

NO TEMPLE FOR THE MESSIAH

The presence of the unusual rabbi from Nazareth in the small village of Cana, with his six impressive disciples, was a cause of much speculation. It was a small village about five miles from Nazareth where he had lived after the family returned from Egypt. Both Nazareth and Cana were located on the slopes of a mountain about thirty miles from the Mediterranean Sea and fifteen miles from the Lake of Galilee to the east. The main highway from Egypt to Damascus passed nearby and the Herodian city of Sephoris was only a few miles away.

Jesus was known in Cana, because there were family relatives living there, and one of them was about to be married, so Jesus and his followers were invited to the wedding. As a senior member of the extended family his mother, Mary, was in charge of some of the wedding arrangements.

Already rumors were circulating regarding getting rid of John the Baptist because of his increasing influence. In Jerusalem the professional religionists were involved in conspiracies and power-plays as they battled with the procurator Pontius Pilate for control of Judea, and as he sought to impose Rome's authority on

Jerusalem. Within the high priest's family the two leading political figures of Annas and Caiaphas, his son-in-law, intrigued against each other and with Pilate, with Herod Antipas, with Pharisees, Sadducees, and with Zealots. It was public knowledge that Herodias wanted Herod Antipas to remove John the Baptist from public life by any means—death, if necessary—as he continued to denounce her adulterous liaison. In Jerusalem, and the surrounding countryside, a new and dangerous terrorist group known as *Sicarii*, or “daggersmen”, because of their method of killing, pursued their radical and murderous path to power by killing all those not nationalist or religious enough by their own extreme standards.

All of these elements had a religious or political interest in putting a stop to such a spiritual movement as was being advocated by John the Baptist, and they would be even more opposed to Jesus' concept of the kingdom of God which minimized their conception of the political aspects of the Messiah. But even the spiritual emphases of the two differing messages of John the Baptist and Jesus were sufficiently confrontational to the professional religionists for them to be feared. They both involved a high level of public witness, of personal and institutional and national repentance, of a radical commitment of loyalty to God above the Temple, the Sanhedrin and the nation. It was not something that could be taught inconspicuously in the quiet places of the countryside, as even John the Baptist's Jordan-based preaching had demonstrated. Any allegiance to the kingdom of God as preached by John and Jesus was antithetical to other allegiances.

The house where the wedding in Cana was to take place was a large, two-storey structure built around a central courtyard, for the family were well-to-do merchants. A covered gallery ran along the sides, providing shade from the sun, wind and rain. Rows of large water-pots, each holding about twenty gallons of water for cooking, bathing and purification purposes, stood along the pillared corridor around the courtyard.

It was a local custom at a wedding for the ceremony to take place during the day. This gave time for the bride and bridegroom to dress in their marriage finery in their respective homes. Then the families,

with friends and neighbours, would join in a procession, escorting the bride from her house to that of her husband-to-be, where the marriage supper was prepared. The festivities usually took place in late afternoon or early evening, and the flaming torches in their sconces on the pillars of the courtyard added to the excitement of songs and dances, and the music of flutes and drums. The marriage service, which declared the couple man and wife, did not take place in the synagogue but in the new home, and it took only a few moments. The "Covenant" rites were added at the formal feast. When these were completed there was a ceremonial washing of hands, a blessing, and then the festival meal began with toasts in wine.

The celebrations were in full flow when Jesus and his companions arrived. As he made his way through the joyful, shouting, singing guests the mind of Jesus was filled with flashing images—the austere stillness of the Judean desert, John the Baptist's ascetic figure, the excited multitudes being baptized in the Jordan, the smouldering ruins of the nearby city of Sephoris razed by the rebel Galileans, the armed cavalry and infantry of the Roman legions criss-crossing the highways of the country. But here in Cana, for a short time, there were simple pleasures of joy and love and friendship.

Jesus' mother, Mary, was busy with the women of the household, helping to organize and distribute food and wine to the guests. When Jesus greeted her she was in the middle of a domestic crisis. As her glance took in his companions, and she recognized some of them, a swift look of comprehension lit up her face.

"They have no more wine," she said indicating the concerns of the women round her, and looking at Jesus expectantly. Perhaps it was the unexpected crisis of the moment, and her responsibility as senior matron of the festivities that caused Mary to lose her usual good sense; much the same as when she found the "lost" young Jesus in the Temple many years before. She knew John the Baptist had stepped out of obscurity to fulfill his destiny as Forerunner of the Messiah, and she had heard of the public baptism of Jesus several weeks before; and now here he was with six obvious

disciples, and she assumed that, he, too, had begun his public ministry as the miracle-working Messiah.

Jesus was aware of what she was implying, and he dealt gently and firmly with her maternal expectations for him, much as he done in the Temple all these years ago, “Dear woman”, he said, using the respectful colloquial expression, “why do you involve me? My time is not yet come.”

Here, in Cana, he was prepared to demonstrate his power as Messiah, but he wished it to be seen in the context of the many powers he would manifest in the immediate future, not just seen as flowing from responses to a fond parent, credulous public, sceptical priesthood, curious intellectuals, or—worst of all!— as a quixotic response to a passing superficial domestic need. It must be seen as part of a divine pattern, beginning with his baptism in Jordan and ending with a predetermined death.

Each act of his life from now on would have to carry its own distinctive character of Messiahship, be shaped and performed with the same gem-like clarity as it had been honed in his own mind when received from his Father in heaven, so that the message of the act would bear the imprint of the divine source and revelation claimed for it. Also, the time for him to be publicly and divinely glorified as God’s Messiah was not yet, and would be entirely different from what Mary had in mind for him. So he gently placed his mother and her suggestion in perspective. Mary saw that she had overstepped their relationship again, and with her customary grace she accepted the implied rebuke as from God Himself. As she turned to attend to her duties she warned the servants, however, “Whatever he says to you, do it without question.”

The important point having been emphasized for his watching and listening disciples as well as for his mother, Jesus was now ready to do what could be done in the circumstances. He called for the servants to go and get six of the large water-pots standing in the corridor, and to fill them to the brim with water from the well. The water-pots held about twenty gallons each, and were used not only to hold water for domestic purposes but also for the religious purifications commanded by Moses in the *Law*. Because of the

unusually large number of guests the contents of the water-pots had been greatly depleted. When the servants had filled them all with water Jesus told one of them, "Take a bowl to the master of the feast."

The servant was obviously surprised at being asked to carry an un-requested bowl of water to the feast supervisor. When he handed the bowl to the feast-master it had become wine and, when the master tasted it he nodded approvingly for it to be served to the guests. Turning to the bridegroom beside him he complimented him on the wine: "Most people serve good wine at the beginning of a feast and then later, when the guests' palates have been dulled, serve a poorer quality, but you have kept the best wine until now."

What was even more miraculous to the astonished guests was that the water-pots remained filled with water, and it was only when it was taken bowl-by-bowl to the guest that it became wine. It was not just a single miracle, but a miracle for every bowl drawn. When the guests asked Jesus to explain the miracle he told them that it was a "*sign*", choosing the word with care, not denying that it was a miracle. A miracle could also be an "*act of power*", which he would do on other occasions; and each sign or miracle would have its own lesson from God. But this was the first sign of his Messiahship, to demonstrate his care for the even the smallest requirements of his people, the first of many to come.

Cana was about two thousand feet above sea level, with grain fields and vineyards replacing the palm trees of the lower and hotter regions behind them. To the east, over the Plain of Esdraelon, they could see the wide blue estuary of the River Jordan pushing its way through the reeds on the distant copper-colored river-banks. Overhead a passing flight of flamingos made an eye-catching pattern of brilliant rose and black against the blue of the sky. In Cana there was more than usual interest in Jesus, for many of the local people had been to Bethabara to be baptized by John and had seen and heard what John had said about Jesus. They brought relatives and friends to Jesus, especially those who were sick, and he healed them. This added to his growing reputation and popularity. It was not unknown for a saintly rabbi to claim powers of healing by laying on of his hands, but it was rare to find one actually doing it.

