

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They Worship In Vain

In the palace of king Herod Antipas, plans were under way for an elaborate birthday party. Herodias, daughter of Aristobulus, granddaughter of Herod the Great, sulked in her lavishly decorated dressing room. With the wave of her outstretched arms she angrily dismissed a nervous servant. "Get out...I want to be alone with my daughter!" she screamed. She turned to the beautiful young Salome and ranted, "How dare Antipas let that son-of-a-dog, that so-called prophet, openly insult me before the world! That cowardly Antipas may be afraid of him, but I will not let him go unpunished if it's the last thing I ever do," she seethed.

"If it had been left to me, the meddling fool would not be alive today. If Antipas had any guts he would have done more than throw the scum into the dungeon. So what if I was once married to your father, Antipas' half-brother, Philip? Antipas is by far the better man, at least I thought so...although I am beginning to wonder. It is not fitting that a sane ruler be so taken by the ranting of a wild, religious fanatic. I think someone should remind this imposter that we belong to the Herodians. We don't have to answer to anyone, especially some self-appointed judge that descends upon us from out of the wilderness, ranting and raving about 'sins'!"

Young Salome applied a thick layer of eye color and examined her long, flaming, red hair in a full-length mirror. "You are a queen, Mother. Why do you allow what some strange preacher says bother you so? We have more important things to think about."

She twirled her slim, shapely body about, and gracefully fell into a soft cloud of colorful pillows. "Tonight uncle Tipas has requested I dance before all of his royal guests. Along with his high captains and chief friends, he has invited all of the choice young men to attend. Isn't that wonderful? I have spent many days under the tutelage of my dance instructors; they say I am the champion dancer of all the palace. I can hardly wait until tonight!" She turned her beautiful face toward her mother, her pouting lips pursed. "Can't you stop fuming long enough to enjoy the evening with me, Mother?" she coaxed.

"I'm sorry, my pet. I am not so sure you will only arouse those young princes you so hungrily yearn for. The old man, though celebrating his fiftieth birthday, thinks himself a handsome, amorous young bull. Don't be naive, my child. He has as great a passion for you as he had for me when I was your age. He would no doubt have a severe attack of inferior-it is if he even suspected you found anyone other than himself desirable. I wouldn't be surprised if the old fool doesn't secretly entertain the idea of you sharing his bed."

“Mother...how can you say that? I have been his little girl ever since you and I came to live here. His love for me is that of sweet ole doting uncle.”

“Yes...I’m sure, my child,” Herodias mocked. “Just the same, you are aware that he is indeed my own uncle. That fact never kept his passion from seducing me away from his half-brother, Philip. I have been keenly aware of his beady, lustful eyes following your every movement when you are in his presence. You run along and prepare for your big evening. I will try to get over my rotten mood and join the festivities. After all, I wouldn’t want to miss my beautiful daughter’s performance...now would I?”

The gaily decorated ballroom walls echoed loud talk and boisterous laughter. Long dining tables hosted hundreds of soft reclining couches filled with richly dressed statesmen and their companions. Herod Antipas and his invited guests ate hungrily from huge platters of roasted meats, rich sauces, fresh fruits, and artistic pastries. Every gold wine cup had been filled and refilled several times. In the center of the massive oval room, teams of colorful jesters entertained each team intent on out-performing the last.

The audience grew restless; excitement changed to boredom. “Away with these blunderers,” a loud, masculine voice demanded, “Call out the dancing girls!”

“Let’s see some action!” another voice insisted.

Soon many voices agreed in unison, “Dancers...dancers...we want the dancers!”

Within minutes the center stage was filled with swirling sheets of blazing silks. Dozens of beautiful young women swayed and swirled to the call of sensual music—music temporarily drowned by an amalgam of roaring applause.

After a parade of performances, the smug host waved his arms high above his swaying figure. “Friends and noblemen...give me your attention...please,” he called. “We have an unusual treat in store for you this evening; the best has been saved for the last. I have just been informed that the most beautiful and artistic dancer of the land has agreed to share with us her graceful talents! She’s the darling of the Herods, our own wonderful, fabulous, radiantly beautiful...Salome!”

The guests screamed with pleasure. Salome waited until the air was filled with quiet expectation. She appeared suddenly, as from nowhere, in a cloud of silk scarves. For the next half hour her graceful, cat-like movements captivated her impassioned audience and held them spellbound. Lecherous eyes feasted upon her near nude body. She artfully ended the sensual performance as tantalizing as she had begun. The audience emerged from its hypnotic spell. Once again, the room resounded with wild applause.

Herod, moved by drunken passion, motioned for a servant to fetch his step-daughter to his table.

Salome, skimpily clad, reappeared perspiring and panting. Coquettishly, she joined her stepfather’s table. His guests watched knowingly as Herod clumsily pulled her down onto his recliner. Running his hands up and down her body in suggestive strokes, he slurred, “What do you want, my beauty? You

just tell me...anything...it's yours. I will give you anything...even half of my kingdom," he drunkenly vowed.

Surprised, Salome gingerly pulled away from Antipas. "Oh...Uncle Tipas, you are so kind," she purred. "I don't know what to say. Your generosity has overwhelmed me." She rose gracefully to her feet, leaned over and kissed his moist, pink, forehead. "This is just too much...may I please...have time to think about what to choose?" she requested tactfully.

