

SOME SAY HE WAS AN OUTLAW

Various Scripture

“He was not Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God! He was Jesus, the bastard child of Mary and Pantera, a Roman soldier. He was not the Messiah! He was a troublemaker, a rebel, a criminal, an outlaw. That is why He was executed!”

Not long after Jesus’ death, His opponents tried to discredit Him by spreading such a rumor.¹ The idea would have been preposterous, except Roman soldiers raping Jewish girls was something that happened far too often, especially in a small, back wood town like Nazareth.

This rumor, about Mary and a Roman soldier named Pantera, tells us something about the political situation into which Jesus was born.

Revolts, Revolutions, and Rebellions²

After his death in 323 B.C., Alexander the Great’s empire was divided among his generals. Israel (or Paletstine) fell under the control of Seleucus, who quickly developed a heavy system of taxation that made life difficult for the Hebrews. At times, the tax system took as much as 33% of a person’s income.

In addition to keeping the heavy taxes, in 167 B.C. Antiochus IV Epiphanes outlawed the Torah, the practice of circumcision, the observance of Jewish dietary laws and the Jewish

¹ This particular rumor gained popularity among Christianities enemies in the 2nd century in an attempt to discredit Him. The source of this rumor can be traced to Celsus, an anti-Christian philosopher whom Origen (an early church father) quoted in his book, *Contra, Celsum*. Pantera, it is believed by critics of Christianity, was an archer in the Roman army.

² A book that was of great help to me for this section was *The Politics of Jesus*, written by Obery M. Hendricks Jr. (2006). While I did not agree with everything Hendricks said, I found a lot of his history to be insightful.

sacrificial system. Antiochus set himself up as God,³ ordering the Israelites to forsake worshiping their God, for the worship of himself and Zeus. The key element in this “new” worship was sacrificing a pig on the holy altar.⁴ Soldiers were stationed throughout Israel to enforce compliance and squash rebellion.

One man and his sons, in the small Judean town of Modein, refused to comply. Mattathias, and his six sons, attacked the soldiers, leading a rebellion against them. The oldest son, Judas, became the leader of the revolt and was given the name “Maccabeus,” meaning “hammer.” This rebellion, known as the “Maccabean Revolt,” came to a climax in 164 B.C. when the Maccabean Freedom Fighters liberated Jerusalem. Twenty-two years later (142 B.C.), after a generation of grueling guerrilla warfare, the last occupiers left Israel. The Jewish holiday, Hanukkah, celebrates this liberation.

With the occupiers gone, the Jews were “free”⁵ for the first time since 597 B.C.⁶ They formed their own government and dreamed of their “messiah” coming to reinstate the reign of King David. However, skirmishes continued between the Jews and the Greeks up to, and through, the time of Jesus. In 43 B.C., Cassius⁷ conquered a town in Galilee, enslaving all 30,000 of its civilians. In 40 B.C. the Roman authorities gave control of Galilee to a half-Jew, half-Arab person who became known as Herod the Great. He ruled by terror, seizing Jerusalem around 37 B.C. Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, describes the seizure this way: “when the troops poured in, a scene of wholesale massacre ensued; for the Romans were infuriated by the length of the siege, and the Jews of Herod’s army were determined to leave none of their

³ Antiochus referred to himself as “Epiphanes,” which means “God manifest.”

⁴ A pig was a detestable animal to the Israelites. Using it as a sacrifice was unimaginable.

⁵ The reason I placed quotations around the word “free” is because the Israelites were still under Greek/Roman rule. They were no longer “oppressed” but they were not completely “liberated.”

⁶ 597 B.C. is the approximate date of the Babylonian siege led by King Nebuchadnezzar.

