

# **WAS JESUS A VIOLENT REVOLUTIONARY?**

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## I. Introduction

The *Online Etymology Dictionary*<sup>1</sup> provides this synopsis of the origins of the word “revolution:”

General sense of "instance of great change in affairs" is recorded from c.1450. Political meaning first recorded 1600, derived from French, and was especially applied to the expulsion of the Stuart dynasty under James II in 1688 and transfer of sovereignty to William and Mary. *Revolutionary* as a noun is first attested 1850, from the adjective. *Revolutionize* "to change a thing completely and fundamentally" is first recorded 1799.

The concept of “revolution” is a relatively recent idea and the contemporary usage implies a change in a socio-political system that involves thorough change in fundamental ideology. Instances of “revolution” in the last century, of which there are many, are mostly violent<sup>2</sup>, although the fall of communism in the Soviet Union during 1989-1991, unlike the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 which established the soviet state, is a notable exception where the change was mostly non-violent.

Can a religious system undergo revolution? My answer is yes, it can. The establishment of Christianity as a separate religion from Judaism in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE is an appropriate example of the retroactive application of our understanding of “revolution” to a series of events that precipitated a thorough change in a very ancient and preceding religious system, even though the events occurred before the coinage of the term “revolution.” Just as in a modern revolution, there are many prominent figures,

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<sup>1</sup> See, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=revolution&searchmode=None>

<sup>2</sup> Some famous 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionaries who used violence were V. I. Lenin, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh, all of whom were Marxist.

but the one who stands heads and shoulders above the others in the founding of Christianity is Jesus Christ. If Jesus started a “revolution,” as we understand the word, the more intriguing question is “Was Jesus a violent revolutionary?”

My answer is: **No - Jesus was not a violent revolutionary – but his followers have advocated violence, actually committed violent acts and stirred up hope that Jesus will march at the head of a violent revolution.** To support my answer, this paper explores the overall historical setting which includes social history, political history, the existing theology and some of the characters who preceded and were contemporaries of Jesus during the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE and also examines the scriptures for illumination on the question.

## II. A Glimpse of the Social Context

Jesus was born, lived and died in Roman-Herodian Palestine. As a generalization, Jesus’ Palestine “mirrored Mediterranean society as whole.”<sup>3</sup> It was a thriving peasant economy supplemented by mining, fishing, and herding. It was an agrarian, limited-good, and slave society that is stratified into hierarchical patron-client relationships. Within the family, the *paterfamilias* ruled through the “Household Code.” The core social values that regulated this society were that of honor and shame and that of patron-client.

Because of Alexander of Macedonia, the cities were Hellenized and public life revolved around one or more *agoras*. Even among the Jews, Greek language, culture, and wives can be found. Economic power was concentrated in the Greco-Roman cities

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<sup>3</sup> Dennis C. Duling, *The New Testament: History, Literature and Social Context*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. Thomson Wadsworth 2003, at page 15.

and the countryside was relegated to the poor peasants who labored for absentee urban landlords. Continuing a trend started since King Solomon (notwithstanding the warnings of the Prophets), there still prevailed a social rift between the poor and the rich. The arrival of imperial powers from the west, first the Greeks and then the Romans only worsened this social alienation on account of wealth. The rich and powerful in the population were seen as collaborating with the conquerors so as to perpetuate their economic domination of the poor and to maintain their own *status quo ante*. The local Hebrew tax collector who squeezed the population on behalf of Rome was a reviled character. Despite the social tensions, the regional economy was productive and Palestine was considered a lucrative source of imperial revenue for Rome.

As a result of the disparity between rich and poor, and the divide between city and countryside, banditry was a part of the landscape. Some of the stronger amongst the poor and oppressed would resort to robbery as means to a livelihood. The more successful bandits often drew the admiration and support of peasants. Duling, citing Josephus, notes that “after 44 [CE], such bandit-led peasant groups, according to Josephus, increased.”<sup>4</sup>

### III. A Glimpse of the Political Context

Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus Caesar (68 BCE – 14 CE) and died during that of Tiberius (14 – 37 CE). Led by the general Pompey, the Romans had arrived in 63 BCE and gradually colonized the entire region which they renamed Palestine. Judea first became a client-kingdom or vassal state and in 6 CE was annexed as a province under the direct Roman rule. The land has never been completely pacified

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 20.

and there were intermittent skirmishes which climaxed in the Jewish-Roman War of 66-73 CE. During this conflict Jerusalem was sacked and burned to the ground under Titus Flavius in 70 CE. Led by Bar Kokhba, Jews revolted again in 135 CE and this time the Romans attempted to erase all traces of the Jews by rebuilding the Roman city of Aelia Capitoina over the ruins of the Jerusalem and re-incorporating the whole region as Syria-Paleastina.

