cor 15:20–28 makes it clear that Jesus plays only a brokering role in bringing his own clients into God's eternal kingdom). Interestingly, as we will see in a moment, these three differences also are retained respectively in the European or Roman Apostles' Creed and the Asian or Nicene/Constantinopolitan Creed.

The embarrassment of Jesus' death on a Roman cross was not easily forgotten nor glossed over. The eastern Roman world well knew what Paul did, that this death was the most shameful death the Romans could devise. Not only did it shame the victim, but also the victim's family and friends. The embarrassment began to be papered over, so to speak, in the passion narratives of the New Testament. One need only think about Pilate's washing his hands and the Blood Libel in Matthew's Gospel, or of Luke's centurion declaring Jesus innocent at the foot of the cross, or of Pilate's attempt to release Jesus in the Gospel of John. The Seer John of Revelation believes that Jesus' true followers must also "witness unto death" against Rome if they are loyal to his witness. Loyalty to Jesus means disloyalty to Rome. In the early second century, Pliny the Younger famously writes to the emperor Trajan to ask what to do with Christians who meet in secret over a meal and sing hymns to Christ as to a god (*Epistles* 10.96). This suspicion of the Name also is shown in the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus. Tacitus especially is instructive:

Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but also in the City, where all things hideous and

shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular.⁵

The very name Christian, *nomen Christianus*, was during the second century associated with treason. And loyalty tests, including the burning of incense to the emperor in a sacral context, are attested in the cases of the martyrs Justin and Polycarp. Yet, the *Christiani* are not mentioned as resisting taxation or advocating debt forgiveness. In fact, 1 Peter and the Pastoral Epistles urge giving honor to the authorities, including the emperor, and Rom 13:1–7 (probably inserted into Romans by the editor of Paul's letters toward the end of the first century) admonishes that the authorities be respected and taxes be paid. Also, Matt 17:27 seems to enjoin tax-payment of the *Fiscus Judaicus*, the Jerusalem temple tax that was redirected by Vespasian to the Temple of Jupiter in Rome after the Judean temple destruction in 70 CE!

Our story continues in conjunction with the emergence of Christian creeds. One remarkable development that goes with the political theme has already been adumbrated. Jesus' concern had to do with the Kingdom of God. As Rudolf Bultmann once remarked, after Jesus' lifetime, the Proclaimer became the Proclaimed.⁶ Paul, the Sayings Source Q, and Mark enshrine the earliest understandings of this proclamation. It is entwined with the interpretive apparatus of Judean eschatology—Jesus was understood as the Messiah in service of the arrival of God's final rule on earth. His historical activity was portrayed, as argued by recent Jesus scholarship, as a movement to renew Israel. He calls the Twelve, he is conscious of being the Messiah, he goes to his death in service of the New Age that is coming. The thought worlds of Paul, Q, and Mark (our earliest witnesses to these developments) are all shaped by Judean eschatology, and Jesus in all three significantly will return to judge and claim his own. None of these three mentions where Jesus might have been before his appearance on the historical stage.

This is the predominant mode of interpreting Jesus' theological significance up until the Judean-Roman war of 66–70 CE. A different mode comes into view as voices from the Greco-Roman cities,

5. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.4.

6. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1:33.

notably those standing in the Pauline and Johannine traditions, begin to shape understandings of Jesus in ways more comprehensible to Gentiles or non-Judeans. Notable here will be the clear emergence of the belief that Jesus as God's Son is his only begotten Son, and that Jesus is not merely a human Messiah but now one who shares in the very nature of God and then becomes incarnate.

