

## Discovering Jesus Course

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## Messianic Fever

Israel in the first century was a society in foment. “Crushed by poverty and taxation, the great mass of urban rabble was largely unable to live by all the Pharisees’ precepts regarding purity and tithing, or by the priests’ rules of ritual and sacrifice. Their existence was frugal at best and could easily slide off into grinding, impoverished misery.”<sup>1</sup>

In any society, such social despair could easily incite a revolutionary uprising. But Israel was no ordinary society. The Jews had a keen sense of their own God-ordained destiny, and this spiritual dimension sharpened their desire for things to change. As N T Wright explains it:

“The Jews of Jesus’ day, as is well-known, were living under foreign rule and had been for several centuries. The worst thing about that was not the high taxation, the alien laws, the brutality of oppression and so on, awful though that often was. The worst thing was that the foreigners were pagans. If Israel was truly God’s people, why were the pagans ruling over her?”<sup>2</sup>

To have the land of promise under the rule of pagan Rome was offensive to the first-century Jew. He viewed the Gentile as “unclean.” This didn’t mean that the Gentile was *physically* dirty; it meant he was *spiritually* dirty. And if the Romans were spiritually unclean, then the land was contaminated by their rule.

The Jews were not strangers to foreign rule. As N T Wright points out:

“This state of [foreign occupation] had existed ever since the Babylonians had come and destroyed Jerusalem in 597 BC, carrying away the Judaeans captive into exile. Thus, though some of them had returned from *geographical* exile, most believed that the *theological* state of exile was still continuing. They were living within a centuries-old drama, still waiting for the turn in the story that would bring them out on top at last.”<sup>3</sup>

Nor were the local politics any better. Israel’s community, though governed by Rome, was ruled on a day-to-day basis by Jews who were, in the eyes of the common people, mere puppet extensions of Rome’s power.

With this historical background, we can understand why the Jews of the first century were convinced that God would empower them to overthrow Roman rule, just as he had empowered the Hasmoneans to overthrow Greek rule two centuries earlier. It was unthinkable that the status quo of pagan rule would continue. And so a cry began to rise – a cry for a savior, a Messiah, who would rescue them from the tyranny of the rich, break the shackles of Rome and establish, finally, the kingdom of God on earth. And when they heard of a young rabbi, just thirty years of age, who taught in the synagogues with a unique authority, they flocked to hear him.

The time was right. All Scripture pointed toward the arrival of this unique deliverer. The prophecies of Daniel, particularly his “Seventy Weeks” prophecy (**Daniel 9:24-27**), foretold that the Messiah would arrive in the fourth decade of the first century, precisely the time when Jesus made his appearance. Daniel predicted that “the Anointed One, the ruler” would come “to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy.” One apocryphal prediction, two hundred years before Christ, had this to say about the coming Messiah:

“In his priesthood shall sin come to an end, and the lawless shall cease to do evil. And he shall open the gates of paradise and shall remove the threatening sword against Adam, and he shall give to the saints to eat from the tree of life, and the spirit of holiness shall be upon them. And Beliar shall be bound by him, and he shall give power to his children to tread upon the evil spirits.”<sup>4</sup>

This messianic expectancy gripped the common people of Israel. They knew with absolute certainty that their current state of affairs – being subjected to the rule of a pagan power – could only be temporary and would change with the coming of the Anointed One. Historical records indicate that many devout Jews cried out to God three times a day for the arrival of the Messiah, praying along these lines:

“In your great mercy, O Yahweh our God, have pity on Israel your people...and on the kingdom of the house of David, the Messiah of your righteousness. Let the shoot of David sprout quickly and raise up his horn with your help. Blessed be you, Yahweh, that you would cause a horn of help to grow.”<sup>5</sup>

It was into this climate of messianic fever that Jesus would soon arrive with the stirring proclamation: “The kingdom of God has arrived!”

<sup>1</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1987), p.75.

<sup>2</sup> N T Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p.36.

<sup>3</sup> N T Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p.36.

<sup>4</sup> “The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs,” published in *The Lost Books of the Bible and the Forgotten Books of Eden* (World Bible Publishers, 1927), pp.220-269.

<sup>5</sup> The Eighteen Benedictions, quoted by Richard A Horsely, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), rephrased in modern English.

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