

2 Israel's Hope

“For today a Savior has been born for you. He is the Messiah, the Lord.”

The message of the angels placed the new-born child in the long tradition of Israel's prophets and kings. “He will rule over the kingdom of his ancestor David.”

Tho there had been no Davidic king for 500 years, it was a powerful tradition to evoke. David the shepherd, fighter, king and poet, was the greatest ruler Israel had ever known. He had united and led the tribes of Israel to such complete victory over their former overlords, the Philistines, that they had risen in one generation from helpless subjection to an independence and strength that gave them the ascendancy over all their neighbours and made their kingdom unassailable for two generations.

He was the one who captured the city of Jerusalem and made it his capital, the seat of royal independence from where he was free to unite and to govern the disparate Israelite tribes. He had built a palace there, and it is known that he had the ambition of building a temple to Israel's God, Yahweh¹. But the temple was to be the task of David's Son, Solomon. David's task, or rather the task God would carry out for him, was the founding of a dynasty, the building of a House of David. At his death he handed on to his son a kingdom intact, and the dynasty ruled on the strength of his name for five hundred years.

People will achieve great things – and remember even greater things - if there is a leader in whom their struggling vision and courage can be focused. Like the Scots following Wallace or the French Jeanne D'Arc, the Israelites with David had overturned their oppressors and established themselves as a people to be reckoned with. He was a warrior to be remembered, a leader who had led them to victories of which they could always be proud. But, more than a fighter, David had shown himself a revolutionary who could also rule. Like Alfred the Great of England or Fidel Castro in Cuba he had gone on from successful resistance to good government, establishing sovereignty, order and control.

For a thousand years after his time David's memory had burned in the imagination of Israel, inspiring them with the hope of new glories. Not surprisingly he had come to represent their aspirations as a people, a nation. He stood for independence and security; he embodied their confidence, the spirit of their poetry, and above all, a true, strong relationship with God that was the essence of faith. As Moses became the legal and moral voice of Israel, David became their political, spiritual and poetic voice, remembered most of all as the faithful and trusting servant of God, who, relying on God, received all his success and everything he gave to his people from the hands of God.

In the days of foreign occupation, when Israel was forced to serve the ambitions of Rome, they found their greatest inspiration and their most enthusiastic hopes focused in the vision of an anointed king like David, a Messiah, who would once again rule an independent kingdom of Israel and make it strong as David had done.

Much would be expected of Miriam's child.

¹ Yahweh: this, the Hebrew name of God, is replaced in most Bibles with “the Lord”.

Jesus Messiah

David's son, Solomon, enjoyed a reign even more glorious than that of his father. David had fought both internal and external enemies to establish the kingdom, but Solomon was able to enjoy it and rule it in peace. If David expressed the hopes, struggle and victory of Israel, Solomon represented their glorious fulfilment. This reign of the first Son of David was remembered as the great flowering of the kingdom of Israel, a time never to be surpassed. Solomon turned the hill fortress of Jerusalem into a golden city of temple and palace, of stone, copper and cedar wood. He presided over an abundant economy and organised an efficient state with power enough in arms, chariots and men to guarantee respect and security. In the reign of Solomon, justice, wisdom and the arts – the prize of peace – flourished, and foreign rulers like the Queen of Sheba came to show their respect, to learn wisdom and to court the favour of so great a ruler.

Solomon's reign was a time of prosperity unparalleled in Israel's history: merchants, aristocrats, builders and priests all flourished. But more than anything else it was a time of fulfilment, tranquillity, and prosperity for the ordinary people of Israel.

All Judah and Israel enjoyed complete security, each man under his own vine and fig tree, from Dan to Beersheba thruout Solomon's lifetime. (I Kings 4:25)

If such a reign of peace was to be restored in the hands of Miriam's son, a thousand years after Solomon, when Rome ruled with ruthless power and winners and survivors all learnt to do things Rome's way, God would have to overturn every power there was in the world.

