



Jesus Christ and His Audience: A Study of the Reception of His Message within the Socio-Political Context of the New Testament

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.68050/JAMS.2026.766>

Received: 28 September 2026; Accepted: 05 October 2026; Published: 14 October 2026

ABSTRACT

The reception of the message of Jesus Christ cannot be understood apart from the socio-political, economic, and religious realities of first-century Palestine. The New Testament presents Jesus as a teacher, prophet, healer, and Messiah whose ministry generated both acceptance and opposition across different segments of society. This study investigates how various audiences received Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God within the historical context of Roman imperial rule, Second Temple Judaism, economic inequality, and widespread messianic expectations. Employing historical-critical and socio-historical methodologies, the study examines the responses of ordinary people, religious authorities, political leaders, women, and marginalized groups to Jesus' message. The findings suggest that reactions to Jesus were shaped not only by theological concerns but also by social location, political interests, economic realities, and religious expectations. The paper argues that the varied responses to Jesus contributed significantly to the emergence and expansion of early Christianity and continue to provide valuable insights into the relationship between religion, society, and political power.

Keywords: Jesus Christ, New Testament, Kingdom of God, Roman Empire, Second Temple Judaism, historical Jesus, socio-political context, early Christianity

INTRODUCTION

The ministry of Jesus Christ occupies a central place in Christian theology and world history. Yet a full understanding of His message requires more than theological reflection; it demands a careful examination of the historical environment in which He lived and ministered. The Gospels portray Jesus as a figure whose teachings inspired devotion among many while provoking resistance from others. Crowds followed Him in Galilee and Judea, marginalized people welcomed His message, religious authorities questioned His legitimacy, and political leaders ultimately sanctioned His execution (Dunn, 2003; Wright, 1996).

First-century Palestine was a region marked by political oppression, economic inequality, religious diversity, and intense messianic expectations. Under Roman rule, Jewish society experienced significant social tensions. Many Jews hoped for divine intervention through a Messiah who would restore Israel's fortunes and end foreign domination (Sanders, 1995). It was within this environment that Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, calling people to repentance, faith, and participation in God's redemptive purposes.

The significance of Jesus' ministry is further understood by examining how different audiences responded to His teachings. The reception of Jesus was not uniform. Ordinary people often responded positively, while some religious authorities and political leaders perceived Him as a threat. These varied responses reveal the complex interaction between religion, politics, economics, and social identity in the New Testament world.

This study investigates how Jesus' message was received by various audiences within the socio-political context of first-century Palestine. It argues that the reception of Jesus was significantly influenced by existing political structures, religious traditions, economic conditions, and social realities.



Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the reception of the message of Jesus Christ within the socio-political, economic, and religious context of first-century Palestine during the New Testament era. Scholars increasingly recognize that Jesus' ministry cannot be separated from the realities of Roman imperial rule, Jewish sectarianism, social stratification, and messianic expectations (Horsley, 2003; Sanders, 1995; Wright, 1996).

Specifically, the study investigates how diverse social groups, including ordinary people, women, religious leaders, political authorities, and marginalized populations, responded to Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. It further seeks to demonstrate that acceptance or rejection of Jesus often reflected broader social, economic, and political considerations in addition to theological convictions.

Research Questions

Main Research Question

How did the socio-political context of first-century Palestine influence the reception of the message of Jesus Christ?

Specific Research Questions

1. What were the primary socio-political, economic, and religious characteristics of first-century Palestine?
2. How did Roman occupation influence Jewish expectations concerning the Messiah?
3. What were the central themes of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God?
4. How did different social groups respond to the teachings and ministry of Jesus?
5. What factors contributed to the acceptance of Jesus among the poor and marginalized?
6. What factors contributed to opposition from religious and political leaders?
7. How did the reception of Jesus' message contribute to the rise of early Christianity?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to New Testament scholarship by providing a historically grounded interpretation of Jesus' ministry within the realities of first-century Palestine. Understanding the historical setting of Jesus is essential for interpreting His message, actions, and significance (Wright, 1996).

The study also contributes to socio-historical approaches to biblical interpretation by demonstrating the close relationship between religious movements and social environments (Malina, 2001). Furthermore, it provides insights into how transformative religious messages are received within contexts of political tension, economic inequality, and social stratification.

Finally, this research contributes to contemporary discussions regarding social justice, human dignity, religious identity, and the relationship between faith and power.

Delimitations of the Study

This study focuses specifically on the reception of Jesus' message during His public ministry as recorded in the canonical Gospels.

The geographical scope is limited to first-century Palestine, particularly Galilee, Samaria, Judea, and Jerusa-



lem. The historical scope encompasses approximately 4 BCE to AD 33.

