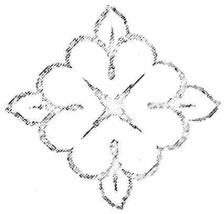
THE FIRST MESSIAH

INVESTIGATING THE SAVIOR BEFORE JESUS



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elder son, Hyrcanus II, as high priest, and charged him with instituting the Pharisaic statutes in the Temple. The state now stood behind the Pharisaic vision of the law.

But as it turned out, the crisis was not thereby resolved. It had simply undergone a metamorphosis: the outs were in, and the ins, out. The issues remained, the enmity remained, the violence would continue.

THE JEWISH NATION was an animal caught in a trap, chewing off its own leg. The situation was ripe for what happened next. A millenarian prophet arose to lead a crisis cult. And he would become more than a prophet: he would be the first messiah of recorded history.

Before him the sources know no messiah. In the two centuries after him, like a mid-Atlantic hurricane, messianism fed upon the currents, growing, gaining force, sometimes swirling shoreward to batter those in its path with revolution. Twice the messianic idea helped propel its nation of origin into war with Rome and its legions. The first time, Jerusalem was burned to the ground and the Temple destroyed. The second time, half a million Jews lost their lives and the southern towns of Judaea were obliterated. In the decades following this archetypal messiah, other men repeatedly stepped forward to claim the role he debuted and to lead messianic movements among the Jews.

Jesus of Nazareth was one of them.

The name of the first messiah is nowhere stated outright, but a few clues in the Dead Sea Scrolls suggest that it may have been Judah. That is what I shall call him. His own followers called him the Teacher of Righteousness. This charismatic figure was able to express what many people were feeling but could not articulate. He began to caress, to shape anew, the inchoate notions of the myth-dream of Israel. The conceptual artifact that he created was beautiful and immensely powerful. Its repercussions reach to our own day.

ENTER THE PROPHET

Judah stepped forth from the highest ranks of the Jerusalem priesthood, a man well acquainted with the corridors of power and the politics of the royal court. About sixty years old, he was one of the greatest minds of his

generation, and he had exercised that mind all of his life in the study of Holy Writ.

Now he confronted his weary nation with an urgent message from God. The nation's crisis had come about, Judah declared, because the people and their leaders had sinned, abandoning the ways of God that their forefathers had honored. They must now return to those ways. They must enter a *covenant of repentance,* a New Covenant.[3] Then would follow blessing, the wondrous era of peace and prosperity of which the biblical prophets had spoken.

But if the people refused, they would be destroyed and the nation would fall, for the Latter Days were at hand. Recognizing his as the last generation, the millennial generation, Judah called for decision. The time to repent was at hand.

Judah presented the people with Ten Commandments, the essence of his New Covenant, as Moses had done with the original covenant at Sinai. (Actually, there were more than ten, but if you examine the Bible carefully, you will find that the same is true of Moses' list.) In typical crisis-cult fashion, Judah's law encapsulated the divine message:

> *You shall separate yourselves from the Children of Hell.*
>
> *You shall renounce wealth acquired by wickedness, which defiles gifts and offerings dedicated to the Temple, and the Temple treasury as well.*
>
> *You shall not rob the poor of God's people, for that is to plunder widows and murder orphans.*
>
> *You shall distinguish between what is ritually unclean and what is pure, and so teach the difference between the holy and the profane.*
>
> *You shall observe the Sabbath as is proper, and the festivals and Day of Atonement according to the teachings of the New Covenant.*
>
> *You shall offer the sacrifices according to the exact rules for each.*
>
> *You shall love one another as yourselves.*
>
> *You shall fortify the poor, the needy and the stranger.*
>
> *You shall each of you seek the other's welfare.*

You shall not deal treacherously with your own flesh and blood.

You shall refrain from illicit marriage according to the law.

You shall reprove one another according to the commandment.

You shall not carry a grudge from one day to the next.

You shall separate yourselves from every type of ritual uncleanness in the proper way.

You shall none of you defile your holy spirit, avoiding that as God has taught.[4]

The first and foremost requirement of Judah's New Covenant was the one most provocative to authorities: *You shall not enter the Temple to kindle God's altar in vain.* By "vain kindling" Judah alluded to Malachi 3:10, which states that offering no sacrifices is preferable to offering them wrongly. With these words and without the slightest nuance, Judah condemned the Pharisaic laws taking hold in the Temple.

And he went further. He charged the people to refuse support to the Temple activities so long as the Pharisee laws held forth. Judah was convinced that the nation had gone awry in how it celebrated the festivals, especially that holiest day of the year, the Day of Atonement. Under Pharisee direction, these celebrations were taking place on the wrong days, which meant that they were null and void. Therefore, lacking atonement, the people were still in their sins, and they did not even realize it. This sin was provoking the crisis.

