

Jesus and the Jewish Resistance

abridged from *Revolution in Judea: Jesus and the Jewish Resistance* by Hyam Maccoby

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1973

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Introduction

There are certain advantages in being Jewish when attempting to understand the Gospels, especially if one has been brought up in close contact with the Jewish liturgy, the ceremonials of the Jewish religious year, the rabbinical literature, and the general Jewish moral and cultural outlook. Many aspects of the Gospels ... are for the Jew as familiar as the air he breathes.

When Jesus drank wine and broke bread at the Last Supper, he was doing what a Jew does every time he performs the Kiddush ceremony before a Festival or Sabbath meal. When Jesus began his prayer with “Our Father that art in heaven...” he was following the pattern of Pharisee prayers which still form part of the Jewish Daily Prayer Book. When he spoke in parables and used startling phrases (such as “swallow a camel” or “the beam in thine own eye”) he was using methods of expression familiar to any student of the Talmudic writings.

At the same time, a Jew reading the Gospels is immediately aware of aspects which do not seem authentic; for example, the accounts of Pharisees wanting to kill Jesus because he healed on the Sabbath. The Pharisees never included healing in their list of activities forbidden on the Sabbath; and Jesus’s methods of healing did not involve any of the activities that *were* forbidden. It is unlikely that they would have disapproved, even mildly, of Jesus’s Sabbath-healing. Moreover, the picture of bloodthirsty, murderous Pharisees given in the Gospels contradicts everything known about them from Josephus, from their own writings, and from the Judaism, still living today, which they created.

So here we have a contradiction in the Gospels between those passages which seem authentic and those which do not. To a Jew studying the Gospels the contradiction is manifest, and ... the issue widens as he considers the religion based upon the Gospels, Christianity itself, with its mixture of Jewish, non-Jewish, and anti-Jewish elements.

How does it come about that a religion which borrows so heavily from Judaism has, for the major part of its history, regarded the Jews as pariahs and outcasts? In a civilization based on the Hebrew Scriptures, a civilization whose languages are permeated with Hebrew idioms, the Jews have been treated with extraordinary hate, culminating in the Holocaust of 6,000,000 European Jews during the Second World War.

Religion and Revolt: The Pharisees

The motive force behind the Jewish Resistance was the Jewish religion. This is a difficult point for the modern reader to grasp because we are not used to thinking of religion as a political, activist, revolutionary force. Also, the picture of the Jewish religion given in the New Testament is that of a rigid Establishment clinging to the status quo ...

There is no indication in the New Testament of any conflict between Jewish religion and Roman power. In fact, the whole issue of Roman power is played down to such an extent that there is hardly a hint of *any* opposition to Rome. The aim of the Gospels is to present the revolutionary issue of the day as between Jesus and the *Jewish* Establishment. The fact that there was a Roman Establishment against which revolutionary forces existed is veiled so that the Establishment against which Jesus rebelled can be represented as entirely Jewish.

There was a small religious party, the Sadducees, who were collaborationists, that supported the status quo and accepted official posts under the Romans ... The High Priest himself was a Sadducee, and it is one of the most important points to grasp in New Testament studies that the High Priest was appointed by the Romans. As a member of a quisling minority group he was regarded with contempt by the great mass of the nation. Religious authority lay not with the priests but with an entirely different body of people called the Rabbis, the leaders of the Pharisees.

Thus the picture given in the Gospels of a Jewish religious Establishment which supported the status quo is true insofar as it relates to the Sadducees, who were ... established by the Romans. As far as the mass of Jewish people were concerned the true Establishment was the dispossessed party of the Pharisees who held no positions of political power and whose leaders neither sought nor received recognition from Romans ... So from the first to the last, the Resistance against Rome came from the Pharisee party.

This statement will come as a surprise to those whose knowledge of the Pharisees depends on New Testament accounts. The Pharisees there are represented as being concerned only to safeguard their own official positions ... The Romans are such shadowy figures in the Gospels that the question of whether to resist or collaborate with them hardly arises. The powers-that-be are the Jews; Pilate the Roman appears only as a background figure on whom the Jews call in their vendetta against Jesus and whom they have to manipulate and mislead in various ways in order to wreak their vengeance.

