



# The Sword & The Plow

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Commentary on Matthew

Chapter Three

## The Eschatology of John the Baptist

by  
*Kurt M. Simmons*

### 1- In those days

We learn from Luke that this was the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar (Lk. 3:1). Roman emperors dated their reigns by calendar years, or from January 1 to December 31 following their accession (the “non-accession” method). Augustus Caesar, who was the reigning emperor when Jesus was born, died August 19, A.D. 14. Thus, the first regnal year of Tiberius would have been the calendar year A.D. 15, making his fifteenth year the calendar year A.D. 29.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (1998 Revised ed., Hendrickson), p. 329, 340.

### came John

It was customary among the Jews to name their sons at the time of the child’s circumcision, the eighth day after birth. Custom dictated that the child be named after his father or other family member. Thus, when the family and neighbors of Zechariah and Elizabeth gathered together for the child’s circumcision, they called the child Zechariah after his father (Lk. 1:58-63). However, Gabriel had instructed the couple to name the child John, which therefore became his name (Lk. 1:13). The name John is from the Hebrew *Johanan*. The Greek form of the name is *Ioannas*; the Latin *Iohannes*; the French *Jean* (old French, *Jehan*); and the Irish *Sean*, derived from the Norman French.

The name occurs as early as the reign of David or Solomon (I Chr. 6:9, 10).

### **the Baptist,**

So called after the identifying feature of his ministry. The first announcement of the gospel began and ended with baptism. John came baptizing as a way to prepare men for Christ, and the Lord's final instruction to his disciples when he ascended into heaven was to continue the work of preaching and baptizing in his name (Matt. 28:19; Mk. 16:15, 16). John's baptism called men to repentance and to believe on the Messiah to come, but did not evoke any name over the subject. In contrast, Christian baptism evokes the name of Jesus over the subject for remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16). Following Jesus' ascension, those baptized with the baptism of John were charged to be re-baptized in Jesus' name (Acts 19:1-5). The word "baptize" is from the Greek **baptizō**, and means *to dip repeatedly, to immerse, submerge; to cleanse by dipping or submerging.*<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the examples of baptism we find in the New Testament involve immersing the repentant believer in water.<sup>3</sup> Precedent for baptism may be found in the Old Testament and its many washings to purify the flesh, but whose real purpose stood as object lessons regarding the holiness of God and man's defilement from sin. The priests, upon their first consecration to office, and the high priest, before entering into the Holy of Holies, were to wash their flesh in water (Ex. 30:20; 40:12; Lev. 8:6; 16:4); and for defilement associated with the generation of children, men and women were to bathe in water (Lev. 15:5, 21). Naaman, to be cleansed from his leprosy, was told by Elisha to dip himself seven times in the Jordan (II Kng. 5:10, 14). Josephus reports that the Essenes required those who sought entrance into their order to undergo purification by bathing in cold water.<sup>4</sup> But there is no scriptural or period evidence that would allow us to conclude there was a general practice among the Jews, which required the

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<sup>2</sup> Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, in loc.

<sup>3</sup> Baptism entailed *water* (Acts 8:36); *much water* (Jn. 3:23); *going down into the water* (Acts 8:38); *coming up out of the water* (Matt. 3:16; Mk. 1:10; Acts 8:39); *a burial* (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12); *a planting* (Rom. 6:5); *a washing* (Acts 22:16).

<sup>4</sup> Josephus, *Wars*, 2.8. 5, 7.

baptism of proselytes for admission into the covenant community.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the very fact that Josephus mentions the practice among the Essenes shows that it was unique to that sect and not common to the Jews as a whole. Hence, John's baptism marked the dawn of a new day and the sunset of circumcision as the rite of passage into the assembly of God's people.

### **Preaching in the wilderness**

Jewish convention required that men attain thirty years of age before undertaking active, public teaching. John was six months older than our Lord (Lk. 1:24, 26, 56), and thus began his ministry six months earlier. This was according to the word of the prophet Malachi, who foretold John's coming to prepare the way before Christ:

*"Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold: he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts. But who shall abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap...And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be swift witness against the sorcerers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the Lord of hosts." Mal. 3:1, 2, 5*

Malachi is among the prophets whose message bypassed the redemptive work of Christ and focused instead upon the eschatological aspects of the Messiah's appearance (cf. Joel; Haggai): There was a time of wrath coming upon the world, and the Jewish nation in particular, as Christ took up his reign from the right hand of God in heaven and began to rule the

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<sup>5</sup> John Gill (1697-1791), *A Body of Practical Divinity, Bk. V, A Dissertation Concerning the Baptism of Jewish Proselytes*. Tertullian thought John's account of the pool named Bethesda, by the sheep market in Jerusalem, into which the first man stepping when the waters were troubled by an angel, was cured of his disease (Jn. 5:1-9), prefigured baptism. Tertullian, *On Baptism*, V; Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3, 671, 672.

nations with a rod of iron (Ps. 2; 110; Heb. 1:3; 10:12, 13; Rev. 2:27; 12:5). The eschatological events that would overtake the nation were a prominent part of John's preaching, which urged men to repentance, baptism, and faith in Christ in order to escape the wrath to come.

## Of Judaea,

Herod the Great ruled over Judea, Idumea, Samaria, Perea, Galilee, and the north east quarters of Palestine, including Iturea, and Trachonitis. At his death, Augustus Caesar divided Herod's kingdom between his surviving sons, making Archelaus ruler of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria (See comments at Matt. 2:21, 22). For his cruel and tyrannical deeds, Archelaus was banished to Vienna of Gaul in A.D. 6. Josephus says this was the tenth year of his reign and the thirty-seventh year from Augustus' victory over Antony at Actium (31 B.C.).<sup>6</sup> Herod had been given authority from Caesar to appoint a successor to his kingdom or to distribute it in parts to his sons,<sup>7</sup> and it seems clear that before his death they began to share in his government.<sup>8</sup> Hence, we conclude that Josephus numbers four years of Archelaus' reign from his first entrance upon the government with his father, rather than from Herod's death in spring of 1 B.C. With the banishment of Archelaus, Judea was joined to the province of Syria and ruled by a Roman procurator, in which it continued until the nation was destroyed, except for a brief period when it was returned to a kingdom by Caius Caesar under Herod [Agrippa](#) [Agrippa](#) I (A.D. 41-44) (Acts 12).

*“Now Cyrenius, a Roman senator, and one who had gone through other magistracies, and had passed through them till he had been consul, and one who, on other accounts was of great dignity, came at this time into Syria, with a few others, being sent by Caesar to be a judge of that nation, and to take an account of their substance; Coponius also, a man of the*

<sup>6</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.13.2; 18.2.1.

<sup>7</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.4.5.

<sup>8</sup> “When the affairs of Herod were in the condition I have described, all the public affairs depended upon Antipater.” Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.2.4; Whiston ed. If Antipater shared the rule with his father, we may assume his brothers had some part as well.

*equestrian order, was sent together with him, to have the supreme power over the Jews. Moreover, Cyrenius came himself into Judea, which was now added to the province of Syria, to take an account of their substance, and to dispose of Archelaus's money.”<sup>9</sup>*

The taxing here mentioned by Josephus must be distinguished from the registration of 2 B.C. under Cyrenius and Saturninus, which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem at Christ's birth (see comments at Matt. 2:1). This tax incited the revolt of Judas of Galilee, which Josephus names as the fourth philosophic sect of the Jews and blames as bearing the seeds which ultimately brought the nation to destruction.

*“For Judas and Sadduc, who excited a fourth philosophic sect among us, and had a great many followers therein, filled our civil government with tumults at present, and laid the foundation of our future miseries, by this system of philosophy, which we were before unacquainted withal; concerning which I shall discourse a little, and this the rather, because the infection which spread thence among the younger sort, who were zealous for it, brought the public to destruction.”<sup>10</sup>*

The Roman governors of Judea, from the banishment of Archelaus until the nation's destruction in A.D. 70, are as follows: Coponius (A.D. 6-9), Marcus Ambivius (A.D. 9-12), Annus Rufus (A.D. 12-15), Valarius Gratus (A.D. 15-26), Pontius Pilate (A.D. 26-36), Marcellus (A.D. 36-37), Marullus (A.D. 37-41), Fadus (A.D. 44-46), Tiberius Alexander (A.D. 46-48), Ventidius Camanus (A.D. 48-52), Albinus (62-64), Gessius Florus (A.D. 64-66), Flavius Vespasianus (sent by Nero to prosecute the Jewish war) (A.D. 66-70).

## 2 – And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

There are different conceptions of the kingdom. Some of the early fathers supposed there would be a millennial reign of Christ on earth, a school of interpretation that came to be known as *chiliasm*, after the Greek term *xilia*, a *thousand*. This school is marked by an overly literal interpretation of the prophets:

<sup>9</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.1.1; Whiston ed.

<sup>10</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.1.1; Whiston ed.

