

THE CHILDHOOD OF THE MESSIAH

The home of Jesus and Mary in Nazareth was the same as most of their families and friends in the town. In a narrow, winding street of the small town it was a square, mud-built, roomy, ground-floor apartment, divided into two sections; with one part on a slightly higher level than the other. The upper raised part contained the beds, chests for clothes, the cooking utensils, and the millstones for grinding the corn, and was used by the family. The lower part was Joseph's workshop, extending into the small courtyard, where there were stocks of various woods, benches, trestles and tools.

In the family section some mats were scattered on the floor with brightly coloured cushions and quilts for sleeping, but rolled back during the day; and a raised shelf ran along one wall serving as a shelf for dishes and utensils. On open wooden shelves along one wall were the vegetables and herbs used by Mary in the preparation of food. A large box contained the barley flour which had been ground on the millstones, and beside it stood jars of prepared yeast used in baking the round breads. The dried herbs of mint, cummin,

cinnamon, were used in cakes, mixed with honey for sweetness. Standing along another wall was a row of tall, clay water-jars with cool green herbs in their openings to keep the water clean and fragrant and cool. A low wooden table was in the middle of the room for the family to use at meals, squatting around it on crossed legs on the mats. The yellow light from the sun poured in from the narrow windows and open door. And always there was the fresh, sharp smell of the newly cut woods used in the family carpentering work intermingling with the freshly baked bread and cooking.

An outside stairway led up to the flat roof, which was thatched and plastered, with a low parapet around it to safeguard those who were on the roof for any purpose. In hot weather the family spent a lot of time there in the evenings under awnings shielding them from the direct sunlight; or used it for occasional meals, prayers and visiting friends. A vine planted outside the entrance of the house trailed its many branches up the walls and spread out in a shady arbour along the street side of the roof. Inside, Joseph had built a lean-to in the corner where a brazier was stored for use during the cold nights of winter, and where Mary cooked in the hot summer months.

Outside the door, nailed to the lintel, was the *mezuzah*, a small, longitudinally folded square of parchment, with twenty-two lines of scripture taken from two passages in *The Book of Deuteronomy*. The words of the *mezuzah* were the first Scriptures to be memorized by every member of all Jewish households, and it was the custom to touch the *mezuzah* on the doorposts reverently in acknowledgement on entering and leaving the house. The first read:

"Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands, and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frame of your houses and on your gates".

The second passage read:

"So if you faithfully obey the commandments I am giving you today—

to love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul—then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in the grain, new wine and oil. I will provide grass in your fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied . . .”

Nazareth, having its own synagogue, was officially recognized as a town and not a village. It was only six miles from the Herodian capital city of Galilee, Sepphoris—recently attacked and plundered by the rebel Judas of Gamala, then recaptured and burned to the ground by the Roman legions from Syria—and was again being rebuilt by Herod Antipas, providing plenty of work for Nazareth merchants, artisans and farmers.

As a member of the Sanhedrin, and acknowledged scholar, there was no problem about my travelling to Nazareth and Sepphoris to monitor the consequences of the siege and rebuilding of the city, visiting Mary and Joseph and their family in Nazareth. Class differences were less rigid in Galilee than in Jerusalem, and anyway my wife and I were both Galileans by birth and our friendship with them and the Nazareth villagers became strengthened with time.

The walls and gates of Nazareth had been levelled in the Roman defence of Sepphoris, but the elders of the town still sat in their customary places to meet and discuss with the local townspeople the issues and problems of the day. Between the ruined gates and the houses of the town were the large open spaces used as market-places, and the streets of the town branched away from them. In the market-place beside the gate stood the table of the widely hated *publicano*, the official tax-gatherer, noting every traveller who entered or left the town, and enforcing every transaction subject to the extortionate Roman and Jewish tax laws.

The market-place was the popular gathering-spot for all residents, especially in Galilee. Here the impulsive, friendly, imaginative and sharp-witted Galileans exchanged greetings and banter, the pithy sayings, irreverent satirical jibes against fellow Jews, snobbish Greeks or proud Pharisees and Sadducees. The Galileans were widely known for their reverence towards God and their Scriptures, respect to the aged, enthusiastic of learning and new

developments, and passionate in their belief and commitments—which led so many to be rebels against the Roman occupiers of the country. The market-place was always noisy, stimulating and friendly as merchants chatted or bargained with buyers or passing acquaintances.

In this ancient, normal setting Mary and Joseph and their family were less likely to be noticed whatever gossip regarding their earlier lives was exchanged when they were not present. Herod Antipas, as Governor of Galilee, although just as licentious as his Herodian brother Archelaus in Judea, was less violent and less suspicious about any rumours he might hear regarding a possible Messiah claimant to the throne of Judah.

They settled into the humdrum life of the community among family, friends and relatives who, knowing something of the history of Jesus, quietly supported Mary and Joseph in the spiritual nurture of him according to the Scriptures, and the practices of any devout Jew. Although he was so different in destiny from any of his step-brothers and sisters, he was treated no differently from them or all other Jewish children, but with watchful care from his mother and Joseph from their knowledge of his unique destiny. They were helped with the knowledge of the ancient prophecies which said that the Messiah would be hidden among the people, and would only be revealed when the time of Jehovah was come. What differences there were between the young Jesus and his older step-brothers and sisters were attributed to his being the only child of Mary and the unique circumstances of his birth which diminished with time.

