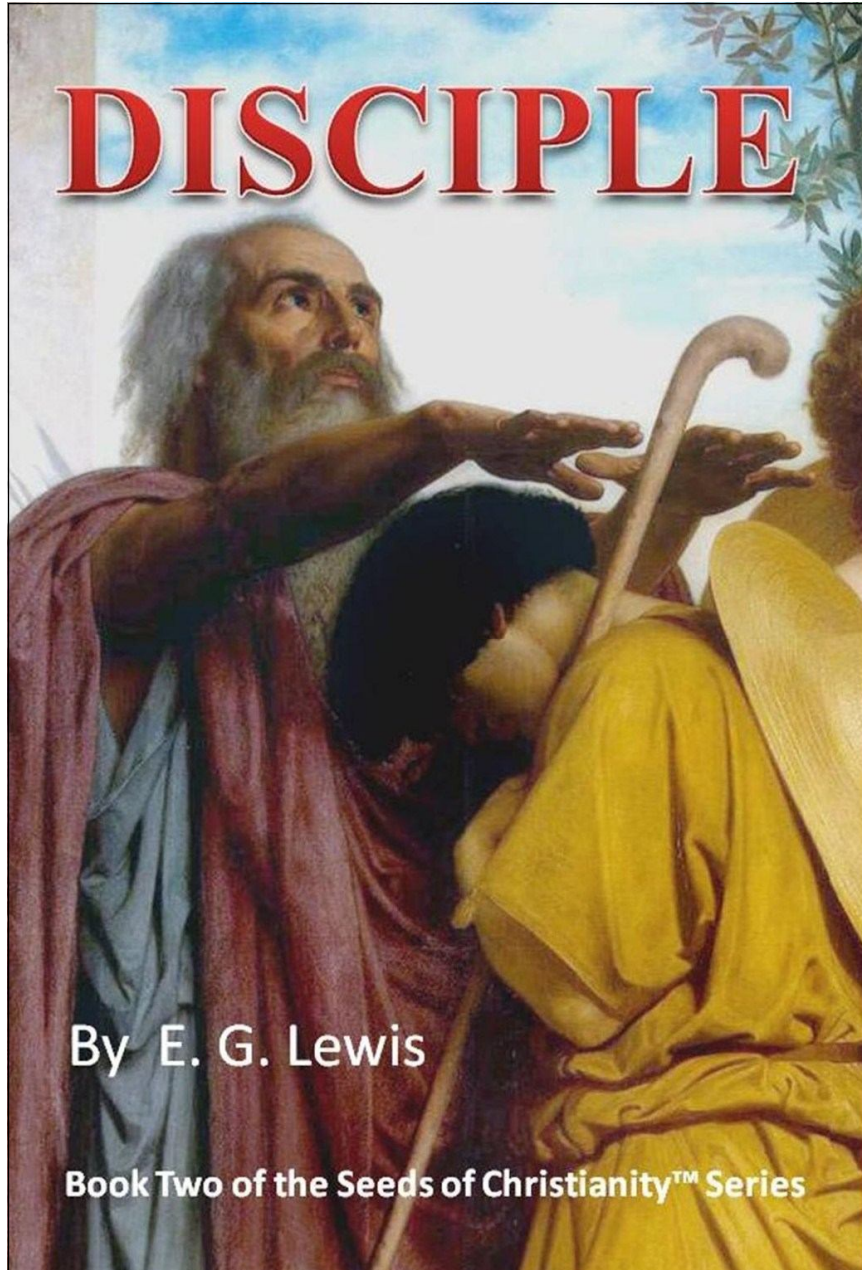


DISCIPLE

By E. G. Lewis

Book Two of the Seeds of Christianity™ Series



Historic Personages Mentioned in DISCIPLE
Name, Meaning, Biblical Reference, Modern Equivalent

Yeshua's Family

Yeshua: Iesous...Jesus
Mother: Miryam...Mary
Foster Father: Yosef...Joseph

Others

Andrew bar Yonah: Apostle Andrew, brother of Simon Peter
Annas: Former High Priest and Caiaphas's Father-in-Law
Caiaphas: High Priest at the time of the crucifixion
Gamali'el: Teacher and Head of the Sanhedrin
Matthias: Apostle chosen to replace Judas Iscariot
Mattithayu bar Alpheus: Apostle and Evangelist, Matthew, Levi
Netan'el bar Tolmai: Apostle Nathaniel aka Bartholomew
Nikademos: Secret Disciple of Jesus
Phillip: Apostle, friend of Netan'el bar Tolmai
Shau'ol: Saul...the Apostle Paul
Simeon the Cananaean: Apostle Simon Zelotes
Simon Petros: the Apostle Simon Peter
Stefanos: First Christian martyr, Stephen
Thaddeus: Apostle aka Jude
Thomas: Apostle, Didymus, the twin, Doubting Thomas
Yaakov bar Alpheus: Apostle James the Lesser
Yaakov bar Zebedee: the Apostle James the Greater
Yaakov the Just: James, first Bishop of Jerusalem
Yohan bar Zebedee: the Beloved disciple and Apostle John
Yohan Marcus: Evangelist and companion of Peter, John Mark
Yosef Barnabus: Apostle and companion of Paul, Barnabus
Yosef of Arimathea: Secret disciple of Jesus

Fictional Characters

Name, Meaning, Modern Equivalent

Rivkah's Family

Rivkah: A snare...Rebecca
Shemu'el: God has Heard...Samuel
Their Oldest Son: Yo'el...Yahweh is God...Joel
Yo'el's wife: Tzipporah...Bird...Zipporah
Their Son: Shemu'el...God has Heard...Samuel
Their Oldest Daughter: Hadassah...Myrtle Tree...Esther
Hadassah's Husband: Hebel...Breath...Abel
Their Granddaughter: Sarit...Lady...Sarah
Their Middle Son: Yaakov...Supplanter...James
Their Youngest Daughter: Channah...Grace...Hannah
Their Youngest Son...Yudah...Praise...Judah/Jude

Others

Channah's Friend: Eleana...God has Answered...Ilana
Idriya: Midwife, Siphrah's replacement...Duck
Pavlos: The Autistic Giant...Small
Phaidra: Eleana's Midwife...Bright
Rivkah's friend: Rachel...Ewe...Rachel
Shemu'el's friend: Atticus...of Athens...famous Roman name
Atticus' Wife: Marcelina...dedicate to Mars...Marcella
Siphrah: Hadassah's Midwife...Beautiful

~ 1 ~

Rivkah's skin prickled at the sound of their coarse laughter.

Tossing a damp towel over the dough she'd been kneading, she whipped off her apron and raced to the window. Ear cocked, she huddled beside the window's hide covering.

The jumble of voices, though indistinct, grew steadily louder. Somewhere beyond the hill a rooster crowed and chickens squawked in fright.

The tromp of hobnailed sandals on the road winding through the cluster of small homes in their settlement made her heart pound. Rivkah strained to decipher their conversation. She caught a smattering of words and phrases. Among them *meretrix*, the Roman word for prostitute.

Expletives, grunts of acknowledgement and additional coarse laughter followed.

Soldiers. Roman soldiers on the march.

Why here? Why now?

Rivkah lifted the worn corner of the window covering. Peering through a green curtain of fig leaves, she watched six Legionnaires descend the hill toward her home. Six professional soldiers could decimate her small community much as they had when Herod the King sent them in search of infant boys. The memory made her shudder.

She eased back the hide cover and glanced into the sleeping area.

Though it was already mid-morning, her husband, Shemu'el, dozed on the bed. The night before he'd sprinkled medicine from the vase shaped like a poppy pod into his wine to help him sleep. His right leg, broken weeks earlier, remained

encased in a heavy plaster cast. He sighed in his sleep, coughed, and brushed away a fly crawling on his forehead.

Rivkah waited until he resumed snoring, then crossed to the front of the house. She pressed her back against the wall between the door and the front window and eased the bolt across the doorframe.

Shafts of sunlight cut through the clouds of yellow dust billowing around the soldier's feet. Their insignias indicated they were part of the Jerusalem detachment stationed at Antonia Fortress, the military garrison adjacent to Herod's Temple. But Bethlehem was miles from Jerusalem and this little shepherd's settlement farther still.

Why were they so far from home?

The soldiers were 50 cubits from the path leading to their door and closing fast. She knew she had to do something...but what?

Carrying their arms loosely, they laughed and chatted as they walked. Their pace had the cadence of a drum roll. From long habit they maintained the Imperial standard of 3.6 Roman miles per hour regardless of the terrain.

So long as their swords remained holstered she allowed herself to hope they were merely passing through. undefended women were at risk anytime soldiers moved through the countryside. Bad things happened to a woman left alone.

Despite his handicap, she knew Shemu'el would rise to defend her. Better he sleep undisturbed. On his best days, he could barely hobble on his walking sticks.

Rivkah ran her eyes around their modest home searching for a weapon, any weapon. She spotted a sickle hanging above the door. The week before her middle son, Yaakov, had sharpened its crescent-shaped blade in anticipation of harvest. Twisting to her left, she reached up and snatched it off the hook.

Her stomach lurched.

They were outside now. The men drew even with the path leading to her home and continued on without missing a beat.

