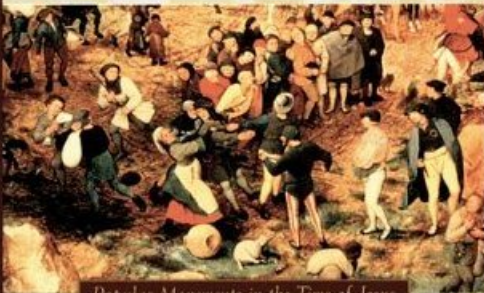


# BANDITS PROPHETS & MESSIAHS



*Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus*

Richard A. Horsley  
WITH John S. Hanson

# **BANDITS, PROPHETS, AND MESSIAHS**

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of Jesus*

**Richard A. Horsley  
and  
John S. Hanson**

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# CONTENTS

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<b>Acknowledgements</b> . . . . .	viii
<b>Table of Abbreviations</b> . . . . .	ix
<b>Introduction</b> . . . . .	xi
Rationale and Purposes . . . . .	xi
Methods and Limitations . . . . .	xviii
<b>Chapter One—Historical Background</b> . . . . .	1
Israel's Origins as a Free Peasantry in Covenant with God . . . . .	5
Establishment of the Monarchy over Israel and Prophetic Protest . . . . .	6
Judea under the Persian Empire: The Establishment of the Priestly Aristocracy at the Head of the Temple-Community . . . . .	8
Hellenistic Rule: Political Subjection, Cultural Imperialism, and Popular Rebellion . . . . .	10
Hellenistic "Reform" by the Jewish Aristocracy . . . . .	12
Popular Resistance and the Program to Suppress the Jewish Law . . . . .	13
The Resurgence of Apocalypticism . . . . .	16
The Popular Revolt and the Rise of the Hasmonean Dynasty . . . . .	20
Origins of the Qumran Community (Essenes) and the Pharisees . . . . .	23
Roman Domination: Oppression and Revolt . . . . .	29
Roman Conquest and Herod's Regime . . . . .	30
Client Kings, Roman Governors, and Popular Protests (4 BCE-66 CE) . . . . .	34
The Great Revolt (66-70) . . . . .	43

<b>Chapter Two—Ancient Jewish Social Banditry . . . .</b>	<b>48</b>
The Characteristics and Conditions of Social Banditry . . . . .	48
The Socioeconomic Conditions of Jewish Social Banditry and Other Popular Movements . . . . .	52
Social Banditry in Palestine . . . . .	63
Relations between Brigands and Peasants . . . . .	69
Jewish Banditry and the Revolt against Rome . . . . .	77
<b>Chapter Three—Royal Pretenders and Popular     Messianic Movements . . . . .</b>	<b>88</b>
The Tradition of Popular Kingship . . . . .	92
Popular Kingship in Ancient Israel . . . . .	94
The Official Royal Ideology and Its Unpopularity . .	96
“Messianic” Memories and Expectations . . . . .	98
Conditions of the Revival of the Tradition of Popular Kingship . . . . .	102
Resurgence of Messianic Expectations among Learned Groups . . . . .	102
Sociohistorical Conditions and Popular Expectations . . . . .	106
Popular Kings and Their Movements . . . . .	110
Popular Messianic Uprisings at the Death of Herod . . . . .	111
Royal Pretenders and Messianic Movements during the Jewish Revolt (66-70) . . . . .	118
The Bar Kochba Revolt (132-135 CE): The Final Messianic Movement in Jewish Antiquity . . . .	127
<b>Chapter Four—Prophets and Prophetic Movements</b>	<b>135</b>
Traditions of Two Types of Popular Prophets and Prophetic Expectations . . . . .	136
The Prototypical Charismatic Leaders of Early Israel: The Judges, Moses, and Joshua . . . . .	136
Prophets as Both Messengers and Leaders of Movements . . . . .	138
The Classical Oracular Prophets . . . . .	141
Postexilic Prophets and Prophetic Expectations . . .	146
The Continued Appearance of Oracular Prophets . . . . .	147
Expectation of a Future Prophet . . . . .	148
Memory of Yahweh’s Great Acts of Deliverance through the Leadership of a Prophet . . . . .	150
The Relation of Prophets and Apocalypticism . . .	151

