

death and resurrection wrought it. Here was not just another life to be written but a life to be preached.

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THE HIDDEN MESSIAH AND HIS ENTRY  
INTO JERUSALEM—I

'Many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Messiah" and they will lead many astray. . . . Then, if anyone says to you, "Lo, here is the messiah" or "There he is!" do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Lo, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, "Lo, he is in the wilderness" do not go out; if they say, "Lo, he is in the inner rooms" do not believe it.' (Mt. 24:5, 23-4)

How precise a commentary these words make on all that age, feverish, deeply disturbed, superficially religious, that went down in flames with the burning temple and city just a few weeks after the small Christian community, duly forewarned, had left it to settle in Pella, bearing with them, we must suppose, their precious scriptures. It was these words that Jesus not many years before had spoken, with the same city and temple before his eyes, as he sat on the hill of Olives. The last years of the second temple had been full of the sense of impending tragedy. In October 62, when the course of events was already getting rapidly out of hand, a crazed prophet or dervish, the namesake of our Lord, appeared in the city among the crowds at the feast of Booths, crying out his lament over the city: 'A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the holy house, a voice against the bridegroom and the bride, a voice against this whole people!' Dragged before the procurator Albinus and flogged to the point of death, he still refused to keep quiet and was let go as one out of his mind until, four years later, in the opening exchanges between the artillery of Vespasian and the beleaguered, he was struck with a stone from one of the *tormenta* and killed.<sup>1</sup> This was only one of the untoward signs seen those days. Some said they saw a star shaped like a sword hang over the city, and there was also (so they said) a comet visible for a whole year. At the last Passover before the temple was destroyed some said they saw a great light shining round the altar, and it was reported that a sacrificial heifer gave birth to a lamb! And at midnight during the

<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 6, 5, 3

same feast the east gate of the inner court was seen to swing slowly open of its own accord, although it normally took twenty men to open and shut it. Armed men were said to have been seen riding and fighting in the clouds and—a climax of horror—at the feast of Weeks (Pentecost) which followed, a group of priests on their way to officiate heard a voice preternaturally loud which said, 'Let us remove hence!'<sup>1</sup> At the very end, when the flames were already rising from the doomed city and the temple precincts had caught fire, another false prophet, one of many those dire days, called on the survivors to make their way into the temple itself where they would see the apocalyptic deliverance. They went in, and six thousand perished in the flames.<sup>2</sup>

Matthew and the others must have known of all this and what fury of prophecy and oracles of doom filled the air during those days. But all this was only intelligible as the end process of a whole chain of events leading to a conclusion which the more perspicacious could foresee without any great difficulty. The background of the life of Jesus and his first followers was loud with the cry of voices calling out, 'Here is the Messiah!' and 'There he is!' An important chapter of the history of that period is made up on the one hand of the emergence and disappearance of these political pretenders and, on the other, of a series of rapacious and inept imperial representatives, most of whom found the situation too much for them. Long before, Herod himself in the last terrible years of plot and counter-plot wasted no time in dealing with the messianic menace. A candidate of the Pharisees who was to be set up by a certain court eunuch called Bagoas was summarily dispatched, following a method familiar to readers of St Matthew's Infancy Narrative.<sup>3</sup> The death of the wretched tyrant was naturally the occasion for a renewed spate of disturbances. The Passover of 4 B.C. saw blood shed in the streets of Jerusalem after Archelaus had lost his head and sent in a cohort to break up a crowd of demonstrators, which they did, not wisely but too well. There was a repeat performance when the governor Varus came down from Syria after the departure of Archelaus for Rome. Fifty days later at the Feast of Weeks, the second of the great pilgrim feasts, there was wholesale

<sup>1</sup> These omens are recorded for us by Josephus who, although quite capable of falsifying when it suited his purpose, and, at the same time, pompous to the point of absurdity, gives us all in all a very fair picture of the horror of those last days of the city. They are repeated in the Roman historian Tacitus and may have been influenced by the account in Ezekiel of the destruction of the city six centuries earlier; in ch. 10 we read of the 'exodus' of the 'Glory,' the Shekinah, borne away on the mysterious chariot drawn by the four living creatures, which go out through the East Gate and come to rest on the hill of Olives.

<sup>2</sup> *Jewish War*, 6, 5, 2

<sup>3</sup> *Jewish Antiquities*, 17, 2, 4. Whether the youth referred to was meant to be the secret *Messias designatus* as Prof. Stauffer claims in his book *Jerusalem und Rom*, 1957, p. 81, must remain doubtful. cf. Mt. 2:16-18.

fighting and the porticoes of the temple were burnt down. Once more Varus had to come and this time two thousand of the rioters were crucified *pour encourager les autres*. We can notice the leading role which pilgrims, especially from Galilee, play in these disturbances; on the latter occasion referred to, the townsmen gave precisely this excuse for what had taken place and, some years later, when Pilate, newly in office, attempted to bring the imperial standards into the city, they were there in considerable numbers among the demonstrators.