The laws regarding the duties of children and respect towards both parents were strict, the parents being held responsible for the conduct of their children. If any children were rebellious they had to be taken by their parents to the elders in the gates and accused by them of the nature of their rebellion. Parents were held responsible to the community if the child became a drunkard. If the children were found guilty they were to be stoned. There were also strict safeguards for children, which the elders enforced on the parents. A father should chastise his child only when young, and even then not to such an extent as to destroy self-respect; to beat a grown-up child

was forbidden. A son was considered independent when he could earn his own living. And although a daughter was under the authority of her father until marriage, she could not be given away without her own express and free consent. Jewish family life commanded by Jehovah through Moses—before it was burdened by the many rabbinical legalities of the scribes and Pharisees—rested on love and duty, reverence and obedience, and was the envy of all nations where dispersed Jews lived.

Jesus, therefore, grew up in an environment of more than usual scrutiny, because of the events surrounding his birth. In the small community of Nazareth the circumstances of Mary's pregnancy were still a source of great speculation. The stories surrounding the birth of her child in Bethlehem, together with Herod's violent response, followed by the flight of the family to Egypt, had contributed to intense interest in their child Jesus. Few believed he was the Messiah, and most believed the stories were exaggerated rumours of the times, but neighbours speculated quietly about Mary. The ideal Jewish wife and potential mother of the Messiah had been described in a Hebrew poem several centuries earlier:

*"A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.
Her husband has full confidence in her
And she lacks nothing of value.
She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.
She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.
She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar,
She gets up while it is still dark;
She provides food for her family and portions for her servants . . ."*

The standard by which Mary was judged by the townspeople of Nazareth was even higher than others because of the notoriety associated with the conception and birth of Jesus, but she went about her daily tasks with a quiet serenity. It was her task, with Joseph, to teach the young Jesus all they could of the Scriptures. Knowing that her cousin Elizabeth's son, John, was being brought up a Nazirite in order to fulfil his divine calling as "*Forerunner of the Messiah*", Mary

set herself the task of teaching Jesus all that would be required of him as Messiah. There was no great difficulty in delineating the great shining example of their ancestor, David, who had risen from being a youthful shepherd in simple circumstances to being Israel's greatest king through faith, vision and dedication. It was the other prophecies - such as Isaiah's - which were puzzling and more difficult to anticipate:

*"See, my servant will act wisely;
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
Just as there were many who were appalled at him —
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man
and his form marred beyond human likeness —
so will he sprinkle many nations,
and kings will shut their mouths because of him . . .
He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not . . ."*

When they read such Scriptures together, and Jesus asked what and whom they meant, Mary knew with silent grief the words spoken by the aged Rabbi Simeon: *"Sorrow, like sharp sword shall pierce your heart"*. She watched as Joseph struggled with patience to explain to the avidly listening Jesus what none of the rabbis had ever been able to explain to the most intellectual of Jews; in the prophetic Scriptures the Messiah was both ruler and servant, protector of the weak and a scourge of the oppressors, a nurturer of the faithful Jews and punisher of the heathen Gentiles, a roaring lion and a slain lamb. The mission of the Messiah, Joseph said thoughtfully, was not only to teach and lead God's chosen people to their divine destiny as *"a perfect and holy nation"* in order that all other nations might learn and follow the same enlightened path, but also to be living exemplars of that path.

That involved personal suffering, such as Moses and Samuel and David had also experienced as they led the people into an understanding of God. For a long time afterwards, Mary noted, Jesus concentrated on reading and asking questions about Moses and Samuel and David, especially meditating on the *Psalms*. His insatiable hunger to learn became a byword in the synagogue and homes of Nazareth. But the divine destiny of Jesus as Messiah was not publicized by Mary and Joseph; they kept it to themselves, and only spoke freely about its implications with me and my wife, Mary, and with Elizabeth and Zechariah when they met at the annual Feasts in Jerusalem.

Both parents took an active part in their children's education. Joseph carried the primary responsibility to teach them the words of Moses' *Law*, the significance of the Feasts, the sacred history of the nation, and the heroic deeds and varying fortunes of their forefathers. Mary was responsible to see that they learned their lessons while their father was working, that they memorized Moses' five *Books of the Law*, the *Psalms* and *Proverbs*. One formula of teaching had been described by a rabbi:

"At five years of age, reading the Scriptures; at ten years, learning the Mishnah; at thirteen years, bound to the commandments; at fifteen years, the study of the Talmud; at eighteen years, marriage; at twenty years, the pursuit of trade or business; at thirty years, full vigour; at forty years, maturity of reason; at fifty years, for counsel; at sixty years, commencement of agedness; at seventy years, grey age; at eighty years, advanced old age; at ninety years, bowed down; at a hundred years, as if he were dead and gone, and taken from the world."

