

CHAPTER SEVEN

Everywhere—New Sects

Yeshua's family was hosting a Sabbath day get-together for friends and relatives. The great room of the large, cool, stone house was filled with laughter and friendly chatter. In the dining area a long, wood table was still laden with leftover food from the late afternoon Sabbath meal. Visiting friends and relatives reclined on comfortable, straw-stuffed lounges, sipping cool drinks from colorful earthen cups. A small child lay curled into a ball, sleeping on a thick pad near his watchful mother. After a filling and enjoyable meal Yeshua found himself surrounded by inquisitive, younger cousins. A group of smaller children sat restlessly on the colorful, tile floor quietly competing for his attention. They anxiously hoped for Yeshua to tell another of his exciting stories. He was keenly aware of each person in the room as he listened to their conversation. Yeshua's cousin, Simon, savored a plump grape he periodically plucked from a nearby cluster. Simon's brother, Andrew, sat at the table, in his reclining position, still nibbling on a morsel of meat.

James sat amid a group of cheerfully boisterous young men, leading a lively conversation. "It won't be long...I suppose everyone in Nazareth is beginning to get excited about the fall festivals...I wonder what new thing awaits us this year? There are so many new religions, and so-called prophets, rising up, one never knows what to expect..."

Uncle Jonas responded, "Each year we go to Jerusalem it seems the air is energized with added anticipation of a Deliverer. You can feel the mood; it is the urgency of the day...people are restlessly eager for a new leader. Not only in Judea, but in Samaria as well...I hear there is a powerful new religious leader by the name of Simon Magus who is experiencing surprising success. He is becoming very popular. He's reported to be a worker of miracles...claims the power to fly...to make images talk. No doubt these claims have been overly exaggerated—as is always the case. This fellow is—in my opinion—just a clever magician. Of course those ignorant Samaritans will believe anything. They have the audacity to claim to be descendants of Abraham. Just because they have adopted some of our religion...have practiced parts of Moshe's laws...they think The Father accepts their worship of him.

"Everyone knows Jerusalem is where our Creator demands to be worshipped, not Mount Gerizim. What can one expect of such inferior people?" The speaker hesitated long enough to finish his cup of wine. Satisfied he had his audience's interest, he continued. "Throughout their history, when Israel achieved prosperity and peace, it was to these scroungie Samaritans' advantage to claim to be children of Abraham. When we Israelites are in peril they all too eagerly admit to our enemies they are merely Gentiles from Babylonia. We all know they were planted in the land seven hundred years ago by Assyrian king, Sargon II."

"I wouldn't give much thought to a religious fanatic rebel that comes from such base beginnings. He can't amount to much," Simon asserted.

The twins, amid a small group of restless, young beauties, stopped their whispers and giggles long enough for Marta to add, "It seems everyone is only interested in some strange thing these days...I just enjoy traveling and meeting with new friends and seeing the fine clothing of wealthy ladies...and..."

With a mischievous gleam in his sparkling grey eyes, her older brother, Simon, spoke up, "And looking over the new crop of pitifully unsuspecting, prospective husbands, no doubt," he teased gleefully.

Yeshua controlled an urge to chuckle. "Simon, no doubt, is more observant than will be appreciated by his sister. Time and maturity will teach him to be a little more tactful," he thought. "Perhaps I can soften her embarrassment by changing the subject." He turned to Maria, "Lady...are you ready for another hassle with our gifted group of young jesters this fall?" Directing a deliberate look toward his younger brother he added, "It seems our talent for humor increases daily, does it not?"

Maria sighed, "Of course, Son. Surely you all know I still anticipate the yearly trip to Jerusalem with my children. It would not be the joy that it is without the youth and the family activities that we share so lavishly during the festival. The Feast of Tabernacles was always my, and your Abba's, favorite festival. It's just not the same without him," Maria stated sadly. "Every year it seems there is more violence and unrest among the people. I try to keep a positive attitude, though it is very difficult at times. So many of our old friends have died, or been killed. Some are just plainly too scared to make the long trip into Jerusalem. Many prefer staying home, celebrating the festivals at their synagogues. Every festival brings back memories of missing loved ones. For many years I hoped there would be word concerning my dear cousin, Elizabeth, but...I have finally given up hope. She and Zachariah are probably in their graves by now. And Jehovah only knows what happened to little Johanan."