The Absence of the Two Types of Popular Prophets among the Literate Groups . . . . .	153
Seers and Scriptural Interpretation among the Essenes . . . . .	153
The Relative Lack of Prophecy among the Pharisees . . . . .	157
Two Types of Popular Prophets at the Time of Jesus . .	160
Popular Prophetic Movements . . . . .	161
Oracular Prophets . . . . .	172
<b>Chapter Five—Fourth Philosophy, Sicarii, Zealots . .</b>	<b>190</b>
The Fourth Philosophy . . . . .	190
The Sicarii . . . . .	200
The New Strategy of the Sicarii . . . . .	202
Effects of Agitation by the Sicarii . . . . .	208
The Brief and Limited Role of the Sicarii in the Jewish Revolt . . . . .	211
The Zealots . . . . .	216
The Sequence of Events Involving the Zealots . . . .	217
Zealot Origins: A Product of the Roman Reconquest of Judea . . . . .	220
Zealot Attacks on the Herodian Nobility . . . . .	223
The Zealots' Election of New High Priests: An Egalitarian Theocracy . . . . .	229
The High Priests' Assault on the Zealots . . . . .	237
<b>Conclusion—A Typology of Popular Movements and         Their Implications . . . . .</b>	<b>244</b>
<b>Chronological Chart . . . . .</b>	<b>260</b>
<b>Map . . . . .</b>	<b>262</b>
<b>Index of Citations . . . . .</b>	<b>263</b>
<b>Index of Modern Authors . . . . .</b>	<b>270</b>



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# TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

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AB	Anchor Bible
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> , ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Studies</i>
IDB	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
IDBSup	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> , <i>Supplement</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series

TC Theological Currents  
 TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*

## **BOOKS OF THE APOCRYPHA AND PSEUDEPIGRAPHA**

2 Bar.	2 Baruch
1 Enoch	1 Enoch
4 Ezra	4 Ezra
1-2 Macc.	1-2 Maccabees
Ps(s). Sol.	Psalm(s) of Solomon
Sir.	Sirach (Ben Sira)
T. Issachar	Testament of Issachar
T. Levi	Testament of Levi
T. Reuben	Testament of Reuben
T. Simeon	Testament of Simeon

## **DEAD SEA SCROLLS**

1QM	Milhamah (War Scroll)
1QpHab	Pesher (Commentary) on Habakkuk from Qumran Cave 1
1QSa	Appendix to 1QS (Rule of the Community, or Manual of Discipline)
4QFlor	Florilegium (or <i>Eschatological Midrashim</i> ) from Qumran Cave 4
4QpNah	Pesher (Commentary) on Nahum from Qumran Cave 4
4QTest	Testimonia Text from Qumran Cave 4

## **JOSEPHUS**

<i>Ag. Ap.</i>	<i>Against Apion</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
<i>J.W.</i>	<i>Jewish War</i>

# INTRODUCTION

---

## **RATIONALE AND PURPOSES**

Two events that took place in Jewish Palestine during the mid-first century C.E. have been highly significant for subsequent history: the career and death of Jesus of Nazareth and the great Jewish revolt of 66-70. Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet from the remote district of Galilee, became the focal figure for what has developed into Christianity and become the dominant religious faith and established religious institution in the West. Little more than a generation after the crucifixion of Jesus, the Palestinian Jewish people erupted in a massive revolt against Roman domination which took more than four years to suppress. The consequent devastation of Palestine, including the destruction of the temple and much of the city of Jerusalem, became a great turning point for both the Jewish and Christian religious traditions. In reaction against the apocalyptic spirit and revolutionary impulse, sobered Pharisaic sages laid the foundation not only of a reconstructed Jewish society, but also of what became Rabbinic Judaism. As a result of the Roman suppression of the Jewish revolt, moreover, the nascent Christian movement turned its orientation away from Jerusalem and the temple as a geographic and symbolic center.

