

ever heard or read. To move about as far afield as we can, though, let's consider the word "dude."

"Dude" is the kind of word (actually, every word is this kind of word) that always means something that is pretty obvious to its hearers, depending on their context—that is, who they are, where they are living, and when. At one time and place the word "dude" typically referred to a dandy—an urbane and sophisticated fellow who dressed to the nines and liked to appear cultured. Eventually, the word came to refer to anyone who was a modern city-person, as opposed to someone who lived in the country. And so, dude ranches were, and are, places that city-folk could go in order to learn how to ride horses, lasso cattle, chew straw, and do whatever else suited their rural fancies.

When I was in high school back in the 1970s, the word "dude" had taken on a completely different meaning. It was a term that a guy would use to greet another guy: "Hey dude." In that context, you would never say this to someone you didn't know and never, ever to someone you didn't like. It was a kind of insider term that denoted a bond of friendship—usually among guys who would cringe to hear such words called "terms of affection" (and so far as I can recall, the term was a completely male thing).

In different contexts, the word has meant different things (see, e.g., the Jack Nicholson jail scene in Dennis Hopper's film classic *Easy Rider*). But recent developments have become even more interesting. About six years ago my fifth-grade son came home from school. When he walked in the door I said, "Hey dude." His reaction shocked me: "Dad, don't call me that!"

"Why not?"

"Don't you know what a dude is?"

"Uh, well, I thought I did. What's a dude?"

"A dude is a camel's gonads."

Personally, I thought this was terrific. I told a good friend about it, and he thought so too. Now when he answers the phone, I say, "Hey camel's gonads."

And if you've hung out with high-school or college kids in the mid- to late 1990s, you'll know that dude has grown to mean something else altogether. In fact, now it doesn't mean *anything*. It's an interjection completely devoid of content that begins a sentence and is intended to convey a sense of enthusiasm: "*Dude*, you should have been at the mall yesterday" (contrary to what you might suspect, dude is not used in this sentence as a vocative—that is, to address a person whom you're calling a dude; it's a null term expressing interest or excitement).

And so it goes. New contexts, new meanings; change the context,

change the meaning. The same is true of every word in every language ever spoken. And of every combination of words: Does the sentence "this is so bad" always mean the same thing? And every gesture: What does it mean to stand with your arm raised over your head and your first finger pointed up? And every action: What does it mean to kiss someone on the cheek? And in fact everything in our human experience.

My immediate point: if you want to understand words and deeds—including the words and deeds of Jesus—you have to understand their context.

To give a full account of Jesus' context would take a huge multivolume study of its own. But I can give enough here at least to get us started and to help us make sense of the things Jesus said and did. To begin with, Jesus was a Jewish man living in the first century of the Common Era, in the Roman territory of Galilee. What was that like?

Political Crises in Palestine and Their Consequences

The ancient history of Palestine was long and complex, and here I'll deal with only a minute aspect of it, namely, that which had a direct bearing on the context of Jesus' adult life in the 20s of the Common Era.¹ In a nutshell, the political history of the land had not been happy for some eight hundred years; these had been eight centuries of periodic wars and virtually permanent foreign domination. The northern part of the land, the kingdom of "Israel," was overthrown by the Assyrians in 721 BCE; then, about a century and a half later, in 587–86 BCE, the southern kingdom of "Judah" was conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem was leveled, the Temple destroyed, and the leaders of the people taken into exile. Some fifty years later, the Babylonian Empire was overrun by the Persians, who brought an end to the forced exile and allowed the Judean leaders to return home. The Temple was rebuilt, and the priest in charge of the Temple, the "high priest," was given jurisdiction as a local ruler of the people. This was a man from an ancient family that traced its line back hundreds of years to a priest named "Zadok." Ultimately, of course, the Persian king was the final authority over the land and its people.

This state of affairs continued for nearly two centuries, until the conquests of Alexander the Great, ruler of Macedonia. Alexander overthrew the Persian Empire, conquering most of the lands around the eastern Mediterranean as far as modern-day India. He brought Greek culture with him into the various regions he conquered, building Greek cities and schools and gymnasias (centers of Greek culture), encourag-

ing the acceptance of Greek culture and religion, and promoting the use of the Greek language. Alexander died a young man in 323 BCE. The generals of his army divided up his realm, and Palestine fell under the rule of Ptolemy, the general in charge of Egypt. During all of this time, the Jewish high priest remained the local ruler of the land of Judea. And that did not change when the ruler of Syria wrested control of Palestine from the Ptolemeans in 198 BCE.