The history of Israel's rulers for some centuries after David was largely disappointing. When Solomon died, the kingdom was divided. His reign of forty years, tho remembered as glorious, had nurtured inconsistencies, resentments and frustrations that tore the kingdom apart after his death, when it split into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and never recovered its unity.

In the northern kingdom, the greater part of Israel, prophets from Elijah to Amos and Hosea did battle with kings and élites who cared much more for their own wealth and power than for God or the people of Israel. They did battle and they won battles, but in the end both they and the kings lost, and the northern kingdom, as a political entity, disappeared. Corrupt to the end, it was destroyed by the expanding Assyrian empire, and only the smaller, southern kingdom of Judah remained.

It was there the prophet Isaiah began to hope for a better future when Israel would again be ruled by a truly faithful and God-given king. The very failure of their actual kings seemed to breed a hope that, after the misrule, oppression and apostasy of so many, God would one day give them again a king like David to rule them rightly. Isaiah and the prophets who followed him forged a new vision of order, justice and security, of a people at peace with itself, protected from its enemies and faithful to God, all under a king who would really be God's blessing to them.

An heir to the throne was always a sign of hope, and when a wife of King Ahaz got pregnant Isaiah was moved to proclaim:

The girl has conceived and is carrying a child. She will give birth to a son, whom she will call Immanuel: "God-with-us". (Isaiah 7:14)

And when the northern kingdom was overthrown, cast into the darkness of political non-existence, Isaiah foresaw the dawning of a new light and a savior-king to rescue even them:

The people that walked in darkness are now in bright daylight! Light has shone upon them in the deep shadows of their land. For a child has been born to us and a son is given to us, and the government shall be upon his shoulders. They will call him Wonderful-Counsellor, God-is-Mighty, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Wide will be his rule from the throne of David, his power made secure by justice and integrity, his peace and order confirmed for all time. Yahweh of Armies himself, zealous in his love for his people, will bring this about. (Isaiah 9: 2, 6-7)

And Jesse, the father of David, would be the ancestor of a great and good king to come:

A new shoot springs from the stump of Jesse, a branch from his root bears fruit. The spirit of Yahweh rests upon him: a spirit of wisdom and understanding, of sound judgement and power, of knowledge and the fear of God. He will not judge superficially, relying on talk, but will decide with integrity and equity the case for the poor.

The psalms, the songs and hymns of Israel, echo this prophetic hope, looking back to David in order to look forward to a future Son of David, a king anointed by God to rule his people in freedom, justice and peace. As anointing with oil was the sign of kingship conferred, poets and prophets came to speak of their ideal and future king as the Anointed One, the Messiah (“Messiah” being the Hebrew word for “anointed”).

I have chosen my servant David and anointed him with holy oil;
my hand will be with him all the time, my arm will be his strength. (Psalm 89: 20 – 21)

Yahweh says to you, my King, “Sit at my right hand and I will put your enemies under your feet. Yahweh has sworn an oath. He will not take back his word. You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedech.” (Psalm 110: 1,4)

I will raise up power for the line of David; I will light a lamp for my anointed one. (Psalm 132: 17)

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But there was an older, perhaps stronger tradition, which could challenge the whole idea of a monarchy, and which was rooted in signs more solid, dynamic and elusive than a ritual anointing. In this tradition, the leaders of Israel were designated by God alone, who gave them his own spirit both as effective power and as the sign of their authority. In times of crisis he would give Israel her leaders by breathing (or perhaps “unleashing” is a better word) his spirit into men who could rescue Israel from danger. Whereas kings would be known from birth and brought up to rule in a nation that had become an institution, the successive heroes who, as the Book of Judges tells us, were endowed with God’s spirit, were God’s instruments or servants raised up individually for a particular time of need. The spirit given to them remained the action of God in them – never given over to be passed on by inheritance or by any institutional arrangements.

