

Jesus thought the world as he knew it was about to end, and he taught and acted accordingly.

That’s what I tell people when they ask me who Jesus *really* was.

Many are taken aback when they hear me say this. Such doomsaying conjures up images of unctuous televangelists and megaphoned prophets in New York’s Times Square. Most people imagine Jesus as a more exalted figure than a mistaken herald of the end-times.

But such a view of Jesus is not as odd as it might seem.

While for modern Jews the notion of end-times seems peripheral at best, it aroused great fervor among our ancestors in first-century Judea.

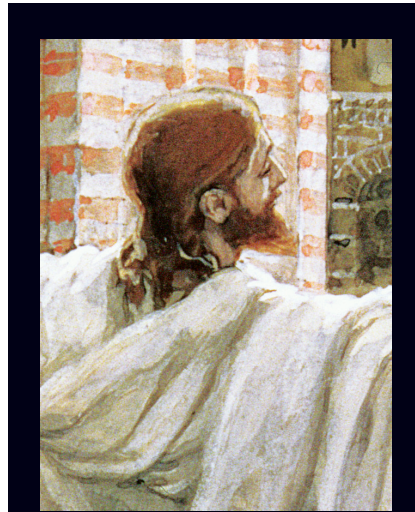
Some history: decades of Roman domination had worn on the Jews’ independent spirit. Some at the top of Jewish society did not mind foreign rule, or at least they learned to live with it: They helped the Romans to administrate and owed their well-being to their imperial overlords. But many more Jews wished to see the hated Roman regime toppled, some advocating violent means.

Other Jews warned that expelling the Romans would require more power than mortal soldiers could possibly muster, as the enemy was far mightier than the legions of Rome. For these Jews, Roman soldiers were but human pawns of a cosmic evil force that controlled the world, an array of demons led by Satan. Only a rival cosmic force headed by God could be victorious. Soon, they believed, God would intervene in history and redeem the world, conquering the ruling powers (and their Roman deputies); restoring the twelve tribes of Israel; and replacing death, disease, and famine with life, health, and abundance.

This worldview is known as apoca-

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lypticism, from the Greek word for “unveiling” or “revelation,” as many of these Jews expressed their ideas as revealed visions. We cannot readily gauge the popularity of apocalypticism in the late second temple period, but numerous and unique Jewish texts, from Daniel (ca. 164 B.C.E.) and a few of the Dead Sea Scrolls (ca. 150 B.C.E.–70 C.E.) to 1 Enoch (ca. 200 B.C.E.–100 C.E.) and 4 Ezra (ca. 100 C.E.), reflect the belief



“How
 is it that Jesus
 of Nazareth,
 a Galilean preacher
 and wonder-worker,
 so worried the Roman
 regime that he ended
 up crucified as an
 enemy of the state?”

that the world as it existed was about to end, setting the stage for a new chapter in human history.

Jesus of Nazareth shared this view, as best we can determine from ancient Christian sources. Culling such information is not easy when the four Gospels of the New Testament, the primary resources for reconstructing Jesus’ life,

do not offer straightforward historical reportage, but rather accounts obscured by legendary material reflecting the interests and concerns of the first Christian communities. Nonetheless, by submitting these Gospels to methodological criteria, most scholars believe that we can winnow at least a few reliable reminiscences of what Jesus actually preached and did.

One of the major themes in Jesus’ preaching was what he called the “kingdom of God.” Especially according to the Gospel of Mark, the first written Gospel and a primary source for both Matthew and Luke, this kingdom was to manifest itself imminently, probably within the lifetime of Jesus’ disciples: Amidst great tribulation—storms, celestial phenomena, and the like—God would send forth from above a heavenly figure called the “Son of Man” who would judge the world, gather together those who passed muster, and with them initiate a new kingdom (Mark 13:24-27). Not only would this happen soon, it would also occur abruptly and without warning, thereby requiring vigilance and preparation (e.g., repentance and upright conduct) from those hoping to participate in the new regime.

Just what role Jesus envisioned for himself in this scenario is difficult to ascertain. Was he merely a herald, charged with the task of preparing as many Jews as possible? Was he to be the earthly ruler of the new kingdom? Was he the “Son of Man” himself, who would return on the clouds soon after his death?

We do know that of the few ethical teachings we can confidently trace back to Jesus some appear apocalyptic. These encourage his followers to renounce material or cultural attachments, presumably to focus on the repentance and radical love required for the impending kingdom of God. The rich were to discard their wealth (Mark 10:23–25), the powerful their authority (Mark 10:42–44). Even families were to be abandoned if they interfered with one’s preparation (Luke 14:26). Corresponding to this ethic of renunciation was a celebration of the poor and downtrodden, whose status would be dramatically reversed under God’s rule. The poor, meek, and ostracized were to be blessed, since the

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