Because the Romans were foreign, they ruled most of Palestine through the Herodian kings who were the remnant of the Hasmonean Dynasty which arose when Dynasty in 165-164 BCE Judas Maccabeus successfully revolted against the Hellenistic Seleucid.<sup>5</sup> After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, his empire had been divided between his generals, the *Diadochi* and Palestine fell under Seleucus and his descendants.

Herod the Great (c.74–4 BCE) was King of Judea at the time of the birth of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> He is identified in the Gospel of Matthew as ruthlessly ordering the killing of the Innocents<sup>7</sup>, and is credited with enlarging the Second Temple. When Herod died shortly after the birth of Jesus, his kingdom was divided among his three surviving sons, amidst great popular unrest. This was to the chagrin of the Roman overlords who valued stability for instability impeded the flow of tribute and taxes to Rome.

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<sup>5</sup> The last Seleucid in Jerusalem was Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

<sup>6</sup> Herod the Great served with the approval of the Roman Senate which first installed him in 40 BCE as “King of the Jews,” and he ruled until the ripe old age of 70 years.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the biblical charge of killing innocent babies, the cruelty of Herod the Great is legion. History records him as having executed three of his own sons, Antipater, Alexandros, and Aristobulos.

A son of Herod the Great, Herod Archelaus (23 BCE–c.18 CE) was ethnarch of Samaria, Judea, and Idumea and ruled so badly in the eyes of the Romans that he was dethroned in 6 CE and banished to the frontiers of Gaul, whereupon, his lands became a Roman Province which was administered directly by governors such as Pontius Pilate (governed from 26-36 CE). The early governors (or prefects) were drawn from the lower military rank of equestrian (or knight) and after 44 CE were procurators, senior politicians who had command of a Legion. The lowly status of the early governors suggested that Judea was a minor Roman province.

Herod Antipas (20 BCE–c.40 CE) was another son of Herod the Great and he got to be tetrarch (ruler of one quarter) of Galilee and Peraea. The Gospels portray him as a licentious tyrant who ordered the beheading of John the Baptist and satirized Jesus before his crucifixion. Herod Philip (4 BCE– 34 CE) was the third son of Herod the Great and he inherited the northeast part of his father's kingdom.<sup>8</sup> Agrippa I (c.10 BCE– 44 CE), was yet another Herodian king of Judea, the grandson of Herod the Great and he is referred to simply as "Herod" in the Acts of the Apostles.

The political climate during the lifetime of Jesus glowed with the heat of resentment that eventually burst forth in flames as the great Jewish revolt some thirty years after his death. The common people detested the pagan Roman presence and also felt oppressed by their own Hellenized aristocracy. The leaders of the religious sects tried to defuse the internal tensions and to keep Hellenistic philosophy at bay while at the

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<sup>8</sup>He was tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis. He married his niece Salome, daughter of Herodias, who according to the Gospels, danced and asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

same time maintaining by own status by collecting temple taxes and money for the sacrifices and other legalistic services.

Judea since 6 CE was under direct Roman rule imposed through a governor. The Sanhedrin was a Jewish court which administered the Torah, but by the time of Jesus' crucifixion, was without power to impose the death penalty. Josephus mentioned an early Sanhedrin that was convened under the Romans in 57 BCE. The Jewish Virtual Library provides the following description of the Sanhedrin:

Tannaitic sources describe the Great Sanhedrin as a religious assembly of 71 sages who met in the Chamber of Hewn Stones in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Great Sanhedrin met daily during the daytime, and did not meet on the Sabbath, festivals or festival eves. It was the final authority on Jewish law and any scholar who went against its decisions was put to death as a *zaken mamre* (rebellious elder). The Sanhedrin was led by a president called the *nasi* (lit. "prince") and a vice president called the *av bet din* (lit. "father of the court"). The other 69 sages sat in a semicircle facing the leaders.<sup>9</sup>

Consistent with the imperial policy of religious toleration, the Sanhedrin was permitted to operate as a judicial body insofar as Torah is concerned and to impose its own religious order on the Jews. The primary Roman objective was the collection of tribute and tax for which political stability was the *sine quo non*.