From the beginning of each day - that is, from the appearance of the first star - to its close, from the first day of the week till the Sabbath, from the beginning of each month to its Feasts and half-Feasts, and from one Sabbath-year—that is, each seventh year—till the next, the attention of every true Jew was to be fixed uninterruptedly on the sacred usages which were designed to keep his mind fixed on the requirements of his religion.

The leading Jewish historian of the time, Josephus, declared:

"We interest ourselves more about the education of our children than

*about anything else, and hold the observance of the laws, and rules of piety they inculcate, as the weightiest business of our whole lives. If you ask a Jew any matter concerning the **Law**, he can more readily explain it than tell his own name. Since we learn it from the first beginning of intelligence it is, as it were, graven on our souls."*

Jesus attended the synagogue from the age of five like all Jewish children. When the last of the Jewish nation was led away into Babylonian Captivity in the sixth century, they were deprived of the centralizing worship of their divinely-provided Temple, so they built "prayer centres" in their exile communities and named them "synagogues", in which they could gather and worship. All it required to establish a synagogue in any Jewish community was a basic ten families. After the return of the Remnant Jews from Babylon, and the rebuilding of their Temple in Jerusalem, the synagogue had remained the seed-bed of the religion of the Jewish people, its inspiring soul and abiding nurture, and there were an estimated four hundred synagogues in Jerusalem alone.

It was in the simple synagogue in Nazareth that Jesus as a child was first drawn into fascination, then love and sympathy, for his people. It was there he heard the rights, duties, prospects, values, justice and compassion of the chosen people of God in daily practice - often in contrast to the irrelevant and sterile legalities taught by the rabbis. The synagogue was the true heart-beat of the nation, the place where the ancient voice of Jehovah was heard through the Mosaic Scriptures, where the revealed word of Jehovah was revered, where the love of Jehovah was demonstrated, where the patience of Jehovah was exemplified. In the synagogues every shade of Jewish religion was taught: the strictness of the school of Shammai; the mildness of Hillel; the godliness of Simeon; Judean bigotry and Galileean freedom; the puritanism of the Essenes; the eclecticism of the Sadducees; the ritualism of the Pharisees; the nationalism of the Zealots. In it were taught with perception and intelligence, often with exciting grandeur and vision, the great doctrines of redemption and atonement, of ceremonial purity and righteousness of works, of justification by faith, of sanctification by obedience.

A devout Jew such as Joseph began his daily religious observance with his first waking moment. Having risen from bed it was not lawful to move four steps before washing hands and face. It was unlawful to touch the face, or any part of the body, until this was done - and that in the prescribed manner. Lifting the water jar with the right hand it must be placed in the left hand, and clear, cold, religiously clean water poured three times over the right hand, the fingers of which must be open, must be pointed towards the ground - and so on, and on.

The historian Josephus boasted that by the age of fourteen he had such a thorough knowledge of the *Law* that the priests and others of his town sought his opinion. And Philo, the Jewish philosopher of the time, living in Alexandria, said:

“Since the Jews look on their laws as revelations from God, and are taught them from their earliest childhood, they bear the image of the Law on their souls. They are taught from their very swaddling clothes, by their parents, masters and teachers, in the holy laws, and in the unwritten customs, and to believe in God, the one Father and Creator of the world.”

What this meant, among other duties, was long prayers in set forms to be repeated three times each day, and also at all Feasts, half-Feasts, and fast days; and each day in addition had its own special prayers. In every week there was set aside a preparation day for the Sabbath, and there were similar preparation days for each Feast in different months. Public worship was held twice weekly, each Monday and Thursday, and on Feast days and holy days. Three pilgrimages to Jerusalem were required each year. A whole week was taken up by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and by the Feast of Tabernacles and Feast of Dedication. There were also regular family events, community observances, and festivities of various kinds—weddings, funerals, circumcisions, betrothals, etc. Almost all of these were requirements added by power-hungry rabbis in their religious ambitions to provide a dense “hedge” around the basically simple divine commands of *Moses’ Law*. Many devout Jews, therefore, questioned these rabbinical *Talmudic* additions and simply practiced the earlier Mosaic *Laws* of godliness.

From Mary and Joseph, Jesus learned the Scriptural commandments, and from his school-teachers and the rabbis he learned the historically added—and often conflicting—restrictive disciplines. Mainly they taught him the Scriptures that related to the prophecies concerning the attributes and responsibilities of the Messiah. In such a setting Jesus grew in wisdom and stature. Every Nazareth family knew every other family, with their hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures. Industry and idleness, worth and vice, pleasure and sadness, were noticed and debated, challenged and resolved, in the criteria of Moses' *Law* and the rabbinical *Traditions*. National and provincial, district and village, political and religious differences were passionately discussed. The great issues of Rome and Jerusalem, with their local implications for Galilee and Nazareth, were viewed through the words of Jehovah in their ancient Scriptures for applications that often meant death for those prepared to put them into practice.