A long and bitter dispute lay behind Judah's charges about the festivals. For more than a century, priestly groups had been advocating that a solar calendar of 364 days be used in the Temple. This calendar, they argued, was once used by the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; only later had Israel forgotten it. Theirs was a nationalist claim and also an implicit criticism of the calendar of the Pharisees, which was a variant of those used in the surrounding Gentile nations.[5] The Pharisee calendar, a 354-day lunar-based calendar, was more or less identical to the modern Jewish version. To the nationalist priests it was also a calendar of the Gentiles.

Despite the feuding about the calendar, earlier priestly groups had been willing to participate in the Temple activities; Judah himself had once

been among them. But now, seeing with the clarity of new revelation, he thought differently. To obtain God's blessing, the nation must return to God's laws—all of them, including the proper calendar. Half measures were useless.

Judah's message was radical and divisive. No one could miss its implicit criticisms of the royal family's behavior. Controversy stirred within the most powerful circles in Jerusalem. The Pharisees—who were hardly, as Elizabethans would say, "secret in displeasure"—went on the attack.

UNAPPRECIATED by scholars for what they really are, Judah's words have come down to us in a work known as the *Thanksgiving Hymns.* A copy of this writing was among the original group of seven Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts discovered in 1947 by an Arab shepherd, Muhammad edh-Dhib, in a cave now known as Cave One. Later six additional copies of the *Thanksgiving Hymns* turned up in another cave (Cave Four), and a few postage-stamp-sized scraps of one more copy were salvaged from the original cave. By combining all eight of these fragmentary copies of the *Hymns,* it is possible to reconstruct the original form of the best preserved manuscript. It comprised twenty-eight columns (a column being the ancient equivalent of a page), on which were inscribed about forty separate hymns and discourses.

All but two or three of these hymns are couched in the first person. They share with the other Dead Sea Scrolls and 99 percent of all ancient Jewish literature something that strikes us as odd: they contain no signature; they name no author. Charles McGrath, editor of the *New York Times Book Review,* once opined, "In an ideal world every book would be anonymous—read for itself, not for who wrote or published it."[6] Perhaps. Still, that ideal world existed once, among the ancients of the Near East, only to give way before the Greek cult of personality. Anonymity has been unsatisfying to us ever since. We want to know.

Consequently, a notable problem of scholarship has been to figure out: Who was this "I" of the *Hymns?* The key that turned the lock has proven to be literary criticism, the techniques that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars developed when they initiated the enterprise of modern biblical studies. Gert Jeremias was among the first to apply the method to the *Hymns.*[7] Writing in 1963, he showed that two distinct levels of authorship are mixed together in these writings.

On one level, the "I" of the *Hymns* is only representative. Here the pronoun stands for a group, not a single person. At other times, though, the "I" makes strong claims of authority and distances himself from others. Jeremias went on to note that the "authoritative" hymns also employ a vocabulary that is self-consistent and that differs from the rest of the hymns. For Jeremias, the individual "I" was the Teacher of Righteousness.

In a recent doctoral dissertation, Michael Douglas has advanced our understanding with a more comprehensive study of the levels within the *Hymns*. He has refined Jeremias's conclusions with a wealth of additional data and also has shown that the individual "I" hymns were transmitted as a unit. Subsequently, followers added materials fore and aft. These additions, the second level of authorship, are known today as Community Hymns. They are the writings where the "I" stands for a group. Thus we have Teacher Hymns and Community Hymns.[8]

So literary critics have been able to separate out two levels of authorship in the *Hymns*. And, granted, one level, one "I," is an individual of great authority. Still, how do we know that this "I" is the Teacher? How can we be sure that these are the words of Judah? Jeremias pondered this question long and hard. He studied other Dead Sea Scrolls that talk about the Teacher and compared their claims for the man to the claims being made by the authoritative "I." He then came up with a compelling argument, writing, "It is completely inconceivable that there could have been within the [same] company in a short span of time two men, each of whom came before the group with revolutionary claims to bring about redemption through his teaching, and that both men could have been accepted by the group."[9]

Had two such men arisen at the same time, Jeremias implied, there would have been conflict. No group could accept two such singular personalities as leaders simultaneously. And if the group had known two charismatic figures who lived at different times, evidence of that fact should be discernible in their writings. It isn't. Powerful logic indeed. But the best logic about what should have been in history is often overturned by later discoveries. The historian prefers evidence over logic. The historian wants a statement in the sources, something close to the time of the events. Fortunately, we have that in this case.

In their later writings, followers of Judah interpreted the "anonymous" words of his hymns and discourses as his.[10] They applied them to events in the life of a man they explicitly called the Teacher of Righteousness, so the conclusion is hard to resist: even though his name is not on

them, Judah's followers believed that he had written the Teacher Hymns. They evidently possessed oral traditions about him and the early years of their own movement. When they wished to write about Judah, they turned to his very words.

