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John Riches

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Introduction

Great religious prophets and innovators transcend their time. They reach out beyond it, perceiving new worlds and new times beyond the imaginings of their contemporaries. They evoke in some of their contemporaries a response that sets them on the difficult and problematic task of transposing such dreams into reality. The Protestant Reformation gives birth to modern Europe; early Christianity dons the imperial robe.

Such religious figures, however, remain in one sense on their own. Standing at the margins of their society, isolated from the rest of their contemporaries, they dream dreams that bring down the wrath of the powers that be and cause their friends to wonder if they have taken leave of their senses. Luther stands alone at Worms to face the might of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. Jesus dies on the cross abandoned by even his closest followers.

And so it is tempting for the prophets' later followers to wrest them out of their time altogether, to see them and their words as belonging no longer to their original setting but as eternally destined for all peoples and societies. We study the texts that report their words and deeds as if they spoke equally clearly to all people at all times. The text becomes the thing. But in setting the text free from its time, the prophets' followers run the risk of divorcing the texts, not only from their contemporary setting but from the prophets themselves.

And this will not do. However much some prophetic figures transcend their time, they do so precisely as men and women of their time. Standing at the doorway into a new world, they

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nonetheless share their contemporaries' hopes and fears and seek to lead their people out into what is to come. Their words speak to their contemporaries' condition: They may meet with opposition and incomprehension, but they also address their people's deepest hopes and desires. In their preaching and their deeds they seek to transform people's understanding of themselves and their world and prepare them to embrace the world to come. It is in this interaction with traditional, inherited beliefs and practices that they are able to exercise their extraordinary power over their contemporaries. And it is in this that their power to create new worlds resides.

For this reason study of the biblical texts about Jesus needs to set them back into their contemporary context. If we want to understand how these texts may serve to transform our own situation, then it may be of help to see how Jesus' words and deeds were able to transform his own world and indeed to produce the texts the church was subsequently to canonize.

But what kind of context do we need to explore? Often in this kind of quest the context has been conceived of fairly narrowly as a literary one: We need to know as much as we can about other contemporary Jewish texts in order to understand what Jesus was saying. There is nothing wrong about that in itself; there is danger only if we divorce those writings from their context in the life and history of the Jewish people, just as we have tended to divorce the biblical texts from their own particular historical context. Then we shall treat these ancient texts merely as sources for other religious doctrines of that time, with which to compare and contrast Jesus' teaching. And we shall fail to ask how those doctrines related to the actual lives, hopes, and fears of the Jewish people.

To give an example, a great deal of attention has been given to Jewish apocalyptic literature at the turn of the era. This literature, starting with Daniel in the second century B.C. and including great collections like 1 Enoch, contains visions of a

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catastrophe that will bring in the final age. It is full of doctrines about how this future world will come, some of which bear striking resemblance to ideas found in the New Testament. One way of relating Jesus' teaching to this kind of text is simply to compare and contrast: Jesus speaks about the coming of the kingdom "with power" but does not engage in speculation about when this will be, rejecting calls for signs of its coming. Apocalyptic literature gives much richer portrayals of the end and also speculates vigorously about the "times," how much longer there is before the end arrives, and how God's people will be able to recognize the crucial moments. Similarly we may choose to contrast different views about the nature of the Messiah, or similar savior figures referred to in these texts.

That is all very well so far as it goes. Indeed, it is most important work. But we shall not come to understand very much about why there are these similarities and differences between Jesus and contemporary seers, unless we understand more about how this body of literature relates to the situation of the Jews at the time. Under what conditions did people begin to dream such strange dreams of future torment and rescue? How did such hopes – and fears – relate to the political and social aspirations of an occupied people? How did they relate to more traditional Jewish beliefs? Why did Jews find it necessary to modify or recast their traditional beliefs at all?

The answer to these questions, I want to suggest, can only be found if we first take a much closer look at the economic, social, and political setting of such texts. We need to see texts like the apocalyptic texts as responses to an ongoing history of national struggle for independence and for the preservation of traditional Jewish religious practices and beliefs. And the same goes for other contemporary texts and doctrines.

The emergence of great religious figures can hardly ever be purely accidental, independent, that is, of the historical constellation under which they are born. They are figures who

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mark the great cultural shifts in the history of the human race. But they are not simply products of such shifts: Their greatness lies in the way in which they set their own stamp on them, laying the foundations for a host of cultural constructions in following generations.