Rivkah released her breath and, for the first time, relaxed a little. Sickle in hand, she ran to the window beside the bed. Her foot brushed the night pot as she passed and its white pottery lid clanked against the bowl.

Shemu'el woke with a start and glanced around. "Heh? Wha..."

The after effects of the narcotic he'd taken dulled his mind and slowed his reactions. Digging an elbow into the bed, he used it to leverage himself onto his side. His right leg, encased in a cast, thumped onto the bed.

Finger to her lips, Rivkah spun to face him. "Shhh!"

Shemu'el shook his head, clearing the fog in his brain. His brow knitted as he watched his wife crouch beneath the window clutching the sickle like a battle axe.

"What is going on?" he whispered.

She fluttered her hand at him and stared at the soldier's backs until they marched out of the settlement.

Shemu'el, now fully alert, heard their footfalls fading in the distance. "How many?"

"Six." She continued watching from the window. "Just passing through. They're on their way out now."

He grabbed her arm and jerked her around. "Why didn't you wake me? What if they came to the door...broke into the house?"

Rivkah shrugged, trying to appear calmer than she was. "You and I both know there is little you could have done."

He released his breath in a huff. "I am still the man of this house. You should have woken me."

"Why? So you could challenge six men and be killed?"

Rivkah carried the sickle into the kitchen with her. Setting it aside, she tied on her apron.

"All I have are loaves from last evening." She pointed to the mound of dough hidden under the cloth. "The soldiers interrupted my baking."

Rivkah filled a cup with warm apple peel tea, swirled in honey, and carried it to him.

Shemu'el took a sip and nodded appreciatively. "What is

done is done. I know you've had to shoulder additional responsibility while my leg heals, but in another week or so all that will end." He took another sip. "Fortunately, no harm came of it."

In the kitchen Rivkah filled a plate with bread and soft cheese. She was stretching for a plum when a terrifying thought stopped her. Their youngest daughter had taken the sheep to pasture that morning. Channah was alone in the meadow and six soldiers were headed in her direction.

"Channah!" The plate slipped from Rivkah's fingers and crashed to the floor.

"What about her?"

Ignoring the shards on the floor, she grabbed her veil and swept it over her head. "She is out with the sheep. I must find her."

"You cannot go alone. Help me up." Shemu'el waved his arm and rocked in the bed, trying to rise.

Rivkah snatched up the sickle and raced out the door leaving him to fend for himself.

~ 2 ~

Shemu'el's protests died against the slamming door. Fuming, he groped under the bed for his walking sticks. He shoved one under each arm, planted them on the floor, and rocked forward with all his might. The added weight of his cast increased his momentum and he sprang off the bed staggering like a drunkard.

Sweat beaded on his forehead as Shemu'el teetered around the small room trying to avoid the shards of his breakfast on the floor. Once he achieved a tenuous equilibrium, he hobbled over and buried his hand in his tool kit. Rummaging around, he pulled out one of his carving gouges.

He settled onto a stool and set to work. Rivkah could hardly complain about plaster chips and dust on the floor, he thought, glancing over at the plate's shards.

Shemu'el stretched out his leg and scratched a line down each side of the cast. In a perfect world he would've given the leg another week to heal and asked his oldest son, Yo'el, to cut away the cast.

And in a perfect world Roman soldiers didn't ravish innocent maidens while they tended their sheep.

Shemu'el rolled his shoulders, easing out the kinks. The muscles in his jaw tightened in concentration. Cupping the gouge's handle in his right hand, he moved it around his palm until he found a comfortable spot.

Easy enough to do. Etch two lines down the cast, one on each side. Slice through the plaster to weaken them then shatter the cast along one side by prying up on the other.

How many casts had he removed when he was a slave to Evodius the *Medicus Cohortis*? Fifty? A hundred? More than he could count. But he'd never been both patient and physician until today.

Tiny chips of plaster sputtered from the tip of the gouge as Shemu'el inched it along the cast. He worked with deliberate slowness, keeping the tip of the gouge on his guidelines. Chalky plaster dust coated the stones beneath his leg by the time he

finished.

Shemu'el breathed a sigh of relief. Halfway there. So far, so good. Now came the tricky part, cutting through the upper layer of cloth without accidentally slicing an artery. He took out his sharpest cutting blade and went to work.

Pale skin showed through the crack when he finished.

He inserted the pry. Leaning back in the seat, he gently tested the handle. The pry bar sank into his thigh, but the cast refused to budge. The handle sprang back when he released it. Impatient to be on his way, he gritted his teeth, closed his eyes and slammed his hand down with all his might. He roared in pain when the metal pry bit into his leg.

Shemu'el hurriedly stripped away the outer wrappings, sending cloth, plaster and bindings flying. A growing blood-red stain saturated the underlying wrap. He nicked the cloth with his blade and ripped it across. Gathering the torn scraps, he folded and tied them around his thigh as a makeshift bandage.

Shoving a walking stick under his armpit, he heaved himself up. A bolt of lightning flashed up his leg when he put his foot on the floor. Bright colors danced before his eyes. Waving one arm for balance, he made a wobbly circle before collapsing on the floor.

Several tries later, Shemu'el finally managed to stand on the leg. Ignoring the pain and plaster dust in his hair and beard, he stuffed his shepherd's rod into his girdle and headed down the road after his wife and daughter.



Rivkah found the sheep wandering aimlessly in the meadow. Lingering dust from the Legionnaires' passing hung in the air far down the road. She scanned the field, but saw no sign of Channah. Dropping the sickle in the grass, she cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, "Channah!"

She listened for a few moments, then called again.

"Over here," a tiny voice answered. "Have the soldiers gone?"

“Yes.” Rivkah swiveled her head. “Where are you?”

“In the brambles.”

Rivkah walked over to the wall of thorny vines. “Channah?”

“How are the sheep?”

“They’ll be fine.” Rivkah peered into the tangle of branches. “How did you get in there?”

“I burrowed in from the back. Fear gives you amazing powers.”

“Well, the soldiers are gone. You can come out now.”

“I can’t. The branches closed behind me.” Channah sounded near tears. “I’m trapped.”

“Stay where you are, I brought the sickle.” Rivkah attacked the vines with slashing strokes, sending leaves and branches flying.

“How did you happen to have the sickle?” Channah asked when she crawled out the opening her mother hacked in the brambles.

Rivkah shrugged. “It was handy.”



They gathered the sheep and started back to the house. A short time later Rivkah noticed Shemu’el’s wobbling silhouette rising over the brow of the hill. Leaving Channah around the bend with the sheep, she rushed ahead to meet him.

Her heart went out to him as he limped toward her, grim-faced and scowling. Parts of his face and beard were ghostly white. His clothes were covered with yellow dust from falling on the road. He’d given up trying to walk and resorted to dragging the foot of his bad leg along in the dirt like a stubborn donkey that refused to be led.

Rivkah ran to meet him. “What are you doing here?”

Shemu’el patted the club tied at his waist. “I came to help you and Channah.” He scanned the fields. “How is she?”

“What about your cast?”

His eyes narrowed. “I took it off. Where are Channah and the sheep?”

“Your cast should have remained on at least another week. Why didn’t you wait at the house?”

The veins in Shemu’el’s forehead bulged when he frowned. “You and Channah needed my protection.”

Rivkah ran her eyes over him, surveying his disheveled appearance. White dust puffed out of his beard when she touched his cheek. “Did you stick your head in the flour bin?”

He refused to meet her eyes. “It’s plaster dust from the cast. I tripped the first time I tried to stand up,” he said, gritting his teeth. His eyes were full of masculine defiance.

She struggled to contain her pity, knowing it was the last thing he wanted. “More than once based on the way you look.”

Shemu’el grabbed her arms. “Forget about me. What matters is Channah. Where—” He stopped in mid-sentence as Channah and the sheep rounded the bend.

“She is fine,” Rivkah whispered, “And so am I.” Seeing the state on his cloak, she wondered how many times he’d tumbled to the ground, but knew better than to ask. “Does it hurt when you walk?”

“Just a little.” He moved his foot in the dirt and, despite his best efforts, winced in pain.

Rivkah threw an arm around him and kissed his dusty cheek. “Rest your arm across my shoulder so we can get you back home where you belong.”

~ 3 ~

“Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how he told you, while still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must...be crucified, and on the third day rise.”

– Luke 24:5-6

Jerusalem, several days later—

Someone called Rivkah’s name from across the marketplace. She turned and saw Miryam rushing toward her with open arms.

“It is good to see you, my friend.” Miryam reached to hug her. “How have you been?”

Rivkah took a step back, resisting her embrace. When their eyes met, Rivkah looked away.

Miryam touched her coarse gown. “You are wearing sackcloth.”

“And you are not.”

“I do not understand. Has someone died?”

“Has someone died?” Rivkah struggled to control her rising anger. “Yes, someone died. Your son! Look at you. You wear a fresh tunic while I am dressed in sackcloth. I have ashes sprinkled on my head. You have washed your hair and anointed it with oil. Each night since his crucifixion I have recited Torah verses on Yeshua’s behalf. Why do I, merely his friend, honor the 30 days of *Shloshim* while you, his mother, have ceased mourning?”

