

BACK AGAINST THE WALL:
A Dialogue Concerning Jesus' Eschatology

BY

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Judging from the brightness of the day, I estimated that it was mid-afternoon. I could see the narrow road winding ahead of my position for a short distance. Not knowing where I was, but with no better plan, I started out in the direction the road led. I came very shortly to the crest of a hill and saw below me a gleaming city. The knowledge of where I was began to suggest itself to my mind, but I tried to keep calm. As I approached the gates of the city, I saw a bewildered looking individual sitting with his back against the city wall, and his head in his hands.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” he said, “the man told me to wait here. When I asked, ‘why?’ he said I already knew why. I’ve been sitting here for some time, now, puzzling over his words, trying to figure out what he meant.” He sounded confused.

“Do you know where we are?”

“Well, I suspect that I know,” he mumbled.

I sat down beside him, not because I was weary, but because I was moved with sympathy for his predicament. “Dr. Faust, my name’s, ‘Joe’” I said, sticking out my hand toward him.

“Call me, ‘Thomas’”, he answered, shaking my hand, “But how do you know me?”

I regarded him for a moment before saying that I had seen his picture in an Internet article about one of his books. “Have you read my work?” he asked.

“Some of it,” I explained, “especially about Jesus’ mistaken expectations. But my own understanding of the subject has led me more often toward other points of view.”¹

¹ My interpretation of Jesus’ own eschatology is fairly close to that of Guinness, Gill, Henry, Elliott, and Calvin (see Bibliography). In my opinion, these writers represent the traditional Protestant view.

“What is your understanding, then, of the issue? I’ve been thinking that might be why I was told to wait here. Perhaps talking about it might help,” he looked at me with a quiet desperation as he spoke. At that moment he seemed so different to me from the proud scholar whose photograph I had once seen. He seemed now like a man attempting to keep a stack of books dry in the middle of a river with water up to his neck.

“Well, I remember reading once that you thought Jesus expected, ‘... an imminent end of the world,’ but that He turned out to be wrong about that,”² I said slowly, watching him while I spoke. “When I first read that, I couldn’t help but think how wrong you were about Jesus and about what He said.”

I was surprised at Faust’s reaction to my words. He sighed deeply and, without looking at me, said quietly, “Circumstances would suggest that some reconsideration of the evidence might be in order.”

I smiled at his humility; sure that this was very difficult for him. People, especially great scholars, do not usually “eat crow” very well. “Okay, I think I probably have time to spare,” I grinned, “so I think a starting point would be to agree on our basic approach to the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels. You have argued that proper understanding can only come as the result of taking ‘context and content’ together.³ And I take it that by ‘context’ you mean both the historical setting as well as the theological setting of first century Judaism?”

“Yes, of course,” he brightened, obviously feeling like he was returning to more familiar ground. “That is the central thesis of my book on Jesus in the context of Judaism.

² Scot McKnight, *Who Was Jesus?* (Norcross, GA: RZIM, 2002), 6. The quote is from McKnight who here paraphrases E. P. Sanders’ own argument. This comment by McKnight was the inspiration for my topic in this paper, and my character, Thomas Faust, was inspired by Sanders himself. The actual source for Sanders’ argumentation is found in *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (1993) p. 180.

³ E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London, New York, Toronto: Penguin, 1993), 76.

When you come to an understanding of first century Judaism, the sayings and actions of Jesus take on a significance that is quite consistent with his milieu. Not surprisingly, however, this approach highlights the disparity between many popular beliefs about Jesus and his teaching that result from anachronistic readings and misunderstandings of Jesus' own culture.⁴ This is especially the case with the so-called, 'eschatological' sayings of Jesus."

I had picked up a smooth stone that looked like it might be either jasper or agate, and I tossed it at a nearby tree. "In that case, and to save some time, why don't we concentrate then on those sayings of Jesus which would indicate that He expected the end of the world-as-we-know-it, and discuss those sayings—that would be the 'content'—and think about them in light of Jewish theological development—that would be the 'context'? We can talk about the immediate historical setting as it comes up. Otherwise, since we don't know really how much time we have, we might not get to finish the conversation."

⁴ C.f., *Historical Figure*, n. 11.2, p. 305; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 334ff. Sanders relies heavily on insights from the Mishnah for his perspective on 'Judaism.' But as Neusner argues in "The Mishnah in philosophical context and out of canonical bounds", there is no such thing as a singular "judaism", much less any possibility of understanding Jewish thought in the first century through a reading of the Mishnah which was edited in its current form in medieval times. "...In ancient times there was no Judaism but only Judaisms,...[the] documents adumbrate religious systems, each with its worldview, way of life, and account of the social entity, 'Israel'" (300-301). Furthermore, any attempt to try and define Jesus' thought and theology through the lens of rabbinical theology is misguided, because, according to Neusner, "...there is not a shred of evidence that the vast corpus of theology and law characteristic of rabbinic writings in the Talmud of Babylonia characterized [a] Judaism in the first century" (300). And further on he writes, "The canonical writings of the Judaism of the dual Torah--the Mishna, Tosepta, midrash compilations, and two Talmuds--tell us about that Judaism as represented by, and in the time of, those documents--and that alone" (304). Sanders, although he does claim to give minimal priority to rabbinical writings, unfortunately is overconfident regarding the value of much that is written during the rabbinic period for the purposes of understanding first century Judaism(s). (fn 18, 303). However, as Craig A. Evans observed in *The Missing Jesus*, the Gospels and "later rabbinic literature," can be "mutually clarifying" (101). Therefore I will draw later literature from Judaism into this discussion while placing primary emphasis on the role of the Old Testament in shaping the theological contours of Jesus' self-understanding and teaching.