#### IV. A Glimpse of the Religious Scene

In addition to the delegation of political power to the Herodians and religious power to the Sanhedrin, at the popular level Duling notes that “[t]he Romans were sensitive enough to permit the stubborn Israelites special exemptions from performing military service, appearing in court on the Sabbath, having to portray the emperor’s head

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<sup>9</sup> See, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/Sanhedrin.html>

on their coins (Israelite prohibition against images), and offering sacrifices *to* the emperor as a deity... [and] in areas of heavy Israelite population, the Romans were not to represent the image of the emperor on their military standards.”<sup>10</sup> The Jews, especially those who resided in Judea, and particularly in Jerusalem who by reason of proximity to the Temple thought highly of themselves as the preservers of the faith of Moses and jealously defended this prerogative. The Judeans simmered with resentment at the presence of the Romans, but most of the time did not feel sufficient outrage to engage in violent rebellion so long as the Romans respected their religious customs and practices.

The phrase “customs and practices” is used because there were distinct sects within Judaism during the time of Jesus. Duling identifies the following religious groups, noting that “Josephus calls them ‘philosophies:’”<sup>11</sup> Sadducees, Pharisees, the Dead Sea Assembly or Essenes. Relations between these various sects or groups were not in perfect harmony as illustrated by Paul’s resort to the disagreement between the Sadducees and Pharisees over the questions of the after-life<sup>12</sup>. The Essenes chose to withdraw from the city (and the Temple) and they worshiped according to “their own calendar and customs, baptized, celebrated a common meal, and sought to live pure and undefiled lives.”<sup>13</sup> While contending with their internal disagreements over certain points of religion, the sects appeared united and unbending (or stiff-necked) against outside encroachment of their faith and the Romans knew enough to respect the key manifestations of Jewish religious compliance.

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<sup>10</sup> Duling at pages 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 46.

<sup>12</sup> When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council, ‘Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection\* of the dead.’<sup>7</sup> When he said this, a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.<sup>8</sup> (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge all three.) Acts 23:6-8.

<sup>13</sup> Duling at page 47.

As the distance increased from Jerusalem, the self-perception of religiosity also declined. The Judeans held the Jews of Nazareth in Galilee in a lesser light,<sup>14</sup> and distinguished themselves from their northern neighbors by the Galilean's speaking accent.<sup>15</sup> They held the Samaritans, whose land separated Galilee from Judea, in even lower esteem and actual contempt because of the latter's heretical interpretation of the Scriptures and worship in their own temple. Since the Babylonian Exile, many Diaspora Jews simply did not return to Jerusalem despite the rebuilding of the Second Temple. They remained in cities such as Rome, Antioch, Damascus, and notably Alexandria in Egypt and their scholars wrote in no longer in Hebrew but in *koine* Greek.<sup>16</sup> During the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE, the Jewish scholars in Alexandria completed the *Septuagint* (*LXX*). They also wrote works which reflected Platonic and Stoic philosophy, as well as, Jewish Wisdom. Duling opined that “[n]o doubt many Israelites of the Diaspora became less inclined to follow the Torah as strictly as Israelites in Palestine, especially because much of it dealt with issues about the temple.”<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, since Jesus' ministry culminated in Jerusalem and he was executed there, the thinking of the various powerful Jerusalem Temple sects and their perception of Jesus are critical towards understanding how Jesus was perceived by the Jewish elite and subsequently by the Roman overlords. Another man preceded Jesus in Judea and he too suffered death – he is John the Baptist.

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’<sup>46</sup> Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ John 1: 45-46.

<sup>15</sup> Peter who was a fisherman from Galilee gave himself away at the night trial of Jesus by his accent.

<sup>16</sup> Duling at page 48.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 49

V. Who was John the Baptist and why he was beheaded.

Josephus provides the following glimpse of John the Baptist:

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's [Antipas] army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. *Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late.* Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him. (Whiston Translation)<sup>18</sup> [Emphasis added.]