The Messiah

If the longing for the Messiah had been no more than a desire for political independence it would not have had the power to inspire such extraordinary resistance. In other countries patriotism had produced great heroism against Rome but nothing so prolonged and determined as the Jewish efforts which by this obstinacy and courage aroused the wonder, fear, and hatred of Roman historians. The Messianic ideal arose from the whole “*weltanschauung*” of the Jewish people which was unique in the ancient world. The Messianic ideal arose out of *monotheism*.

Monotheism unified human history into a single process tending towards one final aim, the fulfilling of the purposes of God in creating the world. The idea of a Mes-

sianic age providing the denouement of the cosmic drama is inherent in monotheism. Polytheism, on the other hand, provided no such cosmic drama. Each nation had its own gods and there was no overriding purpose for mankind. History, in polytheistic cultures, was regarded as cyclic. Nations like individuals had their life-cycles of youth, maturity, and decline. Even the gods had these life-cycles; and above both gods and men was an inexorable, indifferent Fate. Only the Jews claimed to be in contact with this supreme immortal Fate, claiming also that it was not indifferent to mankind but a loving Father who molded the process of history. This concept of progress in history towards a final Utopia has been the inspiration of the progressive and utopian tradition in Western culture — so much so that it is difficult nowadays to visualize the *uniqueness* of this idea in the ancient world.

As well as being a source of unquenchable optimism, Monotheism was unable to acknowledge defeat. Polytheistic nations could admit that their gods had proved weaker than those of Rome; or could succumb to Roman syncretism by which the undefeated gods were *identified* with the gods of Rome (e.g., Jupiter/Zeus/Ammon). The Jewish God, the creator of Heaven and Earth, could not submit to such annexation ... When the Jews were in fact defeated it meant not that God had been defeated but that God's people had failed in their mission and must re-dedicate themselves by repentance. This is the meaning of the campaigns of repentance ... which accompanied a Messianic movement ... Monotheism began as the religion of a band of runaway slaves; and it expressed their determination not to submit to any oppressive individual or class again.

The King of the Jews

The Gospels show Jesus ... repeatedly prophesying his own death in Jerusalem and subsequent resurrection. The disciples are shown as failing to understand these prophecies, and at one point there is even a serious quarrel between Jesus and Peter on this very issue. While we may reject the idea that Jesus expected his own death in Jerusalem, it is quite possible that there was at this time some dissension between Jesus and his chief followers, the Twelve. The subject of dissention, most probably, was the plan of resistance to be followed against the Romans. Jesus's disciples, with their Zealot background, may have wished to organize a full-scale resistance. The countrywide enthusiasm for the advent of Jesus as Prophet-King must have seemed an ideal opportunity for mobilizing a large army to engage the Romans in battle. Jesus, on the other hand, was a convinced apocalypticist, who considered that the fight against Rome would be won largely by miraculous means, and therefore made no serious military preparations ... Jesus was no political or military opportunist. He was prepared to stake his life on his belief that his mission was of cosmic proportions. To drive out the Romans by force of arms, as Judas Maccabaeus had driven out the Greeks, was not his purpose; such success would only lead to the founding of one more

dynasty like the Hasmoneans. Jesus would inaugurate the kingdom of God, a new era in world history, or nothing ...

The Triumphal Entry was the high point of Jesus's political career. The apocalyptic hopes which had centered around him, first as a Prophet and then as a Prophet-King, burst into an ecstatic welcome as the teeming crowds of Jerusalem ... hailed him with the cry, "Hosanna! Save us!"

What was the date of Jesus's Triumphal Entry? According to the Gospels, it was at the time of the Feast of Passover, i.e., in the spring. However, there are many indications that this was not so, and that the Triumphal Entry in fact occurred in the autumn, the time of the Jewish festival known as the Feast of Tabernacles.

The whole series of events from the Triumphal Entry to Jesus's crucifixion (including the enquiry by the High Priest, a trial before the Sanhedrin, a trial before Herod Antipas, and a trial before Pilate, not to mention various previous activities such as the Cleansing of the Temple, the preaching in the Temple, and the Last Supper) is supposed to have taken six days ... This is an impossible speeding-up of human political and judicial proceedings ... The history to be argued here is that Jesus's Triumphal Entry took place just before the Feast of Tabernacles, and his execution took place on the Feast of Passover, about six months later.