*But He, when He shall have destroyed unrighteousness, and executed His great judgment, and shall have recalled to life the righteous, who have lived from the beginning, will be engaged among men a thousand years, and will rule them with most just command...Then they who shall be alive in their bodies shall not die, but during those thousand years shall produce an infinite multitude, and their offspring shall be holy, and beloved by God; but they who shall be raised from the dead shall preside over the living as judges...About the same time also the prince of the devils, who is the contriver of all evils, shall be bound with chains, and shall be imprisoned during the thousand years of the heavenly rule in which righteousness shall reign in the world, so that he may contrive no evil against the people of God...Throughout this time Beasts shall not be nourished by blood, nor birds by prey; but all things shall be peaceful and tranquil. Lions and calves shall stand together at the manger, the wolf shall not carry off the sheep, the hound shall not hunt for prey; hawks and eagles shall not injure; the infant shall play with serpents.<sup>11</sup>*

This sort of approach betrays the most fundamental misunderstanding of the *usus loquendi* (Lat. “manner of speaking”) of the prophets. The language of the prophets was figurative and poetic; they used metaphors and similes to describe spiritual truths and events in the political world of men. The kingdom, rather than signifying a political reign of Christ on earth, is best understood as Christ’s dominion over the nations from the right hand of God *in heaven* (Ps. 110). Christ received the kingdom at his ascension (Dan. 7:13; cf. Ps 2). The *coming* of the kingdom was eschatological and would occur within the lives of the disciples (Matt. 16:27, 28; Mk. 9:1). The kingdom came *in power* in the events that witnessed the destruction of the Jewish nation and the “year of four emperors,” the civil wars that destroyed Rome and Italy following the death of Nero. These terrible judgments avenged the blood of Christ and his faithful martyrs as Jesus took up his reign and put his enemies beneath his feet. John thus urges the Jews to faith and repentance because the time of reckoning had drawn near and was at hand (Gk. *hggiken*).

<sup>11</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, XXIV; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. VII, p. 219

**3 – For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.**

The original prophecy in Isaiah may have had a double meaning. It follows the prophet’s word to Hezekiah that Judah would go into captivity in Babylon, and seems to describe Cyrus’s highway in the desert by which the captivity would return.

*“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”*  
*Isa. 40:1-4*

If the prophecy has a dual meaning, the glory of the Lord would refer to the return of the captivity and revival of the Jewish nation upon its land. However this may be, the Messianic dimension of Isaiah’s prophecy looked beyond the return of the captivity to Judah unto the coming of Christ. The crookedness of sin and every uneven way was to be purged, and men were to prepare a straight way and level road by which the Lord might be received into every heart. All flesh – the men of every nation – would see the Lord’s salvation by the gospel.

**4 – And the same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leather girdle about his lions;**

Sackcloth was made of camel’s hair (Rev. 6:12; Zech. 13:6); sackcloth was donned at times of great calamity (Gen. 37:24; II Kng. 6:30) and was oftentimes accompanied by rending one’s clothes, fasting, throwing dust in the air or upon one’s head, and sitting in ashes (I Kng. 21:27; Job 2:8; Ezek. 27:30). These were outward tokens of great personal anguish and grief, affected to as a means of afflicting oneself and entreating heaven’s mercy. Elijah donned sackcloth in warning of divine wrath and to call Israel to repentance (II Kng. 1:8). Elijah’s dress created such a lasting

impression upon the collective psyche of the nation that it was adopted as a means of gaining recognition as a prophet (Zech. 13:4). After John's arrest by Herod the tetrarch, Jesus asked his disciples

*"What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee...And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come."* Matt. 11:7-14

The soft raiment of kings living in pleasure in palaces is here set in contrast to John, who was clothed with rough garments and dwelt in the desert. The kings of Israel were great violators of God's law and persecuted the prophets. This was especially true in the time of Elijah and the prophets of his day, whom Jezebel sought to slay, but were hidden in a cave by Obadiah (I Kng. 18:13), and Elijah fled into the wilderness (I Kng. 19:1-3). John's preaching in the wilderness of Judea, may have been to elude Herod the tetrarch, whose jurisdiction was confined to Galilee, Judea then being under the government of Pontus Pilate. Jesus' reference to John being the "Elijah to come" ~~hales-hails~~ back to the prophet Malachi, who foretold of one who would come in the spirit of Elijah before the destruction of the Jewish nation:

*"For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch...Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."* Mal. 4:1, 5, 6

Scripture records numerous "days of the Lord." By consulting and comparing these examples, we find that the phrase signifies a time of divine wrath and judgment upon men and nations (Isa. 13:1-18, *Babylon*; 34:1-10, *Edom*; Ezek. 30, *Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Lydia, Chub*; Zeph. 1, *Judea*). The "day of the Lord" foretold by Malachi and preached by John was not the end of the cosmos, but the end of Jewish state

and polity. This may be seen by comparing Malachi with the prophet Joel.

*"Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand. A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains: a great people and a strong; there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations...the earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble: the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining: and the Lord shall utter his voice before his army: for his camp is very great: for he is strong that executed his word: for the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; and who can abide it?"* Joel 2:1, 2, 10, 11

Joel's exclamation, saying, the "day of the Lord is great and terrible and who can abide it" mirrors Malachi who asked "who may abide the day of his coming?" (Mal. 3:1, 2). Peter quoted Joel on Pentecost, saying Joel's prophecy was hastening toward fulfillment upon *that generation* (Acts 2:16-21, 40; cf. Matt. 23:36; 24:34). It seems apparent that John and Peter warned of the same impending judgment upon the Jewish nation, and that Malachi and Joel likewise therefore foretold the same.<sup>12</sup> God bore with much longsuffering the rebellious nation; many times God had suffered the nation to be subjugated by its enemies because of its rebellion and sin. Although he brought the nation back from captivity in Babylon, still they refused and rebelled. For rejecting Christ and persecuting his church, the Jews "filled up" the measure of their fathers (Matt. 23:32; Rev. 6:11), and God finally and irrevocably took biblical Israel and Judah away in the cataclysmic judgments of A.D. 66-70.

#### **And his meat was locusts and wild honey.**

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<sup>12</sup> Joel's prophecy had a double meaning and fulfillment: there was day of judgment in the form of famine induced by drought and locusts "at hand" when Joel wrote, but which served as a type of the nation's final day of judgment by God at the hand of Rome. As further evidence of this double meaning, John employs the imagery of Joel in Revelation to describe the Jewish war with Rome and the successive invasions of Zealots, Idumeans, and Roman legions that brought Jerusalem to its end (Rev. 9).

After the universal deluge, every manner of food and meat was permitted man without distinction, except they were prohibited to eat flesh with the blood, which was set aside as sacrosanct (Gen. 9:3, 4; Lev. 17:10, 11). In constituting the covenant people as a single nation and body politic, the law of Moses introduced dietary restrictions, which deemed certain foods “unclean” (Lev. 11). Locusts were among the clean foods Jews were permitted to eat (Lev. 11:22); honey was prohibited to be offered upon the altar (Lev. 2:11), but was otherwise clean. The purpose of this legislation was to isolate Israel from her pagan neighbors by preventing table-fellowship. Circumcision (Acts 10:28; 11:3), laws against mixed marriages (Deut. 7:1-6), and laws against the admixture of things different in kind (Deut. 22:5, 9-11) seem to have served this same purpose and lesson, that God’s people were to be separate from sin and the world around them. The dietary laws and restrictions of the Mosaic law were done away by the gospel, and the Noahide laws permitting all manner of foods, save blood, are again in force (Acts 10:9-16; I Tim. 4:3-5; cf. Gal. 2:11, 12).

We can only conclude that Matthew mentions John’s diet because it was unusual and severe. Does John’s dress, diet, fasting (Mk. 2:18) and habit of dwelling in the desert (Lk. 1:80) indicate he was an ascetic? Asceticism is the doctrine that one can obtain spiritual perfection and approval with God through severe self-denial and mortification, as if God found merit in men for abstaining from certain foods and living in self-imposed austerity. Jesus’ comments about fasting in Mark’s gospel assign it to the age that was then passing (Mk. 2:18-22); like a garment worn and old, it was not to be patched with the teaching of Christ, but laid aside as no longer useful. Paul warned against all forms of asceticism, stoicism, and law-keeping, as systems of self-justification, which are according to the “rudiments of the world” – the stuff of childhood ignorance that cannot justify or save (Col. 2:18-23). Christians should practice self-control in all things, but true asceticism today is to abstain from sin, to do acts of mercy and charity, and to sacrifice on behalf of the gospel.

### **5 – Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan,**

Jesus’ first disciples (Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathaniel, Jn. 1:40, 41, 43, 45; 21:2), and more than

half of the twelve apostles, including James, John, and Matthew himself, are known to have been from Galilee. Why Matthew should thus omit mention of the Galileans who came to John’s baptism is unclear. John grew up in the deserts and hill country of Judea (Lk. 1:39, 80), and it was in Judea and the Jordan that John’s ministry was centered. It is therefore probable that, of those who responded to John’s preaching the great majority were from the areas named and are thus mentioned, although men also came from Galilee and other areas as well.

### **6 – And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.**

The response to John’s preaching was very great (“all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan”), and underscores the eschatological nature of his message and the urgent expectation the people were under. John’s appearance had been preceded by over four hundred years of prophetic silence, which served to emphasize the momentous events even then unfolding as the heavens broke silence and urged men to repent. The prophets had provided indicia by which it might be known when Christ would appear. Daniel had announced Christ would appear four hundred eighty-three years (“seven weeks and three score and two weeks”) from the commandment to restore and rebuild the wall of Jerusalem (Dan. 9:24-27). Nehemiah received permission to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (Neh. 1:1). Archbishop Ussher dates Artaxerxes reign from 474 B.C. when he was made viceroy with his father, Xerxes. The twentieth year of Artaxerxes would therefore have been 454 B.C., and it is from here that Daniel’s seventy prophetic weeks take their start.<sup>13</sup> Four hundred eighty-three years from 454 B.C. brings us to A.D. 29 (483 - 454 = 29), which was the fifteenth year of Tiberius. It was then that Jesus was baptized, shortly before his thirtieth birthday (Lk. 3:1, 21, 23). Given Daniel’s prophetic timeline, all men were in great expectation of Christ’s appearance, and the response to John’s preaching was therefore very profound.