Thomas Faust, the renowned scholar on the “historical Jesus” looked at me, his eyes smiling under his bushy eyebrows, and announced, “Agreed!”

“To begin with, then, it surprises me that you insist on seeing the predictions of the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem, in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, as either unrelated to the actual destruction of the city in 70 C.E., or as later editorial reinterpretations.”⁵

“Well, actually,” Faust protested, “it’s not that I don’t believe Jesus really did expect the destruction of the temple, but that the actual historic destruction of the temple in 70 did not fulfill his predictions.”⁶

“Why would you say that?” I asked.

“Because Jesus expected the temple to be destroyed by God, in a radical, eschatological, apocalyptic event as part of a fundamental transformation of earthly reality—what we might think of in terms of ‘the end of the world’. The temple was destroyed in 70, but history has plodded on for over 1900 years. The historical destruction of the temple wasn’t by the hand of God, it was by the Romans, and it wasn’t associated with the end of the world. Therefore it was not the event Jesus had in mind.”⁷

I had to think for a minute to know how to respond. Faust was clearly a brilliant man, with an amazing recall for important details. “So the ‘abomination of desolation’ (Mat 24:15; Mar 13:14; Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11 NAS95)⁸ was in fact thought by Jesus to be connected to the destruction of the temple. But, you say, the destruction of the temple was connected in Jesus thought to the invasion into history of the Kingdom of God?”

⁵ *Historical Figure*, 256, c.f., n. 16.14, p. 310.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 256-252.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 261-262.

⁸ Unless otherwise specified all quotations from the Bible will be from the *Updated New American Standard Bible* (NAS95).

“That’s right,” he nodded, “you have it as I see it.”⁹

“And you believe,” I almost stuttered as I struggled to concentrate to hold these various points together, “that Luke’s account reinterpreted the mistaken prediction to refer to 70, whereas Matthew and Mark understood the prediction, in hindsight, to point to the threat of the pollution of the temple by Caligula—placing the actual referent in the 40’s—hence the different wording between the synoptics?”

“Again, you have it right,” Faust confirmed.

“In that case, if we are going to think about this in light of first century Judaism, what do you think of the Talmud’s own interpretation of the significance of 70?”¹⁰ I asked.

“What part of the Talmud do you refer to?” he inquired.

“In Berakhoth 3a, Rabbi Jose is quoted as saying, ‘I heard a *bath-qol*¹¹ cooing like a dove and saying: ‘Woe to the children for whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My Temple and exiled them among the nations of the world!’”¹² Would you say that while Jesus expected the temple’s destruction to be accompanied by the end of the world, the medieval Rabbis later saw it as a precursor to their national exile?”

“That seems like a fair assessment,” Faust approved.

“Okay. So I am going to try and explain why I think you are mistaken in attaching the imminent end of the world to the temple’s destruction, in Jesus’ thought, and why I

⁹ C.f., *Ibid.*, 170-171; 174; 176-177;

¹⁰ Although I cite the Talmud as support for this view here, the issue is really much more complex than the scope of this paper will allow. Neusner has explained in *Messiah in Context*, that although the reasons for the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem are discussed, “...the discussion is hyperbolic and inconsistent” (60). Various views are represented in the literature of the various periods of Judaism. My purpose here is simply to demonstrate that at least one of those valid perspectives from a Jewish theological context can support an accurately fulfilled prediction by Jesus that the destruction was the result of the failure of Israel to recognize the day of her visitation (Lk 19:44).

¹¹ A “daughter-voice”.

¹² *Babylonian Talmud, Zera'im, Berakhoth 3a.*

think Jesus saw it in the same general sense that we have identified in the Talmud.” Faust shifted his position, making himself more comfortable as if to say, “I’m listening.”

I thought for a minute to recall a quote, “Brad Young wrote that, ‘The message [to Rabbi Jose] deals with the national catastrophe of the destruction of the temple which left the holy city of Jerusalem in ruins.’¹³ So if we are right in understanding 70 C.E. as that catastrophic event, then what does the Talmud say precipitated that event?”

Faust did not even hesitate, “It was the result of the guilt of their sins according to the portion you quoted.” I jabbed the air with my finger, expressing that this was exactly what I also thought.

“I think,” I continued hesitatingly, “that the words, ‘spoken of by the prophet Daniel’ are something like an instance of ‘stringing pearls’¹⁴ by which method the Rabbi’s drew their audience’s attention to related passages of Scripture which they would have previously memorized. Hence, this quote is a call to consider the context of that quote—it is not a reinterpretation of the quote.”

Faust looked sideways at me, “Even though I suspect that you are reading too much into Jesus words—to see ‘stringing pearls’ there—your point is still taken since he actually does refer to Daniel.”