The most obvious feature that points to autumn as the date of the Triumphal Entry is the palms which were in evidence on Palm Sunday. At Passover time, there are no palm branches in the region, and it is unlikely that Jesus's admirers would have greeted him with withered palm branches left over from the previous autumn. Furthermore, palm branches played (and still play today) an essential part in the rites of the Festival of Tabernacles. The "branches of trees" mentioned in the Triumphal Entry accounts are also important in these rites, being used in profusion to roof over the "tabernacles" or booths which give the festival its name, and to accompany the use of the palms (see Leviticus xxii. 40).

A curious confirmation of autumn being the time of the Triumphal Entry can be found in the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree, which happened immediately after his Entry. Jesus, apparently, came across a fig tree without fruit, and said, "Let no fruit grow on thee henceforth for ever"... Now this must have occurred in the autumn, as no one would expect to find a fig tree bearing fruit in the spring. The reason for Jesus's angry reaction is probably this: the Hebrew Prophets had foretold that the time of the Messiah would be one of unprecedented fertility of plants and animals (Joel ii. 22: "...the fig tree and the vine do yield their strength"). Jesus, with his Galilean belief in evil spirits, may have thought that the fig tree contained an evil spirit that was fighting against the kingdom of God.

Use of the cry "Hosanna" by the crowd (Hebrew, "hosha-na," meaning "save, please") also confirms an autumn date for Jesus's Entry. This cry has a special liturgical use in the rites of Tabernacles, and in no other festival. The cry was addressed to God, not to Jesus, and meant something like "Save us, God, through your Messiah." The word "save" is especially associated, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, with God's mercies

through rulers and fighters who protected Israel against their enemies. A prayer for such salvation was offered up in the Feast of Tabernacles and would have been especially fitting as an accompaniment to Jesus's Entry on a mission of salvation.

This leads us to an even more important point: that the Feast of Tabernacles was in a special sense a Royal festival. In general, the Jewish royal family had little part to play in the ceremonials of the Jewish religion; but the exception was the Feast of Tabernacles. In this festival, the King actually entered the Temple Court and read aloud "the paragraph of the King," i.e., the portion of the Mosaic Law relating to his duties (Deut. xvii. 14–20) ...

The Reading of the Law by the King was performed every seven years. No doubt Jesus timed his Entry to coincide with the end of the Year of Release, on the expiry of which the King's Reading of the Law took place. He would have carefully planned the timing of his Coronation and his Royal Progress so that he arrived in Jerusalem just in time for the Festival. He would then enter the Temple Court as King and renew the rite performed by his great predecessors on the Jewish throne. This act more than any other would signalize his accession to the throne and his intention to carry out the duties of king and savior.

One particular figure must have been in Jesus's mind, namely his great ancestor, King Solomon ... It was on the Feast of Tabernacles that Solomon performed the Dedication of the First Temple, offering a long, moving prayer to God, standing on a platform specially built in the Temple Court.

We can see now why Jesus's first action on entering Jerusalem was the Cleansing of the Temple. This action has been much trivialized by the Gospel writers, who have presented it as an individual demonstration in which Jesus chased out the money changers with a whip. The action was far more important than this: Jesus, as rightful King, carried out a thorough-going reform of the Temple, cleansing it from the corruptions of its venal Sadducean High-Priesthood. Jesus was at the height of power. Though he had no organized army, the Jewish masses applauded his every move. The Temple police, who would have acted sharply against mere individual violence, were powerless to hinder Jesus's reforms. He may have even appointed a new High Priest, which as King he was entitled to do. (This is the first thing that the insurgents did in the Jewish War of 66 A.D.).

Having cleansed the temple administration, Jesus must have carried through his plan of re-dedicating the Temple for the Messianic age by appearing in the Temple Court, like Solomon at the Dedication of the First Temple, to read "the paragraph of the King." No doubt, like Solomon too, he took the occasion to address a prayer to God for his new regime, and perhaps to give a prophetic message to the people. So much we can gather from a confused and garbled account, found only in the Gospel according to John, of a visit by Jesus to the Temple on the Feast of Tabernacles — though John represents this visit as being a distinct occasion from the Triumphal Entry.