Antipas' marriage with Herodias who was the wife of his half-brother Herod Philip and daughter of his half-brother Aristobulus involved him in war with his previous father-in-law, Aretas IV Philopatris king in Arabia Petrea Nabatea, father of Phasaelis whom he divorced to marry Herodia. In this war, Antipas lost his army and Josephus explained the loss as punishment for the execution of John the Baptist. Josephus is also convinced (or tries to convince) that Antipas had executed John to prevent the rising influence and power of the Baptist from precipitating a popular rebellion.

The Gospels, on the other hand, attribute the execution of John the Baptist to the whimsical trick of a dancing girl and her mother, the scripturally unnamed daughter

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<sup>18</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Book 18, Chapter 5, Paragraph 2.

of his wife Herodias, but traditionally understood to be Salome<sup>19</sup>. However, John's objection to Antipas' taking Herodias as wife also comes through in the Gospels. The Gospels further portray John as coming in from the wilderness of Judea<sup>20</sup> wearing camel hair and a leather girdle and eating locusts and wild honey,<sup>21</sup> denouncing the Jewish religious authorities as a brood of vipers,<sup>22</sup> and causing large crowds to gather, whom he baptized with the waters of Jordan.<sup>23</sup> The Gospels leave no doubt that John stirred the interest of the common people. In those days (as is today), the established authorities are always wary of large crowds gathering before a charismatic leader – such a configuration can lead to conflagration, and rebellion, should the charismatic so instigate.

Was John the Baptist merely a religious upstart who enticed the spiritually curious away from established Temple worship and who offered an alternative for the poor who could not afford the traditional atonement for sins via animal sacrifices in the Temple? He certainly had very harsh words for Sadducees and Pharisees, both of whom represented the Jewish religious elite and politically powerful. Was John a peaceful social reformer or was he an awakening firebrand<sup>24</sup> attempting to first rouse a band of common folks for mischief and then an army for rebellion? Was he on the verge of starting a fiery revolution with his call for repentance, the remission of sins through

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<sup>19</sup> See, Matthew 14:6-11 (NRSV). See, also Mark 6:17-28. Luke merely records John's imprisonment.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 3:1-12.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 3:4.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 3:7. See, also, Luke 3:8.

<sup>23</sup> The Gospel description of John suggests that the Baptist may have come out seclusion from an Essene community located around the Dead Sea.

<sup>24</sup> Is it a mere coincidence that John the Baptist is quoted as prophesying: 'I baptize you with - water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with - the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' Matthew 3:11. See also Luke 3:16.

baptism, and visions of the kingdom of heaven<sup>25</sup>? Were his followers ready to use violence to make John's message of the kingdom a reality on earth?

Josephus, who was at one time a rebel leader, and now writing historical commentary for an audience comprised of Roman elite, argued that the Baptist was on the brink of causing a violent change of the *status quo*. His observation is reiterated here:

Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to *raise a rebellion*, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late.<sup>26</sup> [Emphasis added]

According to Josephus, the potential for rebellion was not abated by locking John the Baptist in the fortress of Macherus – it was thought best that he be killed. Given the oppressive political climate and general discontent in Judea, Josephus' argument carries plausibility. The Gospels are correct in noting that Herod Antipas had thrown John the Baptist into prison for preaching against his marriage, but would he execute a prisoner for no other reason than the whim of a dancing girl?

#### VI. Can Anything Good Come Out of Nazareth?

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.'<sup>46</sup> Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'<sup>27</sup> Nazareth actually was an obscure village in Galilee and the nearest Greco-Roman city was Sepphoris. While

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew 3:2.

<sup>26</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Book 18, Chapter 5, Paragraph 2.

<sup>27</sup> John 1: 45-46,

Jesus may have been born in Bethlehem in Judea, the Gospels report that Joseph the carpenter and Mary settled in Nazareth and Jesus grew to manhood in Galilee.

Josephus, while being known to exaggerate his numbers, reports that "the cities [of Galilee] lie here very thick; and the very many villages ... are everywhere so full of people, by the richness of their soil, that the very least of them contain above fifteen thousand in habitants."<sup>28</sup> In *Jewish War*, Josephus describes the campaign of Herod the Great in Galilee (c. 43 BCE) specifically in and around the city of Sepphoris. Early in his reign, Herod, after entering Sepphoris without much resistance from the guards left by his rival Antigonus, "turned away to the robbers that were in the caves, who overran a great part of the country."<sup>29</sup> During the campaign and with the help of Roman arms, Herod had "followed them [the bandits] and killed them as he followed them ... until those that remained were scattered beyond the river [Jordan] and Galilee was freed from the terrors they had been under, excepting from those that remained, and lay concealed in the caves." At a considerable cost, Herod finally "subdued these caves and the robbers that were in them." Nevertheless, the strategic pass through the Plain of Gennesaret (northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee), was unable to shake of its notoriety as the "Valley of the Robbers." It was through this narrow valley that Jesus and his followers, as well as, Roman armies traversed (along the road they called Via Maris) in their journeys around and through Galilee.

