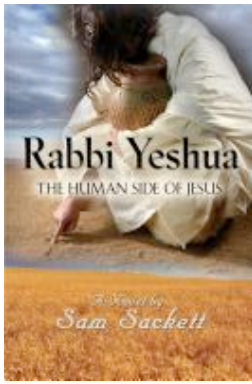


A person with long dark hair, wearing a white robe, is kneeling in a desert landscape. They are holding a large, decorated brown clay jar against their chest. Their right hand is touching the sandy ground. The background shows a vast, flat desert under a cloudy sky. The foreground is a field of golden-brown grass.

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Scalawag

Chapter One

i

The town of En-Nazira in H'galiyel crept up one of the hills in the row that flanked the Plain of Esdraelon on the north. It was located beside a bend in a main road in Kanaan; to the east the road went over the hills, past Mount Tabor, to Lake Gennesaret, and to the south it went through Shomron and Yahudiyagh to Yerushalom. This road was less important than the one that followed the east bank of the Khyldan, because it was so hilly; but since the Khyldan road was insufferably hot in summer, the one which passed by En-Nazira was heavily traveled during that season.

The site of En-Nazira was ancient, but the town itself was only a couple of centuries old. There had been a village there until about six hundred years before the time of which we speak, but the site was then deserted for some four hundred years. No one knows why the previous inhabitants left. Then, when the Hebrew kings of the Has-monean Dynasty pushed north out of Yahudiyagh, subduing Shomron and extending their sway into H'galiyel, some of their followers were attracted by a spring flowing out of the grainy red sandstone cliff nearby and set up a town on the ruins of the old village.

Like other towns in Kanaan En-Nazira was surrounded by a wall, behind which not only its residents but those of the surrounding villages could take shelter in the face of danger. But now for more than a half century there had been no war in the land, and the wall had begun to fall into disrepair, although sentries were still posted at the gates at night. The men of the village took turns volunteering as sentries. Also like other towns, and unlike the villages, En-Nazira had a law court, and when court was in session throngs of litigants swelled the population. At those times the inn made enough money to bide it through the times between sessions.

Between the road and the wall, just before the main gate, was a market area where merchants set up stalls to sell pots, baskets, cloths, jewels, scents, and other wares. Here also men who needed work came to wait for prospective employers; as they waited, they talked and laughed and commented on the women who came to buy things.

There were only a few streets in the town; they marked off large, roughly rectangular areas of land. Within each rectangle was a clutter of houses, scattered higgledy-piggledy and separated by a maze of lanes and alleys. At the highest point in the town, just outside the wall so that it would be close to the stream that flowed east toward the Kishon River, was the *kenishta*. Nearby, just within the wall, was the *rabbi's* house, which was one of the largest; the other large houses belonged to the judges of the court and to the deputy of the Roman Procurator.

The Procurator for H'galiyel and Perea was at this time located in Sepforis, just as the Procurator for Yahudiyagh was in Yerushalom. Sepforis, some four thousand paces over the hill to the northwest, had been destroyed by the Romans after an insurrection about twenty-five years previously, but then had been rebuilt by King Herod Antipas as his capital. Now a city of about thirty thousand, with a palace, the royal bank, a fortress, an arsenal, a theater, and two markets, the King called it *Autocratoris*, and so it was known in official documents; but the people who lived in the area continued to call it by its old name. The Procurator there, like the one in Yerushalom, controlled his territory by placing deputies in each town.

Large though Sepforis was, the people in the towns and villages around it went there as seldom as possible. Usually a large city in a countryside is a center of trade, as the country folk go there to sell their products and buy various goods. But in H'galiyel the situation was different. Sepforis was hated by the townspeople and villagers in the surrounding area because its inhabitants were viewed as traitors, as Roman sympathizers, since they were willing to live in the city which was the Roman administrative center.

At the time this story opens, Antipas had begun building a new capital, Tiberias, northeast of En-Nazira on the shores of Lake Gennesaret, and when he moved his capital there, the Procurator would

move too. But that would hardly affect the towns in the region, for there would still be a deputy in each one, no matter where the Procurator was.

The house where Yussuf and Maryam lived with their sons -- their daughter, also named Maryam, had married at fourteen and lived with her husband's family--was located between the town gate and the only fountain. Neomiv, the young wife of their oldest son, also lived with them. The house was much like most of the other houses in En-Nazira, although perhaps a little larger. It was basically a one-room cube made out of stones and mud covered with white plaster; Yussuf had laid the foundation by digging down to bedrock. There were no windows, but there was a door; the door jambs and lintel were made by Yussuf, as well as the door itself. To the right of the doorway was a leather cartridge, the mezuzagh, containing the commandments of Elaha. Because there were no windows, a lamp set on an earthenware lampholder provided illumination; it was kept burning olive oil night and day, so that there would always be fire in the house.

A stairway of Yussuf's manufacture was attached to one outside wall; it led to the roof, which was a pleasant place to find cool air in the evenings. The young men would go up there to play games until it got too dark to see. Yussuf had made a square board and marked it off, and his sons threw dice to move cone-shaped pieces around the board; he also made a rack with seven holes in it and counters which they could slide into the holes. They played these games to much shouting and laughter.

The roof was flat, tilted just enough for rainwater to run off. Yussuf had made it by laying beams across the top of the walls, then climbing up on a ladder to strew reeds and branches across the beams and to cover these with the same mixture of stones and mud he had used to build the house. He had then surrounded it with a low parapet, as commanded by Towragh, to prevent anyone from falling off. The roof had to be repaired every year before the rainy season.

The furniture within the house was simple. There was a special cabinet, made by Yussuf with pride, for storing the Book of Esther, read aloud at home as well as in the kenishta every year on the fourteenth day of Adar at the Feast of Purim. There were three wooden

chests, all of Yussuf's own workmanship: one was where Maryam kept food, one was where Yussuf and his sons kept their clothing, and the third was for the clothing of Neomiv, Maryam, and—until she left home—her daughter.

Piled in one corner were the mats the family slept on; in the hot nights of Kanaan's summer they took these up on the roof, where it was cooler, and in the winter and rainy season they spread them out on the hard-packed dirt floor inside. In another corner was a pile of folded camel's hair blankets, used in the winter; when it got really cold, they put on cloaks as well as blankets. Though cloaks and blankets protected them from cold, they were ineffective against the demons that inhabited the night; thus each member of the family recited the Shema Israel on going to bed.

The clothing and blankets were Maryam's work; she used distaff and spindle to make thread from wool that Yussuf bought from shepherds in the area, sometimes from flax grown by area farmers, then wove the thread into cloth on the loom which was set up in the work area in front of the house. In this work area Yussuf also made tables, chairs, benches, wheels, plows, chests, kneading troughs, doors, and other objects of wood. Here also the family usually ate, seated cross-legged on the red ground around the food, which was set on a low table which Yussuf had made

In back of the house were a garden, where Maryam raised beans, onions, peppers, pumpkins, and melons, and a small pasture, where Yussuf kept his donkeys and one yoke of oxen. When they were needed for plowing, the oxen were driven out to a small patch of land Yussuf had bought outside the town to raise wheat on. Maryam's grinder was in the garden, next to the house. It consisted of two basalt stones; the lower one was set in the ground, and every few days she turned the upper one to make flour from the wheat Yussuf raised. Her oven was here, too, next to the house; it was a flat rock, blackened from frequent fires and covered with a hood of baked clay made by a potter in the next lane. Rough stone walls, without mortar, marked off the garden and pasture.

On this day Yeshua was in the work area, planing a cypress board smooth. While his father wore a wood chip behind his ear as the mark of his trade, Yeshua had chosen a shaving rather than a chip, because he liked the curl of the shaving. It was like the curl of his side locks. On this day Yeshua was working alone, for his father had gone out to the wheat field with Yeshua's younger brother Yakob.

As usual when he was working, Yeshua was wearing not the fringed tzitzith, with its four wool tassels, that he and the other men of the family wore at other times, but a simple chalouk, with the skirt tucked into his leather belt to leave his legs free. His shoulder-length hair was rolled up under his headcovering to keep it from being bothersome.

His work reminded him of one day, more than a dozen years before, when he had first begun to work with his father. Yeshua had been dawdling, lazily pressing the plane over a board of olive wood, pressing slowly and lightly to make the work go slower while he dreamed a boyish dream.

Yussuf had straightened up from hammering pegs into a bench and spoke commandingly to him: "Son!" The voice was not harsh or angry, but it was filled with authority.

