

doctrines, but while the Pharisees were content to let the Lord break the foreign yoke in His own time, the Zealots felt called to be the instruments by which He would accomplish that purpose. Depending upon your point of view, they were freedom fighters, guerrillas, or bandits.

The Silence Breaks

*Matthew 1:1–4:11, Mark 1:1–13,
Luke 1:1–4:13, John 1:1–51*

Shadow Hopes

On the evening of earth's great disaster in Eden, the Lord promised that a Son of Eve would someday crush the Snake who had led humankind into misery. As time went on, the Son of Eve was revealed to be a Son of Abraham, Son of Judah, Son of David. Isaiah saw him as a Warrior King, full of the Spirit of God. But he also gave him titles no man could claim for himself: Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah also glimpsed someone whom he dubbed "the Servant of the Lord." Like the Son of David, He would establish a regime of justice. It would be not just a Jewish nation, for He would also bring the Gentiles the same deliverance from darkness. Yet somehow, before He attained His glory He would suffer unspeakably, bearing in His body the full cost of His people's crimes. He would die and yet reign – a paradox.

Daniel saw another kingly figure: "one like a son of man" who would receive dominion over the whole earth forever. One like a man? He glimpsed the coming of the King who would suffer and reign, and even heard a timetable that might pinpoint the King's arrival within a decade or so. Micah learned the King

would be born in Bethlehem. Zechariah implied that the Deliverer would be Priest as well as King, staining His holiness with the people's corruption in order to cleanse it away.

And yet God had told several prophets that He would not share His glory with someone else. He Himself would come to deliver His people: "Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1). There was also that odd bit in Zechariah about God apparently sending God.

But the fine points of these prophecies were largely lost on a nation shuddering under the weight of Rome. The people had long pinned their hopes on the Anointed One (*mashiach*, or Messiah), the anointed king of David's line who would come to liberate them. The sufferings, the promises to the Gentiles, the inscrutable titles—these perplexities blurred amid the shining vision of Someone Who Will Get Us Out of This Mess!

God Becomes Man

Perhaps the wildest fantasy a Jewish woman could have would be mothering the Messiah. She would have to consummate a marriage with a man of David's line, of course. How else did one have babies?

But God had never done anything the way humans expected, and He wasn't changing that pattern in the last years of Herod the Great, king of the Jews. Adolescent, virgin Mary lacked the only requirement for motherhood history had ever known. She had, however, all of the qualities God required: the right lineage, and the same attitude of total trust and devotion that had won Abraham titles like "righteous" and "friend of God."

The stump of David had run into hard times since noble Zerubbabel led his compatriots back from Babylon more than five centuries earlier. But peasant Mary's blood was royal enough, and she was engaged to a man with comparable pedigree. So the Spirit of God came upon her and completed what was lacking in her egg's twenty-three chromosomes for the making of a man. It was that simple.

Simple. All it required was for that Person of divinity who had eternally been joined as a Son to a Father to empty Himself of His infinity and pour Himself into a single human cell. It

required nothing but a divine self-humiliation that made Heaven gasp.

It was God's joke on the wisdom of men. Greek philosophers had recently been defining God as an unmoved Mover, utterly detached from the base material world, utterly beyond feelings or any touch from the earth at all. For their part, the Jews had walled their God off behind multiple layers of temple courts and fully expected that if they slit the throats of the right animals every day, God would stay in line. But the Lord who had thundered to Moses, whispered to Elijah, and wept with Hosea was not about to be banished to some hygienic spiritual plane where He wouldn't interfere with human plans. And while some were watching the skies, waiting for Him to ride in on a cloud, He snuck into their midst incognito, in a teenager's womb.

One of the baby's biographers called him "the Word"—God's self-expression, revealing in human form everything the Unpronounceable One had ever been. In a day when His people had grown afraid to utter His name, God chose a new one.

Jesus was the Greek version of that name; the Hebrew equivalent was *Joshua*, "Yahweh saves." The baby's namesakes were the general who led Israel to possess the Promised Land, and Zechariah's high priest. Another name lingered in the background, for the impossible birth recalled one of Isaiah's more obscure predictions: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel [God with us]" (Isaiah 7:14).

By rights, this Jesus was in every way a king. Son of David and Son of God—who could dispute His claim? But the road to His throne would be the thorny one of a God who had always preferred to woo rather than ravish.

A certain Matthew, another of Jesus' biographers, said it all in the genealogy that opens his book. The women he chose to mention in Jesus' ancestry were Tamar (who seduced her father-in-law because she saw no other hope of gaining her rights), Rahab the prostitute, Ruth (who came from an explicitly blacklisted foreign nation), Uriah's wife (Bathsheba, whom David seduced and whose husband he subsequently murdered), and Mary (whose neighbors were all certain she was a slut). Surely

this boy bore in His bloodline all the worst that men and women could do to each other. He was a true son of Adam, and "Son of Man" was the title He chose for Himself.