### **7 – But when he saw many of the Pharisees**

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<sup>13</sup> James Ussher, *Annals of the World* (2003 ed.), pp. 146, 152, §§ 1177, 1228.

The term “Pharisee” denotes “separatist.” The Pharisees and Sadducees grew up during the inter-testamental period, following the return of the captivity, between the close of the Old Testament canon and the opening of the New Testament. Josephus first mentions them during the time of John Hyrcanus, who left the Pharisees and became a Sadducee.<sup>14</sup> The Pharisees set oral tradition in equal or greater authority than the written law.<sup>15</sup> Their blind adherence to tradition brought stinging rebuke from Jesus, who charged them with negating the commandments of God by their traditions (Matt. 15:1-9). Regarding the Pharisees holding to tradition, Josephus said:

*“The Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses; and for that reason it is that the ~~Sadducees~~ Sadducees reject them, and say that we are to esteem those observance to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers.”<sup>16</sup>*

The Pharisees also believed in the resurrection of the dead, which the Sadducees did not. However, based upon the hypothetical question about the resurrection posed to Jesus by the Sadducees, the Pharisees’ conception of the resurrection apparently involved a return to earthly life, including marriage, instead of being raised to life in heaven (Matt. 22:23-33). Josephus says concerning the Pharisees:

*“Now, for the Pharisees, they live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they followed the conduct of reason; and what that prescribes to them as good for them, they do; and they think they ought earnestly to strive to observe reason’s dictates for practice. They also pay a respect to such as are in years; nor are they so bold as to contradict them in anything which they have introduced; and, when they determine that all things are done by fate, they do not take away the freedom from men of acting as they think fit; since their notion is, that it hath pleased God to make a*

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<sup>14</sup> Josephus *Antiquities*, 13,10.6.

<sup>15</sup> The oral law was reduced to writing between the second and fifth centuries in what is known as the Talmud.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*; Whiston ed.

*temperament, whereby what he will is done, but so that the will of men can act virtuously or viciously. They also believe that souls have an immortal vigour in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again; on account of which doctrines, they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people; and whatsoever they do about divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices, they perform them according to their direction.; insomuch that the cities have great attestations to them on account of their entire virtuous conduct, both in the actions of their lives and their discourses also.”<sup>17</sup>*

### **And Sadducees**

This sect is thought to derive its name from Zadok, who was high priest in the time of Solomon (I Kng. 2:35). They represented the Jewish aristocracy and were a priestly caste, which came to the fore during the Maccabean war. The Sadducees are charged with the spread of Hellenism through Jewish culture; the high priests, Jason, and Onias, who led the nation into apostasy in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, were probably members of this party.<sup>18</sup> The distinguishing characteristic of the Sadducees was their rejection of the oral tradition of the Pharisees, and the resurrection of the dead. Concerning the Sadducees, Josephus says:

*“The doctrine of the Sadducees is this: That souls die with the bodies; nor do they regard the observation of anything besides what the law enjoins them; for they think it an instance of virtue to dispute with those teachers of philosophy whom they frequent; but his doctrine is received by a few, yet by those still of the greatest dignity; but they are able to do almost nothing of themselves; for when they become magistrates, as they are unwillingly and by force sometimes obliged to be, they addict themselves to the notions of the Pharisees, because the multitude would not otherwise bear them.”<sup>19</sup>*

### **Come to his baptism,**

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<sup>17</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.1.3; Whiston ed.

<sup>18</sup> II Mac. 4; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 12.5.1.

<sup>19</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.1.4; Whiston ed.

John's gospel indicates that priests, Levites, and Pharisees came from Jerusalem to demand of John whether he was Christ, or Elijah whom Malachi foretold, or the prophet foretold by Moses (Jn. 1:19, 25). When asked by Jesus whether the baptism of John was from heaven or of men, the chief priests and elders said they could not tell (Matt. 21:23-27). Luke says that the lawyers and Pharisees "*rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized*" by John (Lk. 7:30). Hence, if some few consented to be baptized, the great majority of the rulers did not.

**-He said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee**

Their appearance at his baptism surprises John, who expresses amazement that they should be sensible of their impending doom and thus make provision for safety. Few of the religious leaders believed; we must imagine that their motive in coming to John was to entangle him in his speech or seek grounds for a charge of heresy or sedition. Such was their malignant nature that it evoked John's biting condemnation as a brood of vipers. Jesus said regarding the chief priests and elders, "*Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of heaven before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him*" (Matt. 21:31, 32).

**From the wrath to come?**

Daniel's seventy prophetic weeks (four hundred-ninety years) foretold the destruction of the Jewish state: "*Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon the holy city*" (Dan. 9:24). "*For the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured out upon the desolate*" (Dan. 9:27). Four hundred eighty-three years from the commandment to rebuild Jerusalem's wall brought us to Jesus' baptism (see comments are verse six, above). One week of years remains. The first half consisted of Jesus' earthly ministry. The week experienced a gap when Christ was "cut off," and did not resume again until he returned in vengeance upon the nation. The latter half of Daniel's final prophetic week was fulfilled in the Jews' war with Rome. The three and a half year war (February, A.D. 67 – August, A.D. 70),

would witness the death of over 1.1 million Jews, many of whom starved to death in the siege.

The Jews were divided into three factions: John of Gischala, Simon, son of Gioras, and Eleazar, the son of Simon, who together did more to destroy the nation than the Romans.<sup>20</sup> After the Romans subdued Galilee, the Zealots and robber bands fled to Jerusalem. When they tried to take over the city, they were set upon by the high priests and elders of the Jews, who shut them up in the temple like a prison. However, the Zealots were able to send to the Idumeans to assist them. The Idumeans responded with an army twenty thousand strong. The Jews responded by shutting the gates of the city against them. That night, a great storm of preternatural proportions descended with great winds, continual lightning, thundering, and earthquakes.

*"For there broke out a prodigious storm in the night, with the utmost violence, and very strong winds, with the largest showers of rain, and continual lightning-s, terrible thunderings, and amazing concussions and bellowings of the earth, that was in an earthquake. These things were a manifest indication that some destruction was coming upon men, when the system of the world was put into this disorder; and anyone would guess that these wonders foreshewed some grand calamities that were coming."*<sup>21</sup>

The violence of the storm allowed the Zealots to escape their prison unnoticed. The Zealots then let Idumeans into the city, who proceeded to make a general slaughter of the citizens, including the high priests, until twenty-thousand were slain, including the priests and those here mentioned by John:

*But the rage of the Idumeans was not satiated by these slaughters; but they now betook themselves to the city, and plundered every house, and slew everyone they met; and for the multitude, they esteemed it needless to go on with killing them, but they sought for the high priests, and the generality went with the greatest zeal against them; and as soon as they caught them they slew them, and then standing upon their dead bodies, in way of jest upbraided Ananus with his kindness to the people, and Jesus with his speech made to them from the wall. Nay, they proceeded to that degree of impiety, as to cast away their bodies without burial,*

<sup>20</sup> Josephus, Wars, 5.1.1-6.

<sup>21</sup> Josephus, Wars, 4.4.5; Whiston ed.

although used to take so much care of the burial of men, that they took down those that were condemned and crucified, and buried them before the going down of the sun. I should not mistake if I said that the death of Ananus was the beginning of the destruction of the city, and that from this very day may be dated the overthrow of her wall, and the ruin of her affairs, whereon they saw their high priest, and the procurer of their preservation slain in the midst of the city...cast out naked, and see to be the food of dogs and wild beasts.<sup>22</sup>

### **8 – Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:**

True faith and repentance will bear fruit answerable to itself; a changed heart will produce a changed life. So James: “Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works...For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (Jm. 2:18, 26).

### **9 – And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father:**

As the lineal descendants of Abraham, the Jews were the covenant people. However, whatever advantages this carried, including possession of the land, were merely conditional: Sin and rebellion would bring wrath and ejection from the land. However, through various devices, the Jews tried to cling to the idea that they were somehow secure in the land and immune to national destruction. Prior to the Babylonian captivity, the Jews thought that God would not suffer the nation to be destroyed because they were the descendants of Abraham, saying, “Abraham was one, and he inherited the land but we are many; the land is given us for an inheritance” (Ezek. 33:24). However, God answered them, “Ye eat with the blood, and lift up your eyes toward your idols, and shed blood: and shall ye possess the land?” (v. 25). In the same way, John warns the men of his day that physical descent from Abraham afforded no shelter to those who rejected his message and God’s proffered grace.

