

The Disciple

I had two visions then, one by day and one by night, which both smote at the eyes and then at the conscience before I knew which way to take.

I found myself on the eastward road to Damascus, my donkey beneath me kicking up powder and dust, the hard, dry, much-trodden way bleached to alabaster-white by the sun which burned there the green of copses to ashen-grey, which dried the hide of cattle and asses down to knobbled and flint-edged bone, and which drove men, the very best of them no less, to convulsions, hallucinations, visions and demented frenzies. Whatever casual conversation took place in those parts, the sun, the heat and the *hamsin* dryness, all scorching and parching and shimmering golden like ever-receding waters, formed a goodly part of it. Our ancestors may have been misguided, to be sure, but not for nothing did they in times past worship that celestial orb, the sun, that mighty incandescent force that was deemed to determine every rhythm of life, every warp of nature and every turn of human destiny. — What. . . What contrast! How bright that sun and diaphanous its light, yet how pervasive had been our ancestors' unilluminated darkness then! . . .

So — I found myself heading for Damascus, carrying highly-commendatory letters of introduction to companions written for me by my fathers in the faith, to seek out the followers of him they called Yehoshua the Messiah, and denounce them for heresy against God and for treason against the State.

And wherein lay the heresy and the treason that I took upon myself to root out?

It lay in this, as my teacher Yekutiel had summarised during an address he once made.

"While this Yehoshua ben Yosef, who in Latin is known as Jesus, was, in his time, like all of us, but a mere son of man, yet have his followers come to refer to him as Only-Begotten Son of God. While this Yehoshua was in himself nothing other than mere mortal man, yet do his adherents today perversely call him Our God, Our Saviour, Our Lord. Further, while this Yehoshua was in his time but another of a thousand ordained preachers, teachers, rabbis, counsellors and guides, yet have they made of him a miracle-worker, sorcerer, exorcist and healer. And while this Yehoshua was in his time but another of the Empire's million, two million, three million common citizens before the law, yet have his disciples taken to speaking of him as resurrected leader and sovereign of a rival kingdom in heaven that is soon to come upon this earth."

He had been a swarthy pock-marked firebrand, too, this Yehoshua — this much I had also learned from my masters — a recalcitrant subversive, feverish, turbulent, and quick to anger, an agitator choleric against authority, both civil and religious, and impatient in the way he dealt with it. At the same time, he unabashedly preached disruption of family, severance of bonds, and renunciation of earthly possessions, and pressed for revolution, change, and the overthrow of established order, promising in its place a new order of peace, humility, blessedness and justice in some other fancied future world. Such men as he had long dotted history's annals — from old Canaan and Goshen through Babylon, Athens and Sparta to more recent Rome — just as every generation will continually see others such as he, demagogues and seditionists all, who, to a man, foment insurgency and chaos, themselves the while drunk with the notion that they alone possess all truth, that they alone possess all wisdom, that they alone possess the right to overturn the accepted order which by their sights has grown stagnant, ritualistic, legalistic and obsolete.

As for this Yehoshua, the authorities whom he abused refused to truck with him. To them, he was a thorn in their side whom they tolerated at first or, more wisely still, ignored, if only to keep the peace with Rome. But they, the fathers whom he assailed, wise as they were, had not reckoned with the wiliness of that overheated malcontent. True, they had elected to ignore this Yehoshua, but this same canny Yehoshua was determined not to be ignored; they had, in camera, voted not to take notice, but, not to be denied, he would *make* them notice; and where they, our fathers, our teachers, turned away from him their ears, he went instead to the people, to the lowly, the uneducated, the dull-witted, the orphaned, the superstitious, the frail and the poor, beguiling them with clever parables and metaphors, and using these to promise them deliverance from their lowly state, escape from their humble station and release from their servitude, for all of which, with passion, sinewy pyrotechnics and silvery words, he over and again charged the keepers of the Law as purblind, self-serving, antiquated and sorely out of touch with their every most basic, most human, most earthly needs.

Such had been the wisdom handed down to me and my colleagues in the several academies through which latterly I had passed.

