

G. Sloyan, Jesus in Focus

8

## The Age to Come

IT WOULD BE EASY TO SAY THAT JESUS DID NOT EMERGE OUT of the Judaism of his day as a *hasid*, or saint, because the age was looking for a *hakam*, or sage, and he did not meet the expectation. This may have something to do with an explanation. It is much too simple to account for all that took place, however. The authentic heroes of Jesus' time were committed to the Torah in a way that he was not—even though the law meant much to him. Yet it cannot be established that a Jew such as he, in the mold of the prophets, had no chance of surviving in the popular imagination. Had there been no Jesus, John the Baptizer might easily have achieved the status of a latter-day Elijah. When John's calls for repentance went unheeded, the failure to repent might have been credited with bringing on the sack of Jerusalem forty years later. Jesus' appearance subsequent to John's served to promote the figure of John in one religious community, the Christian, and obliterate it in another, the Jewish. It left him a vestigial remnant as an anti-hero (anti-Jesus,

that is) in a third community, the baptizing sects. As was the case with Jesus and Mary, John survived with honor in still a fourth community, Islam.

More influential than any theorizing on the fate of Jesus in history is the view that he was counted out of Jewish life because of his commitment to the end of history as something to come soon. It did not come, the theory says. Hence, the Jewish faith community was right in finding an embarrassment in Jesus. This is a serious observation and deserves to be examined. The way it is generally framed is that Jesus found congenial the spirit of flight from reality and the disregard of history that were abroad in Jewish circles, namely, apocalypticism. He found it more than congenial, he and his disciples were obsessed with it. Most of his Jewish contemporaries went unbeguiled by any such attraction. Far from mistrusting the world and history, the sages sought ways to help their fellow Jews live a fully Jewish life in their time and place. If God wished to use the Romans to tell them something about their unfaithfulness to the law, so be it. God had done the same before, using the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

Josephus reports that the Pharisees believed in "fate," while the Sadducees did not. He doubtless means a providential design, using a term familiar to Greeks in their own language.

To have a firm conviction that the end would come soon was to put one's trust in deliverance from history, not salvation through history. The question is: Did Jewish apocalyptic writers teach that? Was their discourse about "the end" really concerned with the termination of life on this earth? With the end of the world?

Jesus was quite in tune with his time in speaking of an age to come in contrast with the present age. Such was the bedrock of Pharisee hope. He shared it to the full. In this connection we must not think of "the world to come" as personal immortality, Greek-style. It was not even as simple as life after death in a bodily resurrection of the just. It was more the assurance based on hope that, since God was faithful to his word, God would bring those who lived faithfully under the law to fruition. The divine fidelity demanded it. This age or world was obviously not the scene of perfect justice. But the Lord had vowed justice. Therefore, death would somehow be overcome and a new era be inaugurated.

A variety of speculative writings in this vein was spawned by the Maccabean revolt. The first and best known is the biblical book of Daniel. The sight of the destruction of Jewish youth by the thousands at Greek hands brought the conviction that in a new eon the Jewish dead would rise from the dust and live again. Israel's God was a God of hope. That hope, for the Pharisee, was ultimately in victory over death.

In conversation with a woman who had just lost her brother, Jesus said by way of assurance: "Your brother will rise again." "I know he will rise again," Martha replied, "in the resurrection on the last day."<sup>1</sup> John's gospel reports them in easy agreement over a future reality. It then emerges that Jesus has in mind something other than the hope they share. The point is, however, that they both expect some mysterious "last day" that will usher in a new age.

This eon-theology is perhaps made clearer in Matthew when, making the account of an occurrence in Mark more specific, he has Jesus say:

Whoever says anything against the son of man will be forgiven, but whoever says anything against the holy spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.<sup>2</sup>

In a graphic tale about heeding Moses and the prophets—all the teachers one needs, in Jesus' view—a rich man ends in torment in the abode of the dead, and a beggar in cool consolation in the bosom of Abraham.<sup>3</sup> This is not eon-thinking so much as a tale of God's immediate justice. But Jesus would not have told it unless he thought the popular imagination was conditioned for it.