“Thanks,” I said, “it looked like an example of something like ‘stringing pearls’ to me—and I do think it is at least functioning in the same way—but I appreciate you granting me the point anyway.” I took a deep breath before continuing. The air was crisp, yet not cold, inviting a person to savour it; sweet and fresh, like Spring without the hint of brevity. “In the passage in Daniel, chapter 9, verses 24-27, the phrase, ‘מְשִׁיבֵי הַיָּם’

¹³ Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1995), 20.

¹⁴ Young, 210.

וְעַל כְּנַף שְׂקוּצִים (in English, ‘...and on the wing of abominations...one who makes desolate’ [Dan 9:24 NAS95] or, ‘...and upon the wing of detestable things shall be that which causeth appalment’ [JPS],) alludes to ‘abominations’ or ‘detestable things’. In the context, I think we should see this naturally related to the programmatic introduction to the passage in verse 24. As we look to that verse, we see three phrases which can be understood in relation to ‘abominations’: ‘...to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make atonement for iniquity’. The prophecy announces a time-period of grace; an extension of God’s favour, during which period the nation must repent, receive and recognize the atonement ‘for iniquity’, the sealing up of ‘vision and prophecy’ the provision of ‘everlasting righteousness’ and the anointing of ‘most holy’. As John Gill rightly observed, it was the failure of the Jewish nation to accept God’s grace that led to the resulting desolations.¹⁵ Their rejection is rightly described as ‘abominations’ (v 27). Isaiah 66:3 uses this same word, ‘abominations’ for the formal worship and sacrifice done by Jews but without the right attitude of a humble heart. So, as we saw together that the Rabbis did interpret the event of Jerusalem’s destruction as punishment for their national sin, we read in Daniel that the passage Jesus quoted predicted the destruction of the city as the consequence of their national ‘abominations’.”

Faust beamed at me, “Nicely done! If I shared your presuppositions, I would no doubt share your point of view on all this. However, not only do you assume a great deal regarding the authority and authenticity of Daniel, but you assume that simply because certain words are used in similar contexts this somehow equates to a ‘Jewish’ perspective and context for Jesus’ own statements. For example, a modern Jew, and scholar, Jacob

¹⁵ John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, 9 vols. Revised Electronic Edition by Larry Pierce, 1995 (London: Matthews and Leigh, 1809), #Dan 9:27.

Neusner, in *Jewish-Christian Debates*, with Bruce Chilton, is on record as believing that the coming of the promised Messiah depended on the righteous works of Israel in keeping the Law.¹⁶ Not only was Jesus not what the nation expected of Messiah, but it was the observance of the Law that was and is most important in the faith of Judaism.”

“I recall reading that book,” I agreed, “Neusner comments on *Yerushalmi Taanit 1:1*, which includes several quotes and allusions to Old Testament passages, mainly in Isaiah. He was explaining that although the Torah was efficacious for the salvation of the people, the repentance of the people must be heart-felt, not just formal, in order to bring the Messiah:

The one thing Israel commands is its own heart; the power it yet exercises is the power to repent. These suffice. The entire history of humanity will respond to Israel’s will, to what happens in Israel’s heart and soul. And, with the Temple in ruins, repentance can take place only within the heart and mind.”¹⁷

“Young man, you have an extraordinary memory,” Faust observed wryly.

“Thank you. I can assure you that normally I would not be able to remember this kind of detail. I think there is something vivifying about the air here.” We both were quiet for a short time, thinking about this place and its strangeness.

Before long I spoke again, resuming where I had left off. “I also remember that Neusner made an interesting observation in that passage of the book. ‘...Israel bears responsibility for its present condition, which has been brought about by the wrong attitudes, leading to deeds of rebellion against God.’¹⁸ He even goes on to explain that one of the purposes of the Talmud was to reflect on the developments of history in their national tragedy, and to learn from that in order to shape Judaism appropriately. So it was

¹⁶ Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, *Jewish-Christian Debates* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), 168.

¹⁷ *Jewish-Christian*, 169.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

God who brought the Roman Empire, and the other empires before that, against the nation of Israel, because the Jews provoked the ‘divine wrath [that] was executed by the great empire.’”¹⁹

Faust blinked. “As much as I respect Neusner’s scholarship, I can’t say that I much admire his god. What kind of Deity would demand that people try to obey an impossible Law and then keep on repenting when they predictably fail?”

I was surprised at the depth of his feeling as he asked that question. “That is really a complex question, with a complex answer. My answer to that would be an apologetic for the revelation of God’s grace throughout the Old and New Testaments. But for the time being, in this present discussion, let us stick to the issue: what does Jesus’ theological context within Judaism suggest about righteousness versus grace? Neusner was helpful to me on that point when he wrote that in the perspective of the writers of the Talmud, Israel had to choose whom she would serve: the particular Gentile Empire of the period, or God? It was a choice of rules—the option of freedom and self-rule being out of the question. The Talmud intended to provide a guide through the nation’s difficult reality toward the goal of God-rule.”²⁰

“I see your point,” allowed Faust, “but that leaves you with a serious discrepancy between the Christian beliefs about Jesus and those of Judaism. In John 14:4 Christians believe that Jesus is claiming to be the exclusive mediator of salvation when he says, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me’. That seems more like a later Christian perspective than a Jewish one. You acknowledge that the Talmud places itself in precisely that position.”

¹⁹ Ibid., 169-170.

²⁰ Ibid., 170.