Thanks to historical and literary criticism, we may be confident that in the *Thanksgiving Hymns* we do have the words of the prophet Judah. We have at least nine hymns from his hand. Together they constitute his spiritual testament—the Testament of the Teacher. They seem to have begun as personal meditations. These were Judah's reflections on events, poured out privately before his God in poetry and rhythmic prose. This origin explains much.

It explains why the hymns are sometimes concise to the point of obscurity, touching down on a notion only to fly on immediately to another, like a stone skipping over a pond. At other times the ideas are so overgrown with words that a machete is needed to hack through the verbiage and follow the trail. To this very personal origin the closest ancient parallel is the *Meditations* of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (ruled 161–180 C.E.). Like the twelve books of Marcus's *Meditations,* Judah's were personal writings composed at various times and places, only discovered and published after the author's death. Yet Judah's hymns were even more personal than the precepts set forth by Marcus Aurelius; they were akin to a modern diary.

Judah's hymns seem to have been arranged and transmitted in chronological order.[11] We can therefore map out the prophet's thought as it unfolded in response to changing circumstances. Though personal, these are also political writings, reflecting what Judah was saying and doing in the political situation in which he found himself. Once we understand that context, they leap to life. They allow us to follow matters closely from the time of the Pharisee takeover until events took a most unexpected turn.

THE TESTAMENT OF THE TEACHER

Once Alexandra became queen, Josephus reports, "She permitted the Pharisees to do as they liked . . . and commanded the people to obey them."[12]

But Judah did not obey them. Moreover, he urged others not to obey them either, declaring that God was behind his words. The Pharisee response becomes evident in Judah's first hymn, written in 76 B.C.E. (You are

reading here the words of the first messiah; think of them as such while you read.)

> *[I praise You, O Lo]rd . . . You have placed truth before my very eyes, and righteous men to reprove me . . . Those who, when I am sunk in mournful gloom, give me reasons to rejoice; they declare to me glad tidings of a peaceful result in the face of destructive rumors about me and [fears] so strong that my heart melts. They fortify me in the face of attack.*
>
> *You have given to my uncircumcised lips a tongue capable of reply, and You have supported me as I gird my loins and gather my strength. You have ordered my steps within the wicked realm. I am a snare to sinners, but healing to all who repent of sin; wisdom to the simple folk, and a steadfast mind to all the faint hearted. You have made me an object of scorn and derision for the unfaithful, but the very foundation of truth and understanding for the upright. Because of the iniquity of the wicked, I am defamed by the lips of violent men; scorners gnash their teeth. Sinners mock me in song, and the party of the wicked falls stormily upon me. They roar like mighty winds upon the seas; lifting up their waves, they spew mud and slime.*
>
> *Yet You have set me as a banner to the chosen righteous, a prophet given knowledge of wondrous mysteries. I test [the men] of truth, and try those who love instruction. I am an adversary to advisers of falsehood, but a man of [pea]ce to all seers of uprightness. I am become a spirit of zeal against all the Seekers of Accomm[odation, wherefore all] deceitful men bellow against me like the roaring of mighty waters. [All] their thoughts are so many schemes of Belial. Accordingly, they turn back to Hell the life of the man whom You had set aright by my mouth and taught. You placed insight in my heart whereby to open the fount of knowledge for all the initiated—yet they have exchanged this wisdom for an uncircumcised lip and a strange tongue, so becoming a people without understanding. Thus will they be ruined in their delusion.*[13]

Judah was under attack; with this hymn he made the case for his leadership. His first defense was to focus attention on who he was. He wrote of himself, *I am a snare to sinners, but healing to all who repent of*

sin . . . a steadfast mind to all the faint hearted . . . a man of peace to all whose vision is righteous. Note Judah's use of the term *all.* He was saying that what happened to him was crucial to the entire nation, to every Jew.

He stigmatized his opposition as all the unrighteous: *I am a spirit of zeal against all the Seekers of Accommodation . . . all deceitful men bellow against me.* Judah was not some fringe politician with a small group of extremist followers. He claimed to be a leader of national significance, and the ferocity of the verbal attack against him argues that he was. Again and again Judah defines himself: I am . . . I am. Clearly a focal point of the controversy was whether or not Judah actually was who he claimed to be.

So it was with Jesus, as the Gospels tell the story. "Who do men say that I am?" Jesus once asked his disciples, according to the author of Matthew's Gospel. The Gospel of John depicts Jesus, like Judah, using "I am" phrases to declare his sense of mission. Jesus says, "I am the light of the world" and "I am the way, the truth, and the life." John is often called the Gospel of the "I am" statements. Judah's various expressions of status and significance in the first hymn are analogous. These are the "I am" statements of the *Thanksgiving Hymns.*

Almost certainly Judah wrote in Jerusalem, for this controversy centered around religious law and the Temple. Jerusalem was the one religious and political center of significance in Judaea at this time. This is where *the party of the wicked,* that is, the Pharisees, had their headquarters. Judah subtly punned on the Hebrew name of Jerusalem when he spoke of being *within the wicked realm* (the second and third syllables of *Ye-ru-sha-layim* are assonant with the word for wicked, *ri-sha*). Furthermore, this phrase was a quotation from Malachi 1:4, whereby Judah invoked the broader context of the quotation. It was a portion familiar to everyone in the debate: "They will be called a *wicked realm,* a people always under the wrath of the Lord."