⁷ Cassius served under Marcus, was the brother-in-law of Brutus, and one of the major conspirators in the assassination of Julius Caesar.

opponents alive. Masses were butchered in the alleys, crowded together in the houses and flying into the sanctuary.”⁸

By the time of Jesus’ birth political, racial, and ethnic tensions were rising. Even the New Testament mentions a skirmish that took place around 6 A.D.⁹ Luke, the historian, writes, “After him, Judas the Galilean¹⁰ appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.”¹¹

Judas, along with Zadok, led a group of Zealots against the Romans. Judas proclaimed that the Jewish nation was not under the authority of Rome, but were a republic that recognized God alone as king and ruler. Even after his death, his revolt continued to the point that his two sons, Jacob and Simon, were crucified by Tiberius. Another of his son, Menahem, led a group of assassins, called Sicarii; or, pronounced another way, Iscariot¹², of which Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, was a part.¹³

Are you beginning to see the turmoil into which Jesus was born? Faithful Jews were anticipating the arrival of their Messiah; but their idea of the Messiah was political—and even militant. As a result, the Roman authorities were looking, and watching, for troublemakers. The

⁸ Flavius Josephus. *History of the Jewish War*, 1:342-346.

⁹ Remember, biblical scholars place the birth of Jesus somewhere between 7 and 3 B.C.

¹⁰ The Jewish historian, Josephus, mentions the revolt led by Judas the Galilean, writing, “Judas Galilean (and his followers) have a passion for liberty that is almost unquenchable, since they are convinced that God alone is their leader and master.”

¹¹ Acts 5:37. It is easy to see the high regard the Jewish people felt for Mattathias and Judas by noted the number of people in the New Testament who were named either Matthew or Judas. In Jesus’ day, both names were quite common. Apparently, the census in which the Christmas story takes place, put such a huge taxation on the Jews that the people revolted.

¹² There is debate over the correct translation of “Iscariot.” Some believe it simply refers to the town of Kerieth in southern Judah; thus, Judas was from Kerieth. However, others believe that the word makes reference to “Sicarii,” the most radical group of Jewish zealots known for their “terrorist” type attacks on the Roman government; thus, Judas was part of this group of radicals.

¹³ JewishEncyclopedia.com.

moment one appeared on the scene, if it seemed he was gathering a following, soldiers would pounce, and put the movement to an end, often times crucifying the leader.¹⁴

Within Judaism itself, there were four groups vying for the people's allegiance. Each group had their own idea about the coming of a messiah and what the Messiah would do. Jesus did not fit any of their ideas.

First, were the Pharisees. The Pharisees are subject to extreme criticisms by most modern day believers, and rightfully so, but that wasn't always the case. At one time in their history the Pharisees were well respected in the Jewish community.

The Pharisees loved the Mosaic Law and took vows to keep every detail of the Law. The problem was their rules and regulations got in the way of their relationships with one another, the public, and ultimately with God. Keeping the Law became an end in itself instead of a means to an end.

The Pharisees had strong opinions about the coming of the messiah and the role the messiah would play. They believed the Messiah would set up his kingdom on earth, overthrow their Roman oppressors, and reestablish the Kingdom of David. Thus, the messiah would be a political freedom fighter who would set up a monarchy, often times referred by them as the "kingdom of God."

Instead of embracing Jesus as Messiah, the Pharisees accused Him of blasphemy. One of Jesus' characteristics was that He was able to deliver people from demonic possession. After witnessing a series of such encounters, the Pharisees said of Him, "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons He is driving out demons."¹⁵ On another occasion, after

¹⁴ It is possible that Barabbas, whom the people asked to be released instead of Jesus, was such a troublemaker, as well as the two "robbers" crucified alongside of Jesus. Thus, they were not common criminals, but, at least to some, they were "freedom fighters."