“Yes, I guess they—the Talmud writers—did place themselves somewhat in the position of ‘showing the way’ to the nation. And yes, I agree with those ‘Christians’ you refer to. But the important difference is that even the Talmud writers did not see their work as authoritative except as it accurately interpreted the Scriptures. In *Berakhoth* 11b, the Rabbis debate whether to say a blessing along with the reading of the Midrash, Mishna and Talmud. Although they disagree and offer various opinions, they all agree that the blessing should be pronounced when reading the Torah, since the Torah alone comes from God.²¹ Notice also in the work cited by Neusner, *Yerushalmi Taanit 1:1*, and the other writings of the sages, the pattern by which the justification for teachings is demanded: ‘what is the Scriptural basis?’ and, ‘what is the Scriptural basis for this view?’²² So how could the sages provide an authoritative guide for Israel to usher in the age of Messiah? Even the rabbis quoted in the Talmud ask for Scriptural justification for teachings from prophets! Although you may not be persuaded by the preaching of the prophets, the Rabbis of the Talmud certainly were, as were the first century Jews in Jesus’ historical, geographical, and cultural context. Since we are talking about accurately interpreting Jesus’ words in light of His context, this is sufficient: the Scripture was received as both primarily authoritative and divinely inspired. Everything else is secondary, although often important.”

Faust leaned back against the wall. It seemed as if he was willing to concede that point if only because he suddenly remembered his present situation. In another place and another time, he surely would not have made such a concession. Perhaps even great

²¹ Bab. Tal. *Zera'im*, *Berakhoth* 11b.

²² *Ibid.*, 168, 171.

scholars can be humbled to reconsider their cherished theories in light of their experiences?

“Very well,” he said. “For the sake of this conversation I will grant that we can treat the Old Testament *as if it were* really God’s word.²³ These kind of theological questions are outside of the usual scope of my work, but so-be-it.²⁴ At the same time, keep in mind that I do not agree that Jesus fulfilled even the much later Jewish expectations placed by the Jews on the concept of ‘Messiah’. The Christian identification of Jesus as ‘Messiah’ is one of the distinctive issues which actually divided the Christian movement from Judaism.”²⁵

“I would agree with that,” I said. “But that point is actually important to my understanding of what Jesus meant in the prophecies we are discussing. Anyway, I would just like to point out that Neusner admits, while making much the same point you just did, that the Talmud clarified what the people should look for in ‘Messiah’ at least in part because it was a hot topic. Some Jews during the formative period of the Talmud, must have wondered if Jesus was ‘Messiah’.”²⁶

Faust agreed, “Yes. But don’t forget that in order to avoid speculation that might look back and identify Jesus or any other specific individual as the ‘Anointed’, Neusner observed that the Talmud purposefully instructs the people to look forward for ‘Messiah’, not backward in history, because, ‘...the Messiah will be a sage, the Messiah will come

²³ Of course, neither Faust, nor E. P. Sanders, would agree to the doctrinally loaded proposition, “the Bible is the Word of God”. But in this fictional conversation, Faust is agreeing to examine the theological context of Jesus’ sayings and the resulting content and meaning of His sayings in light of the hypothesis that the Bible really is the Word of God.

²⁴ *Historical Figure*, 2-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁶ *Jewish-Christian*, 163.

when Israel has attained that condition of sanctification, marked also by profound humility and complete acceptance of God's will, that signify sanctification.'²⁷

“Sure. I can see that. But, and I don't want to make too much of this point, it is significant for my argument that although Judaism in general flatly rejects the fulfillment of 'Messiah' in Jesus, there was at least enough pressure within Judaism in the medieval period to push the Rabbis to respond with specific instruction. There is an interesting passage in which Jews were forbidden to look too closely at the passage in Daniel 9:24-27 and perhaps come to the conclusion based on the predicted chronology that Jesus was 'Messiah'. The Babylonian Talmud evidently recognizes that this Scriptural passage seems to indicate the chronology of the appearance of Jesus as the Messiah. In *Neziqin, Sanhedrin, 97.2*, there is a curse proclaimed against anyone who tries to figure out the chronology given by Daniel in this passage: 'let them burst, or their bones rot, that compute the times'.²⁸

“But like I said, I am not trying to suggest that this is a popular interpretation in Judaism, or anything like that, I would just like to show that at least Jesus' Messiahship was not completely antithetical to a Jewish mindset even as late as the Talmudic era.

“More important for this discussion is what Judaism and the Old Testament mean by sanctification? Your point, in your quote from Neusner, was that the nation must be completely sanctified to usher in the Messianic age. Let's look at that more closely. If one is going to 'attain' a state of holiness, how does one simultaneously demonstrate 'profound humility' that signifies 'sanctification'? For whether we understand 'humility' from *ταπεινός*, (lowliness) or from *עָנִי* (poverty), the conclusion is necessary that

²⁷ Ibid., 163-164.