Outside of his daily studies Jesus played in the streets of the town, and in the nearby verdant fields, with his step-brothers and sisters, his relatives and neighbourhood companions. There were relatives in Nazareth from both Mary and Joseph's sides of the family, and there were others from farther away in Galilee and beyond, such as Elizabeth and Zechariah near Jerusalem. Some were prosperous farmers, with thirty or forty acre fields, and some were fishermen owning their own boats in the communities around the inland Lake of Galilee. At family gatherings and celebrations they discussed the issues of the day which affected their lives in their districts, the crippling taxes, the endless religious squabbling, the nationalist struggles.

Jesus also learned to handle Joseph's tools, slowly acquiring Joseph's skills in shaping woods and metals into yokes and ploughs, into furniture and wheels and carts, into frames for houses. He walked the hill-paths between oxen ploughing the fields, or with farmers sowing seed, and joined in the communal ingathering of the harvest. He watched with interest the passing caravans of asses, mules and camels laden with goods and produce from Sepphoris or

Capernaum or Jerusalem or more distant places, from Syria to Egypt on the highways passing Nazareth. He noticed who were wise, and who were simple; those who paid debts, and those who avoided paying them; the scholar and the clown; the harassed poor and the indulgent rich; the weary worker and the arrogant official; the helpless infant and the equally helpless aged; the extremist rebels and the crippled from the battles. The schools, the playgrounds, the market-places, the burial grounds, the ruined towns, all had their lessons for him as well as the synagogues.

At twelve years of age, as with all Jewish children, Jesus reached an important watershed in his childhood, in the *bar mitzvah* preparation of becoming “a son of the *Law*”. From ten years of age every boy had to acquire knowledge of the whole *Law* of Jehovah, and be familiar with the practice of it. All normal schooling ended with the *bar mitzvah* ceremony, unless he was going on to further studies; but it marked a legal coming-of-age. At twelve, the rabbis affirmed, the son should be brought to the Temple in Jerusalem to observe the various rites and Feasts. The *Talmud* declared:

“After the completion of the twelfth year a boy is to be considered a youth, and is to keep the fast on the Day of Atonement. Till he is thirteen his religious duties are to be performed by his father, but on his thirteenth birthday the parent is no longer answerable for his son’s sins.”

On these initiatory visits to the Temple the representative members of the Sanhedrin Council, as well as the regular teaching rabbis, made themselves available on a terrace of the Temple to teach and answer questions from any young enquirer. The only qualification required for any student to enlist the time and interest of the learned authorities was that they be recommended by a reputable local elder or rabbi.

Jesus was tall for his age, already showing signs of a well-muscled body from the heavy lifting involved in the family carpentering business, and from the regular local popular exercise of swimming. He had his mother’s dominant eyebrows and nose, the broad forehead, and the characteristic fair skin and auburn hair of the family of David. The thick hair hung loosely to his shoulders in long

ringlets, with the curling wood shaving of the carpenter over his ear, indicating the family trade. His eyes were wide and intelligent, serious in repose but lit with gleams of humour or quick flashes of anger when he was moved by some story or act of injustice. He studied much more than he played, but he moved lithely from the long walks into the mountains, or to the nearby towns and villages to visit relatives and friends, and from the many fishing trips to the Galilean rivers and lakes. As the youngest of the family, with four step-brothers - James, Joseph, Simon and Jude - and two step-sisters - Esther and Tamar - he was at times left alone to sit quietly reading; and at other times drawn into the more boisterous activities. Whatever Mary or Joseph believed about him as a Messiah, his step-brothers and step-sisters never expected him to be different from themselves or others around them, and they treated him accordingly. What Jesus thought about his unique destiny he told no-one, turning aside the curious attempts with the courteous reply, "God, who prepares all things, will no doubt reveal what I have to be and do in His own time."

He did not *feel* himself to be different from other children, but he *knew* that he was. He had been told the details of his birth by his mother, and the associated events involving his cousin John, and he knew that he had to be "different" - not only as "different" as Abraham and Moses and David, but also much more in an indefinable way. As Messiah, with a Spirit-conceived birth, he transcended them in that he had come directly from God Himself; he was uncreated divine spirit, they were created human flesh. One "difference", therefore, had to be an *exercised* and not an *acquired* holiness, such as John was devoting himself to as a Nazirite. The holiness of Jesus had to flow outwards *from* God in demonstrated godliness, and not upwards *to* God from acquired godliness. This meant a communion directly with God above and beyond any practised by his teachers or rabbis - or parents. He communed with God in daily dependence as he studied, searching in the satanically-inspired turbulence of his mind for the "still, small voice" of the Holy Spirit of God for answers to his many questions.

In the spring of 9 AD, when Jesus was twelve years of age,

Archelaus the governor of Judea, Herod the Great's tyrannical and trouble-making son, had been banished to the Rhone valley in Gaul by Caesar Augustus a few years before. His brother, Herod Antipas of Galilee, sought the continued favour of Augustus in trying to keep his turbulent province from rebellion by cunningly playing off one religious or political faction against the other in their adjoining territories. But Caesar Augustus had appointed as governor of Syria one Sulpicius Quirinius, and as proconsul for Judea, Coponius. Together, they imposed a census for the purpose of further property taxation of one per cent to bring Palestine into line with Syria. At the same time they also enforced a land tax, which claimed a tenth of corn, and two-tenths of wine and fruit. There was an immediate outcry by the Jewish religious leaders whose own taxes would be affected adversely by the new Roman imposition.