One of the people who sought out Jesus was an aristocratic official from the court of Herod Antipas in Capernaum, called Chuza. His wife, Joanna, had met Jesus during a previous stay in Capernaum. The official had come to Cana at the urging of his wife to meet up with Jesus; and he now pleaded with Jesus to come with him to Capernaum to heal his sick son, who was close to death.

Jesus surprised him, not by refusing but by challenging his motivation: "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe."

Jesus knew that it was not difficult for Jews to believe in miracles - their whole history had been a record of a miracle-working God. What was difficult, and had been found impossible for them, was for them to believe and trust in their God without some self-serving motive. Even his mother had wanted to use God to make up their lack of wine for the wedding feast—as well as prove his Messiahship. The God they wanted was one who would serve their wants, and not one who required their allegiance. If this Jewish aristocrat could detect the difference then he was on his way to the kingdom of God.

"Sir," the man said desperately, "come down to Capernaum before my child dies."

Jesus shook his head. This poor man thought his presence in Capernaum was necessary for him to accomplish the miracle of healing, again not knowing that it was God the omnipresent Spirit as well as omniscient Power who was responsible. "Go," he said to the man. "Your child will live."

He watched the man struggle with the implication of the assurance for a little, then his face lit up and he turned away with a smile of relief and gratitude. While Chuza was on his way back to Capernaum he was met by a fast-riding group of his servants who were on the way to tell him that his son was alive and well. Curious, because of Jesus' response, he asked the servants at what time his son had begun to improve. They told him, "Yesterday, at the seventh hour". That was the exact time he had been speaking with Jesus! When he arrived in Capernaum he called his whole household together and told them the details of what had happened at Cana,

and of how he viewed the significance of Jesus' words. Should they not all accept this man as the Messiah? They did.



When the wedding was over, after informing Mary of his plans, Jesus left Cana for Capernaum with his disciples. Capernaum—*“the village of Nahum the prophet”*—was no longer a village, but a busy marketing and trading center in prosperous Galilee. It was now recognized as a key city on the *“Via Maris”*, the strategic coastal *“highway of the seas”*, the network of major highways reaching from Rome to Damascus, and from Anatolia to Egypt. In Judea it was also known as *“the jewel of Galilee”* by all travelers; even the rabbis, who viewed all Galileans with contempt as uncouth rustics and had a saying that *“God made seven seas, but chose only one for himself, the Sea of Galilee.”*

It was not for its beauty or reputation that Jesus chose Galilee as his central sphere of operations, it was also said by the ancient prophets that the Messiah would come out of Galilee, and Capernaum offered a greater potential for impact on the country than the sleepy Nazareth or turbulent Jerusalem. It was also the favoured town of the families of Andrew and Peter, of James and John,—who only berthed their boats in Bethsaida and fished from there—and of some of his own relatives. Simon Peter's wife and mother-in-law continued to live in Capernaum.

Capernaum was reckoned to be the richest agricultural region in the country. Five clear streams watered its darkly volcanic soil with astonishing fertility: wheat, barley, millet, rice, melons, grapes, dates, figs, citrons, oranges, vegetables of all kinds, every variety of tree and plant, grew in plentiful profusion, and was sold in the busy market-places of the city. There traders from near and far, even those from ships plying on the shores of the Great Sea to the west, bought large supplies of the produce. Rich traveling merchants with Babylonian and Persian carpets, Syrian and Thracian sellers of valuable jewels and silks, Anatolian and Cilician dealers in horses and dyed cloths, added their exotic merchandise to the crowded market-places.

A few miles round the Lake, in Bethsaida Julias, Herod Philip lived in autocratic seclusion, and another few miles beyond Bethsaida Julias, was Tiberias where Herod Antipas was living in hedonistic indulgence with Herod Philip's former wife, Herodias, and her daughter, Salome. Still further around the graceful sweep of the Lake lay other towns, such as the notorious Magdala with its reputation for sorcery, now being built into a new city avoided by the religious because of its reputation . . .

Jesus began his public ministry in the synagogue in Capernaum, as he had done quietly in most places he visited in the recent past. The synagogue was unusually impressive because it had been built with the assistance of a wealthy Roman centurion "God-fearer", or Gentile worshipper of Judaism. One of the ancient prophecies concerning the Messiah was: "*He will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets*". It was not his intention to draw attention to himself by self-aggrandizement or superficial demagoguery, but simply to let the words and works of God fulfill the purpose of God. In the synagogues of Capernaum and surrounding cities and towns, the thrust of his preaching and teaching was declamatory rather than expository, announcing the news of the arrival of the kingdom of God. In addition to the differences of emphases with John the Baptist's preparatory message, he introduced his own distinctive healing ministry as sufficient validation of his person and message. John had done no miracles, but Jesus expanded his preaching with healing the bodily and mentally sick in response to their belief in him as the Messiah.

"You are the salt of the earth," Jesus declared to his disciples forcefully. "If salt loses its saltiness how can it be made salty again? It is no longer useful for anything, except to be thrown out. You have heard that it was said, '*Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.*' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be worthy children of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on both evil and good, and sends rain on righteous and unrighteous. If you only love those who love you, what reward will you get? Even the tax-collectors and pagans do that. *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*"

Even as their minds rebelled against such an apparently impossible doctrine his disciples were conscious that all Jesus was doing was raising their consciousness higher, lifting their minds and spirits above the level already set by Moses in his *Pentateuch*, the *Psalms* and the *Prophets*. There was no doubt in their writings that the goal of God had always been what Jesus had just emphatically stated: “*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” Moses in the Covenant had left on record the divine command: “*Be holy as the Lord your God is holy.*”

The words spoken so quietly and calmly by Jesus were accompanied by such assurance and intense conviction that the disciples were stirred into a rising excitement which made them restless to begin their task: to be salt and light and perfect in a corrupt and dark and imperfect world. All around them people were dying for hate, for revenge, for power, for wealth, for nationalism, for religion. Jesus was asking them to preach and display love and understanding, righteousness and justice, peace and joy and contentment. They could not wait to begin.



After a few months in Galilee they made their way to Jerusalem for the spring Passover and other Feasts with the majority of Jewish people. For a few weeks before the Passover all the roads and bridges were put in repair, and all sepulchers, or tombs, were whitened to prevent accidental pollution to the traveling pilgrims. The flocks and herds and other possessions of individual Jews were tithed two weeks before the Passover, and in every village, town, and city, and in every market-place, road crossing, and bridge-crossing, stalls of tax-gatherers and money-changers were set up to collect the Temple tribute, according to the Levitical *Law*, of a half-shekel of silver from every Jew, plus proselytes—women, slaves and minors excepted. This Temple-tribute had to be paid in the exact half-shekel of the Sanctuary which, of course, the Temple authorities had decreed could only be obtained from them. This meant that every type of coin circulating in the country at that time

- Palestinian copper and silver, Persian, Syrian, Roman, Greek, Egyptian, Tyrian and others—had to be exchanged at a rate set by the Temple authorities, and the revenue from this was astronomical. In addition, sacrificial animals had to be accredited by the priests—at Passover over two hundred thousand sheep, plus bullocks and doves—and for this priestly accreditation charges were made according to the type and size of the animal, adding still further to the Temple revenues. The Temple officials, without any Scriptural authority, nominated to themselves a heavy commission on this “sacred” revenue, especially the family of the serving high priest who “owned” the rights. The extortion of this money from the pilgrims had become so blatant that the collecting stalls were widely described as “*the bazaars of Annas*,” the previous avaricious high priest who had initiated the practice to enrich his family.