### **For I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.**

Their hearts were hard and impenetrable as adamant. The very stones themselves were more ready to hear

and to obey than the elders of the Jews. The true children of Abraham are not his physical, but spiritual, descendants. Ishmael and the offspring of Abraham’s concubines were not sons or heirs (Gen. 25:5, 6). Isaac was deemed Abraham’s only begotten son and heir (Gen. 22:2; Heb. 11:17). Jesus told the Jews

“If ye were Abrahams’s children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham...Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do,” Jn. 8:39, 40, 44

Paul told the Romans “He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Rom. 2:28, 29). Paul said, moreover,

“They are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.” Rom. 9:6-8

The children of the promise are the children of faith and obedience. All who come to God in faith through baptism are received by him and made the heirs of the Abrahamic promise:

“For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Gal. 3:26-29

### **10 – And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees:**

Trees are used numerous times in scripture as symbols for nations (Ezek. 17:1-10, Judah; Ezek. 31:3-18, Assyria, Egypt, and the nations of Palestine and the Mediterranean). They are represented as flourishing, spreading their roots and branches, and growing to great height as the nations they represent prosper and extend their power. They are represented as being felled or cut down as they lose power, their armies are

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 4.4.2; 4.5.1, 2; Whiston ed.

defeated, and they are subjugated by their enemies. The ax that fells them is a conquering nation; the tree-faller its king. Thus, Isaiah describes the king of Babylon as a faller, who conquered nations as a man might fell trees, at whose fall the nations rejoiced:

*“Take up this proverb against the king of Babylon, and say, How hath the oppressor ceased! The golden city ceased! The Lord hath broken the staff of the wicked, and the scepter of the rulers. He who smote the people in wrath with a continual stroke, he that ruled the nations in anger, is persecuted, and none hindereth. The whole earth is at rest, and is quiet: they break forth into singing. Yea, the fir trees rejoice at thee, and the cedars of Lebanon, saying, Since thou are laid down, no feller is come up against us.” Isa. 14:4-8*

Malachi warned Israel that it would be burned “root and branch” if it failed to amend its ways and repent of its sins (Mal. 4:1). John, who was the Elijah of Malachi’s prophecy, here warns the Jews that the day of judgment is fast upon them – already the ax of Rome was laid to the root of Israel’s national tree.

**Therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit**

Like a man who has an orchard and cannot permit useless or harmful trees to take up valuable ground, so the Lord requires men and nations to bear fruit, or else be removed. Jesus thus warned the Jews that except they repent, they would all likewise perish, and then gave the following parable as instruction:

*“A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.” Lk. 13:6-9*

**is hewn down, and cast into the fire.**

In the last days of the Jewish nation, from John the Baptist until its destruction by Rome, the nation’s condition deteriorated: the land was full of robber bands, false pretenders, assassins, and seditions.

Famine and all manner of disasters overtook the nation in continual succession:

- Caius Caesar ordered his image to be installed in the Jerusalem temple, almost bringing the nation to war;<sup>23</sup>
- A great famine overtook the nation in the days of Claudius Caesar;<sup>24</sup>
- As many as twenty thousand Jews were trampled to death in a tumult that arose when a Roman soldier exposed himself in mockery from the temple cloisters while the multitude was celebrating Passover;<sup>25</sup>
- The whole nation was thrown into disorder and rose up when a soldier, finding a copy of the law, tore it to pieces and cast it a fire;<sup>26</sup>
- When Cumanus, the procurator, was corrupted by money not to avenge the murder of a Galilean slain by the Samaritans on his way to Jerusalem, the Jews took up arms and marched upon the country of the Samaritans, burning villages and making great slaughters;<sup>27</sup>
- A group of assassins called the *Sicarii* murdered the high priest, Jonathan, and began daily assassinating many men;
- Feigning divine inspiration, false pretenders deceived the multitude to follow them into the wilderness where they promised God would give them a signal of national liberty;
- An Egyptian false prophet got together thirty-thousand men and attempted to storm Jerusalem to overthrow the Romans, but was defeated in an armed battle at the Mount of Olives.<sup>28</sup>

Josephus summarizes the state of Judea in those times, saying:

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<sup>23</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.8; *Wars* 2.10

<sup>24</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.2.5

<sup>25</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.5.3; *Wars*, 2.12.1

<sup>26</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.5.4; *Wars*, 2.12.2

<sup>27</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.5.4; *Wars*, 2.12.3-8

<sup>28</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.8.6; *Wars*, 2.13.5

*“Now when these were quieted, it happened, as it does in a diseased body, that another part was subject to an inflammation; for a company of deceivers and robbers got together, and persuaded the Jews to revolt, and exhorted them to assert their liberty, inflicting death on those that continued in obedience to the Roman government, and saying, that such as willingly chose slavery ought to be forced from such their desired inclinations; for they parted themselves into different bodies, and lay in wait up and down the country, and plundered the houses of the great men, and slew the men themselves, and set the villages on fire; and this till all Judea was filled with the effects of their madness. And thus the flame was every day more and more blown up, till it came to a direct war.”<sup>29</sup>*

**11 – I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I,**

John came bringing a message of *warning*; Jesus would come and *execute* divine wrath. Here we see that no appreciable period is contemplated between Jesus’ earthly ministry as servant, and his coming in judgment as king. John was not warning of far distant events. The Old Testament prophets did not distinguish between Christ’s earthly ministry and his second advent, but treated them as a single, historical unit or event. No one reading the Old Testament prior to the writing of the New Testament could have known or anticipated there was more than one advent of Christ. It is only by reading the New Testament we learn that the appearance of the Messiah was briefly interrupted by his crucifixion and ascension to heaven to receive his kingdom and return again to put his enemies beneath his feet. So close would be his coming, that John omits entirely mention of his earthly mission, focusing instead upon the horrible events hastening upon the nation, heralding its doom. Jesus told his disciples they would not have time to preach in all the cities of Israel before he came in wrath (Matt. 10:23; 16:27, 28)

**Whose shoes I am not worthy to bear:**

It would have fallen to the lowliest slave in the master’s house to remove the shoes of his master and wash his feet (I Sam. 25:41; Jn. 13:4-10). Though John

was the voice of a moral giant, urging men to forsake all sin and receive baptism; still he was a sinner whose conscience bore witness of his need for salvation (*cf.* v. 14).

**He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.**

John gives a clear indication of Christ’s divinity, for no one can baptize with the Spirit of God, save God alone. The gift of the Holy Ghost had been prophesied by Joel and was among the signs preceding the “great and terrible day of the Lord.”

*“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit. And I will shew wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD come. Joel 2:28-31; cf. Acts 2:14-21*

Blood, fire, and pillars of smoke, refer to the murders, slaughters, and civil uprisings that overtook the nation in its final days, in which the nation was filled with constant tumults and bands of robbers filled the countryside, burning estates and villages, whose smoke blackened the sun by day and made the moon like blood by night, while they attempted to bring the nation to revolt from Rome. While these things were happening, and conditions in Judea deteriorated past all remedy, the gospel was proclaimed and miracles were wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit. Those who neglected the signs of divine grace would be consumed by the fire of divine wrath.

**12 – Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor,**

Before modern agriculture, wheat was harvested by hand with a sickle, a crescent shaped knife about two feet long. The stalks were then bound in sheaves and left standing in the field to be gathered later. Gleaners would go behind the harvesters to collect stray stalks of wheat. Once the field was cut, the sheaves were then gathered and brought to the threshing floor, which was a large open area where the ground was level and hard. The wheat was then threshed to separate the grain from the stalk and papery husk. Threshing could be accomplished by beating the sheaves with sticks or staves, or by the hooves of oxen, which were made to tread upon the sheaves. Micah describes this last

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<sup>29</sup> Josephus, *Wars*, 2,13.6; Whiston ed.

method, saying, God's people would thresh their enemies with "hooves of brass" (Mic. 4:11-13). Another method was for oxen to pull a heavy sledge equipped with sharp teeth or wheels over the sheaves to cut them small into chaff. The sheaves were piled in great heaps and an ox or donkey led round and round, until the stalks were cut small and the heap lay in a great circle flat upon the ground. Isaiah mentions this type of threshing instrument:

*"Behold, I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth: thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shalt make the hills as chaff. Thou shalt fan them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the whirlwind shall scatter them: and thou shalt rejoice in the Lord, and shalt glory in the Holy One of Israel." Isa. 41:15, 16*

Different grains were threshed in different ways (Isa. 28:27, 28). Once the grain was threshed, it was then winnowed by tossing it in the air with a winnowing fork or shovel, or a fan, which was shallow basket that allowed the winnower to toss the grain in the air, so the wind could carry the chaff (the stubble and husks) away. The grain was then shifted, to clean it of dirt, sand, or small stones and pebbles. The "floor" in John's description is the world, which Christ inherited at his ascension (Ps. 2:6-8; 110:1). Men and nations are gathered before him like sheaves, and winnowed to separate the wheat from the chaff.

#### **And gather his wheat into the garner;**

The term "gather" here carries the idea of an agricultural harvest and occurs in several parables about the time of the end, in which the wicked and unbelieving were separated from the righteous; the wicked are gathered and burned; the righteous inherit glory (Matt. 13:36-43; 49). Obeying the gospel made men wheat; rejecting the gospel made men chaff. "Burning up the chaff" involved the death of the wicked, here principally Jews who rejected the gospel of Christ. Similarly, "gathering the wheat into the garner" involved the death of the righteous; viz., bringing the saints to glory by martyrdom.

The end of the pre-messianic era was a time of crisis for both the righteous and the wicked. Daniel foretold a time of trouble unlike anything the world had seen before (Dan. 12:1). Jesus said that *"Except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elects' sake those days shall be shortened"* (Matt. 24:22). Just before his crucifixion, Jesus told the disciples *"They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service"* (Jn. 16:2). Scripture

describes two periods of persecution that overtook the first saints. The first was the great persecution under Caiaphas, Pilate, and Saul (Paul), which arose over Stephen and occurred shortly after Jesus' ascension. This persecution lasted three and a half years (A.D. 34-38) and is described in Acts 7-9 and Rev. 12. This persecution collapsed when Pilate was commanded to answer charges in Rome before emperor Tiberius concerning his handling of a tumult that arose among the Samaritans. At the same time Pilate left office, Vitellius, the president of Syria, removed Caiaphas from the High Priesthood.<sup>30</sup> The final blow to the persecution came with the conversion of Saul (Acts 9:31).