Jesus himself was well aware of the dangers of traveling the roads of Palestine. He tells the parable of "[a] man [who] was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and

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<sup>28</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War*, Book 3 Chapter 3 Paragraph 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* Book 1 Chapter 16 Paragraphs 2-6.

fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.”<sup>30</sup> This parable is effective because the danger of falling into the hands of robbers, that is brigandage, were very real in the minds of Jesus’ audience. So, when Nathanael rhetorically demanded of Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth,” he may have been thinking of the rustic ignorance of the Galileans or he could very well have been thinking of the robbers that plague the Galilean countryside.

## VII. Who were the two crucified on the left and right of Jesus

The Gospels are unequivocal about Jesus was crucified between two nameless bandits. While the death companions of Jesus shall forever remain unnamed, a number of exceptional robbers have gained notoriety as bandit kings or even messianic kings, and their names have been preserved in history. Josephus wrote that after the death of Herod the Great in 4 CE, a number of bandit chiefs rose up to challenge the authorities. One was named Judas, son of Ezekias

who had been head of the robbers; which Ezekias was a very strong man, and had with great difficulty been caught by Herod. This Judas, having gotten together a multitude of men of a profligate character about *Sepphoris in Galilee*, made an assault upon the palace [there,] and seized upon all the weapons that were laid up in it, and with them armed every one of those that were with him, and carried away what money was left there; and he became terrible to all men, by tearing and rending those that came near him; and all this in order to raise himself, and out of an ambitious desire of the royal dignity; and he hoped to obtain that as the reward not of his virtuous skill in war, but of his extravagance in doing injuries.<sup>31</sup> [Emphasis added].

Another was Simon,

who had been a slave of Herod the king, but in other respects a comely person, of a tall and robust body; he was one that was much superior to others of his order, and

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<sup>30</sup> The parable of the Good Samaritan found only in Luke 10:25-37.

<sup>31</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, Chapter 17, Paragraphs 269-85.

had had great things committed to his care. This man was elevated at the disorderly state of things, and was so bold as to put a diadem on his head, while a certain number of the people stood by him, and by them he was declared to be a king, and thought himself more worthy of that dignity than any one else.<sup>32</sup>

Yet another was Athronges,

a person neither eminent by the dignity of his progenitors, nor for any great wealth he was possessed of, but one that had in all respects been a shepherd only, and was not known by any body; yet because he was a tall man, and excelled others in the strength of his hands, he was so bold as to set up for king.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps, more serious was the threat mounted by Judas of Galilee who revolted in 6 CE after Herod Archelaous was deposed by the Romans and replaced by a Roman governor.

This “patriotic” Galilean allied himself with a Pharisee and rose up for Jewish self-rule, :

Judas, a Gaulonite, of a city whose name was Gamala [a town located 7 miles east of the Sea of Galilee], who, taking with him Sadduc, a Pharisee, became zealous to draw them to a revolt, who both said that this taxation was no better than an introduction to slavery, and exhorted the nation to assert their liberty; .... They also said that God would not otherwise be assisting to them, than upon their joining with one another in such councils as might be successful, and for their own advantage; and this especially, if they would set about great exploits, and not grow weary in executing the same; so men received what they said with pleasure, and this bold attempt proceeded to a great height.<sup>34</sup>

The notoriety of Judas the Galilean is corroborated by Luke in *Acts of the Apostles* during a speech attributed to Rabbi Gamaliel before the Sanhedrin during which he juxtaposed the Jesus movement to the rebellion of Judas (and also of Theudas).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* Chapter 18 Paragraphs 1 – 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Acts* 5:34-37: “But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, ‘Fellow-Israelites, - consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him *Judas the Galilean* rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered.’” [Emphasis added].