It is hard to know how widespread or intense the antagonism toward foreign rule was throughout most of this period, given our sparse sources. No doubt many Jews resented the idea that their own rulers were answerable to a foreign power. They were, after all, the chosen people of the one true God of Israel, the God who had agreed to protect and defend them in exchange for their devotion. This was the land that he had promised them, and for many of them it must have been more than a little distressing, both politically and religiously, to know that ultimately someone else was in charge. In any event, there is no doubt that the situation became greatly exacerbated under the Syrian monarchs. Over the century and a half or so since Alexander's death, Greek culture had become more and more prominent throughout the entire Mediterranean region. One Syrian ruler in particular, Antiochus Epiphanes, decided to bring greater cultural unity to his empire by requiring his subjects to adopt aspects of Greek civilization. Some of the Jews living in Palestine welcomed these innovations. Indeed, some men were enthused enough to undergo surgery to remove the marks of their circumcision, allowing them to exercise in the Jerusalem gymnasium without being recognized as Jewish. By all accounts, the operation was not pleasant. Others, however, found this process of "Hellenization," this imposition of Greek culture, absolutely offensive to their religion. In response to their protests, Antiochus tightened the screws even further, making it illegal for Jews to circumcise their baby boys and to maintain their Jewish identity, converting the Jewish Temple into a pagan sanctuary, and requiring Jews to sacrifice to the pagan gods.

A revolt broke out, started by a family of Jewish priests known to history both as the "Maccabeans," based on the name given to one of its powerful leaders, Judas "Maccabeus" ("the Hammerer"), and also as the "Hasmoneans," based on the name of a distant ancestor. The Maccabean revolt began as a small guerrilla skirmish and ended with much of the country in armed rebellion against its Syrian overlords. It started in 167 BCE; in less than twenty-five years, the Maccabeans had successfully driven the Syrian army out of the land and assumed full and total control of its governance, creating the first sovereign Jewish state for

over four centuries. They rededicated the Temple (one of their first acts, in 164 BCE, commemorated still by Hanukkah) and appointed a high priest as supreme ruler of the land. To the dismay of many Jews in Palestine, however, the high priest was not from the traditional and ancient line of Zadok, but from the common stock of priests of the Hasmonean family itself.

The Hasmoneans ruled the land as an autonomous state for some eighty years, until 63 BCE, when the Roman general Pompey came in conquest. The Romans allowed the high priest to remain in office, using him as an administrative liaison with the local Jewish leadership. But there was no doubt who controlled the land. Eventually, in 40 BCE, Rome appointed a king to rule the Jews of Palestine; this was Herod the Great, renowned both for his ruthless exercise of power and for his magnificent building projects, which served not only to beautify the cities but also to elevate the status of Judea and to employ massive numbers of workers. Many Jews, however, castigated Herod as an opportunistic collaborator with the Romans, a traitorous half-Jew at best. The latter charge was based in part on his lineage: his parents were from the neighboring country of Idumea and had been forced to convert to Judaism before his birth.

During the days of Jesus, after Herod's death, Galilee, the northern region of the land, was ruled by Herod's son Antipas; and starting when Jesus was a boy, Judea, the southern region, was governed by Roman administrators known as prefects. Pontius Pilate was prefect during the whole of Jesus' ministry and for some years after his death. His headquarters were in Caesarea, but he came to the capital city Jerusalem, with troops, whenever the need arose.

The point of this brief sketch is not to indicate what Jewish children learned in their fifth-grade history classes; indeed, there is no way for us to know whether a boy like Jesus would ever have even heard of such important figures from the remote past as Alexander the Great or Ptolemy. But the historical events leading up to his time are significant for understanding his life because of their social and intellectual consequences, which affected the lives of all Palestinian Jews. For it was in response to the social, political, and religious crises of the Maccabean period that the Jewish "sects" of Jesus' day (e.g., the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes) were formed; and it was the Roman occupation that led to numerous nonviolent and violent uprisings during Jesus' time, uprisings of Jews for whom any foreign domination of the Promised Land was both politically and religiously unacceptable. Moreover, it was the overall sense of inequity and the experience of suffering during these times that inspired the ideology of resistance known as

"apocalypticism," a worldview that was shared by a number of Jews in first-century Palestine.

One Consequence: The Formation of Jewish "Sects"

It was during the rule of the Hasmoneans, and largely in reaction to it, that various Jewish sects emerged. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions four of these groups; the New Testament makes explicit reference to three. In one way or another, all of them play a significant role for our understanding of the life of the historical Jesus.

The first thing to note, though, is that most Jews did not belong to any of these groups. We know this much from Josephus, who indicates that the largest sect, the Pharisees, claimed six thousand members and that the Essenes claimed four thousand. The Sadducees probably had far fewer. These numbers should be considered in light of the overall Jewish population in the world at the time; the best estimates put the number at something like three and a half million.

What matters for our purposes here, however, is not the size of these groups—for they were influential, despite their small numbers—but the ways in which they understood what it meant to be Jewish, especially in light of the political crises that they had to face. Members of all of the sects, of course, would have subscribed to the basic principles of the ancient Jewish religion: each believed, for example, in the one true God, the Creator of all things, who was revealed in the Scriptures, who had chosen his people Israel, and who had promised to protect and defend them in exchange for their committed devotion to him through following his laws. The groups differed in significant ways, however, when it came to knowing what obedience to God's laws required and to knowing how to react both to the rule of a foreign power and to the presence of a high priest from a line other than Zadok's.

