

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS – PART III

What did the Jews know and when did they know it? Jesus was not just a blip on the tides of history. He was not just some man that came on the scene with no past and no prophetic perspective. There was a history here and a heritage that meant that the Christ; - the Messiah, - should have been expected, - and recognized. Let's look at the evidence.

WHAT DID THEY KNOW & WHEN DID THEY KNOW IT ?

Let's try and put this all in perspective. What can we really know? We know for instance that the testimony of his contemporaries confirms so much that we know about Jesus. A passage in the Babylonian Talmud, a Jewish book of commentary on the Scriptures, contains references to "Yeshu, the Nazarene". Writings dated to the 2nd century confirm that he was hanged "on the eve of the Sabbath", at the time of Passover. The passage also mentions Joseph of Arimathea, who buried Jesus in his own tomb, and refers to the fact that he was accused of sorcery. This latter reference confirms the reaction of the Pharisees to his casting out of a demon that was described in Matthew 12. Other Talmudic passages speak about Jesus' disciples, identifying at least Thaddeus and Matthew and also speak about the powers of one Jacob who was said to have healed "in the name of Yeshu". This is all evidence that his contemporaries never questioned the fact that Jesus was a performer of miracles. Instead opponents tried to attack him on the grounds that his power was derived from the devil. The public nature of his ministry meant that he could not be so easily dismissed.¹

Other historical confirmation comes from the pen of Flavius Josephus, a priest, Pharisee and generally trusted historian writing in the 1st century AD. Some of Josephus' writings include references to James the brother of Jesus and John the Baptist, whom he described as "a good man". He is also known to have authored a passage specifically about Jesus, found in his work called '*Antiquities of the Jews*'. Though long controversial, experts now agree that the majority of the passage comes from the pen of the historian. In the uncontested version he refers to Jesus as "...a wise man ...For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly." He goes on to talk about his death at the hands of Pilate and the fact that his followers believed him risen from the dead. Additional confirmation exists. Roman historians Tacitus and Lucian both testified to the execution of Christ under Pilate, Lucian adding that he was considered a lawgiver and worshipped as God. And the work of Caius Suetonius suggests that Christians were known to be able to perform healings and miracles.^{2 3}

A most interesting confirmation of Matthew 27:45 is found in several ancient sources. In that passage Matthew writes, **"From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land."** Luke 23:44-45 states it this way, **"It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining."** Pagan historian Phlegon of Lydia, writing early in the first century refers to a "great and extraordinary" solar eclipse, dating it according to the Olympic year. He writes, "At the sixth hour the day was turned into dark night, so that the stars in heaven were seen, and there was an earthquake in Bithynia which overthrew many houses in the city of Nice." Tertullian found evidence of this in the Roman archives of his day. The Greek historian Thallus also wrote of that supernatural event, a most fearful darkness accompanied by earthquakes. Second century teacher Julius Africanus wrote that this was no eclipse of the sun. An eclipse is a predictable event. Working backwards from that time he points out that an eclipse is impossible when there is a full moon. This was evidence then that this unusual darkness not only occurred, but also was not due to an eclipse of the sun but was rather an unnatural event.⁴ The Scripture too, prophesied that unnatural darkness. In Amos 8:9 written long before the event, we read: **"'In that day', declares the Sovereign Lord, 'I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight'."**⁵

In fact, in examining the Rabbinical writings, we find that the common beliefs included not only the fact that the Messiah was expected to appear at that time but that he was to be no ordinary man. They believed that he had existed since before the creation. The commentaries on Isaiah and Micah give evidence that it was commonly held that the existence of the Messiah was eternal. The text of Micah 5:2, describes a Messiah **“who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times.”** These writings also anticipated his cruel and violent death, the re-establishment of Israel, and redemptive nature of his ministry. Commentaries reveal that they believed that the Messiah would forgive sins because of his position as the “Righteous One”.