Josephus, who essentially was writing for a Roman audience, was quick to point out that

And now Judea was full of robberies; and as the several companies of the seditious lighted upon any one to head them, he was created a king immediately, in order to do mischief to the public. They were in some small measure indeed, and in small matters, hurtful to the Romans; but the murders they committed upon their own people lasted a long while.<sup>36</sup>

The motives of the various writers and certain inconsistencies notwithstanding, it is plausible to conclude that robbers were common in the Palestine during the lifetime of Jesus, and those charismatic robbers with popular support, gained sufficient prowess to style themselves as bandit-kings or even as messianic kings. Because of their potential to ignite rebellion among a tinderbox population, the authorities, Herodian, Roman, and even the Temple elite, were constantly on the look-out for zealous trouble-makers in order that they may be killed while their influence was still small.

#### VIII. Some Revealing Scriptural References

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Theudas' rebellion is corroborated by Josephus who wrote: "Now it came to pass, while Fadus was procurator of Judea, that a certain magician, whose name was Theudas, persuaded a great part of the people to take their effects with them, and follow him to the river Jordan; for he told them he was a prophet, and that he would, by his own command, divide the river, and afford them an easy passage over it; and many were deluded by his words. However, Fadus did not permit them to make any advantage of his wild attempt, but sent a troop of horsemen out against them; who, falling upon them unexpectedly, slew many of them, and took many of them alive. They also took Theudas alive, and cut off his head, and carried it to Jerusalem. This was what befell the Jews in the time of Cuspius Fadus' government." *Antiquities*, Chapter 20, Paragraphs 97-99.

There is an anachronism between Luke and Josephus in that the latter places the Theudas rebellion at a time when Fadus was procurator (c. 44-46 CE) while Luke has Gamaliel refer to Theudas as preceding Judas.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* Chapter 17, Paragraphs 269-85.

A key question in this paper is **“Have the followers of Jesus advocated violence, actually committed violent acts, or stirred up hope that Jesus will march at the head of a violent revolution?”**

Reference has already been made of *Acts* 5:34-37 wherein Gamaliel, speaking in the Sanhedrin, compared the Jesus movement with rebellions headed by Judas and Theudas, self proclaimed bandit-kings. In addition to Gamaliel’s speech, there are other scriptural references which suggest that Jesus’ followers were preparing for violence during their teacher’s lifetime. An example is *Luke* 22:35-38:

He [Jesus] said to them, ‘When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?’ They said, ‘No, not a thing.’ He said to them, ‘But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no *sword* must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, “And he was counted among the lawless”; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.’ They said, ‘Lord, look, here are two *swords*.’ He replied, ‘It is enough.’ [Emphasis added].

This passage certainly suggests that the followers were armed with swords. Not only were they armed, at least one did not hesitate to draw his sword. The most memorable incident was Peter cutting off the ear of the Temple guard named Malchus, albeit in defense of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, an event recorded in all four Gospels.<sup>37</sup> While Peter was quick with the sword, Jesus was also quick to admonish Peter for actually resorting to violence, saying "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword."<sup>38</sup> Not only did the teacher rebuke the follower for drawing blood with his sword, but Jesus is reported to have also healed Malchus severed ear.<sup>39</sup>

The followers not only went about their business carrying swords, but they were also had an awareness of the vindictive use of fire. According to Luke,

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<sup>37</sup> See, *Mark* 14:43-50, *Matthew* 26:47-56, *Luke* 22:47-54, *John* 18:2-11.

<sup>38</sup> *Mark* 26:52.

<sup>39</sup> *Luke* 22:51.

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?'<sup>40</sup>

This passage is revealing in the way James and John, whose feelings were incensed by the lack of welcome and perhaps exacerbated by racial prejudice, quite casually inquire of Jesus whether the offending Samaritan village should be set on fire. The passage suggests that the followers either believed they actually had the power to summon fire from heaven or they were prepared to commit arson to punish a village with fire. The tradition of calling for the destruction of enemies by fire is an ancient tradition. The famous prophets of old such as Elijah, and Elisha,<sup>41</sup> were endowed with this special power to call for fire and were feared for this prowess. Should it be surprising that the followers of Jesus also had a fire routine to consume those who have caused them offense? What is novel and out of line with the ancient prophetic tradition is Jesus' answer to James' and John's request for permission to use fire: "[H]e turned and rebuked them"<sup>42</sup> and "[t]hen they went on to another village."<sup>43</sup> The Samaritan village was not consumed with fire, whether celestial or man-made. In lieu of fire, Jesus prescribed a less destructive response for inhospitality, a severe social failure in a culture which stressed the welcoming of strangers: "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Luke 9:51-54.