His word to a fellow-victim from the cross is in the same vein: "I assure you, this day you will be with me in paradise."<sup>4</sup>

While these instances reflect the widespread conviction that death would be followed by just retribution at God's hands, they do not precisely reinforce the eon-theology we are tracing. Jesus' parables are much the best place to look for it. For example:

When the crop is ready [a farmer] "wields the sickle, for the time is ripe for harvest."<sup>5</sup>

The mustard seed . . . once it is sown . . . springs up to become the largest of the shrubs, with branches big enough for the birds of the air to build nests in its shade.<sup>6</sup>

"No," he replied, "pull up the weeds and you might take the wheat along with them. Let them grow together until harvest. Then at harvest time I will order the harvesters: First collect the weeds and bundle them up to burn, then gather the wheat into my barn."<sup>7</sup>

In all these agricultural examples, a time lies ahead when humanity will flourish. The figure of the mustard bush is based on a parable in Ezekiel. The first and third feature the "day of the LORD" of the eighth- and seventh-century prophets, when he will come in judgment to sustain the good and punish the wicked. Other examples from Jesus' parables follow:

When [the dragnet] was full they hauled it ashore and sat down to put what was worthwhile into containers. What was useless they threw away. That is how it will be at the end of the world.<sup>8</sup>

With that [the tenant farmers] seized him, dragged him outside the vineyard, and killed him. What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do to them when he comes?<sup>9</sup>

When once the master of the house has risen to lock the door and you stand outside knocking and saying, "Sir, open for us," he will say in reply, "I do not know where you come from."<sup>10</sup>

You can find the same idea put more subtly, that is, without the imagery of force or violence, in many other of Jesus' stories. A man asks his two sons to help him work in the family vineyard. One says he will, but does not. The other says he will not, but does. Jesus asks: "Which of the two did what the father wanted?"<sup>11</sup>

This hint of a twofold outcome, one for those responsive to his preaching and another for the resistant, underlies many of Jesus'

1. Jn 11:23-24    2. Mt 12:32    3. See Lk 16:19-26    4. Lk 23:43  
5. Mk 4:29

6. Mk 4:31-32    7. Mt 13:29-30    8. Mt 13:48-49  
9. Mt 21:39-40    10. Lk 13:25    11. See Mt 21:28-31

stories. The theme common to most is the working out of justice, irresistibly and beyond appeal, in the future. Often in Jesus' brief vignettes nature takes its time, by which we are to understand that God takes his time. The seed grows, the dough rises, the fig tree buds, all in due season. In stories of human activity the house built on rock lasts, the judge vindicates the widow, the employer pays everyone at the same rate. It all works out somehow. Justice, often mystifying justice, is done—later. Tolstoi puts the main point of Jesus' stories when he says, "God sees the truth, but waits."

What is destined to come is God's reign, whether humanity expects it or not, prepares for it or not. The notion of God's kingly rule was an old one in Israel, so much so that the people were convinced that they had no king but him. Neither Saul nor David nor Solomon, neither Judahites or Ephraimites, Hasmoneans or Herodians were kings in the eyes of the Jews as other nations had kings. The LORD was king and he alone.

References to this dominion of God over the Jewish heart are found everywhere: in the Bible, in the literature of apocalyptic eschatology (a vision of "the last days") that came after it, in the writings of the rabbis, in the writings of the Christians. The one matter that is a constant is God's reign. The word "kingdom" does not convey the idea very well, nor does "kingship." The reality is far too active and relational for that. It is the subduing in freedom of that most restless of creatures, the human heart. The dream that recurs in every stage of Jewish life envisions the hearts of a whole people obediently submissive to its LORD.

Whereas this ideal reign or rule is encountered at every turn, only within a limited period does the expectation occur that God will break in on his people forcibly and exact dominion. His own people will submit willingly, his enemies (*their* enemies) cravenly. The time around 175 B.C.E. is the starting point of such writings, 135 C.E. the terminus. The first of those dates marked a revolutionary spirit that led to victory over the Seleucid dynasty of Greeks, the second, a political defeat by Rome that proved final for the Jews. In between, a visionary literature proliferated that saw a cataclysmic end to the world as we know it: the sun darkened, stars falling from the skies, people withering with fear. In a final conflict, God and the sons of light would take the measure of all the forces that dwelt in darkness. The heavens and the earth would pass

away. There would succeed a millennium and many millennia of prosperity and peace.