Their beliefs were based on ancient Scriptural prophecy and the commentaries on those prophecies. Both the Midrash and the Talmud itself reveal that the Messiah was expected to be the full Son of God. Confirmation of this is found in Psalm 2:7. In the King James Version we read, **“Thou art my Son; this day I have begotten thee”**. Predictions of the Messiah were so prevalent that it was the non-Jewish Magi, possibly originating from a class of Zoroastrian priests, who relied on the prophecy of Micah 5:2 to inform the unschooled Herod that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. They too expected his imminent arrival to redeem Israel. Much of this speculation was based on the very precise prediction found in Daniel 9:24. The Rabbis of that era were aware that no matter how one interpreted the 70 weeks of Daniel, the arrival of the Savior should occur sometime in the first decades of the first century. This belief was confirmed by the teachings of the Essene community that gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls. They firmly believed that Daniel’s prophecy would be fulfilled during their lifetimes.

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD all that changed. The later commentaries on the Scripture reflect the loss and confusion of a people whose earlier hopes now seemed misplaced. Written after that time, the Babylonian Talmud acknowledged the prophecies of Daniel had predicted the coming of the Messiah, but that the time had already passed. Moses Maimonides, working twelve centuries later, recognized this too. Almost cryptically he refers to the censoring of that teaching by the Jewish religious leaders. He tells us they “...have barred the calculation of the days of Messiah’s coming so that the untutored populace will not be led astray.” [They of course, were protecting the masses against the ‘*Christian Heresy*’.] Grant Jeffrey, writing again in *Jesus the Great Debate*, cites some of the censored Jewish material. The writings confirm the basic account of Christ’s trial and death. Significantly the passage also acknowledges him as a legitimate king of Israel in the line of David and most notably that he was referred to in the prophecies of Daniel. There is little doubt that the Messiah was expected at just the time Jesus came on the scene. Events surrounding an obscure passage in Genesis accentuated the anticipation. Genesis 49:10 reads, **“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes.”** It must be understood that ‘Shiloh’, by general Rabbinical concurrence refers to the Messiah. So what this is saying is that the power to rule, especially the power over life and death, would be secure in Judah until the coming of the Messiah. Throughout all the centuries of Jewish captivity this power had never been removed. Interestingly however the Romans had recently taken this authority. This happened on the occasion of the dethroning of Archelus, the king of the Jews in AD 14. This would have been the same year that Jesus came up to the temple for his Bar Mitzvah at the age of twelve. In his commentary Rabbi Rachmon describes the consternation of the assembly when this power was removed. They were mourning the fact that “...the scepter has departed from Judah and the Messiah has not come.”⁶ So many of the expectations of the Jews regarding the imminent arrival of their Savior were based on the remarkable Book of Daniel. We need to look at that prophecy that led to such high expectations.^{7 8}

The prophecy beginning in Daniel 9:25 is as follows. **“Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild the city of Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven ‘sevens,’ and sixty-two ‘sevens.’ It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two ‘sevens,’ the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler will come and destroy the city and the sanctuary.”**

When Daniel wrote this, Jerusalem had been destroyed. At that time there was no reason to believe that it would ever be rebuilt again. Secondly, Daniel predicted not only the rebuilding, but also the fact that this second Temple would again be destroyed. Of course as already noted, this occurred in AD 70 at the hands of the Romans. So in just the broadest sense we see that the prophecy was fulfilled. Coincidence? Perhaps, if the prediction it made was just a general statement. But as we read in Daniel chapter 9, we see it contains a claim of the exact timing of its fulfillment. The Jewish community of course understood the meaning and significance of its reference to the seven 'weeks' plus sixty-two 'weeks'. And for them it was this specific phrase that led to the widely held expectation of messianic fulfillment around the time of Christ.

It is the Hebrew word 'shabuim', which is translated into the English word 'weeks', in this passage. By common custom we know that this word was often used to refer to a 'week of years', or seven years in the Hebrew language. This is the context in which it is used here. Now there are to be sixty-nine weeks of years before the appearance of the Messiah. This works out to 483 years **"From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One"** comes. Taking this one step farther we multiply the 483 years by 360 days. This was the length of a year in the Jewish calendar. This comes out to 173,880 days from the issuing of the decree. Now the critical question becomes, when did the decree go forth?

