

1. With Rivkin's thesis that "what emerges with great clarity both from Josephus and from the Gospels is that the culprit is not the Jews but the Roman imperial system" (95) I am entirely sympathetic, whatever reservations I may have about the detailed meaning he takes this to have. Thus I take him to have shown more than adequately that "from perceived threat till final judgment, political factors alone weighed in the balance. Whatever linkage there may have been between the Scribes-Pharisees and the political authorities, it was a linkage that derived from the doctrine of the two realms and not a linkage that derived from Jesus' 'heretical' teachings" (101).
2. Moreover, I see merit in the procedure Rivkin follows in establishing his thesis--namely, to reconstruct from the data provided by Josephus what presumably would have had to have been the case with Jesus as "a charismatic of charismatics" if one accepts not only Josephus' picture of the Roman imperial system and the situation in Judaism contemporary with Jesus but also his specific account of "a charismatic" like John the Baptist.
3. The difficulty remains, however, that such arguments--to what would have had to have been the case, given thus and so--want historical confirmation of a kind that, in this instance, is hard to come by. The very thing that leads Rivkin to follow this alternative procedure--namely, that "the Gospel record . . . is a record penned with faith, written with passion, and bristling with anger, hostility, and resentment" (3 f.)--eventually creates no less serious a difficulty for establishing his picture of what crucified Jesus than the procedure of beginning with the Gospels--or, with historical reconstruction from the data they provide. From a portrait drawn from Josephus of "a charismatic of charismatics who could have lived, died, and been seen as resurrected" (75; my italics) there is no grounded inference to the Jesus who in fact did live, die, and appear as resurrected except by comparison with the portraits drawn in the Gospels--as Rivkin himself evidently recognizes (75 f., 90 f.) Significantly, Rivkin's report on the comparison is cast in negative terms when he says: "Jesus is none other than the charismatic of charismatics whom we had looked for in Josephus, but could not find" (90).
4. As for his more positive claim that "the essential features of Jesus in Mark, Matthew, and Luke are one and the same as the features of the charismatic of charismatics we had drawn from Josephus' portrayal of the time, the place, the circumstances, and the religious casts of mind in Jesus' day" (90), I see no reason whatever to agree with him, given his characterizations of "the charismatic of charismatics"--e.g., as "a person of flesh and blood in whom the spirit of God dwelled and who became thereby worthy of resurrection" (80), or as "the Son of Man, a prophetic-like figure . . . enjoying a special relationship to God the Father" (79), or, again, as one "whose humanity stirs the hearts and souls of those he touches and whose teaching arouses within them the hope for the coming of God's kingdom" (76), or, yet again, one in whom "what would be decisive" would be "the goodness, the compassion and the gentleness of soul which reached out with love to the lowly, the disheartened, and the dispirited," "a healing and

loving spirit which restored dying souls to life" (64 f.). The decisive objection to all such details of Rivkin's argument is that the Gospels do not give the least reason to suppose that the Jesus of whom they bear witness was this kind of a figure. Rivkin fails to recognize this, presumably, because his whole approach is as little informed by the method and results--as well as the reservation--of form criticism as are those who wish to see in Jesus' death a religious, or moral, as distinct from a merely political meaning. The decisive confirmation of this is his claim that "the portraits of Jesus in the Synoptic gospels . . . stand out in sharp contrast to the portrait of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospel of John" (79). Rivkin quite ignores the clearly theological intentions of the synoptic evangelists when he represents them as painting portraits "which they believed to be the very likeness of a remarkable person who had lived, died, and been seen as resurrected while Pontius Pilate was procurator and while Caiphas was High Priest" (75). In all this, Rivkin's reconstruction is on all fours with typical revisionary christology, with the singular difference that he makes a case, by his use of Josephus, for the strictly political character of the procedure that led to Jesus' crucifixion. Clearly, one can concur with the second without endorsing the first.

5. However well intended--and there isn't the least question, in my opinion, that they are most sincerely intended--Rivkin's comments about Jesus are not only lacking in historical basis but are also religiously sentimental: "a gentle charismatic, a prophetic visionary, an earnest seeker of salvation and redemption for his people" (2); "the most gentle of charismatics," whose "call to repentance was so eloquent that crowds gathered round him to hear and to hope" (27); "a charismatic of charismatics [who] stirred crowds with his call for repentance; awed crowds by his wonder-working; or uplifted crowds with the promise of God's Kingdom come" (42); "a charismatic so compassionate, so loving, so eloquent, and so filled with the spirit of God that his disciples would refuse to accept his death as real" (56), etc. Indeed, one must take profound exception to the whole understanding that lies behind such questions as these: "What manner of man must such a charismatic have been? What qualities must he have had to have [to] so endear . . . himself to his disciples that death itself would not have been able to pry them apart? . . . In a word, what qualities would this unique individual have had to possess to make him an even more powerful and alluring charismatic than John?" (57).

6. The significant datum in this whole matter, as in all matters concerning Jesus, is not what qualities he had or what he claimed but what significance he was taken to have by those to whom we owe whatever we know concerning him. By Rivkin's own account, whether the charismatic claimed to be or was believed to be King of the Jews, the result would have been the same (cf. 69 f.). But, then, the most relevant thing in the synoptic tradition is not what Jesus can be inferred to have claimed but what can be inferred about the significance discerned in Jesus by those who followed him prior to his death and resurrection as well as after them. In fact, Rivkin's whole argument is such as to give priority precisely to the significance attributed to Jesus as distinct from anything that he himself may have

done, said, or intended (66 f., 69, 84 f.). Whatever Jesus himself may have been, etc., his fate was decided by the significance attributed to him in a situation in which "crucifixion awaited the revolutionary and the charismatic alike" (70). As Bultmann puts it, "one must be clear that the first historical reality we are able to lay hold of in the tradition is the oldest community. We recognize further that the picture of this community displays certain characteristic features of a new spirit, which by its own historical power breaks free of Judaism. Finally, we recognize that this community is conscious of owing its existence and its spiritual content to the work of Jesus. Thus through the medium of the community there appears the picture of the historical figure of Jesus" (Die Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien, 3d. ed.: 41). "One characterizes Jesus' work correctly if one says, 'He was a prophet.' To be sure, one may and must designate the movement he stirred up among the Jewish people as a messianic movement, because it was sustained by the faith that the messianic promises were now to be fulfilled, that the reign of God was now breaking in, and that one could already sense and see its breaking in in the mighty works of Jesus, in the flight of the evil spirits. To the outsider this movement must have appeared much like one of the other messianic movements that unsettled the Jewish people in those decades and finally led to the war with Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem. The Roman procurators bloodily suppressed such movements, and Jesus, too, was sacrificed to the intervention of the Procurator Pontius Pilate. When he entered Jerusalem with his followers, he struck the Procurator as politically dangerous. What role the Jewish authorities played in this can no longer be determined, because the passion narrative is so strongly overgrown with legend. . . . It is certainly possible that the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, in order to prove their own political harmlessness, had a hand in it. But in any event one may not assume that Jesus' moral proclamation so aroused the Pharisees and Scribes against him that he was finally sacrificed to their enmity . . . the constant opposition of the Pharisees and Scribes rests on the schematic construction of later Christians" (49 f.).