In this article the author discusses one of the most radical interpretations of the person and mission of Jesus, namely the position that sees Jesus as a supporter of violent resistance to Roman tyranny or a revolutionary preacher, sympathizing with the ideology and methods of the Zealots. The article is written in such a way as to introduce the reader to the main arguments of the view, its version of the central meaning of Jesus’ public ministry and preaching, and to present some problematic aspects of this theory by means of historical and biblical analysis of its claims. The study of this issue, despite its brevity and introductory nature, will be of interest to those who are interested in the field of Christology and in iterative views on the role of Jesus in the history of Israel and of humankind.
Was Jesus a Zealot Sympathizer?


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INTRODUCTION

Vyacheslav Gerasimchuk, 39 years old, is an instructor of Old Testament at Odessa Theological Seminary. He has studied at Odessa Theological Seminary, Evangelical Theological Faculty (Leuven, Belgium), and Trinity College (Bristol, England). Currently, the focus of his theological work is on the presence of Yahweh. He is married and has two children.

He began asking His disciples saying, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets" (Matt. 16:13-14). Later on in history, the list of people’s opinions on the question would be expanded and include such epithets given to Jesus as a wise man (Josephus),[1] a sorcerer (Talmud),[2] the originator of a "mischievous superstition" (Tacitus),[3] etc. It is interesting and at the same time regrettable that the most extravagant and controversial pictures of Jesus have been produced by Christianity, not by outsiders. These pictures are uncommonly diverse: there was Jesus the teacher of secret knowledge (Gnosticism), Jesus the created son of God (Arius), Jesus the fully divine, but not fully human person (Appolinarius) or only seeming to be human (Docetism) etc. These are the portraits that were drawn during the first five centuries of Christianity.

Yet, these monotonous images of Jesus cannot be compared with the wealth of colorful graphic portraits of Jesus that have been painted for the last two centuries. As a

[1] Actually, Testimonium Flavianum 3.3, the most celebrated passage in Josephus which speaks about Jesus, contains the following statement: "Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ." Many scholars, however, question the authenticity of the phrase "He was the Christ." Jesus under Fire, ed. Michael Wilkins (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 212-213.

[2] Sanhedrin 43,1; 107,2.


result, many people have come to know, to their surprise, that Jesus has lived many "lives." He is said to have been a perfect man and a sage, a teacher of morality and a social reformer, a Pharisee and a Cynic, an apocalyptic mystic, and a magician. But there is one "life" which is totally different from the others—the life of Jesus the revolutionary or sympathizer of the first century movement of armed resistance to Rome called the Zealots. The most surprising thing about this theory is that its begetters seem to have effectively won over some Biblical and historical data to their side in order to support their hypothesis.[4]

A SUMMARY OF JESUS THE ZEALOT SYMPATHIZER THEORY

The idea that Jesus was mixed up with the revolutionary movement is not new. As far back as the eighteenth century, Herman Reimarus already argued that the purpose of Jesus’ mission was "activating everywhere in Judaea those Jews who were groaning under the Roman yoke and had long before prepared for a hope of deliverance."[5] Although variations of this approach to the goal of Jesus’ ministry were proposed from time to time, it was only in 1967 that, due to the publication of Samuel George Frederick Brandon's book, Jesus and the Zealots, the theory of Jesus the Zealot Sympathizer created a furor.[6] The impact made by the book was so great that some Christian and non-Christian political activists were filled with enthusiasm and were even ready to use violence in the struggle against injustice and political oppression.[7]