There were two forms of taxation levied among Jews, civil and religious, and both were heavy; the former had been imposed since the time of Solomon; and the latter since the time of Moses. After the Jewish Remnant's return from Babylonian Captivity new taxes had been imposed by different conquerors, some of them pagan, and these led to protests and uprisings as Jews believed they should not pay taxes to pagan occupiers of God's Promised Land. Herod the Great had further increased the taxation demands on Jews for his ambitious building projects, although judiciously modifying them when Jewish revolt against them seemed imminent. The new Roman taxation was both direct and indirect. The property taxation was paid directly to agents of the imperial treasury; and the poll tax which was levied according to the wealth or produce of the citizen was indirectly collected by officially approved "tax-gatherers" who had paid for the privilege. The taxes were collected at bridges, cross-roads, market-places, entrances to towns and villages—everywhere people had to pass or shop or trade—and they were hated by everyone as the tax-gatherers were universally corrupt and extortionate.

The taxes had intensified the activities of the rebel groups, especially in the region of Galilee, where Judah of Gamala, John of Giscala and another rebel leader, Zadok the Sadducee, benefited

from the mass exodus to the mountains. Gamala was the centre of the revolt, on the shores of the Lake of Galilee not far from Nazareth, and reports of the Gamala activities were the talk of the market-place. Three years before, Judah of Gamala had called on the youth of Galilee to follow him in revolt against Rome with the ringing words: *"No Lord but Jehovah; no tax but that of the Temple; no friend but the Zealot"*. These Zealots took their name from the words of the dying Hasmonean, Matthias: *"Be ye zealous for the Law, and give your lives for the Covenant of your fathers"*. He declared that it was idolatry for the Jews to reverence Caesar, idolatry to pay the Roman *denarius* in tax to the Gentile state, a breach of Levitical purity to tax *"clean"* goods in order to pay tolls or taxes to the *"unclean"*. All who demanded these things, he asserted, were enemies of Jews and Jehovah. The youth of Galilee responded in great numbers with enthusiasm and commitment. Josephus, the historian of that time, later wrote of them: *"It was the youth that, by their fanaticism for that unprecedented doctrine, brought the state to destruction."* One of the step-brothers of Jesus, Simon, joined the Zealots and the rebels.

All of these turbulent events made the journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the *bar mitzvah* of Jesus even more dangerous than usual for the pilgrims on the normal pilgrimage, but they increased the interest of the twelve-year-old Jesus to see the historic *"City of God"* of which he had heard and read so much. To make the journey to Jerusalem safely they travelled in a large caravan of relatives and friends from Nazareth with an armed escort.

Jerusalem was love at first sight for Jesus. Coming from rural Galilee it was a whole new world. From the pastoral calm of Nazareth he was swept into the noisy turmoil of the crowded highways with their groups of cosmopolitan Diaspora travellers and pilgrims making their way to the city of the legendary King David for the Feasts. This glorious city was not only the city of God, the central focus of God's interest in the world, it was also the place where his own known destiny would be fulfilled. From Jerusalem, ultimately as conquering Messiah, he would rule the world in God's Name, but before that time there were other prophecies to be fulfilled, other work to be completed.

They approached the city from the north, and the first part of it Jesus saw was Mount Zion to the north-west of the city, above the hills across the Valley of Hinnom. To the east, the Mount of Olives rose above the highest part of the city by almost the same height, three hundred feet above the eye-transfixing beauty of the gleaming white-and-gold Temple built by Herod. The Temple dominated everything, despite the recent depredations of the Roman armies during their siege of the city, dwarfing even the other surrounding imposing structures built by Herod's cosmopolitan architects. At its feet lay the fabled city, golden in colour because of the "lion-skin" stone of which it was built, giving it its unique beauty. A rabbi had written of Jerusalem: *"Ten measures of beauty hath God bestowed upon the world, and nine of them fell to the lot of Jerusalem"*.

The city lay between two valleys, running north and south, and joined by a viaduct built by Herod running from the west side, where he had his palace, to the Temple precincts on the east. The road from Nazareth entered the new suburbs also built during the reign of Herod the Great, through the magnificent houses and gardens outside the city walls and the Damascus Gate. A great part of the Kidron Valley was a cemetery, made famous by Jehoshophat, in which every Jew desired to be buried because, it was said by the prophet Joel, that men would be gathered there on the Day of Judgment. Many famous names were buried there, including Absalom, David's rebellious son. The other valley, Hinnom, well-known as Gehenna, was the infamous location of the former devotees of the god Molech, where human sacrifices were offered and was the repository for rubbish and dead animals.