Yeshua looked up with startled brown eyes.

"Son, I'm a carpenter. To be a carpenter's a good thing; a carpenter's a skilled man, and a carpenter can take a piece of wood that no one else sees anything in, and draw a piece of beauty or usefulness from it."

Now, thinking back, Yeshua smiled in amusement at his father's earnestness and at his own amazement at being addressed so at the age of eight. Then, at the time, he had simply felt his muscles slacken in surprise.

"But a carpenter's a servant. A man comes to me and says, 'Yussuf, make me a table,' or 'Build me a house.' And I have to say to him, 'Yes, master.'" Yussuf paused, thinking. Then he said, "A king is here." And he raised his hand a little higher than his head. "A carpenter is here." He extended his arm, lowering his hand to mid thigh.

“Yet in this carpenter,” Yussuf went on, spreading his fingers against his chest, with that damp, matted hair Yeshua envied so much at that age, “in this carpenter flows the blood of a king, the greatest King of Israel, Daavid himself. That blood flows in you, too, son. I’m a carpenter, but I’ve never forgotten that I’m descended from kings. I’m proud, and I work proudly, as a king would work if he were a carpenter.

“Son,” Yussuf concluded mildly, “you’re not planing that board as a king would plane it.”

It was a startling end to a startling speech. The boy who heard it found himself unable to move for moments. But then he bore down on the plane, peeling off curls of wood in long sweeping, biting strokes.

Yussuf laughed with delight. “That’s how a king would plane!”

And Yeshua never forgot the lesson. Since he emerged from the typical adolescent disvaluing of his father, he had come to admire Yussuf. Though a carpenter, Yussuf was a learned man, a leader in *kenishta* and the congregation of elders, one who was respected by the other men in En-Nazira. He bore himself like the descendant of kings that he was. Yeshua hoped even now, in his early twenties, that he would develop into a man like Yussuf.

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Now, as Yeshua worked, humming, Nahum entered the work area, wearing a brown *tzitzith* and head covering. Yeshua steeled himself; ever since the two had played together as boys, Nahum had made too much of an effort to be friendly, creating in Yeshua an urge to withdraw, and had had a tendency to gossip which Yeshua had trouble responding to, torn as he was by equal tendencies toward curiosity and charity about the objects of Nahum’s tattle. What made it worse was Nahum’s freedom. Though like Yeshua he was past twenty, he was an errand boy for the town and spent his time running through the streets for first one man and then another; on his errands he frequently stopped here and there for his own purposes, in the wineseller’s, in the whorehouses, and, regrettably so far as Yeshua was concerned, at the carpenter’s house.

“Peace be with you,” Nahum said.

“And with you peace.”

They exchanged questions about each other’s health, and then Nahum inquired about that of Yussuf, Maryam, Yeshua’s wife Neomiv, and Yeshua’s brothers and married sister; all, Yeshua averred, were well.

“What do you think of your cousin now?” Nahum asked.

The question took Yeshua so much by surprise that he almost gouged his board. “Cousin?” he asked.

“Yohanan.”

Yeshua had not seen his cousin and childhood playfellow for years, since Yohanan had left Karem, where he lived with his parents, to join the Seregh ha Yahad. So far as he knew, Yohanan was still pursuing his sober purpose to achieve sanctity as a member of the desert community. “Why, what should I think of him?”

“Oh, hadn’t you heard?” Nahum smiled at the pleasure of being the first to tell Yeshua of his cousin’s strange behavior. “They say he’s left the Seregh and founded his own community in the wilderness.”

Yeshua did not want to commit himself to a reaction; yet he wanted more information, finding himself moved to curiosity, as he had to his own disgust been moved so many times before by one of Nahum’s stories. He remained silent and kept planing, knowing that Nahum would continue in order to sting him to a response yet feeling cowardly for his unwillingness to ask honestly.

“He’s preaching at Beit Abara now. He says he can wash away men’s sins if they come to him and repent.”

“If a man truly repents of his sins,” Yeshua countered, “surely they’ll be washed away.” Immediately he regretted his words; Nahum had drawn him out before he had intended to speak.

The errand boy smiled with satisfaction. “He’s preaching every day. He says that M’shihagh’s at hand, that the promised Anointed One is now alive.”

Yeshua remained silent.

“People from as far away as Yerushalom have come to hear him preach. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of it.”

“I stay here and tend to my father’s business.”

"He says that Malkutha, the Kingdom of Elaha, will come soon. Do you believe he's right?"

It was a direct question, and Yeshua could not avoid answering it. He laid aside his plane and considered. "Elaha'll bring all things to pass when He wills. If He wishes His Kingdom to come upon Earth now, it'll come. If He doesn't, it won't."

"Ah, you're a crafty one!" Nahum exclaimed, grinning. "Some say that Yohanan is mad," he persisted. "He won't wear woolen cloth but weaves his own clothes from camel's hair and wears a leather belt. He doesn't eat anything but grasshoppers and wild honey, saying that that's the food Elaha placed in the desert for him to eat. Do you believe he's mad?"

Yeshua had resumed planing and did not stop as he replied, "I don't know. I'll have to see him for myself before I decide."

"Then you will go to see him?"

Bitterly Yeshua realized that he had trapped himself. "I suppose so."

"When?"

"Not until after I finish this table you're keeping me from making."

Nahum laughed to show that he took Yeshua's flash of anger as a joke. "Then I'll leave you to your table, so that you won't be delayed in going to hear your cousin tell people how to wash away their sins." And he left.

It gave Yeshua something to think about. When his cousin had first told him of his intention to join the Seregh ha Yahad, Yeshua had been interested and had even thought of joining the desert community himself. He explored the possibility and found that he would have to spend one year as a neophyte, then two years as a novice; during this time he would accompany one of the brothers in journeys throughout the province, helping the poor and learning from his mentor how to drive demons from the afflicted, how to heal the blind, and how to revive the dead. There was much in this that appealed to him, but he was reluctant to join the community because some of what they did seemed to him to verge on the practice of magic, because much of their time was spent not in activities that would help people but in

copying texts from the Towragh, and especially because their laws and regulations were so rigid. The words of Hillel had returned to his mind, that all religion could be summed up as love of Elaha and love of fellow man.

Yeshua determined to report the conversation at dinner. Yussuf and Maryam had obeyed the injunction to be fruitful and multiply, and it was a large family that met around the table in front of the house. Yussuf and Yeshua were seated crosslegged there, as were Yeshua's younger brothers, Yakob, Yussuf the Younger, Yehuwidagh, and Shimeon. Maryam and Neomiv, as befitted women, served the meal they had prepared; when the men had finished, they would eat what was left.

Before Yeshua could bring up what Nahum had told him, first Yussuf had something to say, and as a respectful son Yeshua listened dutifully. "Taxes," Yussuf began, "are eating me alive. First"—and he ticked them off on his fingers—"we have a head tax from the Romans, then we have a handicraft tax from them, and finally a temple tax from Yerushalom, though we use Koaygh Aelhys only a few days a year." Every male Hebrew was required to pay a didrachma tax to Koaygh Aelhys annually on the fifteenth day of the month of Adar. "The money comes in, yes," he went on, "but it seems to slip through my fingers to the tax gatherers."

"How much of what you take in goes for taxes?" Maryam asked.

Yussuf shrugged eloquently. "Maybe two-thirds. It leaves enough for us to live on. Barely. So I keep sharpening the old saw to keep from having to buy a new one, and now the teeth are getting so small I'll have to get a new one anyway."

Yakob said, "If we could only get rid of the goyim, things would be better."

Yussuf laughed. "You're young yet. That's what Yehuwidagh bar Hezekiyagh thought, and he raised a rebellion in Sepforis just a dozen years or so before you were born. He said taxation was equivalent to slavery and the only ruler the Children of Israel had or needed was Elaha. So the Romans came to Sepforis, made slaves of all the people, and left the city a pile of gravel. There wasn't anything there until the new King built it up again. So I suppose it's better to go on

paying taxes to the Romans than to be enslaved or dead. If it wasn't the Romans it would be somebody else."

There was silence after Yussuf spoke, and, having waited to make sure that his father was through, Yeshua cleared his throat and began to tell about Nahum's visit.

As she stood behind her husband, Maryam listened carefully. She was interested; she had been fond of Yohanan's mother when they were both still maidens, and she had always liked Yohanan when he was a child. "Yussuf," she said, "I'd like to go hear Yohanan some time when he preaches." Yeshua looked up at his mother; age had lined her face but left it beautiful.

