

Covenant Faith vs. Roman Pincers

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

Viewing the Lake of Galilee from the Mt. of Beatitudes, we may try to imagine what was in the minds of the Jewish fishermen 2000 years ago, before they encountered Jesus. On the one hand, they had the Jewish covenant faith, as enunciated in Deuteronomy 11: 13-17

It shall happen, if you shall listen diligently to my commandments which I command you this day, to love Yahweh your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul,

that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, and your new wine, and your oil.

I will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full.

Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them;

and the anger of Yahweh be kindled against you, and he shut up the sky, so that there shall be no rain, and the land shall not yield its fruit; and you perish quickly from off the good land which Yahweh gives you.

These words appear often in Jewish ritual. Pious Jews recite them twice a day. A scribe writes them on a small piece of parchment, which is placed in a container and nailed to the doorpost of the house. The Hebrew for doorpost is mezuzah, and the container with the parchment got that name.

The covenant as it appears in Deuteronomy 11 is the earliest written statement of the notion that God rewards the good and punishes the wicked. Its classic illustration (including background for understanding much of what follows) appears in the account of Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel.

Such was God's covenant with Israel as the Jewish fishermen on the lake understood it 2000 years ago. That would have been in their minds.

Something else too was in their minds: what they saw around them. Through their control of the roads, the Romans had the land in a pincers:

The fishermen saw Hippos and Gadera: two cities of the {tips2}Decapolis. A league of cities under Roman auspices. Sometimes ten are mentioned, sometimes more. According to Josephus (War: 3, 446), the biggest was Scythopolis (Beth Shean). It was the key link city west of the Jordan, whereas the others were east of the river. They included Damascus (an honorary member), Hippos, Gadera, Gerasa (Jerash), Pella and Philadelphia (Amman). Other cities were later added to the original ten. In the first century AD, however, no coins minted in these cities mention a Decapolis. Matthew (4:25) and Mark (5:20, 7:31) write of Jesus' passing through it, but they may have been using a term first current in their own time. All other historical references to the league date from after the outbreak of the Jewish revolt in 66 AD.

(See Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge, Jerusalem, Carta, 2006*, pp. 361-362.) Decapolis, once under Jewish sovereignty, now dominated by Rome. In the Jordan Valley to the south lay Scythopolis (a.k.a. Beth Shean), patronized by Dionysus. On the lake itself were Tiberias, Magdala and Bethsaida; these were "mixed" cities, pagan and Jewish. Farther west was Sepphoris, with its cult of Dionysus, and beyond it Ptolemais (Acco), dedicated to Zeus-Jupiter, not to mention Caesarea Maritima, dominated by the divine Augustus. Rome, in short, was everywhere.

On the one hand, then, the fisherman had their covenant faith, and on the other hand, here was Rome. These two things stood in apparent contradiction.

 Foreign conquest and the covenant faith hadn't always been in contradiction. In earlier times of suffering (say, when the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom called "Israel," or when the Babylonians took Jerusalem) the pain could be seen as God's just punishment, because the people had not kept the covenant. But when the Jews returned from their Babylonian exile (530 BC), they had learned their lesson: they no longer worshipped foreign gods. This was even more purely the case after the successful Hasmoneans: family of Judah Maccabee ("the hammer") and his brothers, who revolted successfully against the Greek Empire in 167 BC. They purified and re-dedicated the Temple in Jerusalem, establishing the festival of Hanukah ("dedication"). They ruled till 63 BC, and their domain extended almost as far as King David's. Hasmonean revolt against the Greeks. So the question arose: Why are we not sovereign in our own land? Why do we not have the place among the nations that God promised us? Why are we trapped in the Roman pincers?

The question had an economic side. The fishermen, as well as the peasants, were kept at a mere subsistence level by the Roman emperor, his client (in Galilee that was Tetrarch Herod Antipas), the urban aristocrats, the tax collectors and the brokers (who sold, for example, fishing licenses). (More...)

Why the Roman pincers? Confronted with this problem, religious Jews did then what they have always done: they searched the Bible for an answer.

They found it in Micah 5:

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,

being small among the clans of Judah,

out of you one will come forth to me that is to be ruler in Israel;

whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.

Therefore he will abandon them until the time that she who is in labor gives birth.

Then the rest of his brothers will return to the children of Israel.

He shall stand, and shall shepherd in the strength of Yahweh,

in the majesty of the name of Yahweh his God:

and they will live, for then he will be great to the ends of the earth.

The decisive hint was in the words: "until the time/When she who is in labor gives birth." Labor... birthpangs... the birth of the Messiah! As soon as that connection flashed through someone's mind, the Roman pincers became explainable. The thought might have gone something like this: "Just as a woman in labor undergoes pains before the joyous event, so our time is in pain, because the Messiah is about to be born! Indeed we are suffering. But it is not an arbitrary or punitive suffering. It is rather the prelude to God's redemption of the world, which is about to occur: soon, in this generation, tomorrow, next week, next month, very soon!" Compare {jtips2}Mark 13:8, "For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will also be famines. These things are merely the beginning of birth pangs." Romans 8:22, "For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now."|Mark 13:8 and Romans 8:22.{/jtips2}

Various groups took shape around the idea that God was about to re-enter history, establishing His kingdom. Among them were the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as John the Baptist and his followers, some of the Rabbis, and the militant groups that undertook revolts against Rome.

The fishermen heard the message from one who walked along the lakeshore, saying to people,

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4: 17).

The question is, Did it happen? Was the Messiah born: at this time, in these circumstances? That is the question about which Jews and Christians have disputed ever since.

What starts out looking like a bit of geography (all that about rain and springs and roads) probably has a great deal to do with the fact that we are who we are. Those roads became, 2000 years ago, the Roman pincers. Out of their apparent contradiction with the covenant faith developed the belief that the Messiah was about to arrive.