Judah vilified the Pharisees and their supporters with a variety of epithets, calling them *sinners, the unfaithful, violent men, scorners, advisers of falsehood, deceitful men.* The wording that most specifically refers to the Pharisees (*Pharisees* being a term the Dead Sea Scrolls never use) I have translated *Seekers of Accommodation.* The Hebrew is *dorshe halaqot;* the second word, *halaqot,* basically means "smooth." It plays on the technical term that the Pharisees and the later rabbis used for "religious laws," *halakhot.* By this wordplay Judah derided the Pharisaic laws as unreliable,

slippery, insufficiently rigorous, and thus an accommodation—made, he implied, merely to gain popularity with the people, and at the expense of faithfulness to God's covenant with Israel.

Judah found himself the target of a war of words: *I am defamed by the lips of violent men; scorners gnash their teeth. Sinners mock me in song.* The first acts of Judah's public conflict with the Pharisees were verbal volleys. That accords with the natural order of human societies.

As the eminent sociologist Bruce Lincoln has written in *Discourse and the Construction of Society,* "Discourse and force are the chief means whereby social borders, hierarchies, institutional formations, and habituated patterns of behavior are both maintained and modified."[14] The Pharisees were dismantling social patterns that under Alexander Jannaeus had held sway for decades. In the process, they sought to intimidate Judah and others of his station in society (Judah's *righteous men to reprove me*) into shifting their allegiances, into following the lead of Alexandra and the ruling family. Moreover, this intimidation was working—Judah admitted to being terrified (*my heart melts with fear*). The Pharisees had succeeded in winning over some of Judah's allies and disciples: *they turn back to Hell the life of the man whom You had set aright by my mouth and taught.*

This seething war of words threatened to boil over. Social conflicts work themselves out through stages, as the research of the anthropologist Victor Turner has shown. Turner's stages are first "breach," then "escalation of crisis," "redressive action," and finally "reintegration or irreparable schism." Matters between Judah and the Pharisees were at the third stage. Actions were being taken that would either heal the breach, or widen it into irreparable schism. At this point, says Turner, "the group [to whom the action is addressed] is . . . at its most 'self-conscious' and may attain the clarity of someone fighting in a corner for his life."[15] Judah and his allies were being cornered.

Turner continues, "When redress fails there is usually regression to crisis. At this point direct force may be used."[16]

And the Pharisees did intend to force the issue.

THE CRISIS that now roiled around Judah drove him to write the first hymn. What he wrote gives us precious insight into the developing self-consciousness of a prophet. It also allows us to draw inferences about

Judah's situation before the Pharisee takeover. The critical phrase in both respects is the claim to be *a prophet given knowledge of wondrous mysteries.* This assertion invites closer inspection, for much lies beneath the surface of these words.

The term I have translated *prophet* is not the ordinary Hebrew word for such figures. In modern translations of biblical texts, the word that Judah used (Hebrew *melits*) is usually rendered into English as *interpreter* or *envoy.* For example, Genesis 42:23 uses the word in the context of the patriarch Joseph's meeting with his brothers. They first sold him into slavery and then, years later, came down to Egypt to buy grain. Thinking Joseph an Egyptian official ignorant of their native tongue, when in his presence the brothers conferred in Hebrew. The portion reads, "They did not know that Joseph understood them, since he spoke with them through an interpreter *(melits)."*

The term's use in Job 33:23 exploits a different nuance. The biblical writer employs it in parallel with a Hebrew word for *angel.* (The study of such poetic parallels is one of the best ways of determining the range of meaning for ancient Hebrew terms.) "Then, if there should be for one of them an angel, a mediator *(melits)* . . ." Here, a superhuman element intrudes.

In brief, analysis of biblical Hebrew usage shows that *melits* means, broadly, "one who speaks for another." Precisely how it ought to be understood in any one case depends on the parties involved: on who is spoken for, whom addressed.

The word's use outside of the Bible, in a Hebrew book composed just a hundred years before Judah set down his hymns, is especially instructive. About 180 B.C.E., Jesus ben Sira penned (quilled, actually; ancient writers used reed quills) a work known today by two names: *The Wisdom of Ben Sira,* and *Ecclesiasticus* (not to be confused with the biblical book Ecclesiastes). In chapter 10:1–2 of this book, Ben Sira ruminated on the connections between rulers and their subjects. He wrote, "A wise magistrate lends stability to his people, and the government of a prudent person is well ordered. As is the people's judge, so are his *ministers (melits);* as is the head of a city, so are its inhabitants."[17]

The Wisdom of Ben Sira shows that in the second century B.C.E., the word *melits* had taken on a connotation not clearly present in biblical usage. It had come to mean "minister" or "courtier." The term was a class marker, almost a title, describing someone of elite social standing. As a

member of what sociologists call a "retainer class," this person evidently stood above the masses, but beneath the ruler, whom he served directly.[18]

The way Judah used the word drew on more than one of these meanings. (It is thus an excellent example of the double entendres frequent in Judah's hymns.) He had presumably served at the court of Alexander, advising the king on religious matters, so Judah was a courtier. On one level that is what he said about himself. Likewise, his Pharisaic opponents were also courtiers, though in Judah's view not the sort a king would want. Judah called them *advisers (melits) of falsehood*. Yet Judah was not merely a courtier—at least, not anymore.