“It is not as you imagine,” Miryam said. “After they placed Yeshua in the tomb I stumbled home grief stricken. Friends brought me the *se’udat habra’ah* and I ate my bread and eggs of consolation alone in the darkness. Though it was *Pesach*, a time when mourning is prohibited, I sat on a stool in my room and wept for three days.”

“And then what?”

Miryam snatched Rivkah into her arms and kissed her cheek. “And then my room was suddenly filled with light and

Yeshua stood before me.”

Rivkah began to tremble. “His ghost visited you? How can this be?”

Joyful tears sparkled in Miryam’s eyes. She shook her head. “It was no ghost, my friend. Yeshua lives. His Father in heaven raised him up from the tomb just as he predicted. I held him in my arms. He told me not to mourn, but to rejoice.”

A shiver passed through Rivkah. She experienced the same unexpected surge of hope she’d felt the first day of the week after Yeshua’s crucifixion. She and her son, Yaakov, were on the road home from Jerusalem and she had noticed the fields filled with lilies.

“So the feeling I had on the road is true. His death was not the end of all that we hoped for.” She lowered her eyes. “I feel so foolish dressed this way.”

“Nonsense. You did not know. Now you do.” Miryam caught her by the hand and pulled Rivkah away from the stand. “This fruit will still be here when you return. Come home with me. I have so much to tell you.”

She tugged Rivkah through a confusing labyrinth of streets. Leaving the stands of fruits and vegetables behind, they passed through the market of wool buyers and sellers of cloth. Turning one corner and then another, they eventually entered the bazaar of the fishmongers.

“This way.” Miryam led her into the front portion of a two-story stone building.

A shipment had just arrived and they were forced to step around workmen unloading barrels from a cart parked beside the shop’s open door. The men hoisted the heavy containers onto their backs and weaved between customers to complete their delivery. After stacking the barrels of dried fish on the shop’s wooden floor, they returned to the cart for more.

Miryam led her toward the back of the shop. They wove through a maze of merchandise, passing crates of spicy fish sauces from Rome and Alexandria and baskets of fish from the Great Sea. On the way, she paused to speak to some clerks sorting fresh fish.

As they spoke, the man pulled another wiggling fish out of a large clay jar and inspected it. Satisfied, he passed it to the man beside him who opened it with a quick slice of his knife and gutted it. The third man stuffed the fish with damp moss, wrapped it in grape leaves, and packed it.

“Fresh fish?” Rivkah asked. “Here in Jerusalem?”

A man’s deep voice chuckled behind her. “Nothing but the best at Zebedee’s Fish Market.”

She watched as the intense young man stepped around her to check the last fish the man placed in the basket.

He shook his head. “This will never do.” He quickly replaced it with a larger one. “How many times have I told you, nothing but the pick of the catch for the High Priest’s household?” He brought his hands together in a loud clap. “Hurry! His servants are waiting. Caiaphas has a banquet planned for this evening.”

The man’s expression softened when his eyes returned to the women. “Imma Miryam, how was your trip to the market?” He rested an arm on her shoulder and bent to kiss her cheek as any son would do. “You found many bargains, I hope.” A spark of recognition flashed in his eyes. “And who is this with you?”

“You remember Rivkah, wife of Shemu’el. She was at Golgotha the day they crucified Yeshua.” Miryam turned. “Rivkah, this is Yohan bar Zebedee, my new son and benefactor.”

“Oh, and about the fish,” Yohan said. “During the cooler months fishermen at Jericho transfer their catch into jars of cold water. Before dawn these fish, fresh from the Jordan River, are loaded onto wagons and rushed through mountain passes to Jerusalem where they command a premium. But in this heat they won’t last forever.”

Grinning, he turned to help the men.

Miryam led Rivkah out a side exit to a stairway. “Up here,” she whispered. “This is where I live now.”

Leaving the hustle and bustle of the shop behind, the two women climbed the narrow stairway. They entered a simple loft with whitewashed walls and pine floor. It had a small sitting room and tidy kitchen in front and two bedrooms in the back.

Yohan's deep voice resonated through the floorboards as he directed the workmen in the shop below.

"Who is this young man who called you mother, the one you introduced as your son?"

"Yohan was Yeshua's loyal disciple and most beloved friend. Both he and his older brother, Yaakov, were with him from the very beginning. While he hung from the cross he charged him with my care."

Rivkah glanced around the plain room. "Are all your needs met?"

"I am well cared for." Miryam chuckled. "One thing we never lack is fish. Although I must confess the smells one encounters living above a fish market differ greatly from the sweet perfume of wood shavings."

"Has Yeshua visited others as well?"

"Oh, yes. Many of those who loved him. He appeared to Miriam from Magdala when she went to the tomb on the morning after *Shabbat*. And to his disciples, of course, a number of times...both here in Jerusalem and in Galilee."

She motioned Rivkah into a seat and offered her dried fruit from a pottery plate. "He appeared to others along the road to Emmaus." She sighed with satisfaction. "The list grows and grows."

"Where do you think this will lead?"

Miryam shook her head. "I do not know what God has planned for us. Those who knew Yeshua are ecstatic, yet terribly afraid. None of us knows what to expect from one day to the next."

She rocked from side to side, crossed her arms and hugged herself. "But my son lives. I held him in my arms and kissed his cheek just as when he was a young man. For now, nothing else matters."

"Where are his disciples now?"

"They fear the Great Sanhedrin will order their arrest. When they tired of cringing behind bolted doors and creeping through dark alleyways, they left Jerusalem and scattered.

"Yohan, of course, remained behind because of me and his

father's business. His older brother, Yaakov, returned to Capernaum to help their father, Zebedee. Andrew and Simon have gone back to their nets as well. Mattithayu also returned to Capernaum, not to fish, but to write."

"He is a scribe?"

"No. He was a tax collector before Yeshua called him to be a disciple. He has begun collecting all of Yeshua's sayings on a scroll. When he finishes, Mattithayu says it can be copied and distributed to keep the memory of those teachings alive."

Miryam stared away into the distance. "You are correct; our story is far from over. Yeshua promised to send a Comforter...a Counselor who would teach us all things."

"Who will this Counselor be? How will we recognize him?"

"No one knows. All we can do is wait and wonder. In my heart, I feel we should not be dispersed as we are now. We draw strength from each other. I am hoping that during the pilgrim feast of Pentecost his disciples will return to Jerusalem so we can again gather as a group."

~ 4 ~

“I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamali’el, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers...”

– Acts of the Apostles 22:3

Sweat beaded on the young man’s forehead as he raced through Jerusalem’s crowded streets. Down the hill he ran, robes billowing as he wove in and out between foot traffic and plodding donkeys.

Startled passersby slowed to watch and wonder. Some imagined him a criminal fleeing a crime. Others merely shook their heads and chuckled. They’d seen this handsome stranger make similar dashes in the past.

Pesach had come and gone and, as the month of Nisan drew to a close, a calming lull settled over Jerusalem. The crush of Passover pilgrims had vacated the surrounding hillsides and headed home. Shopkeepers and businessmen, having just completed their most lucrative selling season, happily counted their profits.

Things felt normal again and the city acknowledged it with a collective sigh of relief. Now the merchants busied themselves replenishing their inventory in anticipation of the influx of worshippers at the next pilgrim feast, Pentecost.

The ruling elite also noted the change and congratulated themselves. “Watch and wait,” Caiaphas, the High Priest, had counseled. “Time heals all wounds.”

And, just as he predicted, events of the recent *Pesach* gradually receded into the background as the day-to-day necessity of earning a living replaced the turmoil that accompanied Yeshua’s crucifixion.

But this particular young man knew how mistaken Caiaphas was. This comforting period of normalcy was only the calm before the storm. Soon, very soon, Jerusalem’s foundation

would be shaken to the core. Rocked until the city split apart.

If, what he had heard proved true.

The street on which Stefanos ran bordered the city's aqueduct where late winter rains flowed fast and deep. He gazed up at Herod's Temple. A wonder of the Roman world, its white Melekeh limestone walls sparkled in the morning sun.

When Stefanos reached the base of the hill, he slowed long enough to gulp in a few breaths and mop his damp forehead. Then he joined the crowd on the broad north-south walkway leading to the Temple. Rows of wooden stands, packed tightly together and shaded by faded awnings, lined both sides of the concourse. On his left, the Temple Mount's Western Wall towered like a sheer cliff.

Stefanos passed under the eighty-foot arches supporting the upper walkways and hurried through the bazaar. He ignored the merchant's pleas to stop and examine their merchandise.

Let the pilgrims buy their overpriced souvenirs, he thought, with a dismissive glance. No one but a pilgrim would be foolish enough to patronize the swindlers who rented space from the Temple aristocracy.

The crowd in front of him came to an abrupt halt. Catcalls and frustrated shouts echoed off the surrounding walls.

Stefanos ground his teeth and clenched his fists. He was already late and had no time for this. Taller than most, he rose to his tiptoes and peered over the crowd.

Ahead, a distraught woman stood in the midst of the angry throng fingering a tattered cloth purse which had sprung a leak. Her simple clothing labeled her a country dweller.

And a poor one at that, Stefanos noted.

Two children crawled on the ground around her, groping between people's feet to retrieve the coins that spilled from their mother's purse.

Stefanos forced his way into the crowd, elbowing people aside. "Make way. Make way, make way."