As Jesus and his companions made their way to Jerusalem with the thousands of jostling, excited pilgrims in every kind and color of clothing, the chief topic of conversation heard above the bleating of the animals was this mercenary exploitation on top of all the other crippling taxes to be paid. But as they came nearer to the city its age-old magic changed the mood and conversation. The cymbals, drums and horns struck up, the ancient *Psalms* were sung, and shouts of laughter replaced the raised voices of argument. They came over the hills surrounding the city and entered the ravines slashing the countryside around the city walls, with the lovely high-arching Roman viaducts bridging them. Between them, and on the hillsides above, the mansions and villas of the wealthy gleamed white in the midst of their lush gardens and sparkling fountains. Jerusalem in the spring—the Jewish month of *Nissan*—was at its loveliest, known as “the month of flowers”. The sun glinted off the white-and-gold Temple and neighboring palaces, birds sang joyfully in the branches of the many trees, the sky was cerulean blue, and the air was like wine.

Inside the city gates crowds jammed the narrow streets and market-places. For some time now Jesus had not made it his earlier practice to be with relatives inside the city, choosing to remain outside in “booths” of green branches, with the many pilgrims who

were accustomed to doing this during the Passover. But from there he visited his relatives and friends, informing them of his commitment to a public ministry, and continuing his newly adopted practice of adding healing to his preaching and teaching. It increased the number of people following him and his disciples, but they were still only a small company in the midst of the estimated one to three millions pilgrims visiting the city. At some point each day Jesus went to the Temple and moved quietly around its courts, observing all the activities going on there. He was known from his visits in the past, and there were even some of the younger rabbis who remembered his first youthful visit to the Temple, such as Gamaliel, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea.

But this year was different—and never-to-be-forgotten. A few days before the Feast, as Jesus entered the Court of the Gentiles, packed as usual with shouting money-changers and pilgrims trying to get their attention above the noise of bleating sacrificial animals, he walked through the litter to where the rubbish from merchant stalls and animal pens was piled waiting to be removed. Picking up some of the pieces of cast-off ropes, he was watched in puzzled silence by his disciples and the curious crowds around them as he slowly plaited a long single scourge.

Finishing, he looked at them, and the questions on their lips died away as they saw the blazing anger in his eyes for the first time. This was a new Jesus to them. They watched him as he stepped past them, swinging the scourge, and then, shocking them into frozen immobility, he began whipping the money-changers at the tables. Turning to the stall-holders who cowered under the lash, and shouting angrily, he tipped up their tables, moving on to empty the animal pens. The crowds began scattering in front of the steadily whipping and verbal scourging, and there was further confusion as Jesus began driving the lowing cattle and bleating sheep in front of him towards the exit gates amid a cloud of fluttering sacrificial doves released by Jesus from their cages.

The disciples, released from their initial paralyzed shock, formed a wedge behind Jesus, and the angry shouts of the stall-holders died away before the seven grim-faced men. Above the bedlam of the

Courts Jesus raised his voice in a triumphant shout: "Clear the Courts," he commanded, "and do not make my Father's house a den of thieves." The disciples then remembered the Scripture which said prophetically of the Messiah: "*Zeal for your house will consume me.*"

In the cleared and now strangely silent Courts of the Temple, emptied of its desecrators and animals, the clustering rabbis and priests and excited pilgrims furiously demanded of Jesus: "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Not even the turbulent John the Baptist had dared to do what this man had done, and they wanted to know the identity of the rabbi who would certainly be called to account when the Temple authorities caught up with him.

Jesus threw away the scourge, and looked at them calmly. Roman soldiers and Temple guards were already moving towards them, gazing at each other suspiciously as they assessed whose responsibility it was to deal with the disturbance. He looked beyond them to the Inner Court with its Holy Place and Holy of Holies. The time had come to make the challenge, for the central issue to be declared, in this place chosen by God Himself—where Abraham had offered up Isaac, his beloved son, as a willing sacrifice—to be His dwelling-place on earth. Let it furnish the sign they demanded—if they could see and understand it.

"Destroy this Temple," he said challengingly, then pausing, he added emphatically, "*and I will raise it again in three days.*"

There was a murmur of astonishment from the crowd, followed by raised voices of protest. "This Temple took forty-six years to build, yet you say you will raise it in three days," they jeered, demanding a clearer explanation.

But Jesus had said all he was going to say for the present. They would recall later that he was meaning he would die, and after three days rise from the dead, to be head of a Spiritual Dwelling-Place of God that would last for ever. But that understanding would only come with time and teaching. What he had just claimed, that he had authority from his "*Father*", would be carried to the authorities, and the leaders of the various factions would be faced with an action whose perpetrator was known to be an associate of John the Baptist,

who had declared prophetically that Jesus was the expected Messiah, and they would recall the Scriptures about him. There would be no arrest yet, and this, too, would fuel debate. He was content. He called on his disciples to follow him and, pushing through the vociferous but now awed crowds, they left the Temple precincts.

In the last few days before the Passover all the talk was of the rabbi from Nazareth who had cleansed the Temple, claiming God his Father's authority. They were all aware that on the night before the Passover it was the responsibility of the head of every household to take a light and search out all signs of leaven, and to remove them, so that the household would be "*cleansed*" before the Passover. Had Jesus, declared by John the Baptist to be "*the Lamb of God*" cleansed the Temple of the leaven of the tax-gatherers? It was a potent sign—to those who had eyes to see. The city throbbed with excited speculation and argument as groups debated the significance of the appearance of two prophets—John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth - among them at this time of national crisis.

After the Passover ended, and the usual festivities with families and friends had begun, one evening as Jesus returned from the city to his booth outside the walls he was accosted in the darkness by a shrouded figure. When he removed his headscarf Jesus saw that it was Nicodemus, whom he had known as a young acolyte rabbi in the Temple. Now he was a leading Pharisee, a rich and distinguished citizen of Jerusalem, a ruler of the synagogue and member of the influential Sanhedrin. It appeared from his conversation with Jesus that he had always been impressed by what Jesus had to say regarding the Scriptures, but his aristocratic associations, his ecclesiastical orthodoxy, and his political ambitions, militated against close identification with Jesus' views. He had heard of Jesus' emergence from obscurity in the past few months, his public baptism by John in the Jordan and John's startling declaration about him, and now the cleansing of the Temple, all of which added up to a possible crisis involving Jesus with the powerful Sanhedrin. So he sought a personal—but unobserved—meeting with Jesus to talk matters over with him.

He acknowledged graciously the authority of Jesus as a fellow-rabbi, and noted sincerely the evidence of divine approval that were reported in his words and works. It was a typically cautious and courteous exploratory statement, with no overtones of hypocrisy, as he sought acceptable points of possible agreement which might avoid the necessity for confrontation or commitment. He was a man of known integrity, but he was also a polished diplomat in the convoluted politics of the Jews and Romans, and the less he was involved with anything that could be interpreted later as subversive—or even just questionable—the better.

But Jesus had neither time nor caution, and his message eliminated the elements of compromise, so he used the same frank approach as when he approached Nathaniel. “Look”, he said firmly to the intent Nicodemus, “unless a man is born again he cannot even see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus was startled by the singular unequivocal use of the phrase “*born again*” in connection with entry into the kingdom of God. He had wanted to avoid a distracting discussion of Jesus’ teaching, and to concentrate instead on the significance of the signs which Jesus had been demonstrating recently, especially the dramatic events in the Temple before the Passover and Jesus’ reported statements then. Instead, Jesus was forcing him into facing what was obviously the crux of his teaching: namely, who would be divinely acceptable to enter the kingdom of God. The term “*born-again*” was not entirely new; it was known to all educated Jews in several contexts. It was applied to all Gentile proselytes who became Jews. It was used on occasions when a bridegroom got married, a king on his coronation, and certain forms of promotion—usually implying some sort of new relationship. For the proselyte, it had the strongest application, in that it meant his old relationships—father, mother, brothers, sisters—were no longer to be considered next of kin; he was to consider himself a new and another kind of man with different loyalties. John the Baptist had given it a new dimension, with his requirement of baptism as a sign of death to sin and being raised out of the water to be born into a new manner of life.

