# Hark, the End is Nigh: Two Visions of Eschatological Messianism in Judaism in the Late Second Temple Period

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The late Second Temple period (200 BCE- 70 CE) was a time of internal transformation and external crisis for the Jewish community of Palestine. The assimilation of Hellenistic cultural norms into Jewish life increased dramatically in this period. This led to great internal strife between those who advocated integrating Hellenistic elements into their culture and those who were bitterly opposed to assimilation. At the same time as the Jews were experiencing this civil conflict, imperial control of Judea became more repressive than at any previous time in Jewish historical memory. The ascendance of Antiochus Epiphanes IV marked the first time that Judaism ceased to be a *religio licita* in its native land. This shift would be followed, after the brief and often corrupt period of Hasmonean rule, by the repressive Herodian and Roman regimes. Significant elements of the Jewish community came to the conclusion that the upheaval they faced signaled the destruction of the old order, and the dawn of a new age.

This conclusion resulted in an unprecedented surge in messianic and eschatological concerns among the Jews of Palestine in the late Second Temple period. While such beliefs always had a place in Jewish theology, the fervent eschatology of this period represented a new innovation. Theologians produced a variety of speculations about the end of times, including one canonical apocalypse as well as significant apocryphal and pseudo-epigraphic texts. Political dissidents committed acts of violence in hopes of hastening the final eschatological battle. Religious extremists formed separatist groups who isolated themselves to await the coming of the Messiah. While there were many and diverse manifestations of apocalypticism, they are divisible into two primary strands: a political messianic movement, which was principally a response to external domination, and a spiritual messianic movement, which was principally a response to widespread Hellenization within the Jewish community. It is axiomatic that messianism and eschatology are responses to crisis, and the late Second Temple period was fraught with crisis. However, the nature of each of the messianic movements was dependent on which crisis that particular movement felt was most salient.

The Jews of Palestine had not lived as an autonomous people since the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Their political life subsequent to that historical turning point was dominated by a series of imperial rulers, from Nebuchadnezzar to the Persians, to the various Hellenist powers: the Greeks, the Ptolemys, and the Seleucids. Yet, despite their total military hegemony over Palestine, these rulers were tolerant of the religious and, to some extent, the political autonomy of the Jews. Even in *galut* in Babylon the Jews were allowed to practice their religion relatively unhindered. In fact, many Jews chose voluntarily to stay in Babylonia after their exile had ceased, and transformed it into a cultural and religious center where the authoritative version of the Talmud would eventually be written. Cyrus the Great's decree in 538 BCE not only returned the Jews to their homeland, but also commissioned the rebuilding of the Temple in 515 BCE and allowed the Jews substantial religious autonomy in keeping with a Persian policy of toleration[1]. This policy remained in effect through the Alexandrian conquest in 332 BCE and through the Ptolemaic and the beginning of the Seleucid reigns. Under the Ptolemaic kings, Judea was considered an autonomous territory under the leadership of the institutions developed during the Persian period—namely, the increasingly powerful High Priest, and the Gerousia, or council of

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1. George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 297.

elders[2]. Far from limiting Jewish religious expression, the Ptolemys "confirmed the ancestral laws of the Jews as the binding code for the entire territory of autonomous Judea."[3] However, the era of toleration ended with the ascendance of Antiochus IV in 175 BCE, and a new era of harsh imperial control began.

Antiochus IV was a dictatorial ruler who attempted to impose total control over the province of Judea. His actions ignited a surge of Jewish nationalism, which was the basis of the political strand of the messianistic boom of the late Second Temple Period. Antiochus raided the Temple to pay off war debts, and took control of the High Priesthood by appointing a puppet.[4] Then, in 167 BCE, he came to a fateful conclusion: it was "the Jewish religion, with its militant monotheism, that lay behind the stubborn resistance of the Jews to the innovations he wished to introduce."[5] This represents a crucial turning point in Jewish history—it was the first time a ruler had turned his animosity not against the Judean state, but upon the Jewish religion itself.[6] His subsequent outlawing of Judaism and persecutions of those who continued to practice released a wave of nationalism that fueled the Hasmonean Revolt, which succeeded in toppling Antiochus by 164 BCE. The Hasmonean period was brief, and was itself mired with corruption and instability. By 66 BCE, the Roman general Pompey had secured control over Judea, which would be controlled by the repressive Herodian and Roman regimes until the destruction of the Second Temple and the end of the Jewish nation-state in 70CE.

