

# Jesus and Judaism

By Craig A. Evans

"What more than anything else," says Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, "incited them to the war was an ambiguous oracle, found in their sacred scriptures, to the effect that at that time one from their country would become ruler of the world" (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 6.5.4 §312). We suspect that Josephus has in mind the prophecy of Numbers 24:17 ("from Jacob a star shall go forth") not only because it fits so well the immediate context, but because a few paragraphs earlier he mentions a star that appeared over the city of Jerusalem, followed by a comet that shone in the sky for a year: "By the inexperienced this was regarded as a good omen" (*Jewish Wars*, 6.5.4 §289-91).

This is a remarkable admission on the part of Josephus, for the wily survivor of the great rebellion scrupulously avoids the subject of messianism in his scattered discussion of Jewish beliefs. He does this deliberately, so that his Roman audience will view Jewish faith as constituting no threat to the empire. This apparently inadvertent admission is carefully camouflaged, for Josephus claims that the prophecy of Jewish scripture was in fact fulfilled by the acclamation of Vespasian as emperor while on Jewish soil. Notwithstanding Josephus' clever strategy and resignification of sacred scripture, we nonetheless catch an important glimpse of popular Jewish messianic expectation. It is in the light of this expectation that Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15) should be understood.

Josephus' reluctance to acknowledge the messianic dimension of the Judaism of his day is curiously paralleled by a similar reluctance in scholarly circles today. Some scholars who are engaged in the "Third Quest" of the historical Jesus assume that Jesus had no messianic self-understanding and had no interest in eschatology or in the restoration of Israel. Indeed, some of these scholars deride the notion.<sup>1</sup> But an even-handed assessment of the sources—biblical and extra-biblical—suggest that Jesus' message and activities situate him squarely at the center of Jewish hopes and concerns. There are five important elements that make this clear: (1) the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the expectation of Israel's restoration; (2) the miracles and exorcisms; (3) Jesus' messianic self-understanding; (4) a high view of the authority of Torah; and (5) teachings and activities in the Temple precincts. Let us review these elements.

## PROCLAMATION OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL

The Markan evangelist summarizes Jesus' message in this way: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Jesus' teaching is characterized by Kingdom parables in all sources and layers of tradition (i.e., Mark, Q, and material unique to Matthew and Luke). These parables closely resemble those of the rabbis in subsequent generations.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the very proclamation itself, "The kingdom of God is at hand," reflects the Aramaic paraphrase of Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7, both of which read: "Behold, the kingdom of your God is revealed!" Jesus' predilection for the book of Isaiah, his frequent preaching and teaching in the synagogue, and the coherence between his teaching and the Aramaic paraphrase of Isaiah (which emerged in the synagogues)<sup>3</sup> strongly argue for understanding Jesus' proclamation in the light of a popular Jewish piety deeply influenced by prophetic scripture. Burton Mack's recent attempt to understand the expression "Kingdom of God" in Hellenistic, philosophical tones is not persuasive.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus' appointment of the Twelve (Mark 3:14, 6:7) suggestively points to ideas of the restoration of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Also of significance is that Jesus called these special disciples "apostles," that is, those "sent" to proclaim the message of the Kingdom. This concept is most probably rooted in Isaiah 52:7 (cf. Rom. 10:14-15, where Paul appeals to this passage to clarify the apostolic office) and 61:1-2. The latter passage Jesus

applied to himself in his reply to the imprisoned John the Baptist: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (Matt. 1 1:5; cf. Luke 4:16-30).

Moreover, Jesus promises his disciples that they will sit upon 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30). This promise, in combination with the threatening Parable of the Wicked Vineyard Farmers (Mark 12:1-12), clearly implies that Jesus foresaw a change in Israel's administration. The exploitative ruling priests will be replaced by Jesus' disciples. Thus, Jesus understood himself as anointed of the Spirit to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom, a task he has delegated to 12 chosen disciples, whose very number signifies the restoration of Israel.

## **MIRACLES AND EXORCISMS**

Jesus linked his miracles and exorcisms to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God: "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). Evidently Jesus understood himself as the one promised by John (cf. Mark 1:7), who is "stronger": "But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house" (Mark 3:27). For Jesus the miracles, especially the exorcisms, offered powerful, tangible evidence that God's Kingdom was invading and overpowering Satan's kingdom.