²⁸ *Bab. Tal., Neziqin, Sanhedrin 97.2.*

humility is an admission of our lowliness or poverty—an admission of dependence and reliance on God. It seems impossible to attain perfection and admit utter poverty at the same time. Furthermore, look back to *Yerushalmi Taanit 1:1*: What does the prophet say from Isaiah? ‘For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, ‘In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.’ And you would not’ (Isa. 30:15).”²⁹

Faust scratched his chin as he replied, “Yes. I think you are seeing something of a paradox in Jewish theology. Both an emphasis on national purity and on inward humility are attested throughout the literature of Judaism. These two concepts could be considered as righteousness to fellow-humans, and piety to God.”³⁰

“Thank you, that is helpful. If we can see this duality in the Jewish concept of morality or spiritual worthiness, then is it not reasonable to consider Jesus’ teaching against a backdrop of society in which the people had largely substituted formal, outward, ‘righteousness’ in place of real ‘righteousness’ to one’s neighbour accompanied by inward ‘piety’ and humility? That certainly seems to be what is going on in the Matthew passage just before the teaching on the Mt. of Olives:

The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say *things* and do not do *them*. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with *so much as* a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels *of their garments*” (Mat 23:2-5 NAS95).”

Faust said, “I have seen it, although not quite exactly the way you see it, in a similar way. Jesus does not appear, in the Gospels, to be concerned with legalistic

²⁹ *Jewish-Christian*, 168.

³⁰ *Historical Figure*, 92.

perfection in the following of the Law of Moses, but with love, compassion, tolerance, the welcoming of the marginalized and outcast and the acceptance of sinners.”³¹

“I remember you talking about that in one of your books,” I added. “You mentioned the passage in Matthew 5:23-24, noting that Jesus had taught people to go and put their relationships right with those whom they had offended before presenting their offerings in the Temple.”³²

“Yes,” Faust interrupted. “I did write that. But I meant that Jesus taught his followers to make sure that their hearts were right as they presented, for example, a guilt offering for harming someone. It was of no use if they had not repented inwardly for the offense for which they were seeking forgiveness.”³³

As I stretched my legs out, it came to me that there was something sort of arbitrary in that section of Faust’s book. “In your book,” I began, “you brought up the person who comes to Jesus seeking salvation (Mat 19:16-22). Jesus tells him to go and sell his belongings and to donate the proceeds of the sale to the poor. You brought this up as the only exception to the usage of the word, ‘perfect’—which you felt normally meant God-like perfection of showing mercy to others.”³⁴ But if you notice in the first verses of the exchange, Jesus only cited the commandments in Ex 20:13-16. He left out the commandments in Ex 20:3-12, the ones that had to do with the inner attitudes of the heart. So the man asks what he is still lacking since he has kept the ones Jesus mentioned. And Jesus answers that he should go and sell what he has and give the money to the poor—this changing of his internal attitude, from self-service to love for others is what he

³¹ Ibid., 201-204.

³² Ibid., 202.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 204.

was lacking. It is this precise heart-attitude that is reflected and commanded in Exodus 20:3-12: first love for God, not for self or any other; real, sincere, heart-felt dependence on God and a corresponding lovingkindness toward other people that becomes to them a blessing. So where you see this as an exception to Jesus' use of the word, 'perfect', I see it as the exemplar of Jesus' usage: the love that Jesus commands of the rich inquirer is the precise pattern of love revealed by God in Exodus 20:6, '...showing lovingkindness to thousands.'

"Well," Faust humphed good-naturedly, "that is interesting. I would have to look more closely at those texts before I could comment further. But what is the point you are driving at?"

Feeling like I was on a role, I went on, "The pericope of Matthew 5:23ff bears great similarity in its teaching to the passage in Luke 18:10-14, the parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. In this passage, two very different men are coming for the daily sacrifice at the Temple. The one of whom Jesus approves saying he was, 'justified' is the recognized sinner, the Tax Collector. The other one, the Pharisee, is externally righteous and confident of his standing with God. It is remarkable that this passage follows the eschatological teaching in Luke 17:20ff. Jesus is saying that those who are saved by His Gospel, who will enter His Kingdom, are those who cry out to Him for mercy, repentant in their hearts, not confident in their works (Lk 18:7, 9).

"Moreover, although in this parable the two men go to the Temple for the daily sacrifice and for forgiveness, in the preceding parable Jesus puts Himself, 'the Son of Man,' in the place of the unrighteous judge, clearly teaching that He has come to replace the Temple as the personal God who hears the cries of the elect in person (Lk 18:6, 8)."

“That is a bold idea,” Faust replied, “can you substantiate this interpretation further?”

“I think so,” I answered. “But this is, of course, not unique to me. I would actually argue that this is a somewhat traditional reading. Paul Young wrote to the effect that the sacrifice for forgiveness of sins was only efficacious when accompanied by humility and repentance of heart.³⁵ I would go even further and argue that a real standing of righteousness before God, in Jesus teaching, was not possible through the Temple observances at all. The Tax Collector in Luke 18 is in the same position as the widow who cries out to the judge for mercy. Their physical location is irrelevant—it is the attitude of their hearts that Jesus is concerned with. He shows this in his action of occupying the Temple. Jesus occupied the temple, driving out the animals sold for daily sacrifices (Joh 2:15ff). When Jesus did this he fulfilled the words of the prophet, Malachi:

Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts. "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. "He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness (Mal 3:1-3).

“Chilton sees that in this event and the later meals the authorities understood that he was making a claim to replace the daily sacrifice.³⁶ I think Matthew 21:23ff confirms that Chilton is right, at least in part. The ‘chief priests and elders’ wanted to know the basis for Jesus’ authority. And then shortly afterward, when He taught that the Kingdom would be taken away from them and given to another people, they knew he was talking about them and sought to kill Him (Mat 23:45).”