Yussuf nodded as he chewed, his gray beard bobbing up and down with each movement of his jaw.

"Perhaps," Yakob suggested, "we could go next week."

Yussuf nodded again.

iv

Over the next few days they heard more and more about Yohanan and his strange message. It became fashionable for people to make the day's journey to the banks of Khyldan and listen to him. Some scoffed; some believed; and some stood silently and wondered.

On the day Yussuf selected, he and his family put on goat-hair traveling cloaks, took a basket of wheat bread with them, and journeyed to Beit Abara, on the east side of Khyldan, south of Lake Genesaret. Yussuf and his older sons rode donkeys; the women and younger boys walked.

At the southern end of the lake an outcrop of lava dammed its waters, and the river was narrow as it tumbled southward into a wild valley, barren except along the river banks. Yohanan had chosen the spot because below the outcrop was a ford used by caravans traveling to and from the east, so that a potential audience was continually passing by. The carpenter's family itself made a small caravan.

It was, indeed, a strange ceremony, and Yohanan looked every bit as strange as Nahum had described him. He wore a garment woven of camel's hair, belted with a rope; his sandals were made of palm bark;

his hair and beard were long and uncombed; he was bare headed; and his skin was dark and leathery from living in the desert.

First Yohanan preached to the people briefly, as Nahum had reported, about the coming of M'shihagh and the Kingdom of Elaha and about how it was necessary to be cleansed from sin in order to meet M'shihagh in purity and to enter into Malkutha, Elaha's Kingdom, when it was established. Then he waded waist deep into the muddy river and asked the people to come to him one at a time. Even though in neither kenishta nor Koaygh Aelhys could men and women worship together, Yohanan washed both men and women, one at a time. Yeshua was struck by this. Why should not men and women worship together? Elaha created both, both were prone to sin, both were in need of repentance.

As each person waded out to him, Yohanan asked what sins he or she had committed in his or her life. Some confessed a few; others, many. Some spoke in loud, clear voices; others whispered, to keep the knowledge of their transgressions from those on the bank. But all Yohanan then pressed firmly down into the water until they were completely beneath it, and then lifted them up dripping. "Your sins are forgiven," he told them, laying his hands on them as he spoke. "Go and sin no more."

Yeshua stood beside Neomiv, wondering. His cousin spoke as if he really had been given the authority to pardon men's sins. Had Elaha spoken to Yohanan as he had spoken in years past to Adém, to Moishegh, to his own namesake? And how did this relate to Koaygh Aelhys in Yerushalom? The kohens there maintained that the only way a person could free himself from his sins was by paying them and making sacrifices. Yet here was his cousin, a lone man under the sky, not under the Temple's roof, claiming the same power. And he asked no payment! Yeshua felt an urge to talk to Yohanan, after the ceremony was over.

But now there was a commotion. Surprised, the crowd pressed forward to hear. To this time all Yohanan's baptisms had been from the working or peasant classes; now on the bank, about to enter the water, stood a small group of wealthy men, mostly P'ryshaya, dressed in blue-fringed, embroidered tzitziths covered by cloaks and cinched

with leather belts, and wearing gold rings on their fingers and gold signets hanging from leather thongs around their necks. Their shoes were made of expensive jackal hide.

In the days of Alexander the Great's conquest of Kanaan, the P'ryshaya had been the heroes of the struggle against the Greeks. Later, a century before Yeshua's birth, when Alexander Iannæus became High Priest, the P'ryshaya had led the rebellion against him; they had accused him of excessive militarism, of allying himself with goyim, and of marrying a widow, this last being forbidden to the priesthood. Alexander Iannæus crucified eight hundred of the P'ryshaya and slaughtered their wives and children before them as they died. More recently hundreds of them had been hanged by Herodes the Great for having criticized him too openly. After Herodes' death, they had opposed his son Archelaus for marrying a widow and for excessive taxation; they sent a delegation to Roma to ask Augustus to remove him and were successful. Now they formed the group among the Hebrews most bitterly opposed to the Roman occupation.

Because of this history of opposition, both to goyim oppressors and to Hebrew leadership which violated acceptable behavior, the P'ryshaya had come to regard themselves as the most pious among the Israelites, the most knowledgeable about religion, and the most rigorous interpreters of the Word of Elohim.

But Yohanan ignored their evaluation of themselves. "You vipers!" he shouted at them, his voice loud in the sudden hush. "You vipers! Look at the rings on your fingers, look at the golden chains of jewels around your necks. Do you think you can get rid of your sins just by having me wash you? Every gem you wear is made from the sweat of laboring men. People starve so that you can live in ease. You vipers!" He raised a hand angrily, and even though they stood on the bank, out of his reach, the men drew back instinctively. "It'll take more than washing to cleanse you from your sins."

One of the P'ryshaya found the courage to say, "We're children of Abraham as much as you. We're the chosen people of Elaha."

"Children of Abraham!" Yohanan shouted the words as though they were a curse, and a murmur swept through the crowd. "I don't care whether you are children of Abraham. Do you think M'shihagh

is going to receive all the children of Abraham into the Kingdom of Elaha, no matter what they've done? I tell you that if Elaha wants more children of Abraham, He has the power to take these rocks and turn them into children of Abraham. His power is unlimited!"

Yeshua was listening with a pounding heart. Yes, he must stay behind and talk with Yohanan. The rabbi in En-Nazira never spoke this way. Yohanan used meshalim, the traditional figure of speech, but he spoke with a firmness that gave authority to his words; he was confident, as if he knew that he was right. And the rightness of his words strummed some string deep in Yeshua's soul. The rich did gain their wealth at the expense of the poor. It was an empty boast to be one of the chosen people, for Elaha could make as many people as He wanted or needed. What mattered was yourself, as a person, not your money or your ancestry.

But Yohanan was continuing, using another mashal: "You're like a tree, and Elaha is sending M'shihagh to be an ax to cut you down at the root. You're like a tree, and if you don't bear good fruit, M'shihagh'll cut you down and throw you in the fire."

A woman in the crowd asked, "Are you M'shihagh?"

Yohanan threw back his head and sent a shaft of laughter winging over the crowd. "Me? No, no. No, I'm not M'shihagh. I'm not even good enough to buckle his sandals. You'll know M'shihagh when he comes. He'll carry a winnowing shovel, to separate the wheat from the chaff. He'll thrash you with it, and those of you who're wheat, he'll gather you into his barn; but those of you who're chaff, he'll throw you into the fire."

One of the P'ryshaya said, "Yohanan, I came here to learn from you, and all you've done is give me hard language. You say that I have to do more than be washed in the Khyldan in order to enter into Malkutha. Already I obey scrupulously every yot and tittle of the Law. All right, then, tell me what more I have to do, and I'll do it."

"Do you have more than one robe?"

"Why, of course."

"You can wear only one at a time. Keep one robe and give all the others to poor people. Sell your jewels and buy food, and every day set out food for people who don't have enough to eat."

The P'rysh paused, then murmured something which only those near him could hear, turned, and walked away sadly, followed gradually by the other P'ryshaya.

Next came a Tzadowk. The Tzadowkayim had at first fought side by side with the P'ryshaya against the Seleucid successors of Alexander the Great, but they broke with the P'ryshaya; for pragmatic reasons they supported Alexander Iannæus when he called on the Romans for assistance, which had led to the Roman occupation under Pompeius. Where the P'ryshaya had embraced the whole of the Law and the Prophets and considered that therein could be found answers to any questions that life posed to a person, the Tzadowkayim limited themselves to the first five books of the Law and said that where these were silent, a man was free to judge for himself what was proper. Confronted by the remnants of Greek civilization all around them, on which were superimposed Roman civilization, the P'ryshaya said that everything was to be rejected even if one's death was the consequence; the Tzadowkayim, on the other hand, were willing to make accommodations so long as these did not absolutely conflict with the code of Moishagh. Yet on two points the Tzadowkayim were even stricter conservatives than the P'ryshaya; while many Hebrews believed in the resurrection of the body after death, the Tzadowkayim did not, saying no proof of the doctrine could be found in the first five books of the Law. And whereas most Hebrews compromised with that section of the Law which said that every seventh year slaves were to be freed and debts canceled, the Tzadowkayim held to every yot and tittle.