To drive the point home, God had the baby born in a stable. It was indeed in Bethlehem, but the only people who showed up to mark the occasion were a mob of shepherds (who ranked extremely low on the Pharisees' list of law-abiding servants of God) and some Persian magicians. The prominent priestly families were notified, but declined to attend. Herod responded to the news by decreeing that all unweaned boys in Bethlehem be slaughtered. His only interest in a Davidic king was to stamp out a rival. But of course Herod was a Snake's pawn, and the Snake knew well enough who Jesus was.

It was pathetic. Haggai and Malachi had both extolled the glory of the day when "the desired of all nations" would come to His temple. But when Mary brought her newborn to fulfill the proper rites, only an elderly saint and a closet prophetess noticed. The priests were busy elsewhere. Jesus made hardly a ripple in the human world when He arrived, but behind the scenes Heaven and hell were holding their breath.

John the Baptizer

A few months before Jesus' birth, God had given a son to a cousin of Mary's in one of those postmenopausal conceptions He had made famous with Sarah. This child may have been raised in one of the monastic communities scattered around Judea, for he emerged from the desert twenty-something years later as an ascetic firebrand. But whereas the folks at Qumran were preparing for the Day of the Lord by walling themselves off, John intended to prepare for it by slapping his countrymen into line.

He was in fact the first capital-P Prophet the nation had seen for four hundred years, and it was his business to summon every man, woman, and child to prepare. His chosen piece of theater was baptism, a ritual washing that converts from paganism usually underwent as a sign of being cleansed from their idolatrous past. John insisted even "good" Jews needed this bath. He hugely impressed the common people with his wild appearance

and hellfire sermons on the banks of the Jordan River. The religious leaders rolled their eyes.

Perhaps the first and last time John was ever stopped in his tracks was when his cousin Jesus arrived to be baptized. He had been warning everybody that Someone was coming who would baptize them with fire rather than mere water, and here was the Coming One looking at him serenely, waiting to be dunked. John tried to refuse. Jesus did not deny that He had no need to be cleansed, but He maintained that He needed to identify fully with the people to whom He was sent. Furthermore, His Father had chosen this occasion to publicly declare that Jesus was the Son of God and was empowered by the Spirit of God. It was the first time in history that God publicly paraded His strange nature: there were Three of Him who related to each other as Father, Son, and Spirit; yet there was only One of Him.

Entrance Exams

Before He had lifted a finger in His Father's service, Jesus emerged from His bath in the Jordan mantled in His Father's approval: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). This conviction would be the bedrock of His life; in a whirlpool of popular acclaim and rejection, He would have one relationship to stand on. For it was His job to relive the trials of Adam and Israel, and prove faithful where they had failed.

First the ancient Snake met Jesus in the desert and coaxed Him to make Adam's choice: Take by force what the Father could give by grace. Be a Messiah of your own making. Choose physical comfort, pride, or personal glory. And always the refrain: "If you are [really] the Son of God. . . ." Doubt Your Sonship. Doubt Your Father's love.

Jesus faced this assault not with His divine strength, but with only the weapons available to all people. He quoted from Moses' sermons about what Israel should have learned during her forty years in the desert. What Israel never did learn, Jesus clung to at the core of His being.

Those long desert days were His last test before His real work began. He was about thirty years old and had never yet done anything that anyone had taken special notice of. But now

He headed back to where John was still preaching and baptizing and did more nothing. The Baptizer, however, told his followers that Jesus was "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). In other words, "Follow that one instead. Somehow He is the fulfillment of all that the temple system represents." John probably didn't even know what he was saying when he pushed his own followers to abandon him. Yet five of them ended up accompanying Jesus on the eighty-mile walk north to the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus had been raised and where He was still based.

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The Kingdom

*Matthew 4:12–20:34, Mark 1:14–10:52,
Luke 4:14–18:43, John 2:1–10:42*

New Wine

The Son of God yielded His divine power when He confined Himself to humanness. But at His baptism, Jesus received the power of God's Spirit, just as the prophets before Him had done. And His total surrender to the Father made Him more open to the Spirit than any prophet; for the first time ever, a human walked in the full authority of the Holy Spirit. What God had intended for Adam, this second Adam lived.

His first public use of this power was to supply wine for a wedding feast. It was an entirely appropriate debut. God liked parties. He had told Isaiah that His Kingdom was going to be like one immense party with the best food and the finest wine. And weddings were His favorite, since they reminded Him of the union He would one day have with His Bride, the people He loved.

So Jesus selected six huge stone jars, slimy with the scum of ceremonial Jewish washing, and ordered them filled with water. To the wedding guests who drank the water-become-wine, the miracle probably meant little. But to the five men who had followed Jesus from the Jordan, this was a hint. The King who had