This kind of thinking is reflected in a snatch from one of the *Hymns* of the community of Qumrân along the shores of the Dead Sea:

The floods of Belial shall go over all steep  
banks like a devouring fire  
Consuming every tree, green and barren, in  
their channels.  
It shall sweep with burning flames until all  
who drink of them are no more.  
It shall consume the foundations of the earth  
and the expanse of dry land.  
The foundations of the mountains shall blaze  
and the roots of flint become streams of pitch.  
It shall devour down to the deep Abyss.<sup>12</sup>

We should note immediately that this is the only passage in the scrolls of a supposedly apocalyptic community that *may* speak of the end of the world. Close inspection of all the literature of the period shows that "the end" is more a time of crisis than a definite end. Very clearly conveyed by the colorful language are notions such as cataclysm, conflict, and purgation—but always with the underlying theme of a new start. Apocalyptic eschatology was a literature of hope, not of destruction. The "apocalypse" spoken of was the disclosure of the prophetic vision of the LORD's supreme rule, usually of a hidden or in-group kind. How he will deal with his people in the future, how he will rearrange the cosmos, is all there. But the language is figurative to the point of inscrutability.

Many, in fact most, have interpreted this colorful writing as the reflection of a pessimistic view of reality that grew out of the bleak prospects of Judaism after the exile. The theory is that, discouraged with life on the earth, the people's poets held out to them a life under new heavens on a new earth. But for this to be true, the poetic imagery must be taken literally, which is death to the intent

12. Column III, 29-33

of a poet. The language must also have a deep pessimism as its theme, whereas, in fact, it stresses new beginnings.

The apocalyptists spun their webs of fancy on a loom of hope. They employed myth to help their readers live life and transcend death. If they proclaimed an end, it was in the interests of a fresh start. The new humanity sketched out had, to be sure, elements of the angelic and the heavenly. But how else could the reality of the new age be conveyed, with its setting aside of all the distressing limitations of the present one?

Jesus spoke at times in the poetic language that was his inheritance from Daniel, Zechariah, and the non-biblical apocalypses that preceded him.

The heavens and the earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.<sup>13</sup>

During that period, after trials of every sort, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not shed its light, stars will fall from the heavens, and the heavenly hosts will be shaken. Then the son of man will be seen coming in great glory. I assure you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.<sup>14</sup>

Matthew even appears to have accommodated a judgment-scene poem, in which  $\chi\eta\omega\eta$  had been the judge, to Jesus:

When the son of man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, he will sit upon his royal throne and all the nations will be assembled before him. Then he will separate them into two groups as a shepherd separates sheep and goats.<sup>15</sup>

From utterances like these attributed to Jesus it has been assumed that he was apocalyptic, that is to say, nonrealistic, in his outlook. It is also widely assumed that he expected the end of the world to come soon. One needs to be ignorant of the kind of Hebrew speech attributed to him to make a claim like that with certainty. He expected judgment to come in the future. He expected it

13. Lk 21:33 14. Mk 13:24-26, 30 15. Mt 25:31-32

to come suddenly. He was certain it would come. "Soon" is the apocalyptic word for this expectation, but it lacks the ordinary connotations of time.

Jesus had an urgency of tone about the reality of the impending crisis that few in his time who were interested in the everyday choices of Jewish life shared. He was too deeply interested in continuing patterns of human conduct to be accused of thinking that things were, in Edwin Albee's title, "All Over."

He preached, rather, a new beginning, which his own generation was going to witness.

He predicted the impending end of "this age."

For those who came to believe in him, under God he brought it about.