In both of these events the Jewish peasantry was the dynamic force, the original source of historical change and

its ramifications. Jesus came from the peasant village of Nazareth. To judge from the synoptic Gospel tradition, which rarely even mentions any city other than Jerusalem, he spent most of his career moving from village to village. In the most distinctive form of his teaching, the parables, he draws analogies from the experiences of Galilean peasant life. Similarly, in the Jewish revolt, except for the outbreak of the insurrection in Jerusalem itself, the peasantry produced the vast majority of those who originally drove out the Romans and who resisted the Roman reconquest of the country. Indeed, in any traditional society such as Jewish Palestine in the first century C.E., the peasantry comprise 90 percent or more of the population.<sup>1</sup>

Yet until very recently, the modern Western assumption has been that the common people have had little to do with the making of history.<sup>2</sup> Insofar as any have ever been aware of the existence of peasants, it is commonly believed that they were simply very conservative folk pursuing their traditional way of life and “vegetating in the teeth of time.” Standard treatments of Jewish history and of the background of Jesus and the Gospels almost always discuss groups and figures from the ruling class and from the literate middle stratum of the society, e.g., the Herodians, the high priests and Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes (especially prominent since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947), and usually also the Zealots.<sup>3</sup> However, all of these groups taken together constituted only a small fraction of the Jewish people at the time of Jesus. Our handbooks give us little or nothing on the other 90 percent, many of whom, we have reason to believe, often supplied the motive force in the history of this period. The reasons for such a gap, such an ignorance of the bulk of the population in an otherwise heavily researched period, are not difficult to trace. Most determinative has been the basic orientation of New Testament studies. As a field whose principal purpose has been to interpret sacred literature, it has generally focused almost exclusively on literature, with corresponding attention to the

ruling elites and other literate groups that produced or appeared in the literary records. The other obvious reason for the neglect of the common people is the paucity of sources and evidence.

The Jewish peasantry, however, were largely illiterate and produced no literature, except perhaps for the sayings of, and reports about, Jesus of Nazareth, which were remembered and developed in oral form until written down in the New Testament Gospels. Hence we moderns have almost no access to what the peasants were doing and thinking. Yet despite the fact that the ordinary people of the time did not produce any equivalent to the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Essenes, or the halakic rulings of the Pharisees, or apocalypses of certain other scribes, they did gather together in certain types of groups and movements, as we know from the Jewish historian Josephus, the Christian gospel tradition, and other fragmentary reports. Hence the *first* reason for writing this book is to analyze and present some of the movements and leaders among the common people in the late second temple period.

A second reason for this study is that Palestinian Jewish history must be critically reexamined now that the old "Zealot" concept has been shown to be a historical fiction, with no basis in historical evidence. Since at least the turn of the century, the concept of "the Zealots" has played an important role in scholarly writing on ancient Jewish history and the background of the New Testament as well as in both scholarly and popular views of Jesus. Despite the warnings of a few distinguished American scholars,<sup>4</sup> the view became enshrined in important handbooks and dictionaries in the field that at the time of Jesus there existed a religiopolitical movement of national liberation called "the Zealots."<sup>5</sup> According to the usual scholarly construct, the Zealot party was the same as the Fourth Philosophy founded by Judas of Galilee in opposition to enrollment for the tribute imposed along with direct Roman rule in 6 C.E., and its members,

called interchangeably “Sicarii” and “brigands” by Josephus, agitated for Jewish liberation until they finally provoked the massive revolt in 66. This view has served an important function in the concerns of many modern theologians and biblical scholars. As the supposed fanatical advocates of violent revolution against the Romans, the “Zealots” served as a convenient foil over against which to portray Jesus of Nazareth as a sober prophet of pacifist love of one’s enemies. Especially in the last two decades, many European and American scholars, responding to domestic protest and Third-World movements of national liberation, attempted to ward off any implication that Jesus had advocated active resistance of any sort to the established order by contrasting Jesus with the “Zealots”.<sup>6</sup> The “Zealots”, leaders of a Jewish people united against Roman domination, served equally well as a historical precedent for the Zionist cause or the modern Jewish state fighting for its survival against hostile neighboring states. The ancient fortress of Masada, where supposedly the last remaining band of Zealots held out valiantly against the Roman siege, finally committing mass suicide rather than “surrender” to the alien conquerors, became a rallying symbol for modern Israel: “Masada shall not fall again!”<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately for these studies (and the concerns of their authors), “the Zealots” as a movement of rebellion against Roman rule did not come into existence until the winter of 67-68 C.E., that is, until the middle of the great revolt.<sup>8</sup> There is simply no evidence for an organized, religiously motivated movement advocating armed revolt against Rome from 6-66 C.E. Otherwise, for the sixty years prior to the revolt there was an assortment of separate and unconnected movements and events. Among these diverse movements, the group called Sicarii and the groups properly called brigands were not only different from the Zealots proper, but were themselves distinctive social movements (as we shall explain further).<sup>9</sup> The recognition that “the Zealots” is a modern scholarly construct and has little relation to actual Jewish history in the

first century will require several reformulations and openness to new perceptions about first-century Jewish society.