A rolling *denarius* wobbled to a stop at his feet just as he reached the tiny circle of pavement surrounding the woman.

An unkempt man in a dirty cloak saw it at the same time.

Grimacing at his good fortune, he leaped for the silver coin.

Stefanos stepped on the man's hand, pinning his fingers to the ground.

Grimacing in pain, the man muttered curses.

Stefanos eased his sandal back.

The man scooped the coin up and clutched it to his chest. "It's mine. I saw it first."

Stefanos grabbed the man's wrist and pried his fingers open. "It's hers and you know it."

He snatched the coin out of the man's sweaty palm. Then, ignoring his angry glare, Stefanos stepped to the front of the crowd and raised his arms. "Give the children room."

At his command, the crowd took two steps back. The children scurried about easily collecting the spilled coins. Several people bent to help them and the children returned to their mother with happy faces.

When Stephanos lowered his arms the crowd surged past like water released from a dam. He rested a hand on the woman's shoulder. "Over here." He guided her to a shady spot beside the Temple wall.

She stammered her thanks, then stared down at her cloth purse in dismay. Two fingers poked through a gaping hole in one of its many patches. The children, their hands folded over the precious coins they'd gathered, watched in silence.

Stefanos untied the tooled leather pouch he wore at his waist and handed it to her. "Use this."

Coins jingled inside the purse when she took it from him. The woman rocked the expensive purse in her hand and looked up at him with questioning eyes. "But your money is still in it."

"Take it with my blessing, little mother." The silver denarius sparkled in the sun when he held it out to her. "And this, I believe, is yours as well."

She opened her new purse wide. The children giggled as they dumped their treasure in. When she turned to thank him, her benefactor had already melted into the crowd.



Myriad conversations buzzed around him. Words and phrases in multiple languages reverberated off the cool stone wall, blending into gibberish.

Stefanos climbed the stairway to the Temple's upper level. He cared nothing for other's conversations. More pressing things weighed upon his mind.

Unbelievable things.

He'd overstayed his time with Yohan Marcus and risked being late for class. He knew he should have been concerned, but strangely enough he was not. After their meeting, class no longer held the same importance as it once had.

All entrances to the Temple emptied into the Court of the Gentiles, forcing every visitor to cross it. Stefanos stepped out of the stairwell and into the courtyard. Far to his left a gray ribbon of smoke rose from the place of sacrifice into the cloudless sky.

Knots of pilgrims, drawn to Jerusalem from the Empire's distant provinces, paused to spin in awestruck circles as they gawked at the Temple's magnificence.

Breaking into a run, Stefanos crossed the wide esplanade with long strides. His mind remained fixed on the strange tale Yohan Marcus had told him earlier that morning.

Running violated protocol and he risked detention by the Temple Guard as a rabble-rouser, but the morning's delays left him no choice. It was either run or arrive late for class. He moved through the crowd mumbling apologies.

After crossing the Court of the Gentiles, Stefanos took the steps two at a time and rushed along Solomon's Portico toward a cluster of students gathered for the day's lesson. His teacher, the esteemed Rabbi Gamali'el, stood to one side tall and austere.

Stefanos slowed to a walk and adjusted his robes. After taking several deep, cleansing breaths, he ran a smoothing hand over his chestnut-colored beard. He stopped before the teacher, bowed slightly, and placed his hands on Gamali'el's shoulders. Then, as custom dictated, the disciple leaned forward and kissed his master's cheek.

Still bent forward, Stefanos whispered, "Rabbi, I must speak with you about a matter of extreme importance."

Despite the urgency in the young man's voice, the older man's placid demeanor remained unaffected. "After the examination, Stefanos. Lessons first, then discussion."

"After the examination then," he said, fixing the appointment.

Taking a seat on the stone walkway beside his friend, Yosef Barnabus, Stefanos swept his cloak around him and spun to the ground cross-legged. Like Stefanos, both Yohan Marcus and his cousin, Yosef Barnabus, were Hellenistic Jews. They belonged to the *Diaspora*, Jews dispersed to the four corners of the world who had come back to Jerusalem to live, work or study.

Stefanos nodded a quick greeting to Barnabus, and leaned close. "I have something to tell you." He winked. "You will not believe it when I do."

Conversation ceased when Gamali'el stepped into their midst.

"*Shalom Aleichem*, my disciples. Today my commentary shall be on the upcoming *Shavo'ut*, the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, as it is often called." The old man smiled. "And, as usual, following that we shall have our weekly examination."

The young men surrounding the rabbi were divided evenly, half Hebrews and half Hellenists. The Hebrews, all born and raised in the land of Israel, sat in a group on his right. They were the sons of wealthy merchants and influential priests. Their father's wealth, influence, or both, purchased them the privilege of studying at the feet of the esteemed Gamali'el, Head of the School of Hillel and *Nasi* of the Great Sanhedrin.

The Hellenists sat on Gamali'el's left. Like Stefanos, these Greek-speaking Jews came from far and wide. The only exception was Sha'oul of Tarsus, the son of a Cilician tentmaker, who insisted on sitting with the Hebrews even though everyone knew he did not belong there.



A keen observer of persons, Stefanos enjoyed watching his teacher conduct the weekly examinations. He smiled as the thin, gray-haired rabbi swirled in circles and lobbed questions at his

students. He moved around the group, hand darting out, finger pointing like an arrow, shooting questions like a Roman archer.

The longer he watched him work, the surer Stefanos became that these seemingly random choices were, in fact, not random at all. How else to explain the way each student received a question designed to test them to the maximum?

An ominous silence descended around him.

Stefanos glanced up. A quiver of panic clawed at his stomach when his eyes met Gamali'el's.

"Well, Stefanos, what say you?"

Stefanos lowered his head and stared into his lap. "Could you repeat the question, Rab?"

"Daydreaming again?"

"Praying, Rab. Always praying."

His teacher waited until the laughter subsided then repeated the question. "Is the child of an unmarried woman always considered a *mamzer*?"

"It cannot be determined if the child is a mixing without knowing who fathered it." Stefanos breathed a silent sigh of relief. Quick thinking had saved him once again.

"On whose authority do you make such a statement?"

Like bricks in a wall, Pharisaism consisted of a series of carefully crafted opinions, each supported by the others which preceded it. Only the most esteemed rabbis, such as Gamali'el, dared break precedent with the past.

"Your own, Rab. Both you and Rabbi Eliezer ruled that if the mother names the father, her testimony is sufficient proof. And only by knowing the lineage of both parents can the child's caste be determined."

"Truly spoken."

Stefanos glanced across the circle of students and locked eyes with Sha'oul. Rather than seeing the empathy of one student for another, it surprised him to see a look of delight on the young man's face.

Clearly, Sha'oul had enjoyed watching him struggle.

The thought made Stefanos' pulse pound, but he swallowed his anger. He had more important things on his mind.

~ 5 ~

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind...”

– Acts of the Apostles 2:1-2

The hope Miryam expressed to Rivkah became a reality. Fifty days after the *Pesach*, all of the Twelve returned to Jerusalem to celebrate *Shav’out*, or Pentecost. The Twelve, along with the women and some of Yeshua’s other disciples, gathered in the upper room above Aristopolus and Miryam’s home where they’d eaten a last supper with their Master. Early on the first morning of the feast the Holy Spirit descended upon them as fire and wind.

Inspired, Simon preached the word and 3,000 believed that first day. After the feast ended pilgrims from all over the Roman world returned to their home cities carrying the good news of Yeshua’s resurrection with them.

The number of believers in Jerusalem increased greatly. So much so that in a short while the upper room could no longer accommodate all who came to worship. Aristopolus’ neighbors began to complain about the crowds. Faced with this unexpected problem, the Twelve met to seek a resolution.

“Why must we have a meeting place? We can go to the Temple as a group and worship together there,” Andrew said.

“We are no longer welcome at the Temple since the day I healed the crippled beggar, Abijah,” Simon replied. “Yohan and I were hauled before the Great Sanhedrin where Caiaphas threatened us for preaching Yeshua’s name.”

“We do not need this Temple, or any temple,” Thomas said. “Yeshua told the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well a time was coming when his Father would not be worshipped on the mountain or in the Temple, but in spirit and truth.”

Simon nodded in agreement. “Truly such a time has come. Our presence in Jerusalem is driving a wedge. Being neither fish

nor fowl, we are not welcome in the Temple or at any of the synagogues. Some of the merchants treat our people as if they were Gentiles and refuse to conduct business with them.”

Netan’el bar Tolmai combed his fingers through his curly black hair as he gathered his thoughts. “We need to find a place where Yeshua’s followers can feel at home. Where we can be among people of like mind. A place where we can celebrate the breaking of the bread as the Master commanded us to do.”

“A synagogue is what we need,” Mattithayu said. He smacked the flat of his hand onto the table. “There is our answer; we need to form a new synagogue here in Jerusalem.” He glanced around the room at their skeptical faces. “Why not? We have the necessary funds.”

He spun in his seat to face the head of the table. “Simon, did you not tell us a number of believers have deposited funds with you for the Lord’s work?”

“Well, yes they have, but how do we know this is the best use of those funds?”

Yohan, the youngest among them, glanced around the table. “We have more than the minimum needed for the *minyán*. Each man here qualifies as an elder of the synagogue’s ruling body.”