So Nicodemus, as a “*master-rabbi*”, knew of the term. What he did not know was what Jesus was now meaning: that it was a necessary experience before being allowed to enter the kingdom of God. He knew that Jesus must be aware of the accepted Jewish teaching that proselytes were “born-again” *after* they had taken upon themselves the spiritual requirements. Even John’s baptism was an indication of this process. But what Jesus had stated, and was now waiting for Nicodemus to respond to, was that a man must be “born-again” *first* in order to enter the kingdom. Also, according to Jesus, it was a new birth “from above”, a concept which he had never heard before in Judaism. The only possible way in which it might be understood would be to become like Adam, a new creation, or a new and sinless child.

“How can a man be reborn when he is old?” he asked in genuine puzzlement. “How can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus noted the evasive weakness of Nicodemus’ two-fold questioning reply. The first part was sincere, expressing a deep desire for knowledge; the second was a product of his skilled debating experience, used to evade the practical consequences of commitment to what was being presented to him. Jesus pursued him remorselessly. “Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, only the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ It is like the wind that blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is like everyone born of the Spirit.

“The word ‘person’ is never used in Scripture to describe God because He cannot be either described or understood in such physical terms. God is Spirit and, like the wind, is by nature indefinable. As Spirit, and so ‘First Cause’ of all things, He sent me in the form of a person, the Son of Man, so that He could be understood by all mortals; and also as Son of God so that all mortals might know the ideal of all His purposes in Creation. To understand this you must be born again by His Spirit into the family of God.”

Nicodemus was conscious once again, as he had been when he

first listened to Jesus as a youth, that he was lost in a world beyond his comprehension, a world in which Jesus seemed so assured and familiar, a world beyond the rigid boundaries of his own intellectual Judaism. He understood the references in Jesus' statement regarding being baptized with water—for it was common knowledge since the appearance of John the Baptist—but Jesus was adding what John had only mentioned, a new experience of being "*baptized by the Spirit*" in order to enter the kingdom of God. He knew from the Scriptures of individuals in the past who had been "*clothed with the Spirit*" or "*filled with the Spirit*" for particular tasks, but had never read or heard of being "*baptized by the Spirit*."

"How can this be?" he demanded of Jesus, not in the rejection of debate, but in the confusion of mental anguish. He wanted to know fully what it was Jesus knew and was teaching of the deeper truths of God; and he was aware that Jesus held in contempt almost everything he had cherished.

"You are a reputable teacher," Jesus affirmed, "and you say you don't understand these things? I tell you we"—and he waved his hand to include the watching and listening disciples—"speak about what we know and have seen, but still you people don't accept our testimony. Here I have spoken to you of known earthly things and you don't believe; how can you possibly believe if I speak to you about heavenly things? No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

If Nicodemus was startled before at what Jesus said, he was now stunned into a mind-reeling speechlessness. He knew what Jesus was saying, he knew the Scriptural imagery—Moses had lifted up a brass snake in the desert to effect the healing of the people who had disobeyed God, and Daniel had spoken of one like "*the Son of Man*" walking in the Babylonian furnace—but Jesus was undoubtedly identifying himself as "*the Son of Man*" from heaven, and that, as such, he was destined to be "*lifted up*" in death on behalf of the people.

As if in confirmation Jesus was continuing: "God so loved the

world that he gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in the Son is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the divine verdict: Light has come into the world, but men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what is done has been done through God."

Nicodemus struggled with the overwhelming central truth at the core of all that Jesus had just declared: that he was God incarnate in human flesh, come to bring the eternal light and life of heaven into the darkness of men's minds – all men and women all over the world and not just the Jewish people!. If this was true, then all he and everyone else had to do, according to Jesus, was to reach for it and take it as a gift: "*For God so loved the world that he gave—*" Jesus had said. As he began to give credence to the possibility Nicodemus felt the darkness of his sterile intellectual world lightening with promise, like the light and warmth of the sun in the early dawn. To believe was to pass from darkness to light; to be "*born again*"; to enter the kingdom of God; to obtain eternal life. It was so simple, yet so complexly true.

Then Nicodemus thought of the consequences, of the implied death of Jesus—and possibly for all who followed him! If only it were possible to just believe, and not have to act! Surely there must be some reasonable course between the two extremes: between the working-class spiritual idealism of these sincerely committed Galileans, and himself and his peers as leaders of religion and politics and society in the nation? He would go away and think seriously about what he had heard, Nicodemus assured Jesus.

When Nicodemus had gone the disciples discussed with Jesus the implications of his startling conversation. The conversion of such a distinguished leader of the people would be a singular triumph

for the new spiritual movement. But they had seen his hesitancy, and his final cautious commitment "*to think it over.*" They had already seen the different kinds of reactions from various kinds of people to the messages of John and Jesus.

The Messiah Establishes His Kingdom

During the Passover season it was the custom of the Roman procurators in Palestine to reside in the heavily over-crowded Jerusalem, hopefully keeping the city quiet by their high-profile presence, instead of remaining in their more pleasant sea-coast Caesarea headquarters. Pontius Pilate, with the usual Roman legion reinforcements, was in residence at the nearby Antonia Fortress overlooking the Temple at the time Jesus had cleared it of its hucksters, and he had been informed immediately of the disturbance. When nothing further happened, and he was told that the Galilean prophet had apparently left the city after the Passover, he ignored the episode. There were other, more pressing, political circumstances demanding his attention.

But reports were brought to him of the unrest and even anger of the Jewish religious leaders at the activities of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, and he was intrigued. It was Roman policy everywhere not to interfere with officially recognized religions, and the Jewish religion was one of the most safeguarded by Rome because of the wealth of many Dispersion Jews in the Roman empire; but this practice did not extend to religious sects, especially

those likely to cause trouble like the Zealots. Pilate's only interest in the two Jewish prophets, therefore, were the likely possibilities of the followers of John and Jesus causing trouble for the Jewish religious leaders who would be held responsible by him. Otherwise he rather liked the idea that the religious rogues Annas and Caiaphas, who were losing a fortune by the actions of this Jesus against the money-lenders in the Temple, and the devious Herod Antipas, who was furious with John the Baptist over his denunciations regarding Herodias, were being publicly embarrassed by the teachings of the two prophets—who had nothing to say against Rome.

Pilate was especially intrigued with the reports about Jesus of Nazareth. Within a few months he had become even more conspicuous than the desert prophet John the Baptist—who had tens of thousands of followers before Jesus had appeared. Now the miracles that this Nazarene prophet was doing were having an even greater impact than the fiery oratory of John. Their combined doctrines and activities were the central matter of debate in the Temple among the religious representatives, but there was no agreement among even the noted rabbis there. Pilgrims and merchants, traders and soldiers, priests and officials, housewives and harlots, were all debating the teachings and distinctive religious merits of the two prophets. But they seemed not to be able to make up their mind which of them was the expected Messiah.

When Pilate's spies went out seeking information, they reported on their return that facts became fairy tales, incidents became awed legends, and statements became impending crises. When their spies listened to both John and Jesus, and to their disciples, there was nothing significantly political to worry Rome. Also, Jesus had left the city, presumably to return to Galilee.

But Jesus did not immediately return to Galilee. He decided to visit John in nearby Judea on his way north. It was his conviction that the authorities must soon intervene in some way with John's outspoken ministry. John now had a vast following, growing larger every day, with people arriving from all over the country and pilgrims coming from distant lands. John's fearless answers to all the

questions thrown at him left him vulnerable to a variety of possible charges by religious leaders seeking excuses to remove him. Some of them were now trying to cause divisions between John's disciples and those of Jesus because of their different emphases, especially on the subject of "*purification*" in baptism.

The problem was easily resolved, but it highlighted the increasing disturbance of John's disciples at the growing popularity of Jesus and the greater number of people following him. They disliked the "sheep stealing", feeling that John had borne the brunt of the first opposition only to see Jesus and his followers drawing the believers away with a more dramatic, miracle-working Messianic vision. They got no encouragement from John himself, whose life had been spent in anticipation of this moment and who had grown up with the knowledge that he was only the Forerunner. Now that the Messiah had come, he said, he was the true Bridegroom, and he, John, was content—"my joy is fulfilled"—to be the Bridegroom's friend. "He must increase", he told his disciples gently but firmly, "and I must decrease."