¹⁵ Mark 3:22.

healing a paralyzed man, telling him that his sins were forgiven, the Pharisees protested saying, “This fellow is blaspheming!”¹⁶ And then, after He was arrested, Jesus was questioned by the Sanhedrin.¹⁷ “The high priest said to Him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the son of God.’”¹⁸ Jesus answered that He was. “Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! Why do you need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?’”¹⁹ Instead of embracing Him as God, they tried (and eventually succeeded) in alienating Him from people. It was the people, whom Jesus came to redeem, that yelled and screamed for Him to die!²⁰

I think the main problem the Pharisees had with Jesus was that He emphasized keeping the spirit of the law over keeping the letter of the law—a revolutionary idea. Jesus taught that you could do exactly what the Law commands, and still not be right with God! Jesus told the Pharisees that even though they were physical descendants of Abraham, their real father was Satan.²¹ Needless to say, that didn’t sit well with them. The bottom line was Jesus placed people above procedures. He looked on the inward heart of a person, instead of the outward action.

Sherry grew up, not only in a Christian home, but in a pastor’s home. She was good girl, nothing more than normal rebellion, never anything serious. After Sherry graduated from high school, she went to Bible College. After all, that’s what was expected of a pastor’s daughter. One night, while in college, Sherry got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was a small party, and it didn’t last very long, but boys and girls were both present and alcohol was involved.

¹⁶ Matthew 9:3.

¹⁷ The Sanhedrin was the Jewish Supreme Court.

¹⁸ Matthew 26:63-64.

¹⁹ Matthew 23:65.

²⁰ Matthew 26:66; 27:22-23.

²¹ John 8:31-59.

College rules were broken. Another student turned her in. No grace was extended because, after all, rules are rules, and so Sherry was kicked out of school.

Since nothing like this had ever happened to her before, Sherry's college pastor went to the dean of the school on her behalf. Nothing changed. She would not be allowed back. Sherry had a good heart. She deserved another chance, but sometimes Pharisees can be irrational. "Letting a girl like her stay in school would harm the entire school's reputation," the dean told her pastor.

One of Sherry's main problem was that she did not fit into other people's box of what a Christian should be and how a Christian should act! She loved Jesus, and wanted to follow Him, but she just didn't fit in to the traditional religious cookie-cutter like everyone else. She wasn't a troublemaker. She wasn't rebellious. Quite the contrary! She was passionate about life, about Christ, and about making a difference.

Sherry's college pastor never gave up on her. He encouraged her and loved her. During her time away from school she grew and matured. Eventually she went back to school, graduated, and is now serving along side her husband in full time ministry. Sometimes people are more important than rules and institutional reputations.

A rival group to the Pharisees was the Sadducees. The Sadducees were the aristocrats of Jewish society (or so they thought and acted). The Sadducees represented nobility, power, and wealth. As result, they were not overly concerned with the hope of a coming Messiah. Their aim was temporary wealth and worldly success. The Messiah (if there ever were one) would upset their lifestyle and their friendship with the Romans. Keeping the status quo was in their best interest.

More interested in politics than religion, the Sadducees did not believe in any type of resurrection or immortality of the soul. They only followed the Jewish Law when it was convenient, and would rather debate than pray. On more than one occasion, members of the Sadducees tried to argue with Jesus.

On one occasion, following their bias, the Sadducees tried to entrap Jesus in a debate about the resurrection. The basis for their argument was a woman who had incredibly bad luck with husbands. This woman married seven different brothers at seven different times because each brother died, leaving her a widow...times seven. Finally, tired from burying so many husbands, the woman dies.

Sarcastically, the Sadducees asked Jesus, “Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven?”²²

In His response, Jesus accused them of being ignorant, not knowing the meaning of marriage, nor the resurrection, and then reminds them that God is not the God of the dead but of the living. “When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at His teaching.”²³ One reason the crowds were astonished was because His teaching was revolutionary. And that did not sit to well with the so called experts.

The main problem Jesus had with the Sadducees was that, to them, winning a debate was far more important than changing a life—even their own life. I still see the same attitude among many religious people today. You hear it when people say, “How can you claim to be a Christian and vote democratic?” You see it when people would rather quote propositional truths—“the bible says...”—without first checking the accuracy of what the bible says. You see it when Christians would rather win an argument about abortion, or homosexuality, or capital

²² Matthew 22:28. The entire encounter begins in verse 23 and goes through verse 40.