Jesus Messiah

The spirit of God as the authorisation of leaders is always less predictable than anointing. Human beings anoint (even if at God's behest) but only God can breathe God's spirit. Elijah, one of the greatest prophets, when he came to the end of his days and his disciple Elisha asked to inherit a "double portion" of his spirit, could do no more than tell him the sign by which God would tell him whether his request had been granted.¹ That spirit is always God's to give as God chooses.

The prophet Isaiah knew that the king to come would need more than anointing: he would need that visible energy and authority of God that is God's spirit:

Yahweh's spirit rests on him, a spirit of wisdom and insight, of good counsel and of power, of knowledge and of awe before God. (Isaiah 11:2)

and a great prophecy later in the Book of Isaiah brought together the messianic, monarchic idea of anointing and the wilder idea of God's Spirit:

The Spirit of Yahweh has been given to me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim the captive's freedom and the prisoner's release. (Isaiah 61:1)

The hopes of Isaiah went unfulfilled in his time, for the kings of Judah seemed to get worse, not better, and even good kings like Josiah were unable to reform the whole kingdom. It was conquered by the Babylonians, and after a futile revolt all of its skilled or leading citizens were exiled to Babylon. It was, it seemed, the end of every hope for Israel, and yet, from this very time the prophets began to speak of a wider hope of God's Spirit, of a time when the Spirit of God would be poured out on the people as a whole, not just on one chosen leader:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit in you so that you keep my laws and respect my commands. (Ezekiel 36: 26 – 27)

The Spirit will be the gift of God creating in human hearts and in human nations the very desire and ability to do the will of God. When God breathed God's Spirit into them, they would recover from total defeat and exile as if someone dead had been raised to life:

I am going to open your graves and bring you out of them, to lead you back to the land of Israel. You will know who I am: Yahweh; for I will put my Spirit in you and you will live. (Ezekiel 37: 14)

Such a prophecy took them back to the story of their foundation as a people under God, and the giving of their law in the time of the Exodus from Egypt. The Book of Numbers² recounts how Moses was told to appoint seventy elders to help him in the work of community arbitration. Moses brought the men he had chosen to the "Tent of Meeting" to receive their accreditation – an exemplary clear and orderly procedure of authorisation. The Spirit of God came upon the chosen seventy, equipping them to lead and to arbitrate, but back in the camp two of the unchosen were also filled with the Spirit – manifest in an

¹ I Sam 8 – 12 ² Chapter 11

enthusiastic outburst of God-praise. When others urged Moses to stop them – for they were not authorised – Moses recognised that God again had done the choosing. He even expressed a wish for the (not to be expected) possibility of all the people receiving God's Spirit:

Are you being jealous for me? If only all Yahweh's people were prophets and he gave his Spirit to them all!
(Numbers 11: 29)

But eventually, beyond all expectations, the prophet Joel did declare from God:

I will pour out my Spirit on all humankind:
your old men will dream dreams
and your young men will see visions.
Even on the slaves, male and female,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.
(Joel 2: 28 – 29)

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Tho the idea of an anointed king or the spirit of God focused their expectations, there was something else that lay in Israel's deepest consciousness as the ground and background to all this. It was the conviction of a fundamental relationship with God, a commitment of God to them that went back to the very beginnings, when their nation was first created by the promise of God. As Miriam and Zechariah had remembered, all hopes for Israel go back to God's earliest commitment: God's promise made in the beginning to their ancestor Abraham:

Yahweh said to Abraham, "Leave your country and your family, your father's house, and go to the land I will show you, where I will bless you and make you a great nation."
(Gen 12: 1-2)

God's promise to Abraham was that he would give his descendants the land of Canaan – the "purple country" – in which Abraham was only a wandering stranger. Abraham's time and space, his future in his descendants and the land which would measure their freedom, were to be God's gift to him and to his descendants. This was the promise of God and God's bond with Israel that Miriam and Zechariah had celebrated

He has come to the help of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,
as he promised to our fathers, his word to Abraham and Abraham's seed forever.

That is the oath he swore to our father Abraham – that he would make space for us to worship him, free from fear and safe from our enemies, in holiness and justice all the days of our life.