<sup>41</sup> See, 1 Kings 18:37-38

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 55.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 56.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew 10:14. See also Luke 10:10. Even so, in those days and today in the Middle East, the showing the shoes and the sole are considered to be a gesture of grave insult or even a curse.

John the Baptist whom the Gospels note as having a ministry before Jesus also had an awareness of the power of fire. He proclaimed: “I baptize you with - water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me ... will baptize you with - the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”<sup>45</sup> Whether this “unquenchable fire” is fire in the afterlife or the fire of imminent revolution and arrival of the kingdom of heaven on earth (under the successor of John) is for the reader to resolve.

Jesus seemed to be aware of the division and the fire that his ministry will cause, specifically within the family:

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps, the basis for this rather radical statement is Jesus’ treatment by his own family – when he first selected his disciples, this family had agreed with some other people that his ministry was that of a lunatic.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew 3:11. See also Luke 3:16.

<sup>46</sup> Luke 12:49-53. The theme of division within the family is reiterated in Matthew 10:34-36 with the difference in that sword is substituted for fire: Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a *sword*. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. [Emphasis added.]

<sup>47</sup> Mark 3:19-21: Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’

While Jesus expressed awareness about division within families, his followers had set their eyes on wider horizons. They wanted to hoist him up as Messiah, a powerful David-like savior of the Jewish nation. The confession of Peter is illuminating:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'<sup>49</sup> He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the *Messiah*.' [Emphasis added].<sup>48</sup>

A distressed commoner also called Jesus "Son of David," which implied that he was a royal Davidic Messiah.<sup>49</sup> More convincing was the report that when Jesus was entering Jerusalem, certain of his followers went ahead of him shouting and causing those behind also to proclaim:

Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!<sup>50</sup>

As part of the Passover excitement, Jesus was given a quasi-royal welcome into the City of David by a large crowd— a crowd that was far too excited for the comfort of the Temple elite.

## IX. Why was Jesus Crucified?

Jesus was not crucified for bringing division into his own family or even for causing disharmony within the family relationship of others. The reasons were far greater, went beyond the confines of his household, exceeded the boundaries of his

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<sup>48</sup> Mark 8:27-29.

<sup>49</sup> Mark 10:47-48.

<sup>50</sup> Mark 11:7-10.

village, and belabored the attention Temple elite and the Roman governor. Why was Jesus Crucified?

This question has been explored by many authors, and Geza Vermes in *The Changing Faces of Jesus*, proposes an answer: “Had he [Jesus] not been responsible for a fracas in the Temple of Jerusalem at Passover time when Jewish tradition expected the Messiah to reveal himself, very likely Jesus would have escaped with his life. Doing the wrong thing in the wrong place and in the wrong season resulted in the tragic death of Jesus on the Roman cross.”<sup>51</sup> This appears to be the “straw that broke the camel’s back” hypothesis. Events, most of which were brought about by the followers of Jesus, had increased the camel’s load next to the point of breaking even before Jesus cleared the Temple of money-changers.

When Jesus was brought up in a night trial in the High Priest Caiaphas’ house, it looked like he was on the way to acquittal<sup>52</sup> until he proclaimed himself the son of God who will be seated at the Father’s right hand in heaven.<sup>53</sup> For daring to place himself in a divine seat next to God, Jesus was condemned by the Sanhedrin on religious grounds. By the time Jesus was handed over to Pontius Pilate, the inquiry was no longer theological but the question now was whether he was “King of the Jews.” The Temple elite had changed their tune – instead of charging Jesus of pretending to divinity, they charge him with pretending to be king, i.e. a fake king, but king nevertheless:

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<sup>51</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Changing Faces of Jesus*, Viking Compass 2000 at page 280.

<sup>52</sup> Matthew 26: 59-60 records: “Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward.”

<sup>53</sup> Mark 14:62-64: Jesus said, ‘I am; and “you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power”, and “coming with the clouds of heaven.”’ See also, Matthew 26:57-66, Luke 22:66-71 .