Andrew, wanting to get the conversation on a more cheerful note, replied. "There's been a lot of talk of a preaching Johanan that comes from near the area where it is thought Zachariah fled with his family years ago. He sure has a lot of people wondering...some think he could even be Messiah...he is acquiring quite a following. Though...those who have gone to listen to him, say he's introducing a strange new form of cleansing rites. Others say he comes from the Hasidim. There's always more rumor than knowledge. My friends and I plan to hear more from him when we attend the Feast this fall."

"Just what we need...a new form of religion to get the already unpredictable rulers suspicious and restless," James growled.

Uncle Jonas continued, "He's a young fellow...about your age, Yeshua. I hear he's sort of an odd looking character...wears strange dress. He's accused of not being very sociable, either...with a crude and somewhat harsh manner of speech.

Belonging to the community of the Hasidim would explain why we haven't ever seen this fellow at the temple during any of the feasts. You seldom ever hear of these religious celibates venturing out of their wilderness city or camps. In their earliest beginning those fanatics followed some spurious prophet proclaiming Eloah sent him to set up a new religious order of self-denial. Our religious leaders could

never explain why the Hasidim withdrew themselves from Israel in search of such a severe life style. None-the-less, they are noted for their intense absorption of the law and are just as anxious for a new age as any sane Israelite. Could be this Johanan is one of their preachers spreading their doctrine of being the 'new Israel of the new covenant.'" "He, no doubt, preaches celibacy, too. That's not going to attract a lot of attention in this part of the world. What keeps the non-marrying Hasidim from dying out, anyway?" someone asked.

"They have had to revise their religious doctrines concerning celibacy to some extent. Since the great earthquake leveled their great city near sixty years ago. It killed off many of their people. Of course they had to rebuild their communities, and population. Otherwise their sect may well have disappeared. They keep accepting new recruits and families that claim they are sick to death of the Pharisees and Sadducees dictating burdensome, senseless religious rituals on them. They are composed of rebels, mostly, who are looking for something different. And this Johanan sure seems to fit their description."

Maria glanced at Yeshua. It seemed she remembered something that Zachariah had prophesied about baby Johanan preparing the way for Messiah. "It has been so long since all that excitement about our baby sons," she thought, "I wish I could remember what Zachariah said. Could it be that this is their son...if so...why has he not come forth...why has Yeshua not found him, making plans to take over his rightful position as Israel's king? Were the two of them not prophesied to work together as a team? It is too much to hope for...this Johanan is no doubt just another ambitious young rebel, eager to make a name for himself. I wonder...did all those things really happen or was it just a magical dream? It has been almost thirty years...our country is still being oppressed by the Romans; taxes are heavier than ever. Yeshua has not even attempted to relieve our people's suffering. I keep wondering when he is going to use those exceptional powers..."

Yeshua, empowered with the ability to discern the deepest thoughts of those about him, was stirred with tender compassion and longed to comfort his mother. "She has been through so much. It is only human that she wonders. I must encourage and strengthen her...for she yet has much agony to endure because of me," he thought.

Cousin Simon turned to Yeshua. "What do you think, Yeshua... if anyone knows whether the prophets speak of him, it would be you. What have you to tell us about this baptizer? They say he refuses to drink wine and he has strange eating habits...eats wild honey and locust blossoms. And he wears garments of camel hair..."

Yeshua reached for a pleading child and placed her on his knee. Then he answered, "The hour will soon come when all shall be revealed. If Johanan is the son of mother's beloved cousin, I'm sure he will identify himself to us. I am as eager as others to hear more about him." He turned to Uncle Jonas, "Tell us more about the teachings of this Johanan you speak of. He, no doubt, is a most interesting person. Who does he claim himself to be?"

Yeshua was amused. He thought, "I expected a similar response from Simon. He was sure to bring me into this discussion. I'm surely glad that among this crowd I alone possess the power to perceive their

thoughts,” Yeshua chuckled inwardly. “What an explosion would occur if they knew my thoughts. Only Simon and Andrew would kindly tolerate me if I spoke the truth. Very shortly, not only our family, but the whole city of Nazareth, will surely have much more to talk about concerning religion. They will think I, too, have become a religious fanatic, teaching a new religion. Yet, I will only speak what The Father gives me. They will accuse me of breaking my Father’s laws...of being demon possessed...of being a glutton and a drunkard. Most will not accept that what I will speak will not be my words but The Father’s, as he speaks to me. Instead, I will magnify and proclaim them to their fulfillment,” he thought to himself.