The second persecution was greater still and was world-wide, and is the subject of the book of Revelation and various prophecies foretelling the rise of Antichrist. This was the persecution under the emperor Nero, but which was instigated and driven world-wide by the Jews. It also lasted three and a half years (A.D. 64-68). This persecution is famous even today for the cruel tortures invented to punish Christians.

*"Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man."<sup>31</sup>*

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<sup>30</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.4.1-3

<sup>31</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, XV, xlv; Loeb ed.

Although heaven permitted its enemies to destroy the saints' bodies, Christ would not suffer the least grain of wheat to be lost: each soul would be tenderly gathered into the garner where they would inherit eternal bliss. John describes the harvest of the saints by martyrdom under Nero and the Jews, saying:

*“Another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a great voice, If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead, or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is prepared unmixed in the cup of his anger. He will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb. The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. They have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name. Here is the patience of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from the labours; and their works to follow them. And I looked, and behold a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man, having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe.” Rev. 14:13-15*

Here we see that the saints were called to bear patiently their tribulations, even unto death, but they were comforted by the promise of blissful rest in the next life. Although they were slain under the beast (the Neronean persecution), they are portrayed as being harvested by Christ.

**but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.**

The Jews were the special object of Christ's wrath; they were enemies of the gospel (Rom. 11:28); vessels of wrath fitted for destruction, which God had borne with much longsuffering and patience (Rom. 9:22). Heaven's wrath stored up for the rebellious nation had been the recurring theme of the prophets. Even Moses, the nation's founder, had foretold the Jews' destruction in the verses of a song:

*“And he said, I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be: for they are a very forward generation, children in whom is no faith. They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I*

*will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation. For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell, and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains. I will heap mischiefs upon them; I will spend mine arrows upon them. They shall be burnt with hunger, and devoured with burning heat, and with bitter destruction: I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them, with the poison of serpents of the dust. The sword without, and terror within, shall destroy both the young man and the virgin, the suckling also with the man of gray hairs.” Deut. 32:20-25*

Although the Jewish nation was the special object of heaven's wrath, judgment was not confined to the Jews: Rome also suffered terrifying plagues and strokes as heaven exacted punishment for the persecution of the saints. Following the conspiracy of Piso (A.D. 65), Nero's reign of terror witnessed the destruction of many leading Romans, including Seneca, Lucan, and many senators and members of the nobility. As they thirsted after the blood of the saints and prophets, so God gave them blood to drink to the full:

*“Meanwhile, however, the city was filled with funerals, and the Capital with burnt offerings. Here, for the killing of a son; there, for that of a brother, a kinsman, or a friend; men were addressing their thanks to Heaven, bedecking their mansions with bays, falling at the knees of the sovereign, and persecuting his hand with kisses.”<sup>32</sup>*

As the end grew near, the condition of the empire deteriorated; calamity followed calamity. A fire at Lyons, France destroyed most of the colony; the disaster was so pronounced, Seneca devoted a letter to the fire, declaiming the fickleness of fortune and the transitory nature of life.<sup>33</sup> A pestilence decimated Rome (A.D. 65) leaving thirty-thousand cut down behind it. The pestilence was followed by a hurricane in Campania:

*“Upon this year, disgraced by so many deeds of shame, Heaven also set its mark by tempest and by disease. Campania was wasted by a whirlwind, which far and wide wrecked the farms, the fruit trees, and the crops, and carried its fury to the neighbourhood of the capital, where all classes of men were being decimated by a deadly epidemic. No outward sign of a*

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<sup>32</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, XV, lxxi; Loeb ed.

<sup>33</sup> Epistle XLI

*distempered air was visible. Yet the houses were filled with lifeless bodies, the streets with funerals. Neither sex nor age gave immunity from danger; slaves and the free-born populace alike were summarily cut down, amid the laments of their wives and children, who, themselves infected while tending or mourning the victims, were often thrown upon the same pyre.*"<sup>34</sup>

With the death of Nero in A.D. 68, the empire was thrown into a series of civil wars (A.D. 68-70). There were five emperors in the space of one year and twenty-two days,<sup>35</sup> dividing the Roman people and laying waste the empire. Plutarch describes the empire following Nero's death, saying,

*"Many terrible events, especially those that befell the Romans after Nero's suicide...show in exemplary fashion that a state should fear above all armed forces subject to untrained and irrational impulses...The Roman empire was overtaken by disasters and upheavals like those caused by the Titans of mythology, at one and the same time being torn into many pieces and collapsing in on itself in many places."*<sup>36</sup>

Josephus reports that over eighty thousand Romans died in the battle between the forces of Vitellius and Vespasian alone; Dio Cassius gives the number at one hundred thousand.<sup>37</sup> Tacitus described the battle between the forces of Vitellius and Vespasian in the city of Rome:

*"The populace stood by watching the combatants, as if they were at games in the circus; by their shouts and applause they encouraged first one party and then the other. If one side gave way and the soldiers hid in shops or sought refuge in some private house, the onlookers demanded that they be dragged out and killed; for so they gained a larger share of booty, since the troops were wholly absorbed in their bloody work of slaughter, while the spoils fell to the rabble. Horrible and hideous sights were to be seen everywhere in the city: here battles and wounds, there open baths and drinking shops; blood and piles of corpses, side by side with harlots and compeers of harlots. There were all the debauchery and passion that obtain in a dissolute peace, every crime that can be committed in the most savage conquest, so that men*

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<sup>34</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, XVI, xiii; Loeb ed

<sup>35</sup> Dio Cassius, LXVI, 17, 3-5

<sup>36</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Galba*.

<sup>37</sup> Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 4.11.3-4; cf. Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, LXIV, xv, 2; LXIV, xix, 3

*might well have believed that the city was at once mad with rage and drunk with pleasure. It is true that armed forces had fought before this in the city, twice when Lucius Sulla gained his victories and once when Cinna won. There was no less cruelty then than now; but now men showed inhuman indifference and never relaxed their pleasures for a single moment. As if this were a new delight added to their holidays, they gave way to exultation and joy, wholly indifferent to either side, finding pleasure in public misfortune."*<sup>38</sup>

### **13 – Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.**

Jesus came to be baptized shortly before his thirtieth birthday in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, which answers to the calendar year A.D. 29 (Lk. 3:1, 23). This was in accordance with the word of the Lord by the prophet Daniel, who was told that the Messiah would appear four hundred eighty-three years from the commandment to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem (Dan. 9:25). Dating from the twentieth year of Artaxerxes in 454 B.C., when Nehemiah received commandment to rebuild Jerusalem's wall, brings us to A.D. 29, precisely as recorded by Luke (see comments at v. 6, above). To ascertain the day and month of Jesus' baptism (so far as this may be known) we reckon backward from his crucifixion. Daniel said that Christ would cause the sacrifice and oblation to cease in the midst of the final week (Dan. 9:27). This refers to the legal termination of the temple service by the substitutionary death and atoning sacrifice of Christ three and a half years after his baptism. The three and a half year ministry of Christ is confirmed by the gospels, particularly John's, who records the passage of feasts by which we may number the years.

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<sup>38</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, III, lxxxiii; Loeb. ed.



*Threshing hills of wheat with a sledge*

- John 2:13, 23 – John records a Passover shortly after the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Passover was typically in April, although, because the Jews used a lunar calendar, it could occur as early as March, depending upon the full moon.
- John 4:35 – Jesus commented that there were “yet four months, and then cometh harvest.” Harvest occurred about fifty days following Passover, and was marked by the feast of Pentecost. Since there were four months remaining until harvest, this would place Jesus’ comments in January or February. Thus, between the first Passover (John 2:13) and the time recorded here, almost one year has transpired.
- John 5:1 – John mentions another, unnamed feast. Many believe this was Passover (the second), but the evidence is unclear. In John 6:4, another Passover is recorded, which was preceded by Jesus’ feeding the five thousand (John 6:5-14). Luke records the feeding of the five thousand in Luke 9:10-17. Before this, Luke records an occasion where the disciples plucked ears of grain while passing through a field, placing this incident near harvest (Luke 6:1). However, this harvest was too early to be associated with the Passover preceding the feeding of the five thousand in Luke 9, but too late to be associated with the Passover in John 2:13. Thus, without identifying the feast in John 5:1, we are able to determine that another year has passed.
- John 6:4 – A second Passover is mentioned. However, based upon the harvest of Luke 6:1, this would actually be the third Passover since Jesus’ baptism. Jesus’ ministry has thus covered the space of about two and a half years (three Passovers, plus the partial year prior to his first Passover).
- John 7:2 – John records the Feast of Tabernacles, which occurs in the fall.
- John 10:22 – John mentions Jesus’ presence at the Feast of Dedication commemorating the re-dedication of the altar by Judas

Maccabaeus Casleu 25, 165 B.C., following its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes (I Macc 4:59). John specifically mentions that it was winter.

- John 11:55 – The fourth and final Passover.