Herodias had observed every detail, every word. "This is a stroke of luck only the gods could have bestowed upon me," she thought. She quickly followed her daughter to her dressing room.

"Mother, did you hear what Uncle Tipas said before all of those people?" the girl asked. "What should I ask for...I have everything I could possibly want. Except...is it possible he would give me Apollynae for my very own lover?" she giggled.

Herodias' hate-filled eyes gleamed with vengeance. She sprang toward the girl, clutched both her arms in a vise-like grip. "You must do this for me...ask him for the head of Johanan the Baptist!" she demanded.

Salome recoiled in horror, "Why would you want me to do a disgusting thing like that?"

"That man has made my life a living hell...if you care anything for your mother...you will not question me. Go, while Antipater is still under the influence of passion and wine...he has committed himself to doing this...he will be too ashamed to renege before his guests. You dare not disobey me!" she threatened. "Ask that the head be brought before you on a charger." Her mouth turned down in a scornful laugh, "Yes...it will give me great pleasure to share Johanan's dramatic farewell appearance with our fellow countrymen...I am sure he will make quite an impression. This will be a birthday present even I can enjoy." As an afterthought she added, "Speak up loudly, so that everyone will hear your request. Now run along." She gave the girl a gentle shove toward the dimly lit ballroom.

Salome entered the noisy, party room. She could feel lustful eyes following her every move. Antipater instantly reached for her hand. She tried to speak. But the words stuck in her dry mouth. She took a deep breath and nervously ran her tongue across her smooth, white teeth. Finally, she was able to speak, her voice quivered, "Uncle Tipas, I have decided what I want for my gift." She watched the amorous expression on the drunken king's face with evasive amusement. For the benefit of the anxious guests she announced in a loud voice, "I choose the head of the prisoner, Johanan the Baptist, to be delivered before me on a platter."

Antipater stared at her in disbelief; he dropped her hand as though it had become a burning coal. Instantly sobered by the sadistic request, he recoiled in abhorrence. He looked around at the drunken faces, enjoying the unfolding of the bizarre drama. "If I refuse," he thought, "I'll become a laughingstock to these merciless people. I must not show weakness before my allies, nor allow anyone to doubt the word of a king.

“What a fool I am to have made such a rash vow to a mere child. Her vindictive mother has put this horrid request into her mind. Herodias has hated that righteous man from the very beginning. Now she has cleverly tricked me into executing him. To save face, I have no choice...may Jehovah have mercy on us.” He rose awkwardly from his lounge. His face heavy with sadness, he gave his somber answer, “Let it be as the child requests.” His throat filled with hot liquid; his stomach threatened to expel the evening intake. He clasped his shaking hand to his tightened lips and hastily excused himself.

The orders were given and the execution swiftly carried out. Shortly thereafter, amid cheers and applause, the warm, severed head of the Baptizer was presented before Salome. The gold trimmed platter was fast filling with draining blood. Unable to view the distasteful specter, she turned away in disgust. “Take it to the queen!” she demanded.

The ministry of Johanan was at an end. Now, Jeshua’s ministry would increase. Just prior to the Passover, the apostles returned with exciting news of their travels. “We were accepted everywhere we went. We told them the wonderful news of the coming kingdom and healed them of their infirmities. Even demons obeyed us!” they exclaimed.

Eventually word of a man of miracles reached Herod’s ears. “It is reported,” an informant said, “that this man goes about from city to city, teaching and healing. He has followers who also travel around preaching his words. He speaks much in the manner of the Baptist whom you executed. Some say he is the same. Others claim he is the prophesied Elias or some other prophet that has risen from the grave. Whoever he is, he surely has the country in an uproar. He’s becoming the most popular man of our time.”

“Johanan was beheaded and his body delivered to his students for burial. This I know. Have this ‘prophet’ brought before me...I would have an interview with him,” Herod commanded.

When Jeshua heard of the execution of Johanan and of Herod’s intention, he called the apostles about him. His voice was softened with personal sadness. “Johanan, the son of my mother’s cousin, Elizabeth, has completed his mission and awaits his reward; The Father has given him rest. There’s so many pressing upon us; it is difficult to find a place to eat. Let us slip away, and sail up and across the sea to a deserted place where we can be alone and relax. I have no desire to waste time satisfying the curiosity of the wealthy.” They left immediately. Soon after they reached their destination, a great mass of suffering people followed them. Many spent the night, sleeping on the ground, restlessly awaiting the dawning of daybreak, and his appearance.

The following day, after several hours of preaching and healing, the apostles became concerned. “Master, this is a desert place, these people have no food...some have not eaten since yesterday. Should we not send them away so they can reach the villages and buy food before the shops close?” Philip asked.

“There is no need to send them away so soon; you give them food,” Jeshua said calmly.

“Must we go and buy enough bread to feed them?” a disciple asked.

“See how much food is present,” was the response.

Later they reported, “We have collected only five loaves of bread and two fishes.”

“Bring them to me.” He took the food and said, “Organize all the people; have them sit on the grass in groups of fifty.”

When the apostles had instructed the people, they reported, “We have done as you said, Master. There are approximately five thousand men, besides women and children.”

Jeshua took the food in his hands and raised his voice, “I thank you Father, for providing food for the hungry and weary. Let them know you are a generous and loving father who supplies the needs of those who ask of you.” He motioned to the apostles to distribute the food he handed them. Each time he tore a piece away, it returned, plus a little extra.