The parallel between Jesus and Solomon throws light on a charge that was later made against Jesus: that he threatened to destroy the Temple and rebuild it ... It is

quite possible that Jesus did declare an intention to destroy and rebuild the Temple, once his Kingdom was fully established. The Temple which Jesus now ruled had been built by Herod the Great, known to the Pharisees as Herod the Wicked. The Pharisees had given their reluctant consent to Herod's rebuilding of the Temple, but despite its superb beauty, they never expected his Temple to last into the reign of the Messiah. If Jesus had indeed proved himself to be the King-Messiah by expelling the Romans, the Pharisees would not have objected to his destroying Herod's Temple and building another; they would have expected him to do so ... Why should the purified and rededicated Jewish people, restored to freedom, worship God in a temple built by the corrupt Herod? There is nothing here that the Pharisees would have regarded as blasphemous, or that would have frightened anyone except the High Priest, Caiaphas, and his clique ... The charge of planning to destroy and rebuild the Temple was part of the indictment against Jesus, not as a blasphemer or rebel against Judaism, but as a rebel against the quisling regime of the High Priest.

Thus the dating of the Triumphal Entry in the autumn, rather than the spring, makes much more sense of the whole series of events; this is just the time that someone putting himself forward as the Messiah would have chosen to enter Jerusalem. One more important argument has not yet been mentioned. The prophesy of Zechariah says that the great battle of the Last Days would take place in the autumn, at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. On the anniversary of this great event, all the nations of the earth would be required to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in Messianic times (Zech. xiv. 16). When Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on the colt of an ass, he was committing himself to Zechariah's concept of the Last Days. Those who knew their Scripture (and many did) would know from Jesus's manner of entry what his intentions were — to engage the Romans in battle before the Feast of Tabernacles came to an end.

Why then did the Gospel writers (probably following an already established GentileChurch tradition) place the Triumphal Entry in the spring? The most likely reason is that to the Gentile-Christians the important event in Jesus's life was his *death by crucifixion*, which they came to regard as the real point of the story. It seemed more dramatic therefore to telescope events, subordinating them all to the Crucifixion and crowding them all into the last scene of the play. The Crucifixion took place in the spring; this, therefore, became the time of all the culminating events of Jesus's life.

In the resurrection cults of Adonis, Attis, and Osiris, the death and resurrection of the Young God took place in the spring. The Triumphal Entry, therefore, would accord with the feting of the Young God before his sacrifice in these cults; and it would therefore be felt right to move the Triumphal Entry much closer to the Sacrifice to which it was now merely the preliminary. The appeal of Christianity to the ancient world depended a good deal on such affinities.

To Jesus, however, who expected success, not failure, and who would not have understood the romantic apotheosis of failure, the natural time for his arrival in Jerusalem was the autumn, the time of the harvest-rejoicing. Many of Jesus's parables compare

the coming of the kingdom of God to the harvest time. This was the most joyous time of the Jewish year, when the New Year period of purification was over, the harvest was secure, and the time for thanksgiving had arrived. The Feast of Tabernacles is the only one of which Scripture says “And you shall be wholly joyful.” Passover, the spring festival, was the time of beginning salvation, the anniversary of the Exodus from Egypt, the beginning of the Jewish story. But the triumphant end of the story could be expected to occur in the autumn; just as King Solomon celebrated in the autumn the end of a long period of tribulation and the inauguration of a Messianic Reign ...

The Day of the Lord

Jesus’s reign as King of the Jews in Jerusalem lasted for less than a week. What happened during that week? According to the Gospels, the only positive action performed by Jesus was his Cleansing of the Temple. After that, apparently, he confined himself to teaching and preaching in the Temple until the time of his arrest. From the argument of the last chapter, we see that Jesus did much more than this. The Cleansing of the Temple was not an isolated incident but a full reform, entailing the occupation of the Temple area by Jesus and his followers. As in so many other insurrections of this kind described by Josephus, Jesus would have made himself master of *part* only of Jerusalem. Most of Jerusalem would still have been held by the Roman troops of Pilate and the Jewish troops of the High Priest. From the point of view of Pilate and Caiaphas, the insurrection was not a great affair. For a few days (as they would have put it) a deluded fanatic with mob support was able to hold a limited area of Jerusalem, including the Temple grounds, thereby interrupting the jurisdiction of the High Priest temporarily. The Temple services were not interrupted, for Jesus allowed the vast majority of the priests to remain at their posts, ejecting only those closely associated with the quisling Caiaphas.

