

hierarchies of the reigning order soon would be stood on end—the last would be first, and the first last (Matthew 5:3–5; Mark 10:31).

Admittedly, not all scholars agree. Some well credentialed historians insist that Jesus was not apocalyptic at all, but a sage, cultural critic, or prophet of spiritual renewal whose aim was to transform his society rather than proclaim its imminent replacement by a new cosmic order. These scholars view the apocalyptic sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels as inventions of the earliest Christians: Since these Christians expected Jesus to return at any moment to judge the world, they ascribed to him a similar apocalyptic expectation. While his followers may have made it seem as though Jesus himself had predicted the imminent onset of a kingdom of God, instead, these scholars argue, Jesus viewed the kingdom as manifest within his own ministry, present when his followers embraced toleration, humility, and radical love. From this viewpoint, Jesus was not an apocalypticist but an advocate for social justice or, perhaps, personal enlightenment.

Alluring as this non-apocalyptic perspective of Jesus as champion of human progress and preacher of compassion and equality may be, it is difficult to accept.

First, most of the sayings cited in support of this theory hinge on less reliable evidence: the Gospel of Luke, which, while utilizing Mark as a primary source, aims to tone down Mark's depiction of Jesus as apocalyptic. Writing near the end of the first century, Luke knew the end had not come in the lifetime of Jesus or Jesus' disciples, and adjusted his presentation of Jesus' message accordingly. The non-apocalyptic Jesus more likely reflects Luke's perspective than Jesus himself.

More importantly, nearly everything Jesus *did* looks apocalyptic. The few details of Jesus' life which historians widely accept as authentic and not embellished by the early church correspond more aptly with an apocalyptic prophet than with an advocate for social change.

Consider Jesus' relationship with John the Baptist. Nearly every scholar concedes that Jesus began his public life under John's tutelage. After all, early

Christians hardly would have invented the idea that Jesus had been baptized by John, and hence subordinated to him. According to the Gospels (and to a lesser extent the testimony of Josephus), John was an apocalyptic prophet who roamed about the wilderness immersing devotees and encouraging repentance in preparation for the judgment associated with God's imminent intervention into histo-

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ry. Jesus' decision to initiate his career under the guidance of such a well-known apocalyptic proponent suggests he was similarly inclined.

Likewise, the few widely-accepted details of Jesus' own ministry point to an apocalyptic outlook. His inner circle of disciples totaled twelve, a number many

scholars interpret as a gesture toward the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel—an event eagerly anticipated by apocalyptic Jews. Many also see Jesus' acclaimed role as a powerful exorcist capable of dislodging people's demons and thereby freeing them from personal afflictions as a prelude to the imminent coming of the kingdom of God, when all demonic forces controlling the world would be dispelled. And they explain the Gospels' report of Jesus causing a minor commotion on the temple grounds not as a protest against corruption, but as a foreshadowing of the temple's imminent destruction and replacement by a more pristine temple, to be established during the reign of God.

Perhaps no aspect of Jesus' ministry is as historically certain as its end. Here, too, an apocalyptic context best accounts for what transpired. Crucifixion, the Roman punishment usually meted out for especially violent or seditious acts, was an agonizing public death intended to discourage imitators. Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect, ordered Jesus' crucifixion on the grounds that he claimed to be "king of the Jews," and, as such, Jesus was executed as a political claimant, a rival to Rome.

But there's the rub: 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? Those who portray Jesus as a sage or cultural critic are hard-pressed to answer. Typically they rely on the plotline of the Gospels, which intentionally transfers responsibility for the execution from the Romans to the Jews: the Jewish establishment opposed Jesus' message and wanted him dead, but they needed Rome to do the deed. At best this explains why Jesus was executed, not why he was *crucified* as a threat to Rome. This hitch has led others to suppose that at some point Jesus took up arms against the state, but this hypothesis fails to explain why none of his followers was hunted down and executed, as was typical practice when the Romans quashed revolts and executed those they deemed insurrectionists.

An apocalyptic message best accounts for Jesus' crucifixion. Most  
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