The shift from tolerant rulers and religious autonomy to repressive imperial regimes was the salient factor in the birth of explicitly political eschatological messianism. Philip Davies and John Rogerson describe the messianic expectation as "essentially not a religious doctrine but a political reflex."[7] As the governance of Judea grew more repressive, the Jews felt increasingly in need of divine intervention to aide them in their redemption. They drew upon the prophetic visions of earlier Jewish literature to imagine a messianic figure who could redeem them from oppression and exact vengeance upon their tormenters. This impulse was not a new innovation in Jewish thought. Joseph Klausner, a leading scholar of messianism summarizes, "[In ancient times] the political part of the belief in the Messiah took…first place during periods of trouble and distress precisely because it declared comfort and the hope that political freedom would return to the Jewish people."[8] Prophetic figures, especially during the period of the Babylonian Exile, also preached messianic redemption and rebirth in the face of utter tragedy and oppression. The appeal to messianism as a tool to face political upheaval is thus a well-documented trend in Jewish theology, which emerges as powerfully as ever before in the face of the new reality of repressive imperialism.

This messianic zeal was transformed from an abstract theological concept into a political reality that would define the rest of the Second Temple period by a totally new development: mass religious martyrdom. Traditional Jewish theology holds that the messianic era will be preceded by a period of great turmoil and chaos.[9] Thus, the new phenomenon of martyrdom, Jews being killed by the imperial rulers of Judea for practicing their religion, was seen as irrefutable proof of the

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2. M. Stern, "The Period of the Second Temple" *A History of the Jewish People,* ed. H.H. Ben-Sasson, trans. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976), 191.
3. Ibid, 193.
4. Raymond Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 36.
5. Stern, 205
6. Scheindlin, 38
7. Philip Davies and John Rogerson, *The Old Testament World* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 343.
8. Joseph Klausner*, The Messianic Idea in Israel: From Its Beginning to the Compilation of the Mishnah*, trans W.F. Stinespring (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 11.
9. See Daniel 12:1, "It will be a time of trouble, the like of which has never been"

imminence of the eschatological period. As Stern points out, "The presence of martyrs was a sign that the End of Days was approaching, and the belief in the eschatological significance of the events served to justify the sacrifice."[10] In that way, the dead were not only sanctified, but also viewed as necessary precursors of the End Times. Martyrdom became desirable, because it served a distinct teleological purpose. It is not at all difficult to see how this doctrine encouraged the more fervent messianists to engage in violent rebellion as a means of hastening salvation.

Many movements attached themselves to this new distillation of the political messianic and eschatological hopes of their generation, and began to actively revolt in hopes of inaugurating the New Era. In 45 CE, Theudas led an unsuccessful messianic-liberation movement. Later, during the reign of Emperor Felix, an Egyptian Jew, whose name is lost to historians, led an unsuccessful attempt to free Jerusalem from Roman control.[11] However, the most significant movement of this type was the Zealots. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian and former slave, describes the Zealots as a group who had "a passion for liberty that is almost unconquerable since they are convinced that God alone is their master."[12] Accordingly, they pursued a philosophy of direct action against Rome, which they sincerely believed would usher in the Messianic Era. Stern believes, "The practical implication of this philosophy was that it served as a permanent incitement to revolt…by whatever means, irrespective of realities."[13] This would be their downfall, when, in 66 CE, they led the disastrous Great Revolt against Rome. The Zealots were not alone in their belief that direct engagement against the Romans would bring messianic redemption. Many of the participants of "the Great Revolt against Rome in AD 66-70 surely believed themselves to be fighting in the eschatological battle that would be followed by the reign of the Messiah."[14] The political messianic theology, which emerges out of the condition of oppression, was actualized as a doctrine of revolutionary violence. The zeal of the believers was strong enough to inspire them to engage the most powerful army of their time in the hopes that such a conflict would bring about messianic redemption.

Political messianism was not only concretized as violent action; it was also reflected in a new genre of Jewish literature, the apocalypse. Jewish apocalyptic literature, in which a mystical seer probes the secrets of the heavens and usually obtains knowledge about the end of days, appeared largely as a response to the persecutions. Stern notes that this transition probably emerged when, "The contrast between the glorious future envisaged for Israel and the sorrows of her actual condition…intensified the urge to imagine an ideal world as a spiritual consolation. Thus prophetic vision was replaced by apocalyptic vision."[15] From the persecutions of Antiochus IV onwards, true prophecy in the Biblical sense no longer existed. To fill the vacuum, apocalyptic visionaries rose up as the primary commentators on current events. The persecutions of Antiochus directly influenced some, like the authors of the Apocalypses of Daniel and Enoch.[16] Daniel, the only canonical apocalyptic work, was almost assuredly composed during the Antiochian reign.[17]

