

Will The Real Messiah Please Stand Up?

Reverend David Jones

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In the year 63 BCE, the Roman general Pompey the Great, climbed the steps of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, flung back the curtain which partitioned the Holy of Holies off from the rest of the structure, and entered its sacred space. Reserved for the High Priest on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur, he thereby desecrated not only it but also the Temple, given that he was a Gentile. Of little consequence to Pompey, in part due to his reputation as the foremost military leader of the day, he wanted to see a statue or image of the Jewish god; instead he found nothing. Somewhat confused and perplexed, he and his officers then examined the menorah and other items used for worship, but removed nothing and soon departed. Afterwards he ordered the temple be cleansed and its rituals resumed. It was an inauspicious moment. The culmination of a three-month siege, the capture of Jerusalem and its place of worship meant that the Jewish nation once again were a subject people, this time under the thumb of the Roman Republic. The disastrous result of seeking foreign intervention in a civil war that had erupted between two brothers over the throne and high priesthood of Judah, following the death of their mother, it marked the end of a century of independence, during which the Jewish people could worship the God in whom they believed and conduct their lives according to the Law of Moses; the successful outcome of a revolt led by the Maccabee family in 167 BCE which led to the overthrow of what were then the nation's overlords, the rulers of the Seleucid Empire, based in Syria but of Greek origin. Fifteen years after his capture of Jerusalem, Pompey would die after fleeing to Egypt, where he was assassinated following his defeat in battle by Julius Caesar, during a civil war that had broken out in the same Republic.

Despondent following the loss of their independence as a nation, many of the population within what had become Judea began to place their hope in a Messiah, meaning literally "the anointed one", chosen by the God they worshipped, who would liberate them from their present bondage and usher in a reign of peace, where all would prosper and live in unanimity. Mentioned originally in the Book of Isaiah in reference to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, due to his role in ending the Babylonian Captivity, as an idea it began to develop following the subsequent defeat of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great, and the occupation of what was then the land of Judah by one of his generals, who, in unison with several of his military peers, had carved out a kingdom of his own following the death of Alexander in 323 BCE. Continued fighting among the descendants of each led to the region coming under different control but with little change in regard to its impact upon the Jewish population, who were increasingly expected to adopt Hellenistic ways and customs, including the worship of Greek gods. After a statue of Zeus was erected in the temple courtyard, and sacrifices performed on its altar, the aforementioned revolt broke out, which initiated a period of freedom, but was ultimately doomed to fail, as the Roman Republic sought to expand its influence throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Caught as it would seem in the vice of the continued struggle for geopolitical dominance, the Jewish people appeared destined to forever remain under the rule of one foreign power or another, their religious heritage and practice consequently threatened each time. As the Roman occupation of Judea lengthened, and its control over the region

strengthened, the desire for release from its harsh effect through the intervention of a God-ordained figure increased accordingly. Jesus of Nazareth was but one of several who were understood to fit this role.

Composed late in the first century, primarily for a Jewish audience, perhaps in the city of Antioch, the author of the Gospel of Matthew, a second generation Jewish Christian, seeks to convince those in the Diaspora, that the Messiah had in fact come in the person of Jesus, in spite of all appearances to the contrary. By this time a shift in sentiment toward those who recognized him as the long-awaited “anointed one” had begun in many synagogues, resulting in their expulsion from various congregations, arising from the perception that he had been a “false Messiah”, due to his failure to free Judea from its Roman overlords, and re-establish it as the Jewish homeland. Instead he had allowed himself to die a criminal’s death by way of crucifixion without a fight, anathema to any devout believer aware that “he who hangs on a tree” (Deuteronomy 21: 22 – 23) is cursed by the God whose expectations for each worshipper were outlined in the Written Law. Using almost ninety percent of the Gospel of Mark, the earliest to be written, along with other source material, the author adapts and shapes what he has at hand to craft a narrative which demonstrates that Jesus of Nazareth in fact is the very Messiah who was expected, as predicted throughout Hebrew scripture. Of all the Gospel accounts his is the most extensive in this regard, referring to various passages some fifty-three times, while alluding to it some additional forty-three times; evidence of his desire to convince his readers that they need to consider who this man truly was within the context of Jewish life and history, given their belief in a God whose actions occur within the realm of human activity. He also takes great pains to note, however, that in rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, and facilitating his death at the hands of the Roman authorities, the Jewish leaders of the day, whether scribe or Pharisee, had in effect passed the torch to the emerging Christian church, as the means through which that same God’s actions would further materialize.

And so we find in today’s Gospel reading further argument from the author that in spite of commonplace assumptions as to how the Messiah should conduct himself, that this Jesus of Nazareth indeed is he. Seated in the dungeon of Machaerus, a palace and desert fortress located just south of the Jordan River near the Dead Sea, John the Baptist mulls over his fate, following his imprisonment for having dared to denounce Herod Antipas for having divorced his first wife, and then married his half-brother’s wife Herodias, in violation of the Written Law. Wanting to know if Jesus in fact is the “one who is to come”, John sends two of his disciples to ask the question, in effect wanting to know if he will remain imprisoned or is he to be liberated when Jesus arrives in all his glory as the warrior-king expected by many. In response Jesus answers by outlining that “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them”. And then goes on to note that “blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me,” in effect encouraging John and his disciples not to lose faith in him or his mission. John after all had baptized Jesus “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15), in preparation for his adoption of the role of High Priest, as required by the Oral Law, and necessary if he also was to assume the mantle of king. Following his comments to John’s disciples, Jesus then goes on to praise him as the greatest of all the prophets, the forerunner who was to prepare the way for his arrival as God’s “anointed

one”; in both instances shown by the author to be quoting from Hebrew scripture. No stranger to physical discomfort and subsistence living, John no doubt accepted that his lot would remain in the hands of the God whose faithful servant he had been. And as fate would have it, he ultimately would die at the behest of Herodia’s daughter Salome, who requests his head on a platter, after performing a dance that Herod found pleasing.

In the years since the author of Matthew constructed his Gospel, the question continues to arise whether this Jesus of Nazareth, whom he proclaimed as the long-expected Messiah, truly was this figure or is his assertion lacking in substance and without merit. Is there any credence to his assertion, and if so, in what way? What evidence does he offer to reinforce his claim or is his audience to accept it on the basis of his reference to Hebrew scripture which foretold his arrival “in the fullness of time”? The answer, of course, lies in the raising of Jesus from the dead, for in the absence of his resurrection, no amount of reference to sacred text can prove sufficient. It amounts to little more than sleight of hand, designed to deceive the naive and confound the gifted. For it is the reality of this event, attested to by his disciples, that undergirds not only the Gospel of Matthew, but the other synoptics as well, and is expounded most fully in the Gospel of John. But as the author of Matthew also takes great pains to emphasize, it is not simply through the acknowledgement of Jesus as the Risen Messiah that his readers may achieve liberation from all that enslaves them, whatever their circumstances may be, for this amounts to no more than changing one’s attire, but remaining dressed in the same clothing.

True religion in this respect consists in emulating he who healed the sick, cured the lame, and preached good news to the poor, thereby making the world a better place in which to live, for only in so doing can lasting peace be obtained, creating the possibility for all to live in harmony, whether of Jewish and Gentile descent.

And we in the twenty-first century can do no less. Conquerors come and go, whether they be a Pompey the Great, or someone equally bent on forging an empire or nation that holds out the promise of peace and prosperity for all, through the suppression of any who question or resist their purposes. For it is only through the giving up of one’s life that all may live and live abundantly... rejoicing. Thanks be to God. AMEN.