PHARISEES. The Pharisees represent probably the best known and least understood Jewish sect. Because of the way they are attacked in parts of the New Testament, especially in Matthew, Christians through the ages have considered the Pharisees' chief attribute to be hypocrisy; indeed, *Webster's Dictionary* gives "hypocrite" as a definition of "Pharisee." This would be somewhat like a dictionary from the year 3040 CE defining a Methodist as a "liar" or a Baptist as an "adulterer" or an Episcopalian as a "drunkard." To be sure, there probably are liars and adulterers and drunkards in these denominations, just as there were hypocrites among the Pharisees. But to define them as such really misses the point. Pharisees were not required to take a "hypocritical" oath upon joining.

It appears that this sect began during the Maccabean period as a group of devout Jews intent above all else on following the entire will of God. Rather than accepting the culture and religion of the Greeks, these Jews insisted on knowing and obeying the Law of their own God to the fullest extent possible. One of the difficulties with the Law of Moses, though, is that in many places it is ambiguous. For example, Jews are told in the Ten Commandments to keep the Sabbath day holy. But nowhere does the Law indicate precisely how this is to be done. Pharisees devised rules and regulations to assist them in keeping this and all the other laws of Moses. These rules eventually formed a body of tradition, which, to stay with our example, indicated what a person could and could not do on the Sabbath day in order to keep it holy, that is, set apart from all other days. Thus, for example, when it was eventually determined that a faithful Jew should not go on a long journey on the Sabbath, it had to be decided what a "long" journey was and consequently what distance a Jew could travel on this day without violating its holiness. So, too, a worker who believed that he or she should not labor on the Sabbath had to know what constituted "work" and what therefore could and could not be done.

Or a second example. The Law of Moses commands Jewish farmers to give one-tenth of their crops, that is, a tithe, to the priests and Levites (e.g., Num. 18:20-21). Priests performed sacrifices in the Temple, and Levites were their assistants; a person became a priest or Levite by birth, not by choice. Since they themselves were not allowed to farm, the tithes were their means of support for their service to God. What should a person do, though, who purchased food from a farmer, not knowing whether the food had been properly tithed? To be on the safe side, some Pharisees maintained that they should tithe the food they *purchased*, as well as the food they grew. This way they could be certain that God's Law was being followed. And if it got followed twice in this case, so much the better—especially for God's priests and Levites!

The rules and regulations that developed among the Pharisees came to take on a status of their own and were known in some circles as the "oral" Law, which was set alongside the "written" Law of Moses (and was sometimes believed to have come, like the written Law, directly from Moses). It appears that Pharisees generally believed that anyone who kept the oral law would be almost certain to keep the written law as a consequence. The intent was not to be legalistic but to be obedient to what God had commanded.

The Pharisees may have been a relatively closed society in Jesus' day, to the extent that they stayed together as a group, eating meals and

having fellowship only with one another, that is, with those who were like-minded, who similarly saw the need to maintain a high level of obedience before God. Those who did not do so were thought to be unclean.

It is important to recognize that the Pharisees were not the "power players" in Palestine in Jesus' day. That is to say, they appear to have had some popular appeal but no real political clout. In some ways they are best seen as a kind of separatist group, one that wanted to maintain its own purity and did so in isolation from other Jews. Many scholars think that the term "Pharisee" itself originally came from a Persian word that means "separated ones." Eventually, however, some decades after Jesus' execution, the Pharisees did become powerful in the political sense. This was after the Jewish War, described more fully below, which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the year 70 CE. With this calamity, the other groups passed off the scene for a variety of reasons, and the Pharisees were given greater authority by the Roman overlords. The oral tradition continued to grow and eventually took on the status of divinely revealed law. This law was eventually written down around the year 200 CE and is known as the Mishnah, the heart of the Jewish sacred collection of texts, the Talmud.

Why are the Pharisees important for understanding the historical Jesus? In part because, as we will see, he set his message over against theirs: he did not think that scrupulous and detailed adherence to the laws of Torah were the most important aspect of a Jew's relationship with God, especially as these laws were interpreted by the Pharisees.

SADDUCEES. It is difficult to reconstruct exactly what the Sadducees stood for because not a single literary work survives from the pen of a Sadducee, in contrast to the Pharisees, who are represented to some extent by the later traditions of the Talmud, by Josephus, who was a Pharisee, and, interestingly enough, by the one Pharisee who left us writings before the destruction of the Temple—after he had converted to Christianity!—the apostle Paul (see Phil. 3:5). For the Sadducees, on the other hand, we are restricted to what we read in other sources, such as the works of Josephus and the New Testament.

During Jesus' own day, the Sadducees were evidently the real power players in Palestine. They appear to have been by and large members of the Jewish aristocracy in Jerusalem and to have been closely connected with the Jewish priesthood in charge of the Temple cult. Most of the Sadducees were themselves priests, though not all priests were Sadducees. As members of the aristocracy, granted some limited power by

their Roman overlords, Sadducees appear to have been conciliatory toward the civil authorities, that is, cooperative with the Roman governor. The local Jewish "council" that was occasionally called together to decide local affairs, commonly called the "Sanhedrin," was evidently made up principally of Sadducees. Given their connection with the Temple, Sadducees emphasized the need for Jews to be properly involved in the cultic worship of God as prescribed in the Torah. In fact, it appears that the Torah itself—that is, the five books of Moses—was the only authoritative text that the Sadducees accepted. In any event, we know that they did not accept the oral traditions formulated by the Pharisees. Less concerned with personal purity and regulations of such daily affairs as food laws, travel on the Sabbath, and definitions of "work," the Sadducees focused their religious attention on the sacrifices in the Temple, and expended their political energy on working out their relations with the Romans so that these sacrifices could continue.