Soon everyone had been fed. “Now, gather what is left over, that nothing be wasted,” he instructed. The men were awed to find they had gathered twelve baskets of left-over food. When the people realized what had happened, they all agreed, “This truly is the prophet that is predicted to come into the world. No other man has ever performed such works as this.”

Before the day ended, without Jeshua’s permission, several well-meaning, over-zealous men appointed themselves leaders and began organizing a plan to take him before the multitude—to force him to accept the position of king.

Realizing what was happening, Jeshua instructed his men, “Keep the people occupied until I can escape into the mountain, and then send them away. I want to be alone; I will meet you later, at the ship.” Once again he mysteriously disappeared from among the excited crowd.

Later that evening, while the men waited for Jeshua in the ship, a fierce wind blew them out to sea. For several hours the apostles struggled desperately, fighting against the raging waves, trying to control the ship and return to shore. Exhausted and scared, they had almost accepted defeat when from out of the gloomy darkness someone glimpsed a light figure moving about on the surface of the blackness. The terror stricken apostles cried out, “It’s a ghost...there on the water...see?”

Then from the distant roar of the sea, the waves carried a familiar voice, “Cheer up, men. There is no need to be frightened; it is only I.”

Peter, not yet totally convinced, ventured, “If it is you, Master, let me come out onto the water to meet you.”

Jeshua extended his arms, “Come on.”

Peter cautiously climbed down the side of the boat. He lowered his feet onto the cool surface of the black water. Fastening his eyes upon Jeshua, he took his first step, and began walking. He was aware of Jeshua several feet beyond. The sounds of pounding waves thrashed against the battered ship behind him. The black overhanging clouds grew increasingly threatening. Suddenly a blinding flash split the sky

followed by a deafening clash of thunder that resounded across the turbulence. Directly in front of Peter a forceful wind lifted a towering wave; it drenched him thoroughly with a shower of cold water. He looked out over the darkened, moving sea and terror knotted his stomach. Suddenly he realized he was being pulled down by a swirling force. Sinking, he yelled, "Lord, save me!"

Jeshua appeared instantly. He reached out and pulled the spluttering Peter back up out of the deep. "Where is your faith, Peter? Why did you doubt?" As they continued walking atop the water back to the ship, Jeshua thought, "Could he not remember, just a few hours ago, the feeding of the thousands from a handful of food. How long will it take for them to mature enough to believe?"

They climbed aboard the ship, the wind calmed, and the men came and worshiped Jeshua. "There is no doubt; this man truly is The Son of Eloah," they agreed.

Shortly after they re-charted the ship's course, they were astonished to find they had reached the shores of Gennesaret hours earlier than they had expected to arrive. They were delighted and deeply thankful for a few hours left for restful sleep before the fiery sun would rise its head above the distant mountains.

As soon as Jeshua stepped from the ship, the men of Gennesaret recognized him as the healer. An abundance of sick people could be found near the coastal areas seeking health resorts that offered them hope in the warm, sulfur springs. Runners broadcasted to the surrounding towns, villages, and country. "Bring your sick...the Healer has come...bring your sick...the Healer will heal your sick...bring your lame to the Healer..." they cried. By midday, the beach was lined with pallets of all manner of afflicted people. As Jeshua walked by, they merely had to reach out and touch his clothing, and they were instantly healed. The air was filled with joyful conversation and laughter. The beaches swelled with recovered invalids. The air reverberated with music, song, and dance. The healed, and their families, celebrated newfound life.

Many grateful people, overcome with emotional reverence, insisted on giving gifts of money, clothing, and food to Jeshua. The money was collected and carried by Judas. The food and clothing was shared among the poor. It was very late into the night before Jeshua and the apostles worked their way back to their ship.

Meanwhile, people on the other side of the lake came seeking Jeshua hoping to be fed again. They had watched the apostles row out to the ship in smaller boats, without Jeshua—and now the ship was gone. They could see Jeshua had not used his dingy to return to the ship; it was still bobbing atop the shallow water's edge where he had left it secured. Unable to find him there, they finally decided to go across the lake in their search.

Later in the day, commercial boats from Tiberias took many of the seekers on as passengers to Capernaum. When they arrived they were greatly surprised to discover Jeshua already there with his apostles. They asked, "Rabbi, when did you get here? We know your men left without you...your boat is still where you left it...how did you get here?"

Ignoring their questions, he accused, "You have followed me here, not because of my message and my healing powers, but because you want more free food. You are more concerned about satisfying your physical appetites than in spiritual food. You should hunger after food which gives you, not only physical life, but everlasting life. That is the food The Father sent me to feed you. This is the work The Father sent me to do."

"How can we be a part of the work of Jehovah?" they asked.

"This is the work of Eloah...you must believe me, and believe that he sent me."

"What credentials do you have to substantiate your claims? We descend from those who were fed manna in the desert. Eloah gave them bread to eat."

"Listen...the bread Mosheh fed was not the same kind of bread that I bring. Even though your fathers ate manna, they, none- the-less are dead. The bread of Eloah gives eternal life." He looked around at the smug faces and thought, "If only there were words plain enough...even so, they still would not comprehend. Yes, their fathers ate physical bread, a type of the spiritual. But...that bread has not given them life...for they are not only physically dead but spiritually dead as well. For unless I give up my body, to pay for their sins, none will ever attain eternal life. My body...through its sacrifice becomes the true bread. If they reject me, they reject the bread of life."