Another detail became clear, too. It might have been a small thing, to be sure, but wholly important to a full understanding of the man and the effect he had upon his followers. That man Yehoshua's undoing did not lie in his maligning of the elders; nor even of the civil leaders of the time. In the disbursements of such slanderings as his upon authority, he was neither the first, nor was he the last. He was but one of a host and, in his vituperations, wholly in fashion. Whatever its configuration, authority can never be unused to accusations, contumely, popular disenchantment and contempt, which wise government will suffer with disinterested patience.

What, in the end, led him to the cross, however, was something else wholly of his own making. It was his peculiar habit of speaking in metaphors, metaphors, it must be said, to which

the people were not equal. In seeking to goad them to revolt, he laced his oratory with such high rhetoric, hyperbole, allegory and imagery that that which had, in actuality, been wholly and purely turns of speech, assumed for the credulous, superstitious and untutored a literalness that so distorted all truer intended meaning that the words he uttered incited rumour, this in turn opening the way for opinion, and opinion to conviction that this Yehoshua, mere rabbi, mere teacher, mere son of man, child of Judea and subject of Rome, was more, far more than these. Thus, when he declared, "I am way and truth and light", meaning "My teachings are way and truth and light", or when he proclaimed, "I am resurrection and life" meaning again "My message will bring you resurrection and life", or when he declaimed, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father", meaning "As a man is, so is God, for in His image is man made", the people did not perceive the meaning behind the words, but heard and believed only the words themselves. And so, in the common manner of things, word passed from mouth to ear and from ear to mouth, receiving embellishment in its every passage, the populace that followed him becoming rabble, becoming mob, so construing his every utterance that, seizing upon his most banal allusion to Scriptural text, misinterpreting the simplest allegory he offered, and misreading the most picturesque and artless of parables he entertained them with, they raised him in their sights to King, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, and any number of other appellations tending to divinity.

That it may be still further seen how language had been the source of inordinate mischief — mischief that to this day persists, the while becoming consecrated into ossifying ritual — my teachers, my own Yekutiël among them, pointed to yet another instance, a most telling one, of that speechifier's intractable bent for metaphor, when, even at the sacred festive Passover feast on the eve of his trial, at the Passover *seder* he could not desist from morbid, mordant and sardonic jest, calling the bread he broke his body that would similarly be broken on the cross and the wine his blood that would soon be spilled;

whereupon his pupils, come in time to be called disciples, twelve young and impressionable trusting boys all, carried his words abroad so that bread and wine were no longer the humble basic consecrated fare with which to celebrate a joyous feast of liberation, but became instead to the simple and deluded actual objects of mystery, of magic and of supernaturalism. Hearing him speak — he was no mean orator — or hearing at second hand, or third, or fourth hand, what he had said, folk everywhere were so transported to flights of fancy laced with expectations of reward, blessedness and joy in the hereafter, that they, too, were moved to protest against the authorities, they too denouncing heatedly the rigidity and obsolescence of the law-enforcers, and, more bizarrely, and clearly unthinkingly, broadcasting the prophecy of a new kingdom to come, a kingdom with their own Yehoshua at its head, that would alter the interpretation of the Law, that would displace the Roman realm, and would liberate, deliver and redeem all men, that would free, release, transform all men.

Such inflammatory agitation fell nothing short of civil treason, albeit incited by religious frenzy, and the long and short of it was that that Yehoshua, for his role in inciting the people to widening all-disrupting mutinous dissent, expired, as Roman law decreed, upon the cross, his head encircled by a crown of thorns denoting most aptly what manner of thorn he himself had been.