The crisis of the Pharisees' rise to power had forced Judah to rethink everything that he believed. His thoughts about himself had also taken a new direction. Under the pressure of events he had come to see himself as *the* intermediary between the nation and God. That is why what happened to him mattered so much. Of course, the Pharisees, reputed (as Josephus says) to be the most accurate interpreters of the Bible, were also professing to be intermediaries. But they made the assertion in an attenuated sense. They claimed merely to possess the proper understanding of the authoritative writings that had come down through the ages.

Judah trumped that ace. His was no claim to explicate difficult biblical laws, though he could do that. Judah *knew*. He did not get his message only by studying the sacred texts. Judah got his message directly from God. The supernatural nuance we observed in Job's use of *melits* is a second element of Judah's intention in using the word. He had come as a messenger intermediary to deliver a message from God.

Few scholars have gotten Judah's point. According to Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, for example—they seek to represent the consensus of modern scholarship—Judah "had been the *Teacher* of Righteousness; he was of a different lineage, and no one had ever claimed for him that he was a prophet." No one, perhaps, but Judah himself.[19]

WHAT, PRECISELY, did Judah mean by the phrase *wondrous mysteries* (Hebrew *razze pele*)? This is not an easy question to answer, though an answer is essential if we are to understand Judah. Other than Judah's own use and a few derivative occurrences in the literature his crisis-cult followers composed after his death, the phrase appears in just one surviving work of Second Temple Judaism. This work was demonstrably influential

on the movement Judah founded, though, so it is reasonable (though not provable) to conclude that he lifted this phrase from it.[20] The scroll in which it appears is a specimen of "wisdom literature."

Essentially, "wisdom literature" means how-to books on the topic of life. These writings search for understanding, trying to discover—and, once it is found, to communicate—the meaning of life. The idea that a basic order underlies the apparent randomness and injustice of day-to-day life was fundamental to the ancients. Several books within the Bible are wisdom writings (notably Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job), and almost every culture of the ancient Near East developed similar books. The oldest collections of proverbs are not Israelite, but Egyptian; they antedate the Bible by more than a thousand years.[21]

In Israel the writing of wisdom literature did not cease when the biblical writers laid down their quills. Prominent among the nonbiblical representatives of the genre is one book we have already encountered, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a number of other nonbiblical wisdom books came to light. These works otherwise perished in antiquity, though they may have been widely known among the Jews of Jesus' time. It is one of these books that contains Judah's key phrase *wondrous mysteries*. We must therefore take a closer look at this writing.

The work is sometimes called, after one of its recurrent phrases, *The Secret of the Way Things Are*, and seven copies of it have emerged from the caves of the Dead Sea. Like the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, *The Secret of the Way Things Are* issues ethical instructions for the imminent end of the age.[22] In the shadow of this impending apocalypse, the work is much concerned with God's foreordained timetable. Its author urges the reader to *learn the secret of the way things are, the weight of eras.* He declares that *God has put into my heart true knowledge and understanding*—the result, he intimates, of *the vision I have seen.*

The author touches on a jumble of topics, including wisdom and folly, marriage and the proper respect for parents, borrowing and lending money (do neither), and the need to keep his teaching a secret from the wicked. Few modern women (and even fewer mothers-in-law) will be pleased to hear his admonition to husbands: he tells the man, *God has made you ruler over her . . . He has not made her mother ruler over her. He has separated her from her mother and given authority to you.* (These ideas are worth comparing with similar injunctions to husbands in the New Testament book of Ephesians, chapter 5).

An important element of *The Secret*'s teaching involved astrology, but this portion of the manuscripts has suffered great damage and it is no longer possible to extract the details of what was said about the royal science. Still, there can be no doubt of astrology's prominent role within *The Secret of the Way Things Are*. We may begin to suspect that astrological knowledge lay within the compass of Judah's *wondrous mysteries*. The portion of *The Secret of the Way Things Are* that uses that phrase now commands our attention.