²³ Matthew 22:33.

punishment, or whatever—instead of trying to change the heart and life of other people, starting with themselves. Sometimes we are real quick to condemn “*phariseeism*” within the church when “*sadduceesim*” may be more prevalent. Jesus did not come into this world proclaiming propositional truths. His purpose was not to direct our dogma. Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God! His purpose was redemption—a changed life that brings about a changed world.

As their name suggests, the Zealots were radicals. They saw themselves as “freedom fighters,” defending the Law and Jewish nationalism against idolatrous Rome; and they were not opposed to using violence. The origin of the Zealots goes back to the Maccabean revolt. At least one disciple is known to have been part of this group, “Simon the Zealot”²⁴; some believe Peter and Judas Iscariot were Zealots as well.

The main problem with the Zealots was not their zeal, but their misplaced passion. Jesus admired their fervor; He simply tried to get them to focus on what was important. Passion is wonderful. Misplaced passion is dangerous.

Years ago, a wise mentor took my aside and said, “Kevin, if you are going to survive ministry and make a difference in people’s lives, you have got to decide on which battlefield you would be willing to die.” Like a Zealot, in my younger days, I had a tendency to fight the wrong battles. As a result, I was wounded on a lot of wrong battlefields. And, I confess, I did a lot of wounding of others. I have no doubt that many of my religious leaders saw me as a troublemaker; but I didn’t see myself that way. It is hard to look past a person’s passion to see their heart, but my heart was in the right place, even when my passion was misplaced.

Not much is known about the fourth group—the Essenes—mainly because they did not want much known about them. The Essenes were possibly a branch of Pharisees, who considered

²⁴ Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15.

the Pharisees to soft and liberal. The name itself means “pious”; and in their piousness they did not refer to themselves as *essenes*, rather, that was a name others tagged on them. Many Essenes lived in the desert (like hermits), but others lived in the cities and villages, mixing in with society at all levels.

Strict obedience to the Torah (Law) was the primary feature of Essene behavior. They were known for their shared ownership of property, their hospitality to one another, and their disciplined life of prayer and study of the Old Testament. While more strict than the Pharisees, the Essenes carried far more respect among the people than the Pharisees or Sadducees. Their desire for piousness came out of their sincere desire to follow and obey God. (Some biblical scholars speculate that John the Baptist was part of this sect. Other, more liberal scholars, speculate that Jesus was a member.)

The Gospels do not mention the Essenes,²⁵ and thus, no conflict between them and Jesus is recorded. If there was one, I bet it was their irrelevancy to their culture. People respected the Essenes, but they thought their lifestyles were strange, old fashioned, and impractical. Apparently, in all their piousness and disciplined lives, they did very little to change their world. The Essenes stayed in their own little groups, their own little “holy huddles.”

I’m afraid we are more like the Essenes than we want to admit. After several recent conversations with non-believers I have come to the following conclusion: *People may respect us, but they do not want to be like us.* Many unchurched people see the church as being outdated and irrelevant. They aren’t nearly as impressed and enamored with our buildings, programs, and budgets, as we are. I pray, that as devout, disciplined, followers of Jesus, we strive to stay relevant in our culture, making a difference in our world.

²⁵ The fact that there is no mention of any conflict between Jesus and the Essenes is used as proof by liberal scholars that Jesus was part of that group.

When Jesus announced that He was the Messiah, He did so in a culture where faithful Jews were waiting, and looking, for a political savior. At the same time, the Roman authorities were on the constant lookout for troublemakers within the Jewish community. Their goal was to keep the peace, keep themselves in power, and keep the Jews in submission.

The Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes, all had their idea of what the Messiah would do and be. Jesus did not fit any of their ideas and so they rejected Him. The Roman authorities really didn't see Jesus as a threat at all, and so they tried to ignore Him. The only reason they acted against Jesus was to keep the peace with the Jewish religious leaders, especially their friends the Sadducees. Jesus thought outside the box, questioned the religious norms, and reached out to ordinary people. Some said He was an outlaw. God said, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."²⁶

Rebel Yell

Christianity could use a few more troublemakers. Our culture needs a revolutionary. It is time for someone (maybe you) to stand up, be counted, and shake things up for Jesus! Complacency never got a person anywhere. Nice people never change the world.