“And, yes, during my travels I have heard much of this great man, Johanan. His name is on the lips of many and shall go down in the pages of history for all of mankind to read. Of a surety, he is my distant cousin. I long to meet this righteous man whom The Father has called and educated—born with the power of the Holy Spirit. I could have told our loving lady about Johanan, but by the time I was made aware of what had happened to them, her beloved cousin, Elizabeth, and Zachariah, already slept with their ancestors. Johanan will enjoy telling her about his parents—how they lived a long and happy life in the safety of the wilderness. He will tell her how The Father protected and nurtured them for many years. She will thrill to the news of how the Great One extended their old age until young Johanan matured.

“Soon Johanan will become well known...his fame will spread throughout the world. Though he and his parents did live among the heretics, they never entered into their oath. Though Johanan’s manner has resulted from his lifestyle among them, he never accepted their code. Just the same, it is not in The Father’s plan for Johanan to espouse a woman at this time. Like unto myself, it is the will of The Father for Johanan’s life to terminate shortly following the completion of his mission. Johanan’s message will be brief and then give way to mine. This phase of our work, another step in the plan, has now just begun. Sadly, the joy Johanan’s appearance will bring Mother will be short lived. Expecting great things for him—as she does for me—his untimely death will cause her added grief and disappointment. She doesn’t know that the fulfillment of my greatness will not come in her time, but in a future age.

“As for Simon Magus...though this disciple of Satan does not know me...I know him well. What he now accomplishes is just a small beginning of greater deceptions taught through Satan’s powerful apostate synagogues. He seeks only his own glory and power. There is one—my powerful enemy—who rules the passions of greedy men. Satan, not Simon, performs the miracles—to rise up his religious groups. These clever counterfeits, instruments of power blind and deceive the nations of the world. They will grow in great numbers. I, too, will build a church. My small, called-out elect—in their physical period—will never grow powerful nor influence great movements. For hundreds of years Satan’s powerfully rich church and her many protesting daughters shall be thought to be institutions of righteousness. They would deceive, if it were possible, even my small elect. Satan, too, is blinded...self-deceived...too vain to realize he is a valuable part of the plan, serving to strengthen and purify my devoted ones for future greatness in my glorious kingdom.”

Yeshua picked up a second small child and balanced him on his other knee. He studied the restless faces of his brothers, cousins, and relatives. He chuckled. “For a truth...it’s a good thing this group cannot read my thoughts.” He turned his attention to the group of anxious children waiting for him to

take them into a world of suspense and adventure. “Now, small ones, you have waited patiently...let us gather aside and I shall tell you a wonderful story about a beautiful, wise queen, and a wicked man who schemed to destroy our nation, and was caught in his own trap.”

Later in the evening, after the last guest departed, Yeshua collected his thoughts and communed with his heavenly Father. “I know the time is drawing near. I have set my family and business in order and freed myself for my mission. I have given the family business over to my brothers. They will continue to provide for the family. Even the youngest, Betha and Marta, are nearing adulthood; soon to be wives and mothers. In my travels I have met and acquainted myself with most of the students you have given me. They are in need of much conditioning and training, but they are young men with strength of character. They will falter and stumble many times; nevertheless they will always bounce back. With our help they will mature into powerful leaders of truth and righteousness, recording and spreading the message of the future kingdom you have sent me to proclaim. Already, I have confided my mission, in part, to a few. I expounded the ancient writings to them concerning my birth and explained that I was he that would bring about the prophecies of the scriptures. Even though they do not now understand how the plan is to be fulfilled, they believed when I told them you sent me—that I am to become king of Israel. You know, Father, some of these men are my close friends, some are my relatives...I have known most since childhood. When the time is ripe, I know you will reveal—from among them—those whom you will give me.”

His mother’s sad face flashed before him. “Father, I am concerned for the lady whom you chose as an instrument of my birth. From harshness of life, she has aged prematurely. For many years she has been a devoted wife, mother, tutor, friend and councilor. She has attended not only to her family’s needs, she also serves the needy. She has been a great inspiration to many—faithful in the role you assigned her—but now her flesh is growing weak. With it, her spirits have grown faint. She still grieves the loss of her husband. She cannot understand why I did not heal him of his sickness. Where once her eyes sparkled with life, they now are dimmed with sadness. These are severe times for her people. Her parents...many of her friends and family have died before their time. In her younger years she was full of faith and hope...looking forward to my becoming the Deliverer. Now, she sees much distress, much sadness about her, and her faith has waned. I have become a disappointment to her lively hopes. Father, in your loving kindness...by the power of your Holy Spirit... Restore her life. Comfort her, and give her strength, in her hour of confusion and sadness.”