Here the writer has been discussing good and evil and the enigmas of God's purposes. He goes on to say:

> *Seek these things with longing at all times; give careful thought to all their effects, and then you will experience [His eternal] glory, His wondrous mysteries and His divine wonders. By knowing the times, you are one who understands the best way to act.*
>
> *[For] the decree engraved in advance is coming. Every time of punishment has been inscribed. Indeed, what has been decreed is engraved for God in stone, concerning all the sins of the children of Seth. A book of remembrance stands written before Him, accessible to those who keep His words; and that book of remembrance contains the vision of meditation.*
>
> *God bequeathed the meditation to Enosh by spiritual perception, because his nature was patterned after the holy angels. Otherwise He has not given meditation to those of a fleshly nature, for they do not know the difference between good and evil in accordance with spiritual law.*[23]

This passage, with its sharply drawn distinction between "the spirit" and "the flesh," almost sounds like something the apostle Paul could have written. Occasionally what the author intended to say is obscure, but the general movement of his thought is clear. He describes a heavenly book, open before God. People with the proper spiritual cultivation can "read" it by *meditation*.

Through meditation the initiate seeks a particular *vision*. We have thus entered the realm of mystical experience, of esoteric revelation. The vision focuses on knowledge of the times—that is, the predestined course of history. The content of this book is one of God's *wondrous mysteries*.

Somehow the initiate can *experience* the mysteries. That experience also involves the glory of God, and—whether in a concrete or abstract sense—God's *divine wonders*. Miracles?

The writer goes on to say that this book is immensely old—older, by far, than the law of Moses. Given by divine revelation in the days of the patriarch Seth, knowledge of it was passed on to later generations, but not in writing. Rather it was *by spiritual perception*, beginning with Seth's son Enosh.

Now, Seth was the third child of Adam and Eve, born after Cain had murdered Abel. The Bible says that when Seth's son Enosh was born, "people began to call upon the name of YHWH" (Genesis 4:26). This portentous statement generated considerable speculation in later Judaism and among the exponents of early forms of Christianity. From it grew the notion of a pure line of Sethians carried on by Enosh. Gnostic circles included a group styling themselves "Sethians," and a Gnostic writing known as *The Three Tablets of Seth* was among a group of ancient Coptic texts discovered in 1948 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt.

Josephus also knew of a tradition connecting esoteric revelation with the line of Seth. He included in one of his books, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, something of what he called "the story of the children of Seth." These virtuous people, he says, "discovered the science of the heavenly bodies and their orderly array. Moreover, to prevent their discoveries from being lost to humankind, perishing before they became known . . . they erected two stelae, one of brick, the other of stone, and inscribed these discoveries on both."[24]

In outline Josephus's tradition of the Sethian line is similar to the statements of *The Secret of the Way Things Are*. The line that began with Enosh was virtuous, and because of that virtue they were granted the secrets of *the science of the heavenly bodies and their orderly array*. That means astrology and related knowledge. These secrets they preserved for posterity on two stelae (tablets set upright into the ground). Evidently Josephus and the author of *The Secret of the Way Things Are* were both acquainted with this tradition, though in variant forms.

With the explicit link between the Sethian secrets and astrology in Josephus we have even more reason to believe that Judah's *wondrous mysteries* did involve astrology. The heart of the secrets will have been the proper use of these sciences—as an adjunct, doubtless, to the study of scripture to secure the *knowledge of the times*: foretell the future.

A SECOND PASSAGE in the Dead Sea Scrolls, this one in the introduction to the first edition of the *Thanksgiving Hymns* itself, appears to clinch the [illegible]ological connection.

This introduction to the *Thanksgiving Hymns* was inscribed by one of Judah's disciples soon after Judah's death. The disciple wrote in the first person. Judah, of course, had done the same in his own hymns. The result of this pronominal peculiarity was to make the disciple's introduction seem to be the words of the Teacher. This effect was intentional, but—fine as the line may seem—the ancients did not consider such writing fraud per se. Not that the ancients were blind to the possibility of literary forgery.

They knew it well, for it was not uncommon, and they condemned it. The church father Tertullian reports an instance of a presbyter in Asia Minor who was removed from office for composing a pious forgery. But the ancients made a distinction that we do not. This distinction hinged on integrity and intent. Provided that one wrote not to deceive, but in the spirit of the figure impersonated—carrying his ideas forward with integrity, making *his* point, as it were, in current controversies—no offense was involved. This was a common literary convention of the period. Reflecting our own sensibilities rather than ancient mores, scholars call the phenomenon *pseudepigraphy,* "false writing."[25]

Depending on how well the writing was done, modern literary analysts can often distinguish the true from the false. Michael Douglas has shown that not Judah, but a later follower, wrote the introduction. The situation parallels the common scholarly view of the apostle Paul's letters. Virtually all scholars agree that Paul wrote the New Testament books of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and several others. But most also believe that the letters of Titus and 1 and 2 Timothy—though they seem to claim Paul's name—were written instead by disciples. If so, they were pseudepigraphs.[26] Parts of the *Thanksgiving Hymns* were likewise pseudepigraphy.