At this time the Tzadowkayim were drawn from the wealthy classes and controlled the Temple in Yerushalom, including the finances. It was they who dealt with the Romans, for the P'ryshaya felt defiled even to speak with a goy. Yet their influence with the ordinary Hebrews was declining; since the Hebrews cordially hated their Roman oppressors, the Tzadowkayim were seen as collaborators with the enemy. And as the influence of the Tzadowkayim declined, that of the P'ryshaya rose.

This Tzadowk said, "Yohanan, I'm a tax collector. What do I have to do to enter into the Kingdom of Elaha?"

“Some tax collectors collect only what goes into the treasury; others collect that and a little more for themselves. Be one of the first kind.”

“I am!” the Tzadowk said joyfully and waded out into the river to be immersed.

Another Tzadowk, this one in the armor of a Temple guard, said, “I’m a soldier. What can a soldier do to enter into Malkutha?”

“Some soldiers swagger through towns and frighten people into giving them money. Don’t be one of those. Others get money by accusing people falsely of treason to the Tetrarch and collecting the rewards. Don’t be one of those.”

The soldier began to unbuckle his armor so that he could wade into the river, and the parade of people wading out to Yohanan continued.

Yeshua turned to his wife. “I want to stay here and speak with Yohanan afterward. You can return home whenever you want.”

“I want to be washed,” Neomiv said. “Then I’ll wait for you.” She joined the crowd on the bank, which now also included Yussuf, Maryam, and their other sons. Yeshua squatted in the shade of his donkey to wait until all were through. Again he heard Yohanan say, in response to some question he had not heard, “Yes, I tell you that M’shihagh’ll be much greater than I. I don’t deserve even to be allowed to untie the thong of his sandals.”

v

Gradually the people were washed, one by one, and left; even the remainder of Yeshua’s family after trying unsuccessfully to get him to join them. Neomiv, now drying in the sun, remained squatting beside their donkey.

Then, as Yohanan came up from the water, Yeshua came down the bank to meet him at the edge. They embraced and kissed, and Yohanan smiled broadly. “Cousin, I’ve been waiting for you to come.”

“I’ve heard many things about you,” Yeshua said. “Some say that you’re M’shihagh, but I heard today how you deal with those. Others say that you’re mad, but the words you said today aren’t madness.”

"I'm pleased you believe that they're true."

"Yes, they are. I look around me, and while my family's comfortable, I see people in sadness and suffering. One man has a festering sore but can't buy the salve to ease his pain. A mother watches her child die because she can't afford the cure. Children are hungry, starving; I see the flies swarm around their mouths, not even waiting for the children to die. Our people are groaning under the heel of the conqueror, who takes a lot and gives very little. I've wondered why Elaha permits such suffering."

"Yes," Yohanan said eagerly. "And what have you decided?"

"I haven't known what to think. But you made it clearer for me today. Our people say it's because of the Romans, but whether the Romans were here or not, our own people are as much to blame. When a rich man hires a servant, he pays him as little as possible, and the servant has to try to live on that. This lets the master eat rich food and drink fine wines, while the servant's children chew crusts of stale barley bread to keep their stomachs from hurting."

Yohanan smiled again. "You listened well."

"I found that your words said what I already had in my heart."

Yohanan's smile faded, and he grew more serious; his face even seemed to darken. "Cousin," he said abruptly, "there are signs and portents around you. You must be aware that you've been chosen for some great accomplishment."

Yeshua spread the fingers of his right hand and shook his head. "No," he said. "No, not I."

"I tell you yes," Yohanan said, without raising his voice, but in so commanding a tone that Yeshua was silenced. "My mother told me many times that when I was in her womb and you were in Maryam's, your mother came to visit her. I leaped within her when Maryam entered the room. It was a sign, Yeshua. I leaped inside my mother's womb the first time you came into my presence, though you were still in your mother's belly too. There's some greatness ahead of you."

Yeshua's curiosity overcame his resistance to the idea. "Do you know what it is?"

"No. But my father always believed that you were M'shihagh. Your mother even named you Yeshua."

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“No,” Yeshua denied again, pushing Yohanan’s words away with his right hand.

Yohanan sat on the shore, his feet in the water; Yeshua joined him. The desert dweller said, “My father looked at the Roman legions tramping through the roadways of the land Elaha gave us and said that someday the prophecies of Isheyihav would be fulfilled in a leader who’d raise up the Hebrew people to drive these goyim into the sea. He said it’d be a descendant of King Daavid—as you are, Cousin. And as you grew up, he said many times that he believed you’d be the one; there was a kingly air about you, an air of command, an air that men would follow. I remember when we were boys together. You were always the leader, always the one the rest of us looked up to and followed.”

vi

Yeshua was silent, brooding on his cousin’s words. Over the years of his life there had, it was true, been signs. A troubling recollection came to him, of something his mother had told him many times. When she was pregnant with him, she said, a man had come to her and told her that her child would be King over Israel, as his ancestor Daavid had been. His father, too, had told the same story; the same man had spoken to him.

Then, his parents had told him, even before he was circumcised, some shepherds had come past the carpenter’s house; his mother had been sitting in front, holding him, to get some sunlight and fresh air. The shepherds had stopped and exclaimed over the beauty of the child. “He looks like a baby king,” one of them had said. “Maybe some day he’ll grow up and save us from these damned legions.” Maryam had treasured that prediction and had repeated it to him many times.

And then there was the old man, Shimeon by name, in Koaygh Aelhys in Yerushalom. Yussuf had often told Yeshua the story: Shimeon had prayed to Elaha countless times that he would not die until he had seen the King who would drive the Romans out of the land of Kanaan. Yussuf and Maryam had taken their infant son to Yerushalom to sacrifice two pigeons, give five shekels to the Tem-

ple, and offer him to the service of Elaha; and Shimeon was standing there, having come to Koaygh Aelhys to pray. He saw the child, felt affection toward him, and took him in his arms. At that moment Shimeon fell dead; fortunately, Maryam still had not fully relinquished her grip on her infant, and hence Yeshua had not fallen too.

There was much outcry, to which Yeshua contributed some frightened wails, his parents told him, and then an old woman, Hannagh, had informed them about Shimeon's prayer; she had exclaimed that the boy must be the infant M'shihagh and predicted that Yeshua would grow up to bring about the liberation of Yerushalom.

After the presentation in Koaygh Aelhys they had returned to En-Nazira, and then there came to their house three astrologers from Persia, claiming that their calculations had told them that the Hebrew M'shihagh would be born in En-Nazira on the very night when Yeshua had in fact been born, and that thus he must be the baby prophesied. The astrologers had made much of him, Maryam told him often, and had given gifts of precious things which she and Yussuf had benefited greatly from. There had been myrrh and other scents which Maryam had used to adorn herself with, but best of all there had been gold, which Yussuf had used to buy much of the new equipment with which he had improved his carpentry business.

So many signs -- the shepherds, Shimeon, the astrologers -- all led Yussuf, and especially Maryam, to expect Yeshua to reach some great achievement. It had been a disturbing expectation. As a child, steeped in these stories about himself, he had imagined himself king and had tried to act as king over his playfellows. They had not liked it at all and had shut him out of their games for a while. No one would wrestle with him; the other boys would not let him contest against them with bows or slings or let him play kickball with them. But once he had stopped trying to lord it over them, they began to follow his leadership spontaneously. From that experience he had for some time always felt the coldness of embarrassment whenever his mother mentioned the portents. When he became older, he told her of his distaste for these stories, but she merely laughed and ignored him.

And then, Yeshua remembered, there had been the experience in Koaygh Aelhys when he was twelve. All Israelites, every spring in the month of Nisan, at the first full moon after the equinox, were supposed to go to Yerushalom to celebrate Pesakh there. Though Yussuf was a devout Hebrew, a pillar of the kenishta, he didn't go every year; he complained that the moneychangers in the Temple cheated him. But this year he decided to present Yeshua for his bar mitzvah, though he was a year younger than required, because he was such a precocious boy. So he and Maryam took their growing family, making a party with some of Yussuf's relatives.

Yussuf and his friends had gone together to purchase a male, unblemished yearling lamb to be sacrificed. Over the years Yussuf had prospered sufficiently to buy a small plot of farmland, on which his sons worked when they were not needed in the carpentry shop and from which he contributed a sheaf of wheat. The wheat was not really ready for reaping, but this was the time that tradition had set for offering the first fruits of the harvest.