The day arrived for the trip to Jerusalem, to observe the feast of Tabernacles. Traveling the last day on their journey to Jerusalem, Yeshua encouraged Maria to stop by the wayside and refresh in the shade of a towering oak. The day had grown unusually hot, narrow roads were filled with travelers from Nazareth and other cities. “I will be fine, now, son. I know you are anxious to visit your cherished friends who live in Bethany. I can travel the remainder of the way with the rest of the family...you go on ahead. It is enough you have coddled me this far. You have made arrangements for my stay during the festivals; that is enough. Be gone with you now,” she insisted.

Visiting Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was one of the highlights of the feast for Yeshua. They had been best friends since their youth, their friendship growing stronger each year. As Yeshua neared the home

of his friends, he was met with shouts of joy. Martha, the oldest of the three, bustled about serving refreshments while Lazarus gave instructions to hired servants to care for Yeshua's tired animals. Mary sat on the floor, tenderly washing Yeshua's tired feet. In her excitement, she babbled, "I told Martha you would come today...she said it was too early. Just the same, I had this wonderful feeling..."

"This is a special feast...the last one, really, that I will attend as an obscured citizen...unencumbered. The time is drawing closer, my dear friends. As I have explained to you before...when I involve myself totally with the plan I shall have to deal with time in a different way. Johanan already is preaching about me...preparing the way. This time next year I will be absorbed in proclaiming the gospel of the good news."

Mary lovingly dried her friend's feet with a soft towel and gave the bowl of water to a waiting servant. "It sounds rather exciting...at the same time...very frightening; must it be so soon? I remember what you explained to us from the prophets and what the prophet Isaiah wrote concerning you...and I dread..," she tried to swallow the lump that rose in her throat.

"You must not..." Yeshua comforted her. "Remember, whatever happens, this is what I came into the world to accomplish. Throughout my life I have prepared for this. Enough! Let this be a joyous festival."

Mary knew that when he spoke in this authoritative tone, she had no choice but to yield to his wishes. Never had she known a man such as Yeshua. She could not get enough of listening to his kind, yet, commanding, masculine voice. Even now, she thrilled to the music of his hearty laugh as he shared a humorous story with her brother Lazarus.

Long after the candle lights were snuffed, Mary tossed about in her bed, thinking about Yeshua and the effect he had had on her life. It seemed to her they had known each other all their lives. "There must have been a first time," she thought. "I know I have loved him all my life. Even when we were youngsters...and it wasn't smart to admit to liking boys...I loved him. It was hard to pretend to my little friends that I couldn't stand boys when Yeshua was near. I used to get so jealous when other girls tried to get his attention...and there was plenty...all the girls adore him. It surely is not his looks...his dark eyebrows are too unruly and thick...his nose is too prominent...his teeth are uneven and his mouth is too wide...his heavy, wiry hair seems always in defiant of order. What then?" she asked herself.

"The man exudes unusual physical strength and spiritual authority, yet he demonstrates such kindness and gentleness, especially to women and children. One cannot be in his presence without feeling sincerely respected, loved and appreciated. What he lacks in appearance he makes up for in his warm, magnetic personality...always sharing something to make one feel good, to laugh about or to enjoy. And though everyone knows he has a brilliant mind and is exceptionally talented...one feels only comfort in his presence. When he speaks seriously, in that deep, resounding voice, one respects the authority that rings through. No one questions that he knows best.

"When did I first notice a change in our relationship?" she asked herself. "It must have developed gradually. How confused and heartbroken I was the first time I noticed Yeshua avoiding me. We were about sixteen years old...I remember we were attending a family picnic during a festival. There was

singing and laughter...I had never heard anyone sing so beautifully as Yeshua had. In appreciation and youthful excitement, I impulsively threw my arms around him and gave him a sisterly squeeze...his arms instantly tightened about me. Suddenly, his eyes widened in surprise, his tanned cheeks turned beet red. His arms dropped as though they had gained the weight of lead; he hurriedly excused himself and mysteriously vanished. In my embarrassment I ran and hid. The following festivals were painful for me. I was sure Yeshua was deliberately avoiding me. I was afraid I had embarrassed him so badly he would never want to associate with me again.

“Finally, when our families got together for another festival visit, Yeshua surprised me by asking Abba if he could call on me. I was elated. I wondered if he knew how I felt. I fantasized Yeshua proposing to me...I wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of my life worshipping him. Never would I have suspected what was about to transpire.