Morton Smith tried to define the miracles and exorcisms of Jesus in terms of Greco-Roman magic.<sup>6</sup> This approach, however, has gained few adherents. Geza Vermes' Jewish holy man paradigm rings truer.<sup>7</sup> The upshot is that Jesus' miracles are still best explained in the light of Palestinian Judaism of late antiquity, miracles intended to document the powerful presence of God who is in the process of reclaiming and restoring Israel.<sup>8</sup>

## **MESSIANIC SELF-UNDERSTANDING**

The proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the sense of empowerment, and the demonstration of power over Satan at the very least lead to the conclusion that Jesus possessed a sense of mission. But his appeal to Isaiah 61:1-2 suggests that he understood himself as the one "anointed" of the Lord, that is, as Israel's Messiah. A recently published scroll from Qumran has lent additional support to this traditional Christian belief. According to 4Q521, "Heaven and earth will obey his Messiah and all that is in them will not turn away from the commandments of the holy ones ... for (the Lord) will honor the pious upon the throne of the eternal Kingdom, setting prisoners free, opening the eyes of the blind, raising up those who are bowed down. ... For he will heal the wounded, revive the dead, proclaim good news to the poor." This passage, which contains allusions to Isaiah 26:19 (raising the dead), 35:5-6 (opening the eyes of the blind), and 61:1-2 (proclaiming good news to the poor), parallels Jesus' reply to John the Baptist. Because 4Q521 implies that these wonderful things happen at the time of the Messiah, we may correctly assume that by describing his ministry in the same terms, Jesus was telling John that, yes, indeed he is the Messiah, the "one who is to come."

It is highly probable that Jesus was understood by himself and his closest followers in messianic terms prior to the Easter event for two basic reasons. First, all of his followers spoke of Jesus as the Messiah or Christ. There may have been theological differences about this matter or that, but there is no evidence of anyone in his following who simply thought of Jesus as a beloved rabbi or prophet. Such widespread, universal opinion is best explained as having its origin in Jesus himself, and not simply in an idea that arose solely on the basis of Easter. Second, the Easter event alone cannot account for a messianic assessment of Jesus. There simply is no tradition that expected a messianic contender to die and then be resurrected as evidence of his messiahship. Had no one thought of Jesus as the Messiah prior to Easter, his alleged resurrection should not have led people to think of him as the Messiah. Had Jesus died on the cross simply as a rabbi, or prophet, or philosopher, then in the aftermath of his resurrection his followers would have continued to think of him as a rabbi, or prophet, or philosopher, whose teaching and life had been dramatically vindicated.

Finally, his crucifixion as "King of the Jews" is best explained in reference to a prior messianic identity, as opposed to an identity as a rabbi, or prophet, or philosopher. The epithet "King of the Jews" is very probably authentic, for it does not represent Christian titles for Jesus. Jesus is Messiah, Son of God, Lord, and Savior. He is not King of the Jews.

## HIGH VIEW OF THE AUTHORITY OF TORAH

According to Luke 10:25-28, an expert in the law asks Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds with questions of his own: "What is written in the Law?" And how does he read it? The Scripture scholar responds by reciting the double commandment, a commandment which Jesus also is said to have recited (Mark 12:29-31): "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus commends the man for his answer: "You have answered right; do this, and you will live." The Scripture scholar's question constitutes the classic Jewish religious question (see also Mark 10:17). His answer, prompted by Jesus' question, reflects a summary of the Law that is attested in various forms in many sources (cf. *T. Iss.* 5:2; 7:6; *T. Dan* 5:3; *Ep. Artist.* 229; Philo, *Virt. 1*, 95; *Spec. Leg.* 2.63; *Abr.* 208).<sup>9</sup> Jesus' positive response, in which he alludes to Leviticus 18:5, could not possibly be more thoroughly Jewish.

Does the question of the greatest commandment derive from authentic tradition? It probably does. Had this exchange been produced by a Christian community, surely the right answer would have been different. After all, Christians proclaimed that salvation came through faith in the risen Jesus (e.g., Acts 2:38; 4:12; Rom. 10:10), not through obedience to the Jewish Law. Therefore, Luke 10:25-28, even if edited and recontextualized, must derive from the life and ministry of Jesus, not from the Christian community.

What is especially interesting here is that once again Jesus' teaching presupposes Jewish interpretive tradition. Jesus' assurance to the legal expert ("Do this, and you will live") alludes to Leviticus 18:5, as commentators recognize.<sup>10</sup> But Leviticus 18:5 says nothing about "eternal life," which is what the legal expert had asked about. Evidently, Jesus presupposed the Aramaic paraphrase: "You should observe my ordinances and my laws, which, if a person practices them, he shall live by them in eternal life" (*Tg. Onq* Lev. 18:5). The antiquity of this interpretive tradition is attested at Qumran, where those who do "the desires of his will, 'which a man should do and so have life in them' [Lev. 18:5] ... shall receive eternal life" (CD 3:15-16, 20). Jesus' high regard for Torah places him squarely at the center of Jewish faith and piety.

## ACTIONS IN JERUSALEM

Jesus' actions in Jerusalem during Passion Week are entirely consistent with actions taken by other Jews in late antiquity. Jesus spends virtually all the daylight hours in the Temple precincts teaching and disputing points of Jewish interpretation and belief. His entry into the city appears to have been deliberately modeled on Zechariah 9:9. Other elements of Zechariah are in evidence, such as criticizing the business activities in the Temple precincts (Mark 11:16-17; cf. Zech. 14:20-21). In his demonstration (the so-called "cleansing of the Temple") Jesus appeals to the great oracle of Isaiah 56:1-8, which envisioned the day when peoples from all over the world would come to Jerusalem to worship. This is not the creation of the church, but authentic tradition. Why would early Christians have Jesus speak of people going to Jerusalem to worship God in the Temple? Christians were seeking to bring people into the church, to worship God in the name of his Son Jesus.