³⁵ Young, 189-191.

³⁶ *Jewish-Christian*, 86.

Faust shook his head, “I don’t see how that would mean that Jesus thought of himself as replacing the ‘daily sacrifice’ as you are trying to argue. It only shows that Jesus thought they were unworthy of the possession of the Law and of the Temple. When you take his teachings all together, it looks instead like Jesus imagined God as a loving father more consistently than a condemning judge: ‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom’ (Luk 12:32).”³⁷

“I guess you have a point. Let me see,” I scratched my head trying to figure out how to pull my ideas together, “I know you likely disagree with Hasel, but he has shown how the concept of Immanuel in Isaiah implies the presence of a remnant of people who come to YHWH in faith, who are formed and ruled by YHWH’s personal representative incarnate, who, as a community, are separated from the unfaithful in an eschatological climax of judgment and salvation.”³⁸ Note the context of these passages in Matthew suggests the same sort of understanding of Jesus as Immanuel. In chapter 21, Jesus enters Jerusalem in the place of YHWH, occupies the Temple in an action that signifies the presence of YHWH and the condemnation of the daily sacrifice, attributes Psalm 8:2 to Himself in the place of YHWH, symbolically condemns the nation for their rejection of their visitation by cursing the fig tree, claims to be YHWH’s personal representative when asked for validation of His authority, and applies to Himself the prophecy of the Cornerstone, making Himself the Foundation of the Temple, and therefore superior to the Temple and all that it stood for.”

“I am surprised,” Faust said, looking as if he really were surprised, “that you make this case. I have argued something somewhat similar as to Jesus’ own idea of what

³⁷ *Historical Figure*, 194.

³⁸ Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant*. Andrews University Monographs Studies in Religion, Vol. 5; 2nd Ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1974), 288-301. C.f., Isa 7:14; 8:8.

his mission was, but without the self-conception of actually being God. You see, Jesus was not a reformer, calling for repentance; he actually was more radical than that. Although he did not seem to disapprove of making the appropriate offerings and sacrifices that would accompany the repentance of the wicked within his contemporary system of Judaism, by his actions he indicated that if sinners accepted *him* and *his message* then that was all that was necessary. He seemed to see his own role and authority as of greater importance than that of the Law and the Temple. But are you suggesting that Jesus' new 'eschatological community', of which you spoke, consists of tax collectors and wicked people? Because it is hard to avoid the implication of what we are saying that Jesus did not demand repentance, he did not seek the reformation of Israel,³⁹ but actually thought he could grant wicked people access to the imminent kingdom on his own authority."⁴⁰

"Faust," I responded, "you yourself have said that, 'He regarded himself as having full authority to speak and act on behalf of God.'⁴¹ I agree with you—so He did. But you seem to think that He somehow failed to call for repentance because He did not either offer His followers a new and better interpretation of the Law, or demand that they

³⁹ *Jesus and Judaism*, 269.

⁴⁰ *Historical Figure*, 232-237. Sanders' own views seem a little less than consistent on this issue of Jesus' own theology of repentance. Howard Clark Kee notes that Jesus, according to Sanders, "...joined with other Jews in regarding obedience to the whole law as an essential requirement for the people of the covenant in the future restoration" (936). Kee helpfully notes that in Sanders earlier research he understood that "...determining the grounds of inclusion in the people of the covenant was the paramount issue in Judaism in the post-Maccabean period. Yet, in evaluating the New Testament evidence about Jesus, Sanders implicitly assumes that the question had one basic answer--the one that later took definitive form in the Mishnah and Talmud" (ibid). Kee believes that Sanders is "impatient" with efforts, like those of Neusner, to research first century Jewish thought in light of a multiplicity of theologies and worldviews competing together within the lifetime of Jesus (936). Instead, Sanders' approach is artificially two-dimensional, down-playing the rich development of Jewish religious thought through many centuries and in various places.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 238. Sanders represents one fairly sceptical position on the evidence for this self-conception of Jesus in the Gospels. Another, more evangelical theology is offered by N. T. Wright in *The Challenge of Jesus*, in his chapter on "Jesus & God", 96-125.

change their ways and conform to the present system of repentance and offering with regard to the Temple system. Instead you point out that He said something to the effect of, 'Give up everything you have and follow me, because I am God's agent.'⁴² But I am arguing that those two things are not mutually exclusive. I am suggesting that since He was YHWH incarnate, following Him personally, accepting His mission and message, really constituted not only a new way of interpreting the Law, but was in fact the only proper and efficacious interpretation ever intended in the giving of the Law by God. This was the eschatological shalom promised to God's people throughout the Old Testament in the Sabbath dwelling-of-God among His own people. The prior interpretation of Moses that produced a formal, works-based righteousness was really and finally a misinterpretation of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus said, 'If you follow me, trust in me, depend on me, you've got it right.'

For thus the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, has said, "In repentance and rest you will be saved, In quietness and trust is your strength." But you were not willing. ...Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you, And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; How blessed are all those who long for Him. O people in Zion, inhabitant in Jerusalem, you will weep no longer. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you. Although the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression, *He*, your Teacher will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher (Isa 30:15-20 NAS95).