“We took our refreshments into the study room, within hearing of the family outside. I was thankful for what little privacy the room afforded us. My body trembled with shyness and anticipation. Yeshua smiled a warm crooked smile and motioned for me to sit across the table from him. I would have kissed his feet had I thought that was his wish. In his soft, deep voice he began, ‘My dear little friend, I owe you a very important explanation. The Father will give you special help in accepting the mystery I am about to reveal to you. I have deliberately avoided visiting you for a very specific reason. You are a wonderful friend, a beautiful woman, and a great prize for any man. That day, when you embraced me, I felt a powerful hunger take control of my flesh. Until that day I had never experienced that kind of emotion...however, I discovered, to my dismay, the pulls of the flesh are stronger than I suspected. I stayed away until I received strength to conduct myself properly. Through the years, you and I, and your sister and brother, have shared an unusually close relationship. We have experienced many happy events...I have often felt a bond closer to the three of you than with my own brothers and sisters. I did not realize my affection for you had changed from a brother-sister relationship to a much different, deeper, personal love. Yes, Mary, I found myself loving you...as a man loves the woman he wants for his wife. I am not free to love any woman...that way. I am aware that you love me the same way. If I were free to marry, I would ask you to be my wife. Listen while I explain why that is impossible.

“My heavenly Father and I are as one...we agree on everything; we work as one mind. I am The Word, The Light, and Life. The Great Eloah sent me to planet Earth to fulfill an eternal plan...a plan for all of mankind. You have known me in my human form. Yet...I have many forms. I am one of Elohim...now dwelling in the flesh. I am Messiah.’

“His words rang heavily with unquestionable truth and authority. I had always known he was different. As he continued speaking, I had no doubt he spoke the truth. He was, indeed, Messiah. My youthful dreams of marriage to this wonderful young man came crashing about me, leaving me weak with awe and wonder.” Mary’s young face blushed as she relived her shame and humiliation. “I fell to my face, ‘Forgive me, my Lord...I did not know.’ How kind were his words as he lifted me to my feet.

“You have done no wrong, dear friend. I have not shed the love I have for you...only the power of the flesh, which I must constantly conquer. I know your deepest, inward feelings; even to your most personal thoughts...realize this: to choose loyalty and devotion to me will bring you much suffering. In

this life I am powerless to fulfill your fleshly desires. I am to be cut off in the mist of my prime. Even so, there will be joy, hope, and eternal life. Though I love you, as one loves with the flesh, I must be about my Father's business; nothing can interfere. Shortly I will shed this house of flesh and return to my Father. Yet...I shall never leave you. This is most difficult for you to understand now, in time you will. This is a great mystery to be revealed to those The Father will call...after the Holy Spirit is sent to open their spiritual eyes. I shall avoid you no longer...you will remain my very special, precious friend...to the very end.”

Mary's thoughts continued. “In the following years Yeshua gradually demonstrated unusual, secret powers. He gave Lazarus and Martha bits of information that convinced them I had not been merely indulging an over-active imagination. In the last two years, during his rare visits, we have spent many hours listening to him expound upon the ancient writings that speaks directly about him and his mission. How I wish I could understand everything that is about to happen to him. Even when he explains, it is not clear. I find myself excited and frightened at the same time.”

Mary blotted moist eyes. “I shall never love another man as I do Yeshua...through death, through life, through suffering—no matter what. No one could ever take his place in my heart,” she vowed to herself.

On the first day of the festival Yeshua mingled among the people, surrounded by a large group of personal friends and family. The temple court was crowded with Israelites from every nation. Some were very wealthy; most were poor. The stench of animals filled the air. Hundreds of cages held doves and pigeons, awaiting their purchase by the poor. Greedy men, positioned behind tables of money, were busy over charging for sacrificial animals and birds. Dishonest money-changers haggled with suspicious worshippers. Yeshua looked upon this scene with anger and loathing. “What a bunch of crooked snakes, these ‘righteous’ leaders robbing poor, helpless people of their last coin in the name of my Father. Each year my indignation grows stronger...I must hold my peace yet a little longer...the time is not now. Soon the world will see the authority The Father gives to his son.”

Two weeks later, James, having just recently returned home from Jerusalem, was again at his regular work routine. Small talk was flowing smoothly as he worked with his hired crew. He was anxious to get the present job finished before the winter rains began. He stated encouragingly, “The end of the fifth day should find this job completed, weather permitting. I enjoy working this time of the year. I look forward, all summer, to this cooler weather.” He selected a large, colorful stone and expertly cemented it into the fashionable garden wall.