"Give us this bread, then," they said.

"I am this bread of life. The bread that I give is my flesh.

I give my flesh for spiritual food, my blood for spiritual drink. Those who come to me, believe me, eat of my flesh and drink of my blood, shall never hunger, nor thirst. You have both seen and heard me, and still you disbelieve. Those The Father gives to me shall come to me and I will accept them. I came from heaven, not to do my own, but my father's will. His will is that I do not lose anyone that he gives me, and that I shall raise them up in the last day. No one can come to me of their own will...The Father must first draw him."

Some of the locals murmured among themselves, "Isn't this Jeshua, the son of Yowceph and Maria? He was born an infant and grew to manhood just as any one of us. How then can he say he came from heaven?"

Many of his followers, not understanding the spiritual meaning when they heard his words, became confused. "This is indeed difficult to accept," they agreed.

Jeshua, knowing their attitude asked, "Does this offend you? What are you going to think when you see me ascend back up into heaven? The words I speak are spiritual, referring to spiritual things. The flesh is of no consequence, compared to the spirit. It is the spirit that changes the flesh to life. There are some here who do not believe, who will turn against me and betray me."

From that time many of his disciples stopped following him.

Jeshua addressed the remaining twelve, "Will you reject me also?"

Peter answered, "Where would we go? You alone have the words of eternal life. We know you are the son of the Living Eloah."

In the synagogue, the following Sabbath, some influential Pharisees from Jerusalem questioned Jeshua, "Why do your disciples break the laws of the elders? They totally disregard the ritual of washing the hands as prescribed by our law. And you do not rebuke them!"

Jeshua responded, "Why do you break the commandments of Eloah by keeping your traditions? Eloah says, 'Honor your father and mother; he who curses either deserves the death penalty'. You teach that it is more honorable to give money to the Temple, than to give it to a needy parent. By supporting the Temple you feel freed from the responsibility toward your parent. You hypocrites, Isaiah was accurate when he spoke of you saying, 'These people speak as though they love me, but their heart is deceitful. They worship me, but they do it in vain.' Yes...you worship Eloah, and your worship is useless. You teach man-made doctrines as they were the commandments of Eloah." Then he spoke to the congregation, "Food, handled and eaten with unwashed hands, is not what defiles a man; it is what proceeds out of his mouth. A hypocritical attitude, spewing forth from a wicked heart, that condemns a man."

Later, his apostles reminded him, "The Pharisees were very offended by what you said."

"Every plant which The Father has not planted shall be rooted up. Let the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into a ditch."

"Explain this further to us," Peter asked.

"Don't you understand yet? So what if the food you eat is touched by unwashed hands? After it has been digested in the stomach, it's expelled from your body as waste. The things one speaks, that identifies what is in the heart. There are evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, lies, blasphemies, pride, and foolishness. These are the things which defile you, not that your hands are soiled when you eat."

In the following weeks they traveled into the coasts of Tyre, Sidon, Decapolis, Dalmanutha, and finally into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, where they healed all manner of afflictions.

When they were alone, Jeshua asked, "Who do men say that I am?"

"Some say you are Johanan the Baptist. Some, Elias, others say Jeremiah, or one of the prophets," Peter answered.

"Who do you say that I am?"

"You are the Christ, the son of the Living Eloah."

"You are blessed, indeed, Simon Barjona, for you have not learned this from carnal flesh and blood, but my father has revealed it to you. And I will tell you this: you, Peter, are a small pebble. I am a rock. Upon this rock, for I am the cornerstone, I will build my church. The gates of the grave will not prevent

its growth. I will give you the keys of understanding. And whatever decision you make on earth, concerning the church, shall be bound in heaven. Do not spread this knowledge that I am the Christ to the multitude. For in a short time I will go into Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders and chief priests. They will kill me, but after three days I shall be quickened.”

“That is not so, Master. We will not allow such a thing to happen to you,” Peter insisted.

“Get behind me, Satan. For you do not understand the things that are planned of Eloah. You understand only carnal things,” he rebuked.

And later, when he was surrounded by many people and his disciples, he said, “Come, follow me, take up your cross and pattern your life after me. If you lose your life for my sake or the gospel’s, you will save it. What will it profit you if you save your life now, but later lose eternal life? Then to what advantage would it be had you gained the whole world? If anyone is ashamed of me and my doctrine now, understand this: when I come into my own glory, and in my father’s and the holy angels’, I will be ashamed of him. However, there are some standing here that will glimpse the kingdom of Eloah before they die.”

Several days later, he took Peter, James, and John up into a mountain apart from the others. When they had reached their special private place of prayer, he said, “Wait here while I go on up higher to pray alone.”

The three men were tired; they had had very little sleep the night before. Soon after they had prayed and relaxed, they fell asleep. Suddenly a strange light startled James, waking him. “Wake up, Peter,” he whispered. “Look...see...up there...where The Master prays.”

Peter rubbed his eyes and shook John, “John, look!” he pointed toward a blazing white halo of light. Jeshua stood transfigured as a celestial being. His face had changed to a bright, glowing light and his clothes glistened whiter than purest snow. “There are two other men talking to him. Listen...what are they saying?” Peter breathed.