In this, however, in the signing of the warrant that sealed his death and his immolation upon the cross, the authorities, clearly having lost their nerve, had erred. For nothing so begat followers and disciples, apostles and evangelists, fellow-travelers and leech-like lackeys as a martyr who has visibly and defiantly died in the name of a cause, however worthy, or, more commonly the truth, however infamous the cause. And so, in awesomeness and in the shadow of the cross, as in its aftermath, hosts of stories sprang up and like mustard-seed flourished enormously, each more fantastic and inventive than its predecessors, embellishments of fanciful fictions all, telling of healings of the sick by a laying-on of hands and restoration to

life of the dead, or of walking on water and calming of storms, these leading with mighty leaps of imagination to tales of that reprobate's own corpse rising from the grave and its miraculous ascent to heaven, leading to his identification too with the suffering servant told of by the Prophet Isaiah, to his being called Messiah descended as foretold from the line of David, to his birth being appraised as a miraculous act of God, and to the keen, tremulous, breath-quickenning expectation of the imminent establishment of his kingdom on earth. All this his followers so unabashedly and credulously imbibed as, in infancy, they had imbibed their mothers' milk. And, having so credulously imbibed these fantastical tales, they passed them on, relayed them further, repeated them ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times over, until that which began as an irksome eccentric idiosyncratic sect — an aberration, as my teacher Yekutiel was wont to say — swelled under the disorienting dementing influence of the sun in these parts into a turbulent movement, the current of which indiscriminately and overwhelmingly sucked in all who strayed too close and caught them up in a hell and hell-fire maelstrom that menaced to the core the authority of both the rabbis and the civil masters whose patience progressively wore thin.

That current, for the sake of order — both political and religious — had perforce to be stemmed. I, for my part — if I may be so immodestly bold as to quote my teachers, a future leading light of the academies — did as necessity bade me, seeing it as my duty to use every means available to oppose and eradicate the name of that scapegrace Yehoshua, myself apprehending and delivering scores of his followers to the authorities, casting my vote against them in meting out punishment, and causing to have inflicted such onerous penalties upon their synagogues as would compel them to renounce their aberrant faith, my fury against them so severe that I pursued them even into other towns and villages east and west to which hosts of these reprobates, apostates and blasphemers had fled.

But even as I pursued them, there being time to deliberate along the burning dust-and-stone-heaped highways between

the towns through which I passed, inklings of doubt at times fell like wind-blown seeds into the crypts and crevices of my brain. Even as I waxed vehement against the transgressors as a group, such was their acceptance of their fate when apprehended, tried and sentenced, that I could not help but admire them as individual human spirits, the men, the women and the children, even the *children*, appearing almost beatific in their readiness to yield up their lives, the name of their master on their lips even as our own fathers and grandfathers in times past had perished with the name of God on theirs. If they were so prepared to die in that miscreant's name, might he, might they not in fact have possessed a truth — *the* truth — to which my own otherwise-so-learned, so-honoured fathers in the faith, and I in turn, had perhaps been blind? If, as it was said, they died for the sake also of a universal kingdom of love, and peace, and righteousness, and mercy as their own master and mentor had done, such kingdom being the very fulfilment of prophetic divination in its highest order, might we not perhaps have been too harsh on them? And, as a consequence, were we not perhaps in our obstinate stress upon the strictest ritualism and upon the letter, as against the spirit, of the Law, being both narrowly particular and arrantly parochial, thereby subjugating the individual to the herd, and in such way contravening each man's separate worth in the eyes of God and contradicting the very universality of the true prophetic vision so assiduously propounded and promoted in our own synagogues, academies and schools? If so, other questions could not help but follow. If, say, the Law had led a man to be killed for propagating on earth that very vision, as others after him had also been killed, then, were the Law and love, the Law and peace, the Law and righteousness, the Law and mercy at all compatible? And even if he were brazenly bumptious, that Yehoshua called Jesus, and unconscionably maverick in his methods, and offensive in his seemingly self-promoting claims, did all this render the message he carried necessarily false? Was the wine the poorer for coming in a crude and flawed, unpolished vessel?