One of his hired men commented, “Sure was a lot of talk around Jerusalem about this preacher, Johanan. Many people are contending about whether he is a prophet or just another madman. They say he is commanding repentance, and is baptizing his converts by immersing them into the Jordan River. He keeps preaching something about a ‘kingdom’ that’s being sent from Eloah. He has followers from all over Judea. I hear they are flocking to him in droves.”

A second burly worker hefted a large stone onto the growing wall. “Everyone is looking for a miracle man to appear...there’s no question that we definitely could use one. I have a kinsman that has gone

out to the Jordan, seeking to be baptized...claims Johanan's written about in the scriptures. It sounds like just another strange religion to me. He surely isn't making the rulers very happy. Did you hear the synagogue Rabbi this past Sabbath day? He was grumbling about his congregation being afflicted with the latest spiritual disease...disloyalty and ignorance. He says we are like stupid sheep, running off to the call of every enticement, thinking the grass is forever greener in a new pasture."

"We plan to wait until Passover to see this Johanan. My brothers and I plan to check this fellow out," James stated. "Our mother is all excited, thinking he is a long-lost relative. She tells about a favorite cousin of hers who had a son by the name of Johanan who disappeared with his parents into the wilderness during the madness of Herod the baby-butcher."

"Wouldn't your brother, Yeshua, know something about this Johanan...whether he is just another rabble-rouser? The way your brother reads and teaches in the synagogue...you would never suspect he has never had any formal education in the arts of religion. He leaves you with the impression he understands every word that he reads. You'd think he would know from the writings of the prophecies whether this Johanan is Messiah, or not. What does he have to say about him?"

"Yeshua spends so much time in the mountains, or roaming around the country, I seldom find him alone long enough to talk to him. About the only time I see him is on the Sabbath, then he's preoccupied, or he has a bunch of friends following him about. He's changed a lot in the past couple years...used to be lots of fun...do a lot of interesting things...worked like a slave to keep our business booming. Now, it's up to me and Jude to make all of the family decisions. He spends most of his time away from home. It would be interesting, though, to know his views."

James' comments gave way to personal thoughts. "He's turned into a regular Rabbi—with all that so-called wisdom. I think he's taking himself too seriously. He keeps the whole family confused. It's hard to know what he means anymore. You'd think, as knowledgeable as he is, you could get a straight answer from him. If he bothers to give an answer, it's so clouded in mystery you don't know what he's talking about...I'm not too sure he knows what he's talking about either. I wonder sometimes if Yeshua doesn't think too grand of himself. Lately he's been talking about 'when the hour comes' and 'when all is fulfilled' as if some spectacular occurrence is about to happen. There is no doubt that Yeshua is exceptionally gifted with many talents. And maybe he does have a better than average closeness with Jehovah. He prays, meditates, studies, and fasts more than any human I've ever known. Notwithstanding, that doesn't prove to me he is Messiah. I know Mama used to think he was...even she has lost her dreams of his ever being Israel's Deliverer. If he were Messiah, why hasn't he made an effort to get into politics or organize a following?"

James' thoughts were interrupted as his helper continued the conversation. "I know he really gets lots of attention from our women folks. A fellow like him...homely as a camel's ear...makes you wonder what they see that's so appealing. Just a day past, at Sabbath's end, the women of our family—even the aged—were singing his praises...as though he were a ruler, or something great. The fellow must have some magical spells cast on them. Personally...I never felt comfortable around him. I'm sure he disapproves of me. Did he ever tell about the time a bunch of us lads way-laid him on the way from

school? We all liked him well enough; he never did anything against us. Just the same, it really irritated us that he was always teacher's favorite, that he got more favors than we. He always knew the answers...never acted like a normal run-of-the mill classmate. Not that that endeared him to the majority of his fellow students. Especially not us. We were a restless bunch of young ruffians, spoiling for mischief. The first time we caught your brother out by himself, we jumped him...almost had him beat to a pulp before we noticed he wasn't defending himself. For some strange reason, we all seemed to panic and run at the same time. Seeing he had aroused James' interest he continued, "I thought we'd killed him. Believe me...we sweated blood all night, worrying about what we had done. We hadn't meant to kill the lad, just engage in a little harmless diversion. We sneaked around all the next day trying to find out what kind of trouble we'd gotten ourselves into, afraid to show our faces at school. To our great relief, we were surprised to find Yeshua had survived. Our next worry was what would happen when the school Master found out what we had done—not to mention the wrath of our parents. Strange, never a word was uttered. Yeshua showed up with some pretty bad bruises and scratches. From the way he acted, you'd think we had never so much as turned a hand against him. We never could figure him. I'll admit, we had a certain peculiar respect for him after that. He could have gotten us into a real sour kettle of fish, had he had a mind to. Just the same, I always felt like he expected an apology. I couldn't take a chance on the fellows seeing me humbled to that degree, so, we all just acted like it never happened."