Working, as he believed, under the inspiration of the Teacher's spirit, this disciple poured forth praise to God in a long hymn on the creation.[27] *By your wisdom,* he wrote, *you established the generations of eternity. Before you created them, you knew everything they would do forever and ever.* These words laid the foundation for what follows, a long list enumerating the elements of God's creation, beginning with heavenly creatures, then turning to

earthbound entities. The list includes various categories of divine beings—spirits, the heavenly host, principalities and powers, holy angels—each of which was said to rule its own domain. Of particular interest is the mention of God's creating *the sun and moon, together with their mysteries,* and *the stars, together with the paths they should take.*

What would have seemed mysterious about the sun and moon? It was their movements. Many believed that God had plotted out these movements aforetime and that they affected matters here on earth. Yet ancient observers of the heavens found them difficult to chart. Especially puzzling was the passage of the moon. (These motions are indeed highly variable. Only in modern times have they yielded to human efforts at a full and accurate understanding.) One reason to try to understand these movements was to design a calendar. Calendars, as markers of sacred time, were important and often controversial documents. We have seen how much weight Judah put on the proper calendar. The reference to the paths of the stars, on the other hand, was a straightforward ancient Hebrew way of describing astrology.

The writer went on to list other heavenly spirits: storms, thunder and lightning, and the storehouses of heaven (the latter, according to conventional notions, served as receptacles for rainwater). All of these entities he conceived as just that: living, moving beings who served at God's pleasure. And all of their deeds, everything they would ever do—every movement they would make, from everlasting to everlasting—was predestined. Thus, if one could break the code of their movements and deeds, one could know the end from the beginning. The key to the code, the disciple implied, lay in astrological and calendrical knowledge.

The writer next turned to human affairs. These, too, he asserted, God had purposed before creation, *according to the number of generations forever, for all the years of eternity.* God in his wisdom had established *their periods of existence before ever they came to be.* Then came the climax: *I know these things through understanding you have granted, for you have revealed to me your wondrous mysteries.*

What was the disciple-as-Teacher claiming to know? Not merely the fact of the creation of these celestial and earthly beings, for any reader of the initial chapters of Genesis could claim that much. Even children would scoff at a claim that such knowledge was special. That God had created the sun, moon, stars, and creatures of this world, culminating in humankind, would hardly qualify as a mystery at all, much less a wondrous one.

No, the real claim was to knowledge of the *patterns* of the creation. These patterns—whether celestial or chronological, whether involving the paths of the stars or those of a generation of humankind—were truly mysterious, and to know them was wonderful indeed.

Thus, writing not long after Judah's death, and doubtless with a firm tradition about what the Teacher had taught under the phrase in question, this disciple defined what the *wondrous mysteries* embraced. To know the mysteries meant to know God's creation and how it worked, where it was going. It meant an understanding of human destiny in the whole and in the parts. It therefore meant, among other things, being able to predict the future.

Ultimately this knowledge could come only through direct revelation from God, but full immersion in his wisdom, including an esoteric literary tradition, was the absolute prerequisite—the union card, as it were, without which one could not work. The means by which this revelation could come included astrology and (as *The Secret of the Way Things Are* suggests) visions induced by meditation.

By calling himself *a prophet given knowledge of wondrous mysteries,* then, Judah was asserting that he was of a stature comparable to that of any of Israel's ancient prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel—these men had long ago spoken for God. All Jews held their written words to be divinely authoritative. But they had nothing on Judah. Had they declared the future from of old? So would he.

And he would do it in part using a method earlier prophets had condemned.[2] Judah well knew the words Isaiah 47:13–14 directed to Israel: "Let those who study the heavens stand up and save you, those who gaze at the stars and at each new moon predict what shall befall you. See, they are like stubble. The fire consumes them!" Yet Judah need not hew to what the ancients had laid down. As a prophet himself he was all that they were—and even more.

For when Judah wrote, *You have given to my uncircumcised lips a tongue capable of reply,* he was hinting that one greater than Isaiah was here. The only person in the Bible to whom the phrase *uncircumcised lips* is attached is Moses: lawgiver of Israel, greatest of the biblical prophets. Judah was intimating that he was a new Moses. Since he had a new law to give, and a New Covenant to inaugurate, the comparison was natural. It carried with it an implied threat. Any reader of the Bible would know the fate of those who had opposed Moses.

Fire came from heaven and incinerated some; the earth opened and swallowed others.

A SECOND TRAJECTORY emerges from Judah's hymn. The wording suggests that before the crisis of the Pharisee takeover, Judah had lived in Jerusalem as a wisdom teacher.

The hymn contains manifold references to wisdom, teaching, initiation into truth, and understanding. Judah wrote that he was the *foundation of . . . understanding;* his role was to *try those who love instruction.* We have seen that the phrase *wondrous mysteries* implies Judah's immersion in wisdom writings. Judah even went so far as to say that he was wisdom personified: *I am . . . wisdom to the simple folk.* (The idea of the personification of wisdom is central to modern research on the historical Jesus, for he also, according to many scholars, was first and foremost a sage.) These wisdom elements point us backward, telling us something of Judah's life in Jerusalem in the decades preceding the crisis of 76 B.C.E.