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10. Stern, 285
11. Geoffrey Wigoder, ed. *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), s.v. "Messianic Movements" by H.H. Ben-Sasson.
12. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:97ff cited in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, "Messianic Movements"
13. Stern, 274
14. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Messianism in Jewish History" in *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements and Personalities in Jewish History,* ed. Marc Saperstein (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 42
15. Stern, 290
16. Davies and Rogerson, 322
17. Klausner identifies Daniel with the Antiochan period for four reasons, 1) In Chapters 8 and 11 the book gives almost exact details of the reign of Antiochus but does not appear to know the end of the story 2) The Book of Daniel itself claims to be a "seal of prophecy" which obviously could not have been claimed by an earlier prophet 3) The Hebrew vocabulary is from a relatively late period 4) Daniel

The book is messianic in essence, describing a variety of visions of the end of times and the ascent of Israel over her enemies. Specifically, it predicts the end of a Hellenist kingdom that is dominating Judea (clearly a reference to the Seleucids). The first half of Enoch, a pseudo-epigraphic work,[18] was composed around fifty years after the persecutions. It understands the uprising of the Hasmoneans as a signal of the upcoming messianic period. Enoch depicts the oppressors of the Israelites as a series of birds of prey, during the reign of the ravens (representing the Seleucids), a ram (representing the Maccabees) rises up to defeat the raven and bring about the End of Days.[19] A variety of other pseudo-epigraphic work filled with messianic and eschatological themes were produced throughout late-Hasmonean and the Roman period until the final exile of the Jews from Judea. The deluge of such writings during this period demonstrates the magnitude of the response to the harshness of the imperial paradigm of the late Second Temple period.

Spiritual messianism, a very different kind of eschatological theology from its political cousin, also cropped up during this period. Spiritual messianism was not a reaction to crises emanating from outside the Jewish community, but rather, to what some perceived to be a religious crisis within the community. From around 200 BCE, Hellenistic influences grew pervasive, especially among Judean elites.[20] The trend persisted throughout the late Second Temple Period. The Hasmonean rulers inspired particular concern for traditionalists by adopting Greek names and court manners.[21] Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE to 50 CE) attempted to fuse Platonic philosophy with traditional Jewish theology, which many contemporary religious authorities perceived as a threat to traditional Judaism. The internal transformation, wrought by the integration of Hellenistic norms into Jewish society at all levels, resulted in the emergence of separatist groups that declared themselves the only true heirs of the Biblical tradition. The impurity they perceived in their community led them to conclude, like political messianists, that they were living at the dawn of the eschatological era. Some scholars contend that this type of response to the pressures of cultural change is not atypical. Werblowsky, for example, argues, "The analysis of modern messianic movements in 'primitive societies' suggests that these are to a large extent connected with the stresses and tensions of an acculturative situation."[22] This should not be surprising, given that crises tend to promote just such responses, and the upheaval of cultural and religious norms is just as much a crisis as the upheaval of political conditions.

The most significant spiritual messianic community of the late Second Temple period was the Qumran group, a radical segment of the Essene sect.[23] While the origins of the community remains a topic of scholarly debate, there is a general consensus that they were part of the priestly class who felt disenfranchised by the assent of the highly Hellenized priests during the Hasmonean Period. They subsequently isolated themselves in the desert, and came to regard themselves as the sole remnant of true believing Jewry. Frank Cross describes the Essenes as, "Separatist, in the radical sense that they regarded themselves as the only true Israel and separated themselves fully from contact with their fellow Jews."[24] The development of the Qumran community came about

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appears in the Writings in the original Hebrew Scriptures, indicating it was not written until after the Nevi'im had been canonized. Klausner, 225-226.

18. Pseudo-epigrapha refers to non-canonical works, not included in the Septuagint, which are usually characterized by their attribution to figures of the past, like Enoch, Baruch, and Ezra. From Lawrence Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, 1991), 6-7.
19. Klausner, 286
20. Stern, 197
21. Ibid, 231
22. Werblowsky, 38
23. While the identification of the Qumran group with the Essenes is still debated, a majority of scholars seem to be convinced of their connection. See Davies and Rogerson, 340-1; Stern, 273
24. Frank Moore Cross "A Historical Context of the Scrolls" *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls,* ed. Hershel Shanks (New York: Random House, 1992), 24

not through discontent with the treatment of the Jews by such external powers as the Seleucids or the Romans, but rather out of a concern with the character of the normative Jewish body.