The study concentrates on the following social groups:

- Ordinary Jewish populations
- Pharisees
- Sadducees
- Zealots
- Roman political authorities
- Women
- Tax collectors
- Socially marginalized persons

The study does not attempt a comprehensive examination of all aspects of Roman history, Jewish history, or early Christian theology.

Limitations of the Study

This research relies primarily on the New Testament documents together with selected historical sources and modern scholarship. The Gospels were composed within early Christian communities and therefore contain theological interpretation alongside historical information (Dunn, 2003).

Additionally, historical reconstruction of first-century Palestine remains limited by available archaeological and documentary evidence. Some interpretations continue to be debated among scholars.

Despite these limitations, the historical-critical and socio-historical methods employed in this study provide a reliable framework for investigating the reception of Jesus' message.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern scholarship increasingly emphasizes the importance of understanding Jesus within His historical and Jewish context. Sanders (1995) argues that Jesus must be understood fundamentally as a Jew operating within Second Temple Judaism. According to Sanders, many traditional portrayals of Jesus underestimate the continuity between His teachings and broader Jewish traditions.

Wright (1996) situates Jesus within the context of Israel's hopes for restoration and God's promised reign. He argues that Jesus proclaimed the fulfillment of Israel's expectations while simultaneously redefining prevailing interpretations of messianic identity and divine kingship.

Dunn (2003) emphasizes that Jesus emerged from within mainstream first-century Judaism and should not be viewed as detached from Jewish thought. He argues that understanding Jewish expectations concerning the Kingdom of God is essential for interpreting Jesus' ministry.

Crossan (1995) highlights the social and economic dimensions of Jesus' message, presenting Him as a figure who challenged hierarchical structures and advocated a vision of social transformation. Although some aspects of Crossan's interpretation remain debated, his work has contributed significantly to discussions of Jesus and social justice.

Horsley (2003) focuses on the effects of Roman imperial domination and argues that economic exploitation



Horsley (2003) focuses on the effects of Roman imperial domination and argues that economic exploitation and political oppression shaped the social realities of Jesus' audience. His work demonstrates that Jesus' message possessed political implications even when not advocating political revolution.

Malina (2001) employs cultural anthropology to examine the social world of the New Testament. His analysis of honor, shame, kinship, and patronage systems has become highly influential in understanding audience responses to Jesus.

Theissen and Merz (1998) further argue that responses to Jesus were often shaped by the social positions of those encountering His ministry. Marginalized persons tended to receive His message positively, whereas established elites frequently perceived Him as threatening.

Recent scholarship continues to explore these themes. Taylor (2021) argues that health crises and social conditions in Galilee help explain the popularity of Jesus' healing ministry. Brown (2020) examines first-century concepts of honor within early Christian marginalization, while Blumenthal (2021) explores the intersection of theology, politics, and social history in New Testament interpretation.

Overall, the literature demonstrates broad agreement that Jesus' ministry must be interpreted within its historical, social, economic, and religious context.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs the historical-critical method and socio-historical analysis.

The historical-critical method seeks to reconstruct the political, economic, religious, and social conditions of first-century Palestine. The socio-historical method examines how various audiences responded to Jesus in light of their social location and historical circumstances.

Primary sources include the New Testament Gospels and relevant first-century historical materials. Secondary sources consist of contemporary scholarly monographs and peer-reviewed journal literature.

The Socio-Political Context of First-Century Palestine

Roman Imperial Rule

The ministry of Jesus occurred within the context of Roman imperial domination. Following Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem in 63 BCE, Judea became increasingly integrated into Roman administration. During Jesus' lifetime, Roman governance operated directly through prefects and indirectly through client rulers such as Herod Antipas (Horsley, 2003).

Roman rule was maintained through military presence, political alliances, and economic extraction. Taxation represented a significant burden on local populations and contributed to widespread resentment. These realities created an environment in which many Jews anticipated divine intervention and national restoration.

Any public figure attracting large crowds inevitably attracted political attention. Consequently, the popularity of Jesus possessed political implications regardless of His intentions.

Economic Conditions

Economic inequality characterized first-century Palestine. Wealth was concentrated among priestly elites, landowners, and political authorities, while many peasants lived near subsistence level (Fiensy & Hawkins, 2013).

Agricultural hardship, debt, and taxation created conditions of vulnerability for many families. Jesus frequently addressed these realities through teachings concerning wealth, generosity, justice, and God's concern for the poor.



The prominence of economic themes within Jesus' ministry helps explain why many ordinary people responded positively to His message.

Social Stratification

Jewish society was structured according to distinctions involving wealth, status, purity, ethnicity, and gender.

Jesus frequently crossed these boundaries. He associated with tax collectors, women, Samaritans, the sick, and other marginalized persons. Such behavior challenged prevailing social norms and contributed to both admiration and controversy.