In his book, Brandon suggested a radically different explanation of the mission of Jesus than those which were commonly proposed in the 60s. The way Brandon came to his conclusions has to do with reading between the lines of the Gospels as well as with a critical reinterpretation of the historical information about the movement of "freedom fighters." According to his theory, the "real" Jesus, unlike the Jesus of the Gospels whose image had been considerably distorted by the Evangelists, is not a "pacifist," but rather a propagandist of the revolutionary ideas of the Zealots who did not disdain violence in their attempts to achieve political freedom. Jesus' work was linked with the Zealots, and he himself agreed with their principles. Even if Jesus was not a Zealot, it is difficult to see any essential differences between the purposes of Jesus and those of the Zealots.[8]
of fact, they had started to show their anxiety even before Jesus entered into Jerusalem. "If we let Him go on of any further activities of the movement, which could shake their well-being and the political status quo. As a matter

No wonder the actions and words of Jesus alarmed the priests and the Pharisees. They appear to have been fearful forecourt of the temple". \[12\]

The proponents of Brandon's theory claim that actually the last week Jesus' life was full of revolutionary activity. Thus, by his entry into Jerusalem—a demonstration of political Messianism—Jesus tried to bring his far-reaching aims home to the people. Jesus' ambitions were even more loudly announced in his mopping-up of the

What are the grounds for these statements? First of all, it is argued that, because Jesus grew up in Galilee, he must have been informed of the revolt of 6 C.E., the uprising, which was stirred up by Judas the Galilean and his followers prompted by a zeal for their nation and a great passion for freedom. Though the rebellion was suppressed, stories about the heroism of the martyred patriots were afloat, and had probably reached and captivated Jesus' imagination. \[9\] These early reminiscences must have played a considerable part in shaping the ideology of the movement of Jesus.

Therefore as soon as Jesus came to ministry, his unambiguous predilections started to become apparent. \[10\] Jesus selected Simon the kananaios, a representative of the Zealot resistance party for an apostle (Mark 3:18). \[11\] Jesus protested against the paying of tribute, saying, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 13:17). If one scrutinises this pronouncement in light of one of the principles of the Zealots, that the land and its wealth belong to God and must not be rendered to a foreign ruler, he can see that its real meaning is as follows: Caesar could have what belongs to him, but certainly not the Holy Land and its fortune. In all fact, this view seems to find confirmation in the accusation laid at Jesus by the Jewish authorities: "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar" (Luke 22:50).

Faint notes of Jesus' supposed Zealotism can also be seen in such pronouncements as, "the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force (Píaatal appaCouoin ait"n)" (Matt. 11:12), and, "But now, let him who has a purse take it along, likewise also a bag, and let him who has no sword sell his robe and by one" (Luke 22:36).

All the way through his ministry Jesus incessantly denounced Pharisees and Sadducees, but never the Zealots. Is that not an indirect corroboration of Jesus' favourable attitude to the Zealot movement?

The attempt to convert the idea of the "taking of the kingdom by force" into a fact is said to have been made during Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the "cleansing of the temple." The proponents of Brandon's theory claim that actually the last week Jesus' life was full of revolutionary activity. Thus, by his entry into Jerusalem—a demonstration of political Messianism—Jesus tried to bring his far-reaching aims home to the people. Jesus' ambitions were even more loudly announced in his mopping-up of the temple — the den of the spiritual and political elite, which cooperated with ungodly heathen Rome. Jesus "puts away his meekness, grasps violence and disorder as one who is already assuming secular might, turns over the tables of the money changers, takes a whip and drives out the buyers and sellers and the dove traders from the forecourt of the temple". \[12\]

No wonder the actions and words of Jesus alarmed the priests and the Pharisees. They appear to have been fearful of any further activities of the movement, which could shake their well-being and the political status quo. As a matter of fact, they had started to show their anxiety even before Jesus entered into Jerusalem. "If we let Him go on
Philosophy shared with the Pharisees. "That is, although Richard Horsley suggests that the belief in "synergism" with God was one of the principles which the Fourth friends if only they may avoid calling any man, "master" (Jewish Antiquities, 18:23).