It may have been their rejection of all written authority outside of the five books of Moses that led the Sadducees to reject several doctrines that later became characteristic of other groups of Jews: they denied, for example, the existence of angels and disavowed the notion of the future resurrection of the dead, doctrines held by the Pharisees and the Essenes. Their views of the afterlife may well have conformed, essentially, with those of most non-Jews throughout the empire: either the "soul" perishes with the body, or it continues on in a kind of shadowy netherworld, regardless of the quality of its life here on earth.

Why are the Sadducees of importance for understanding the historical Jesus? In part because he roused their anger by predicting that God would soon destroy the locus of their social and religious authority, their beloved Temple. In response, some of their prominent members urged Pontius Pilate to have him executed.

ESSENES. The Essenes are the one Jewish sect not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament. Ironically, they are also the group about which we are best informed. This is because the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were evidently produced by a group of Essenes, who lived in a community east of Jerusalem in the wilderness area near the western shore of the Dead Sea, in a place that is today called Qumran. I say that they "evidently" produced the Scrolls because the term "Essene" never occurs in them. But we know from other ancient authors such as Josephus that a community of Essenes was located in this area; moreover, the social arrangements and theological views described in the Dead Sea Scrolls correspond to what we know about the Essenes from these

other accounts. Most scholars are reasonably certain, therefore, that the Scrolls represent a library used by this sect, or at least by the part of it living near Qumran.

As was the case with the Gnostic documents uncovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was completely serendipitous. In 1947, a shepherd boy searching for a lost goat in the barren wilderness near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea happened to toss a stone into a cave and heard it strike something. Going in he discovered an ancient earthenware jar that contained a number of old scrolls. The books were recovered by bedouin shepherds, news of the discovery reached antiquities dealers, biblical scholars learned of the find, and a search was conducted both to find more scrolls in the surrounding caves and to retrieve those that had already been found by the bedouin.

Some of the caves in the region yielded entire scrolls; others contained thousands of tiny scraps that are virtually impossible to piece back together. The problem is that so many of the pieces are missing; imagine trying to do an immense jigsaw puzzle under these conditions—or rather dozens of immense jigsaw puzzles, not knowing what the end product of any of them is to look like, when most of the pieces are lost, and those that remain are all mixed together! All in all there are hundreds of documents that are represented, many of them only by fragments the size of postage stamps, others, a couple dozen or so, in scrolls of sufficient length to give us a full idea of their contents.

Most of the Scrolls are written in Hebrew, others in Aramaic, a few in Greek. Different kinds of literature are represented here. There are at least partial copies of every book of the Jewish Bible, with the exception of the book of Esther. Some of them are fairly complete. These are extremely valuable because of their age; they are nearly a thousand years older than the oldest copies of the Hebrew Scriptures that we previously had. We can therefore check to see whether Jewish scribes over the intervening centuries reliably copied their texts; the short answer is that, for the most part, they did. There are also commentaries on some of the biblical books, written principally to show that the predictions of the ancient prophets had come to be fulfilled in the experiences of the Essene believers and in the history of their community. In addition there are books that contain psalms and hymns composed by members of the community, prophecies that indicate the future course of events that were believed to be about to transpire in the authors' own day, and rules for the members of the community to follow in their lives together.

Sifting through all of these books, scholars have been able to recon-

struct the life and beliefs of the Essenes in considerable detail. It appears that their community at Qumran was started during the early Maccabean period, perhaps around 150 BCE, by pious Jews who were convinced that the Hasmoneans had usurped their authority by appointing a non-Zadokite as high priest. Believing that the Jews of Jerusalem had gone astray, these Essenes chose to start their own community, in which they could keep the Mosaic Law rigorously and maintain their own ritual purity in the wilderness. They did so fully expecting the apocalypse of the end of time to be imminent. When it came, there would be a final battle between the forces of good and evil, the children of light and the children of darkness. The battle would climax with the triumph of God and the entry of his children into the blessed Kingdom.

Some of the Scrolls indicate that this Kingdom would be ruled by two Messiahs, one a king and the other a priest. The priestly Messiah would lead the faithful in their worship of God in a purified Temple, where sacrifices could again be made in accordance with God's will. In the meantime, the true people of God needed to be removed from the impurities of this world, including the impurities prevalent in the Jewish Temple and among the rest of the Jewish people. These Essenes therefore started their own monastic-like community, with strict rules for admission and membership. A two-year initiation was required, after which, if approved, a member was to donate all of his possessions to the community fund and share the common meal with all the other members. Rigorous guidelines dictated the life of the community: members had fixed hours for work and rest and for their meals; there were required times of fasting; and strict penalties were imposed for unseemly behavior such as interrupting one another, talking at meals, and laughing at inappropriate times.

