

# *Obama and Jesus*

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The “Obama-phenoma” inevitably invites parallels with great leaders of the past. Obama and JFK? Obama and Martin Luther King, Jr.? Obama and Lincoln?

Obama and Jesus?

Think about it:

He appeared suddenly—a young, articulate leader who impressed people but prompted questions. Where did he come from? Who was he, really, and what did he want?

Crowds followed him, impressed with his vision and his words. He spoke of hope and a better future, denouncing injustice. He talked of peace rather than war; reconciliation rather than antagonism. He identified with common people and the poor. He was charismatic yet self-disciplined, and expert at verbal sparring.

He said we should follow the Golden Rule and treat others with respect. Common people hailed him as a Messiah; influential leaders called him a false prophet. He taught a sort of upside-down theory of society: from the common people up, rather than from the society’s leaders down.

Remarkably, this picture equally fits Jesus Christ and Barack Obama. How could it happen that a leading U.S. Presidential candidate might evoke images of Jesus of Nazareth?

Peek into Obama’s Senate office in Washington, DC. Photos of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and Mahatma Gandhi are displayed prominently. We know who Obama’s heroes are.

But what about parallels with Jesus Christ? Is Obama a latter-day Messiah? Or perhaps the Anti-Christ, that arch deceiver?

The differences, of course, are obvious. Obama is a political candidate; Jesus flatly refused to become a political leader. Jesus, unmarried, said he was uniquely the Son of God with a once-for-all historic mission to save humanity. Obama is married, and although he has a more global vision than any other U.S. political candidate, he claims no more than the competence to be U.S. President and a political reformer.

Jesus was the son of a devout young Jewess and claimed God as his father. He said, “I have been sent by my Father, and have come to do his work.” Obama’s mother was an agnostic American anthropologist, his father an atheist tribal African from a nominally Muslim family. Obama’s book *Dreams From My Father* tells the story. Yet Obama himself claims to be a follower of Jesus.

**What’s the Point?**

So is there any point to a Jesus-Obama comparison? Yes.

The big question with Obama: Does this young leader and relative newcomer to national politics have the wisdom, the depth, the *gravitas* to be President of the United States? Does he have major character flaws that could prove disastrous or make him a grand disappointment?

Obama's two books, *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, reveal a man who has wrestled deeply with issues of character, personal identity, ambition versus humility, religious faith, economics, and political philosophy. His writings, more than his speeches, reveal a mind that is keen, broad, and finely nuanced—in stark contrast to our current President who, famously, doesn't "do nuance."

But Barack Obama is no Jesus Christ. He is no Messiah. He has his foibles and weaknesses, perhaps his private vanities. He is relatively untested as a national political leader (true also, however, of most U.S. Presidents before they assumed office).

But like Jesus—and like Lincoln, Gandhi, and King—Obama does exhibit that rarest of qualities: *moral leadership*. Unlike 99% of today's political leaders, Obama calls for higher values, less self-centeredness, a broader moral vision, some element of self-sacrifice for the larger public good. His patriotism is real but not blind or pig-headed. His philosophy is not "America—love it or leave it," but "America—love its ideals and live them."

Obama has said, famously, "There is not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America." In *The Audacity of Hope* he says the Golden Rule is "not simply a call to sympathy or charity" but is "something more demanding, a call to stand in somebody else's shoes and see through their eyes." As we do this, we find that all of us—"the conservative and the liberal, the powerful and the powerless, the oppressed and the oppressor"—are "shaken out of our complacency" and "forced beyond our limited vision."

Obama articulates a politics and a vision of society that prioritizes the common people and insists on equal rights and opportunity for all, rather than privileging the powerful. He writes, rather remarkably, that he finds "comfort in the fact that the longer I'm in politics the less nourishing popularity becomes, that a striving for power and rank and fame seems to betray a poverty of ambition, and that I am answerable mainly to the steady gaze of my own conscience."

### **Cautious Audacious Hope**

Obama may not become President. If he does, he may disappoint. Like all U.S. Presidents, even the greatest ones, some of his decisions may prove to be colossal blunders. But he shows promise of being a President whose vision, competence, idealism, and charismatic persuasiveness could make him one of our country's greatest.

Not Jesus, certainly. Yet Obama reminds us of some of the reasons Jesus is so universally admired. Among millions of Americans, Barack Obama inspires a hope and

idealism more potent than our chronic cynicism.

I write this merely as political analysis; a civic consideration. Christians, of course, have other and broader issues that concern them; they should understand that God's kingdom does not come through politics. That's what Jacques Ellul called "the political illusion." National renewal, here or elsewhere, is not salvation.

But political leadership does have kingdom-of-God implications in all kinds of ways. And in the U.S. it is refreshing (finally and once again) to have a national leader with a higher and broader vision than we have seen in this country for well over a generation.

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