This development is most evident in the first-century New Testament materials that were shaped in Roman Asia and ancient Turkey. And it is carried in the next few centuries by those—Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus—whose thought about Jesus was significantly shaped by Christianity in Roman Asia. For it is precisely in Roman Asia, around 100 CE, that the Colossian letter and the Gospel of John assert Jesus' preexistence, his role in creation, and his unique status as God's only-begotten Son. Jerome Neyrey has argued that "divinity" in the mind of first-century Christians involved not only the final power to judge the world, but also the primal power to create the world.⁷ In this sense, then, the thought world of the Seer John in Revelation is just making the transition, which is fairly complete in Colossians and John. In Revelation, Jesus' preexistence is not overtly stated, although he is the Alpha and the Omega, but his role in world judgment is clear in chapters 19–20. Moreover, in the hymns sung to God in Revelation 4, God's creative powers are directly mentioned: "Worthy you are, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you did create all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (Rev 4:11).

How, then, did this preexistent creative power come to be associated with Jesus in his post-Easter existence? How did he move from being Paul's New Adam and Lord in the New Creation (the Philippians Christ Hymn) to Jesus Christ the Creator, embodying deity, with his own Eternal Kingdom (the Colossians Christ Hymn)? And how did this play out in the Christian tradition for several centuries until the Constantinian developments? And, to ask the Lutheran question, what do these two kingdoms mean for us?

There are at least two important things to see in the Second Panel before turning our attention finally to the Center Panel. The first important thing is the relationship between Roman imperial

7. Neyrey, "My Lord and My God"; and Neyrey, *Render to God*.

worship, which was very prominent in the cities of Roman Asia, and the development of High Christology; the second important thing to note is the resistance of the early Christian creeds to the deification of Jesus!

While the *mos maiorum* or “moral sense” of traditional Roman society rejected kingship and divine honors for human rulers, Caesar Augustus was quite happy to assume his imperial role as “first among equals” (*primus inter pares*) among the Roman elites, and he was equally happy to allow worship of Rome and even the emperor in the East. An inscription from Priene in Roman Asia (about 9 BCE) famously states:

Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came by reason of him . . .⁸

Caesar's achievements merit him these honors, but it was a close next step for Greeks to sing hymns to him as to a god. We know from inscriptions that the worship of Rome and Caesar was conducted in Pergamum, and in many Asian associations, and that there was a special Choir of the West, that is, West Roman Asia, devoted to the singing of these hymns. Caesar even provided resources to support these choirs, since they were good expressions of loyalty. Religion served imperial politics quite well, thank you!

The hymns we see in Revelation take on added significance in the light of the emperor cult, since the hymns express a contest of loyalties and patrons. It was precisely in this context that the Colossians Christ Hymn was formulated, as well as the familiar words of John 1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word . . . Through the Word all things came to be

8. Translation in Finn.

. . . and the Word became flesh.” Indeed, the Colossian household duties make no mention of respect for political authorities, as do 1 Peter and 1 Timothy. And it is in Col 2:15 that we find the politically resonant statement, Christ “having disarmed the powers and the authorities boldly showed them up, having led them in triumph.” High Christology, in other words, was born out of Christian worship in a context of contested political loyalties.

The early Christian creeds, however, show that High Christology was not easily adopted. Partly, this may have been because of the second-century development of the view that Jesus had only seemed to be human, or because of efforts to deny that the creator God was the father of Jesus. But these ideas took Jesus even farther away from the imperial political arena. In the catholic camp, the Syro-Palestinian, North African, and Roman creeds for several centuries resisted Colossians on expressing the three major differences—the second article of the Roman Creed (the basis of the Apostles’ Creed) is instructive:

[I believe] in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord, Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried, on the third day rose again from the dead, ascended to heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, whence He will come to judge the living and the dead . . .⁹

Notice that there is no assertion of Jesus’ preexistence, no elaboration of his sharing in God’s divine substance, and no eternal kingdom. Arius, famously, understood Jesus as created Word or Logos, but said with old tradition, “There was a time when he was not.” The time was right for a political solution!

With the appearance of the Nicene Creed in 325 CE, we see creative preexistence and the elaboration of Jesus’ relationship to God as of one substance with the Father. With the appearance a little over a century later at Chalcedon, the final piece is added: Jesus “sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end.”¹⁰

These creedal assertions, sponsored by imperial power, were dramatic innovations in the catholic tradition of Christian belief

9. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 102.