Critical of Temple polity, Jesus alludes to Jeremiah 7:11 ("cave of robbers"), thus implying that the Temple establishment faced the same danger that the Temple establishment centuries earlier had faced. In appearing to Jeremiah 7, Jesus has once again assumed the role of Jewish prophet, much as another Jesus (this one a son of Ananias) would do 30 years later (cf. Josephus, *J. W.* 6.5.3 §300-309).<sup>11</sup> Jesus utters the Parable of the Wicked Tenant Farmers, which again reflects acquaintance with the Aramaic paraphrase of Isaiah, warns of the avarice of the scribes, laments the poverty of the widow who gave her last penny (her whole life), and debates with Sadducees the question of resurrection. Finally, he speaks of the Temple's

certain doom, retires to eat the Passover meal with his disciples, and slips out to pray. At every point we find Jesus behaving in a manner that is perfectly intelligible from a Jewish perspective.

## CONCLUSION

A more thorough review of Jesus' teaching would only add to this picture. Jesus is situated squarely within Palestinian Judaism. It is true that there was no such thing as a non-Hellenistic Palestine, at least not after Alexander's conquest, but some scholars in recent years have exaggerated the degree of Greco-Roman influence and in so doing have minimized the Jewish context in which Jesus lived and ministered. Some in the Jesus Seminar have tried to refashion Jesus as a philosopher of sorts, perhaps even a Cynic. It has even been argued that a Cynic or two might have lived in Sepphoris and that because Jesus lived in nearby Nazareth he might have come in contact with one of these Cynics.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps. But in growing up in Nazareth, Jesus grew up next door to a synagogue; and as we have seen, there are in Jesus' teaching and behavior numerous indications of longtime acquaintance with the synagogue. Where the weight of probabilities fall I shall let the reader decide. The Jesus Seminar cannot simply make a Jesus a "Cynic Jew"; they have to create a Cynic Judaism." In the final analysis, we have a very Jewish Jesus who spoke the language of Judaism and spoke to the needs and hopes of man of his countrymen. The movement he launched cannot really be adequately understood in another context.

One of the first things seminarians are taught about biblical interpretation is the importance of context. If the interpreter has found the proper context, his or her interpretation will be the better informed and more accurate for it. Becoming acquainted with Jesus' Jewish context is a must for sound exegesis; finding it brings us much closer to the Jesus of history and of faith.

## ENDNOTES

1 Notably, B. L. Mack, "The Kingdom Sayings in Mark," *Forum* 3.1 (1987) 3.47, esp. 17. Mack caricatures traditional scholarship, which supposedly holds to the "view that Galilee was abuzz with apocalyptic hysteria, the hotbed of rebellion under Herod Antipas."

2 See B. H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables: Rediscovering the Roots of Jesus' Teaching* (New York: Paulist, 1989); H. K. McArthur and R. M. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables from the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). B. B. Scott (*Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989], 18) views Jesus' rabbinic-like parables "as composed out of the elements of a traditional thesaurus."

3 On the coherence between Jesus' teaching and the Aramaic paraphrase of Isaiah, see B. D. Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible: Jesus' Use of the Interpreted Scripture of His Time* (GNS 8; Wilmington: Glazier, 1984).

4 B. L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 69-74 idem, "The Kingdom Sayings in Mark," 3-47. Mack claims that the expression "Kingdom of God" is rare in Palestine, but its appearance in the Aramaic paraphrases of Scripture and the numerous references to it in the Songs of the Sabbath Scrolls at Qumran and Masada belies this claim.

5 As is rightly argued by B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 154; and E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 95-106.

6 M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978). For a better, more carefully nuanced comparison of Jesus' miracles with magical practices and beliefs in late antiquity, see J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (SBT 2.28 London: SCM Press, 1974); Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 157-73; and H. C. Kee, *Medicine, Miracles and Magi in New Testament Times* (SNTSMS, 55; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

7 G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew. A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 58-82. See also G. H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Tubingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1993; repr. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993).

8 See also C. Brown, "Synoptic Miracle Stores," *Forum* 2/4 (1986), 55-76.

9 See D. C. Allison, "Mark 12.28-31 and the Decalogue," in C. A. Evans and W. R. Stegner (eds.), *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 270-78.

10 See J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV* (AB 24A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985) 881.

11 Jesus son of Ananias proclaimed Jerusalem's doom from A.D. 62 until his death in 69. According to Josephus, his words alluded to Jer. 7:34.

12 J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991).

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