Naturally the situation was even worse in Galilee itself. There was the guerilla leader Judas who, Josephus tells us, had aspirations to kingship, and came down from the hills to burn the capital city Sepphoris, only a mile or two from Nazareth. There was a host of other aspirants to the messianic office: Simon of Perea who 'assumed the diadem' and burnt Jericho down on his way to Jerusalem, a giant shepherd called Athrongaeus who also aspired to the kingship, and many others. Our chief source for the period tells us that 'Judaea too was full of robberies; and as the several companies of the seditious lighted upon any one to head them, he was created king immediately.'<sup>1</sup>

With the deposition of Archelaus in A.D. 6 the rule of the procurators began. Most of these seemed quite bereft of the psychological insight necessary for so delicate a situation. They were dealing after all with a subject people held down by an army of occupation. Current messianism, as can easily be imagined, had a predominantly political flavour and it was natural that in the circumstances people should live keyed up to the expectation of a new passage of the Red Sea of their hopes—away from the 'house of bondage.'<sup>2</sup> Against the rising tide of violence the best the procurators could do was to match force with force; it is even possible, from the time that Sejanus, a bitter anti-semite, took the reins of government while Tiberius enjoyed himself in Capri, that a policy of positive provocation was followed. Things at any rate started badly for the first of them, Coponius, during whose tenure of office occurred the incident of the Samaritans who scattered bones in the temple precincts. It is quite likely that Jesus, aged twelve, was in Jerusalem for the Passover at that time and saw for the first time how the legionaries went to work. Josephus also tells us that it was at this time that the Zealots, the 'fourth sect,' came into existence, or at least came for the first time to the public notice. A kind of 'Maquis' or 'Eoka,' their advocacy of violent revolution and bloodshed greatly exacerbated the already tense situation. This

<sup>1</sup> *Antiquities*, 17, 10, 8. cf. John 6:15 where the crowds wished to make Jesus king.

<sup>2</sup> This is the classic description of Egypt and, by extension, of any of the other half-dozen world empires which, at different times, dominated Palestine.

was the condition when Pilate arrived in A.D. 26 and it was followed immediately by the unfortunate incident which we referred to above. In A.D. 30 Rabbi Sadoq began his fast on behalf of the temple and many untoward omens are said to have been seen at that time.<sup>1</sup>

Whether Pilate's years of office were marked by a series of crude errors of judgment or deliberate acts of provocation will remain a matter for the interpretation of the historian. Either in 30 or the following year, he took money from the Korbona for the prosecution of his building programme; the riot that ensued may be that referred to in St Luke where he speaks of the Galileans 'whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.'<sup>2</sup> It is at this point of his history that Josephus mentions, laconically enough, the execution of Jesus. The text has been so much glossed by a later Christian hand that it is now impossible (and will despite controversy probably remain impossible) to know exactly what Josephus wrote here. In any case, from the way in which he introduces the next example of strife and outrage—he speaks of 'another sad calamity'—it is highly probable that he saw our Lord's death as just another example of a messianic pretender removed.<sup>3</sup>

Pilate was recalled in disgrace in A.D. 36, but the story went on unchanged. During the tenure of Fadus and after the death of Agrippa, another Theudas invited the hordes of malcontents—always at hand at that time—to follow him into the wilderness beyond the Jordan, the waters of which would be cloven asunder as of old. He, too, was eliminated. In the next decade, under Cumanus, a ribald gesture of one of the Roman garrison on duty during the Passover (probably the year 48) sparked off yet another serious disturbance in which thousands lost their lives.<sup>4</sup> Another ambush of Galilean pilgrims by the Samaritans followed, another forced march of the proconsular army from the north—an unending round. Under Felix, the next to try his hand (he is known to us also from the New Testament), it became evident that a full-scale settlement of accounts could not be far off. The search for signs of the promised divine intervention *per catastrophes* became frenzied. To quote our principal source once more:

<sup>1</sup> One of the candles of the seven-branch candlestick unaccountably went out and the temple door flew open, as we read in later rabbinical writings.

<sup>2</sup> Lk. 13:1—was this the cause of enmity between Herod and Pilate?

<sup>3</sup> *Ant.*, 18, 3, 3. In the Slavonic Josephus there is another mention of our Lord (6, 5, 4) in which it is said that some applied the oracle of world rule from Juda to 'the crucified wonder-worker Jesus.' The fantastic theory of political messiahship which Robert Eisler (*Jesus Basileus ou Basileusas*, 1929) based upon the wholly unfounded hypothesis of the priority of the Slavonic to the 'received' Greek text of Josephus is well known and was exhaustively refuted as soon as it appeared.