This is not an excuse to cause trouble for the sake of causing trouble, but it is a challenge to not be afraid to be different. Don't be afraid to speak your mind. Don't be afraid to push the envelope. Don't be afraid to start a reformation. Remember, *people, whom others consider to be a rebel, God considers to be a revolutionary.*

Which one are you, a rebel or a revolutionary? Do you desire to change your world? Your school? Your place of employment? Your church? Your family? Your life? Get ready.

²⁶ Mark 1:11 (and other places in the Synoptic gospels).

Because the journey following Jesus was never meant to be an easy, simple, conventional one. The journey following Jesus is a revolutionary journey filled with danger and adventure.

I dare you to be a rebel, to shake things up, to cause a little trouble. Before you accept this challenge, however, take a moment to stop and reflect. Are you headed in the right direction? Are you doing the right thing? Is your passion in the right place? Are your motivations pure? Are you willing to die on the right battlefield? Or, are you spinning your wheels? Are you wounding and being wounded in the wrong battle? Are you complacent? Lazy? Bored? Don't just stand up. Stand up for the right thing! Fight against the right enemy! Don't waste your time on unimportant detractors.

Nehemiah was a revolutionary. He stirred it up quit a bit by returning to his home land to rebuild a wall—both a physical wall and a symbolic wall. He met opposition. Some people tried to get him to quit, but he knew who his real enemy was and so he said, “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop.”²⁷ He knew his opposition wasn't the real enemy. The real enemy was much more sinister. Likewise, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”²⁸

After you take a moment to stop and reflect, pray for discernment. Praying for discernment is the only way you will be able to answer the questions above. Being a revolutionary is not easy. Pioneers, explorers, and frontiersmen usually get shot...in the back. If your going to cause trouble, make sure the trouble is because of the light you are shining in a dark place, not because you are personally offensive, arrogant, or sarcastic. Speak the truth in love. People may shoot the messenger, just make sure it is the message they are mad at, not the

²⁷ Nehemiah 6:3.

²⁸ Ephesians 6:12.

messenger. Jesus proclaimed, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lived by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been through God.”²⁹

Another thing a trouble maker must do is count the cost. Jesus said, “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?...Suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand?...In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”³⁰ This is why it is so important to stop and reflect, and to pray for discernment. You’ve only got one life to live (and give), so make sure you live it to the fullest, and give it for the highest cause. Doing so requires courage.

LaVerne was different, some might call him eccentric. He graduated from high school at 14 and from college at 18. He studied engineering, but later answered the call to preach; and then later still, answered the call to missions as a medical missionary. Finishing at the top of his class in medical school, Dr. LaVerne Miley left the comforts of home (and a doctors salary) to travel to the northeast corner of Ivory Coast, West Africa, to serve the Lobi people of Doropo.

People thought he was crazy to take his young family so far away. But he wasn’t crazy. He was a rebel with a cause, a modern day revolutionary. Today, the hospital he started in the “bush” country, still operates; and eight churches in the area owe their existence to his ministry.

²⁹ John 3:19-21.

³⁰ Luke 14:28, 31, 33.

Now it's your turn to walk courageously. Don't back down. Do what you know God has called you to do. Don't compromise. Jesus needs someone like you to change a world that desperately needs changing. Never, ever, accept the status quo. Never, ever place religious rituals over real people...like the Pharisees. Never, ever, place winning an argument above changing a life, even your own...like the Sadducees. Never, ever, lose your passion, just make sure it's not in the wrong place...like the Zealots. Never, ever, be content to remain in your "holy huddle"...like the Essenes. Be a rebel. Be a revolutionary. Shake things up. Cause a little bit of trouble.