The families all traveled together in a caravan of camels, donkeys, and mules. They wore thick goat-hair traveling cloaks and put their money in their belts for safe keeping. They carried wallets containing spare sandals, skins filled with water and wine, and gourds for dipping water out of wells they came across. There were not enough animals to carry all the men; those who walked tucked their coats into their belts, to leave their legs free, and bore staffs, both for help in hiking and for defense. The women who had young children rode on donkeys. Their route went south across the Plain of Esdraelon, forded the Kishon River, and went into Shomron, where the land, at first flat, became hillier as they went along. Yussuf told Yeshua that the Shomerayin were not proper Children of Israel; they did not worship at Yerushalom but at Mount Gerizim, and, like the Tzadowkayim, they believed only in the first five books of the Law. When they passed that mountain, on their right, Yeshua looked at it curiously; he did not see anything remarkable about it. Then the road took them into Yahudiyagh. The country was very different from H'galiyel; the color of the land was mostly tan as a lion's skin, but at the bottom of the

hills, terraced with grain fields, were valleys of red soil. They were amid a throng of pilgrims, all converging on Yerushalom from every part of Kanaan except Shomron, and from many parts of the Roman world; for coming to Yerushalom for Pesakh was important to Israelites who had left Kanaan for such cities as Alexandria and even Roma itself, and who came by ship, disembarking at Yoppa, by caravan from Tyre, or over the desert from Damascus. As they marched toward the capital, they filled the air with the music of Psalm 83. One year Herodes Agrippa demanded a kidney from each lamb sacrificed; he received six hundred thousand.

Yeshua remembered how he had marveled at all the people. The road was packed as well with travelers for reasons other than religious: merchants from Babylon, dressed in silk and wearing gold rings in their noses, leading caravans of merchandise to sell; Syrian businessmen; messengers carrying their messages in wooden tubes hung around their necks; Negroes from Abyssinia and the Sudan seeking bargains to sell at profit at home; Greeks carrying supplies for the bazaars; peasants bringing produce to meet the needs of the pilgrims; and especially beggars, who lined the road as well as traveling on it, for they knew that Hebrews going to Yerushalom for Pesakh would be more generous than at any other time. Many of the beggars along the road were lepers, who held out fingerless hands, or handless stumps of arms, to excite pity in the other travelers. Yerushalom was the largest city Yeshua had ever seen. To reach it, the travelers first crested Mount Scopus, from which they saw the entire city spread before them. It lay atop the next mountain and was cut into two sections by a narrow valley. In the western part were the glittering marble homes of the wealthy, roofed with tiles; the eastern part, where were situated the more modest tan limestone homes, topped with reeds and mud, of ordinary people, comprised three broad mesas leading upward to a crest, which was topped by Koaygh Aelhys, the House of Elohim. Beyond the Temple was the valley of the Kidron, and beyond that, connected to the city by a bridge over the river, the Mount of Olives.

Yussuf's family approached Yerushalom from the north, passing first through a section outside the wall, a section of shops in the

houses of their owners; the city had grown too large to be contained within its original bounds. They entered the city through the Sheep Gate. Within Yerushalom they found a maze of houses much like those they had left in En-Nazira, threaded by a warren of narrow, crooked streets, most of them stepped, that took the travelers up over the uneven ground to the Temple. Beside the Temple was a broad forum, made by Herodes the Great, who wanted Yerushalom to emulate a Roman city, and not far off were a hippodrome for chariot races and a theater, both scorned by pious Hebrews.

Yeshua recalled that as he had approached Koaygh Aelhys, he paused involuntarily, impressed by its beauty. It sat on the crest of Mount Moriyagh, which King Herodes had leveled and even expanded by bringing in additional dirt. The Temple was surrounded by an immense wall, pierced by gates; as Yussuf's family approached from the north they saw only a single gate, but there were four on the west and two each on the south and east. Above the gate could be seen the glistening white marble buildings.

Yussuf looked back to see Yeshua and from the expression of awe on the boy's face he knew what Yeshua was thinking. "Yes," he said in agreement, "it is beautiful. But its beauty is a shame to us Hebrews, because when Herodes had it built, he modeled it on a Temple to Yuppiter. He even set gold eagles upon the gates, until the people of Yerushalom rose up and tore them down. But Elaha knew what Herodes had done, and in punishment He prevented the building from ever being finished; it is still being worked on to this day."

Near Koaygh Aelhys stood the palace of Herodes, an enormous marble structure built on the Greek model except for three four-sided towers, on the highest of which a watch-fire burned every night. Between palace and Temple was the Antonia fortress, which had been taken over by the Romans as their barracks and administrative center. The fortress contained four towers, from the highest of which the legionaires could look out over the entire city. In front of the fortress was a paved area, from which the Roman Procurator pronounced his judgements and issued his proclamations. When not used for such solemn occasions, children played there—hopscotch and a circle

game which was played with four knucklebones marked with numbers and letters.

When Yussuf's family crossed the bridge which spanned the valley and connected the two halves of the city, reaching Koaygh Aelhys, they passed through the Temple gate and crowded into the Court of the Gentiles, so called because anyone, Hebrew or not, could enter it. The wall was surrounded by walkways of colored stone whose cedar roofs were supported by columns so tall that Yeshua had to strain his neck back to see the tops of them. Yussuf's family was massed together with what seemed like hundreds of other pilgrims and their lambs. Then the shofar sounded. The lamb was supposed to be offered up in the evening, but there were so many of them that the sacrifices had to begin earlier and end later.

The Court of the Gentiles was as busy as a marketplace. Here were men selling lambs to pilgrims who had not brought their own, there were men exchanging drachmas and denarii into shekels, for only the last coinage was acceptable in the Temple. "Thieves," Yussuf grumbled. "They don't exchange money at a fair rate. They manage it so that at every exchange they put a few coppers into their own purses." Yeshua stared at these men, impressed by his father's words. The river of pilgrims moved toward the sanctuary itself, stretching from east to west. Between the wall and the sanctuary were many levels rising up, so that the pilgrims and their lambs had to go up stairways to reach their goal. First they went up fifteen steps to reach a balustrade which marked the point beyond which goyim or infidels could not go. At the balustrade were thirteen receptacles for coin offerings to be given. Beyond the balustrade was the Court of the Women, where Maryam, Neomiv, and the other women of Yussuf's party waited until their men returned; women could not proceed up the next curved stairway of fifteen steps, leading to the Court of the Israelites. That court was surrounded by a wall, and the pilgrims and their lambs passed into it through the bronze Nicanor gate, so heavy it took twenty men to open it. Three more steps led upward to the Court of the Priests.

At the far end of that court stood the Temple itself, on a level reached by twelve more steps. Yeshua gave a sharp intake of breath

when he saw at close range the tall white marble colonnades, nearly three times as tall as those in the Court of the Gentiles, which held up the pediment and, above that, the golden spikes of the roof. Through the columns the golden door could be seen.

But Yussuf and the other men remained with their lambs in the Court of the Priests, where the altar stood. This was a huge rough rock, twice as high as a man, into which channels had been cut to carry away the blood. Beyond that was a huge fire onto which the entrails of the sacrificed animals were cast once they had been killed. There were eight cedar pillars to which the sacrificial animals were tied while awaiting the sacrifice. At a gesture from the kohen Yussuf untied his lamb and led it up the ramp to the level at which the sacrifice was to be made; the animal halted as it neared the altar, smelling the blood of its fellows, but Yussuf was strong, and as he pulled on the rope and Yeshua pushed from behind they got it to the sacred rock.

The yellow-robed kohens stood in two lines, chanting the Hallel and killing the lambs one by one, the blood covering their hands and staining their robes, catching the blood in great bowls. Each time a bowl was filled, it was handed to another kohen, who poured the blood over the altar. Then the kohens disemboweled the lamb, cast the entrails into the fire, and returned it to its owner.

When the lamb of Yussuf and his friends had been sacrificed, they carried its body to the hooks at the side of the courtyard, hung it from one, and skinned it. They cut out the heart, liver, and kidneys, and cut off the tail, which they left in the temple to be burned. Then they wrapped the rest of the lamb in its skin and carried it to the camp they had set up outside the city.

At sunset, they heard the sound of the shofar being blown in the Temple. Then the men impaled the lamb on two pomegranate branches, one horizontal and the other vertical, crossing each other at the animal's shoulders. The lamb was roasted over an open fire, and then seasoned with special salts. Yussuf stood facing the Temple and with upright arms blessed the food. Then he and the other men cut the meat off the lamb, and they ate it sitting crosslegged on the red ground, tearing off pieces from the round sheet of azumos bread.