They turned their heads to one side, listening intently; astonishment showed on their faces. “The names, Mosheh and Elias, are mentioned. They are talking about The Master going to Jerusalem. I can’t grasp all of their conversation,” John frowned, but I heard something like ‘the time near...is at hand’, and ‘Passover...Jerusalem’.

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Gradually the light dimmed and before their eyes the other two figures faded, leaving only Jeshua. Peter ran to him, “Master, how good it is to be here with you,” he sputtered incoherently. “Let’s build three tabernacles, one for you, one for Mosheh, and one for Elias.”

Suddenly, as if from out of nowhere, a thick, bright cloud hovered above them. The confused men shuddered with fear, not knowing what to expect next. From the dense cloud they heard a deep, vibrant voice, “This is my beloved son. Hear him.” The cloud and the voice left, only Jeshua remained.

As they descended the mountain Jeshua charged the three, "You are not to tell anyone about what you have just witnessed. This is to be kept secret until after I have risen from death."

They began to talk among themselves, "What must he be talking about? Is he not going to set up a new kingdom?" Then James asked, "Master, why do the scribes teach that Elias must come before the kingdom is established?"

"They speak the truth. Elias will indeed come; he will restore all things in preparation for my return. Think, why is it written that I must suffer many things and be rejected? I will tell you this: Elias has already come. He was treated by the people just as the scriptures predicted he would be...they threw him into prison and beheaded him." Then they understood he was referring to his cousin, Johanan, the Baptist.

The following day they found the other disciples surrounded by an enormous crowd, being questioned by a group of scribes. When the people saw Jeshua they turned their attention to him. He directed a question to the scribes, "What do you wish to know from them?"

A man from the crowd interrupted, "Sir, I brought my son...my only son, for help. He has a demon spirit which has rendered him speechless. When it takes control of him he often stiffens and falls to the ground. He thrashes about, tearing his flesh, gnashing his teeth, and foaming at the mouth. He was once a strong and healthy child, but now his body is wasting away. I asked your disciples to rebuke and drive the spirit away, but they were unable to do so."

Jeshua looked sadly at the desperate father, at the many suffering people in the crowd. In a stinging rebuke he addressed the scribes and disciples, "How weak your faith is! How long must I endure your disbelief? Bring the boy to me."

As soon as they brought the boy to Jeshua, the demon caused a violent convulsion, throwing him to the ground, foaming at the mouth, wildly thrashing about. "How long has he been like this?"

"Ever since he was a small child. The demon has tried many times to kill him by throwing him into the fire or into deep water. Please, if you possibly can...help us," The father pleaded.

A stab of pain pierced Jeshua's heart, "When will they ever understand...when will they ever believe me?" he moaned inwardly. He answered the anxious father, "I can if you can. If you can believe. Everything is possible for one who has enough faith."

The man stood over his tormented son, tears streaming down his dust covered face. "I have a measure of faith, but perhaps not enough. Please help me to have enough," he pleaded.

The crowds came running, pressing in about them, anxiously hoping to witness another miracle. In a controlled, stern voice Jeshua commanded, "I order you, come out of the boy, you deaf and dumb spirit, and never enter him again!"

Suddenly the spirit screamed, causing its domicile to twist and writhe in excruciating contortions. After the evil spirit vacated the body, the pale, crumpled boy lay lifeless; they thought he was dead. Jeshua reached down and pulled him to his feet. The boy stood; on unsteady legs he slowly walked into his weeping father's open arms. To every one's surprise he began to speak, "Abba, are you sad...why do you cry?" he asked. The happy parent joyously lifted his frail son above his shoulders for all to see.

"No, my son, I have never been happier. Now you can speak, soon you will be strong and healthy again. The Master Healer has driven out your tormentor."

Later, apart from the crowds, the disciples questioned Jeshua, "Master, why were we not able to rebuke and cast out the evil spirit from the young boy's body?"

"Because you lack faith. If you have enough faith...even the size of a mustard seed...you could command a mountain to move and it would. With enough faith, nothing would be impossible for you to perform. However, you will only receive this kind of faith by much fasting and praying first."

Shortly afterward, they quietly returned to Capernanum, careful not to let it be known they were in the area. Jeshua wanted to teach the disciples in private. "I shall soon be delivered into the hands of wicked men; they shall kill me. But after I am killed, within three days, I shall be brought back to life. Let these words sink deeply into your mind."

Unwilling to believe him, thinking he was speaking in allegory, they closed their minds to his words. "The master's words are increasingly hard to understand. All this talk about death and raising in three days reminds me of the 'eating of my flesh' and the 'drinking of my blood' talk," whispered Thaddeus. He turned to John, "Why don't you ask him to explain the parable more clearly?"

"Not I...I prefer to wait until he chooses to explain. I will have ample opportunity in the future to show my ignorance. I have no desire to deliberately appear slow-minded."

"He often talks in riddles," Andrew agreed.

"He speaks one day of 'a new government...a kingdom' and the next about dying. It is difficult to grasp. We are but businessmen in the fishing industry, not soldiers. On the other hand, we are not women that we cannot defend ourselves against any who would attempt to do us harm. Besides...we would have the support of the common people...they are all on our side. How often has The Master resisted their attempt to make him ruler? No small group would dare go against such power," Peter added.

Judas Iscariot stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Maybe an opposing power is what is needed to force The Master's hand...he has more power at his disposal than all of us put together. Has he not said himself that he has enough faith to move mountains? He certainly has demonstrated his powers in service to others...why should he not use this power to his own advantage?"