Josephus notes that they had such a character of their views, the followers of Judas held to Pharisaic principles. The thirst for freedom, according to the historian Flavius Josephus (also known by his Jewish name, Joseph ben Mattathias),[16] he states that in the very beginning of the first century, the idea of resistance first started to take root in the nation under the influence of the "fourth philosophy" (the first three were the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes), the school of thought established by Judas the Galilean and Saddok the Pharisee. The event, which provoked Judas to start his revolutionary campaign, was the census of Quirinius (6/7 C.E.), assessment of how much revenue could be extracted from the people.[17] In his first work, The Jewish War, Josephus writes: "A Galilean named Judas was urging his countrymen to resistance, reproaching them if they submitted to paying taxes to the Romans and tolerated human masters after serving God alone" (Jewish War, 2.118).[18] Practically speaking, these irritants, i.e. paying taxes and having someone (emperor) besides God as master, formed the kernel of the ideology of Judas' movement. Judas and his followers understood the tribute as tantamount to slavery; this idea, in turn, was rooted in their peculiar understanding of the First Commandment, which reads, "I am the Lord your God,... you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). Hence, the accusation in Mark 14:58, "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands', is to be considered in the context of the attack on the temple, as an anticipation of the actions of the Zealots in 66 C.E.

"There can be little doubt, Brandon argues, that Jesus shared the outrage of the Zealots towards the sacrifices offered daily for the well-being of the emperor — sacrifices which the lower priests, influenced by Zealotism, brought to an end in 66." Irving M. Zeitlin, Jesus and the Judaism of His Time (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 136; S.G.F. Brandon, Jesus and the Zealots (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 335.

At least one of the disciples was armed when Jesus was arrested, but it was beyond the powers of the disciples to manage a Roman cohort (John 18:10,12).


THE ZEALOT MOVEMENT IN THE TIME OF JESUS?

Before we discuss the issue of any real presence of the Zealot traces in the words and the actions of Jesus, we should touch upon some major landmarks of the history of the resistance movement in Palestine in the period between 6/7-44 C.E., that is mostly in the time of Jesus' life. To begin with, it has to be noted that though it is usual for many to designate the participants of the different extremist (revolutionary) parties and movements, which were active in the afore-named (and later) period of time, by the common name Zealots, the term itself "referred at one point only to one trend in the activist liberation movement."[15] Keeping this very essential remark in mind, we shall begin our exposition of the question under consideration.

The main and the most original source of information about the movements are the writings of the Palestinian historian Flavius Josephus (also known by his Jewish name, Joseph ben Mattathias),[16] he states that in the very beginning of the first century, the idea of resistance first started to take root in the nation under the influence of the "fourth philosophy" (the first three were the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes), the school of thought established by Judas the Galilean and Saddok the Pharisee. The event, which provoked Judas to start his revolutionary campaign, was the census of Quirinius (6/7 C.E.), assessment of how much revenue could be extracted from the people.[17] In his first work, The Jewish War, Josephus writes: "A Galilean named Judas was urging his countrymen to resistance, reproaching them if they submitted to paying taxes to the Romans and tolerated human masters after serving God alone" (Jewish War, 2.118).[18] Practically speaking, these irritants, i.e. paying taxes and having someone (emperor) besides God as master, formed the kernel of the ideology of Judas' movement. Judas and his followers understood the tribute as tantamount to slavery; this idea, in turn, was rooted in their peculiar understanding of the First Commandment, which reads, "I am the Lord your God,... you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3).

Richard Horsley suggests that the belief in "synergism" with God was one of the principles which the Fourth Philosophy shared with the Pharisees. *That is, although

[16] Ibid., 292.
[17] Richard A. Horsley, John S. Hanson, Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs (Minneapolis: Winston
and sinners, who to the Fourth Philosophy (and Zealots) were even more abhorrent than the Romans, attests that
us to explain how he managed to put up with Matthew, the tax-gatherer. In fact, Jesus' welcome to the tax collectors
2:20; 22:3), by which he meant only that he was devoted to the spiritual traditions of his ancestors.
Even if we possessed any political connotation. Paul says he had shown zelos ("pepiko0Tepwj Chlwthc", Gal. 1:13; cf. Acts
religion where Simon's zeal was focused. In the Pauline epistles, the word "Zealot" still does not seem to have
adherent." One could have been enthusiastic about many things in those days, but it was most likely the realm of
Simon the Zealot in the Synoptic Gospels does not necessarily imply the political interpretation; it may as well
among the chosen apostles of Jesus? Answering this question, I need to say that the term "Zealot" in the allusion to
"Zealots" in the sense of belonging to the Zealot movement.