After the men ate, the women did also. Then the men drank wine; the women and children sipped it. When the meal was finished, Yussuf bound on his forehead his leather teffilin, containing the verse from Psalm 90 ("Nothing shall you have to fear from mighty terrors, nor from the arrow that flies by daylight"); covered his head with his tallith, his prayer shawl; stood; turned southward toward Koaygh Ael-hys; raised his arms; and gave thanks to Elaha.

That evening, sitting around the dying fire, the men talked; the women and children listened. To begin with, they talked, as men will, of the weather.

Shemiwel, a glazier who was one of Yussuf's friends, said, "The harvest will be good this year. We had ample rain."

"Yes," Yussuf rejoined, "but we're not likely to make much profit out of it. Between the Romans and the Temple kohens, they'll find a way to get it from us."

The other men nodded, and some said, "Yes," in agreement.

"When a peasant comes to me for a plow or a yoke," Yussuf continued, "I'm never sure that I'll be paid for it. And yet these are good men, who have no wish to cheat me. It's only that when they've paid their taxes, they have barely enough to eat, let alone pay for what they need to buy."

Shemiwel said, "I set up my table in the marketplace to sell the glassware I've made, and the peasant women come by and look at it só longingly, and then they shake their heads and pass by. My heart goes out to them. If I could afford to do it, I'd give it to them. But my family and I have to eat, too."

Again the other men murmured, "Yes."

"Some day," Yussuf said, "some day the Romans and the Temple kohens will pay for what they do. You and I can't act; there are too few of us. But Elaha will act."

"How?" came a voice from the dark.

"Who knows?" Yussuf answered. "Who can know the ways of Elaha? But He will find a way in His own good time, and then some who are mighty today will run in terror, looking for hiding places from His wrath."

More murmurs of agreement followed his words.

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They stayed in the camp outside Yerushalom until the sixteenth day of Nisan, the day of Matsoth, when they offered the sheaf of wheat. Then, together with a large number of other boys his age and a year older from all over H'galiyel, Yeshua underwent the bar mitzvah ceremony. Now that he was a man, Yeshua was allowed to wear a man's head covering, a cloth tied at his forehead and falling over his shoulders.

The next morning they awakened to a cool breeze blowing in from the Mediterranean. When they heard the clashing of bronze as the kohens opened the Nicanor Gate, and the trumpets welcoming the rising of the sun from behind the mountains of Moab, Yussuf recited the Shema Israel, and the caravan set off toward En-Nazira.

Yeshua had quarreled with Yussuf. His father had always been strangely contradictory, Yeshua reflected, proud of him for the omens of kingship or M'shihaghhood, but at the same time accusing him angrily that he was putting on regal airs and not doing his share of the chores. It had made his boyhood difficult in that he was never certain how to behave so as to please Yussuf.

And on this morning Yeshua had complained about having to leave Koaygh Aelhys before having an opportunity to ask the rabbis there about matters that he felt the local rabbis at En-Nazira could not instruct him in. Yussuf had been patient but adamant, making it clear that in his opinion no twelve-year-old boy could have questions worthy of the attention of the rabbis in Yerushalom. Bitterness ate at Yeshua's heart. It would serve Yussuf right if he ran away. And Maryam had told him so many times about these prophecies that he would become the King of the Israelites, had talked to him so much about some special plan that Elaha had for him, that he had felt drawn to Koaygh Aelhys. And so he had stolen away and had gone back to the temple. It had been easy to get lost among all the children in the families of the caravan.

The scene in Koaygh Aelhys came back to him now. When he reached the Temple, he roamed through the halls and buildings, passing kohens and other men without attracting attention. The door of the sanctuary stood open, but the entryway was covered by a beautifully embroidered curtain. He pushed aside the curtain and entered. Inside

the sanctuary, instead of the noise and tumult he had witnessed at the time of the sacrifice, there was a silence and peace which he found as restful to his spirit as lying on the roof of his home and watching the stars.

The sanctuary itself was a long hall, paneled with cedar and cypress, surrounded by rooms, some of which were offices and others lodgings. As Yeshua explored it, he saw an altar, on which he recognized a loaf of bread, a menorah, and a golden stand on which incense was burning. Beyond the altar was another curtain, and he pushed it aside to see what lay beyond it. There was nothing there but a large rock. He closed the curtain and was going back when a rabbi stopped him.

“Here, boy, where are you going?”

“I came here because I want to learn more than I can at home.”

The rabbi smiled. “A commendable ambition. What do you want to learn?”

Yeshua said, “Has Elaha forgotten us? Why has he allowed the goyim to rule over us?”

The rabbi had been pleased by so thoughtful an inquiry from so earnest a twelve-year-old, had praised him, and had brought him to the attention of his colleagues. The elderly men were astounded at his knowledge of Towragh; though, like other Hebrew boys, he had been studying the sacred Word in kenishta from the age of five, the rabbis seemed to think that Yeshua's grasp of it and his ability to reason about it were exceptional. Yeshua was greatly impressed by the rabbis and noticed that they wore their phylacteries, which were larger than any he had seen before, on their foreheads all the time, not just when they were praying. It had been an exciting time; it was as if a thirst were being quenched with cool water.

The rabbis even told him that the empty room he had penetrated into beyond the curtain was the Holy of Holies, and the stone he had seen there was the one Elohim threw into the ocean so that the land could form around it.

Then he had met the famous Rabbi Hillel, who had achieved his fame by setting down the “seven operations” by which any text in Towragh might be interpreted. Hillel turned out to be an aged and

kindly man, white of hair and deeply creased of face, frail of body and tottering on the rare occasions when he walked, dressed in a richly embroidered blue-fringed tzitzith. Hillel questioned him, patted his head, and advised him to study hard and he might become a rabbi.

“Where’s your family?” Hillel had asked him.

He felt an at-homeness in this serene atmosphere of teaching and seeking which was missing from the busy hammering of the carpentry shop and the noisy boisterousness of the home he shared with his brothers. He felt he should have been born to a rabbi instead of a carpenter. “Yóu’re my family,” he had said.

Hillel had smiled, somewhat uncertainly, and pressed him for a less metaphorical answer. But he parried the old man successfully, and so the rabbis let him stay. He sat cross-legged on the floor before the rabbis, listening to them discuss religious matters and asking questions that they praised him for thinking of at his young age.

He was puzzled on the second day when after a discussion Rabbi Hillel rose and said, “Now I’m going to perform a religious duty.”

One of his students, older than Yeshua, asked, “Which religious duty?”

Hillel smiled and said, “I’m going to take a bath.”

The student repeated the words in astonishment: “A bath?”

Hillel said, “Of course that’s a religious duty. Shouldn’t I take care of my body? Wasn’t it made in the likeness of Elohim?” And to the silence of his auditors, the rabbi left the room.

In that way Yeshua became impressed with the importance of cleanliness.

Once, when he was seated by Rabbi Hillel, Yeshua told him, “Rabboni, there are so many teachings in Towragh that it is hard for me to remember them all.”

The old man put his wrinkled hand on Yeshua’s shoulder and said, “Yes, my son. That’s why we spend our lives studying it.”

Yeshua rose and stood on one foot. “Can you tell me what I must know while I stand on one foot?”

The rabbi laughed, tousled Yeshua’s hair affectionately, and said, “Yes, I believe I can. I’ve been asked this before. You must love El-

ohim with all your heart, and you must love your neighbor as yourself. And this is the Law and the Prophets.”

The boy said, “I love Elohim already, but what does it mean to love my neighbor as myself?”

The old man smiled. “You ask piercing questions, lad. If you love your neighbors as yourself, you will do for other people what you would like them to do for you.”

Yeshua never forgot what Hillel had taught him.

On the third day a frantic Maryam, with an angry Yussuf in tow, had appeared. They had got to Shufat before they missed Yeshua, had had to let the caravan to go on without them, and had come back looking for him. They spent more than a day searching for him throughout Yerushalom before they remembered his desire to stay longer in Koaygh Aelhys. Yeshua was asking the rabbis a question when his father burst into the room. Yussuf said, “Boy, why did you do this to us? Your mother and I have looked everywhere for you.”

The twelve-year-old rabbi said loftily, “You should’ve known that I’d be here, here in the house of my real Father.”

Yussuf had never looked so angry, and Yeshua knew at once that he had gone too far. His dignity crumbled, and he began to cry. Outside Koaygh Aelhys Yussuf began to whip him, but slackened his arm at Maryam’s pleading that they should be happy to have their firstborn back with them again.