It stood at the very beginning of Israel's story as God's assurance to Abraham. It was not anything Abraham had done for God, nor that he was thereafter required to do something for God; but it required that he should trust God, that he should believe, and believing, act upon God's promise. He did so. Abraham left his own land and family to wander as a nomad in Canaan.

Jesus Messiah

In Canaan, the promise was confirmed as a solemn undertaking secured on oath in a special, binding ceremony. The promise became a covenant, an undertaking solemnly and visibly attested. Instructed by Yahweh, Abraham took a young heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtle dove and a pigeon. He brought them to Yahweh, cut them in half and placed the halves on opposite sides, facing one another (but he did not cut the birds in half). Birds of prey came swooping down on the carcasses but Abraham drove them off. They were an evil omen, and about sunset he fell into a troubled sleep, dreaming of the harsh future that lay ahead of his descendants, but also of their rescue by God. When the sunlight had gone and darkness reigned, a smoking furnace appeared and a firebrand passed between the slaughtered halves. Yahweh was binding himself by solemn ritual to deliver what he promised or to suffer the fate of the slain and divided animals.

That day Yahweh made a covenant with Abraham: “To your descendants I give this land, from the wadi of Egypt to the Great River.” (Genesis 15: 18)

The covenant established a personal and social relationship as a deep and permanent commitment, but the undertaking was first and essentially on Yahweh’s side. He would deliver. Abraham had only to trust him and live in that trust. His trust would be vindicated and God’s promise would be fulfilled and renewed again and again, but in times that lay far ahead of Abraham, who died still a stranger in Canaan. His great-grandchildren, the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel, ended up as economic refugees in Egypt and Israel’s national experience began there, where they became an oppressed and exploited minority.

There they were reduced to slavery, but because of his promise God came to them and set them free. Their story tells of terrible events, of plagues and disasters in Egypt, and then of one dreadful nite when the angel of death slew all the first-born, the pride of Egypt’s population. That nite the Israelites had been protected. Instructed by God, each family had sacrificed a lamb and smeared its blood on their doorposts. The blood had protected them while they ate the lamb and celebrated their coming freedom.

And freed they were. They escaped from Egypt into the wilderness, but they remembered that terrible nite, its sacrifice and its celebration, as a fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham and a sealing of the bond between Yahweh and Israel. That bond, described again as a “covenant” became the formative law of Israel. They were led by Yahweh to Mount Horeb (or Mount Sinai) in the desert, where they received their laws from him as the laws of the covenant. Their communities would always be shaped by the law of God, and they would need neither king nor emperor to legislate for them.

As the lawgiving was a fulfilment of Yahweh’s promise to Abraham, so too was the land-giving that followed. After the conquest of Canaan the land was divided out among the tribes and clans and families, and when they came to that point where the land and the future were theirs, Joshua their leader summoned the tribes and clans to Shechem¹, where he presented them with a choice: to adhere to Yahweh or to go their way with other gods. The covenant was to be freely affirmed by the Israelite tribes themselves, a relationship into which they entered gladly. Convinced by Joshua, they so affirmed it:

We too will serve Yahweh, for he is our God. (Joshua 24: 18)

¹ Joshua Ch 24

So the bond with God or “covenant” of Israel’s tradition was not a single document, like the Magna Carta or the Declaration of Independence. It was a number of related historical experiences. It was a promise made to Abraham; it was God’s commitment to Israel when he rescued them from slavery; it was the law-giving on Mount Horeb; it was the land-giving of Canaan and the agreement of the tribes to have only Yahweh for their God.