The famed stone wall of the city encircled it without a break except for the gates, and the breaches made during the recent Roman siege. Beginning at the Temple and the Antonia Fortress, it wound past the Kidron and Hinnom Valleys, turned at the Hippicus Tower and led past Golgotha, where criminals were put to death by the brutal method of crucifixion, and then back to the Temple. Standing on the great bridge built by Herod's engineers, at the Western Gate of the magnificent Temple, the pilgrims looked beyond the revered building to the north on the eastern hill, with the hated Roman

Antonia Fortress beside the Temple facing them, and began the traditional pilgrim's song from the *Psalms*:

*"I rejoiced with those who said to me,
'Let us go to the house of the Lord'.
Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem,
Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely
compact together.
That is where the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
to praise the name of the Lord according to the
statute given to Israel..."*

Once through the gates of the city they were presented with a maze of narrow streets wandering erratically between blocks of houses, most of them composed of broad raised steps from the lower part of the city to the later post-David and post-Herod additions. The streets were crowded with people of all nationalities from the Dispersion countries but Jewish by inheritance, tribal visitors from the surrounding deserts, merchants displaying or purchasing goods, and jostling donkeys loaded with bulging panniers. The sides of the streets were lined with shops or traders' stalls, and these spilled into the side lanes and alleys. There were no carriages to be seen, but occasionally a rich merchant or his wife would be carried by in ornamented litters, or Roman cavalry pushing their horses through the crowds.

The most magnificent of the houses were the palaces of the Hasmoneans in the Upper City, especially the later members of Herod's family, and that of the high priest. The present high priest was Annals, who had a reputation for ruthlessness and cunning rather than holiness and integrity, and who had manoeuvred the previous high priest out of office by accusing him of colluding with the Romans over imposing high taxes. In the centre of the city, below the Temple, there was the *Xystos*, or great paved square surrounded by colonnades, built as an *agora*, or forum, by Herod the Great. Other smaller squares had been given the name of the trades practiced by local merchants: the Square of the Butchers, the

Fullers, the Wool-gatherers, the Fishmongers.

Jerusalem was a model of cleanliness and good sanitation. No burial places were allowed inside it, and all rubbish, manure and the dead must be removed before each sunset. But there was a pervasive strong smell over the whole city of burning flesh from the Temple sacrifices, and of the sacred incense used in the Temple, plus the fragrant perfumes favoured by the women. The upper market, where myrrh and nard and other spices and perfumes were sold, was always crowded. But the most overwhelming impression in the city was the noise. The shouting of the market vendors, the soliciting of the merchants and haggling of the shoppers, the yells of the donkey drivers and protests of the jostled pedestrians, the shrill cries of the water-carriers and food-sellers, the public criers calling out official announcements, all combined into a steady roar and air of heady excitement like no other city.

The panorama, the history, the people and the pulsating life of the city around him engrossed the young Jesus. His mind was filled with flashing memories from the past mingled with recollections of stories of his own birth told him by his mother—of Herod and the three astrologers, of the prophecies concerning the Messiah and this city—and Scriptures foretelling the future of Jerusalem in the purposes of God. This city was where eternal history was being made, and where he would be a central figure. Even the magnificently dominating Temple of Herod was a passing irrelevance.

His greatest excitement was not in the buildings and history of the city, but in his meeting with his cousin, John, also in Jerusalem for his *bar mitzvah* and the Passover Feast. Together, they hurried through the streets to the Temple to visit the place where John's father, Zechariah, had been told by the Angel Gabriel regarding John's birth and destiny; and the Court where Simeon and Anna had held the infant Jesus in their arms while pronouncing him the Messiah. They visited Mary and me, both on their own and with Mary and Joseph, to glean further details of the past and present history of the Jew and other nations..

But it was the Temple and its activities which most drew their

interest. There each day it was possible to see and hear, meet and talk to, any class of Jew from every part of the world. For most of the year there were only fifty thousand regular inhabitants of Jerusalem, but at the Feasts, especially the Feast of Passover now due to be held, it was estimated that three million people crowded into the city, or spilled over into the suburbs outside the city walls. There they set up "*booths*", or tents of various kinds depending on their means, from branches of trees to expensive hand-woven awnings. For a single Passover it was reckoned that over two hundred thousand lambs were brought to Jerusalem for the sacrificial Feasts. There were Jews of the Diaspora from Babylon in their long black robes, Jews from Phoenicia in tunics and striped pants, Jews from Anatolia wearing their goat's-hair cloaks, Persian Jews with a variety of silks brocaded with gold and silver trimmings, Greek Jews and Jews from Cilicia in the glorious colours of their indigenous dyes.

It was in the Temple that the leading rabbis of the great religious schools were to be found, together with the most eminent scribes, or "*doctors of the Law*", surrounded by their followers and young acolytes. The rabbis came from all classes of the Jewish community. Anyone could become a rabbi by attaching himself to one of the many rabbinical "*schools*" surrounding the most famous of them. It was the obligation of every rabbi to "*gather disciples*", and these different schools met under one or other of the porches of the Temple. A person only emerged to distinction and eminence by unique knowledge and interpretation of the *Law*. In recent times this proficiency had deteriorated from constructive insights regarding spiritual values derived from Moses' *Law*, to arcane and exigent applications of abstruse texts and words from the rabbinical *Traditions*.

As accredited student-scholars Jesus and John were permitted to attend the daily schools of the rabbis held on the Terrace, between the Courts of the Temple. Here the rabbis sat on raised steps, with the students around them in a crescent listening and asking questions from the Scriptures and from history. On the Temple Courts were to be found the distillation of the greatest wisdom of the Jewish nation, the best teaching, the most profound perceptions,

the most reflective philosophies, the most comprehensive theology, the highest doctrine, the most lucid oratory.