However, for those few days, Jesus reigned supreme in the Temple area. The Gospels make it clear that the High Priest was unwilling to attempt the arrest of Jesus because of the strong popular support given him by the Festival crowd. Caiaphas probably calculated that it would be better to wait until the first wave of enthusiasm was over and then catch Jesus off guard. He did not ask for the aid of Roman troops at this stage because he thought he would be able to handle the matter himself.

Jesus’s appearances in the Temple during those few days would have been as a Prophet-King, not as the preacher portrayed in the Gospels. His performance of the Tabernacles rites of the King was a political act of great significance, consolidating his claim to the Messiahship. His preaching was no doubt of an apocalyptic character, as the Gospels indeed show, but not prophesying his own death and the doom that would come on the Jews and the Temple; these prophesies were inserted in the Gospels after the defeat of the Jews and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D.

Jesus did not spend all his time in the Temple area during his few days of kingship. In the evenings he went to the Mount of Olives, on the east of Jerusalem, about a mile outside the city. The prophesy of Zechariah on which Jesus was particularly relying states that the location of the miracle would be the Mount of Olives. This mountain was of great religious significance, especially for a Messiah, for not only was it the location of the expected miracle, it was also the place where David used to pray. Moreover, it was here that the prophet Ezekiel had seen the appearance of the “glory of God” for which Jesus was waiting.

We come to the incident known as the Last Supper. It follows from the argument of the last chapter that this took place not at Passover time but during the Feast of Tabernacles. In the Gospels the Last Supper has been overlaid with myth serving three purposes: to show that Jesus foresaw and intended his own death on the cross; to show how Judas Iscariot became ... determined to betray Jesus; and to show that Jesus instituted the rite of Communion, with its pagan symbolism of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the god.

No trace is revealed of any of the special rites of a Passover “Seder,” such as the eating of unleavened bread, the eating of the Paschal lamb, the bitter herbs, and the relating of the Exodus from Egypt. The only special rite of the Tabernacles, as regards eating, is the taking of meals in the Succah, or booth (from which the festival takes its name). Of this there is some trace in the odd reference to an “upper room,” described in Mark as “strewn over.” The ritual booths or “Tabernacles” were often constructed on the flat roofs of houses, so the “upper room” may in fact have been a “tabernacle” which was “strewn over” with tree branches in the prescribed manner.

The feature of Sanctification (“Kiddush”) with wine and bread is common to all Jewish festivals, and applies to Tabernacles as much as to Passover. There is no mystical symbolism of “flesh” and “blood” in the Jewish use of bread and wine in the ceremony of Kiddush. The wine is used first to pronounce a blessing on the Festival. The bread is then used as a ceremonial beginning to the Festival. Jesus would have been appalled to know of the pagan interpretation later put on the simple Kiddush with which he began the Last Supper.

Jesus had no foreknowledge of his failure and crucifixion. The Last Supper was a celebration with his closest disciples of his appearance as King and the imminent overthrow of the Roman power. After preparing himself by several nights of prayer on the Mount of Olives, Jesus was convinced that “the day of the Lord” was close at hand, and he called together his disciples for a final strengthening of the bond between them before their crucial testing time. The atmosphere must have been extremely tense. They were about to embark on a great venture on which the fate of their country and the whole world would depend. But the special poignancy and drama of the Gospel accounts are the product of hindsight and of the myths that grew up later to explain Jesus’s failure.

The Last Supper would also have been regarded as a foretaste of the great Supper and Feast which would take place if Jesus were successful. Jewish legend, prophesying

Messianic times, contained many details of the great Messianic Feast at which the Leviathan would be eaten and all the great heroes of Jewish history would be present. This is no doubt what Jesus meant when he said at the Last Supper, "Verily I say unto you, I will drink no more the fruit of the vine until that day that I drink it new in the kingdom of God." Their next meal would be the Messianic Feast itself, in celebration of victory over God's enemies, the Romans.

After the Last Supper, Jesus led his disciples, as usual, to the Mount of Olives. But this time there was a difference. Jesus was convinced that this was the night on which God would appear in glory and overthrow the foreign invaders of his Holy Land. Accordingly, he required his disciples to equip themselves with swords. Two swords were produced, and Jesus said, "It is enough." The Messiah and his followers, like Gideon and his tiny band, would be required to fight, for the prophesy of Zechariah had said, among its awesome predictions of God's intervention, "And Judah also shall fight at Jerusalem." But two swords would be enough: the miracle would be even greater than in the case of Gideon.