Thus, Jesus' ministry spanned four Passovers, plus the period from his baptism to the first Passover, for a total of three and a half years.<sup>39</sup> Passover occurs the fourteenth day of Nisan at the full moon (Ex. 12:2-6, 18). Jesus died on the Preparation (Friday) before the Sabbath, the day following Passover, or Nisan 15, A.D. 33 (Matt 27:62; Luke 23:54). Reckoning backward three and a half years, or forty-two lunar months (the feasts of the Jews followed a lunar calendar), from Nisan 15, A.D. 33, will bring us to Heshvan 15, A.D. 29.<sup>40</sup> Heshvan 15 in the Jewish calendar in A.D. 29 answered to November 8 in our Roman calendar. Hence, Jesus was baptized, and his thirtieth birthday occurred, in the final fifty-three days of the calendar year.

#### **14 – But John forbid him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and cometh thou to me?**

John's refusal to baptize Christ anticipates Peter's refusal that Jesus' wash his feet (Jn. 13:4-8). That John said he had need to be baptized by Christ, shows that something is *received* in baptism, and that it is not merely a symbolic act or ritual. Mark's gospel tells us that John's baptism was for (unto) remission of sins (Mk. 1:4). Peter assigned the same significance to baptism on Pentecost, urging his hearers to "*repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins*" (Acts 2:38). Similarly, Paul was told to submit to baptism that his sins might be washed away: "*And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord*" (Acts 22:16). Peter said "*baptism doth also now save us*" (I Pet. 3:21). Jesus said "*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved*" (Mk. 16:16). Faith and repentance are *expressed* in Christian baptism, which thus becomes the vehicle for receiving

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<sup>39</sup> See also Eusebius who says Christ's ministry was confined within the space of four years, bounded by the high priestships of Ananus and Caiaphas. Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, 1.10.2-3.

<sup>40</sup> A.D. 32 was a leap year of thirteen months.

divine grace through the atoning sacrifice of Christ. That men receive the remission of their sins in baptism was the uniform teaching of the fathers and church for the first fifteen hundred years of Christianity. All versions of the Nicene Creed, long the standard of Christian orthodoxy, state "I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins." It was not until sometime *after* the Reformation that the scriptural doctrine of salvation by *grace alone* was supplanted by the unscriptural doctrine of salvation by *faith alone* (belief minus response), and baptism robbed of its proper place in God's plan of redemption.

#### **15- And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffered him.**

As the child Jesus was subject to the ordinance of circumcision that he might be added to the covenant community of the Old Testament, so the man Jesus was subject to the ordinance of baptism, by which men are added to the covenant community of the New Testament, that he might be identified with the company of sinners and make atonement for their sins.

#### **16 – And Jesus, when he was baptized, ~~when-went~~ up straightway out of the water:**

Baptism by "effusion" (pouring) and by "aspersion" (sprinkling) was unknown to the primitive faith and practice of the church, but grew up later, apparently as an adjunct of infant baptism. As we see by the example of Christ himself, baptism involved *going down into* and *coming up out of* water (*cf.* Acts 8:38, 39). Elsewhere, Paul describes baptism as "burial" and "planting" (Rom. 6:4, 5).

#### **and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him**

John is given a vision of heavenly realities unseen by eye of man; a view into the spiritual realm where the divinity of Christ, veiled in flesh and concealed in human form, is revealed.

**42 Lunar Months Comprising 3 1/2 years between Christ's**

**Baptism and Crucifixion**

Nisan 15, A.D. 33 (Crucifixion)	Nisan 15, A.D. 32 (12 months)	Nisan 15, A.D. 31, (25 months)	Nisan 15, A.D. 30, (37 months)
Adar,	Adar II, (leap year)	Adar,	Adar,
Shevat,	Adar,	Shevat,	Shevat,
Tebet,	Shevat,	Tebet,	Tebet,
Cesleu,	Tebet,	Cesleu,	Cesleu,
Heshvan,	Cesleu,	Heshvan,	Heshvan 15 (Nov. 8), A.D. 29 (42months)
Tishri,	Heshvan,	Tishri,	
Elul,	Tishri,	Elul,	
Ab,	Elul,	Ab,	
Tammuz,	Ab,	Tammuz,	
Sivan,	Tammuz,	Sivan,	
Jyar	Sivan,	Jyar	
	Jyar		

**and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove,**

The vision given to John revealed Jesus' identity as the Christ of God appointed to bring man salvation. John's gospel records the testimony of the Baptist thus:

*"I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God" (Jn. 1:32-34).*

A dove was employed in the vision because of its special place in sacred history; as a clean animal it was used for sacrifice (Lk. 2:24); after the great deluge, it was the bearer of an olive leaf, signaling the end of

divine wrath and the return of heavenly favor and forbearance (Gen. 8:11). So here, the dove signals heaven's compassion upon man's fallen estate; the long ages of estrangement and alienation are ending; man is soon to be reconciled to God by Jesus Christ.

**and lighting upon him.**

The Spirit did not merely alight upon Christ, but abode within and upon him. Jesus spoke by the Spirit (Jn. 3:34), and by the Spirit wrought miracles (Lk. 11:20). John called Christ the "Word" (Jn. 1:1). Words are spirit (thought/intellect) clothed upon with language: Jesus was God's Spirit clothed upon with flesh. *"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14).* The man was an earthen vessel; the life in him was the Spirit; both were from God.

**17 – And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.**

The vision given to John was accompanied by a voice owning Christ as God's own Son. The gospels record three instances during Jesus' ministry when such a declaration occurred: Here at Jesus' baptism (cf. Mk. 1:11; Lk. 3:22); again on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:5); and at Jesus' prediction of his death (Jn. 12:28). The question of Christ's sonship much vexed the church during the fourth century, and no fewer than ten versions of the Nicene Creed were put forward attempting to explain Christ's divinity and sonship, affirming that he was "begotten of the Father before all ages" or words to that effect.<sup>41</sup> However, the "eternal generation" of the Son is oxymoronic; for that which is generated by definition thence is derived and thence takes its start, and therefore cannot be eternal within any normal meaning of the term. . Isaiah calls Jesus the "mighty God and everlasting Father" (Isa. 9:6). If the divinity in Christ was the "everlasting Father," how then can he be the "eternally generated" Son? The better view therefore seems to be that before his incarnation, the life within the man and the earthen vessel we call Jesus was nothing less than very the Spirit of God himself. The Father inhabited the earthen vessel by the Spirit in Christ. Hence Jesus, when Philip asked him to show them the Father, responded, saying,

*"Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works." Jn. 14:8-10*

Thus, the man and earthen vessel we call Christ, here claims to act and speak by the Father *within* him, and not by another or by himself. In another place, Jesus said "I and the Father are one" (*Gk: ego kai o pathr en esmen*) (Jn. 10:30), showing that the human form veiled the Spirit of the Father within, so that there was a virtual identity between them. The Jews understood perfectly the meaning of Jesus' claim, and took up stones to stone him, saying that he, being a man, made himself God (Jn. 10:33). Jesus did not shrink from his affirmation of his identity with God by the Spirit within

him, but said, "If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe that the Father is in me, and I in him" (Jn. 10:38). Isaiah calls Jesus the "mighty God and everlasting Father" (Isa. 9:6). Paul says before his incarnation Christ was "equal with God," and did not take on him the form of a servant because his divinity was ill-gotten by robbery, but possessed it in his own right and not derived from another (Phil. 2:5-8). And Paul, when he says that God created all things by the divinity that inhabited the man we call Christ, and that in him all things consist (Col. 1:16, 17; cf. Jn. 1:3), can speak only of the Spirit, for it is the Spirit we find present in Genesis at creation (Gen. 1:1) and the Psalmist says God "sendest forth thy spirit, they are created: and thou renewest the face of the earth" (Ps. 104:30). Finally, Paul states plainly, "the Lord is that Spirit" (II Cor. 3:18).

Hence, it may be seen that Jesus became the Son of God by incarnation in the virgin's womb, and not "before all ages" as affirmed by the creeds:

*"And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." Lk. 1:35*

Jesus was also made the Son in his resurrection, as the first-begotten from the dead. Hence, Psalm two, speaking of Christ's resurrection, ascension, and coronation, says:

*"Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee" Ps. 2:6, 7; cf. Acts 13:33; Rom. 1:4; Col. 1:18*

Nowhere do we read of the divinity within the earthen vessel we call Jesus being referred to as God's Son any time before his conception in Mary's womb. However, if anyone be otherwise minded, let him take no offense, but let him interpret the person and divinity of Christ according to the light he receives from God.

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<sup>41</sup> Soctrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, XLI.

# The Geographical Distribution of Demon-Possession

## Mapping Demon Belief in the New Testament

S. Snobelen

### Abstract

Demon-possession in the Gospel accounts is not a geographically-uniform phenomenon. Specific cases of demon-possession in the synoptics occur in regional clusters, always in northern environs such as Galilee, rather than occurring throughout every location through which Christ travelled and performed healings.

Conversely, not a single case of demon-possession in Judea or Jerusalem is recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Moreover, the Synoptics include several quantitative summaries of demon-possession that imply that demon-possession was a common and even characteristic phenomenon in Galilee and the northern regions. No comparable statements for Judean areas are found in the Gospel records.

Finally, certain ostensibly physical pathological conditions, such as blindness, deafness and muteness, which are sometimes attributed to demon-possession in the north, are never so characterized in the south, even though descriptions of these conditions do occur in texts commenting on the Judean ministry.