The life of a Jewish sage and wisdom instructor changed little in the years between 180 B.C.E. and the time when Judah held forth in Jerusalem. Therefore we can make inferences about Judah's life based upon our fuller knowledge of that earlier sage, Jesus ben Sira. Ben Sira labeled himself a "scribe," which in this period meant a wise man. Over his lifetime he devoted himself to study and meditation upon the books of Moses, the Prophets, and other holy writ, and in his later years he wrote his own book distilling those years of study.

Ben Sira was a man of leisure. He was free from manual labor, not a peasant as were the great mass of Jews, living as they did by subsistence farming. Indeed, only because he was wealthy enough not to have to toil physically could he hope to become a sage. Or at least, so Ben Sira thought, and doubtless it was the usual pattern. As Tevye of *Fiddler on the Roof* lamented, none but a rich man could discuss the holy books seven hours every day.

With the self-importance typical of many modern academics Ben Sira wrote, "By the scribe's profession wisdom increases; whoever is free of toil can become wise. How can he become wise who guides the plow, who thrills in wielding the goad like a lance, who guides the ox and urges on the bullock, and whose concern is for cattle?"[29]

Ben Sira belonged to the elite, to the educated and literate upper stratum of Jerusalem society. This group represented perhaps 5 percent of the populace. While the peasants labored in their fields, the sage spent his hours in the way Ben Sira described:

> He studies the wisdom of all the ancients and occupies himself with the prophecies. He treasures the discourse of the famous, and goes to the heart of involved sayings. He studies the hidden meaning of proverbs. . . . He is in attendance on the great, and has entrance to the ruler. He travels among the peoples of foreign lands to test what is good and evil among people. . . . He meditates upon God's mysteries. He will show the wisdom of what he has learned and glory in the Law of the Lord's covenant.[30]

As the leading scholars of their society, men such as Ben Sira and Judah were at home in lofty social circles. They tutored the youth of the aristocracy and royal family. Ben Sira ran an academy, and it is probable that Judah likewise met with students in a special venue, perhaps in the Temple courts or a private home.[31]

We must imagine that Judah had spent several decades in regular meetings with Jerusalem youth, instructing them and, naturally, building a following. He would have developed influence among the households whose heads imbibed his teachings, including the royal family. Disciples and supporters grew to respect and even love him. Like all eminent men, he also acquired enemies and stirred rivals who, given the chance, would seek his overthrow.

Ben Sira wrote that wise men were experts in the law. He meant that they were skilled in applying the scriptures to actual practice. In this connection they had to take stands on controversial points, so—as in many societies—among the Jews scholars were natural leaders for conflicting factions.[32] Despite this leading role, they did not comprise the very highest echelon of society. Ben Sira placed above them "the great": kings and queens, princes and members of the extended royal family, upon whose pleasure the wise men ultimately were dependent, and to whom they acted as advisers.

Attendance upon the great was like hang gliding: you took a big risk and had to be very sensitive to wind direction. The displeasure of the royals

might be terminal. Ben Sira is replete with warnings about the care required when speaking with a king or queen.

Scribes studied more than biblical law. They cultivated the deeper mysteries of Moses and the Prophets. They delved into what lay beneath the surface of scripture. As the author of Ecclesiastes 8:1—himself a sage—put it, "Who is like the wise man? Who else understands the true import of a matter" (Hebrew *pesher davar*)? This search for the "true import" could easily lead to esoteric teachings, even give rise to mystical experiences. Some mystics traveled to heaven; Paul apparently did, and Judah himself would soon journey to that realm of "things unutterable."

THE EVENTS OF 76 B.C.E. constituted a mortal danger to Judah's life and station in society and threatened to overturn years of his teaching in Jerusalem. A middle-aged or even elderly sage—in his hymns Judah refers to himself as "gray"—the first messiah came under attack because he dared to defy the new regime, publicly labeling it Satan's dominion. Asserting divine sanction, Judah sought to lead the nation from crisis to repentance, to create a new Israel, members of a New Covenant. He saw his contemporaries as the millennial generation.

So Judah looked backward to apostasy and forward to apocalypse. His own rise at the time of the End he believed forecast in scripture, to which he alluded in his first hymn: "In that day a *fount* shall be *opened* for the House of David and those who dwell in Jerusalem, in respect both to sin and to impurity" (Zechariah 13:1). Thus Judah wrote, *You placed insight in my heart whereby to open the fount of knowledge.* Zechariah had spoken of him."

The Pharisees' initial response was to assail Judah's status, trying to undercut his prestige. The first hymn documents these attacks and the prophet's counterblasts. Remarkable as were the claims Judah made here, he would make others yet more remarkable.

The Pharisees weren't interested. They had heard enough.