

Jesus' Job Description

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Luke

It might seem strange that God introduces Jesus with a job description. But he does, when the angel Gabriel tells Mary she is to give birth to a son. “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32-33).

While we may be unaccustomed to thinking of “king of Israel” as Jesus’ job, it is definitely his work according to Luke’s Gospel. Details of his work as king are given: performing mighty deeds, scattering the proud, bringing down rulers from their thrones, lifting up the humble, filling the empty with good things, sending the rich away empty, helping Israel, and showing mercy to Abraham’s descendants. These famous verses, often called the Magnificat, portray Jesus as a king exercising economic, political, and perhaps even military power. Unlike the corrupt kings of the fallen world, he employs his power to benefit his most vulnerable subjects. He does not curry favor with the powerful and well-connected in order to shore up his dynasty. He does not oppress his people or tax them to support luxurious habits. He establishes a properly governed realm where the land yields good things for all people, safety for God’s people, and mercy to those who repent of evil. He is the king that Israel never had.

Later, Jesus confirms this job description when he applies Isaiah 61:1-2 to himself. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

These are political and governmental tasks. Thus, in Luke at least, Jesus' occupation is more closely related to present-day political work than it is to today's pastoral or religious professions. Jesus is highly respectful of the priests and their special role in God's order, but he does not primarily identify himself as one of them.

The tasks Jesus claims for himself benefit people in need. Unlike the rulers of the fallen world, he rules on behalf of the poor, the prisoners, the blind, the oppressed, and those who have fallen into debt (whose lands are returned to them during the year of the Lord's favor). His concern is not only for people in desperate need. He cares for people in every station and condition, as we will see. But his concern for the poor, the suffering, and the powerless distinguishes him starkly from the rulers he has come to displace.