<sup>4</sup> *Ant.*, 20, 5, 3 and *War*, 2, 12, 1. The numbers of the dead are different in each account.

‘Deceivers and imposters, under the pretence of divine inspiration, fostered revolutionary changes and persuaded the crowds to act like madmen, and led them out into the desert in the belief that God would there give them the signs of deliverance.’<sup>1</sup> It was about this time, too, that there appeared the pretender from Egypt for whom St Paul was mistaken, who led a band out into the desert to come by a devious route to the hill of Olives in preparation for a march on Jerusalem which, in the event, never took place. So it went on. At the last Passover of all the governor Cestius Gallus brought thousands of Roman soldiers into the city, more than ever before, and what followed is too well known to need mention.

Only against the tragic march of events to the climax of civil war can we understand clearly how irresistible was the temptation to see the great national hope proclaimed by the prophets in a purely political light, and reduced by the agonies and pressures of a disastrous situation to exclusively political dimensions. It was supremely difficult for the average Jew of that time to see that this was not the real thing; that it was in fact a perversion and a parody of the messianic hope of his race. But as St Paul was to lament, ‘their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the Old Testament, the same veil remains unlifted’ (2 Cor. 3:14). The reflexion of this perversion can be seen in the popular literature of that age—mainly apocalypses and political tracts for the times. We get it in the Hasidic and Pharisaic writings, which bring us very near to the inarticulate hopes of the ‘average Jew’ of that day. Only a small fraction of these writings have survived. To take one example, it is the political messiah—who is the anti-Christ of the Gospels—that the Psalms of Solomon pray for when they ask God to raise up ‘their king (messiah), the Son of David . . . that he may cleanse Jerusalem from the heathens that crush it under their feet and destroy it . . . that he may shatter all creatures with his iron sceptre and destroy the heathens that do not know the Thorah’; even if, as is possible, this was written in the days when Pompey occupied the city (63 B.C.), it stands for those worse years of oppression which immediately preceded the fall of the second temple. Other writings such as the Assumption of Moses and later 4 Esdras speak in the same way of a political ‘redemption of Israel’ and the killing of the Roman Eagle by the Lion of Juda.<sup>2</sup> This devoutly willed consummation formed the object of a petition in the daily liturgy of every pious Jew, who prayed—in the Eighteen Petitions—‘Make the Branch

<sup>1</sup> *Ant.*, 20, 8, 5; cf. *Ac.* 5:36

<sup>2</sup> *Ps.* Solomon 17; *Ass.* Moses 3·146 which, however, speaks of a deliverer from the tribe of Levi; *Apoc.* Baruch 35-40; 72-4, etc.

of David quickly blossom, and may his horn be raised through Thy help. Praised be Thou, O Lord, who maketh to blossom the horn of help.'

Beyond the confines of the village synagogue on Palestinian soil and the family liturgy of the devout, in the great cities of the Dispersion such hopes as these were also nurtured by what Josephus calls 'an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings how, about that time, one from their country should become the ruler of the universe'<sup>1</sup>—which oracle, for reasons dictated by a prudent opportunism, the writer applied to the Roman general Vespasian acclaimed emperor by the troops in Palestine. The same prediction of world rule for a Man from the East—*dux ex oriente*—occurs in Tacitus and (in practically identical terms) in Suetonius, probably in dependence on the passage in Josephus. They specify further that the ruler must come from Juda and obtain world rule. The connection between these references and certain of the Sibyline oracles has long been noted. Moreover, the Alexandrian Sibyl (a whole movement over a considerable period of time—not of course one person) found material for prophetic utterance and comment on the religious and political scheme of things in the Scriptures recently translated into the *lingua franca* of the east. We therefore must look for a prophecy which predicts world rule to Juda, the 'royal tribe'—and we find it in the Juda Oracle of Gen. 49:8–12. Here, a kingly ruler is to come bearing the mysterious name of *Shiloh*; he is to be the expectation of the nations, that is of the world beyond the confines of Judaism; his ass is tied to the vine; he will bring in the fertility and abundance of the latter times; he will most certainly come.<sup>2</sup>

We shall see how, unnoticed by the assiduous and indefatigable Josephus and the court historians and biographers of the age, Christ, on his entry into Jerusalem, applied this oracle to himself and thus fulfilled it.

(*To be concluded*)

J. BLENKINSOPP

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<sup>1</sup> *War*, 6, 5, 4

<sup>2</sup> The connection between Josephus, the Roman writers and the Sibyls was noted and established by Eduard Norden in an article published in 1913.