The religious leaders were in a quandary, for any overt action taken to safeguard their carefully constructed financial and political vested interests in rabbinical Judaism would have serious repercussions in the new spiritual environment being created by both John and Jesus. The more cynical among the leaders knew that there was no real excuse for the Temple abuses, that these were due to avarice, hypocrisy and expedient politics, and therefore fair game for such spiritual prophets as John and Jesus. But, in their respective interests, they had to be seen to be taking some preventative action, for already some of the more respected rabbis were giving serious consideration to the importance of the two prophets. One of them was even quoting the words of the former prophet Zechariah in support of Jesus's Messianic actions in the Temple that "*the trader would be no more in the House of Jehovah*".

With private reluctance but public enthusiasm they introduced new, strict measures to preserve the sanctity of the Temple. From henceforth, they announced, no-one could approach the Temple with a staff in his hand, or with shoes on his feet, or with money in

his girdle, or even with dust on his feet, and no-one could carry a burden of any kind in the Temple precincts. With these minimal corrections they hoped to buy back some public popularity until such times as the irritated people asked for them to be removed. But it was obvious to everybody that the true cause of the “reforms” was the new prophet from Galilee.

Through all the mounting controversy, news of which was brought to Jesus by the many from Jerusalem and other places who followed him and John, Jesus moved with complete sureness of touch. He had been preparing himself under direction by his heavenly Father for this, and no action or reaction could take him by surprise. He had observed men and women in many places and circumstances, and he was aware of what they might do despite what they might say or believe. He knew his own destiny, the path he must follow, and he would not be diverted from it. As the new followers multiplied he knew it was the supernatural aspects of his life and actions that appealed to them, the superficial excitement of being close to one who might possibly be the Messiah, and all that meant to them. None of them, including the six disciples closest to him, really grasped the significance of his divinely incarnated person and life-transforming gospel. That would take time, patience, and a lot of mental suffering.

So he moved away from the proximity of John the Baptist towards the other, quieter cities, towns and villages of Judea. The huge crowds listening to the preaching, and the daily baptisms of hundreds of converts, were exhilarating for his followers, but they were only a small part of the kingdom of God—the necessary entrance into the kingdom of conversion. There was the greater work of regeneration, the transformation of individuals into a Spiritual Body of God-like believers in the daily battles of ordinary living, at whatever level life was lived. And it was in this work that those he had chosen to be with him would share in the fundamental truths of an elect church, an *ecclesia* of “separated” believers nationwide and worldwide. It was imperative that they should be firmly established in the principles of personal godliness before they faced the mass opposition of the religionists with their facile and casuistical

expertise. The only way to overcome such formidably equipped antagonists was to have a firm grasp of the universal and eternal truths revealed by God Himself.

The Roman administered province of Palestine stretched from Gaza and Bethesda in the south, Samaria in the west, Galilee in the north, Philadelphia and Masada in the east, with the eastern boundary the River Jordan. Between the eastern and western frontiers the land changed dramatically, from the desert around the Jordan through a narrow strip of grassland running north to south, to the richly forested uplands of the central region down to the plains bordering the Great Sea on the west. These three distinct physical and climatic regions were intersected by a maze of precipitous gorges in the thirty-mile wide ridge running from north to south which formed the backbone of the country. To the north-west, beyond Bethel and Shiloh, was Samaria, with its history of political and religious separation from Jewry; and to the north-east “Galilee of the Gentiles” the mixed population of Romans and Greeks with the Jews. Two great trans-Asia highways embracing the country ran north and south, the *Via Maris*, or “*Way of the Sea*” on the coast, and “*the King’s Highway*” east of the Jordan; these were bisected in Judea and Samaria by four east-west linking roads, which, in turn, branched off into others connecting the major cities of the area.

Most Jews avoided the more direct route from Judea to Galilee, taking the longer roundabout road in order to avoid what they regarded as “hostile and impure Samaria”. Jews viewed Samaritans as worse than pagan foreigners, although the Samaritans worshipped the same God as the Jews, revered the same Scriptures—or at least parts of them—and considered Moses the supreme *Law*-provider. For almost a thousand years, from the time just after Solomon when the nation was rent into two parts, Judah and Israel/Samaria, there had been religious and political enmity between them. After the return of the Remnant from Babylonian Captivity four hundred years before, the general hostility had turned into simmering hatred as the racially and religiously corrupted Samaritans refused to recognize the rabbinical version of the

Scriptures brought by the returned Babylon exiles. When, during the reign of Alexander the Great, the Samaritans obtained permission from him to build a temple on Mount Gerizim to rival that of the Jewish Temple on Mount Zion, with their own priests and sacrifices, the breach between them became almost total. The Samaritan temple had been built near the city of Shechem, famous as the place visited by Abraham, Jacob and Joseph, and made the capital of Samaria. This temple had been destroyed during the previous century's Hasmonean wars against the Romans, who also destroyed the city, but it had been rebuilt by Herod the Great, who renamed it Sebaste in honor of his imperial patron, Augustus.

Passing through this strictly supervised Roman-occupied territory Jesus was little known, and as a rabbi with six disciples was able to move northwards to Galilee virtually unnoticed. He was able to spend each day instructing his disciples in the truths of the kingdom of God without the demanding pressures of clamoring crowds. "My doctrine is not my own," he taught them. "It comes from God who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God's will he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of him who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him." They must develop a deep, unswerving purpose to know and do the will of God, he instructed them. It was the pure in heart who "saw" God, and it was the vision of God which, in turn, purified the heart. They were two sides of the same coin. This combination of spiritual perception and spiritual discipline would enable them to "hear" and know the teaching from God, because it was the function of the Spirit of God to reveal these things to men and women.

He spelled out for them the basic principles of the kingdom of God, the "Ten Commandments" of the new post-Judaism which they must learn and teach:

"True joy is for the humble, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

True joy is for those who grieve, for they will be comforted.

True joy is for the obedient, for they will inherit the earth.

True joy is for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,

for they will be filled.
True joy is for the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
True joy is for the peacemakers, for they will be called
the sons of God.
True joy is for those who suffer for righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
True joy is for you when people insult you,
persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil
against you because of me.
True joy is yours because great is your reward in heaven.
*Rejoice because I have not come to abolish the **Law***
*or the **Prophets**, but to fulfill them."*

Jesus halted his heavenly manifestation to give his stunned disciples time to absorb the magnitude of loving provision of his Father for all who would believe in Him. All of these blessings had been buried under the accumulated debris of rabbinical Judaism with its sterile observance of Talmudic rituals. These "Ten Beatitudes" were not promised blessings for the hereafter, but realities in the present for those who had faith to accept and practice them.

Jesus continued slowly and emphatically: "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do so, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. I assure you, *unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the **Law**, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*"

Jesus and his disciples came over the ridge of hills in Samaria on the way from Shiloh and observed the sweep of beautiful undulating hills and valleys, and beyond them the twin peaks of Mounts Gerizim and Ebal seven miles to the north. As they dropped down into the green and fertile valley approaching the small town of Sychar the disciples were apprehensive regarding what might happen to them in an anticipated hostile environment, but Jesus dismissed their fears, insisting emphatically to their

surprise, "I must go through Samaria."

Just outside the town of Sychar, at a road junction, they reached a well. Here Jesus said he would wait while the others went into the town to buy food, as it was late afternoon. John, his cousin, said he would wait with him and Jesus agreed. Shortly afterwards John was intrigued to see a solitary woman walking towards the well carrying a water-pot to draw water, because it was unusual to see a woman on her own, especially at this late time of day. She ignored the two men, as was the custom, which decreed that *"a man should not salute a woman in a public place, not even his own wife."*

John was shocked, therefore, to hear Jesus say to the woman, "Will you give me a drink?" No Jew received anything from a Samaritan. It was even said: *"A piece of bread given by a Samaritan is more unclean than swine's flesh,"*

The woman also was obviously surprised. She looked at Jesus sharply, suspicious and offended. "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman," she said in rebuke. "How can you ask me for a drink?"