These considerations I put out of mind — I *had* to put out of

mind — as, in obedience to my mission, I pursued and apprehended, accused and cast my vote, and in the halls of the academies steadily secured my place among the would-be Fathers of the coming generation. I was not yet twenty-five, but did already rank as high favourite among my elders. I received eloquent testimonials for my dedication, decorations for my zeal, and high praise even among the people for my staunch enforcement of our rendering of the Law. Clearly, other honours awaited me and a succession of illustrious promotions, too, and there were times, in vainer moments, when I fancied myself a future head of the *Sanhedrin*, or the authority supreme in the interpretation of Scripture, endowed with a secure and lasting place as a shining luminary in the annals of my people. How tantalising seemed the possibility and, more than mere possibility, the very prospect of fame! The taste of it, the thrill of it! To be another Ezra to my people, to be as Socrates is to the Greeks, or Cicero to the Romans. My time would come, I told myself. My time would come. In a world so volatile where little could ever for certain be known, this much I did know. My time would in the event most surely come.

And then the day came when I set forth on that fateful Damascus mission, with those letters of introduction and with further promotion awaiting me on my return.

The road was rough and stony and burnished ochre, the air around was hot and dry, the very taking of breath an ordeal that seared the windpipe to its innermost reaches. Though the morning had been auspiciously mild, the sun by midday was burning at its zenith, and not a soul ventured out in the villages that dotted the ringwormed slopes along whose edge we passed. Already by that time, my retinue and I had drunk more than had been wise of our stipulated rations, but even so our tongues remained dry and our throats parched and chalky. Each man's eyes smarted from the heat and the dust, some talked as if they were seeing apparitions, while for me where the blue of the sky met the distant white, and pearl and alabaster of earth, the air trembled numinous and riveting as all manner of quivering, shivering, shimmering forms took shape there — houses

and palms swimming against the horizon, stunted copses and flat-roofed caravanserais, camels and asses being driven by bedouin, these moving as if treading water, and girls who came and girls who vanished, and gardens that seemed to float or hang from the heavens, and lush wooded hills that lured and excited and beckoned and drew but themselves ever receded the nearer we came. It tantalised to determine what was real and what was mirage.

It was then, against and above all these, in the very eye of a white and dazzling shaft of light infinitely brighter than any other I had ever seen, that I had the first of my visions. I saw a swarthy, hard-skinned, sunken-cheeked man with tangled hair and bone-dry fingers who looked upon me with an indulgent pity meet for sons who have gone astray.

And he said, "Sha'ul", and he said, "Saul, you vain conniver. Why, why do you so persist in persecuting me? Do you not find it hard so to hound and harass and kick against the good?"

And I said, "Who are you?"

And he said, "I am Yehoshua, son of Joseph and son of Miriam, I am Yehoshua, the very same whom, even in travesty to your conscience and in defiance of the truth, you are so unseemly persecuting."

And I asked, "What is it that you want of me? And why do you appear before me, before *me*, of all people who are so much against you and against your followers? Why me?"

"That I may help you redeem your conscience," he replied, tapping his brow with his fingers, "and, by redeeming your conscience, to save your soul."

"Have you no other businesses," I asked then, "but that you should concern yourself with my conscience or occupy yourself with my soul?"

"Indeed," he replied, untouched by my essay at mockery. "Indeed, I have. But to achieve them, I have need of you?"

"Of me?" I said. "Of me who so strives against you?"

"Precisely because you strive against me," he retorted. "So that you, the model of scholarship and dedication, of zeal and iron will, and future heir to authority supreme, may bear wit-

ness that what is said about me is true — that I have indeed risen from the grave — and so that, as witness to this truth that makes all else true, you may become my messenger on earth and go forth unto the people and, in my name, deliver them from darkness, save them from the dominion of Satan that is upon earth, and initiate them, too, into the Kingdom of God there to receive, through me, forgiveness for all their sins, absolution for all their weaknesses, and a goodly share, through my body and through my blood, in the inheritance that is to come.”

With that he disappeared and left me deliriously faint. My men, themselves scarcely better off in the heat than I, laid me down, brought upon me shade, and plied me with whatever little water still remained, importuning me the while to tell what it was that had so unsettled me. But searching through the light, scanning the terrain, and scouring in perplexity each man's burnt or ruddy face — each in that instant become so alien, distorted and remote — I did not know where, in order to mollify their puzzlement, I might with either certainty or conviction begin. For I myself could not now wholly tell whether that which I had seen had truly been, or whether it had been more an hallucinatory spectre, fruit of light's warping, distorting, capricious play upon a heat-addled, heat-numbed, heat-scorched brain.

