

Johnson's "A History of the Jews": Used Prophecy as a Problem-Solving Device: Wanted Christ to Be Conquering King but Ignored Him as Suffering Savior

Johnson, Paul. *A History of the Jews*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1987), 121-25 (continued):

Of these works the most influential was the Book of Daniel both because it found its way into the canon and because it became the prototype for many others. It predicts the end of empire and the emergence of God's kingdom, possibly under the heroic liberator, a Son of Man.

Daniel promised not a restoration of the historic, physical kingdom, like David's, but a final event of an altogether different kind: resurrection and personal immortality. What particularly struck the Pharisees was the assertion at the conclusion of the Book of Daniel that, at the end of days, 'the people shall be delivered. And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt' [Daniel 12:1c-2]. (p. 121)

The idea of judgment at death and immortality on the basis of merit ... was not Jewish, because it was not in the Torah, and the Sadducees, who stuck to their texts, seemed to have denied the afterlife completely. But the idea was embryonic in Isaiah, and the Pharisees eagerly seized upon this aspect of apocalypse because it appealed to their strong sense of ethical justice. If there were no justice in this world, there would certainly be justice in the next, when the righteous would be rewarded by the divine judge, and the wicked sentenced. The idea of final judgment fitted neatly into the whole Judaic concept of the rule of law. It was because they taught this doctrine, together with a rationalistic approach to observing the Law, which made salvation feasible, that the Pharisees attracted such a following, especially among the pious poor, who knew from bitter experience the small likelihood of happiness this side of death. (pp. 121-22)

But if the Pharisees drew a distinction between the heavenly kingdom and the earthly one, others took apocalyptic more literally. They believed the kingdom of righteousness was physical, real, imminent and that they were bound to hasten its appearance. The most violent group were referred to by the Roman occupation forces as the Sicarii; they carried hidden daggers and used to assassinate Jewish collaborators, especially in the crowds at festival times. This was merely, however, the ultra-violent terrorist fringe of the movement who called themselves the Zealots. According to Josephus, the movement was founded in 6 AD by Judah the Galilean, when he organized an uprising against Roman direct rule and taxation. He taught the ancient doctrine that Jewish society was theocracy, acknowledging rule by none but God. [Note: 1 Samuel 8:11-22]

Josephus distinguishes between the Zealots, who preached and practiced violence, and what he terms the other three principal sects, Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes \es-sēnz\ [Greek: Ἐσσηνοί *Essēnoi*], who seemed to have accepted foreign rule in general. But the fact that Judah's deputy, Zadok \zā'-dok\, was a Pharisee indicates that the lines could not be drawn sharply, and, as the first century AD progressed, more and more pious Jews, such as the Pharisees, seem to have accepted that violence was inevitable in certain circumstances. (p. 122)

Even more controversy surrounds the various millenarian sects of the desert fringe, whom Josephus grouped together as Essenes. The best known were the Qumran \koum-rän\ monks, because their Dead Sea monastery was excavated by G. L. Harding and Père de Vaux \vawz\ in 1951-6.

John the Baptist lived and worked for the most part in Galilee and the Peraea \pa-rē'-a\, territory which was now overwhelmingly Jewish but which had been annexed to Judaea by fire and sword—and often forcible conversion—in Maccabee times. It was an area both of fierce orthodoxy and diverse heterodoxy [WWCD-11: **Contrary to an acknowledged standard, a traditional form, or an established religion. Holding unorthodox opinions or doctrines.**], and of religious and political ferment. (p. 123)

The Baptist was a believer in what the Jews called Messiah. He was not a hermit, a separatist or an excluder. On the contrary: he preached to all Jews that the day of reckoning was coming. The Baptist was related to Jesus of Nazareth, baptized him and identified him as the Son of Man; and it was shortly after the Baptist's execution that Jesus began his own mission. What was this mission, and who did Jesus think he was?

The Jewish doctrine of the Messiah had its origins in the belief that King David had been anointed by the Lord, so that he and his descendants would reign over Israel to the end of time and would exercise dominion over alien peoples. After the fall of the kingdom, this belief had been transformed into a prophetic expectation that the rule of the House of David would be miraculously restored. (p. 124)

The messianic doctrine, being of complex and even contradictory origins, created great confusion in the minds of the Jews. But most of them seem to have assumed that the Messiah would be a political-military leader and that his coming would inaugurate a physical, earthly state. There is an important passage in the Acts of the Apostles describing how Gamaliel the Elder, at one time president of the Sanhedrin, dissuaded the Jewish authorities from punishing the early Christians, by arguing that the authenticity of their Messiah would be demonstrated by the success of their movement. The Christians, he said, should be left alone because, if their mission lacked divine sanction, 'it will come to nought' (Acts 5:34-40).

The other Jewish elders were persuaded by Gamaliel's argument, for they too thought in terms of an uprising designed to alter the government. When Herod the Great heard that the Messiah or Christ was born, he reacted with violence as if to a threat to his dynasty. Any Jew who listened to a man making messianic claims would take it for granted he had some kind of political and military programme. The Roman government, the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Sadducees and even the Pharisees assumed that a Messiah would make changes in the existing order, of which they were all part. The poor people of Judaea and Galilee would also believe that a Messiah preaching fundamental changes would be talking not, or not only, in spiritual and metaphysical terms, but of the realities of power—government, taxes, justice. (p. 125)

- 15) This may have been data overload but both excerpts were important to establish the historical setting of the Incarnation. During our Lord's adult life, Tiberius was the emperor of Rome. The mind-set of the Jews, regardless of their theological position, was a desire to remove themselves out from under the thumb of a tyrannical ruler and the oppression of a Gentile regime.
- 16) Remember also what time it was during the Incarnation: it was the dispensation of Israel; the prophecies of the Old Testament recognized the appearance of a Messiah through a Virgin Birth followed by the Tribulational events of "Daniel's seventieth week" culminating in the Second Advent, and the millennial kingdom of Messiah where the unconditional covenants were to be fulfilled.
- 17) The Tribulation is a seven-year period defined in Daniel 9:24-27. A complete analysis of this passage is available online by accessing lesson numbers CC02-365 through CC02-371, or by requesting them in audiotape or MP3 format from Media Ministries.