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Jesus: Freedom-Fighter or Prince of Peace?

(A paper written from the Biblical angle, on the idea of Jesus as liberator)

K. DAVID*

In this paper I am concerned with the problem of explaining who Jesus was as shown in his doing of what he did and his saying of what he said. As an introduction to the above theme it will be noted that in the past some, like Friederich Nietzsche, have described Jesus as the great deceiver and betrayer. Occasionally attempts have been made to rob him of his place of central importance in history. H. G. Wells, in his *History of the World*, included Jesus among the great figures of history. But from our study of the Gospels we have come now to know that Jesus came to proclaim the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus concerns himself not only with the sick and suffering but also with the publicans and sinners. He calls Matthew the publican to be one of his disciples, and eats with him and his friends. This the Scribes find strange and objectionable. In other words, the high authorities were worried about his commonness: 'he eats with publicans and sinners' was their complaint. They failed to see that Jesus took them as persons. Jesus was in fact breaking the yoke which they had set upon themselves, and urged them to take his yoke upon them. Also, in the story of Jesus' dining at the house of a ruler who was a Pharisee (Lk. 14:1-14), his injunction to invite lowly guests was addressed to the host. It was a return for his hospitality. In that connection Jesus made it plain that it is wrong to omit benevolence to the poor in whose case the selfish motive is excluded. In the same context Jesus explained that the Pharisees' Sabbath help had an element of selfishness; his had none. Luke's description of the call of Levi underlines his favourite theme of Jesus' friendship for the outcast. This is no less expressed by Mark when he depicts the scene of Jesus' respecting and healing the woman who approached him with her humiliating complaint; Mk. 5:24-34.

The series of conflict stories as found in Mark chps. 2 and 3 (the healing of the leper, the healing of the paralytic, the call of Levi, the debate on fasting, the episode of the cornfields on the Sabbath, and the healing of the man with the withered hand) was also recorded by Luke in the same way. Also important is the fact that for Luke these were sufficient to illustrate the carrying out of the programme laid down in the Nazareth sermon. That makes it clear that Jesus fulfils the prophecy of good news for the poor and redemption for the afflicted.

* Dr K. David is on the Staff of the Andhra Christian Theological College, Secunderabad.

The Old Testament story of God's dealings with his people makes it plain to us that he had been at work to liberate them from slavery and oppression. This gave certain clues to Jesus' disciples and the Gospel writers to understand his role in the total plan of God's salvation history. God's people had come to expect a new deliverance. That is, God's dealings with them would be such that through his agent he would establish his kingdom on earth which would mean the end of the present wrongs. To be more precise, in Jesus the 'new age' has dawned. This is exemplified in Luke's expression *eudokia* (Lk. 2:14), which implies three things, namely God's design, satisfaction and benevolence to his people on earth. These three can be construed as the features of the new liberation which was to be actualised in the coming of Christ. His coming and ministry were made meaningful to his disciples through his benevolent or liberating acts done to people who were suffering from various ailments. In other words, it is an undeniable fact that Jesus brought relief, liberation, the state of being wholesome, well-being, soundness and fulness of life to people who were under oppression caused by demons and the forces of the evil One.

We often say that Jesus Christ liberates people. But what kind of liberator was he? This question was posed by the writers of the Bible Study lessons for the booklet of the World Council of Churches for its forthcoming Assembly, and the same writers also declared that 'Mk. ch. 9 points to some answers'.¹ To find these answers to the above question on the basis of the exegesis of Mk. chap. 9, particularly verses 2-13, is, in the main, the burden of this paper. In the mountain-top experience as recorded by Mk. we are told that Moses and Elijah are said to have appeared as representing the Law and the Prophets. This explains that Jesus' coming is seen as a fulfilment or culmination of this long history. Against this background Jesus would be a new Moses, (Deut. 18:15). In the act of the healing of the demoniac, Jesus enters a new situation, in such a stark contrast to the mountain, that he faces in the mundane experience of the people of his day the problem of human suffering and an atmosphere of the painful helplessness of his disciples. The boy's condition is both chronic and acute. The disciples were confronted with the power of evil, that is, the problem of bringing relief to the boy. Both 'fire' and 'water', mentioned in the story, are symbols of chaos. The disciples could do nothing. In the act of healing, Jesus is 'both alone with the liberators of old (v. 8) and isolated in the company of his followers'. In his bringing the boy back to normal life, Jesus' act of liberation became evident. It was not possible for the disciples to do that act of liberation. What Jesus did was beyond his followers' ability. The boy got back his sound mind and body. The dramatic change brought about by Jesus in the boy's mind and body is the mark of the 'new age' in biblical language; to be more precise, it is the act of liberation. The 'liberating deeds' of the 'new age' are not simply deeds of overwhelming power performed like magic. They are not things simply done to us and for us, but they have a global significance.