What I did know was that I kept murmuring “Lord! Lord! Lord!” through lips that, being chapped, stung with rawness, and that my men came close and bent over me and, bending solicitously over me, repeatedly questioned, “Where is the Lord? What is the Lord?”; to which like some incantation I said “The Lord is love, and he is mercy, and he is righteousness and he is peace, yes, he is love, and he is mercy, and he is righteousness and he is peace, yes, he is love, and he is mercy, and he is righteousness and he is peace”; while, even as I looked up at them and looked beyond them, my vision reached also far beyond their troubled faces, my eyes seeing in the heavens some other realm — O Lord, a kingdom! — a wondrously luminous commonwealth where angels walked, and where all who had ever lived were again restored, sinners too, and the maimed and

the orphaned, the widowed and the poor, as also the epileptic and the leprous, the scrofulous and the pocked, all of them delivered and redeemed, all of them forgiven and cleansed, all reconstituted to virgin wholeness, all of them clad in finery most exquisite, and all aglow with love and free of blemish, cleared of stigma and shorn of shame that had been their burdensome legacy in their transit on earth.

O Lord, the throbbing, exquisite splendour of it! All that had been said of that Yehoshua by those I had so wrathfully pursued was true. He *had* risen! But more than having risen himself, he had also raised. For, as, on taking upon his shoulders the heavy burden of the cross, he had shed from himself the earth-tethering rigors of our Fathers' Law, so, too, had his disciples and adherents also risen; for, while the Law through its enforcers could both disburse punishment and requite all sins, more than this could purity of soul such as had become theirs prevent all sin from being committed from the very first. And whence came such purity? From faith it came! From faith! The faith of Abraham our original Father, the faith of Moses our venerated Teacher, the faith of David the most illustrious of kings, and the faith of Isaiah and of Jeremiah, and of Yehoshua himself in his time, like all the Prophets, so unjustly and so hatefully despised.

This faith — above all, faith — had to him and his followers been unshakably primary; faith above all could secure for them the good life, faith above all the moral life, faith above all else the blameless, edifying and edified sanctified life. And only when faith fell short and sin in faithlessness ensued, then, and only then — such instances, as a consequence, being necessarily rare — would there be need at all to invoke the strictures and retributions prescribed by the Law. Faith, then, with Law as its abettor, was the medium most true uniting man and God, bringing harmony between mind and soul, and securing renewal, redemption and all-encompassing divinity.

I saw it all so clearly then, yes, saw it all so brilliantly, as, by the wayside, with the sun by this time setting in the west somewhere over Phoenicia, I rose, draped my shawl about my

head, and joined my men in prayer. And, as always at that hour, I prayed. The words, they came by rote, they came with ease, they came with fluent facility, that facility being fruit of habit, repetition and routine. But the spirit behind them on this occasion raised them up, elevated them as seldom before, up and up, to be tendered as a thanks-offering to God for His gift of illumination, given in gratitude for His boundless goodness and His mercy, as also for His justice and His loving-kindness, and for having chosen me, of all men, to do His work of spreading His Word as revealed through His Son, His very own, the last and most sublime of His prophets, Yehoshua. I had but to open my soul to receive His grace to the fullest degree He was capable of bestowing upon any mortal man.

And I opened my soul. Even as I prayed, I prepared to take upon myself to do my new master Yehoshua's every bidding, to carry his message unto the world, to preach unto my people, as unto the pagans, too, the truth — *the Truth* — as I had seen it, and deliver to all his promise of ultimate salvation, his vision of the coming kingdom, and his augury of universal resurrection when the bones of all who had ever lived would again gain flesh, again gain breath, again gain movement, even as the prophet Ezekiel in his ecstasies so long before had prophesied.

And yet I paused. On removing my shawl at the end of prayer, I faltered, I desisted from disclosing even to my own men the revelation they ought to have been the first to know of. I was thrown, suddenly and terribly, into such a new confusion and assault of conscience that all doubts and qualms and self-reproaches that had formerly attended my earlier pursuit of that selfsame Yehoshua's faithful were as nothing against these. Oh, God, the agony of it!

