

To make sense of my claim that Jesus himself told the disciples that he thought he was the messiah, I have to set his teachings generally in a wider context. As I have repeatedly argued on the blog, Jesus' teachings are best understood as apocalyptic in nature, and to understand any of them it is important to remember what the world view we call Jewish apocalypticism entailed. This is essential background to the question I'm pursuing, since I will be maintaining that Jesus did indeed consider himself the messiah, and said so to his disciples, but he meant this in a completely apocalyptic sense.

So, to set the stage for my consideration of the messianic self-teaching of Jesus, I need to provide a quick refresher course on Jewish apocalypticism. Here is what I said in an earlier post on the matter.

Jewish apocalypticism was a very common view in Jesus' day - it was the view of the Essenes who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, of the Pharisees, of John the Baptist, later of the Apostle Paul - and almost certainly of Jesus. This is a widely held view among critical scholars - by far the majority view for over a century, since the writings of Albert Schweitzer.

What did early Jewish apocalypticists believe? Let me break it down into four component themes. I have ...

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I have drawn this discussion from my textbook on the New Testament.

Dualism

Jewish apocalypticists were dualists. That is to say, they maintained that there were two fundamental components to all of reality: the forces of good and the forces of evil. The forces of good were headed by God himself, the forces of evil by his superhuman enemy, sometimes called Satan, or Beelzebub, or the Devil. On the side of God were the good angels; on the side of the Devil were the demons. On the side of God were righteousness and life; on the side of the Devil were sin and death. These were actual forces, cosmic powers to which human beings could be subject and with which they had to be aligned. No one was in neutral territory. People stood either with God or with Satan, they were in the light or in darkness, they were in the truth or in error.

This apocalyptic dualism had clear historical implications. All of history could be divided into two ages, the present age and the age to come. The present age was the age of sin and evil, when the powers of darkness were in the ascendancy, when those who sided with God were made to suffer by those in control of this world, when sin, disease, famine, violence, and death were running rampant. For some unknown reason, God had relinquished control of this age to the powers of evil. And things were getting worse.

At the end of this age, however, God would reassert himself, intervening in history and destroying the forces of evil. There would come a cataclysmic break in which all that was opposed to God would be annihilated, and God would bring in a new age. In this new age,

there would be no more suffering or pain; there would be no more hatred, or despair, or war, or disease, or death. God would be the ruler of all, in a kingdom that would never end.

Pessimism

Even though, in the long run, everything would work out for those who sided with God, in the short term things did not look good. Jewish apocalypticists maintained that those who sided with God were going to suffer in this age, and there was nothing they could do to stop it. The forces of evil were going to grow in power as they attempted to wrest sovereignty over this world away from God. There was no thought here of being able to improve the human condition through mass education or advanced technologies. The righteous could not make their lives better, because the forces of evil were in control, and those who sided with God were opposed by those who were much stronger than they. Things would get worse and worse until the very end, when quite literally, all hell was to break loose.

Vindication

But at the end, when the suffering of God's people was at its height, God would finally intervene on their behalf and vindicate his name. For in this perspective God was not only the creator of this world, he was also its redeemer. And his vindication would be universal: it would affect the entire world, not simply the Jewish nation. Jewish apocalypticists maintained that the entire creation had become corrupt because of the presence of sin and the power of Satan. This universal corruption required a universal redemption; God would destroy all that is evil and create a new heaven and a new earth, one in which the forces of evil would have no place whatsoever.

Different apocalypticists had different views concerning how God would bring about this new creation, even though they all claimed to have received the details by a revelation from God. In some apocalyptic scenarios, God was to send a human messiah to lead the troops of the children of light into battle against the forces of evil. In others, God was to send a kind of cosmic judge of the earth, sometimes also called the messiah or the "Son of Man" to bring about a cataclysmic overthrow of the demonic powers that oppressed the children of light.

This final vindication would involve a day of judgment for all people. Those who had aligned themselves with the powers of evil would face the Almighty Judge, and render an account of what they had done; those who had remained faithful to the true God would be rewarded and brought into his eternal kingdom.

Moreover, this judgment applied not only to people who happened to be living at the time of the end. No one should think, that is, that he or she could side with the powers of evil, oppress the people of God, die prosperous and contented, and so get away with it. God would allow no one to escape. He was going to raise all people bodily from the dead, and they would have to face judgment, eternal bliss for those who had taken his side, eternal torment for everyone else. And there was not a sweet thing that anyone could do to stop him.

Imminence

According to Jewish apocalypticists, this vindication of God was going to happen very soon. Standing in the tradition of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, apocalypticists maintained that God had revealed to them the course of history, and that the end was almost here. Those who were evil had to repent, before it was too late. Those who were good, who were suffering as a result, were to hold on. For it would not be long before God would intervene, sending a savior — possibly on the clouds of heaven in judgment on the earth — bringing with him the good kingdom for those who remained faithful to his Law. Indeed, the end was right around the corner. In the words of one first-century Jewish apocalypticist: “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that that kingdom of God has come with power.” These in fact are the words of Jesus (Mark 9:1). Or as he says elsewhere, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things have taken place” (Mark 13:30).

Our earliest traditions about Jesus portray him as a Jewish apocalypticist who responded to the political and social crises of his day, including the domination of his nation by a foreign power, by proclaiming that his generation was living at the end of the age, that God would soon intervene on behalf of his people, sending a cosmic judge of the earth, the Son of Man who would destroy the forces of evil and set up God’s kingdom. In preparation for his coming, the people of Israel needed to repent and turn to God, trusting him as a kindly parent and loving one another as his special children. Those who refused to accept this message would be liable to the judgment of God, soon to arrive with the coming of the Son of Man. [/private



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