Certainly it is true that Jesus emerges at a critical turning point in the history of the Jewish people, as indeed of the whole Mediterranean world. Within forty years of his death the heart of contemporary Judaism, the Temple, was destroyed. Out of that disaster arose, on the one hand, rabbinic Judaism and, on the other, Christianity. But at the same time that disaster in Jerusalem was itself part of a wider phenomenon Jews could ignore only at their peril, namely, the creation of the Roman principate. The resolution of the civil war between Anthony and Octavian in 30 B.C. meant that Palestine became, willy-nilly, part of a larger and largely cohesive political unit. As a religious group Jews had effectively three choices: They could seek to break the grip of Roman power; they could choose to retreat into a form of communal piety, accommodating where necessary to the political realities of Roman rule; or they could attempt to convert Rome.

It is interesting to reflect that, out of the many religious groups and movements that flourished in the Mediterranean in the first century, only two would survive in any substantial institutionalized form, and both had their roots in the crisis in first-century Palestine.

But how far can Jesus be held responsible for what came after him? Even if we succeed in showing him as the kind of prophetic figure who points his people to a coming new age, what is it to say that he set his stamp on it? How far can he be held responsible for the great diversity of forms that Christianity, through the ages, has taken?

Of course this is a massive question that we cannot hope to answer adequately. For the purposes of this book what I want to

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say is this: All cultures are sustained by certain basic beliefs that may, however, be articulated and expressed in a variety of ways. This, as we shall see, was certainly true of Judaism. Belief in the Covenant between God and Israel and in the Law as the expression of God's will was basic to most Jews most of the time. Yet when pressed, those who held such beliefs could articulate them in many different ways, and this gave rise to fierce debate and antagonism. In the same way the many different cultural manifestations of Christianity are all predicated on certain basic beliefs about God's act of salvation in Christ, and yet Christian history too is proof of the way in which different understandings of these basic beliefs have given rise to very different forms of social and cultural life.

What is Jesus' place in all this? It can hardly be said that he himself laid down the basic beliefs that would sustain Christianity through the ages. Insofar as they concern his death and resurrection it must be clear that such a framework of belief was the work of his followers, the Evangelists and Paul, more than of Jesus. And yet that is not all there is to be said. As we shall see, there is an important sense in which Jesus is already beginning to suggest significant modifications in Jewish beliefs. In one sense this may not go as far as challenging basic beliefs in the Law and the Covenant: Such matters were still being vigorously debated in the church at the time of Paul and Matthew, some twenty to fifty years after Jesus' death. What he does, I shall suggest, is to challenge certain modes of articulating belief in God's governance of the world, certain understandings of justice and goodness, which, once pressed, will have far-reaching consequences. It is the radical nature of Jesus' understanding of God's Rule that will cause Paul to start talking about an old and a new Covenant, or to begin to work out some view of the Law that can see it both as superseded and yet as having played a part in God's purposes for his world.

One of the fascinating things about the Christian tradition is

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the way that it has always retained this uneasy relationship with the "Old" Covenant. Rather than having received an unequivocal set of basic beliefs from a "founder," Christianity received as its heritage a series of stories and sayings that place it in a seemingly unending dialogue with the rich and complex traditions of Israel.

Attempts to resolve this dialogue by breaking it off have been resisted. When the second-century Christian scholar Marcion rejected the ancient Jewish writings and indeed part of the Christian Scriptures as well, the church rejected him. But the church has also resisted efforts to absorb Jesus and his teaching within the Old Covenant, as was attempted by certain forms of Jewish Christianity. Rather, by canonizing the "Old" Testament along with the New, the church has given it a normative position within the community and has ensured the continuity of that dialogue. Thus Jesus remains as it were one voice in the Christian church's continuing dialogue. It is an ongoing dialogue and its products in the various forms of church and social life remain always provisional, always subject to revision and modification.

What I want to suggest through this study of Jesus in his contemporary context is that this unending dialogue cannot be seen simply as an intellectual, theological dialogue without relevance to its contemporary social, economic, and political context. Christian theology cannot for long abstract from the practical questions of its implications for social and political life. The context of Jesus' preaching and teaching in the continuing struggle and search of the Jewish people for self-determination should make that clear. In this sense true Christian theology must always be contextual.

In this volume of the series my task is specifically to examine the ways in which Jewish figures and groups of the first century, Jesus included, reacted to the basic social, economic and political realities of the time. Accordingly I shall attempt

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to show how Jesus' prophetic activity represents one among a number of first-century Jewish responses to the prolonged political and cultural pressures to which they had been subjected. And it will be an important part of this task to show how all these responses spring from the same stock of Jewish belief in God's covenantal rule.

We shall begin then in Chapter 1 by attempting to give an account of the social, economic, political, and cultural context within which Jesus and other Jewish leaders operated. And we shall look briefly too at the wider Hellenistic culture that permeated the whole of the Mediterranean world, as it had done with varying degrees of acceptance and rejection since Alexander's campaigns in the fourth century B.C.