From that time on Yeshua had thought more seriously of kingship and everything it entailed, and it seemed to him a burden to be fled from. The prophecy now seemed a terrifying thing, one he dreaded coming true; for a while, about the time his genitals first fuzzed over, he had nightmares about being a king and giving orders to unruly subjects who jeered and pelted him.

Yet at the same time his parents had become more demanding. They expected that now he was becoming a man, at any moment he would begin to fulfill the promise they saw in him. It made him very anxious.

One evening Yussuf sat down with him to discuss what he conceived to be the lad’s mission. “We have high hopes for you, Yeshua,” the older man began. “I chose your name because I hoped that

you would lead the Hebrews to victory as Yeshua defeated the Kanaanites at Ariha. It means ‘Elaha is our salvation.’”

“I know, Father,” Yeshua responded. His head was bowed as he listened to his father’s words.

“Perhaps we’re wrong, but there are many signs. M’shihagh will be a descendant of Daavid, as you are. There’s a tradition that when M’shihagh comes, his father will have been named Yussuf, as yours is.”

“I know that,” Yeshua said.

“When M’shihagh comes,” Yussuf went on, “he’ll become not merely the ruler of Israel. Not only will he reclaim this land for Elaha’s chosen people by driving out the goyim. He’ll sit at the right hand of Elaha and rule all the nations of the world. All the nations will bow down and worship Elaha. Remember Daniel’s vision: ‘one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before Him. And there was given him dominion, and glory and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him; his dominion is an ever-lasting kingdom, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.’ And M’shihagh’ll judge all mankind. He’ll separate the people who’ve followed the Law from the ones who haven’t.”

“That’s an awesome responsibility,” Yeshua replied.

“In order to do this,” Yussuf continued, “M’shihagh’ll have to be absolutely pure himself. He’ll have to have obeyed every yot and tittle of the Law, every commandment in all of its five books.” Yeshua said nothing, but to his mind came the memory of Rabbi Hillel, who had said that all the Law could really be summarized in two commandments—to love Elaha and to love one’s fellow man.

“You chose your words well,” Yussuf said, “when you said that M’shihagh will have to bear an ‘awesome responsibility.’ But in order to bear the responsibility of judging mankind, he also has to live a perfect life himself. Of course I can’t be certain that you’ll become M’shihagh. But you may. So my hope for you is that from this day forward you’ll live a blameless life, following the Law in every respect.”

Yeshua raised his head to look his father full in the face. What could he say? He knew that Yussuf expected him to promise to fulfill all his expectations. It was a promise he did not feel that he could make. He was, he knew, only human. Only Elaha was perfect. But he could not look his father in the face and disappoint him. He said, "I'll go to Elaha in prayer and ask for His help and guidance."

It was the right answer. Yussuf smiled and clapped his eldest son on the shoulder.

And then the political situation in H'galiyel worsened. When Herodes the Great died, Augustus divided the provinces among his three sons. Archelaus was given Yahudiyagh, Shomron, and Idumea; Philip, Batanea and the Decapolis; and Herodes Antipas H'galiyel and Perea. A delegation of Israelites had gone to Rome to protest the excesses of Archelaus. Augustus deposed Archelaus, exiled him to Gaul, and put the three provinces under the control of a Procurator, responsible to Sulpicius Quirinus, Governor of Syria.

The first Procurator, Coponius, set up his capital at Cæsarea, on the coast, and took control of Yerushalom by posting an armed garrison in the Tower of Antonia, from which they could observe what went on in Koaygh Aelhys and the rest of the city. At the same time Quirinus deposed the High Priest and replaced him with a person whom he thought would be more tractable, a priest named Annas. This tightened Roman control over the provinces. Quirinus took the interregnum as an opportunity and ordered a census to be made for the purpose of improving the collection of taxes.

Israelites in Yerushalom rebelled. They marched on the offices of Sabinus, whom Coponius had appointed Deputy Procurator for Taxation; Sabinus fled and took refuge in the palace of Herodes, where the insurgent Israelites besieged him. In H'galiyel an insurrection was led by Yehuwidagh aysh Gamala, the son of Hezekiyagh, a robber who had been killed by Herodes to ingratiate himself with the Romans. Yehuwidagh declared that Hebrews had no ruler but Elaha, called his followers the Qan'an, and made his headquarters in Sepforis, only two leagues from En-Nazira, on the road to Kanagh; there he had seized weapons and money belonging to the Herodian government.

Quirinus responded by invading H'galiyel, capturing Sepforis, torching the city, and enslaving its entire population. The city had been left nothing but rubble. Then Quirinus marched on Yerushalom to rescue Sabinus. He crucified more than two thousand Israelites, in addition to those killed in battle. Roman authority over the provinces was restored, but anger smoldered in Israelite hearts.

Yussuf told his family, "What is the difference between the Romans and a gang of bandits? There are more Romans." He began to teach Yeshua the use of the sword, so that he could lead the Israelites against the Romans; it made Yeshua uncomfortable, and he tried to avoid the lessons. He felt that he was disappointing his parents, and he continued to search himself, looking for the least sign of something within himself that he could take to them and show them, to satisfy their longing for something exceptional in him. But nothing ever came.

viii

Finally, in his teens, he became rebellious, telling Yussuf and Maryam that he was tired of the way they continually watched him, looking for him to grow in some strange and unpredictable way. He shouted at them that he was Yeshua, a carpenter's son and apprenticed to a carpenter, and he was not a king and would never become a king. He told Yussuf that he hated the sword lessons and wanted to stop taking them. Yussuf grumbled but allowed him to quit; Maryam looked sad and denied that he had fallen short of their expectations in any way.

Yeshua began also to rebel against the religion of his fathers. He felt that he was being pushed in directions he did not want to go, and the religion was one of the forces pushing him.

At about this time he met Hermes, a young man about his own age, whose father, a Greek, was the Procurator's deputy in En-Nazira. Hermes's father had ordered some finely carved chairs from Yussuf, and when Yussuf and his sons delivered the chairs, Yeshua noticed Hermes, and Hermes noticed him.

While Yeshua's and Hermes's fathers were busy discussing payment, the two adolescents became acquainted with each other. Her-

mes spoke Hebrew with a heavy Greek accent that made Yeshua listen attentively. They were about of an age and a size; Yeshua had darker skin than Hermes, and while both had dark, curly hair, Yeshua's was curlier. Hermes was interested to learn that Yeshua's name meant "savior"; Yeshua, to learn that Hermes was named for the messenger of the Greek gods. Knowing that neither set of parents would approve of a friendship between a Hebrew and a Gentile, they spoke furtively with each other and made arrangements to meet at the fountain.

They sat together on a low wall near the fountain, both watchful lest someone recognize them and report the meeting to their parents. Yeshua wore the Israelite head-covering; Hermes' head was bare. Yeshua learned that Hermes's parents were Mithraists and asked his friend to tell him about the religion.

"There's much I can't tell you," Hermes replied, "because when we're initiated we swear that we'll never divulge the secrets. But I can tell you some things."

"Are you circumcized, like us?" Yeshua asked.

"What does that mean?" Hermes countered.

Yeshua explained.

Hermes looked shocked. "That sounds terribly painful. Didn't it hurt a lot?"

"I don't really remember," Yeshua confessed. "It was done when I was only eight days old."

"Well, anyway, I'm glad I didn't have to have it done to me. Why do you do it?"

"Elaha told Abraham to do it for himself and his sons, as a covenant."

Hermes shivered and said, "Brrr."

"Do you have rabbis and hazzans and kohens like us?" Yeshua asked.

"We have priests. They preside at our initiations."

"Do you go to kenishta as we do?"

"No. Once we're initiated, each of us has his own personal relationship with Mithra. We don't need to meet together."

"What's your initiation like?"

"I can't tell you details," Hermes said, "but I can tell you a little of what we believe. We believe that the Earth's a sphere, and it's surrounded by seven other spheres. The farther away from the Earth the spheres are, the larger they are."

"I know Hebrews who believe in ten heavens," Yeshua said. "But most say there are seven, because our holy Book uses seven different words for heaven. Our rabbi said that it would take five hundred years to reach the first one, and all the others are the same distance apart."

"The spheres of the sun and the moon and the four planets are six of our heavens," Hermes went on, "and Mithra lives in the seventh sphere, with the stars. When we're born, our souls come from Mithra through the seven spheres, and at each of the spheres the soul picks up the sin of that sphere. For instance, when we go through the sphere of the planet Aphrodite, we develop the sin of lust, and when we go through the sphere of Ares, we develop anger. Therefore all people are born with seven sins."