Only Luke ... has retained the incident of the swords. He could have no possible motive in inventing it, for it goes against the whole grain of his narrative. The only possible explanation of its inclusion is that it is a survival from the original story which only Luke was not ruthless enough to excise. The Gospel writers were following the outline of an older Gospel. To twist this Gospel to a new meaning required courage of a kind; sometimes thier nerve may have failed them. This would explain why bones of the old narrative can sometimes be seen jutting out uncomfortably from the body of the new.

Jesus was now determined to put to the test his interpretation of the prophesy of Zechariah. It may be useful, therefore, to have before us this prophesy, which was of such fateful importance for Jesus:

Then shall the Lord go forth, and fight against these nations, as when he fought in the day of battle. And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives which is before Jerusalem in the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a great valley; and half the mountain shall move toward the north, and half of it toward the south. And ye shall flee to the valley of the mountains ... and the Lord my God shall come, and all the saints with thee. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the light shall be known to the Lord, not day nor night: but it shall come to pass that at evening time it shall be light ... And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Lord, and his name one ... And this shall be the plague wherewith the Lord will smite all the people that have fought against Jerusalem. Their flesh shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in thier holes, and their tongue shall consume away in thier mouth ... and Judah also shall fight

at Jerusalem ... And everyone that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles ... and in that day there shall be no more Canaanite in the house of the Lord of hosts.

The strong influence of the prophesy of Zechariah on Jesus is shown by his mode of entrance into Jerusalem riding on an ass's colt. Such deliberate fulfillment of Zechariah ix. 9 suggests that Jesus also had the rest of Zechariah's prophesies in mind.

"The people that have fought against Jerusalem" were none other than the Romans, the heathen barbarians who had united "the nations" in a great empire and had set their faces against God. He himself, Jesus of Nazareth, was the person to whom the prophet was addressing his instructions; the Messiah who would arrive in Jerusalem on an ass's colt, and would stand in "the valley of the mountains" together with a company of "saints" to witness the appearance of the glory of God on the Mount of Olives. He would see the Romans stricken by a plague, and would lead "Judah" in fighting against them. Then, after a great victory, he would reign as King-Messiah in Jerusalem, where every year on the anniversary of his victory he would welcome representatives of every nation on earth, coming to pay homage to the Lord of Hosts in his Temple.

It may be objected that this account makes Jesus appear insane. Could he really have expected the prophesies of Zechariah to be fulfilled so literally that night on the Mount of Olives? How could he have been so sure he knew the exact hour of the prophesies, and that it was through him that they would be fulfilled? As a person, Jesus was what would today be described as a "manic" character, i.e., one capable of remaining for long periods at a high pitch of enthusiasm and euphoria. This enabled him to impress his associates to the extent that they could not let his memory die. He was not Judas of Galilee, or Bar Kochba, who were Messiahs of essentially ordinary or normal temperament, men who made their bid for power, failed, and that was that. It was no accident that Jesus gave rise to a new world religion. Christianity was a falsification of everything that Jesus stood for, yet every detail of this falsification was built on something that existed in his temperament and outlook. It was only a step for the Hellenistic Gentiles to transform Jesus's soaring conviction of his universal mission into a dogma of his divinity; or to transform his confidence of victory by the hand of God, rather than by guerilla methods, into a pacifist other-worldly doctrine which transferred the concept of victory on to a "spiritual" plane. Jesus's "manic" temperament was the mainspring of the early Christian Church, with its ecstatic mood, its universal ambition, and its confidence in ultimate victory.

To modern minds, it would seem insane to expect to overthrow Rome without a proper army and with only two swords, because of some obscure sentences in a book written five hundred years before. Yet the Christian account of Jesus makes him appear even more insane. According to this account, Jesus regarded himself as one of the Three Persons of the Triune Almighty God, who had descended from the immensities of the World of Light in order to immolate himself on behalf of mankind. Such a

combination of megalomania and suicidal fantasy was alien to the society of Judea and Galilee in Jesus's day. They had their own apocalyptic extravagances, but this kind of Hellenistic schizophrenia was quite outside their experience or understanding. Jesus never regarded himself in this way. His profoundly impressive "manic" nature followed the pattern laid down for such temperaments in the Jewish prophetic tradition. His claims would have seemed, to his contemporaries, breathlessly daring but entirely reasonable.