¹ 'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites', World Council of Churches, C.L.S., Madras, 1974, p. 11.

Jesus' attack on the 'tradition' of the elders, (the explanation of the law which had been given by learned men; Mk. 7:6) his highly irregular attitude to fasting (Mk. 2:18f.), his unpatriotic commendations of Samaritans and Gentiles, his associations with social pariahs and outcasts like customs officers, harlots and the rest, explain to us the full range of the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities of the Jewish community of his day. That is, these incidents not only aroused the antagonism of the Scribes and the Pharisees but led to inevitable conflict. Jesus challenged all manifestations of pride among the Jewish community of his day with regard to long-standing institutions and traditional standards or prescriptions. Jesus of Nazareth set himself unshakeably at variance with the normal patterns and the structures of the community of his people. The acuteness of Jesus' opposition to the religiosity of his day, his unique claim that transcends the bonds of the Old Testament and Judaism, his unparalleled message of God's love towards sinners, his own table-fellowship with publicans and sinners, explain the fact that Jesus expressed his outright dissatisfaction with the conventional religious practices and customs which underrated the human values and the idea of liberation of men from every kind of oppression. It is worth noting that W. Pannenberg has rightly pointed out that 'the unique character of Jesus' historical mission was that it was completely amalgamated with his personal. But only in the function of his historical mission of service to humanity towards the coming Kingdom of the Father is he as a person God's elect'.²

Further, when Jesus told the congregation in Nazareth that God brought relief to a widow of Zarephath in Sidon and healing to a leper of Syria, the people could not stand the thought that the God of Israel would do such a thing for the Gentiles and they threw him out of the Synagogue (Lk. 4:26-29). In the attitude of the people of Nazareth, the Jewish community, to the socially oppressed and men of low origin, Jesus saw the classic example of those who seek freedom for themselves while oppressing others. It is for this reason that Jesus spoke so openly that he came not to call the righteous but sinners, the outcast. When he ate with the publicans and sinners, his act was considered as a failure on the part of Jesus to keep up his dignity as a religious teacher. The incident of his healing on the Sabbath was looked upon by the religious authorities as an offence, and hence Jesus was accused of breaking the laws of the Sabbath. In this accusation Jesus saw that they unwarrantably emphasised the legalistic aspect of the laws of the Sabbath to the neglect of human values, especially their concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the stress falls on the significance for man of the coming 'new age'. Even if we try to bring to light the divine aspect in Jesus' ministry of service and love to humanity, we cannot overlook the fact that in his bridging of the gulf between immanence and transcendence he can be rightly described as 'one who comes unknown and uninvited into the human situation, dis-

² W. Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and man*; translated by L. L. Wilkins and D. A. Priebe, London, 1968, p. 385.

closing himself as the gracious neighbour before he can be recognised as Master and Lord'.³ This point of view enables us to recognise the fact that Jesus was not only the divine person but also the one who performed acts of liberation in order to bring about a community of people who are made whole and thereby enjoy the fulness of life. Also important is the fact that Jesus came to introduce a new spirit into human affairs and bring to men liberty of thought and action. It is in this sense that we can safely suggest that Jesus is liberator.

³ J. A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, London, 1972, p. 239.