He thought to himself, "Why does he procrastinate...now that the people have been won over? It would be a small thing to get them rallied behind us. Everyone is already in a state of unrest, with all

the crooked, greedy rulers we have in Jerusalem, and the Romans lording it over us all. Our teacher has told us more than once that he comes in the power of The Father...that he proclaims the kingdom of Eloah. I, for one, am ready to get on with it, and take my rightful seat in the government. With my experience, I, no doubt, would fill the office of treasurer.”

“Peter, why do you not speak with The Master concerning his words, that he may explain more clearly about the positions we will have in the new government?” suggested Philip.

“We who have been with The Master the longest will no doubt have the highest position. After all we have been in training longer and have proved ourselves,” James offered.

“Some of us are not only his faithful followers but are related by blood. Family ties surely will have a greater advantage,” John stated.

“Who ever heard of important, governmental positions being filled by a mere youth as yourself, John?” grunted an older disciple. “Maturity and living experience will be of prime consideration.”

Jeshua winced as he perceived their thoughts. “They have no concept at all what the plan consists of...such selfish, grasping, carnality resides in the best of all flesh. If only mankind could understand that their sinful attitudes have cut them off from The Father,” he thought.

Later in the evening, at the house, the students reclined around the long guest table, sipping cool wine, talking to each other and listening to Jeshua. “What were you discussing so intently this afternoon?” he asked.

When no one answered, he picked up a servant’s little toddler and gently stroked the child’s cuddly body. He occupied himself with the child, waiting for a response. John, feeling the eyes of the twelve urging him on, took a deep breath and swallowed, “Master, who will have the greatest position with you in the kingdom?” he ventured.

Jeshua nestled his chin on the soft folds of the baby’s neck and gave the trusting, happy bundle a playful tickle with his soft beard. He was instantly rewarded with a spontaneous, musical giggle. “Observe this innocent child. Unless you become converted and as trusting, humble, and submissive as he, you will never enter into the kingdom of heaven. The humbler you become the greater will be your position. Those willing to be servant of all will be greatest of all.”

He kissed a pudgy little hand as it fingered his lips, “It would be better for one to be cast into the sea, with a huge stone anchored about his neck, than for that person to prevent a little one from coming to me. These things will happen, but woe unto him who is the author of offenses. If your hand or foot is responsible for enticing you to sin, it would be more profitable to you if you cut it off. It would be much better to enter into eternal life without your limbs, than to give into the temptation to sin and wind up in unquenchable fire with a whole body. That is how important your spiritual life is compared to your physical life. Nor should you feel superior to one of these little ones. Their angels report to The Father concerning them every day.

“Conduct yourselves graciously toward each other. If your brother has done you a misdeed, go and confront him about it in private. If you reconcile you have the possibility of a lasting friendship. If he will not listen to you, then, in the presence of two or three witnesses, confront him again. If he still refuses to listen to your complaint, take it before the church elders. If he still refuses, then you are free to break off relationship with such a person. When you make such a decision it will be bound in heaven. Whatever decision you make will be backed in heaven. If two of you agree on a need, it shall be granted by my father which is in heaven. For if two or three are gathered in my name I will be in their midst.”

“Master,” said John, “while we were traveling, we saw a man casting out demons in your name. We reprimanded him and demanded he stop his ministry, because he was not a part of our group.”

Jeshua lifted the toddler down and steadied him. He gave him an encouraging smile before sending him toward the outstretched arms of his waiting mother. Then he spoke solemnly, “You are not to forbid them. If they are not against us, they are for us.” And he taught them many things concerning forgiving, having compassion, and showing out-going concern toward others.

Later Jeshua was visiting at Peter’s home. Peter had been so busy with the ministry and travels that he had neglected to pay the local customary Temple tax. It was inevitable that he be accosted by a group of tax collectors. “Surely, Simon, you realize it is time for all local residents to pay their Temple taxes; yours is overdue. Tell us...does your teacher ever pay taxes?” they demanded.

Indignant, Peter growled, “Of course he pays taxes! But perhaps he is not prepared to do so today.”

Aware of what had taken place, Jeshua spoke to Peter when he entered the house. “Peter, what is your opinion concerning taxes? Who is required to pay the kings of this world, their citizens or foreigners?”

Peter answered, “Foreigners.”

“Well...that means we, the citizens of heaven, are not legally required to pay a tax to the house of our father. We don’t want to stir up wrath in these people. Go to the lake and drop in a line, pull up the first fish you hook. In its mouth you will find enough for both our Temple taxes.”

Peter, unable to identify his emotions, tried to appear indifferent. “Surely this is an embarrassing errand. I think I’d much rather pay out of my own bag. What will they say when they discover where the money came from? I will be a laughing stock,” he thought. Going down to the lake, he tried to avoid anyone who might inquire about his mission. He found one of his fishing boats that had been docked for repairs, and hurriedly climbed aboard. He found a fishing line which he carefully baited and dropped into the water. After all the deep sea fishing he had done he felt a little silly trying for just one fish...especially one that is expected to have money in its mouth. He hoped he could get this over with before anyone noticed what he was doing.

