

Unveiling the Scriptures – Second Temple Exegesis

We continue our study by a look at Scriptural exegesis during the period of the Second Temple.

Second Temple Exegesis

It is important to understand how the Scriptures were read during this period. Because the Scriptures functioned as the repository of Israel's poignant and sometimes desperate hopes, people read and re-read them carefully, mining them thoroughly to extract every bit of meaning—especially hidden meanings not immediately obvious to the casual reader. This means that Jewish exegesis during this Second Temple period was not like what is sometimes called today “the historical critical” meaning of the text.

Today we quite properly want to understand what the Old Testament Scriptures meant to their original hearers, and so we strive mightily to place them in their original cultural context. This is a necessary part of modern exegesis. As Christians we go on to mine the text for what it says about Christ and His Church (more about this later), but first we must understand the text in terms of its original historical context. We must respect the text in this way, since we believe it is the Word of God, and we therefore must not foist upon a very old text our modern presuppositions.

But *because* the text is the Word of God, we also believe that it contains hidden meanings as well as the original historical meaning. The Old Testament texts were written by men of their time, so we must try to understand what the authors originally intended their hearers to understand. But these human authors were also indwelt by the Spirit of God, and so their words could have a significance not immediately apparent, even to them. The Jews of the Second Temple period believed this no less than we Christians do, and so they also looked for hidden meanings in the text. (This applies to Saint Paul and the writers of the New Testament, who were also Second Temple Jews.)

The question is: how would the promised restoration come? What would it look like? There was no single, detailed consensus about this. Everyone knew that it would involve Israel's debt of sin finally be totally forgiven, and that it would involve the return to God's glory to Israel, as He dwelt in their midst in power even as He gloriously dwelt in power in the Mosaic shrine and in Solomon's Temple. And it would also involve a world-wide diffusion of God's glory among the Gentiles, who would at long last come to see that Israel had been right and would now come to worship Israel's God. But beyond these basics, there was little consensus.

Did the Scriptures envision an armed uprising against the Gentile powers? Should people take up arms now? Should they wait until God acted before taking up arms to join Him? Would God act through a man, the Messiah? Would God act alone to defeat the Gentile nations and then set the Messiah on the throne? Would all Jews be saved? What about the collaborating Jewish tax-collectors? And what about the prostitutes and the sinners? Would they be saved just because they were Israelites? There were thus plenty of questions, but precious few answers. There were many conflicting guesses and various models for how God's Scriptural promises would be fulfilled. But mostly there was just heated waiting as they paged repeatedly through the ancient sacred texts and looked for any clues in hidden meanings.

The New Testament Answer

Then, just before the death of King Herod, a young Jewish girl of about fourteen by the name of Mariam became pregnant. According to Luke's account, she was not at all well-known, just another young teenager from the obscure town of Nazareth. Her fiancé was apparently an older man, probably a widower. When he learned that she had become pregnant and not by him, he decided that of course he must call off the wedding, and end it all quietly. But after having a dream, he decided to go through with

the wedding after all. Eventually the child was born—a boy—and after some frantic to-ing and fro-ing they settled down to raise the child in Nazareth.

There is little indication that anyone thought much about them in Nazareth. All was quiet until the boy's cousin John departed for the Judean wilderness and made a splash. It seems many regarded him as a prophet, and he started a revival movement, announcing the imminent fulfillment of all those ancient promises for restoration. Mariam's son joined his movement, and was baptized by him. But soon enough he started his own movement, and began baptizing and making converts of his own.

This latter movement grew by leaps and bounds, especially since this young man, Joshua (Hebrew Yeshua, Hellenized as Iesus) was apparently able to perform miracles. He opened the eyes of the blind, unstopped deaf ears, cleansed lepers, and even raised the dead. People began to wonder if perhaps he were not the Messiah, since like his cousin he announced that the ancient promises for Israel's restoration were about to be fulfilled. But he had detractors as well as fans and disciples. For he was saying odd things, claiming divine authority, even saying that he could rebuild the Temple in three days after its destruction, and could forgive sins.

Then, just before Passover, he raised from the dead an old friend who had been buried four days earlier, and who of course had begun to rot. This man stumbled out of his tomb, clean and fresh and alive, after the controversial miracle-worker had stood outside his tomb, saying a brief prayer to God and then telling him to come out of the tomb. The whole nearby city of Jerusalem, filling with people for the Passover, was electrified, and the new movement experienced a sudden surge of popularity. That was why when he entered Jerusalem for the Passover, seated on a donkey, the whole city turned out to acclaim him as the Messiah. They finally believed him. And they also believed his words promising that the ancient promises of restoration were about to be fulfilled. When he commandeered the Temple, the people supported him in this daring act and hung on his every word.

Then, suddenly, the morning after Passover, it was all over. If you somehow slept in that Friday morning, you would have awoken to find that the young miracle-worker had been arrested during the night, had been tried by the Sanhedrin in an extraordinary emergency session, turned over the Pilate, had been tried for treason against Rome, disowned by his former supporters, had been scourged and then crucified. He died on the cross after only a few hours. His followers were now in hiding; his movement utterly discredited. It had been an exciting ride to be sure, but now it was over.

Except that it wasn't. After about a month his disciples were again back in Jerusalem, saying to anyone who would listen that their Master had arisen from the dead the third day after his burial, and that he had been appearing to them repeatedly since that time. They said that they had watched him ascend to heaven, but not before giving them instructions to spread the word that the promises of ancient restoration had indeed been fulfilled in him, and that they should continue to make disciples and converts for the new movement—and not just converts among fellow Jews, but among those in all the world. They had a sincerity and a courage that were hard to ignore—especially since they continued to do the same sort of miracles that their deceased founder had performed. And they continued to spread his message, through preaching, through letters to their new converts, and (eventually) through writing down the story of their founder and his movement.

I have narrated the story of Christian origins in the style of a Gentile journalist of the day rather than as a believing Christian because I want to give a sense of how shocking and scandalously revolutionary the Christian message first appeared to those who heard it. It turned everything on its head—and not least, the interpretation of how those ancient promises for restoration had been fulfilled and were being fulfilled in the Messiah.

Next: The Christian exegesis of the Old Testament