James wiped moist droplets from his dusty brow before helping his employee hoist another huge stone in place. "So that's what happened...never did hear all the details," he mumbled to no one in particular. "I remember something about him coming home late...blood all over his tunic...Mama crying and threatening to go to the school Master. By the time Abba got home from work Yeshua had calmed her. He kept saying, 'There is no damage; I have no broken bones...everything is alright. Those who did this are already suffering for what they did.'" He kept on till she gave in. He promised her, 'They won't do it again. Please...Mama, I don't want the synagogue Master to hold this against them.' He must have convinced her, because I don't recall any more mention of it. No one can accuse my brother of ever being 'hard-hearted' or vengeful. I have witnessed a few times when he exasperated me with his over-abundance of tolerance. That kind of attitude doesn't always make one prosperous in the business world. That's one reason why we never seemed to lay up much profit; he kept donating work or giving free materials to the poor. It's a good thing he turned the business over to Jude and me when he did...else, in time, we'd be out on the streets with the beggars."

At the end of day, James' thoughts turned to the last private discussion he and Yeshua had had. "I hope we are doing the right thing," he thought. "I hate to admit it, but Yeshua has yet to be wrong about anything. He is convinced Mama will be much better satisfied living in Capernaum after the twins are married, especially since neither of them will be residing in Nazareth. And the business has grown to the point where we have as many—if not more—customers in and around that area as anywhere else. Moving the business to Capernaum might be a very wise choice. Mama would be much closer to her sister and brothers and their families. Now that we are all grown she is left alone—and to her unhappy thoughts—too much. Maybe moving to a new area next summer would be a good move. At least it would help Mama to think of something other than Abba and the past."

The winter rains subsided. Fruit trees were coming alive with tender shoots of green. Colorful birds rejoiced in song in their anticipation of dryer and warmer days. Yeshua had spent a week of solitude in the mountains. He had built a comfortable makeshift booth to protect himself from the weather, stocked it with warm, dry skins to sleep on. Bagged dried fruit, cheeses and staples hung on stakes. It was his favorite place to drink in deeply of the Holy Spirit—power from The Father. During the night and into the early hours of the morning Yeshua was being given, by the power and spirit of Eloah, to understand the next step in their plan.

“My servant, Johanan, the son of Zachariah, whom I have called, is well into his mission preparing the way before you. He preaches repentance and baptism for remission of sins. I speak through him, ‘Prepare yourselves for the Lord. Make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, every mountain brought low. All flesh shall see the salvation of Elohim.’ Many Pharisees and Sadducees come to him pretending to accept his message and to embrace righteousness. I have opened Johanan’s eyes to see their hypocrisy. They seek to steal away those who would repent and turn to me. He demands of them, ‘You snakes, who has warned you to flee the terrible wrath soon to fall upon this sinful generation? Before I will baptize you, bring proof of your repentance. You think you are excused because you are decedents of Abraham? Do you not know God is able to raise up from these stones a new generation to Abraham? Beginning now, God is separating those who are not worthy to remain in his family. If you, as a rotting tree, do not show by your fruits your genuine loyalty to him, he will cut you down and destroy you by fire!’ And the people are asking, ‘What shall we do?’ and he answers, ‘He that has two coats, share one with him that has none. And the same goes for food.’ The publicans ask the same. Johanan tells them, ‘Don’t demand more from the people than is right, hoping to fill your own money pouch at their expense.’ The soldiers likewise inquire. Johanan answers, ‘Do violence to no one, nor accuse any falsely. And be content with your wages.’

“To those who have humbled themselves and have repented of their sins and are baptized, Johanan tells them, ‘my purpose is to baptize you with water as you repent. There is one coming very soon, who is mightier than I. I am not even worthy to unlatch or carry his shoes. He has the power to baptize you with the Holy Spirit, or with fire. He is prepared to fan the embers into flame, cleansing his people to perfection, separating the righteous from the wicked. He will destroy the wicked in a fire that will not be quenched.’

“Johanan’s fame has spread so mightily that the Jewish rulers have sent Pharisees, priests and Levites from Jerusalem inquiring of him, ‘Who are you? Are you claiming to be the Christ?’ And when he denies being the Christ they ask, ‘Are you then the prophet? Are you Elijah come from the dead?’ When he answers, ‘No, they insist, ‘then if you are none of these, who can we tell our superiors you are? By whose authority do you baptize?’

