

JESUS A NEW VISION

Marcus J. Borg, *JESUS A NEW VISION* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987),

5. The Social World of Jesus

The phrase *social world* has two nuances of meaning. It refers to the total social environment of a people at a particular time in their history, including such material conditions as the type of economy, level of technology, degree of urbanization, mixture of population, isolation from or exposure to foreign cultures, and so forth. Even more importantly, “social world” refers to the socially constructed reality of a people, that nonmaterial “canopy” of shared convictions which every human community erects and within which it lives, and which is sometimes known simply as “culture.” It is that world of shared ideas that makes each culture what it is. It consists of the shared beliefs, values, meanings, laws, customs, institutions, rituals and so forth, by which the group orders and maintains its world. The “social world” of Jesus thus refers to the social world of Judaism within the total social environment of first-century Palestine (Borg –New Vision P. 79).

That social world occupied a very small geographic space. Jewish Palestine comprised an area of about seven thousand square miles, slightly smaller than the state of Vermont. Politically, it had become part of Roman Empire in 63 B.C. and was governed by rulers appointed by Rome. Until the death in 4 B.C. of Herod the Great, the most famous of the “client” kings who owed their kingship to Rome, it was administered as a single political unit. After Herod’s death, it was divided into three units, each ruled by one of Herod’s sons. One of these three units, Judea (which included Jerusalem), came under direct Roman rule in A.D. 6, administered by a series of Roman governors who replaced Herod’s son Archelaus (Borg –New Vision P. 80).

It was social world of crisis. Before the first century was over, the crisis had resulted in catastrophic war with Romans, climaxing in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. It was the worst calamity experienced by the Jewish people in ancient times, rivaled only by the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the temple some six centuries earlier in 586 B.C. In order to understand the social world of Jesus, we need to examine the conventional wisdom which was at the heart of it, the crisis which convulsed it, and the politics of holiness which was the response to the crisis (Borg –New Vision P. 80).

Two Social World in Collision

By the first century, two social worlds were in collision: The social world of Judaism and the social world composed of Hellenistic culture and Roman political power. The annexation of Palestine by Rome in 63 B.C. generated both political conflict and severe economic pressure (Borg –New Vision P. 83).

The Roman presence was very much felt, even while Rome ruled indirectly through client-king such as Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.). A Hellenizer and Romanizer in his policies, building projects, and resettlement of populations, Herod was generally despised by his Jewish subjects. At his death in 4 B.C., the brutal superiority of Roman military power was experienced directly when the Roman general Varus invaded the country to quell a Jewish revolt, ending with mass crucifixion of two thousand Jewish rebels (Borg. New Vision P. 84).

The governors set out from Rome to rule Judea beginning in A.D. 6 were second-rank and often second-rate Roman colonial administrators, sometimes simply incompetent, sometimes corrupt, sometimes deliberately provocative of Jewish loyalties. Pilate, governor from A.D. 26 to 36, was particularly insensitive, and a few years later the insane emperor Caligula sought to have a statue of himself erected in the holy of holies of the Jerusalem temple. Even beyond these specific provocations (and there were many others) the Roman presence brought unintended but inevitable conflict with Jewish law (Borg. New Vision P. 84).

Under Rome: Double Taxation

Roman rule had direct economic consequences with an immense impact on the Jewish social world. It brought a second system of taxation, which was added to the system of “tithes” contained within the Torah. In the Jewish social world, the tithes required by the Torah were understood as divine laws and functioned as its tax system. The tithes supported the priests, the temple and temple staff (the Levites), and the poor. Designed for an agricultural society, each tithe was a certain percentage of a farmer’s production. Taken together, the various tithes added up to slightly over 20 percent per year (Borg. New Vision P. 84).

To this system of taxation, the Romans added their own. The two with the greatest effect on farmers were the land tax (1 percent of its value) and crop tax (12 ½ percent of the produce). There were other Roman taxes as well (customs, toll, tribute); but even without them, the combined total of Jewish and Roman taxes on farmers amounted to about 35 percent. This was a crushing amount and would be even today. Moreover, the way in which the Roman taxes were collected exacerbated the problem. Rome sold the privilege of collecting taxes to “tax farmers,” who paid Rome a fixed amount and whose own profit depended on the percentage they added to the taxes (Borg. New Vision P. 85).

The impact upon the Jewish social world was severe. The Jewish people were powerless to affect either system of taxation. One was dictated by Roman policy, over which they had no control; the other was required by divine revelation. But there was a difference between the two systems of taxation. The Roman taxes were enforced by police power, the Jewish taxes were not. One had no choice but to pay the Roman taxes, or lose one’s land. Their collection was enforced by the state (Borg. New Vision P.85).

Since more people paid Roman taxes and not Jewish tax and this situation confronted the Jewish population with an economic dilemma which was at the same time a test of religious loyalty (Borg. New Vision P. 85).

Some Jewish farmers could not pay even the Roman taxes and this did lose their land, creating growing number of landless day laborers, widespread emigration, and a social class of robbers and beggars. Many of the rest could save their land only by not paying the tithes commanded by Torah. The system of double taxation was generating a large class of “nonobservant” Jews, because of economic pressure (Borg. New Vision P. 85). A social world remains intact only so long as people affirm it. The Roman occupation, brought a crisis into all aspects of Jewish life, religious, political, and social – and because of economic impact, into the smallest hamlet of the Palestinian countryside. The Roman presence itself in Palestine was the problem (Borg. New Vision P. 86).

The Response: The Politics of Holiness

Most fundamentally “politics” concerns the organization of a human community. *Polis* is the Greek word for “city,” and thus politics is concerned with the “shape” of the city, and by extension, of any human community (Borg. New Vision P.86).

Politics of Compassion

Jesus' compassion stood in contrast to the rigid social boundaries of the Jewish social world; boundaries between righteous and outcast, men and women, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile (Borg. New Vision P.31). Professor Borg also suggest that to advocate compassion as a value, we must stand against hatred, abuse, brutality, injustice, indifference, selfishness, self-righteousness, hardness of heart, racism, sexism, classism, and militant nationalism.

Remembering Jesus' compassion means we too have the same compassion toward homeless crowd of our day.