It appears that when the Jewish War of 66–73 CE began, the Essenes at Qumran hid some of their sacred writings before joining in the struggle. It may well be that they saw this as the final battle, preliminary to the end of time when God would establish his Kingdom and send its Messiahs.

Why are the Essenes important for understanding the historical Jesus? In part because Jesus appears to have shared many of the Essenes' apocalyptic views, even though he did not belong to their sect; he too believed that the end of time was near, and that people had to prepare for the coming onslaught.

THE "FOURTH PHILOSOPHY." When Josephus writes about Judaism for a Roman audience, he describes each of the sects that we have dis-

cussed as a "philosophy," by which he means a group with a distinctive and rational outlook on the world. He never gives a name to the fourth sect that he discusses, but simply calls it the "fourth philosophy." The tenets of this "philosophy," however, are clear, and were manifested in several different groups that we know about from various ancient sources. Each of these groups in its own way supported active resistance to Israel's foreign domination.

The view that characterized these sundry groups was that Israel had a right to its own land, a right that had been granted by God himself. Anyone who usurped that right, and anyone who backed the usurper, was to be opposed, by violent means if necessary. Among those who took this line in the mid-first century were the "Sicarii," a group whose name comes from the Latin word for "dagger." These "daggermen" planned and carried out assassinations and kidnappings of high-ranking Jewish officials who were thought to be in league with the Roman authorities. Another group that subscribed to this philosophy, somewhat later in the century, were the "Zealots." These were Jews who were "zealous" for the Law and who urged armed rebellion to take back the land God had promised his people. More specifically, based on what we find in Josephus, Zealots were Galilean Jews who fled to Jerusalem during the Jewish revolt, around the year 67 CE, who overthrew the priestly aristocracy in the city in a bloody coup, and who urged the violent opposition to the Roman legions that ultimately led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple in 70 CE.

Why are such groups important for understanding the historical Jesus? In part because he too thought that the Romans were to be overthrown. But it was not to be by armed resistance.

A Related Consequence:

Popular Modes of Resistance to Oppression

As we have seen, Jews in Palestine had been under direct foreign domination for most of the eight centuries prior to the birth of Jesus. In particular, the struggles of the Hasmoneans against the Hellenizing policies of their Syrian overlords led to the formation of sects that were active in Jesus' day. But there was much more to his world than this. As I have indicated, most Jews did not belong to any of these parties. All Jews, however, were directly affected by the policies of domination enforced by Rome.²

As a conquered people, Jews in Palestine were required to pay taxes to the empire. Since the Roman economy was agrarian, taxation involved payment of crops and of monies to fund the armies and infrastructure provided by Rome, including roads, bridges, and public build-

ings. In monetary terms, the oppression of Jews appears to have been no worse than that of other native populations of the Roman provinces. We have no reliable numbers from ancient sources themselves, but the best estimates among modern scholars suggest that a typical Jewish farmer was taxed on average something like 12 or 13 percent of his income to support the Roman presence in the land, on top of taxes to support the Temple and local Jewish administration, which might run an additional 20 percent or so. His total taxes, then, were perhaps a third of his overall income.

This may not appear exorbitant by the standards of today's highly industrialized nations; we must recall, however, that in ancient agrarian societies, without modern means of irrigation, labor-saving machinery, and sophisticated technology, most farmers did well to eke out an existence in the best of circumstances. When one is living close to the edge, having to provide financial support for a foreign oppressor is not a cheery prospect. Or to put it less euphemistically, paying for Rome's excesses was seen by many Jews, as well as by many others in the empire, to be both unmanageable and perverse.

At the same time, it must be conceded that the treatment of the Jews was better in some respects than that of other inhabitants of the empire. Since the days of Julius Caesar, Jews were not required to supply Rome with soldiers from their ranks. This was an exemption that was in Rome's best interest as well, since devout Jews refused to soldier every seventh day. Nor did they have to provide direct support for Roman legions stationed nearby or marching through to the frontiers. In another respect, though, the Jewish situation could be seen as far worse than average, in that many Jews considered it blasphemous to pay taxes to support the Roman administration of the land that God had given them. How, then, did Jews react to their domination by Rome?

The short answer is that different Jews reacted in different ways. For many Jews, especially members of the aristocratic upper class, the Roman occupation was no doubt tolerable and had its advantages, for example, protection from hostile nations to the east; but for others, it was beyond toleration, a political and religious nightmare. Resistance to the Roman occupation appears to have been widespread, but rarely was it active or violent. Throughout the first century, Jews of Palestine locked horns with their Roman overlords on a number of occasions. It will be useful for our understanding of the historical Jesus to examine the nature of these conflicts.

SILENT PROTESTS. In chapter 2, I discussed the annual Passover celebration in Jerusalem. The population of Jerusalem would swell many

times over during the weeklong festival, and there is little doubt that those who came to the celebration did not do so for purely antiquarian reasons. That is to say, Jews celebrating the Passover were not simply remembering the past, when God acted on their behalf to save them from their subjugation to the Egyptians; they were also looking to the future, when God would save them yet again, this time from their present overlords, the Romans.

Roman officials appear to have understood full well the potentially subversive nature of the celebration. They typically brought armed troops in just for the occasion, stationing them in the Temple, the locus of all activity. No need to allow a religious festival to turn into a fanatical uprising. Most Jews, for their part, did not much appreciate the Roman presence on such sacred occasions.