By turning to the 2nd chapter of Nehemiah we begin to get an answer to that question. That passage describes a command by King Artaxerxes Longimanus to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. This happened in the 20th year of his reign on the first day of the month of the Jewish month of Nisan. The date of Artaxerxes ascension to the throne is even an easier matter. It can be found in the Encyclopedia Britannica. Counting twenty years from that date we find that day of the decree is fixed as the 1st Day of Nisan in the year 445 BC. Working through astronomical calculations at the end of the 19th century, Sir Robert Anderson confirmed that this date fell on the 14th of March of that year. From that date that we begin counting forward the 173,880 days. What we arrive at is April 6th AD 32.

So what's so significant about that day? That's the first Palm Sunday; - the day that Jesus rode in to Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey to the affirmation of the praising crowds of Jerusalem. He was coming into His kingdom. Confirming evidence can be found in the third chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Luke states that Jesus was about 30 years of age when baptized by John. This was the beginning of his ministry and Luke specifically identifies it as the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Scholars concur that this puts Christ's baptism in the autumn of 28 AD. That would put the final Passover of Jesus' three and a half-year ministry on April 10th of AD 32. The Sunday before that was April 6th. The British Royal Observatory confirmed that date. So traveling this other route, through the history of the gospels, we arrive at the same date that Daniel did in his writings hundreds of years before. More than some vague otherworldly pronouncement, the prophecy in Daniel 9 turns out to be a precisely calculated mathematical prediction, accurate to the very day that Christ presented himself as King and Savior.^{9 10 11} The precision and accuracy of that prophecy given to Daniel is nothing less than breathtaking. By any objective standard, by a preponderance of the evidence, it can only be seen as a remarkably accurate, historically verifiable, confirmation of unambiguous truth.

VERY REAL THREATS

Last week I wrote about the possibility that Israel would act against the Iranian nuclear reactors sometime between the election and the inauguration of the new American President, - and the potential that that would spread into a wider conflict across the region or even the world. It is interesting that a number of other threats have surfaced, - or resurfaced at this very same time. One for instance is the very real danger of an Electro-Magnetic Pulse attack (EMP), launched against the US by Iran. The House Armed Services Committee recently heard testimony on this subject. A special panel believes that preparations for such an attack is the only reasonable explanation for the recent Iranian missile tests which practiced detonating a "warhead near apogee" or at the top of its flight arc. This would generate an EMP that spread over a significant portion of the eastern US depending on its altitude. The resulting pulse would "cripple military and civilian communications," power generation, as well as water and food distribution systems. Hospitals would lose the power to

run life-sustaining devices. Perishables would rot when power to cold storage units failed. According to the panel, the American economy would shut down and eventually result in mass casualties as America reverted to 19th century technology without the infrastructure to sustain it.¹²

Then there is the American Foundation for Counter- Terrorism Policy and Research, which revisited the danger that al-Qaeda cells operating in the US already possess a number of nuclear devices; - and are planning a coordinated multi-city attack dubbed “American Hiroshima”. Terror expert Yossef Bodansky, formerly of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism, is another that believes that Osama bin Laden has nuclear weapons. The evidence is that such weapons made their way into the country across the border with Mexico with the help of the MS-13 gang. The FBI has taken the threat seriously enough to surround mosques in 10 American cities with nuclear radiation detectors. Bodansky has testified that al-Qaida has employed former Soviet Special Forces to “maintain and operate” the weapons.¹³

Whatever the cause, any of the scenarios mentioned above would create a set of consequences far beyond the localized chaos present at the point of attack. Another report by the SAGA Foundation explored the “economic aftershocks” as well as the civil consequences that would ensue following a successful attack against the US. The President’s first order of business in the event of such an attack would be to prevent further attacks against a now more vulnerable country and only then to take retaliatory action against the perpetrators and their national sponsors. Borders would be closed, flights cancelled, transport stopped for inspections. Commerce would, at least temporarily grind to a halt. Our Just-In-Time economy distribution system, (so efficient when everything is working) , - would mean shortages would shortly set in. Food and other staples would disappear from the shelves. Prices would rise. Depending on other world events, - [and other nations may act to take advantage of America’s weakness], - the price of fuel (oil products) may go up precipitously. Foods riots are more than a distinct possibility. All of this could lead to marauding bands seizing essential goods. This of course would be followed (or preceded) by martial law. The Constitution would be suspended; - civil rights set aside. Whether the republic would ever return is strictly a matter of speculation.