The Jewish Resistance against Rome consisted of various groups, all of which were religious in character. They differed, however, on the question of how much could be left to the intervention of God. The Zealots were prepared for a long, hard fight by realistic military methods. Bar Kochba, successor of the Zealots, is said to have prayed to God, "Master of the Universe, I do not ask that you should fight on my side; only that you should not fight for the Romans, and that will be enough." Some would-be Messiahs, such as Theudas, were at the other extreme, and relied on God even more than Jesus did. The moderate Pharisees were cautious "wait-and-see" people, who like Gamaliel, thought, "If this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought; but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it." But even they could be carried away by apocalyptic fervor at times, as was Rabbi Akiva in the days of Bar Kochba. Jesus can be placed, in the spectrum of the Jewish Resistance, as an apocalyptic Pharisee whose hopes were similar to those of Theudas, and the prophet from Egypt, mentioned by Josephus, who also centered his movement around an expected miracle on the Mount of Olives.

Having arrived at the Mount of Olives, Jesus stationed himself with his disciples in the "garden of Gethsemane." This is located traditionally at a spot at the foot of the Mount of Olives, but possibly is further away from Jerusalem in a low valley between two spurs of the mountain. Zechariah's prophecy says that God's feet would stand on the Mount of Olives, which would split in an earthquake towards the east and west, the mass of the mountain removing towards the north and south. The prophecy goes on, "And ye shall flee into the valley of the mountains." Jesus therefore took his disciples to the spot indicated by the prophet, where he could watch the miracle and not be overwhelmed by it. He was further assured by the prophet, "And my Lord will come, and all the saints with thee." (Alternative translation: "...if all with thee are holy.") God Himself would join the Messiah in the valley and fight against the enemy by smiting his ranks with a plague. Other startling miracles would occur: living waters would go out from Jerusalem in two rivers; and "at evening time, it shall be light."

Once in the "valley of decision," Jesus applied himself to prayer and vigil. He told his disciples, "Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation." Jesus now experienced an Agony of sorrow about his approaching crucifixion. This, at least, is the version of Mark and Matthew. (John omits the whole incident.) Only Luke uses the word "agony," and what he seems to describe is not an agony of sorrow but one of strenuous prayer. "And being in agony, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground." What was Jesus praying for so earnestly

at this time? Why did he instruct his disciples to “watch and pray,” an injunction he had used previously to those waiting for the coming of the kingdom of God? Why did he warn them against entering into temptation? If he had resigned to the Crucifixion and was spending the night in Gethsemane waiting for Judas to arrive with the troops to arrest him, there was no particular reason to pray or even to stay awake. And there was no particular temptation likely to assail the disciples while they were waiting.

On the theory outlined here, however, there was great reason to pray and to stay awake, and there was great reason to avoid temptation. Jesus was not waiting passively in the Vale of Gethsemane for his arrest. He was expecting an awesome miracle and the appearance of the glory of God: but he must have felt that this manifestation would depend, to some extent, on his own worthiness and that of his disciples.

Jesus had not merely prophesied the coming of the kingdom of God; he had also prepared for it. He had campaigned among “the lost sheep of Israel,” calling them to repentance, because he felt that the coming of God’s kingdom was being held back by Israel’s sins. Pharisee writings often stress that God’s promises to Israel are not automatically fulfilled; they depend on Israel’s worthiness and cooperation. Consequently, even though Jesus felt that the time was propitious for the coming of “the day of the Lord,” he could not be quite sure. What was needed now was a last great effort of prayer. The belief in the efficacy of prayer was very strong among the Pharisees, especially when the prayer came from a prophet. What might not be accomplished by the powerful prayers of a dedicated Messiah-Prophet, supported by a band of holy men, all concentrating their thoughts toward God, at a time and place appropriate for salvation?

Only the most powerful concerted beam of holy concentration, directed from Gethsemane toward God, could obliterate the traces of the sins of Israel, and bring about the hour of redemption. Jesus alone was not sufficient, for Zechariah had said, “And my Lord will come, if all with thee are holy.” This explains why Jesus narrowed his company to the Twelve on that night. He wanted the company of those on whom he could most rely, for the power of sinless prayer would be far more important than the strength of mere numbers.