At no time did the tension become more evident than during a Passover celebration in the 50s of the Common Era, when a Roman governor named Cumanus was procurator of Judea. During the feast, one of the soldiers stationed on the wall of the Temple decided to show his disdain for the Jews and their religion. In the words of Josephus, he "stooped in an indecent attitude, so as to turn his backside to the Jews, and made a noise in keeping with his posture" (*Jewish War* 2.224-27). The worshipers present were not amused. Some picked up stones and began to pelt the soldiers; a report was sped off to Cumanus, nearby. He sent in reinforcements and a riot broke out. According to Josephus, who probably exaggerated the numbers, some twenty thousand Jews were killed in the mayhem that ensued.

Thus, the Passover feast represented an implicit protest against the Roman presence in the Promised Land; but on occasion, things could get out of hand, leading to violent resistance and death. As a rule, the Romans worked hard at keeping the situation under control, resolving problems before they led to massive uprisings or public riots. You may recall that Jesus was arrested and removed from the public eye during Passover.

NONVIOLENT UPRISINGS. Roman administrators would occasionally do or threaten to do something that offended Jews in Palestine, who would in turn rise up in protest. It appears that for most of the first century, these protests were nonviolent. In the year 26 CE, for example, when Pilate assumed the prefectorship of Judea, he had Roman standards brought into Jerusalem at night and set up around the city. These standards bore the image of Caesar. Jews in the city erupted in protest and demanded their removal. Pilate refused. According to Josephus, hundreds of the leading citizens staged a kind of "sit-in" at his residence

in Caesarea (*Jewish War* 2.169-74; *Antiquities* 18.55-59). After five days, Pilate had the protesters surrounded by soldiers three deep and threatened to have them all put to the sword. The Jews responded by flinging themselves to the ground and stretching out their necks, claiming to prefer death to such a flagrant transgression of their Law. Pilate relented, and had the standards removed.

Something similar happened fourteen years or so later, when the megalomaniac emperor Caligula required the inhabitants of the empire to worship him as a god (the first Roman emperor to have done so). Jews from around the world erupted in protest; some from outside of Palestine came in delegations to Rome to explain why the act would be offensive and blasphemous for them. Caligula responded with intransigence, ordering that a statue of himself, with the body of Zeus (!), be set up in the Jerusalem Temple. According to Josephus, tens of thousands of Jews in Palestine appeared in protest before the Roman legate of Syria, Petronius, who had arrived with two full legions to enforce the policy (*Antiquities* 18.261-72, 305-09). They vowed not to plant their crops if he carried out his orders and offered themselves as martyrs rather than live to see the desecration of their Temple. Petronius was himself powerless to revoke the emperor's order, although he was impressed both by the strength of the opposition and by the danger to the crops, knowing that Rome could collect no tribute if the land lay fallow. Fortunately for him, he was saved from the consequences of failing to follow the emperor's order. For reasons unrelated to the protest, Caligula was assassinated.

PROPHETIC PROCLAMATIONS. One particularly noteworthy form of Jewish protest against foreign domination involved the occasional appearance of self-styled prophets predicting the imminent intervention of God on behalf of his people, an intervention to be modeled on earlier acts of salvation as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Some of these prophets gathered a large following among the Jewish masses. For obvious reasons, they were not well received by the Romans.

Less than fifteen years after Jesus' execution, a prophet named Theudas led a large crowd of Jews to the Jordan River, where he publicly proclaimed that he would make the waters part, allowing his people to cross on dry land (see Josephus, *Jewish War* 20.97-99). Word of his activities reached the Roman authorities, who evidently knew enough Jewish tradition to recognize the allusion to the Exodus event under Moses, when the children of Israel were delivered from their slavery in Egypt and the Egyptian army was routed during the crossing of the Red Sea. Rather than risk an uprising, the governor sent out the

troops. They slaughtered Theudas's followers and brought his head back to Jerusalem for display.

About a decade later another prophet arose, who was called simply the "Egyptian" by Josephus and the New Testament book of Acts, the two sources that refer to him (*Jewish War* 2.261-63; Acts 21:38). This prophet acquired a large following among the masses—according to Josephus, thirty thousand people—which he led to the Mount of Olives. There he proclaimed the imminent destruction of the walls of Jerusalem, another transparent reference, this time to the conquest of Jericho, when the children of Israel came into the Promised Land and "the walls came tumbling down." Again, the Roman troops were sent forth to hunt down and slaughter the group.

Other prophets arose and experienced similar fates. Roman administrators of Judea appear to have had no qualms about destroying those whose proclamation of God's intervention on behalf of his people could win them a following and, potentially, lead to riots. Especially in Jerusalem.

VIOLENT INSURRECTIONS. There were also violent insurrections in Palestine during the first century, incidents in which Jews with forethought and intent engaged in armed revolt against the Romans. It should not be thought, however, that these were everyday occurrences. On the contrary, incidents of this sort appear to have been isolated.