### The evidence: a geographical survey of demon possession in the synoptics

Jesus was raised in Nazareth, a town in the Roman province of Galilee. Aside from the intense period leading up to his crucifixion, the synoptic Gospel accounts show that Christ spent most of his three years' ministry in the north, particularly, but not exclusively, in Galilee. The records themselves attest to a great number of cases where Christ healed demoniacs, although only a few of the cases are commented upon in detail. The following will summarize the data.

First, we find evidence from particular statements in the synoptics that demon

possession was common in Galilee and the north. A few examples will reveal the general tenor of these statements. In the opening chapter of Mark we are told that Jesus “cast out many demons” (daimonia polla) and that “he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons” (1:34 and 39; all quotations from the RSV).

Mark also recounts that the twelve disciples both healed many who were sick and “cast out many demons” (daimonia polla; 6:13). Matthew records the same occasion as that described in Mark 1, and mentions the locals in Capernaum bringing “many who were possessed with demons” (daimonizomenous pollous; 8:16; cf. Luke 4:41).

On another occasion in Luke 7:21, we find Jesus, while near Nain, curing “many of diseases and plagues and evil spirits.” These examples, with their deliberate emphasis on the great number of demoniacs, demonstrate that whatever the situation elsewhere, demon possession was common in Galilee—even endemic.

As with these quantitative summaries, when we turn to examine specific examples, we see that all such cases of demon possession occur in the north, and usually in Galilee. For example, the first healing of a demoniac recorded in Mark occurs in the synagogue of Capernaum (1:21-8). Mark also mentions the case of a demon-possessed girl from Syrian Phoenicia in 7:24-30, another northern region. Mary Magdalene, from whom seven demons were cast out, was from Magdala, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The most celebrated case of demon possession in the New Testament—that of the Gadarene demoniac—occurred in the north as well, beside the Sea of Galilee (Matthew; Mark; Luke-).

When we turn to the fourth Gospel account, we discover that John does not record a single case of demon possession, although he does mention

people with sickness. Many scholars have noticed this and have offered suggestions as to why this should be so.

One theory is that John came from a Sadducean background and, since Sadducees did not believe in demons, he refrains from mentioning them. Aside from the fact that there is no strong evidence for this theory (and in any case, the Book of Revelation tells us that John certainly believed in angels), a better explanation of this apparent anomaly lies in the fact that John, unlike the synoptics, concentrates almost entirely on the south.

The disproportionate ratio of coverage between north and south in the synoptics is reversed in John. With John we have almost an entire Gospel account devoted to the Judean ministry in which demons could appear. Yet, they do not. This is further evidence for the clustering of demons in the north.

In order to confirm the northern bias of demon-possession during the ministry of Jesus, I analysed every reference to demons and evil spirits in the Gospel accounts, paying close attention to the location of each occurrence. The results of this survey are displayed in the accompanying table and map.

To strengthen the above-outlined pattern even further, we can take an additional step and note that there is a difference between the way some examples of physical ailments are described in the north when compared with the south. Illnesses mentioned in the south are always treated as purely organic conditions, while in the north they are sometimes treated as afflictions caused by demons. Thus we see some cases of blindness, deafness, and muteness in the north attributed to demons. In Mark 9:14-29 we are provided with an account of a boy possessed by a “dumb and deaf spirit” (9:25; cf. 9:17).

Moreover, Matthew 9:32-3 records an incident in which Jesus healed a mute man, who was thought to be possessed by a demon. Furthermore, another man afflicted by a demon is described in this same Gospel account as “blind and dumb” (12:22; cf. Luke 11:14). Cases of the blindness in the south are depicted quite differently.

After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus healed people in the Temple who are simply

described as being blind (Matthew 21:14). The man born blind in John 9 did not find himself in his condition because of demonic affliction.

As for blind Bartimaeus from Jericho—he is just “blind Bartimaeus,” not “blind, demon possessed Bartimaeus” (Mark 10:46-52). All this, even though his actions are similar to that of a demoniac: he cries out and attributes Biblical titles to Jesus (Mark 10:47-48). This demonstrates that even demon-like behaviour in the south was not readily attributed to evil spirits.

Why is it that such physical problems are sometimes attributed to demonic agency in the north, but never so in the south? What was so special about Judea that drove away demons? These examples also demonstrate that it is wrong to assume that all cases of demon possession relate to mental illness.

To sum up, the results reveal that every single case of demon-possession in the Gospel accounts occurs in the north, outside Judea; there are no examples of demon-possession in Judea or Jerusalem recorded in any of the four Gospel accounts. What is more, there are several occasions in the Synoptic treatments of the Galilean ministry where we are told that Jesus healed many people possessed by demons. Again, this is in stark contrast to the lack of even a single reference to demon possession in the Judean ministry.

### **Possible objections considered**

Next, we must test this pattern for flaws or alternative explanations. If the pattern is real and significant, it must be able to stand up to rigorous objections. Could it be that there are no accounts of demon possession in Judea because no miracles of healing are recorded there at all? No, there are miracles of healing recorded in both Judea and Jerusalem. Could this pattern be the simple result of the fact that the synoptics spend so much time focusing on the Galilean and northern ministry? No, because, once again, miracles of healing are recorded in Judea.

The accounts of the southern ministry in the synoptics, while not as extensive as the accounts in the north, are by no means insignificant: there was ample opportunity to record cases of demon-possession, if they occurred in that region.

Also, when we turn to John, we see that the majority of his Gospel account deals with the Judean ministry and there is not a single reference to a healing of a demon-possessed person (the only references to demons in John occur when Christ is accused of having a demon — which seems to have been a standard form of slander and abuse among Jews). Thus the pattern holds up in the Gospel accounts.

It is only when we leave the Gospel accounts that we find two possible exceptions to this general pattern. First, in Acts 5:16 we read that those with unclean spirits were brought from the towns “around” or “in the vicinity of Jerusalem” to be healed by the Apostles.

The Greek is not overly precise, so it is hard to say from how far away these demon-possessed people came, but the language does show that wherever they were from, they were not from Jerusalem itself—the main centre for Jewish religious teaching in Judea. But it is worth noting that this is the only example in the book of Acts of demon-possession in a predominantly Jewish region. Based on the pattern of the Gospel accounts one would expect examples around every corner. Yet this is not the case.

The other apparent exception comes in Acts 10:38 where Peter, giving an account of Christ’s ministry, noted that Christ healed all who were oppressed of the devil (ho diabolos). First, it must be stressed that Peter does not specifically use the word demon (daimonion), and it is possible that this distinction is not without import.

Second, while it is true that Peter mentions that the ministry of Christ took him through first Galilee and then Judea (10:37), he does not specifically mention where the healings of those oppressed by the devil took place. His is a general statement about Christ’s ministry as a whole, and since most of Christ’s ministry took place in Galilee, the greatest force of the statement about demons (assuming the reference is to demons) would naturally apply to that region.

As a Galilean himself, the cases of demon possession would have left a strong impression on him, and it is thus not surprising that he should mention them in such a summary of Christ’s ministry. Also, the summary statement

of healing is no less true if Peter knew that those oppressed by the devil lived in Galilee. There is no necessary contradiction in stating that Christ worked in Galilee and Judea on the one hand, and that he healed all oppressed by the devil (or demons) in the north.

Furthermore, it is a long established principle of Biblical exegesis that unclear passages should be interpreted by those more easily understood. In this case, as we have seen, the wealth of testimony from the Gospel accounts confirms that every example of demon possession during the ministry of Jesus occurred in the north. Nevertheless, even if, for the sake of argument, Peter’s summary statement is meant to include otherwise unrecorded cases of demon-possession in the south, such information would in no way counter what would still be an overwhelming trend.

Christ’s words to his disciples in Mark 16:17 offer another possible exception: “In my name shall they cast out demons.” Once again, however, we are dealing with a general statement with no specific geographical cues. Nevertheless, the statement is clearly prophetic, so we can confirm just how it was fulfilled by consulting the rest of the New Testament. Here we see that the Apostles (including, later, Paul) did in fact encounter cases of demon-possession after Christ’s ascension.

But, the point is that with the possible exception of Acts 5:16, these cases occurred in Gentile dominated regions outside Judea. Absolutely no cases occurred in Jerusalem, and no individual cases are highlighted from Judea.

With regard to any unrecorded cases, we may expect that the pattern revealed during the ministry of Jesus would continue in the years immediately afterward his ascension. But the force of the impressive pattern of clear examples from the Gospel accounts cannot be taken away by the three above possible exceptions. If belief in demons was much weaker in Judea than in Galilee, we would still expect to see some belief in demons in the south, just as we should not be surprised if some in the north did not believe in demons. The “demons” may not have travelled, but people and ideas certainly did.

The point is: the general pattern holds up even if there are some limited exceptions. What is more, even if we are only dealing with a general pattern

of demonic activity during the ministry of Christ (i.e. including some possible unrecorded Judean cases as well), it is still true that none of the examples explicitly listed in the Gospel accounts occurred in the south. There must be a reason for this inbuilt into the inspired Word. And even if we are only witnessing a general pattern, this fact alone gives us a compelling reason to seek for explanations.

Given this very powerful evidence, therefore, we must ask: what is going on? Why do we find so many demons in the north and so few (if any) in the south? Why are organic ailments in the north sometimes attributed to demonic activity, but never in the south? For the person who believes in the inspiration of Scripture these examples can be neither accidental nor without purpose. Something is being taught by this pattern.

There are two general explanations: the first is historically-based, the second comes straight from the Bible. We will begin with the historical explanation, and outline the biblical one at the conclusion of this article.