Once again Jesus ignored the usual social formalities and used his direct challenging approach which so disconcerted those who talked with him. "If you knew the generous nature of God," he said emphatically, "and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have requested him to give you living water."

The woman gazed at him in astonishment, uncertain what response to give to such an outrageous statement in such circumstances. She chose her next words carefully. "Sir," she said politely, but coldly, "you have nothing to draw water with, and this well is deep. Where can you get this 'living water'? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who produced the well for himself, his family and livestock?"

Jesus was aware of the reason behind her mocking question. One of the corrupt traditions taught by the Samaritan priests was that an angel had promised to them that the missing temple vessels which had been plundered would be returned to them at the appearance of the Messiah. When John the Baptist's great campaign had swept the neighboring region of the Jews, and the preaching of the imminence

of the kingdom of God caused great agitation, a similar movement was begun by a Samaritan pseudo-prophet in Samaria. He had recently proclaimed that all people were to assemble on a certain day at the sacred Mount Gerizim, where a new prophet would disclose to the faithful the place where the temple vessels were buried. This prophecy had brought Samaritans in their thousands to Mount Gerizim, including the leading elders of Samaria. The crowds had been so great that Pilate was forced to send extra troops to control them, and he had forbidden any more pilgrimages there. There was great resentment among the Samaritans at this order, for they regarded it as discriminatory against them when he was not taking similar action against John the Baptist in Judea.

Jesus pointed to the well and said. "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman laughed skeptically. "Sir," she said, "give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

But Jesus saw beyond her flippancy to her real need, and would not be diverted from his purpose.

"Go, call your husband," he said to her abruptly.

"I have no husband," she answered him bluntly.

"You are right when you say you have no husband," Jesus replied. "The truth is you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband."

The woman was shocked not so much by the words but by the insight. How had this stranger known? Only a true messenger from God would speak as he was doing.

"Sir, I can see you are a prophet," she admitted but, in an attempt to direct him away from more personal observations, she added the usual Samaritan religious argument: "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place we must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus was not to be diverted. "Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship God the Father neither on this mountain nor in

Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we Jews worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is Spirit, and His worshippers must worship in spirit and truth."

Even more than the Samaritan woman, John the disciple was listening in amazement to the conversation, with its increasing dimensions of revelation of the nature and person of God. Jesus was totally absorbed with this woman, and treating her almost like one of them, his closest disciples. He was telling her things he had not even mentioned to them: no Temple in Jerusalem; no temple in Gerizim; a different form of worship in "*spirit*" and "*truth*". This meant no priesthood as well, but a direct approach to God.

The woman now had dropped all resentment, mockery and flippancy as she listened closely to what Jesus was saying. "I know that the Messiah is coming," she said slowly and thoughtfully. "When he comes he will explain everything to us."

Then John heard for the first time the momentous words which he had not heard Jesus speak in Galilee, Jerusalem or Judea. "I who speak to you am he." In fact, the woman had also discerned what John had also noted; namely, that what Jesus was saying was, "**I AM** is speaking to you." Only someone familiar with the Scriptures would have realized that Jesus had used one of God's titles, *Jehovah*, "**I AM**". In other words, "God Himself is speaking to you."

At that point the other disciples returned from buying food in the town, and they were obviously astounded to see Jesus talking with the woman. With their arrival the woman broke off her conversation and, leaving her water-pot, said she would be returning with some of the people from the town. When she got there she told her neighbors of the remarkable Jew she had just met: "Return with me and see the man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"

With the woman gone, the disciples urged Jesus to eat the food they had brought from the town, but they found him lifted in spirit from his conversation with the woman. They, on their part, wished

to avoid an embarrassing discussion. They could understand differences of opinion over the Scriptures with other rabbis, but to discuss the Scriptures with a woman of questionable reputation in a public place was a dangerous precedent which could get them into serious trouble—especially in Samaria.

Jesus saw their reticence, and knew the cause, and he rebuked them for their spiritual apathy. “I have food to eat that you know nothing about” he said sharply. While they looked at each other in puzzlement over who had brought him food, Jesus continued: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me, and to finish His work. You say, ‘Four months and then comes the harvest’ but I tell you to open your eyes now and look at the fields; they are ripe for harvest and the reaper draws his wages so that the one who sows and the one who reaps are both satisfied.”

The disciples knew that his words were both literal and metaphorical. The fields around them were ripening with the first crops for harvesting; but it was also true that the people around them were hungry for a Messiah who would bring in the fruits of righteousness, love, joy and peace. Majestic though this vision was, however, they would have preferred it to have been ushered in by someone as senior as Nicodemus in the Sanhedrin rather than fishermen like themselves. But it was obvious from his conversation with the Samaritan woman that Jesus meant them to reap now what had already been sown by John the Baptist and others.

By this time the woman had returned with a crowd of interested neighbors and, remarkably, they urged Jesus to remain in the town as their guest. He agreed and, when he entered the town and he found others waiting to hear him, he expounded to them what he had already told the woman at the well. He was not speaking to them as a Jew, but as the Son of Man, denouncing the bitter controversy between racial and religious groups, and urging them to get rid of all prejudices, and receive all the benefits prepared for those who believed and practised the words of God. They were seeking validation of a false religion by a false prophet looking for false vessels for a false temple on a Samaritan mountain. But the worth of a person’s homage did not depend on the place where it

was offered. True worship had its place, its true temple, in the human soul and spirit and not in any temple or mountain. It was communion with God; the reverent response of human nature to revealed truth. It was spiritual and moral, not outward and ritual, springing from the great divine truth, rightly apprehended, that God is Spirit. The universal Presence of a spiritual God in the hearts of men and women made the whole world alike His shrine. Samaritans, Jews, and all other nations, who accepted God's gift in his free offer of salvation through His incarnated Son were now the children of a common heavenly Father.

Such visionary teaching to ordinary people was breath-taking in scope and insight. This was no lecture to scholarly rabbis in the Courts of the Temple, which Jesus was equally competent to deliver, but the spontaneous outpouring of passionate conviction of a king to his subjects, and of a man to his friends. To those who listened, and believed, he was a king, more than a king; for he was asking to reign over their whole nature with an arbitrary majesty such as no other king could command. He was setting himself up as a measure of all spiritual purity, peace, joy, righteousness and love for his followers and subjects to emulate. He demanded nothing less than that each person in the kingdom he personified should be perfect, even as their Father in heaven was perfect.

Jesus presented himself as the criterion of the kingdom of God in the eyes of all who saw and heard him in his own time in the microcosm of Palestine, in the sense that it was possible for an individual to live a life in the purpose and to the pleasure of God. He spoke and acted as if the Roman presence in Palestine and imperial world did not exist as far as God was concerned. God was the centre of all things, directing His chosen people towards His predetermined ends through His incarnated Son. It was the peculiar gift of Jesus, his disciples noted, that everyone who listened to him —despite their constant exposure to false prophets and politicians and priests of all kinds—never doubted his sincerity of vision; nor, even more remarkably considering the sweeping assertions he made regarding the kingdom of God, and himself as its king, doubted his sanity.



Jesus had every reason to be satisfied with the way things were going since his baptism several months before. But, as he left Samaria on his way northwards to Galilee, he heard the news that John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod Antipas in the fortress-palace of Machaerus on the other side of the Dead Sea. It was obvious that Herod Antipas had not wanted John to be kept near where John's faithful following could reach him. Machaerus was a fearsome place above a steep gorge, between the mountains of Abarim and Pisgah. Abrupt precipices surrounded the inhospitable fortress, and the barren ranges shut in the view. It had been built and adorned by Herod with royal magnificence, much as he had done with Masada; and it was used by him to give orgiastic banquets for friends and visiting foreign dignitaries.