“That is all well and good for now, but the Master told us to go to the ends of the earth preaching his message,” Yohan’s older brother, Yaakov, said. “What happens when none of us remain to administer things?”

“It is not as if we had an ownership interest,” Simon replied. “The building would no more belong to us than the movement itself. There are no masters here, only servants. Everything ultimately belongs to the Lord. When the time comes for us to leave, we can appoint others to act in our stead.”

The only thing required to form a synagogue was the desire and a common interest. The more the men talked, the more their enthusiasm grew.

“Why shouldn’t we have our own synagogue?” Thomas asked. “Everyone else does. Every neighborhood has a convenient meeting place close to home.”

“Each ethnic group has its synagogue,” Yohan said. “Why

the Hellenists have several where they read the Septagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.”

“The craft guilds have them as well,” Netan’el said. “Look around you. Potters, Millers, Carpenters, Stonecutters, Tentmakers, and Sellers of Cloth, Wine and Oil all have places of worship within their section of the working city. Even former slaves have a place to gather, the Synagogue of the Freedman.”

“We are not the only outcasts in the city,” another added. “Workmen whom polite society barely tolerates have the Synagogue of the Tanners, the Butchers and the Fullers. Why not us?”

When everyone had their say, Simon led them in prayer. Afterwards, they sat quietly awaiting the Lord’s direction. When the time came to vote, the idea of forming a synagogue passed unanimously.

Simon rose and circled the table. He stopped beside Yaakov, one of the Lord’s brethren, and rested a big hand on his shoulder.

“As we are called away to other parts of the world, one of our group must remain behind to shepherd the believers in Jerusalem. I nominate Yaakov here to be that person, the leader of the synagogue of Rabban Yeshua *HaMashiach*.”

The others, recognizing Simon’s selection as an inspired one, responded enthusiastically. Who better to lead the Jerusalem believers? Everyone in Jerusalem, even those who refused to recognize Yeshua as the *Mashiach*, acknowledged Yaakov’s dedication to the Law. How could they not? He spent hours each day at the Temple kneeling in prayer.

They all crowded around Jerusalem’s first leader and congratulated him.

The search for a suitable location began the next day. They settled on a building in the lower city near the pinnacle of the Temple. Mattithayu, the one with the greatest financial acumen, negotiated the transaction and the group set about adapting it to their needs. Now, like fifty or so other groups within the holy city, The Way of Yeshua had its own meeting place.

~ 6 ~

The mood among the students at the School of Hillel lightened once Gamali'el's examination ended. The midday sun warmed the breeze as the students gathered their belongings and broke into small groups.

"I visited your cousin, Yohan Marcus, this morning," Stefanos told Barnabus. "He introduced me to Yohan bar Zebedee from Capernaum."

Barnabus nodded. "The fish merchant's son. I know him. He and his older brother, Yaakov, were disciples of Yeshua from Nazareth."

Rabbi Gamali'el waited a few feet away.

Leaving his friend's side, Stefanos hurried over to his teacher. "Rabbi, may I speak with you privately?"

Gamali'el pointed to a shady spot under the colonnade. "Over there."

Sunlight filtered through the stoa's lathing casting dark bars of shadow around them as they conversed in hushed tones. "Are you familiar with Yeshua...the Nazarene...the one whom they crucified during *Pesach*?"

His teacher did not answer right away. Learned rabbis such as Gamali'el seldom attacked a question straight on and never without first considering its subtle implications.

"Am I not the *Nasi*? How could the leader of the Great Sanhedrin be unaware of these events?"

"I have a friend," Stefanos paused for a moment, nibbling his lip. "A friend of a friend, actually. This person said Yeshua's body is no longer in the grave. He claims he has risen from the dead, that he is the long awaited *Mashiach*. Is such a thing possible?"

"Absolutely not!" Sha'oul shouted. "Everyone knows his disciples bribed the guards and stole the body."

Neither Stefanos nor Gamali'el had noticed the little man slip up behind them.

Stefanos whirled to face him. "How could you possibly

know that? Your words are nothing but malicious gossip started by..."

He left the thought unfinished, preferring not to name names. Instead, he turned his focus on the short man in front of him. "Or are you saying you do not believe in a resurrection?"

"Of course the dead shall rise again." Sha'oul swung his arms in a wide circle. "The prophets foretold it; only a fool would deny the resurrection. What do you take me for, an unbelieving Sadducee?"

Hands on his hips, Stefanos glared down at him. "I take you for someone who intrudes into private conversations when you are not invited."

"You and I both know this has nothing to do with the dead rising. All this talk about Yeshua being the *Mashiach* is dangerous." Sha'oul's eyes shifted to their teacher then back to Stefanos. "That Nazerene was an itinerant...a nobody." He motioned toward Gamali'el with a broad smile. "His stature could never approach that of our esteemed teacher. Besides, everyone knows, in addition to being a great rabbi, the *Mashiach* will also be a great warrior. Yeshua was neither."

Sha'oul hunched forward and wagged his finger in Stefanos' face. "Be wary, brother, you walk a fine line between truth and blasphemy."

Stefanos suppressed a chuckle. Sha'oul's actions reminded him of the old hag who chided him for throwing apples when he was a boy.

"Is not all of the *Halakhah* open to interpretation?" Stefanos looked to their teacher for concurrence.

"Of course men can discuss the laws," Gamali'el said softly. "Reasonable men can discuss all topics."

"Anyone who proclaims Yeshua to be the Son of God is not reasonable," Sha'oul shouted. "You blaspheme!" He rent his cloak. "I will send you to *Sheol* myself so the angels can pitch you into the lake of unquenchable fire. There you will burn with the rest of the blasphemers and idolaters, unbelievers, adulterers, procurers, murderers and thieves."

Eyes bright with righteous indignation, Sha'oul gave a

mighty shout and launched himself at Stefanos. He charged like a runaway bull. Head down and legs churning, Sha'oul flew past Gamali'el and drove his head into Stefanos' stomach.

Caught unprepared, Stefanos doubled over and fell backwards.

Sha'oul's momentum sent them both sprawling across the steps. They bounced and rolled, swinging at each other as they tumbled.

Once they rolled to a stop, Stefanos easily shoved his smaller assailant aside. He rose and dusted himself off. "Have you lost your mind?"

Sha'oul answered by leaping up from the pavement and taking a wild swing at him.

Stefanos, who'd trained in the gymnasiums of Alexandria, ducked the blow and landed a solid punch of his own.

Sha'oul's head snapped back. His eyes widened and he yelped in pain. Bringing a hand to his face, he staggered back and collapsed in a heap. When he raised his head, blood dribbled between his fingers.

"Satisfied?" Stefanos asked, frowning down at him.

Sha'oul remained on the ground, dusty and bedraggled, using his torn cloak to dab away the blood dripping from his nose and lip.

"Why must you harass observant Jews? If you are so anxious to fight, join the *Cananeans* and fight the Romans."

"Ha! Me a Zealot? Only in your dreams. You would enjoy seeing me up on a cross like that *sheker*, Yeshua, wouldn't you?"

"How could you, of all people, possibly know whether Yeshua was a false *Mashiach*, or not?"

Ignoring his injury, Sha'oul leaped to his feet and curled his hands into fists.

The two men circled each other. With fists raised and jaws set, they prepared to do battle once more.

Barnabus watched and shook his head in dismay. Big and brawny, he stepped between the two men and shoved them apart. Their confrontation ended as quickly as it began.

Gamali'el marched over and frowned at them both. "I

cannot believe you are fighting within sight of the house of God. You bring shame upon all who know you. Another incident like this and someone else will take your place in the School of Hillel.”

Neither man dared look at the rabbi. Grabbing his cloak with both hands, Sha’oul tugged it out of Barnabus’ grip and stormed away. He paused at the top of the walkway and glanced back. He held Stefanos’ gaze for a moment then turned and left.

Barnabus, Gamali’el and Stefanos stood in a semi-circle, watching him go.

Gamali’el’s mouth wrinkled into a frown as the short, bandy legged man disappeared from view. He sighed. “Many times I have compared my students to fish.”

“Fish, Rab?”

He chuckled. “Yes, fish. The nets come up from the depths writhing with all manner of life. The first thing a fisherman must do is sort his catch. Some are unclean and are thrown away. Others are inedible; they discard these as well. Some have little value and are barely tolerated. And, lastly, there are the few... those of great worth that one rejoices to find in his net.”

Gamali’el shook his head. “Sha’oul shows great promise, but some days I think it would be best for everyone if he were pitched back into the sea from whence he came.”

He took a step closer and touched Stefanos’ arm. “That man is dangerous. Heed my warning and keep your tongue in check around him.” He adjusted the blue-edged *tallit* on his shoulders and smoothed his gray beard. “He may criticize the beliefs of the Sadducees, but Sha’oul is firmly in Caiaphas’ grasp.”

He paused, giving them a moment to digest his words. “It is hardly a secret that the little man from Tarsus harbors great ambitions.”

Barnabus laughed. “His will be long and difficult climb to power. Not only is he not a member of the Jerusalem establishment, but he’s a Binyamite as well. Sha’oul can never become a priest.”

“Truly spoken,” Gamali’el said. “So he seeks an alternate path to power. He believes he has found it in the Great Sanhedrin.”