### **Belief in demons in Galilee and Judea**

Based on his studies of the relevant Talmudic literature, Cambridge rabbinical scholar Herbert Loewe concluded that during the first century AD rabbis in Galilee and Mesopotamia generally believed in the literal existence of demons, while those in Judea did not. Loewe first of all includes a commendable appeal for the need to exercise great care and sensitivity with respect to local and chronological distinctions:

‘...references must be examined to see whether they are the utterances of individuals or genuine examples of popular belief; and distinctions must be drawn between local and general beliefs, between Semitic and non-Semitic, and between Jewish beliefs and those borrowed by Jews from their neighbours in European countries.

A requirement more vital than any of the foregoing, is the exercise of careful analysis in selecting Talmudic material. It is absolutely necessary to assign each authority to its proper local and chronological category; that is to say, evidence which applies to Babylon is inadmissible for Palestine; that which is found to occur in Galilee cannot be used to prove

arguments for Judaea; and the same care must be exercised in respect of chronology.’

Loewe next summarizes the results of his findings:

‘In investigating Talmudic evidence as to spirits, the reader will notice, at the outset, different attitudes adopted by the Rabbis in dealing with this question. In some cases the reality of demons seems to be taken for granted absolutely; in others it seems, with no less certainty, to be denied. Stories occur in which both these attitudes may be traced simultaneously. The reason for this may be found if the nationality of the respective teachers be sought.

It has already been stated that Galilee was the centre of Palestinian demonology, and it will almost invariably be found that Galilaean teachers accepted, while Judaeans teachers rejected, the existence of spirits. The numerous instances which the NT furnishes would have been impossible save in Galilee; there is a strong similarity between these and those adduced by Galilaean Rabbis. The same must be said of those Rabbis who came from Mesopotamia. And they were brought up in surroundings in which superstition was rife, their teaching was tinged by a belief in spirits, and in comparison with them the clarity of Palestinian teaching stands out in bold relief.’ Loewe, “Demons and Spirits (Jewish),” *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh, 1911), 4:612-13 (emphasis as in original). See also H.A. Kelly, *Towards the death of Satan: the growth and decline of Christian demonology* (London, 1968), p. 68

Loewe then goes on to cite supporting evidence from the Talmud to show that superstitious belief in demons was a characteristic feature of rabbinical teaching in Galilee, while a ~~seepitcal~~ skeptical traditional prevailed among rabbis in Judaea. We have just seen this regional historical phenomenon played out in vivid fashion against the New Testament documents.

There is additional confirmation of this trend in the teachings of the Sadducees, who occupy the extreme ~~seepitcal~~ skeptical end of the spirit-belief continuum. We know from history and the Bible that the Sadducees (who were associated with the Temple and Jerusalem) believed in neither demons nor angels (Luke). The effect of

Sadducean teaching would have reinforced the general trend in the south.

This background information opens a window on demonic activity during the ministry of Christ. Belief in demons was taught and fostered in the north by the local rabbis; conversely, those in the south were encouraged by a ~~seep~~ceptical-skeptical outlook by the Judaeen teachers. Since belief in demons was rampant in the north, many people attributed sickness to demons.

-Because demon belief was much less common in the south (the above-cited scholarly source implies that it was virtually nonexistent among Judaeen rabbis), then the demons did not exist either. Does all of this sound familiar? People who believe in ghosts, see ghosts. Those who don't, don't.

Those who put their faith in televangelist healings are "healed" by televangelists. Those who do not, are not. Enthusiasts who believe in UFOs sometimes see UFOs. Those who do not are much more inclined to attribute unidentified flying objects to more mundane entities like airplanes, unusual cloud formations, and swamp gas. We can even extend this phenomenon across time. In eras when belief in ghosts, witches, and devils was rife, sightings of all three were much more common. Yet no one reported seeing a flying saucer, as such, until well into the twentieth century when alien life and technology had entered the popular consciousness.

Now we can extend this pattern even further to our current topic. Those who believe in demons, experience or attribute demon possession. Those who don't, don't. Strange, anomalous happenings once attributed to ghosts, fairies, and demons are now attributed to UFOs, the laws of chance, and medical causes. People often see and experience what they believe—regardless of whether these things exist in reality.

-This also explains why one can talk to many evangelicals who have "seen" or "experienced" the devil, but one will be hard pressed to find a Christadelphian who has either seen the devil of orthodoxy or been demon-possessed. Why does the devil and his demons afflict those who believe in them and leave those alone who do not?

This pattern strongly infers that putative cases of demon-possession in the Gospel and other New

Testament accounts are positively related to local belief. In other words, where local folk belief encouraged or allowed for belief in demons, cases of possession exist—often in large groupings. Where such belief was either not taught or even actively discouraged, cases of demon-possession are severely reduced or non-existent.

-The implications of this unmistakable pattern in the New Testament have profound ramifications for the ontological status and reality of personal, malevolent demons in the New Testament period. This striking pattern cannot be adequately explained by recourse to the argument that demons are fallen angels ruled by ~~satan~~Satan (spirit beings not restricted by geography), and intent on attacking Christ and his ministry.

If demons were literal spirit beings under the direction of ~~satan~~Satan, the distribution of demonic activity should be uniform, or even close to uniform, in all locales visited by Christ. That the distribution instead shows marked clustering, provides powerful Biblical testimony that confirms the non-existence of demons as personal spirit beings under the control of ~~satan~~Satan.

### **Demons in Acts, the Epistles and the Book of Revelation**

This analysis can be extended further to the rest of the accounts of demons in the New Testament. We see in Acts 8:7 healings of unclean spirits in Samaria, which is to the north of Judea and thus fits the general pattern. Next, we see a reference to a woman with a spirit of python in the Gentile area (Philippi; Acts 16:16-21). This reflects a Gentile belief and not a Jewish one, so this example also fits the pattern: the people of a region are afflicted by "beings" that are believed to be real in their particular area. Additionally, we are told of further activity of evil spirits in Acts 19:12-18, but once again, although Jews were involved, these examples occur in the Gentile region of Ephesus.

To summarize the rest of the New Testament, for Paul demons are worthless idols that have no existence in reality (1 Corinthians 8:4, 10:19-21, 12:2); he does not touch on the phenomenon of demon-possession in any of his writings.

When writing to the mainly Gentile Corinthians, he does not record a gift of casting out demons. Here it is probably relevant to note that Paul was not a Galilean Jew, and thus may have had more contact with Gentile demons than Jewish evil spirits. Demons in Revelation are idols and seducing spirits (Revelation 9:20, 16:14): there is no talk of possession. It is only when we turn to James that we see what appears to be a general reference to demon-possession (James 2:19).

That this should be so is hardly surprising: James, the brother of the Lord, was raised in Galilee and was familiar with demon-possession. He was also writing to Jews and Jewish Christians (cf. James 1:1 and 2:2, which uses the term synagogue), who would be familiar with demon-possession, even if they had not witnessed it in their regions. Paul, in writing to a predominantly Gentile audience, does not feel he needs to mention demon-possession at all.

James also wrote at a very early date, perhaps as early as the late 40s AD, when his memories of such events in Christ's Galilean ministry were still fresh (I think James' allusion is to the Gadarene demoniac—other Galilean case). James' references, then, are likely reminiscences of Galilean demon-possession. Thus, the general geographical patterns holds up for the entire New Testament.

This evidence presents a serious obstacle to the believer in fallen angels. Not only does this

pattern imply accommodation (or something like it), but it cannot be assimilated easily into the other main alternative: literal, personal, malevolent demons.

If this is what the Bible is speaking about, why the regionalization? If Satan was trying to attack Christ in his ministry, why were the demons so ineffective and virtually absent in the south? If the demons of the Gospel records really were fallen angels acting under diabolical orders, why were they not powerful enough to swarm into the southern regions and continue to afflict hapless victims and further attempt to impede the ministry of Christ?

If they had power to enter into a person and bring on that person debilitating illnesses, could they not travel to all regions? Was Christ's power more effective in the south? Yet he spent more time in the north. Some might argue that the demonic onslaught started with the beginning of Christ's ministry and that part-way through his ministry Christ gained control over them, thus when he went down to Judea late in his ministry, they had already been driven away.

But this will not do, because although references to demons and evil spirits are much reduced in the book of Acts, there are examples nonetheless, after this supposed victory. Once again, the geographical distribution of demon-possession cannot be explained by literal demons.

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**Question:** I have been putting this inquiry off until I got some of my ducks in a row...but, the little dickens keep slipping out of line. "The Question" Who are the "they" that sit on the thrones, in the first line of Rev 20:4? I see the "they" and also (in some trans.) the use of, "and I saw those beheaded..." This would lead one to think that there are others included in the ruling and reigning with Christ, other than the beheaded, would it not? If "they" are the ones given authority to judge...that still implies two groups to me.

**Answer:** I agree that there are two groups in Rev. 20:4. The first group seated upon thrones seems to refer simply to the righteous dead in general. Men who died in a saved condition

from the garden forward, who were waiting the general resurrection. They are in Hades Paradise. I think the same group is potentially alluded to in chapter 5 as the 24 elders seated upon thrones. The other group are martyrs who died (were beheaded) during the persecution under Nero for not receiving the mark or worshipping his name, etc. They too are in Hades Paradise and live and reign with Christ pending the general resurrection, when they would be taken eternally to heaven. The souls under the altar in chapter six present a similar message, but seem to be those that died as martyrs in earlier ages and in the persecution that arose over Stephen.

Hope that helps. Write back if you want further clarification.