Now there are different opinions as to the nature of the revolutionary activity of Judas and his followers. Such
scholars as Brandon, Eisler, Cullmann, and Geza Vermes argue that Judas advocated violent rebellion and led an
armed revolt against Rome in 6 C.E. Horsley and Hanson adhere to the opinion that Judas and his Fourth
Philosophy, with their great passion for freedom, sowed the seeds of later troubles without using weapons.
However, these scholars agree that the members of the Philosophy "did organize themselves in some way and
advocated resistance to Roman taxation. but there is little hint of the particular form that their organization or
resistance may have taken — beyond the vague "unrest" or "noisy stir" [Josephus' expressions] they apparently
caused in Judean society in 6 C.E. I am prone to think that Judas and his companions did use arms in their
struggle for freedom in general and the abolition of the taxation in particular, but their movement was too
spontaneous and unorganized to be called a revolutionary organization.

It is interesting that Josephus did not write anything about any possible display of revolutionary activity on the part
of the people during the adult life and ministry of Jesus. David Rhoads, who discusses this issue in his book Israel in
Revolution: 6-74 C.E., writes: "In contrast to his repeated references to brigandage and to revolutionaries in his
narrative of the later period, the absence of evidence for conspiratorial revolutionary activity in Josephus' account of
the period from 6 [?] to 44 C.E. is striking." We do not have to suppose that Israel reconciled itself to the
situation of servile submission to Rome. There certainly were demonstrations of protest and antagonism, but the
resistance itself was not as fierce as in the later periods. If it had not been so, Josephus would have recorded such
disturbances as he wrote about the "unrest" in the other periods of time.

But in the time of Jesus Israel seems to have been making good use of diplomatic ways of dealing with the hated
Rome. Also, many Jews relied on God's apocalyptic deliverance of the nation and judgment of their oppressors.
They desperately waited for God's intervention, judgment, and restoration. And only in the early 60s did they
[21] Richard A. Horsley, John S. Hanson, Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs (Minneapolis: Winston
Press, 1985), 193. The saying "God helps those who help themselves" could properly characterize the principle of
"synergism" in Judas' interpretation.

[22] Ibid., 194. [23] Ibid., 199.
memory of the War of Varus in 4 B.C.E. and the failure of Judas' revolt in 6 C.E. must have discouraged
revolutionary activity; 2) The emperors Augustus (27 B.C.E. -14 C.E.) and Tiberius (14-37 C.E.) were favorable toward
Jews; 3) The procurators in Judaea from 6 to 44 C.E. were not particularly biased in favor of the Hellenistic element
of the population in Palestine; 4) The high priests were almost all from the family of Ananus, a ruling house which
provided stable leadership. Ibid., 66.

begin to exert firm armed pressure on the Romans to gain independence. It is exactly at this time, as N.T. Wright
notes, that the "Zealots" emerged as a clear-cut group. Thus, it is misleading to consider the Zealots as "a long-standing revolutionary organization founded by Judas that advocated and practiced violent revolution with increasing success until the massive revolt of 66-70". So, we are to give a negative answer to the question
whether there were Zealots in the time of Jesus. However, it should not be denied, as I have said above, that there
were individuals and groups who were involved in some sort of subversive activities; they all were zealous, but not
"Zealots" in the sense of belonging to the Zealot movement.