Jesus, with John beside him, visited each of the groups, and then remained with the few which most interested them. Young students were encouraged to ask questions, and Jesus was an eager participant. John, although six months older than Jesus, was more reticent; partly because of his upbringing as a solitary child, and partly because of his strictly disciplined training as a Nazirite. They were even strikingly different in appearance. John was slim, dark-haired, quiet and intense; and Jesus was tall, strongly-built, auburn-haired, articulate and outgoing. John was fascinated with the way Jesus' mind worked as he asked questions of the various rabbis, and responded to challenges. John knew that his own birth was unusual, even miraculous by certain standards, and his announced destiny placed him among the rare elite prophets of Israel; but the birth of Jesus was unique, and as conceived by the Spirit of God he was not restricted by the normal human restraints struggling for spiritual insights.

This was disconcerting for the rabbis who had become accustomed by habit to depend on a variety of individual or group interpretations and commentaries. When Jesus challenged their thinking and their goals by using God's own criteria—for example, "*You shall be holy as God is holy*"—many were left without satisfactory explanations. This brought some of the eminent rabbis to meet Jesus for themselves and to talk with him. Occasionally the venerable Rabbi Hillel, now over a hundred years old, could be seen at the Feasts, although he no longer taught; his son, Simeon, was the revered *Rabboni* who had blessed Jesus soon after his birth. Rabbi Bava ben Buta, of the strict Shammai school, whose eyes had been put out by Herod because he had reproved Herod for murdering his wife, Mariamne; the noted Rabbi Dosithai of Jethma, Rabbi Jochanan ben Zacchia, and Rabbi Yossi from Galilee; Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria, a descendant of Ezra of the Remnant Jews from Babylon.

The schooling which Jesus had acquired with such discipline in Nazareth now flowered into blazing visions of exciting challenge as his highly sensitized mind followed the discussions and debates of

the learned scholars from all over the world in their individual intellectual and spiritual pursuit of the elusive original truth being sought by each rabbinical school. It was these distinguished rabbis and scholars and their followers who would have to be won over or defeated in debate if the destined mission of John and Jesus was to be successful and the purposes of God for Israel and the world fulfilled.

Meanwhile every family made preparations for the Passover Feast. The Passover lamb sacrificed at the Feast was the one Jewish offering which all the people presented spontaneously and personally, and not one offered on their behalf by a priest. The lamb was regarded as symbolical representative of the nation, the tribe, the household, and the individual, with every member of the family taking part in the observance. It not only commemorated a great national deliverance—the “*passing-over*” of the Israelites, during their captivity in Egypt, by the destroying Angel of Death—but it also secured the same divine mercy for themselves with each remembrance. Every Jew regarded it as a debt owed to God, and must by all means pay, if he or she was to be counted worthy of being a part of the national congregation of Israel. The father, as head of each household, killed the lamb, sprinkled the blood on the lintel and doorposts of the house, or temporary “*booth*”, as an expiation for the family as a whole, and for any who joined the family in keeping the Feast. When the Passover was finished the remainder of the week was spent in joyous activities with families, relatives and friends.

Jesus went with his family to the Temple to have their lamb consecrated and slain, and then they roasted it in our home where they were accustomed to stay during their visits to Jerusalem. with other relatives in rooms in the houses or temporary “*booths*” in the courtyards. Each family conducted its own celebration of the Feast, and when Joseph had blessed the prepared lamb and the wine, the ritual question was posed by Jesus as the newly *bar mitzvah*ed “*adult*” son of the family: “*What is meant by this sacrifice?*” To which Joseph replied: “*This is the Passover of the Lord which we eat, because the Lord passed over the houses of our fathers in Egypt.*” When it came to the bitter herbs taken with the meal, he added: “*We eat these because the*

Egyptians made our fathers' lives bitter in Egypt." Then came the eating of the unleavened bread, and Joseph exhorted the family to praise Jehovah "*who has brought us out of darkness into light, out of bondage into liberty.*" This was followed by the **Psalm**: "*He takes the simple out of the dust, and lifts the poor out of the mire, that he may set him with princes.*" There were other blessings, and songs, and psalms, and dances, as the families mixed and rejoiced with relatives and friends.

Only on the first two days of the Passover was attendance at the Temple necessary for each person. With the third day commenced the so-called "*half-holydays*" when it was lawful to return to one's own home. Following on the Passover, however, it was customary for the leading rabbis to deliver special lectures, called *kallah*, and the associated *beney-kallah*. These were for the instruction of special students considered able to grasp the advanced theological postulations beyond the capacities of the standard learner. It was from such a gathering, about a hundred years earlier, that the precociously intelligent young student Hillel had put forward the now famous argument that the Passover might also be offered on a Sabbath, from which he was given the rank of chief rabbi.