## The Man Raised from the Dead

MOST WRITING ABOUT THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS IS ARGUMENTATIVE. It wishes to establish that it could have happened or could not have happened. Sometimes it goes on the assumption that, since it happened, the human race must do something about it. The authors of the gospels and Saint Paul did not go about it that way. The book of Acts does.

Reading what the gospels have to say about Jesus' risen life—and they nowhere describe him as rising, only as risen—is instructive. The tone is laconic, direct, matter-of-fact. You find words like "perplexed," "frightened," and "amazed" to describe the reactions of the early experiencers of his presence as risen, but that is not the general tenor of the accounts. They are concerned with an ordinary, dialogue-type encounter with him, at least those that come after the accounts of the earliest appearances to certain women near his tomb on the first day of the week.

## JESUS IN FOCUS

One wonders how it came about that the most unusual happenings in this sequence are reported in a tone we might employ to tell of a trip to a nearby town. The stories of the treatment of Jesus by his captors and his progress to the place of execution are much more dramatically recounted. The accounts of his appearing behind (through?) locked doors, or telling certain women that his friends should go to Galilee where he would meet them, are models of sobriety. After he is risen, he becomes as if an occasional visitor from another sphere.

The key to the narratives is that he is a visitor not from another sphere but from another age, a new eon that has begun with him.

It is impossible to understand what Jesus' rising from the dead is about if we think of it as the resuscitation of a dead man. He is not described as starting life over again. He did not mythically represent new vegetation after the rains of winter are over, or human life perpetually coming forth from the dark womb of earth. He was, for the Jews who first believed in him, the "first-fruits" of a harvest of all the dead. If you had the faith of the Pharisees, his appearance would have startled you, but it would not have surprised you. You would have been stunned chiefly that he was *alone*. That he was risen in the body was something that ultimately you could cope with.

It seems strange, at this distance of years, to try to re-create a world we have such sparse information about. We cannot reconstruct ancient Jewish religious thought and make it ours. We can save ourselves a lot of headaches, though, if we realize how much preparedness there was in those times for the notion of being raised from the dead.

Preachers like to say of Jesus' disciples: "Their hopes were dashed. They were fugitives because of their association with him. They were not likely, after forty hours of cowed subjection, to have come up with a tale of victory over death." That may be true. It probably is true. But it is not the point. The point is what his disciples were mentally ready for, given the initial shock of encounter. We of the Western hemisphere are prepared for reports about technological possibilities that the Papuan bushman cannot take in. An Iowa farm couple can absorb readily what two prisoners of Second Avenue could not make sense of. In the same way, a person's being

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raised from the dead as the beginning— however meager—of the age that was to come was an idea that all the witnesses of Jesus' risen state could handle. They may not have been expecting it that morning, but seeing him they did not shout "Ghost!" or have visions of Bela Lugosi. They had had a couple of centuries of preparation for the notion—quite strange to us—of the vindication of the just through living again in the flesh. Since the Maccabean revolt there had been renewed faith in what God would do for those faithful to him who had died at the hands of gentile tyrants.

This is not to say that Jesus' rising from the dead was dreamed up because the whole culture was ready for it. It is an attempt to situate it in the religious thought of the times. Any Jews who saw him, or thought they did, would immediately begin to think different thoughts from ours. We would say, "I'm seeing things!" And, in fact, Luke, who does not seem to know Jewish thought very well, has the disciples labeling the women's tale "nonsense."<sup>1</sup> After an initial shock no less than ours, Pharisaic Jews like Peter and James would think, "God's reign has begun! But where are the others?"

It is a mistake, in a sense, to keep saying "rising" and "risen" about Jesus, because the earliest accounts in the gospels are all in the passive voice: "He was raised" or "has been raised."<sup>2</sup> This betrays the conviction of the writers that the God of Israel was the chief actor. Probably the later view of Christians concerning Jesus' power, or his coming forth from the tomb as proving something about *him*, accounted for the translations of the verb as active. But for the evangelists, the deed proved something about *God*. He had not forgotten his servant Jesus, the one he had sent "with miracles, wonders, and signs as his credentials. . . . God freed him from death's bitter pangs and raised him up again, for it was impossible that death should keep its hold on him."<sup>3</sup>