It is no wonder that Jesus gave the Messianic slogan, “Watch and pray” to his disciples, that he himself went into an agony of prayer, and that he reproved his disciples when he felt a lack of concentration and wholeheartedness in their prayer.

The story of the failure of the disciples in Gethsemane must have developed very early in the history of the Jewish-Christian Church. It was impossible to believe that Jesus himself had failed. His disciples themselves preferred to believe that they had failed him, since by blaming themselves they could go on believing in him. He had temporarily withdrawn from the world, like Elijah when he ascended to heaven, but when they proved themselves worthy he would return and lead them to victory.

Later, in the Gentile-Christian Church, when Jesus had been turned into a god, the idea that he needed the support of his disciples to accomplish his mission became

inappropriate. Jesus's injunction to his disciples in Gethsemane to watch and pray, and his own agony of prayer, became pointless and incomprehensible.

It was not difficult for the disciples, after Jesus's arrest and execution, to fall back on guilt feelings and attach the whole blame to themselves. Jesus must have made them feel guilty on many occasions by his white-hot faith and selflessness ... This may account to some extent for the many stories in the Gospels about the lapses of the disciples.

Jesus, then, stands in the Vale of Gethsemane, with the Mount of Olives looming above him. This, he fervently believes, is the valley of decision, the valley of the Lord's judgement. If he has chosen the moment well, if the hearts of his companions are pure, and if his campaign and reclamation among the "lost sheep of Israel" has been successful, the last battle will be fought. But, as he prays, he feels a sense of struggle. He wrestles in prayer till his sweat falls like great drops of blood to the ground. The difficulty of his prayer is unpropitious, and he can see that the powers of his chosen companions are flagging. With a great sadness he realizes that the long travail of Israel has not yet come to an end.

The Arrest and Trial

The miraculous appearance of the Lord God on the Mount of Olives did not occur. Like Theudas and "the prophet from Egypt" and many other messiah-figures of the period, Jesus, despite his tremendous charisma, turned out to be deceived in his apocalyptic hopes. When the Roman troops ... arrived at Gethsemane they found a handful of rebels equipped with only two swords. A few blows were exchanged, but Jesus was soon captured. The disciples fled in dismay and the troops, who had orders to bring in the ringleader only, proceeded on their way with the prisoner.

Jewish Argument Against Jesus As Messiah

(author unknown)

quoted from John E. Remsburg

The Christ, page 362

We do not find in the present comparatively imperfect stage of human progress the realization of that blessed condition of mankind which the prophet Isaiah associates with the era when Messiah is to appear. And as our Hebrew Scriptures speak of one Messianic advent only, and not of two advents; and as the inspired Book does not preach Messiah's kingdom as a matter of faith, but distinctly identifies it with matters of fact which are to be made evident to the senses, we cling to the plain inference to be drawn from the text of the Bible, and we deny that Messiah has yet appeared, and upon the following grounds: First, because of the three distinctive facts which

the inspired seer of Judah inseparably connects with the advent of the Messiah, vis., (1) the cessation of war and the uninterrupted reign of peace, (2) the prevalence of a perfect concord of opinion on all matters bearing upon the worship of the one and only God, and (3) the ingathering of the remnant of Judah and of the dispersed ten tribes of Israel — not one has, up to the present time, been accomplished. Second, we dissent from the proposition that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah announced by the prophets, because the church which he founded, and which his successors developed, has offered, during a succession of centuries, most singular contrast to what is described by the Hebrew scriptures as the immediate consequence of Messiah's advent, and of his glorious kingdom. The prophet Isaiah declares that when the Messiah appears, peace, love, and union will be permanently established; and every candid man must admit that the world has not realized the accomplishment of this prophecy. Again, in the days of Messiah, all men, as Scripture saith, "are to serve God with one accord"; and yet it is very certain that since the appearance of him whom Christians believe to be Messiah, mankind has been split into more hostile divisions on the ground of religious belief, and more antagonistic sects have sprung up, than in any historic age before Christianity was preached.

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Jesus and the Jewish Resistance
abridged from *Revolution in Judea: Jesus and the Jewish Resistance* by Hyam
Maccoby
1973

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