Both men's eyes widened.

"Sha'oul attends every public meeting," Gamali'el continued. "He sits on the back bench, observing and taking notes. No doubt imagining the day when his talents are known and appreciated. The day when he is asked to become a member of the council."

"Perhaps he even dreams of someday being *Nasi*," Stefanos said.

"He very well may. Meanwhile, never discuss Yeshua of Nazareth in his presence again. Anything spoken around Sha'oul will certainly find its way to the High Priest's ear."

He glanced around. Lowering his voice to a tight whisper, Gamali'el said, "I have more to say about Yeshua, but not here. Better we meet in private, far from Sha'oul's prying eyes and curious ears."

~ 7 ~

*“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit...”*

– Matthew 28:19

Shemu’el called from the road.

Grabbing her veil, Rivkah swept it over her head and ran to the door wiping her hands on her apron.

Two strangers stood beside him. A tall, stocky man in a traveling robe with the large hands and weathered complexion of someone accustomed to working outdoors and a petite woman with a pleasant smile.

“Come quickly, my dove. We have guests, important guests.” Shemu’el rested his hand on the man’s muscular shoulder as if they were old friends. “This is Andrew. He came looking for you.”

“Looking for...me?” Rivkah swallowed hard and started toward them.

The stranger met her halfway and grasped her shaking fingers. Her hand disappeared in his when he closed the other over hers. She detected no lust in his eyes when he looked at her, only brotherly love.

“It is good to meet you, Rivkah. Your friend, Miryam, the Lord’s mother, insisted I come see you.”

“Who are you?”

“One of Yeshua’s disciples. My brother, Simon and I spent our lives fishing Lake Gennersaret. Then one day, while we were mending our nets, a stranger, a traveling Rabbi, called us to follow him. He said instead of us being fishermen, he would turn us into *fishers of men*.” He chuckled. “We were so shocked, neither of us bothered to ask what he meant.”

“And this Rabbi was Yeshua?”

“Yes.” Reaching back, he took the woman’s hand and brought her forward. “This is my wife, Tabitha. We came to tell

you and the people of your settlement the good news.”

After supper everyone gathered at the settlement’s meeting site to hear Andrew speak. They took their places as usual, men in the front and the women and children off to one side.

Andrew took one look and shook his head. “This will never do.” He began waving people into new places. “There should be no divisions among the children of God. Come together by family groups. Wives, join your husbands; youngsters, follow your mothers.”

Rivkah sat with her father on one side and Shemu’el on the other. Their sons, Yo’el, Yaakov and Yudah rested in front of them. Yo’el’s wife, Tzipporah, swept her cloak around her and dropped down beside him. Channah sat at Rivkah’s feet with Yo’el and Tzipporah’s son, baby Shemu’el, in her arms. Imma Sarit, Shemu’el’s mother, sat on his left flanked by his brothers, their wives and children.

Rivkah glanced around at her family, friends and neighbors. It felt strange to be sitting with the men. Strange, yet natural. Maybe the way it was meant to be.

It thrilled this community of shepherds to hear Andrew say Yeshua had called himself *The Good Shepherd*. From its very foundation Israel had been a nation of shepherds. Over and over again, God spoke through the prophets of his desire to be a shepherd to his people.

When the fledgling nation of Israel left Canaan and migrated to Egypt, they were a nation of sheep herders. But the Egyptians were farmers, growers of crops who depended on the annual cycles of the Nile River for their sustenance. They esteemed farming and looked down upon animal husbandry.

Over generations the Egyptian way of thinking infiltrated the Israelites. By the time of Moshe, people who once considered sheep herding a noble occupation now scorned shepherds. Even David, a man after God’s own heart, a shepherd boy himself and Israel’s greatest king, could not reverse this prejudice.

Although Yeshua spoke of many occupations in his parables, he never ascribed any to himself except that of a shepherd.



The following day, Andrew spent the afternoon telling them about the things Yeshua said and did. As evening came he invited all who wanted to join the Way of Yeshua to gather early the next morning at a wide spot in the creek where the water pooled. He chose this location because they always tried to use flowing, that is living, water for baptisms.

Shemu'el and Rivkah, their family, and others from the settlement who chose to commit to The Way of Rabban Yeshua, arrived carrying towels. The women also brought hair ribbons and combs to prepare themselves after their baptism.

Early morning fog hung over the meadows and frogs croaked in the rushes.

"This rite of baptism feels very familiar," Tzipporah said as they waited.

"Like going to the *mikvah* each month after our time of *niddah*?" Channah suggested.

"With one difference. Unlike the *mikvah*, which temporarily removes uncleanness and must be repeated each month, the baptism of Yeshua cleanses you forever."

"Andrew said baptism marks us as one of Yeshua's own just as surely as the notches we place in the ears of our sheep," Channah said.

Leaning close, Rivkah whispered, "It's very much like a circumcision."

Channah turned to her open-mouthed. "A what?"

"Think about it. In baptism Yeshua provided us with an indelible mark available to all...boys and girls, men and women."

"Better this than the knife," Channah said with a shudder.

Accepting of the Way of Yeshua *HaMashiach* proved to be both simple and difficult. Instead of hundreds of rules and regulations, he left just two commands: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. Easy enough to say, but oh so difficult to do.

Andrew and Tabitha arrived with towels and broad smiles. He opened his arms to the group. "*Shalom Aleichem*. Welcome,

my brothers and sisters.”

They prayed and sang a Psalm, then Andrew began moving among them with a container of oil. He paused in front of Rivkah.

“May you always walk in the protection of the most High God.” Taking one of her hands, he commanded, “Do the work of the Lord. Your hands are now his hands. May all whom you touch feel the love of Yeshua.”

Wetting his thumb with the anointing oil, Andrew traced the immortal mark of Yeshua’s cross on her forehead. He stared into her eyes. “Keep your mind and heart on the Lord Yeshua,” he said softly. “Honor him with every thought and deed.”

Andrew moved around the small group praying and anointing each man, woman and child. By the time he reached the last of the group the sunrise glowed red-orange along the eastern horizon. He gathered the men and boys, leading them over the hill and out of sight. The women and young children remained behind with Tabitha.

“When you step into the water, I will have some questions for you,” Tabitha explained. “Each of you must answer for yourself. Mothers, you may answer for infants and young children if they are unable to.”

Rivkah wore no jewelry other than her wedding ring, which she had never taken off since the day Shemu’el slipped it onto her finger. To encourage the others, she agreed to be the first one baptized. Shedding her clothing, she stepped into the cool water.

Tabitha gave her a reassuring smile. “Rivkah, do you renounce Satan and all his works?”

“I do.”

“Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?”

“I do.”

“And do you believe in Yeshua, the only Son of the Father, who was conceived of the Spirit and rose from the dead?”

“I do.”

Placing her hand atop Rivkah’s head, Tabitha eased her into the water. “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

The world disappeared as Rivkah sank beneath the surface.

Tabitha held her there for an instant then released her hand.

Rivkah rose and blinked into the light. Rays of morning sun sparkled off of water droplets clinging to her eyelashes. She felt an unexpected sense of peace and inner content. Like arriving at your destination after a long journey.

Rivkah stepped onto the bank and quickly dried. After she dressed, she began helping with the children and holding infants as their mothers prepared for baptism. When Tabitha finished, the happy group sang Psalms as they retreated over the hill.

While Andrew baptized the men and boys the women kindled fires and prepared a celebratory meal.



After the men returned and everyone ate their fill, Andrew gathered a few loaves and a cup wine.

“For generations we Jews have celebrated the tradition of *Pesach*,” he said.

Nods and affirmations arose from the newly-baptized believers.

“But now we have a new sacrifice and a new covenant. As the Lamb of God, Yeshua shed his blood so that all may live. Just as the lamb, after it is sacrificed, nourishes the believer, so too, Yeshua nourishes his followers with his flesh and blood in the sacramental form of bread and wine.”

As Andrew consecrated the bread of the Lord’s Supper, Tabitha lifted her hands to the sky and, in a clear soprano, led the group in Hosannas.

They ate the bread, then passed the cup from one to another so all might drink from it. Children received a sop of bread dipped in the wine.

Before Andrew and Tabitha left he laid hands on the new believers, bringing the Holy Spirit upon them.



Rivkah and her friends discovered being part of The Way of Rabban Yeshua gave women new freedom. Not that they no longer adhered to the Law. They did. And not that they no longer honored and respected their husbands. They continued doing that as well.

In his ministry Yeshua treated women in a new, freer way, giving them a dignity they never had before. To him women were independent beings whose ideas and contributions, though different, were equal to any of his male disciples.

This subtle sense of empowerment carried over into The Way. Whereas Judaism relegated women to a subsidiary role and automatically elevated men to the superior position, this was not always the case among Yeshua's followers. Women could, and did, participate fully in the community of believers.

~ 8 ~

“Be quick about it, Yudah. We do not have all day.” Shemu’el pushed aside the window’s hide covering and stared at the peaks along the eastern horizon. “The sun will be over the mountains soon.”

Knowing the air would be chilly until the sun came up, Rivkah hurried down the path after them, fussing with their cloaks as they walked.