One of them occurred around 6 CE during Jesus' childhood, when Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, was deposed as ruler of Judea and replaced by a Roman prefect. A local census was imposed for tax purposes and a group of Jews led by a freedom fighter named Judas the son of Hezekiah resisted with the sword. The revolt was crushed, effectively and brutally (*Jewish War* 2.117-18; *Antiquities* 18.1-10).

The second, and more disastrous, uprising came sixty years later, when such Roman atrocities as the governor's plundering of the Temple treasury led to a widespread revolt. The Romans sent in the legions from the north, and within a year subjugated Galilee (this was when Josephus had been the commander of the Jewish troops there, prior to surrendering). A group of Galilean Jews who fled from the Roman army arrived in Jerusalem and eventually provoked a bloody civil war against the priestly aristocracy who had been in charge of the Temple and the rest of the city. Once they acquired control, these "Zealots" pressed the fight against the Romans to the end. This led to a horrifying three-year siege of Jerusalem, in which, among other things, reports of starvation and cannibalism were rampant. The war ended in a bloodbath in which tens of thousands of Jews were slaughtered or enslaved, rebel leaders

crucified, much of the city leveled, and the Temple burned to the ground.

CONCLUSION. In sum, Palestine was under Roman domination in the first century and Jews in the land reacted to the situation in a variety of ways. Some, especially members of the upper classes, cooperated with and even supported the Romans; others protested in silence, anticipating a deliverance to be wrought by God; others engaged, when necessary, in acts of nonviolent resistance; others became caught up in spontaneous rioting, provoked by their insensitive treatment at the hands of the Roman rulers and soldiers; others publicly proclaimed the imminent end of their suffering through the supernatural intervention of God; yet others sought to take matters into their own hands, taking up the sword to engage in violent resistance. The nonviolent protesters had some success in getting the Romans to back down on particular issues. The violent protesters—whether rioting masses, prophetic figures, or guerrilla warriors—had none whatsoever. In the cases we know of, the Romans effectively and ruthlessly destroyed those who preached or practiced violence against them.

A Third Consequence: An Ideology of Resistance

We must consider one final aspect of Jesus' historical context before seeing where he himself stood within it. This involves one of the "worldviews" evident in a number of Jewish writings from around his time. Modern scholars have called this worldview "apocalypticism," based on the Greek term *apocalypsis*, which means an "unveiling" or a "revealing." Jews who subscribed to this worldview maintained that God had revealed to them the future course of events, in which he was soon to overthrow the forces of evil and establish his Kingdom on earth.

We know about Jewish apocalyptic thought from a number of ancient sources. It is first attested in some of the latest writings of the Hebrew Bible, especially the book of Daniel, which scholars date to the time of the Maccabean revolt. It is also prominent in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the writings of the Essene community at Qumran from around the time of Jesus. In addition, it is found in a range of other Jewish writings that did not make it into the Bible, books called "apocalypses" because their authors claim that the actual course of future events had been "revealed" to them.

Before describing what apocalypticists believed about this world and their place in it, I should say something about the origin of their worldview itself. Most ancient Jews, as I have intimated, believed that God

had made a covenant with his people to be their divine protector in exchange for their devotion to him through keeping his Law. This point of view naturally came to be challenged by the political history of Palestine. For if God had promised to protect and defend Israel against its enemies, why was it constantly being dominated by foreigners? Why was it conquered, in succession, by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Syrians, and the Romans? How could Jews claim that God was on their side, to protect and defend them, if they were constantly being overthrown?

One of the popular answers was given by ancient Jewish prophets, including those whose writings were later canonized in the Hebrew Bible, prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Hosea. According to these authors, Israel continued to suffer military and political setbacks because it had disobeyed God. He was still their God and he remained the all-powerful ruler of the world, able to dictate the course of human events. But the people of Israel had sinned against him, and their military defeats and economic disasters represented God's punishment for their sins. According to the prophets, if the people would only return to the ways of God, and again become devoted to keeping his Law, he would relent and establish them once more as a sovereign power in their own land.

This basic point of view has always been popular, not only among Jews but also among Christians: people suffer because they have sinned, and this is their punishment. Some Jewish thinkers eventually became dissatisfied with this answer, however, because it could not adequately explain historical realities. For in fact it was not only the sinners who suffered, but people who were righteous as well. And matters never improved even when people did repent and return to God and commit themselves to keeping his Law. Why would Israel continue to suffer after it returned to God, while other nations that made no effort to please him prospered?

Around the time of the Maccabean revolt, when the oppressive policies of Antiochus Epiphanes became too much for many Jews in Palestine to bear, when they were forbidden on pain of death from keeping the Law of Moses, some of them came up with another solution. In their view, the suffering of God's people could not be explained as a penalty for their sin. God surely would not punish his people for doing what was right, for keeping his laws, for example. Why, then, did the people suffer? There must have been some other supernatural agency, some other superhuman power that was responsible. God was not making his people suffer; his enemy, Satan, was.

According to this new way of thinking, God was still in control of

this world in some ultimate sense. But for unknown and mysterious reasons he had temporarily relinquished his control to the forces of evil that opposed him. This state of affairs, however, was not to last forever. Quite soon, God would reassert himself and bring this world back to himself, destroying the forces of evil and establishing his people as rulers over the earth. When this new Kingdom came, God would fulfill his promises to his people.