While waiting for a fish to bite he thought, “The Master does many things in strange ways. I’m sure he could have performed one of his miracles and produced the money in a more profound way.” His thoughts were interrupted by a tug at the end of his line. Pulling the fish in, he noticed it was a good

sized specimen with a large mouth. He quickly removed the hook from its mouth and looked around to see if anyone was watching. Satisfied he was unobserved; he stuck his hand into the flopping fish's mouth. He felt nothing.

"I suppose I will be here all day waiting for the right fish...how long am I to wait?" he wondered. He decided to look again. He grasped the slippery, wet fish behind its gills and forced its mouth wider; this time he touched something hard. A silver coin lay buried beneath the slimy tissues of its mouth. Peter carefully removed the coin and threw the lively fish back into the murky water. Amazed, he stood staring down at the glistening coin. "How did The Master know there was a fish with money in its mouth...or that it would be in this location. How did he know it would take my hook? Truly he is The Son of Eloah," he reasoned. "Just the same...I hope there are no questions concerning this coin when I present it to the tax collectors."

The Feast of Tabernacles was just a few weeks away. Many in the community and everyone in Jeshua's family were preparing for the three day trip to Jerusalem. Jeshua, aware of a plot to kill him—if he gave the Jews the opportunity—had taken pains to avoid them. He had instructed his disciples to each go with their own families, "Those who seek my life in Jerusalem will be expecting to find me with a following. I will not go up at this time."

When Maria learned that Jeshua was not planning to go to Jerusalem she was disappointed. She complained to her son, James, "This is one of the special times when we can all be together as a family. Just when we are beginning to seem more like a normal family...now why does he have to stay behind? There will be so many friends asking for him. What are we to tell them? See if you boys can talk him into changing his mind," she wheedled.

James had no concern one way or another whether Jeshua went or stayed. "I suppose Mother would be happier if Jeshua went along...although I can't understand why. She would seldom see him; he is constantly surrounded by those loathsome, ill-clad, diseased mobs. He is more an embarrassment than anything else. It does mean a lot to her. Just for her sake we will have a talk with him...not that it will do any good," he thought.

Sitting at evening meal with his family Jeshua sensed an air of questioning. "Mother tells us you are not attending the Feast in Jerusalem with us...or with your followers," Jude begin. "Why is this?"

"It is not yet time for me to go. It doesn't matter when you go...you have lots of time...my time is limited."

"Why would you not want to go now...do you not want to perform some of your mighty works in the presence of your followers? No one, who wishes to be great, hides his works. If you intend to become a powerful influence on the world, you must openly show yourself...prove yourself. This is a perfect opportunity for you to make an impression on the whole world. We think you should go. How do you expect to be known if you keep your works secret?" For added persuasion he said, "It would mean a lot to Mother for you to go."

“No...I will not go now. Without my presence you will be safer. The world does not hate you, as it does me. It hates me because I expose its evil.” Jeshua could not bear to look at his mother; he knew her eyes were filled with tears of disappointment. “I must let her think I am not attending the Feast, even though I intend to follow later. I must travel inconspicuously, avoiding the trap Jewish rulers are planning against me,” he thought. “I especially do not wish my family to become involved in an unpleasant situation because of me.”

Even before Jeshua arrived at the Feast, the people began to wonder where he was and if he would show himself. Everywhere people were in disagreement concerning him. Some said, “He is a good man.”

Others argued, “Nay...He is nothing but a deceiver of the people!”

Several days later, near the end of the Feast, Jeshua made his presence known. He took his place before the congregation and began to speak with such eloquence and scriptural knowledge that the Jews were astounded. “This man never attended any of our schools of higher learning,” they agreed. “Where did he get all of this speaking ability...all of this doctrine?”

Jeshua, knowing their thoughts, answered, “The doctrine I speak is not my doctrine! I do not speak my doctrine. If you were obeying Eloah you would know this. When one speaks of himself he seeks his own glory...I seek the glory of the one who sent me.”

He addressed the religious leaders, “Mosheh gave you the law, yet none of you keep it. I have performed one healing on the Sabbath and you condemn me. Mosheh gave you circumcision—handed down from your ancestors—and you circumcise on the Sabbath day. If you do this to keep the law, why are you outraged at me for making a man completely healthy? Why do you make plans to kill me?”

A red-faced, elegantly-clad scribe jumped to his feet, “You are demon possessed! Why do you think we are trying to kill you?”

Several from the congregation began to whisper, “Is this the man they are trying to kill? He speaks boldly before them; why is it they are not doing anything to him? Is it because they really do think he is the Christ?”

Another added, “When the Christ comes, no one will know where he comes from. It’s no secret where this man comes from. We all know him.”

Jeshua responded, “Yes...you all know me. You know where I am, but you do not know him that sent me. I alone know him, for I came from him; he sent me!”

Many began to say, “This man has done many marvelous works, healing, casting out demons, and working miracles. Will the Christ do more than he is doing, when he comes? This is the Christ!”

Jeshua continued, “I shall only be among you for a while longer, then I will go back to him that sent me. You will look for me and not find me...you will not be able to join me; you cannot go there.”

“Where does he intend to go...to the diaspora among the Gentiles?” someone asked.

Alarmed at news the people were beginning to accept Jeshua as Messiah, the jealous Pharisees and chief priests hastened their plans to have him arrested. Jeshua was still free and preaching on the Last Great Day. Concerning the Holy Spirit he said, “If any man thirst let him come to me. As the scriptures say, I will give him living water.”