“Don’t forget about your waterskin.” She adjusted the bag’s strap on Yudah’s shoulder. “Be sure to drink enough water and make your father stop to rest. And I want both of you to eat the meal I put in your satchels. Half of the time your father gets so busy he forgets to eat.”

She gave Shemu’el a nervous glance. “Are you certain you will be all right? Perhaps I should accompany you...just in case.”

His condescending snort made her regret asking.

“I worry about your leg.” Glancing over Shemu’el’s shoulder, she watched red clouds creep across the morning sky. “I only want what’s best.”

“My leg has healed.”

“Of course, but are you certain you can manage the long walk to Jerusalem and back? You have never gone such a distance since you broke your leg.”

Shemu’el grasped his staff with both hands, extended his arms straight out, and did several deep knee bends. “See. Good as...No! better than new.”

He grabbed hold of his youngest son’s shoulder and gave the slim youngster a shake. “Do not fret. I have mighty Yudah along to assist me.”

Without warning, Shemu’el released his son, dropped his staff, and threw his arms around Rivkah. She gasped when he pulled her against him and gave her a long, lingering kiss.

Yudah cleared his throat and stared at the ground. When his father continued holding his mother close, he tiptoed away to wait for him at the sheepfold.

Rivkah staggered when Shemu'el released her.

"And you worry," he said with a satisfied grin. Shemu'el gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "*Kol Tuw*, my dove. We shall be home for supper."

"May you also be well," she said as he left.



Shemu'el and Yudah followed a familiar route, one the boy knew well. Outside of Bethlehem, they stopped at the tollbooth to pay their livestock tax and road tolls. As always, Shemu'el dug in his purse for the coins and then for the next mile muttered about being taxed to death.

They'd left the settlement early hoping to get the sheep to the Temple before the sun reached its full height. They crested the last hill and gathered the sheep by the side of the road so they could rest after the long climb. Standing side by side, the two of them stared down on Jerusalem while the sheep milled around them nibbling grass still damp with dew.

As they walked, they watched the gold roof of the Temple sparkle in the morning light until it disappeared from view as they descended into the valley. The road from Bethlehem led to the south side of the city and their sheep went to the northeast side of the Temple, so they circled the city walls following the Hinnon Valley.

Shemu'el stationed Yudah at the head of the flock and he trailed behind, rounding up any stragglers. The road made a wide, sweeping curve past Herod's palace and then turned a sharp corner, leading them to Tower's Pool. They stopped again to rinse the dust of the road off their faces and water the sheep.

Refreshed, they continued north following the city wall. They crossed the road leading to Emmaus and passed the place of tombs.

Shemu'el pointed to a dark cave cut into the limestone hillside. The tomb's rock cover, big as a millstone, remained shoved aside over a year after the Resurrection. "There is the place where they buried Yeshua, our *Mashiach*."

Yudah stared into the gaping darkness of the open tomb with fear and wonder. Like his father, he bowed his head in respect as they passed Golgotha, the place of crucifixions.

“Not much further,” Shemu’el said, as much to himself as to the boy. He had begun kneading the muscles of his right leg as they walked.

They followed a well-trod path around the high walls of Fortress Antonia. Far above them, a sentry in a knee-length, gray military tunic walked his rounds along the battlements. Yudah heard the man’s hobnailed *caligulea* clack against the stone walkway and glanced up.

Sensing his stare, the soldier looked down at the boy. Their eyes met for instant before a frightened Yudah jerked his away. He walked on certain he could feel the soldier’s gaze boring into his back, but afraid to turn and check.

“Look Abba,” Yudah said.

He ran his fingers along the finely cut margin of the massive foundation stones supporting the wall beside them. Like every Jew, the Temple’s splendor awed him each time he came. Far ahead, barely visible beyond many other shepherds and their lambs, were the Pools of Bethesda where the sheep were washed before they went to the buyers.

Shemu’el stepped into a small patch of shade next to the wall’s foundation. Easing himself to the ground, he sighed and leaned back against the base of the Temple mount. “We can eat while we wait.”

Yudah slid the bag off his shoulder and joined his father.

The two of them sat in the shade eating the meal Rivkah packed. Across the Kidron Valley, neat rows of olive trees marched up to the *gethsemane*, oil press, on the Mount of Olives. The tree’s silvery leaves shimmered in the sunlight with every gust.



When their turn came, Yudah whistled the lambs forward and directed them into a temporary pen for inspection. Off to one side, Obadiah, the overseer, sat at his table, head down, recording

each transaction. Shemu'el smiled as he studied the teetering stacks of clay tablets on the table where the old priest worked. It'd been this way as long as he could remember. Some things never changed, he thought.

"*Shalom Aleichem*, Obadiah," he called.

The old priest quit scratching notations on the papyrus in front of him and raised his gray head. He squinted at the smiling man with the staff for a moment before a look of recognition washed over his face.

"Shemu'el! *Aleichem Shalom*. I became so engrossed in my record-keeping that I did not see you come in." Obadiah waved at his assistant standing in the pen with Yudah and the sheep, halting the inspection.

Shemu'el gave him a confused look. "Is anything wrong?"

Obadiah came toward him shaking his head and waving away his concerns. "Merely a formality. Something new Caiaphas instituted."

Shemu'el felt the hairs on the back his neck prickle. "Something new, you say." He tried to keep his voice level, masking his rising apprehension.

Used to roomier pens at home, the crowded sheep began bleating in protest. Yudah moved among them patting and calming as he watched the old priest and his father confer.

"Have you heard the unbelievable rumors that have grown up around that Nazarene?"

Shemu'el rocked on his staff and flexed his right knee. "Yeshua, the prophet Caiaphas killed?"

"Caiaphas killed no one," Obadiah said indignantly. "You and I both know only the Romans crucify." The old man combed his fingers through his white beard and sighed. "I sometimes forget the everyday working man does not understand things as clearly as we do here at the Temple."

Shemu'el folded his arms across his chest. "Yes, I am sure things appear different from the inside."

"They do. They certainly do."

"I spend my days with the sheep, not in the marketplace, and they seldom have much gossip to share. Why don't you tell

me about these rumors?”

Obadiah cleared his throat. “It has, uh, come to our attention that the man’s disciples bribed the guards placed at his tomb and stole Yeshua’s body.”

Shemu’el rocked forward, nearly dropping his staff. “Stole the body, you say? Why would anyone do such a thing? Handling a corpse renders a person unclean.”

Obadiah grinned. “I see you recognize our dilemma. His disciples now claim he rose from the dead. They preach that he was the *Mashiach*.”

“Which, of course, could never be.”

“Exactly.”

Shemu’el nodded and stroked his beard. “I see your difficulty. It would be unacceptable for the High Priest to have killed Israel’s *Mashiach*.” He glanced at his not-yet-inspected sheep bleating in the pen and shrugged. “But all this is Caiaphas’ problem, not mine. My concern is my sheep...and getting home for supper.”

“True enough,” the old priest said, “and Caiaphas has dealt with the problem. You understand, of course, that all sheep sacrificed in the Temple must be pure and unblemished.”

“As mine are.”

“Perhaps...perhaps not.”

“Meaning?”

“Yeshua’s disciples gather converts everywhere, even in the rural districts. The Temple cannot purchase sheep from *Meshichim Yhudim*, they would be unfit for sacrifice.”

“You’re saying believers in *Mashiach* Yeshua can no longer bring their sheep to the Temple?”

“I knew you would understand. Caiaphas instituted this test so we do not unknowingly purchase sheep from *minim*, heretics.” Obadiah tossed an arm around Shemu’el’s shoulder and walked him toward the pen. “None of this presents a problem for a good Jew like yourself. I ask the questions. You answer, and all is well.”

“Questions? What questions?”

Obadiah looked him in the eye. “Shemu’el bar Yo’el do you

follow the teachings of Yeshua of Nazareth? Are you a member of what is called The Way?"

Shemu'el drew his shoulders back and stood tall. "Yes. I know Yeshua to be the risen Son of the Most High God, the *Mashiach* promised to our forefathers over the ages."

The old priest gasped and leaped away as if he'd seen a snake. He stared at Shemu'el for a long moment then angrily shook his head. "Caiaphas was right; you people are everywhere." He pointed to the pen and shouted, "These lambs are unfit for sacrifice. The Temple will never purchase your sheep again. Take your animals and go."



"They force everyone selling sheep to take an oath," Shemu'el explained as he related the day's events to Rivkah.

"How did you reply?"

"How do you suppose? I could not deny Yeshua before men for material gain."

"But you returned without the sheep, where have they gone?"

"I sold them to one of the traders in the Jerusalem sheep market." Shemu'el's expression turned grim. "I am thankful you were not there to see it. It would have broken your heart. Our lambs, so clean and healthy, mingled in a pen of worn out ewes whose teeth were mostly gone."

He crossed his arms and scowled. "They will surely fetch him a premium price."

"The way you say that must mean he paid you no premium."

"Premium? Ha! He paid me less than half what they were worth. He might as well have stolen them from us."

"Then why did you sell them to him?"

"What could I do, bring them home? The market for sheep has plummeted. Since the drought good pasture has been scarce and many shepherds are thinning their herds. There are already

too many sheep in Jerusalem and now Caiaphas' program puts a further glut on the market."

"Where will the sheep go?" Rivkah asked.