The obvious question that comes to mind in the context of this discussion is: What about Simon the Zealot who was among the chosen apostles of Jesus? Answering this question, I need to say that the term "Zealot" in the allusion to
Simon the Zealot in the Synoptic Gospels does not necessarily imply the political interpretation; it may as well
indicate "the prized quality of ruthless zeal in the service to the Lord," someone who is an "eager or enthusiastic
adherent." One could have been enthusiastic about many things in those days, but it was most likely the realm of
religion where Simon's zeal was focused. In the Pauline epistles, the word "Zealot" still does not seem to have
possessed any political connotation. Paul says he had shown zelos ("pepiko0Tepwj Chlwthc", Gal. 1:13; cf. Acts
21:20; 22:3), by which he meant only that he was devoted to the spiritual traditions of his ancestors. Even if we
admit that Simon was a Zealot (freedom fighter) who came to Jesus as a companion in arms, it would be difficult for us to explain how he managed to put up with Matthew, the tax-gatherer. In fact, Jesus' welcome to the tax collectors
and sinners, who to the Fourth Philosophy (and Zealots) were even more abhorrent than the Romans, attests that
[18i Ibid., 191.
[19] Judas and his companions were aware of the fact that the Roman emperor (Augustus), like the Hellenistic
emperors before him, was understood as divine; that must have promoted their consolidation in the struggle for
having only one Lord.
[21] Richard A. Horsley, John S. Hanson, Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs (Minneapolis: Winston
Press, 1985), 193. The saying "God helps those who help themselves" could properly characterize the principle of
"synergism" in Judas' interpretation.
[22] Ibid., 194. [23] Ibid., 199.
reasons of the lull: 1) The

Jesus was not really in line with any revolutionary party of his day.

**CONCLUSION: WAS JESUS A ZEALOT SYMPATHIZER?**

The main argument against the theory of Jesus the revolutionary is the cumulative force of Jesus' personality, which is revealed in the story of His life. The teaching and actions of Jesus were diametrically opposite to the revolutionary spirit of the resistance movements. The aims of such movements would have seemed to Jesus not only

[25] Irving Zeitlin points out that the adherents of the movement were called kannaim ("Zealots") by their own people and sicarii by the Romans and their collaborators. Irving M. Zeitlin, Jesus and the Judaism of His Time (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 33. The Jewish historian Menahem Stern sees the Zealots and Sicarii as two distinct groups with the following features: 1) The Zealots never attached themselves to one particular family and never proclaimed any of their leaders king; 2) the Sicarii had their original base in Galilee, while the Zealots were concentrated in Jerusalem; 3) the Galilean Sicarii were fighting for a social revolution, while the Jerusalem Zealots placed less stress on the social aspect. A History of the Jewish People, ed. H.H Ben-Sasson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 275.


[29] There are some "hard sayings" of Jesus, some of which have been quoted above, that seem to show the "rough" side of Jesus. There has always been a hot dispute as to what Jesus meant by the sayings, and no consensus is ever likely to be reached.

unimportant and insignificant, as Michael Grant suggests,[30] but also contrary to his proclamation of love, which had been the tenor of Jesus' ministry. Thus, his saying "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44; cf. 5:39-42), which in Jesus' time could not have been said without reference to the Romans, would not find much support in any "freedom fighting" group. In fact, Jesus called the people to be motivated by love and mercy in their treatment of others. "Thus: the potential accuser must be faced and reconciled (Matt. 5:25-26); the soldier who commandeers the services of a Galilean villager must not be resisted or resented, but must be met with astonishing generosity (5:44); enemies of the state are not enemies in the eyes of YHWH, and if Israel is really to imitate her heavenly father she must learn to love them and pray for them (5:44f.). Love and mercy, as practical codes of living, are to characterize Israel as the true people of the Creator God."[31]