Faust acquiesced, "You have made a good case, Joe, for an interpretation in which Jesus conceived of himself as playing the part of God and therefore superseding the Temple and its role in first century Judaism. But your whole argument might not actually prove that Jesus thought that he was God. It might only prove that the editors of the Gospel wrote in such a way as to lead to that conclusion. Jesus never even claimed to be 'Messiah'; he likely never claimed to be the 'Son of God'; he expected another to be the

⁴² Ibid.

‘Son of Man’—probably a symbol of Israel or representative angel; instead he saw himself as different from those expectations, but certainly not as divine. He saw himself as a ‘viceroy’. Instead, what you have in the Gospels is a case of the early Christian theologians, Matthew, Mark, and Luke (and especially John) reading back into the life of Jesus the doctrine of the incarnation.”⁴³

“I notice, Thomas, that you generally provide very little in the way of proof for your assertions. For example you say that since Jesus instructed silence regarding the identification of Himself as ‘Messiah’ that He was therefore not comfortable with that title and therefore not ‘Messiah’ (Mar 8:27-33; 14:61ff; Luk 22:67-71; Mat 26:63-65). You rightly observed, in your book, that Jesus deflects the title, ‘Messiah’ preferring instead to call Himself, ‘Son of Man’. You claim that we can’t really know what He meant by that title, but also saw the eschatological ‘Son of Man’ as different from Himself. The only argument you offer regarding the statement that He is not the eschatological ‘Son of Man’ is an assertion that in Daniel He is not an individual. But that is merely an unsubstantiated assertion. In fact, a legitimate view of the Rabbis, according to the Talmud, was that ‘Messiah’ is one and the same as the ‘Son of Man’ in Daniel, and furthermore, the same as the King entering Jerusalem on a donkey in Zechariah 9:9.⁴⁴ With Scriptural argument, and support from Jewish teachers, I propose that these titles refer to different aspects of one Person anticipated by Israel on the basis of the prophets. Jesus took on Himself all of these titles, King, Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man and ‘I AM’. So where you see a mere viceroy, I see Immanuel.

⁴³ Ibid., 239-248.

⁴⁴ *Bab. Tal., Neziqin, Sanhedrin* 98.1ff. In *Judaisms and their Messiahs*, John J. Collins contributed an essay entitled, “Messianism in the Maccabean Period”, in which he observed that within Judaisms of the periods prior to and after the first century context of Jesus, there are attested conceptions of a Messiah or Son of Man that are angelic, at least, and identified as nearly equal with YHWH, at most (102).

“Now because I think we are short of time, I want to begin to lead this to a conclusion. We have seen together that the Scriptures of the Old Testament, the Talmud and even some of Neusner’s arguments, support certain perspectives of Judaism that emphasize a humility of heart and quiet, restful, dependence on God. Neusner and the Talmud both also mix in some reliance on personal and national deeds, or ‘self-righteousness’, but this does not mean that a complete reliance, as is also implied in the Talmud, is particularly un-Jewish.

“We can also see that Jesus Himself required a corresponding paradigm shift from individual reliance on good works and the daily sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins to a reliance on Jesus alone for the forgiveness of sins. The New Testament and the Jewish leaders of the Temple confirm that Jesus required this. How do we know that the Jewish authorities saw this as an authentic Jewish perspective (even if they hated it)? Because they sought to kill Him, but realizing how many of their Jewish constituents believed in Him they were afraid. Furthermore, one of their own members, Nicodemus, did believe that Jesus was from God (Joh 3:1ff; C.f., Mat 21:46, Joh 2:15, 16, 18, 23).”

“Refresh my memory, Joe,” Faust raised his hand in a self-deprecating gesture, “my memory is not what it used to be. What exactly did Nicodemus admit to Jesus?”

“I would argue that while the Pharisees in general opposed Jesus, at least one of their own associates, Nicodemus saw that Jesus was from God and that not only His message, but His actions were consistent with Scripture. But the words of Nicodemus indicate that he was not alone in this belief, but that there were others who also saw the truth in what Jesus was saying:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have

come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (Joh 3:1-2 NAS95).

“So Jesus’ own words, the crowds of people, some of the Pharisees, and Mark and John understood Jesus to be the Son of David, the Messiah, the King, and even did not contradict His claims to identity with YHWH. In clearing out the Temple and by His words and conduct, by interrupting the daily sacrifice and then by offering Himself as a sacrifice, Jesus proclaimed a permanent provision for the forgiveness of sins. A certain, well-schooled, scholarly Jew wrote in Hebrews 10:4-14, especially 10:9b:

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "SACRIFICE AND OFFERING YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, BUT A BODY YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR ME; IN WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND *sacrifices* FOR SIN YOU HAVE TAKEN NO PLEASURE. "THEN I SAID, 'BEHOLD, I HAVE COME (IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME) TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.'" After saying above, "SACRIFICES AND OFFERINGS AND WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND *sacrifices* FOR SIN YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, NOR HAVE YOU TAKEN PLEASURE *in them*" (which are offered according to the Law), then He said, "BEHOLD, I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL." He takes away the first in order to establish the second. By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (Heb 10:4-14 NAS95).