It was being said that Herod had been forced to take action against John by his slighted and implacable wife, Herodias; and he had even led the troops who had arrested John in order to impress his wife. Herod himself was known to fear, and even respect, the fearless John. He was uneasily impressed by the charismatic desert prophet, with his sweeping vision for the nation of Israel and his conviction that he was the Forerunner of the Messiah. But John had refused to be cajoled with blandishments, as he had refused to be intimidated by threats.

With John in the safety of the impregnable fortress Herod was able to withstand further pressure from Herodias for John's death, arguing that in the dark and damp dungeons John was unlikely to make further trouble for Herod, or excite the crowds with his calls for individual and national repentance. Herod permitted him to have visits from his disciples, and through them John heard of Jesus's visits to Judea and Samaria. They also informed him that the disciples of Jesus did not fast, that Jesus was attacking the much-respected *Traditions*, and that he was even replacing some of Moses' *Law* with a version of his own such as.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you, that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed

adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for the whole body to go into hell.

“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce’. But I tell you, that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to commit adultery, and anyone who marries a woman so divorced commits adultery,

“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths that you have made to the Lord.’ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’, and your ‘No’, ‘No’. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”

As John listened to the verbatim reports from his disturbed disciples he felt the first twinges of anxiety regarding his eloquent cousin. Most of the charges against Jesus he dismissed, for he had discussed with Jesus the significance of his teachings concerning the kingdom of God, and he knew that they were based firmly on the Scriptures. But there were times when the reach of the vision of Jesus was beyond him, and these were times when it troubled him. If the people of Israel had been unable to keep the teachings of Moses in the past thousand years how were they to keep even stricter interpretations and applications being required by Jesus? Yet the recent reports of the visit of Jesus to Samaria, with all its radical departures from Jewish tradition, demonstrated all the virtues and qualifications of a true Messiah.

Herod’s move against John had created further tensions in the already turbulent nation as various factions used it for their own advantages. Herod’s soldiers were at war with the Arabians of his former wife’s father, King Aretas. The Romans legions in Syria were engaged in battle with the swarming Persians from the north. Judas of Gamala was fighting both Roman and Herodian troops from the

mountains of north Galilee. It was said that Pilate was contemplating new measures against Herod and the religious leaders because the anti-Jew favorite of Caesar Tiberius, Sejanus, was once again back in power in Rome after a time in eclipse. Apparently, the emperor had been leaving Rome for the Isle of Capri and Sejanus had outwitted a plot against him by the emperor's divorced first wife, Agrippina; and Sejanus was now in charge of Caesar's affairs in Rome. That would work in favor of Pilate, and against Herod who was a favorite of Caesar Tiberius. Jesus paid little attention to the imperial politics and rabbinical squabbles; they were only passing incidents in the eternal verities of his message of the kingdom of God. The unknown woman of Samaria would be remembered when Rome was forgotten.



When Jesus reached Galilee from Samaria he found that his actions in Judea and Samaria had preceded him, and there was great speculation regarding him. He decided that he would visit Nazareth because there were reports the Nazarenes were discontented because he had done miracles in Cana, Capernaum and elsewhere and none in his home town.

Jesus loved the countryside around Nazareth, the scene of so many happy childhood and youthful memories. The town nestled among the limestone hills, a thousand feet above the distant sea, a cool oasis in the surrounding heat of the Plain of Esdraelon. The Plain stretched below in an eye-caressing pattern of browns, yellows, coppers and grey-greens, watered by the heavy rains of Galilee, between the Lake of Galilee and the Great Sea, and sheltered by Mount Carmel to the west, Mount Hermon to the north, and the mountains of Samaria to the south.

The way into the town lay by a steep, narrow path, each side blooming with red anemones, pink phlox, red and white rock roses, marigolds, geraniums, the elegant golden cytisis and sweet-scented jasmine. The streets of earth-coloured or white-walled, flat-topped houses rose in shallow terraces on the steep slopes of the

over-shadowing hills, which were ablaze with scarlet and white blossoms of the orange and pomegranate trees, and the varying greens of vines, oleanders, cypresses, olive and fig trees.

On the first Sabbath after his arrival in Nazareth Jesus went to the synagogue he had attended for so many years. As a rabbi he was free to read and teach in the synagogue, and when the president of the synagogue handed him the scroll of Scriptures Jesus turned to the Prophet Isaiah and read the prophetic words:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has
anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”*

He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the waiting attendant, and sat down, as was the custom, to expound the meaning of the passage. The audience was attentive because they had heard him preach before and was aware of his great gifts as a teacher, but they were not prepared for the words he spoke now:

“Today,” Jesus declared with measured emphasis, “this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” There was a murmur of surprise and enquiry among the congregation. Someone asked in a loud voice, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

“You are probably going to quote this proverb to me, “Jesus continued over the interruption, “‘Physician, heal yourself! Why don’t you do here in your home town what we have heard you did in Capernaum.’ Let me tell you that no prophet is accepted in his home town. There were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, where there was a severe famine throughout the land for over three years. Yet Elijah was not sent by God to any of them, but to a widow in Zarepath in the pagan region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed by God—only Namaan the Syrian.”

While Jesus was speaking there was a rising murmur of protest at his remarks in the congregation. The point that Jesus was making was clear: God had not sent the prophets Elijah and Elisha to the sick

and afflicted of his chosen people, Israel, because of their state of unbelief and disobedience; but instead had sent them to a God-provided Gentile woman and a Gentile man. It was obvious that Jesus was stating he had not done miracles in Nazareth because they were in a similar state of unbelief and disobedience.

They were swept by fury at his words and they surged forward to get their hands on Jesus to throw him out of the synagogue. The leaders of the synagogue were concerned that the synagogue itself was likely to be damaged in the uproar, and they helped Jesus to get out quickly. As the angry congregation poured out of the synagogue into the streets they were quickly joined by others, and the incoherent shouts of rage against Jesus were now ominous charges of "blasphemy" with threats of "stoning". The figure of Jesus was lost in the surging mob as they made for an open spot outside the town. It was the intention of some of the crowd to stage a fatal "accident" over a sheer drop on the slope of one of the nearby hills, but by the time they got there Jesus had disappeared in some inexplicable fashion.

He made his way rapidly to his home and informed his distraught mother of what had happened. He was leaving for Capernaum immediately, and he proposed that his mother and some members of the family should also go for a time to Capernaum until the present threatening uproar had passed. It was quite likely that, after today's incident, the more extreme elements in Nazareth would make it difficult for the family of Jesus. This kind of reception was what he had expected, and it was likely to escalate as his teachings challenging rabbinical traditions and conformity intensified. His disciples should follow him to Capernaum and they would meet in Simon's house there.

It was almost twenty miles from Nazareth to Capernaum, a journey of about ten hours, and it would be dusk, if not dark, by the time Jesus arrived. He walked quickly over the plateau, and through the black basalt gorge of Arbela, until he could see the deep blue of the Lake in the distance. Once through the gorge the road dropped steeply, and then rose again, along the sloping sides of the foothills, and the day became hotter as noon passed and he neared the Plain.

Walking through the vineyards he took note of the husbandmen repairing hedges, the wine-presses, and the watch-towers; the replacing of the old vines with the new, and laying-out the new wine-skins to dry in the sun. He admired the patience and care of the shepherds as they watched or rounded up the sheep, carefully calling them by name and seeing them following the shepherd to pasture or water. His eye followed the circling hawks, the cawing ravens, the darting sparrows, as they sought food in their different ways. Even the fussing hens, gathering their chirping broods together, held his interest. There was so much beauty among so much surrounding ugliness.

On the roads he listened to the talk of the travelers, of their difficulties with tax-gatherers everywhere, of the disturbed and dangerous state of the roads in Galilee, of the difficulty of bringing ice with which to pack the fish from Hermon to the fishing-stations in Capernaum, Bethsaida and Tarichae, when the road travel was so difficult. He watched the children playing in the streets, learned the price of pearls, the costs of slaves, the news of war.