Fundamentally, it was a relationship, and as a relationship it could grow. The prophets of Israel, just as they discovered wider possibilities in the promise of God’s spirit, also spoke of a wider and deeper application of the covenant. Jeremiah, who took part in a major religious reform of Judah¹ spoke of the covenant as the law given to Israel but broken by them, but he later foresaw its renewal as a new covenant written on the very hearts of God’s people, where they would remember and keep it.²

Ezekiel, writing at the time of Judah’s exile in Babylon, spoke of the covenant as the bond of lovers in marriage, a bond broken by faithless and promiscuous Israel, but one which Yahweh would renew to last forever.³ And he spoke of a vision for the future in which were brought together many of the different strands of Israel’s hope: the reign of a new David, and renewed obedience to the Law of God, a renewal of the land-giving, the granting of a covenant and the direct, unmediated presence of Yahweh himself among them.

My servant David will reign over them and they will respect my laws. They will live in the land that I gave my servant Jacob, they, their children and their children’s children forever. I will make an eternal covenant of peace with them and set my sanctuary among them forever. I will be their God and they shall be my people.
(Ezk 37: 24 – 27)

With the return from exile, came even greater hopes, with prophecies preserved in the Book of Isaiah that the “covenant of peace” would depend not on the people who had to keep it but on Yahweh’s commitment in love to sustain it⁴; that foreigners living in Israel would also be able to keep the covenant, sharing in its blessings as they worshipped God in the temple⁵; that not only Israel but all the nations of the world would come to live in its light.⁶

And there were those, too, who spoke of a furnace of judgement still to be endured like a refiner’s fire, to purify the priests of Israel. God himself will come to expose and judge those who have corrupted society, sorcerers and adulterers, those who lie to damage the innocent, those who oppress the working people and take advantage of the weak, who deny human rights to the vulnerable stranger. Here was a vision of justice, or “righteousness”, which made it only too clear that God’s coming would be the fire of justice, and only those who are purified in it will not need to fear him. So it was foreseen in the book of Malachi⁷: the nation purified and the manipulators and perpetrators of injustice exposed by God to their lasting shame.

Within so much that was said and written in the long tradition of Israel there lay many expressions of hope: hopes of a coming king, the Messiah; hopes of the abundant

¹ the reform of King Josiah, described II Kings 22 – 23

² Jer 31: 31 – 34 ³ Ezk 16: 8, 59 – 62

⁴ Is 54: 9 – 10 ⁵ Is 56: 6 – 7 ⁶ Is 42: 1 – 6 ⁷ ch. 3: 2 - 5

outpouring of God's Spirit; hopes founded on the promise of God and their covenant relationship with him; and hopes, or fears, of judgement and liberating justice.

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Their memory and hope alike were rooted in their experience of God, which ran thru the whole of their history. But they lived too in the world of other peoples' histories, and were subject to other nations' views of destiny, power and rule. In fact, their land, their space, seemed fated to be always part of someone else's empire or a defenceless bit of territory in the route of someone else's expansion. First the Assyrians had destroyed the northern kingdom¹, leaving only Judah in the south. Then the empire of Babylon had conquered Judah² and when, after two generations in Babylon, the Jews (as they might now be called) returned to their homeland, they lived for a long time under the relatively benign empire of the Persians.

Then, in a period of huge kingdoms that followed the campaign of Alexander the Great, they found themselves first under Egyptian then under Greek rulers from Antioch (for Greek culture, in the wake of Alexander, had taken hold of the whole region). Their latest rulers from Antioch saw cultural and religious change as a way of consolidating power and so they encouraged or forced the Jews to adopt Greek custom and religion. It was a new kind of oppression. Other imperial conquerors had been content with political and economic control, since they all ruled vast empires with a great variety of languages, cultures and gods. Not since the rule of Ahab and Jezebel in Israel³ or that of Manasseh in Judah⁴ had there been religious persecution, and that had come internally, from Israelite kings eager to realign their kingdoms with their allies or overlords. Now it was the determined policy of a power so ruthless that it would happily destroy the whole Jewish people if they resisted inclusion in the new universal culture.

Terrible accounts are given, of Jews massacred on the Sabbath when they would not take action to resist⁵, of women who had their babies circumcised, as Jewish practice was, thrown to their death with the babies hung around their necks⁶, and of people cruelly tortured to death as they refused to break the laws of their God.⁷ Yet cruel as these times were, and without any prophet to give God's guidance, the Jews nonetheless discovered a new hope thru the worst of the persecution itself.