The Pharisees called the officers before their council and demanded, “Why have you not arrested this trouble-maker?”

“It is impossible to arrest a man who speaks with such marvelous words of love and compassion. We have never heard a speaker like him,” their spokesman answered nervously.

An angry lawyer collected his long, flowing robes; he leaned forward and growled, “Are you being taken in by this ludicrous actor, too? Have any of the rulers or any of our religious leaders ever accepted him, or accepted any of his teaching? He obviously is taking advantage of the ignorance of the people; they don’t know the law!”

Nicodemus sat quietly, patiently waiting his turn to speak. He clearly remembered the secretive discussion he had once had with the gentle man in discussion. He spoke, “Does our law judge any man before he is given a hearing? Should he not be found guilty of something before we condemn him?”

“Are you also an ignorant Galilean? You should know that no prophet has been predicted to come out of Galilee. Search it out for yourself!”

After the Feast, Jeshua spent the night in the Mount of Olives. Early the next morning he returned to the Temple and taught all the people who came to hear him. The Pharisees joined the people—along with their posted, hired hecklers. The scorners were instructed to move about among the congregation. Jeshua taught, “I am the light of the world. Those who follow me shall not walk in darkness. I judge no one, but if I should, I would judge righteously, because The Father and I agree on everything. If you believe my words and continue in them you will become my disciples. You are of this world, but I am not of the world. I am from above. If you do not believe me, you will die in your sins. I must go away; you will seek me...where I go you cannot come. I am never alone. The Father who sent me is ever with me, for I always do the things that please him. I have many things to teach you, but when you have lifted me up, then you will know that I do nothing of myself, but I speak only the things my father has taught me. These are words of truth. If you accept the truth, the truth shall make you free.”

From the crowd came a taunter’s voice, “We are not slaves. We are descendants of Abraham. We’ve never been in bondage to anyone. What do you mean by being made free...we are free! We have no need to be freed, especially by a blasphemer like you!”

“Anyone who commits sin is the servant of sin. The servant lives in the house temporarily; the son is a permanent occupant. If the son gives you freedom, your freedom will be secure. I know you

descended from Abraham. Nevertheless, if you were Abraham's true children you would be doing the works of Abraham. Instead, you do the deeds of your true father."

Several voices asserted, "We are Abraham's seed! We are not bastards...we have only one father which is Eloah!"

"If Eloah were your father you would love me. You can not even understand that I came from him; he sent me. You are children of your father, the devil! You fulfill the lusts of your father. You seek to kill me because your father was a murderer and a liar from the very beginning. You refuse to believe the truth. Which one of you can prove that I have any sin? If you have no proof, then why do you not believe me? If you were of Eloah you would hear Eloah's words. But you are not, and you don't!"

Several angry Pharisees began, "It is true what we have known all along. You are an unlearned Samaritan with a devil spirit."

"I do not have a demon; I simply honor my father. You dishonor me, that is your loss. For if a man keeps my sayings he shall never die."

"This is just further proof that you have a devil. Everyone knows Abraham and all the prophets are dead."

"Your father Abraham rejoiced over my appearance—my day."

"Are you trying to tell us you have seen Abraham? You are not even fifty years old. Do you actually expect us to believe this foolishness?"

"This is a true fact. I existed long before Abraham."

The hired scoffers incited the crowd with chants of:

"Blasphemer! Blasphemer! Stone the blasphemer...he deserves to die." Some picked up stones intending to lead an execution. Jeshua slipped out of their midst, as he had done many times before. The villains, confused and frustrated, not able to find their target, quickly disbanded.

The following day Jeshua was approached by a group of jeering, smug men, rudely shoving a weeping woman before him. Jeshua recognized the leader as being one of the Temple scribes. Hoping to trick Jeshua, the self-righteous scribe appealed, "We caught this sinful woman in the very act of adultery," they accused. "Now Mosheh's law commands that she be stoned. What do you say?"

Jeshua ignored the question. He knelt at their feet and with his finger, he began writing names in the dust. He knew that some of the accusers had, at one time or another, been secret customers of the ill-reputed woman. Others were committing similar, hidden sins. When the question was put to him a second time he continued to ignore them while he wrote. He drew an extending line from each name and supplied a date and place. When he had finished he stood up, and gave each accusing man time to read what he had written. Gazing sternly into their guilt-ridden eyes he gave his answer, "Let the one who is without sin begin the stoning." He knelt and continued to write more information.

The conscience-pricked men slowly backed away and left, until none remained but the shame-faced woman. He stopped writing, rose up and asked her, "Woman, where are those who have condemned you...are there none left?"

The trembling woman's voice shook, "No, my Lord...none remains."

"Then neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

The indebted woman crumpled to his feet, sobbing, "I am not without guilt, my Lord. I pray you will cleanse me from my sin. I believe you are The Son of Eloah. Please...forgive me," she pleaded.

He lifted her to her feet, "Your sins are forgiven, daughter of Abraham. Believe the words I speak and you shall have springs of living water flowing freely; you shall never thirst."

As another curious crowd gathered about him, he experienced a heavy, painful sadness. He sighed deeply and thought, "I have stayed in the beloved city long enough. The time is not yet ripe for my fulfillment...the Jews are determined to hasten my death. Should I linger, they will kill me prematurely. I have many things yet to teach the children The Father has given me. I have little time to prepare them for their swiftly approaching responsibilities."

end of ch. 11