First, most of the ideas believed to be distinctive to the Zealots, almost all of them relatively widely attested in our limited sources, were probably common Palestinian Jewish ideas. Except for the high priests and Sadducees, the various Jewish groups of the time were distinguished less by any differences in theological-political concepts and eschatological orientation than by their actions or application of those ideas and their particular social-economic interests. Second, once we remove the log of “the Zealots” from our eye, it may be possible to discern significant similarities (as well as differences) between Jesus and one or another of the distinctive movements that previously were lumped together, artificially forming one monolithic liberation movement. Third, the rallying symbol of Masada as the Zealots’ last stand may be left without any historical basis. Fourth, opposition to the Roman rule of Jewish Palestine may have been far more widespread and spontaneous, although perhaps less politically conscious, than previously imagined when opposition was believed to be concentrated in the one organized Zealot movement that was supposedly attempting to provoke revolution for sixty years before it succeeded. Nearly all of the movements and events were anti-Roman in orientation, and especially the more organized movements led by popular prophets or messiahs were consciously seeking a particular sort of liberation. Finally, nearly all of the separate movements were popular groups directed against the Jewish ruling elite as well as against Roman rule.

Once “the Zealots” as a unified and decades-old liberation front is seen to be a modern fiction with no basis in historical evidence, in what terms do we now understand the developments in Jewish society of the first century c.e., in particular, the background of Jesus and the resistance to Roman rule that eventually erupted in widespread revolt? The situation in Jewish society was clearly more complex



than imagined under the concept of a single organized resistance movement. The social unrest took a variety of concrete social forms. More precisely stated, therefore, the second reason for this study is to examine and to delineate these concrete social forms of popular unrest. Of the movements to be examined, the most politically conscious and deliberate were the Fourth Philosophy and the Sicarii, or "dagger men," who carried out a program of symbolic assassination against members of the priestly aristocracy in the late fifties and sixties—a movement led by, and apparently comprised largely of, "intelligentsia". But far more frequent and prominent were the many movements among the peasantry. Besides the widespread banditry, which became epidemic just prior to the revolt of 66-70, there were popular movements which appear to have been distinctive to Jewish society. These include messianic movements and prophetic movements, as well as the occurrence of a type of popular prophet reminiscent of the great oracular prophets of Hebrew scriptures. A reading and analysis of the limited evidence for these movements and leaders should help us gain a clearer sense of what was occurring among the people at the time of Jesus and just prior to the great revolt.

A third reason for this study also pertains to the delineation of these popular movements. New Testament studies, already oriented to sacred *literature*, seeks to interpret the *meaning* of scriptural words, prophecies, stories, symbols, etc. As such, it is drawn to a focus on ideas and the history of ideas, aided by its close relation with theology. Furthermore, the interpretation of the significance of Jesus for Christian faith and theology is of central importance for New Testament studies. Thus, even historical-critical studies of New Testament Christology, interpreting the roles and titles applied to Jesus, tend to concentrate on Jewish "expectations" of "the messiah" or "eschatological prophet," etc.<sup>10</sup> We are now becoming aware of two ironies about this procedure. Evidence for such "expectations" is taken from literature, that is, material produced by literate groups such as the

Pharisees, who were apparently (at least initially) uninterested in, if not simply opposed to, Jesus and his movement. More importantly, in recent decades it has been realized that there is precious little textual (or other) evidence prior to the time of Jesus for those synthetically constructed "job descriptions" which Jesus was found to fulfill so nicely.<sup>11</sup> It may turn out that the most secure bits of evidence available, prior to the time of Jesus, for comparative material for christological interpretation of his role(s) and socioreligious significance are not "expectations" found in Jewish literature, written by intellectuals, but the actual concrete leaders and movements among the peasants, datable within two or three decades of Jesus' own activity.