When the Passover ended there was usually chaos in Jerusalem as pilgrims left the city in groups for their near or distant homes. Many left at night to avoid the heat, and the confusion of the long lines of camels, mules and asses tied to each other so as not to wander away or get lost; the shouts of the animal drivers, or parents calling for wandering children, the flickering torches, all intensified the surrounding darkness and caused domestic panic among many families.

As the distance from Jerusalem increased, the excited and voluble mass of people gradually thinned out and it was possible at last to relax, greet and meet with friends. It was at this point that Mary and Joseph found that Jesus was not with them, or with any of their friends. When they could not find him, they became alarmed and returned to Jerusalem. After visiting us and the homes of various relatives and friends, and not finding him, they made their way to the Temple, remembering his absorbing daily visits there. In one of the groups they found him talking respectfully from a

kneeling position, as was the custom, with several eminent rabbis who were listening to him with rapt interest. Facing Jesus on his left was the aged and revered Rabbi Simeon; next to him was the blind Rabbi Bava ben Buta, implacable foe of the Herods; then Rabbi Johanan ben Zacchai, who had prophesied the imminent destruction of the temple; Rabbi ben Uzziel, the author of the celebrated *Targum*; Rabbi Zadok, the outspoken supporter of the Galileean revolutionary, Judah of Gamal. Beside Jesus, were Gamaliel, son of Rabbi Simeon, and fellow-scholars, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

Seeing their son the centre of such an imposing gathering flustered Mary and Joseph. They were conscious that their conduct as Jewish parents would be under scrutiny of the most formidable religious body in Israel, and the sight of Jesus as the focus of their interest increased their fears of censure. As they hesitated on the outer ring of the group of listeners they heard the murmured expressions of admiration at Jesus' contributions—"remarkable insight", "amazing discernment", "intelligent perception." They pushed themselves through the crowd politely until they stood at the front near Jesus, waiting for him to see them when the discussion ended. They could detect no disapproval on the faces of the illustrious teachers, only deep interest and consideration, and it would have been judged discourteous to interrupt.

Jesus had just asked a question about the nature of revelation from God regarding some task of importance to be accomplished on earth, such as the goal of perfection as had been experienced by Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets, and the extent of such commitment required of individuals living in the present time. It had evoked diverse answers from different schools of thought represented among the rabbis, and they dealt with Jesus in their replies almost as an equal.

When the discussion ended, and Jesus turned smilingly towards them, Mary's concern and tension spilled into irritation, and she rebuked Jesus sharply with the words: "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching everywhere for you."

Jesus, his eyes still gleaming from the intensity of the debate just ended, glanced from the worried face of his mother to the concerned Joseph then, to his parents' astonishment, they heard from the lips of their hitherto quiet and obedient son the words of rebuke: "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you understand that I had to be about my Father's business?"

They gazed at him in bewilderment. They had noted his emphasis on the words "*my Father's business*", but could not understand what work Joseph had for him in Jerusalem. Then Mary noted that Jesus had used the word which could mean "*my Father's own affairs*"; and, with a sudden illuminating flash of insight she divined that Jesus must be talking about his heavenly Father and purposes in some way. Something had happened to Jesus during this visit to Jerusalem, and his visits to the Temple, which had given him a new assurance beyond the normal initiation into Jewish adulthood.

They saw him respectful as always, but with a new determination and confidence in his demeanour; he had not just ignored them in childish forgetfulness and provocation. His decision to remain and take further part in the Temple discussions had been made in the light of a higher commitment to his known destiny, and he was asking them to recognize this as part of his relationship with them from now on. They were aware that, as a "*son of the Law*" in his thirteenth year, he had the right to choose his own way of life, the course he would follow as a responsible adult. But, like all parents, they had not been prepared to face the implications of this so quickly and so unexpectedly in this setting. With his words Jesus was separating himself from them in a fundamental way suddenly and for ever. Their contribution to his upbringing was finished. He now belonged wholly to the God who had given him to them for a little while.

Jesus looked gravely and with understanding at his confused mother, and seeing the pain of growing realization in her eyes, he gently took her arm and left the Temple with them, returning to Nazareth. The work he had to do was still unclear, but the revelation that had come to him—far beyond the consensus of all the knowledge and wisdom of the greatest minds of his people in the

Temple - was very clear: he was the chosen of Jehovah to fulfil from now on all that had been prophesied by all God's servants from the beginning of time. Samuel had been younger than he was when he brought God's message to the aged High Priest Eli. David was only a year or two older when Samuel the Prophet anointed him as Israel's future king, and only eighteen when he killed Goliath. He, Jesus, was the chosen instrument of God, the long prophesied Messiah.

As a prospective rabbi he still had an official three years' study of the *Mishnah* ahead, with another three years study of the *Talmud*, but already he knew that much of what was expected and taught would be of no use to him in his own task for God. There was a different education to be had from God alone, other people to meet, other places to be visited, lessons to be learned from creation everywhere, customs and practices to be observed, skills to be acquired. It took David over twenty years preparing to be a king of Israel, learning to be a man after God's own heart; the Levites were thirty years of age before they were equipped for their work as God's servants. So he reckoned he had twenty years to learn how to be God's first—and last—Messiah.

Chapter 4

will be available on this site on the 1st October 2009