“So the teaching from a valid, Jewish perspective in Hebrews, demonstrates that Jesus Himself ‘took away’ the system of sacrifices including the daily sacrifice (Heb 10:9). So a properly Jewish perspective—the theological context we were discussing earlier—can reasonably include elements of humility and reliance on God, as well as a belief that Jesus is YHWH, as well as the faith that He abolished the system of animal sacrifice and replaced it with an everlasting sacrifice once and for all.”

“The question,” Faust turned to me when I had finished, “you haven’t answered, of course, is why did Jesus then predict the end of the world? If he was God, could he possibly have been mistaken about such an important idea?”

I took a deep breath, suddenly flushed with the thrill that all this theology was about to acquire new depth and experiential meaning for me. Facing Faust, I went on, “Since Jesus quoted Daniel in His ‘Olivet Discourse’ we needed to look seriously at Daniel’s content. I think we have done that, although I did not really make it explicit. In 9:24, Daniel is told that there was a time limit on the city and the Jews to essentially bring their transgression to an end. In that time their sins would be atoned for, and ‘everlasting righteousness’ would be supplied. This was done in Jesus’ sacrifice and resurrection, as I showed from Hebrews.

“Furthermore, Daniel was told that the ‘Most Holy’ would be anointed. The Anointed One, the ‘Messiah’, in the next verse, verse 25, is described also as ‘the Ruler’. Verse 26 describes how, as the result of rejecting Him and despising the ‘day of their visitation’ (Luk 19:44), the Jews would cause the destruction of their own city and sanctuary—these are ‘desolations’. Verse 27 forms a couplet with verse 26, it parallels and expands on the content of the previous verse: ‘What about Messiah?’ He will extend the Covenant to ‘the Many’, and in the middle of the seventieth week would make sacrifice and offering obsolete. But the Jews, in rejecting YHWH incarnate, and His provision of gracious atonement and ‘everlasting righteousness’ (v 24) would commit ‘abominations’ or ‘detestable things’ (which we were talking about earlier).”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ pp 7-8, above.

“Well you have addressed the Olivet Discourse as far as Daniel goes,” Faust allowed, “but what about Jesus’ expectation of an imminent appearance of God’s Kingdom?”

“Thomas, you once admitted that ‘...it is most probable that, in Paul’s view, after both the living and the dead Christians ‘greet’ the Lord in the air, they accompany him to his kingdom on earth.’⁴⁶ So Jesus’ eschatological Kingdom would be on this world, not in Heaven alone. But if you take that fact together with what we have already discussed (although I’m not under the delusion that I have yet persuaded you), that Jesus Himself was Immanuel coming to Israel, YHWH incarnate, to announce both judgment and salvation, to gather an eschatological community of people who would follow Him and depend on Him, providing a covenant of grace that superseded everything the Pharisees thought about the Temple and the Law, then the advent of Jesus was the coming of the Kingdom of God. It was completed (Joh 19:30) in His sacrifice, on the basis of which He was foreseen by Daniel ascending to the right hand of the Father (Dan 7:13-14; Rev 3:21; 5:1-14) as the eschatological ‘Son of Man’. Indeed, the ‘Kingdom of God’ had come.”

“That is a nice idea, Joe,” Faust remarked with an edge in his voice, “but what about the suffering of the past 19-or-so centuries since that advent? Where is God’s Kingdom now? How can you say Jesus was right when what he anticipated was supposed to be much bigger and more spectacular than what the history of Christianity would suggest?”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *Historical Figure*, 181.

⁴⁷ *Historical Figure*, 179-184, 261-262; see p. 4, above.

“Do you remember, in that passage of the Talmud we looked at earlier, what the Rabbis thought accompanied the destruction of the city and Temple as the result of their national sin?”⁴⁸

“Yes,” he said, his gaze far off, “their exile in the Diaspora.”

“Right,” I agreed with him. “Following the ‘desolation caused by the abomination’ of the Jews, the Scriptures predicted a long national exile—a scattering among the nations (Lev 26:33; Deut 28:64; Zech 7:12-14). There has been no delay. It was as Jesus predicted:

For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. "Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short..."For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be... "But immediately after the tribulation of those days ...the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. "And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other (Mat 24:21-31 NAS95).

“This has been, for 19 centuries, the time of Israel’s ‘great tribulation’, but it seems to me to be coming to completion in the history of the 20th century. The Kingdom became a reality in the appearance of Immanuel, the incarnation of YHWH, and the gathering together of an eschatological community at the first advent of Christ. But the Kingdom will not be revealed in its fullness until the abominations of the Jews give way to repentance and recognition of their God; until the kingdoms of earth are shattered by the appearance of the Son of Man in glory and power (Dan 2:44; 7:22; Lk 1:32-33; 1 Thes 4:16-17; Rev 19:11-20:4).” I smiled as I finished. I knew that perhaps nothing I

⁴⁸ P. 5, above.

could say would change his mind about Jesus unless he was willing to accept the implications of who Jesus is.

We turned and saw a man standing beside the city gate. “Joe” he said. I understood that it was time for our conversation to end, and got up to leave.

“One last thing,” Faust appealed. “Who is the ‘faithful remnant,’ the, ‘eschatological community’ you were talking about?”

I looked at him and smiled, “She is the one against whom you have been leaning while we talked. I’m going to join her now. Goodbye Dr. Faust.”

As I entered into the shalom of my Sabbath rest, I wondered if he was still sitting there, his back against the wall, his head in his hands, and his soul in turmoil.

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