The Religious Context of Second Temple Judaism

The Judaism of Jesus' day was far from uniform. Several groups exerted influence over religious life.

The Pharisees

The Pharisees emphasized observance of the Torah and oral traditions. While Jesus shared important theological beliefs with them, disagreements emerged concerning authority, purity, tradition, and religious practice (Sanders, 1995).

The Sadducees

The Sadducees represented priestly and aristocratic interests associated with Temple administration. Their influence depended partly upon cooperation with Roman authorities. Jesus' critiques of Temple practices inevitably threatened their position (Jeremias, 1969).

The Zealots

The Zealots advocated resistance against Roman occupation. Many anticipated a military Messiah who would liberate Israel through force.

Jesus' emphasis on enemy love, forgiveness, and nonviolence challenged these expectations and led some to reject His vision of messianic deliverance.

The Message of Jesus Christ

The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God constituted the central theme of Jesus' ministry (Ladd, 1993; Wright, 1996).

Jesus proclaimed that God's reign had drawn near and called people to repentance and faith. Unlike many contemporary expectations, however, Jesus did not define the Kingdom primarily in political or military terms.

Instead, the Kingdom involved spiritual transformation, ethical renewal, reconciliation, justice, and future hope.

Compassion for the Marginalized

Jesus demonstrated particular concern for the poor, the sick, women, tax collectors, and social outcasts. His ministry embodied inclusivity and challenged prevailing assumptions concerning status and worth (Malina & Rohrbaugh, 2003).

Critique of Religious Formalism

Jesus frequently criticized hypocrisy, legalism, and the misuse of religious authority. Such critiques appealed



to some listeners while provoking opposition from others.

Reception of Jesus among Different Audiences

Ordinary People

The Gospels consistently portray ordinary people responding favorably to Jesus. Crowds gathered to hear His teachings and witness His miracles.

Jesus addressed everyday concerns including poverty, suffering, injustice, illness, and hope. His message resonated with people seeking meaning amid hardship.

The Poor and Marginalized

Some of the strongest support for Jesus came from marginalized groups. His willingness to associate with socially excluded persons conveyed dignity and acceptance.

The positive reception of Jesus among marginalized populations reflects both the content of His message and the manner in which He embodied it.

Women

Women played an important role in the ministry of Jesus. His treatment of women frequently challenged cultural expectations and expanded opportunities for participation in religious life.

Many women became devoted followers and supporters of His ministry.

Religious Authorities

Several religious leaders perceived Jesus as a threat. His growing popularity, criticism of hypocrisy, and challenges to conventional interpretations generated significant conflict.

Opposition increasingly intensified throughout His ministry, particularly regarding authority and Temple practices.

Political Authorities

Although Jesus did not promote armed revolt, Roman officials remained cautious concerning movements capable of inspiring large crowds.

The intersection of political concerns and religious opposition ultimately contributed to His crucifixion.

The Crucifixion as the Climax of Reception

The crucifixion represents the culmination of societal responses to Jesus. Religious leaders accused Him of dangerous teachings, whereas Roman authorities viewed Him through the lens of political stability.

From the perspective of His opponents, execution appeared necessary to prevent unrest. However, from the perspective of His followers, the crucifixion became central to God's plan of redemption.

The subsequent proclamation of the resurrection transformed the meaning of Jesus' death and became foundational for the growth of Christianity.

DISCUSSION

The evidence examined in this study demonstrates that responses to Jesus cannot be explained solely by theo-



logical disagreement. Acceptance and rejection were deeply intertwined with broader social realities.

Marginalized individuals often responded positively because Jesus addressed their experiences of exclusion and suffering. His proclamation of God's Kingdom offered dignity, hope, and belonging.

Religious and political elites, by contrast, frequently viewed Jesus as a challenge to established structures of authority. His message threatened existing assumptions regarding power, status, and privilege.

The diversity of responses highlights the complex relationship between religion and society in the New Testament period. Jesus' message possessed spiritual significance while simultaneously carrying social and political implications.

CONCLUSION

The reception of Jesus Christ's message was profoundly influenced by the socio-political realities of first-century Palestine. Roman occupation, economic inequality, social stratification, religious diversity, and messianic expectations all shaped how different audiences understood and responded to His ministry.

Ordinary people, women, and marginalized groups frequently welcomed Jesus because His message addressed their hopes, struggles, and aspirations. Religious leaders and political authorities often opposed Him because His teachings challenged established structures of power and authority.

The study demonstrates that the reception of Jesus was not merely a theological matter but a social, political, economic, and religious phenomenon. Understanding these responses provides valuable insight into the historical ministry of Jesus and the emergence of Christianity as a transformative movement within the ancient world.

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