10. *Ibid.*, 216, 297.

about Jesus. From the political point of view, they were developments especially welcomed by imperial power. For it was Constantine, after all, the convener of Nicaea, who had seen the cross in the sky before defeating Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge. IHS, the abbreviation for Jesus in Greek or in Latin *in hoc signo*, “in this sign you will conquer” (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.28). And it was Constantine who legalized Christianity as a bulwark to his new empire centered in Constantinople. And it was Constantine who could see his own alliance with the only begotten Son as divine legitimation, having neglected Jesus’ humble historical station and political praxis to broker the Power on behalf of the tax collectors and sinners. This was the ultimate political betrayal of Jesus—the one who had opposed debt and taxation in the name of the Power was now coopted to legitimate that taxation in an emerging Christian Empire. Christ the King, Christus Rex, Christos Pantocrator, reigns from the cross, at the right hand of the emperor supreme!

Center Panel

Above the altar in the church, in the library or galleries of the university or museum, we turn our attention to the Center Panel of our triptych (Fig. 1.3). There we see two emblems—a table and a figure with raised hands (the *Orans* or *Orante*). “Do this in remembrance of me,” he said. As he sat at his final table, in truth if not in historical actuality, he identified wholly with the Passover bread and the wine. These were his central meaning and purpose, as he had come to understand them, and perhaps with the guests around the table he invoked the Power:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe,
provider of the bread and the fruit of the vine.

Jesus asked once again in his prayer that daily bread become secure, that debts be released, that defaults on mortgages not end up in court. As he often said, in line with the opening words of the Passover meal,

This is the bread of poverty
which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt;

let all who are hungry enter and eat;
 this year we are in exile,
 next year may we be free.¹¹

The Q scribes had remembered his typical statements in their opening inscription of his words: How honorable are you poor; how honorable are the hungry; how honorable are those who mourn—for the Power is at hand to heal and provide.

Fig. 1.3: CENTER PANEL

Byzantine altar base at Dominus Flevit



<http://198.62.75.4/www1/ofm/sbf/escurs/Ger/13altareBig.jpg>

Orante (with Greek word "Peace")



<http://www.salomoni.it/davide/theology/blog/2006/10/animals-in-synoptics.html>

Give us today our daily bread,
 Release our debts, as we release those in debt to us,
 And deliver us from the evil creditor's court.

11. Glatzer translation of the opening words of the Passover Seder.

In the center of the Christian memory, therefore, is not an altar but a table, not a sacrifice but a meal, not a political apotheosis but a compassionate plea and worldly engagement. In that Center Panel, we are called continuously to transform the altar into a table. At the table is the real presence of the Power Jesus brokered between the haves and the have-nots. His politics were about redistribution, not property; about reciprocal sharing, not Mammon; and finally about the fullness of life here and now.

In truth, Jesus' political aims remain to be contemplated and taken seriously. They are not confined to first-century Galilee, nor need they be relegated to some dustbin of history. They were a response to the Power, and the same Power still stands behind and energizes all things. Jesus' total identification with the Power led to his absorption into it as God's only begotten. In the Christian tradition and church, the Power is seen as through a glass darkly. It is there, present, where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. But the Power is not confined to church, nor need it abolish modern politics or the separation of church and state. It challenges to the core, however, the plutocrats of a new age of Mammon, whose politics and commerce will be far more destructive and disastrous for global affairs than the Roman Peace. The truth still stands, as it did for Jesus by the lakeside, that you cannot serve God and Mammon. There is still desperate need for redressing the gross inequities of power and wealth across the globe, for a shared vision of a humane future. For the political elites of this time, in Christian lands, who have not closed their hearts and minds to words of the Galilean, the political aims of Jesus may once again inspire creative ways of healing and feasting in the presence of the beneficent Power.¹²

12. Oakman, *The Political Aims of Jesus*, 138.