



CONTEXT FOR THE CHRIST EVENT:

Hasmonean I

WHILE THEY WERE under the dominion of Seleucid kings (ca. 198-140 BCE), the Jews tried to reconcile traditional Judaism with Hellenistic thought and forms. They thus adopted the Greek language, Greek thought and Greek political practices. However, when assimilation reached the level of religious observance, devout Jews became alarmed and considered returning to the previous, more liberal Egyptian Ptolemaic governance.

Suspicion that the Zadokite priests and Hasidic scribes were quietly becoming pro-Egyptian finally led the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, to desecrate the Jewish Temple, expel the priesthood and scribes, and fully Hellenize Jerusalem. This quickly led to a revolt that was initially led by the Hasidim (predecessors of the Pharisees). However, the Hasmonean priest, Mattathias, and his sons from Modin soon assumed the leadership of the revolt, ignoring the Hasidim. Upon the death of Mattathias, his son, Judah, pursued the rebellion and defeated the Seleucids. Judah then proceeded to cleanse the Temple, restore its services, and introduce the festival of Hanukkah. Ultimately, five generations of Hasmoneans assumed both the secular and religious rulership of Judah for more than a century.¹⁻³ Not surprisingly, the Hasmonean dynasty itself became increasingly corrupt. The resulting communal tension led to the emergence of apocalyptic (“prophetic disclosure”) literature, which metaphorically predicted imminent warfare between good and evil and the end of history with the revelation of the Savior.

The book of Daniel (ca. 165 BCE) — the first apocalyptic document — soon led to an explosion of “revelatory” literature in Judaism. This literature was pseudo-epigraphically attributed to ancient Jewish stalwarts such as Baruch, Moses and Enoch. Apocalyptic embraced the ancient concept of a mythical combat between heaven and earth, between good and evil, and between the righteous God and one or more demonic demiurges. Apocalyptic appeared at a time when all traditional, legitimate Judaic authority either had been

terminated or was rapidly fading. Such authority included the Davidic kingship, the prophetic office(s), the Zadokite priesthood and the Levitical scribes. This also was a time when the Chosen People were subjected to foreign domination, the abolition of their ancestral laws, the confiscation of their treasuries, and the desecration of their Temple and its services.

However, the emergence of apocalyptic must be traced to more explicit developments. The Jerusalem Temple was believed to be the very center of Paradise. It was located above chaos and between heaven and earth. The Outer Court and Holy Place of the Temple were metaphors for an anticipated new Creation. The veil between the Holy Place and Most Holy Place represented the archetypal form — the pattern or blueprint — of Creation. And the Most Holy Place signified the divine presence and heaven itself. For any unauthorized person to enter the Most Holy Place was to invade heaven and to challenge divine authority. This was the final desecration — the “abomination of desolation” (cf. Daniel 11:31; 12:11; Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14).

For the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV (ca. 168 BCE), for the illegitimate Hasmonean priests (160-37 BCE), and for the Roman general, Pompey (63 BCE), to enter the Most Holy Place was to defile heaven itself and thus to commit the ultimate crime. This could only trigger the cosmic battle between good and evil. Because such felony transcended time and space, it must be defined in mythological terms. In some documents the battle was linked to the combat myth of ancient Babylon between Marduk and Tiamat. In other documents it was compared with the account of Adam, Eve and the serpent. In still others it was pictured as the watcher angels coming to earth to cohabit with women, who then gave birth to evil giants (Genesis 6:1-7). Generally, however, the conflict involved the personification of evil as Satan (“Adversary”), pictured as a fallen angel who had the support of demonic angels, wicked men and evil beasts.

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In apocalyptic literature the resolution of the crisis required divine intervention. Typically, this involved the coming of a human Messiah (“anointed one”) to lead the forces of good in a final battle against evil and then to a final judgment. Those who were righteous would be taken to Paradise in heaven or on earth. Those who were evil would be cast into a lake of fire and obliterated. Paradise would thus be cleansed, the Temple resanctified, and heaven itself fully restored. These beliefs were closely linked to the teachings of Zarathustra (Zoroaster) and therefore were probably borrowed from the Jews’ Parthian allies.

However, there were two divergent parties of apocalyptic thinking. One group contended that the final judgment constituted the “new Creation” — the restoration of a new created order on a new earth and the re-embodiment of

righteous souls.⁴ The other group contended that the final judgment constituted the abolition of the evil created order, a metaphoric resurrection by the resulting liberation of imprisoned, divinized souls, and the exalted disembodiment of those souls in heaven itself. These souls would thus enter the ethereal order, as Enoch, Moses and Elijah had already done! This latter view of apocalyptic later emerged as Jewish, Christian and related forms of Gnosticism. Such Gnosticism is the foundation of postmodern religious fundamentalism — Jewish, Christian, Islamic and atheistic. Such Gnosticism also represents the postmodern emergence of nihilism.⁵

It is in this context that the inaugural coming of God as the Human One should be understood. This One-and-Only God was and is the ultimate Apocalyptic (“Revelation”). In his incarnate birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ alone inaugurally resolved the cosmic, age-long tensions between, and secured the at-one-ment of, heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, law and promise, death and life. “He [Jesus] assumed his presence to be that of the Jewish apocalyptic ‘Human One’ (‘Son of Man/Son of God’) who restored people to wholeness without insisting that they define themselves according to the sacrifices and role statuses mandated by elite religio-political officials and the temple system.”⁶ Jesus Christ himself is therefore the full and final Apocalypse (“Revelation”) of God.

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Endnotes

1. For the history of the Hasmonean dynasty, see Al Maxey, “The Silent Centuries: The Maccabean Revolt,” at www.zianet.com/maxey/Inter3.htm.
2. The Hasmonean dynasty in Israel (166-37 BCE) included Mattathias (died 165 BCE), Judah/Judas (166-160 BCE), Jonathan (160-143 BCE), Simon (143-135 BCE), John Hyrcanus (135-104 BCE), Aristobulus I (104-103 BCE), Alexander Jannaeus (Yannai) (103-76 BCE), Queen Salome Alexander (76-67 BCE), Aristobulus II (67-63 BCE), Hyrcanus II (67, 63-40 BCE) and Antigonus II (40-37 BCE).
3. The high priests in the Hasmonean era were Jonathan (160-143 BCE), Simon (143-135 BCE), John Hyrcanus (135-104 BCE), Aristobulus I (104-103 BCE), Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 BCE), Hyrcanus II (76-67 BCE), Aristobulus II (67-63 BCE), Hyrcanus II (again) (63-40 BCE) and Antigonus II (40-37 BCE).
4. See Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 109: “. . . [T]he judgement and the renewing of the creation are here shown to be the same process . . .”
5. See *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, s.v. Peter Kivisto, “Postmodernism,” at www.hartfordinstitute.org/ency/Postmodernism.htm.
6. Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 93.