The Qumran community's deep dissatisfaction with the current order led them to believe that all would be uprooted by an imminent eschatological conflict. They envisioned this conflict in terms of an apocalyptic war between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. The details of this conflict attest to a very different set of messianic goals than those held by the political messianists. The Children of Light represented only the members of the Qumran community, who regarded themselves as the only remaining faithful, and therefore the only ones worthy of Divine salvation. The Children of Darkness represented all earthly wickedness, Jewish as well as pagan. The Qumran documents, however, direct their ire primarily against the normative Jewish community, which they felt was corrupted by Hellenistic practices. The leader of the Children of Darkness is the Wicked Priest, probably associated with the Hellenized Hasmonean priests, whose presence had been the original impetus for the Qumranite's retreat into the desert. It is an interesting phenomenon that the eschatological hopes for divine retribution are not turned outward, as in the case of the Zealots and the other political messianists, but are instead focused inward on the "corrupt" parts of the Jewish corpus itself. Their rejection of the rest of Israel as "wicked" leads to a new development in eschatological theology. Whereas Biblical theology promoted the idea that the whole ethno-national entity was collectively redeemed, the Essenes viewed redemption as essentially elective, in which only members who held specific beliefs are eligible for redemption. In a broader context it is significant to note that this idea would be taken further by Christianity, which would claim that salvation did not come through any ethnic or national allegiance, but rather through a pure faith in the divinity of Jesus.[25]

The primacy of spiritual redemption over political redemption in the theology of the Qumran group is also evident in their conception of the nature of the Messiah. The Qumran Essenes believed that there would be two messianic figures, one priestly and one political. The Dead Sea Scrolls term the messianic figures the Messiah of Aaron and the Messiah of Israel.[26] This belief is based on the prophecy of Zechariah, who wrote, "These are the two anointed ones that stand by the Lord."[27] It is absolutely clear from the documents is that the Qumran group believed that the priestly messiah would be preeminent over the earthly messiah.[28] The Qumran community, however, was not entirely indifferent to the political concerns of other Jews of the time. They firmly believed in the coming of a political messiah who would redeem them from tyranny both without and within. Their emphasis on the priestly redeemer over the earthly redeemer, however, underscores the greater weight given to concerns of corruption in the Temple and among the normative Jewish authorities above concerns about political domination.

Whereas the political messianic groups believed that it was necessary to initiate violent rebellion in order to hasten the coming of the eschatological period, the spiritual messianists used ascetic practices to bring about their redemption. The Essene community "was crystallized apocalyptic vision. Each institution and practice was a preparation for or, by anticipation, a realization of, life in the New Age of God's rule."[29] Since they believed that so much of the rest of the Jewish community had been corrupted by foreign ideas and norms, they sought to return to the basics, and by doing so renounce Hellenism. By living their lives at what they understood to be a higher spiritual level, they made themselves worthy of being considered part of the righteous remnant that would be redeemed with the coming of the Messianic Age.

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25. Werblowsky, 41
26. Geoffrey Wigoder, ed. *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), s.v. "Eschatology" by Louis F. Hartman
27. See Zechariah 4:14
28. Lawrence Schiffman, "Jewish Sectarianism in Second Temple Times" in *Great Schisms in Jewish History,* eds. Raphael Jospe and Stanley Wagner (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1981), 26.
29. Cross, 26

The above discussion shows a meaningful conceptual distinction between political and spiritual messianic movements in the late Second Temple Period. Yet, like most historical dichotomies, it is not completely unambiguous. Politics and theology are both systems that seek to resolve the great questions of a society, and as a result, they oftentimes intersect. The gray areas that united the two strands of messianic movements demonstrate the degree of overlap between these two epistemologies. Political messianists responded to domination by imperial powers with a renewed hope for an age in which God would reign supreme. Spiritual messianists responded to the Hellenization of religious practices and social norms, through visions of an Earthly conflict between believers and heretics. Both groups held onto essentially the same vision, the triumph of Israel over her enemies and the beginning of the Messianic era. This is not to say that the movements had identical beliefs and aims. The political and spiritual messianic movements emerged as separate responses to different problems within their society, with different methodologies for bringing about the Messianic era, and different hopes for what that era would entail. Yet, at their most essential level, all the diverse groups were responding to a sense that they were living in a time of terrible crisis by hold fast to their faith in a God who, in times of hardship, redeems His people.