There is also a fourth and more contemporary reason for the material this book presents. Every generation brings new and different questions to biblical history and other traditions of significance to us. In the northern Atlantic countries, where the peasantry had almost ceased to exist in the wake of twentieth-century industrialization and urbanization, we have only recently rediscovered the existence of peasants. The aristocratic elite or governing classes of traditional societies have almost always looked upon the peasants who made their own more luxurious life-style possible as somehow less than fully human. Many of us in the modern West have simply been oblivious to the existence of a peasantry. Marx and his early followers were aware of the reality of peasants, but they did not have much respect for, or confidence in, them (as a revolutionary force). Lenin, however, and especially Mao, realized that peasants could be mobilized to effect the overthrow of autocratic or imperialist regimes that had oppressed them. Nevertheless, even after the French experience in Vietnam and Algeria, it came as a surprise to Americans that the peasantry could be, as Barrington Moore suggests, the dynamite that destroys the old order.<sup>12</sup> With the recent American experience in Vietnam, the rise of liberation theology and base communities in Latin

America, and our increasing awareness that sharply repressive regimes in Latin America and elsewhere can evoke organized resistance, particularly among the peasantry, we are sharpening our interest in the Israelite and Jewish peasantry which figures so prominently in biblical history. Thus, insofar as the material below helps to illuminate conditions and events among the Jewish peasantry at the time and more indirectly to illuminate the activity of Jesus and his movement, the book may be relevant to some of the new questions now being brought to biblical history.

## **METHODS AND LIMITATIONS**

This study of popular movements and leaders is limited and simple. By means of the usual techniques of historical-critical analysis, we are attempting to delineate the social history of selected groups. Perhaps the most distinctive—and problematic—aspect of this study is its deliberate focus on popular groups. Awareness of and interest in the peasantry are relatively recent, but not unprecedented, in biblical studies and Jewish history. In recent years Hebrew Bible scholars have dealt with early Israel in terms of a peasant society.<sup>13</sup> There are also indications that New Testament scholars and historians of Jewish history are realizing that Palestinian society in the first centuries B.C.E./C.E. consisted largely of peasants, and are beginning to raise the appropriate sociological questions.<sup>14</sup> Once the importance of the peasantry in biblical history has been recognized, however, one wants to know far more than is in fact possible. At the outset we must acknowledge that there are serious limitations on our study. We are limited in certain ways both by the sources available and by the elementary stage of development of our analytical tools as applied to the sources.

The Jewish peasantry left no literary remains, except, as already mentioned, their influence on the gospel traditions. The amount of archaeological evidence is at present extremely limited, although archaeologists of the period are

beginning to shift more of their investigations from the remains of the urban locus of the ruling class to the remains of agricultural producers in villages and towns. The principal source of our fragmentary knowledge remains the reports of Josephus in his histories of the Jewish people and the Jewish War.<sup>15</sup> But even this source is complicated by the fact that he is biased against, and even hostile to, the common people. Josephus wrote from the standpoint of a former general of Jewish forces in Galilee fighting against the Romans after he duplicitously tried to check the progress of the revolt in anticipation of Roman victory. It was in Rome and for the Roman victors and their upper classes that he wrote, in their terms, of the remote and alien province of Judea. Similarly, his basic sympathies for the upper levels of Judean society are also evident. As for the peasants, who occupy so much of his narrative in *War*, they should stick, he implies, to producing crops and leave the conduct of serious affairs to the wellborn and educated, such as Josephus himself.

Certain literary features of Josephus's writings also make the use of his material more difficult. Both *Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities* have literary models, and each contains occasional allusions to prominent authors.<sup>16</sup> Both of these features, among others, serve to enhance Josephus's status as author and apologist. At the same time, however, they tend to obscure, intentionally or not, precisely what we seek to uncover. For example, as has long been noted, the sketch of John of Gischala, important to this study (see chapter 5), seems heavily affected by Sallust's characterization of Catiline, despite the fact that Josephus had firsthand dealings with John and harbored intense dislike of him. Further complicating our reading of Josephus, though not taken as a special issue in the following chapters, is the fact that a comparison of *War*, *Antiquities*, and the highly apologetic *Life* reveals many contradictions or differences in emphasis, some directly affecting our material. The differing motives in each of these works explain some of these tensions. In general, however, these works are self-serving, pro-Roman,