“Johanan answers, ‘I am the voice of one crying aloud in the wilderness. Make straight the path of the Eternal. I baptize with water. There is one among us that will appear soon. Though he is to be preferred over me—he has yet to be introduced.’

“Johan an anxiously awaits your appearance. He does not know that he shall have the honor of baptizing the son of God. Go to Bethabara where you shall demonstrate, by example, the act of baptism. And I will set my seal of approval upon you before the Jews and the world.”

Yeshua was prepared and anxious to get started. Soon, he would go out to face the satanic powers that would oppose and try to destroy him. First he must prepare his mother for the things she would witness. He made the trek back down to the familiar house. Maria was startled as Yeshua appeared beside her. “Mother... has your day been pleasing?” he asked. She put her work aside and gave him a motherly kiss. “Thank you, Son, yes. It has been pleasant enough, though the air is still cooler than I prefer. I look forward to warmer days. Spring has always been my favorite time of the year. I was deep in thought; you startled me. I was just thinking about Marta’s and your cousin Jessie’s wedding. You missed seeing your sister, Berta. She and her young husband came for a visit—all the way down from their new home in Magdala. They stayed in Nazareth an extra day, hoping to see you before they returned. Berta must have wearied of hearing nothing but talk of wedding preparations. Although, she appeared as excited for Marta as though she were getting married all over again. Just a few more weeks and both my babies will be living in their own homes.

“It seems like just yesterday my little twins were tiny little things squabbling over rag dolls. Of course I am pleased that Berta, as well as Marta, has been blessed with responsible husbands from good, reputable families. I will be assisting your cousins, Judith and Jermia, with the serving of beverages. They were wise in hiring a director to coordinate the festivities. They have planned for a much grander affair than I expected, seeing that they are getting along in age. Though they are one of the wealthier of our relatives... Just the same, the expense for such a large wedding will be staggering.”

She got up from the couch and offered her son a plate of fruit from a small hutch. When he accepted her kindness, she continued, “Jermia says they can afford to be extravagant since this is going to be their youngest son’s wedding. They have saved a long time for the occasion. I understand their older, married children are contributing some food and wine. They brag about stealing away my last lovely daughter. Do you know...even personal friends of family members have been invited? I wonder if perhaps they are not going beyond their means. James and I have given both the girls some very fine pieces of furniture for their new houses, from the shop.”

Yeshua replied, “I am sorry I was not here for Berta’s visit, Mother...it will be good to see them at the wedding. I, too, am looking forward to the wedding. You are not to worry...I’m sure the needs of the host will be met. I, too, am very pleased with the girl’s husbands. Soon their homes will be blessed with an abundance of energetic sons. Then you can rejoice in grand parenting. I came to tell you...before the wedding I must go away for a while. I have something very important I must attend to. Do not fear, I will return in time for the wedding. If I am delayed, I shall meet you at Jermia’s home for the festivities. Soon afterwards, I shall be about my Father’s business. I must take His message of the kingdom throughout Israel. Many things will happen that will be hard for you to understand. Be courageous and of good cheer...everything will turn out for the best...not only for us but for all people. I am telling you these things now so you will remember, when your confusion has turned to sorrow, that I have told you in advance. I will not desert you. Though I must go away, I shall return.”

Yeshua perceived her thoughts and realized she mistook him to be talking about his immediate trip. "No, Mother...I am speaking about my death. Within less than four years, I must die. You will look on my suffering and grieve for my pain...but I shall not be left to decay. I will live again and appear before you. Then I shall ascend back to The Father."

Maria shook her head violently, her eyes glistened with tears. She stretched forth a trembling hand as though to comfort her first-born son. "You must not die!" she demanded. "You are destined to be Israel's Deliverer. You will grow in power and might. You will see; it is prophesied. You shall become a mighty, and great king...and lead our people in peace and prosperity. You have demonstrated many times that you have a power that only comes from Eloah. Even the prophets of old speak of you in the scriptures. I have seen you perform numerous miracles. From the time you were just a child you had powers only we knew about. You can protect yourself...you must not let anyone harm you."

He put his arms gently around her shoulders. "Precious Lady...trust me. This is my commission...to fulfill all things that are written of me in the sacred books. Keep my words stored in your memory and draw upon them in time of need. For I shall return. I tell you now, so that you will have time to condition yourself to accept the things that must be fulfilled."

End of 7

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