"The Hebrews who believe in ten heavens say that seven of them are the homes of the planets. Our candlestick, the menorah, has seven branches, one for each of the planets. You have only four planets and give them Greek names," Yeshua pointed out.

"Yes. So when we go into the cave where we're initiated, we go through a ritual which takes us through the seven spheres, and one by one we lose the sin that we acquired when our souls came to Earth when we were born. So we're reborn without sin."

"A noble idea," Yeshua said. "I wish I could be without sin." He thought of his prideful attempts to rule over his playfellows, which had ended so disastrously. He thought of a time when he had seen a dyer's cloths lying near a stove and had thrown them into the fire for no reason except mischievousness. Worst of all, he remembered a day only a few months previously when he had been walking through the town and another boy had heedlessly run into him. Angrily Yeshua had begun pummeling the other boy; he had not known that the boy had some illness that had caused a khasid to predict that he would die soon. And the boy had died under Yeshua's blows. Yeshua had been overwhelmed with remorse and guilt, though he had not intended to hurt the boy badly.

“Why don’t you become a Mithraist with me?” Hermes invited.

Yeshua considered the idea. He knew what his parents would say if they even found out he had been talking about Mithraism with Hermes. He shook his head. “No, but tell me more about your initiation.”

“Most of what I’m permitted to tell you I already have,” Hermes said. “But I guess I can tell you that at the end we have a meal where we symbolically eat the body and drink the blood of Zarathustra.”

“Zarathustra?” Yeshua asked.

“He was the prophet of Mithra,” Hermes explained. “He lived in Persia many hundred years ago. He said, ‘He who eats of my body and drinks of my blood, so that he will be made one with me and I with him, the same shall know salvation.’”

Persia, Yeshua thought. The astrologers who had come at his birth had come from Persia. They must have been Mithraists.

“Zarathustra was a great man,” Hermes continued. “He went into the wilderness and was tempted by the devil. When he came back he taught the people about Mithra. The people of those days wouldn’t listen to him, so they tortured him and killed him. When he was dying, he said to his murderers, ‘May Mithra forgive you even as I do.’”

“He was tempted by the devil?” Yeshua asked. “We believe in the devil. We call him Shaitan, the Adversary.”

“We call him Ahriman,” Hermes said. He was able to tell Yeshua little more about Zarathustra and Mithraism, but Yeshua listened avidly.

Nervous at the possibility of being seen if they continued to meet at the town fountain, the boys agreed to meet again at an abandoned sheepcote outside En-Nazira; the owner had died without heirs, and no one else had taken it.

The boys met several times at the sheepcote, and their discussions turned into friendly arguments about the virtues of their respective religions.

“We believe that there’s only one God,” Yeshua said. “We’re forbidden to pronounce His name, but we call Him Elaha.”

“We also believe there’s only one God,” Hermes told him, “but we call Him Mithra.”

“How can you say you believe in only one God,” Yeshua asked, “when you say that there are gods in the spheres that the soul travels through to be born?”

“How can you say you believe in only one God,” Hermes countered, “when your sacred book says that He’s jealous? Who can He be jealous of except other gods?”

“But you believe in Aphrodite and Ares and others,” Yeshua pointed out.

“They aren’t really gods as Mithra is God. We call them the ‘demiurges,’ which means they are half-gods.’ Mithra was the creator of the world.”

“We say that Elaha was the creator of the world,” Yeshua said.

Hermes said, “We believe the world is a battleground between Mithra, the force of good, and Ahriman, the force of evil. The two are evenly matched.”

“We don’t believe that Elaha and Shaitan are evenly matched,” Yeshua said. “Elaha is -- ” He stopped, frowning. There was an idea of Elaha’s supreme greatness in his mind, but he did not have the words for it. He began again. “I’ve heard that those who belong to Seregh ha Yahad believe that Elaha created an angel of light and an angel of darkness. Shaitan is the angel of darkness. Maybe Mithra is the angel of light.”

“Mithra is light and Ahriman is darkness,” Hermes said, “but nobody created Mithra. He created everything that is.”

“No,” Yeshua said firmly. “Elaha created everything that is.”

“Then why did He create Shaitan?” Hermes asked.

“I don’t know,” Yeshua admitted. “If Mithra created everything that is, why did he create Ahriman?”

Hermes shrugged, was silent for a moment, then smiled. “Maybe Mithra and Elaha are one and the same.”

Yeshua was stunned by the idea. “No,” he said. “No. It can’t be.”

And thus they argued back and forth, neither one convincing the other, but each one learning more about the other’s beliefs. In the end Yeshua felt so guilty about sneaking away from his home to meet Hermes that he broke off the friendship.

He never told his parents about these conversations.

When Yeshua reached the age of seventeen, his parents began to consider what girls would be suitable for him to marry the following year. It was hard for them to agree. Yussuf objected to Maryam's choices, and Maryam objected to Yussuf's. Yeshua thought he knew what the trouble was: If he was destined to accede to the throne of Daavid, he should have a consort appropriate to that exalted position, not some tradesman's daughter. He challenged his parents with that, but they denied it. At length most of the girls of marriageable age had become pledged to other men. Finally Yussuf and Maryam agreed on thirteen-year-old Neomiv, a plain girl with a round face, as the daughter of a scribe, a doctor of the law; she was somewhat their superior socially, and Yussuf had to pay a higher bride price for her, though in return she came with a larger dowry. Neomiv was a shy girl, who never raised her eyes to look at Yeshua until after they were married. She grew to love Yeshua and dutifully cared for him, but she never understood, as she lay placidly beside him, the tensions behind his forehead.

Thus all his life he had fought, first on one battleground and then on another, the notion that he was fated to become M'shihagh.

ix

And now his cousin had brought the prospect of kingship before him once more.

Yohanan spoke again: "Cousin, what the rich man is to his servant, the Roman is to the Israelite."

Yeshua shifted uncomfortably.

Yohanan continued: "If the Hebrew nation rose up together, united, it could throw off the legions that now squat on its back and suck its blood."

"Perhaps."

"I say it could. All it needs is a leader."

"We have a king."

"Herodes." Yohanan spat. "Herodes has been bought by Caesar."

Yeshua nodded; it could not be denied.

Yohanan said, "We need a new king, a king the people will follow, a king who will speak out against these goy leeches, a king of the

line of Daavid to take the mantle of Daavid and Shalomogh and restore us to greatness.”

“You mean me,” Yeshua said.

“Yes.”

“I’m not a speaker like you. You use meshalim so well.”

“I’m not a speaker like me. either, until Elaha makes the passion rise in me, and the passion fills my chest and pushes the words out through my mouth. Once Elaha makes the passion rise in you as well, you, too, will be a speaker and use meshalim.”

Yeshua was silent, thinking. “Perhaps you’re right. I feel you’re right about many things. I don’t know whether you’re right about this. But whether or not I’m chosen to lead my people into the new promised land, I want to be myself ready to enter it. Will you wash away my sins?”

“Come into the water.” Yohanan rose and waded in, followed by his cousin. “Although you should wash away my sins, rather than I yours.”

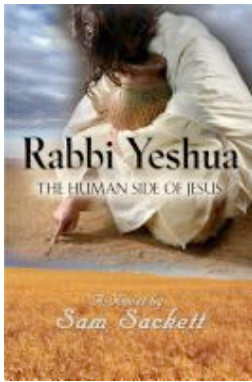
“Perhaps later I’ll do that,” Yeshua said, smiling. “But for now, I feel the need to do it this way.”

When they were waist deep, Yohanan laid his hand on his cousin’s shoulder and pressed him down—as he did so Yeshua took a deep breath—until his head was beneath the surface. Then Yeshua felt his cousin’s hand beneath his armpit, raising him up. Yohanan said, “Today you have been reborn as a son of Elaha.” The word “reborn” reminded Yeshua of the Mithraist initiation that his boyhood friend Hermes had told him about.

At that moment a dove flew down and hovered above Yeshua’s head.

“And you claim that you are not M’shihagh!” Yohanan exclaimed. “Cousin, Elaha has sent you another sign.”

Yeshua looked at Neomiv, still patiently squatting by the tethered donkey. It was going to take longer than he had thought to talk things through with Yohanan; perhaps the dove really was a sign. He had better send her back to En-Nazira with the donkey.



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