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus - before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.'<sup>54</sup>

Nothing was mentioned to the Romans of Jesus' assertion that he was a heavenly being who will be sitting at the right hand of God. The theological aspect of a divine Messiah was forgotten in an instant, conveniently discarded. In its place was brought up the charge of pretense of being "King of the Jews," an earthly Messiah who will conquer the land and set up a new national kingdom which will not pay taxes to Caesar.

Because it was Passover, Jerusalem was packed with Jewish pilgrims and the potential for violence was very great. Pilate made a political decision to execute Jesus for he conveniently refused to deny the allegation that he was "King of the Jews." Jesus was crucified on a cross that carried a placard proclaiming him to be "King of the Jews." Pilate could not care less whether Jesus claimed to be a god or even a son of a god – the pragmatic Roman governor simply could not afford a violent revolution starting in Jerusalem on his watch – a debacle for which he will have to answer to Caesar. The convenient solution for Pilate was to defer to the demand to crucify Jesus.

#### X. Conclusion.

Jesus' disciples and other followers hoped to see great things happen through the charisma of their master. They had carried swords and were ready to defend Jesus by drawing the weapon. One actually did so. Others believed that hostile communities deserved to be consumed by fire. They triumphantly proclaimed Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as that of a king that hailed from the lineage of King David. So effective was

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<sup>54</sup> Luke 23:1-2.

their proclamation and so noisy was the commotion that the Temple elite were unnerved. Jesus made the anxiety worse, when caught up with the intoxicating triumphalism, he exceeded his usual self and behaved irately in the Temple. The Sanhedrin reacted by condemning Jesus for religious heresy. The Roman governor was also informed of an upstart “King of the Jews” and was sufficiently convinced of his potential for mischief that he ordered Jesus’ crucifixion as prophylaxis against an ugly Jewish uprising during Passover.

The followers must have been shocked and disappointed when Jesus had meekly given himself up to the Temple guards. He even ordered Peter to put away his sword and he apologized to the wounded Malchus. Whether another disciple drew his sword is not recorded – they may have resorted to arms and were beaten back by a superior force - but the Gospels only tells of Jesus rebuking Peter for his violence, whereupon the rest all fled, one without his clothes. The sweet dream of conquering Jerusalem dissipated as a dream would upon one’s awakening. Jesus gallantly accepted the penal sentence for the wild but unrealistic ambitions of his followers. He appeared not to defend himself in argument. He was willing to die in order that his followers might live.

This was the *first* atonement – Jesus willingly paid the penalty for his followers who had foolishly nurtured tall hopes of violent revolution. During his entire short ministry, he had tirelessly called on his followers to love their neighbor, to turn the other cheek, to walk an extra mile, and consistently to non-violence. His example was to befriend the down-trodden and to comfort the sick. He did not dream to be an earthly king. They never understood Jesus until he willingly accepted the cruel penalty for their

failed zealous ardor to hoist up a king and establish a kingdom. Instead because of their rash proclamations, their master was hoisted up on a cross.

After the terror of the crucifixion, and with their fear gradually subsiding, the survivors were ridden with remorse for their vainglorious craving for kingship but were also grateful to be spared a humiliating and tortured death which each and everyone of them richly deserved as failed rebels. Miraculously, the Temple elite and Romans seemed satisfied that the scapegoat had been humiliated and his flock scattered. Mixed with this bitter sweet gratitude was the shame of having forced the death of an honorable man whose wisdom they only appreciated after his death. Jesus' society was one that stressed honor and shame, patron and client. They had personally experienced the love and sacrifice of their patron Jesus. They recalled the betrayal and sacrifice which started it all:

So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. <sup>6</sup>When Jesus said to them, 'I am he', they stepped back and fell to the ground. <sup>7</sup>Again he asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus answered, '**I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.**'<sup>55</sup> [Emphasis added].

They, as the clients of the master, resolved to share their overwhelming feeling of redemption and the atoning power of Jesus' death which they had tasted firsthand with their community and soon enough with the world. Finally they have seen the light.

Instead of any further thoughts about sword and fire, the followers of Jesus regrouped to start a revolution based on love and sacrifice. "**I told you that I am he. So**

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<sup>55</sup> John 18:3-8.

**if you are looking for me, let these men go.”** Jesus, their patron and master was elevated to the position of highest honor, a position that cannot possibly be surpassed by any other mere mortal. Out of a tiny seed grew a mighty forest. This was a plausible reconstruction of how the Gospel was born and the Jesus movement motivated to spread a new religion we now call Christianity.

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