"Where they always do, into people's stomachs. The lower prices will entice people who rarely taste meat to visit the butcher. Meanwhile the traders, knowing the Temple continues to turn people away, bid next to nothing. If I had not sold our sheep, there were others in line behind me who would have."

A puzzled expression settled onto Rivkah's face. "What a strange circumstance. Our world seems to be dividing into those who believe in Yeshua and those who do not."

"Reminiscent of the way the Temple separates the sheep from the goats." Shemu'el slapped the meager amount he received for the sheep onto the table. "Hard times are surely coming. Shop carefully. This is all we have."

~ 9 ~

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

– Matthew 5:11

Several weeks after the incident at the Temple, Shemu’el went to the marketplace in Bethlehem. Since they no longer had a ready market for their lambs, he had turned to woodcarving in an attempt to earn a living. He took a number of beautiful bowls with him in hopes of selling them on market day. If that failed, he planned to trade them for needed supplies.

One of the village elders passed his little display and paused to look at the bowls. “Nice.” He turned the bowl in his hands, running a finger over its delicate carving. “And very well done.”

Shemu’el thanked him for the compliment. “I am sure your wife would love it.”

“Perhaps.” The man sat the bowl aside and reached for another. “Tell me, have any of those fanatics visited your settlement?” He held the bowl at arm’s length, balancing it on his fingertips as he examined it in the light.

Shemu’el shook his head. “We have seen no Zealots.”

“Zealots?” The man laughed. “Oh no, I meant the followers of the Nazarene preacher. We had two of them come by here several months ago, a man and his wife. They attended our synagogue and, as a visitor, we invited him to speak. He insulted our hospitality by claiming this Yeshua, the one whom they crucified, was the fulfillment of the prophecies, the *Mashiach*.”

Shemu’el let the man examine his wares without comment.

The elder picked up another item. “Excellent workmanship. I had no idea you were a wood carver. I thought your family raised lambs for the Temple bazaar.”

“The bottom has fallen out of the market.”

“Has it? I heard the Temple pays the same price they always have.” The man locked eyes with Shemu’el. “Am I correct in

thinking you still sell to the Temple?”

“We once did.”

The man tossed the bowl back at Shemu’el with a sneer. “As I suspected; you are one of them.” He gave him an icy stare and spat at his feet. “Take your wares and leave, *Raca*. There is no place here for people like you. We do not tolerate *minim* and *meshunadim* among us. I will make certain no one purchases your bowls.”

Shemu’el started to protest that he was neither a heretic nor apostate, but the man spun on his heel and left before he could say a word.



Rivkah rubbed the back of Shemu’el’s neck while he complained about the unfair treatment he received in Bethlehem.

Channah looked up from her mending. “Maybe someone could mix a few of our lambs into their flock and sell them for us.”

Her father gave her a wry look. “That would only work if we chop off their ears. Our mark is on every one of them.”

“Perhaps we could enter into a partnership with someone in the settlement, all of the new lambs could carry their mark,” Yaakov said.

“That is not a partnership, it is a scheme. Deceit is never a solution.”

“But our cupboards are nearly bare.” Channah glanced into the pantry at their meager stores. “We must do something or we will all starve.”

“A man’s ways are in full view of the Lord. Better we starve honestly, than prosper by trickery,” Shemu’el said, ending the discussion.



“This edict of the High Priest seems so unfair,” Rivkah whispered as they lay in bed that night. “No other sect in Judaism faces the discrimination we do.”

“It is of no consequence, my dove. In troubled times such as these a man must follow his conscience.” Shemu’el gave a frustrated sigh. “Channah is right about one thing, we cannot go on like this much longer.”

Shafts of moonlight illuminated Rivkah’s face. Shemu’el brushed her hair aside and kissed her forehead. She nestled into his embrace. Resting her head on his strong shoulder, she listened to the comforting rhythm of his steady breathing. While Shemu’el dozed, she wrestled with the unfairness of life.

The Hebrew natives of Jerusalem happily traded with Hellenistic Jews. Pilgrims from Africa, Parthia and Gaul were treated with respect when they visited the Temple. Day in and day out Zealots and Essenes, Pharisees and Sadducees, followers of the school of Hillel and followers of the school of Shammai, all worshipped, worked and co-operated with each other.

It seemed there was room for everyone except the followers of The Way of Yeshua. Miryam told her the Temple Guard harassed Simon and Yohan each time they took their place on Solomon’s Porch and preached the good news to the people.

Why them? Why us?

The answer lay in plain sight. Yosef Caiaphas might be the one passing the regulations, but everyone knew who held the reins. Even though he’d been out of office for more than twenty years, wily old Annas remained the power behind the throne. He’d read the handwriting on the wall and it said if Yeshua’s teachings prevailed, the source of his wealth and power would disappear.

They couldn’t enrich themselves with profits from the sale of animals and birds. Their moneychangers could not cheat the people when they came to the Temple. Knowing this, he had plotted and schemed to kill Yeshua.

Now that the deed was done, he did not want Simon, or Yohan, or anyone else mentioning Yeshua’s name ever again. He once said, “Sever the head and the thing will die.”

But it was not to be.



The following day, Shemu'el asked Rivkah to walk with him in the meadow. She went, already knowing what he planned to say.

"After a lot of soul searching, I have decided we can no longer make a living here in this settlement," Shemu'el said.

"It is hardly a secret, even the children know."

He stopped and turned to face her. Taking her in his arms, he hugged her tightly. "I am sorry, my dove. This is not the way I imagined our life would end up."

"What will we do?"

"We must find a living from something other than sheep. I was trained as a physician and blessed with a natural gift for carving wood. Both of these skills would be in demand in Jerusalem." He paused to catch a tear on her cheek. "I could support my family in Jerusalem. I am certain of it."

Though Rivkah knew the truth of his words, she hated to leave her home and the little settlement where she'd spent her life.

The preparations began slowly. She and Shemu'el worked afternoons sorting through their possessions, keeping only what was necessary. What they didn't need, they sold or gave away.

One corner of the house gradually filled with boxes, baskets and packages crammed full of essentials. Shemu'el detached his cupboard of medicinal herbs and ointments from the wall and added it to the growing pile. He hammered out the pins holding Rivkah's loom together. Broken down and bundled, it became a manageable package for transport to Jerusalem.

Gathering his tools and carving knives, he stuffed them into the worn *loculus* he'd carried home from Antioch. The old military traveling case, its brass clasps and fittings darkened by age, had become a fixture in their household. So much so that Rivkah could not look at it without being reminded of Shemu'el's time as a Roman slave.

She chuckled to herself as she watched him straighten the sides yet another time. Each time he did, the tired leather, butter-soft from years of use, slumped to the floor. Without contents to

define its shape, the *loculus* had no more form than their lives.

Shouts from the bedroom broke the afternoon's peace. Channah, their middle daughter, stormed up to her mother with her hands on her hips.

"Imma, tell Yaakov to leave me alone."

Yaakov leaned around the doorway. "Channah is packing everything she owns."

Before Rivkah could reply, Channah spun around and shook a fist at her older brother. "Mind your own business. You are not head of this household."

"Abba said we must travel light."

The stress of the move affected them all. The children bickered constantly. Shemu'el had grown distant and moody and, though she tried not to, Rivkah had begun losing her temper with him and the children.



Shortly after they married Shemu'el planted a fig tree near the entrance to their home. Over the years the tree grew and thrived, its branches spreading wide. Whenever Rivkah needed time alone to sit and think, she crawled under the fig tree.

Shemu'el found her there the morning they departed for Jerusalem. "Come, my dove," he said, extending his arm. "Everything is ready. It is time we left."

Grasping the hand he offered, she came out from beneath the curtain of branches. "I want to walk through the house one last time. I won't be long."

He gave an understanding nod.

By habit, she put her fingertips to her lips and touched a kiss to the *mezuzah* on the side of doorframe. The dark burnish of the little bronze scroll case stopped her in her tracks. Hadn't it been bright and shiny just yesterday? Yes, she thought, it *was* shiny once, many years ago when she and Shemu'el were young and newly-married.

She stepped into the empty house, remembering the day Shemu'el carried his new bride across the threshold. The house smelled of fresh-cut timbers and new plaster then. Closing her

eyes, Rivkah took a deep breath and savored the familiar scent.

It smelled like home.

Moving around the rooms, she straightened the covers on the windows and touched marks on the walls. Each one brought back memories of the children when they were young. The tart, acidic smell of vinegar wafted around her when she opened the pantry door. A circular stain on the floor identified the spot where a large crock of pickled cucumbers always sat.

She ran her eyes along the thick beams supporting the roof, recalling the day Gavriel and Simeon hauled them in as a wedding present. They were freshly peeled then and nearly white. Now they had the golden hue of aged wood and soot stains above the area where she cooked.

The unfairness made her ache. Rivkah stood in the middle of the room with tears rolling down her cheeks. Her fingers closed into tight fists. She wanted to scream and kick and claw. What would happen, she wondered, if I sat down in the middle of the room and refused to go?

In her heart of hearts she knew it would change nothing. Drying her tears, Rivkah lifted her chin and walked out the door, never looking back.

A new life, a better life, awaited them in Jerusalem, she told herself. Believing in the goodness of the future brought her a much needed peace. Later she would realize how foolishly optimistic those thoughts had been.