The news regarding the dramatic healing of Herod's official, Chuza's, dying son had spread rapidly in the Capernaum synagogue, and added fuel to the other stories circulating about Jesus throughout the city. The synagogue was not only architecturally prominent, being of white limestone; it was also socially influential. It had been built with the contributions of a wealthy Roman centurion and by a generous contribution from Herod, whose family *motif* of a palm-tree was conspicuous throughout the building.

Jesus used the synagogue as a central place for his teaching ministry, as was his practice elsewhere; but he was even more at home on the grassy slopes around the city overlooking the Lake of Galilee. He was not restricted to these places, and he taught in the market-places, or on the sea-shore, or in homes of relatives or friends. He never refused to answer a question, or rejected a plea for healing. He encouraged his disciples to involve themselves more and more in the same process. It was imperative, he told them, that the great truths he was communicating should be assimilated into their

lives and daily practice, rather than having small or even large groups of followers simply subscribing to an agreed doctrine and then looking for an ideal place or exclusive community to demonstrate them. This was what the Essenes and their "*Teacher of Righteousness*" had done as they waited for a national leader and physical Jewish kingdom; and it was what John's disciples were doing with their practices—and they were now bewildered and aimless with John the Baptist in prison.

The kingdom of God was not like this, he taught his disciples. The kingdom of God was like a sower going forth to sow his seed. As he sowed, some fell along the path and was trodden underfoot, and the birds of the air came and devoured it. Some fell on rocks, and as it grew up it withered away because it had no moisture. Some fell on thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell on good soil, and grew, and it yielded a hundred-fold. The seed was like the Word of God, he explained. The seed scattered along the path was like those who had heard; then the devil came and stole away the Word from their hearts that they might not believe. And the seed on the rock was like those who, when they heard the Word, received it with joy; but they had no root, they believed for a while and in time of temptation fell away. As for the seed among the thorns, it was like those who heard but as they went on their way they were choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and they did not mature. Finally, the ones in good soil held fast the Words of God they heard, and would bring forth an abundance of produce.

The kingdom of God was also like the mustard-seed, which was the smallest of all seeds yet it grew quietly and quickly until it became the greatest of all shrubs, and put forth the largest branches. It was like the yeast which the women mixed with a large amount of flour, and it acted quietly and powerfully to change the inert flour into life-giving bread. The change of direction begun in the nation with John the Baptist, and continued and expanded by himself, was the correct one—the "*way of the Lord*" foretold by the prophets. John had striven to reform the people by demanding strict outward observances reflecting strict morality. But he had gone further and

deeper than John, requiring a revolution of will and affections in personal attitudes, arising from a changed direct personal relationship with God and personified in himself.

A whole new approach was needed to replace the now-corrupted and obsolete rabbinical Judaism: namely, the principle of direct personal responsibility to God and spiritual freedom, instead of the priestly mediation and ritualistic bondage. Only a spiritual and moral new birth of the people of Israel, and of all nations, could meet the full requirements of God's *Law*, and the desperate needs of humankind throughout the world. The establishment of a world-wide spiritual kingdom of God on earth as it was in heaven was the divine imperative; a Spiritual Body of believers united in one faith, one hope, one baptism; founded not on external precepts, nor trained priesthood, nor sacrificial rites, but on a living Spirit of God; bound together in individual personal conviction born out of experience; grounded in the free, loving surrender of the will to God as Truth, Love, Light and Life.

So three great streams of ideology poured across the tortured nation of Judea in its time of crisis: the simplistic and mystical, but politically nationalistic and violent, Judaism of the Essenes and Zealots, represented by Judas of Gamala and others like him; the visionary but orthodox teachings of repentance and obedience for a purified nation to be ready to rule the world, taught by John the Baptist and his followers; and the spiritual kingdom of God, above all nationalisms and religions and creeds, taught by Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah.

For over a year since he had emerged from his confrontation with Satan in the desert, Jesus had been constantly preaching to crowds and teaching his disciples. He had been involved from dawn to dusk, and often later, with questing people seeking solutions, sick people seeking healing, disturbed people seeking peace. He needed time alone, with his heavenly Father in a way not possible when he was surrounded by people. He needed the quietness and stillness of either desert or mountains, free from distractions of all kinds, if he was to keep the eternal perspectives clear and the presence of his Father intimate. So he told his disciples to return for a time to their

homes and families while he went alone to Mount Hermon in the north.

Jesus left the oppressive heat and cloying agricultural smells, the clamour and pressures of Capernaum, behind him, the rich fields with the golden sheen of barley and wheat, the sharp green of the sycamore and the iridescent green of the olive trees, as he took to the vine-clad hills rich with mulberry, apricot, citron and fig trees; through corn fields where the pear tree supplanted the fig; and on and up through oak coppice and rocky ravines to where there were only dwarf shrubs. And always, ahead of him, were the gleaming white snows of Mount Hermon towering against the deep blue of the sky.

He walked on until the sun was setting, first rose-colored then deepening red, disappearing into the encroaching grey of coming darkness relieved only by the light radiance of the rising moon on the distant snows. He reveled in the deep ruby flush and warm purple shadows of approaching night, and he sat on the hill with his back to the mountain and gazed at the fading delicate greenish-yellow of the distant Sea of Galilee and its encircling walls of low mountains. He watched until the sun, changing shapes and colors, finally disappeared behind the Sea, and the curtain of night fell.

He was reminded of the words of the Prophet Isaiah:

*“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the way to the sea, along the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people living in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned . . .”*

Around the foot of Mount Hermon from ancient times there had been idolatrous sanctuaries, Hermon itself being a great centre of worship of the Canaanite god, Baal. It was also the site of the ancient heathen sanctuary of the god Pan, whose name had been given to the nearby town of Paneas, where Herod the Great had built one of his many temples in honour of Caesar Augustus. Herod Philip had

expanded Paneas into a city, and called it Caesarea Philippi in honour of the emperor. These would all pass away, Jesus mused, the gods forgotten and the imposing buildings crumbling into ruins,—like the blood-red Petra of the Edomites and Nabateans—as would the Herod princes and the imperial Caesars, while the spiritual kingdom of God that he was establishing would remain without an end.

The disappearance of Jesus into the hills of Mount Hermon, and the return of the disciples to their homes, threw the opponents of both Jesus and John the Baptist into confusion. John the Baptist was out of circulation in prison, and with Jesus and his disciples dispersed, it looked as if they had withdrawn from the scene out of fear or discretion. They had expected the Galilean Jesus to take advantage of John's removal to organize the two groups into some form of single identifiable system to be identified as Jesus' "*kingdom of God*." They reasoned that if Jesus were really serious about his claims to be the Messiah of Israel he ought to draw together the devout, as John the Baptist had done; he ought to have impressed and encouraged the guerrilla fighters, as Judah of Gamala had done; and, most of all, he ought to have cultivated the religious factions of Pharisees and Sadducees and others, as all recent aspiring leaders had done. John needed a strong military force to run his purified nation; Judah of Gamala needed a powerful organization to administer an independent Israel; Jesus needed the Temple authorities to reach the Jews of the Diaspora and through them to reach the Gentile nations beyond the borders of Israel. They could not have been more wrong.

The religious leaders had come to Capernaum from Jerusalem to question Jesus. They represented a cross-section of the best minds in Israel—the cream of the theologians, the jurists, the scribes, the politicians, the intellectuals. They were greeted respectfully in the streets and market-places, men standing up to salute them as they passed, the front seats of the synagogues were left free for them, and they were given the place of honor at every home they visited. With their long robes, their grave demeanor, their broad phylacteries on foreheads and arms, their conspicuous over-garment *talithin* with

the sacred tassels and blue thread at each corner, they were a formidable body in the city of Capernaum demonstrating the powerful interests provoked by Jesus of Nazareth, and an indication of his increasing influence in the nation. Yet all they could find were the disciples of Jesus going quietly about their fishing and other tasks, and with Jesus in spiritual retreat somewhere in Mount Hermon.

Chapter 8

will be available on this site on the 1st January 2010