The old conviction that death was the punishment for sin could hardly hold when faithful Jews willingly endured death rather than break the law of God. Even the belief that national disaster and defeat, with all the atrocities that followed, was a punishment for national sin, had to be modified in the light of the martyrs' faithful endurance. God must be disciplining his people, even in their punishment, and preparing them for a faithful and triumphant future.⁸

But the truly great hope born of this suffering and of the conviction that God would be utterly faithful to his people, was a new and deeper understanding of God as their creator. The One who had put together the world, and knit together each one of his people in their mother's womb would not fail to restore to those who had died faithful to him, their

¹ II Kings 17 ² II Kings 24 – 25 ³ I Kings 16: 29 and following chapters

⁴ II Kings 21 ⁵ I Maccabees 2: 29 – 38 ⁶ II Maccabees 6: 10 ⁷ II Maccabees 7

⁸ II Maccabees 6: 12 – 17

bodies, breath and life, on the day when he restored the life of Israel. This was a new and profound conviction: the value of each one to God which would lead to their resurrection in the day of triumph.

In the Second Book of Maccabees¹ we are told how seven brothers died under torture, refusing to break God's law, their mother bravely encouraging them:

I do not know how you appeared in my womb; I wasn't the one who gave you breath and life. It was the Creator of the world who brought about your birth, as he directs the origin of every thing. Will he not in his mercy give back to you both breath and life since you now cast aside your own existence for the sake of his laws?

(II Macc 7: 22 – 23)

It was a profound and powerful insight, born of faithfulness. But not all Jews were faithful and many of them simply fell in with the new world order. Either fear or cynicism took them along with the dominant power, and Israel's Greek rulers found willing enough allies among their Israelite subjects. It was a time of martyrs and traitors and all the people in between, most of whom probably just wanted to survive and find space for their children to survive.

But somewhere among them all the hopes of Israel survived and, if not realised, were passed on to another generation, to remain the abiding hopes of Israel. Hopes of an anointed king, of the gift and power of God's spirit, of the covenant with God restored and reaffirmed, of the law faithfully observed, of true justice to come, and now also of a great conclusion, when even the dead would rise to share in the triumph of God for Israel.

This last period of Israel's history before Jesus included two glorious generations in which the splendid revolt of the Maccabees briefly restored their pride and their hope of independence. For a time the leaders of Judah, a family of warrior-priests, successfully fought against their would-be rulers, or played off one against the other in the bitterly fractured politics of the time: Antioch against Alexandria, usurper against king, rival generals against each other.²

For very small people among fiercely contending giants, they managed brilliantly, giving Israel a brief taste of independence or at least respectful treatment from imperial masters. For the first time in many centuries they extended the authority of Jerusalem up into Galilee and though they remained nominally subject to one or other of the region's powerful overlords, they commanded their own armies and gave birth to one more strand in the tapestry of Israel's hopes: the possibility and the glory of military revolt, of fighting their way to freedom.

This last one was, unfortunately, a futile hope, for the world had grown vastly bigger and smaller since the days when petty kings could build power by fighting one another in the Eastern Mediterranean. Not only was Israel a tiny contender easily trampled by rival armies from Persia, Syria or Egypt but the great kingdoms themselves were about to be swallowed by a power of world proportions, greater than them all. The time was near when Israel and all the kingdoms around them would be swept into the net of the world's new superpower, Rome.

¹ Ch. 7 ²This politically complex story is told in the first Book of Maccabees.

Jesus Messiah

Israel's Messiah, if his time had indeed come, would find himself heir to all this history, in a world dominated by the imperial power of Rome.