This point of view, as I have said, is commonly called apocalypticism. It was an ideology that tried to make sense of the oppression of the people of God. As you have probably inferred, and as I will lay out more fully in chapter 8, I think it was a view embraced by Jesus.

COSMIC DUALISM. Jewish apocalypticists were dualists. That is to say, they maintained that there were two fundamental components to all of reality: the forces of good and the forces of evil. The forces of good were headed by God himself, the forces of evil by his superhuman enemy, sometimes called Satan, or Beelzebub, or the Devil. On the side of God were the good angels; on the side of the Devil were the demons. On the side of God were righteousness and life; on the side of the Devil were sin and death. These were actual forces, cosmic powers to which human beings could be subject and with which they had to be aligned. No one was in neutral territory. People stood either with God or with Satan, they were in the light or in darkness, they were in the truth or in error.

This apocalyptic dualism had clear historical implications. All of history could be divided into two ages, the present age and the age to come. The present age was the age of sin and evil, when the powers of darkness were in the ascendancy, when those who sided with God were made to suffer by those in control of this world, when sin, disease, famine, violence, and death were running rampant. For some unknown reason, God had relinquished control of this age to the powers of evil. And things were getting worse.

At the end of this age, however, God would reassert himself, intervening in history and destroying the forces of evil. There would come a cataclysmic break in which all that was opposed to God would be annihilated, and God would bring in a new age. In this new age, there would be no more suffering or pain; there would be no more hatred, despair, war, disease, or death. God would be the ruler of all, in a kingdom that would never end.

HISTORICAL PESSIMISM. Even though, in the long run, everything would work out for those who sided with God, in the short term things

did not look good. Jewish apocalypticists maintained that those who sided with God were going to suffer in this age, and there was nothing they could do to stop it. The forces of evil would grow in power as they attempted to wrest sovereignty over this world away from God. There was no chance of improving the human condition through mass education or advanced technologies. The righteous could not make their lives better, because the forces of evil were in control, and those who sided with God were opposed by those who were much stronger than they. Things would get worse and worse until the very end, when quite literally, all hell would break loose.

ULTIMATE VINDICATION. But at the end, when the suffering of God's people was at its height, God would finally intervene on their behalf and vindicate his name. For in this perspective God was not only the Creator of this world, he was also its Redeemer. And his act of vindication would be universal: it would affect the entire world, not simply the Jewish nation. Jewish apocalypticists maintained that the entire creation had become corrupt because of the presence of sin and the power of Satan. This universal corruption required a universal redemption; God would destroy all that is evil and create a new heaven and a new earth, one in which the forces of evil would have no place whatsoever.

Different apocalypticists had different views concerning how God would bring about this new creation, even though they all claimed to have received the details by a revelation from God. In some apocalyptic scenarios, God was to send a human Messiah to lead the troops of the children of light into battle against the forces of evil. In others, God was to send a kind of cosmic judge of the earth, sometimes also called the Messiah or the "Son of Man" to bring about a cataclysmic overthrow of the demonic powers that oppressed the children of light.

This final vindication would involve a day of judgment for all people. Those who had aligned themselves with the powers of evil would face the Almighty Judge and render an account of what they had done; those who had remained faithful to God would be rewarded and brought into his eternal Kingdom. Moreover, this judgment applied not only to people who happened to be living at the time of the end. No one should think, that is, that he or she could side with the powers of evil, oppress the people of God, die prosperous and contented, and so get away with it. God would allow no one to escape. He was going to raise all people bodily from the dead, and they would have to face judgment, eternal bliss for those who had taken his side, eternal torment for everyone else. And there was not a sweet thing that anyone could do to stop him.

IMMINENCE. According to Jewish apocalypticists, this vindication by God was going to happen very soon. Standing in the tradition of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, apocalypticists maintained that God had revealed to them the course of history, and that the end was almost here. Those who were evil had to repent, before it was too late. Those who were good, who were suffering as a result, were to hold on. For it would not be long before God would intervene, sending a savior—possibly on the clouds of heaven in judgment on the earth—bringing with him the good Kingdom for those who remained faithful to his Law. Indeed, the end was right around the corner. In the words of one first-century Jewish apocalypticist: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that that Kingdom of God has come with power." These in fact are the words of Jesus (Mark 9:1). Or as he says elsewhere, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things have taken place" (Mark 13:30).

On to Jesus

Some of the earliest traditions about Jesus portray him as a Jewish apocalypticist who responded to the political and social crises of his day, including the domination of his nation by a foreign power, by proclaiming that his generation was living at the end of the age, that God would soon intervene on behalf of his people, sending a cosmic judge from heaven, the Son of Man who would destroy the forces of evil and set up God's Kingdom. In preparation for his coming, the people of Israel needed to turn to God, trusting him as a kindly parent and loving one another as his special children. Those who refused to accept this message would be liable to the judgment of God, soon to arrive with the coming of the Son of Man.

Is this ancient portrayal of Jesus, which is embodied in a number of our oldest traditions, historically accurate? Was Jesus a Jewish apocalypticist?