Before turning to a specific investigation of first-century Jewish groups, however, we need to look in Chapter 2 at the common stock of beliefs on which such groups drew, in virtue of which they could all be said to be Jewish – and at the already quite different forms that those beliefs had been given in the last two centuries B.C. That diversity is itself the expression of different responses to Israel's changing situation and therefore constitutes part of the cultural resources on which Jews of the first century could draw as they grappled with their own particular problems.

Chapters 3–5 then examine the main Jewish movements and groups in the early part of the first century A.D., including Jesus himself. Rather than discuss each group on its own, I have chosen a fairly simple set of questions to put one by one to the various groups, which then makes it possible to compare the respective answers at each stage.

I start, in Chapter 3, by asking how a group defines its membership. Rules and marks of membership, whether or not formalized, may be interestingly informative of a group's central concerns and values. To ask how a group defines membership is, it should be noticed, not quite the same as asking how a

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member gets in. That suggests too easily an element of choice and deliberate initiation, which although it may have been important for some Jews was not so for those who stressed membership through birth and infant circumcision. The question, that is, of how far some deliberate, voluntary act of subscribing to the group was necessary before one could consider oneself a member of God's people was itself contentious.

In Chapter 4 I shall inquire into the various strategies Jewish groups of the time devised to help their members uphold group norms and values. For some this involved a redefinition, in part at least, of traditional Jewish norms, or the emphasizing of parts of the tradition at the cost of others. For some it involved devising patterns of group activity that reinforced members' determination to uphold the traditional norms in their entirety. These are not, of course, mutually exclusive ways: The redefinition of norms and the development of disciplinary strategies may go hand in hand.

And then, in Chapter 5, I shall ask what vision of and hopes for the future were shared by each of the groups. The question is particularly relevant in a situation where the existing state of affairs is regarded as in some sense abnormal – contrary, that is, to God's will. What is interesting to note here is that the views held by any one group may differ considerably. It seems indeed likely that views of the future were the product of individual seers, which were then subsequently espoused with varying degrees of tenacity by particular groups at different times. This is certainly true of the early Christian community.

In all this we shall of course be concerned not simply to give a mere listing of the different ways in which various groups dealt with such questions. Rather in comparing and contrasting the different answers we shall be considering them as more or less intelligible responses to the complex historical situation in which such groups found themselves and which we will have attempted to describe in Chapters 1 and 2. Thus in an age

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in which some Jews by birth saw it as politic to make some accommodation with their received norms and standards in order to coexist and cooperate with an alien occupying power, others may have found it necessary to define membership of the group no longer principally in terms of birth and circumcision but of active and conscious espousal of Jewish norms. Again groups that link their identity strongly with the holding of certain sharply defined beliefs, their preservation, cultivation, and implementation, may need to devise defensive strategies to protect themselves from the infiltration of heterodox beliefs into the community. And I suspect that the fluctuation in beliefs about the future even within individual groups will have related partly to the extent to which they believed the alien forces in society were firmly entrenched and partly to the amount of power they themselves could command. If nothing short of a major upheaval could remove the foreign power then groups with little or no power would be likely to look for some divine act of intervention, while those more powerful would harbor visions of a successful holy war, though even here they might hope for some final divine act of intervention.

Once we have offered such a comparative account of the various Jewish responses to the crisis of first-century Palestine we should be better able to grasp the nature of Jesus' own vision and message, to which we shall devote Chapter 6. Our previous discussion should enable us the better to see it as a distinctive yet analogous response to the perplexing realities that troubled others of his contemporaries. This in turn may enable us to discern something of its remarkable power to transform his followers' understanding of themselves and their world.

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Chapter 1

The Political, Economic, Social, and Cultural Context of First-Century Palestinian Judaism

What were the political, economic, social, and cultural forces that affected everyday life in Roman Palestine in the first century? What was their history and how in practice were such forces experienced by ordinary Jews? Were they experienced as bearable, desirable, offering opportunities for fulfillment; or as oppressive, posing severe obstacles to the development of a truly Jewish way of life? These questions are complex, and the answers given here are necessarily abbreviated.

The Political Situation

Developments up to the Beginning of the First Century and the Pax Augusta

Palestine at the turn of the era was under Roman control. It was not, however, all controlled in the same manner. Herod the Great, a loyal and politically crafty client king, had just died (4 B.C.). His kingdom, after much deliberation by Augustus at Rome, had been divided between his three sons, Archelaus, Philip, and Herod Antipas. Archelaus was appointed ethnarch over Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea; Herod Antipas tetrarch over Galilee and Peraea; Herod Philip tetrarch over Batanaea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis (*Ant.* xvii.317–20). None received the title “king,” which they wanted, though the title “ethnarch” had more dignity than that of tetrarch. Within a few years Archelaus’ disastrous rule would end in the imposition of direct Roman rule over Judea (A.D. 6). Herod Antipas’ rule in