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I believe there is progress in history, tho much less than we sometimes imagine, and one of the great achievements of Mediterranean history was the growth of rational and libertarian ideas that were vindicated by the surprisingly successful resistance, about four centuries before Christ, of the Greek City states to the expanding Persian empire. In them, democracy, government of the people, was shown to be not only possible, but strong enuf to check the world's most powerful empire and provide its own kind of success and safety. (Of course, their "democracy" did not include their slaves, their women or the lowest working classes.)

A similar tradition of democracy became even stronger over the water in Italy where Rome, a "democratically" (again if you don't count the slaves, the women, the poor and the working classes) organised society, grew from a city state into a powerful empire, ruling most of the Western Mediterranean. To the astonishment of the traditional East¹ they showed the possibility of the national will being expressed and upheld effectively thru regularly elected representatives (with provision for short-term dictatorships in times of crisis). It was a radical challenge to all the world's idea of power and authority. While still a kind of democracy, Rome became the most powerful player in the Mediterranean world, and, by the time of Miriam and Zechariah, it was the only surviving player.

But in Rome, democracy, which had long since overthrown monarchy, had risen to spectacular heights only to fall victim to its own success. The problem was that both the power of Rome and the threts to her power outgrew the democracy, and Rome became a permanent dictatorship (even tho, thruout the history of the Roman Empire, everything was done in the democratic name of "the Senate and the People of Rome"). Roman generals and their legions (the Pentagon of their day) became too powerful for democracy to control and the commanders of the army became de facto commanders of the Roman empire. (The Latin word we translate as "emperor" ment "commander-in-chief", and with this to compare, I find it ominous that Americans under the Bush regime so easily warm to his title of Commander in Chief.)

Some fifty years before the birth of Jesus, Julius Caesar had built his reputation and his power on conquest of the Gauls, a feared enemy on the northern borders of Italy. Another general, Pompey built his on conquest of the East (including Israel) and a successful campaign against the Mediterranean pirates, the terrorists of their day. They were so successful in the powerful defence of their democracy, that in the end, the only question left for the democracy of Rome was which of the two would continue to rule them as their permanent dictator. The candidates fought it out and decided the matter for them.

From Julius Caesar onward, the will that ruled the empire was that of the Commander-in-Chief, the Imperator, or Emperor, revered as divine in the East where that tradition still held, and scarcely less absolute in the West in spite of its democratic past. Following Caesar's assassination (by disappointed democrats) great battles shook the world but the

¹ cf I Macchabees 8: 12 – 16

victors were not democrats. The prizes went to the most successful generals with the most powerful backers and armies. That was what the history of Israel's world had come to: that the world would be ruled by the Caesars, heirs to the military and political power of the great Julius.

In this world the whole nation of Israel was only a bit part and all its hopes were a small side-issue in the economic and political moves that were shaping the times. The message may have come from God to a middle-aged priest that his son would usher in the age of the Messiah, and to a country-town girl that she was to bear the Messiah in her body, but Miriam and Zechariah and all the friends and traditions they could muster did not count in the world of the Roman Empire, and they did not even register on the screen of political realism. Their children, if they were to survive, would have to grow up conforming to the realities of their day, for they would be crushed if they caused so much as a tremor in some desert corner of the conqueror's world-wide sphere of interest.

The exodus from Egypt belonged to an unimaginably distant past. David and Solomon were a thousand years ago, and nobody, not even the Jews, now spoke the Hebrew language of the prophets. All of Israel was ruled by a king appointed from Rome or was directly under the control of a Roman governor. Jerusalem was dominated by its aristocracy of priestly families, who were subject to the Roman-appointed authorities but managed local affairs thru a council of priests and elders called the Sanhedrin. They used their influence to maintain a delicate social balance that affirmed the unique identity of Jews, but, as a matter of realistic and practical politics, acknowledged the dominant interests of Rome. In this way, astutely, they managed to preserve their own status and maintain a satisfactory level of peace.

Whatever stories their mothers told them, or whatever tales made up the folklore of their almost irrelevant communities, Jesus and John, if they were to live, would have to learn the ways of the powers that now ruled the world.