"Jesus' program for remaking the world"[32] was totally different from all other programs, including the most extremist ones, which had been proposed in his time. It was truly revolutionary, since it had Jesus as its centre and love, not violence or a rebellious spirit, as the motivating power. In his book The Jesus Myth, Andrew Greeley, in my view rightly, says that the program of Jesus for mankind is that: 1) Man must first accept His kingdom[33], and 2) man must act according to the norms of justice and love.[34] "What Jesus is saying, rather, is that unless men are prepared to commit themselves to the vision of God's love for us that he has come to preach then they will not be able to love one another. One generation's revolutionaries can turn into the next generation's oppressors."[35] The history of humankind has more than once proved the truth of this last statement of Greeley's. It is hard to believe that Jesus, being very well aware of this pitfall, propagated any ideas of revolution.[36] Sontag

[30] Ibid., 133. Jesus. Besides, in order to be ready to enter into

[31] N.T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God the Kingdom of God, a man must not only agree (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 290. with the principles of the Kingdom, but must

[32] Andrew M. Greeley, The Jesus Myth also accept Jesus (by faith) as his King to let the (London: Search Press, 1972), 206. Kingdom indwell in his heart. I think this

[33] In this respect, I would like to quote Doron Mendels, whose position concerning the issue is predominant over any social or political of the political idea of the kingdom in the reforms that the subjects of the King might bring teaching of Jesus is quite sensible. He writes that into the world. But it is not to say that the Jesus spoke "against (Mendels' italics) the Kingdom amounts to nothing more than man's political idea of the kingdom of the son of David. internal transformation; naturally, "the sons of Without going into the problem of whether Jesus the Kingdom" are impelled not to leave the thought that the basileia (kingdom) would be world unchanged.

established in the future or was already there at[35] Ibid.

his present time [I think both aspects of kingdom[36] There is another issue that we have not are present in Jesus' teaching], one thing is discussed in this short article and that is the certain, that Jesus thought neither of the question of the temptations that Jesus faced.

heavenly kingdom nor of himself in terms of a There is little doubt that Jesus, having been
king with an army, servants, conquests, and "tempted in all things" (Heb 4:15), also
territory." Doron Mendels, «Jesus and the experienced the temptations of power. As
Politics of His Day,» in James H. Charlesworth Garlington notes, "it is reasonable to infer—
and Walter P. Weaver, eds., Images of Jesus Today given both the place of the temptations, that is,
(Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), the desert with all its messianic overtones, and
106-107. the framework of the Gospel narratives

[34] Ibid. It should be observed, though, that these generally—that there was a politico-militaristic
two points do not exhaust the whole teaching of dimension to the choices placed before the
raises a question of the revolution "with a human face" and answers the question in the following way: "Can violent
revolution be advocated without a basis in hatred? If not, this is a block for most Christians. The forgiving of our
enemies is difficult for a revolutionary program, and certainly it eliminates violence as an acceptable path. Jesus
turns to the poor and to the rich. He shows no class distinctions in spite of his compassion for those who suffer."[37]

To sum it up, it should be stressed once more that the teaching and the life of Jesus, as they are presented in the
Gospels, place him above all militaristic and revolutionary ideologies. His goals and norms are not of this world
(Cullmann).[38] As Jesus said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My
servants would be fighting that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm"
(John 18:36).

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interpretations of the person and mission of Jesus, namely the position that sees Jesus as a supporter of violent resistance to Roman tyranny or a revolutionary preacher, sympathizing with the ideology and methods of the Zealots. The article is written in such a way as to introduce the reader to the main arguments of the view, its version of the central meaning of Jesus' public ministry and preaching, and to present some problematic aspects of this theory by means of his torical and biblical analysis of its claims. The study The Zealots were an early Jewish sect opposed to Roman rule of Judea. The Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus do not depict him as a Zealot, since he is recorded as on good terms with a number of Romans and approved payment of the Roman taxes. Some say the Jesus movement may have emerged from another early Jewish sect, the Essenes. Others, such as Burton L. Mack (Who Wrote the New Testament) see Jesus more closely associated with the Cynics.