This is not some ‘doom & gloom’ scenario. It is a clear and present danger. Elements within Islam, - buttressed by their holy books, - support the notion of violent jihad as a religious duty among Muslims. Security gaps at the border and nuclear facilities, - as well as the open availability of simple designs for nuclear weapons; - exacerbate the danger. And finding a weapon or weapons that have made their way across the borders into the country is a nearly impossible task.¹⁴ We are living in a dangerous world! We need to be both vigilant in our defense, - and serious about our spiritual commitment.

SUCH A DEAL

Word is circulating around Jerusalem that despite his lame duck status, Prime Minister Olmert is determined to reach a deal on paper with the Palestinians before he leaves office. Olmert has vowed to step down after his Kadima Party primary in September, but could stay on longer if his successor is unable to form a government with majority support in the Knesset. Whatever remains of his term, the PM wants to commit to writing the transfer of much of the Biblical lands of Judea and Samaria to the Palestinians for the establishment of a Palestinian State.¹⁵

GO FIGURE

Here’s some good news! The son of the “the most popular figure” in the West Bank, - a Hamas leader and jailed terrorist, - has renounced Islam, converted to Christianity and moved to the United States. Masab Yousuf has renounced his former life as a Hamas operative at the risk of his own life, - not to mention alienation from his father. He now warns Israel and the West about the true nature of Hamas and the danger of any looming peace agreement. He told the Israeli paper Haaretz: “You will never, but never have peace with Hamas. Islam, as the ideology that guides them, will not allow them to achieve a peace agreement with the Jews. They believe that tradition says that the Prophet Mohammed fought against the Jews and that therefore they must continue to fight them to the death. More than that. An entire society sanctifies death and the suicide terrorists.” His prayer now is: “I hope my father and family open their eyes to Jesus and the Kingdom of God”.^{16 17}

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- ¹ Grant Jeffrey, The Great Debate, Frontier Research, 1999, pgs 162-164 & 184-188
 - ² Grant Jeffrey, The Great Debate, Frontier Research, 1999, pg 166-168
 - ³ Lee Strobel, The Case For Christ, Zondervan, 1998, pg 103-106
 - ⁴ Grant Jeffrey, The Great Debate, Frontier Research, 1999, pg 166-168
 - ⁵ Paul E Little, Know Why You Believe, Chariot Victor, 1999, pg 55
 - ⁶ Jameel, Until Shiloh Comes, from The Timing of Messiah's First Coming, The Stillwater Trust, monitored September 2002
 - ⁷ Grant Jeffrey, The Great Debate, Frontier Research, 1999, pg 193-213
 - ⁸ Dr Mark Eastman, Daniel's Prophecy Came True When Yeshua Entered Jerusalem, Messianic Times, April 1996
 - ⁹ Chuck Missler, Confirming The Prophetic Date of 445 BC, from Mark Eastman, M.D. and Chuck Missler, "The Creator Beyond Space and Time", 1996 The Word For Today. p.138,140-141
 - ¹⁰ Sir Robert Anderson, The Coming Prince, 1881
 - ¹¹ Dr Mark Eastman, Daniel's Prophecy Came True When Yeshua Entered Jerusalem, Messianic Times, April 1996
 - ¹² Kenneth R Timmerman, US Intel: Iran Plans Nuclear Strike on US, News Max, July 29, 2008
 - ¹³ Bin Laden Planning Hiroshima-Type Destruction?, News Max, July 17, 2008
 - ¹⁴ David Bartoshuk, John Diamond, Nuclear Terrorism: Local Effects, Global Consequences, SAGA Foundation, July 28, 2008
 - ¹⁵ Aaron Klein, Official: Olmert to give Palestinians state before quitting, World Net Daily, August 1, 2008
 - ¹⁶ Avi Issacharoff, Hamas' Christian convert: I've left a society that sanctifies terror, Haaretz, July 31, 2008
 - ¹⁷ Aaron Klein, Son of top Hamas leader converts to Christianity, World Net Daily, July 31, 2008