For, it was at that moment, as I gazed this time not upward at the heavens but down into the valley that was darkening lightless before my feet that I beheld the second vision, a spectral apparition most bizarre that filled the very marrow of my bones with a chill more numbing, more riveting, more transfixing than the chill of evening that in those parts customarily augured the end of day.

It was a procession that I saw. It was unmistakable: a procession thrown into relief by flaring torches carried by black-hooded men who, as they walked in dense formation, sang hymns and psalms in gloomy monotones that were the stuff of dirges. Behind them followed eunuchs, themselves chanting joyless hosannas, pallid virgins praying over folded hands, and ascetics, sacristans and acolytes, behind whom, in turn, straggled, singly, or in twos, or in threes, a succession of bare-foot thinly-clad unkempt wretches who lamented and moaned as they dragged themselves forward with clattering clanging chains about their ankles. Among these were men and young boys, and young girls and women, some of them carrying infants in their arms, others, the older among them wailing shrilly as, under the lash and birch and rod wielded by bull-necked guards, all were herded into an amphitheatre where stakes had been thrust into the earth and mounds of kindling heaped dense and fast about their base. There were gallows, too, within that space, and racks and pulleys, whipping-boards and branding irons, and low-roofed annexes, ostensibly disguised as bathhouses that more truly functioned as noxious, suffocating miasma-chambers.

Around the rim of that amphitheatre rose high tiers and galleries occupied by legions of law-makers, judges, princes and priests of every rank, and a multitude of other paid administrators, officials and representatives of state. To either side of them and filling to the limits every broad and narrow space that offered in the stalls were the laity as also the simpler folk, these waxing most loud and cacophonous in clamour and tumult as, from the officials' bay, successions of accusations, interrogations and sentences resounded and redounded against every surface. At the conclusion of each judgement read out by velvet-garbed, most sumptuously adorned but dour and hard-browed men who held the fearsome rank of cardinal, another whoop and cry would arise from these stalls as, below, one by one, in pairs, or in groups, those herded wretches were separated, each according to his sentence, either to be bound against the stakes, there to writhe and scream as leaping fangs of

flame engulfed them whole, or to be flogged to cries of "Confess! Confess! Confess!", or to be strung up on the pulleys by their thumbs to exhortations of "Repent! Repent! Repent!", or to be stretched upon the racks, to be led to the miasma-chamber, or be whipped, impaled, garrotted, beheaded or quartered — all this while tonsured celibates moved among them sprinkling holy water through a mounting surfeit of blood and ashes and smoke, their eyes in beatitude heaven-bent, and while, through high and gilded gates, there galloped forth grand formations of mighty, sturdy horsemen in full cry, each to a man having pledged to decimate those who, calling themselves the Chosen, were imputed to have killed the Lord, each having vowed to pursue all who denied His Word, and having vowed, too, to convert all into whose midst they came on their way to Jerusalem unto the worship of Him Who, to save mankind, had taken upon Himself its sins and sought to cleanse it through His own agonised death.

And there was another thing I saw. Hovering over all this like some incandescent beacon against the black night sky studded with stars so glacial and forbidding in their glow, there rose a cross, an enormous cross that underwent all manner of distorted transformations even as I watched but which remained nonetheless a cross, illuminated with a brilliantly blazing, fiery luminescence, before which, at given signals, all those law-makers, judges, princes and priests, and horsemen and eunuchs, and ascetics and sacristans, and virgins and acolytes, as also the masses in their tiers, fell upon their knees, their garments, particularly of the cardinals and their stern-lipped retinue, spreading out about them rich and flowing with the lush luxuriant velvety crimson and purple of sacrificial blood.

For all its utter and meticulous clarity of detail, the vision lingered there before me for the most mere moment before the valley resumed its silent, lightless, unruffled dormancy. But that moment had sufficed. I had earlier that day been called to carry the Master's staff into a world of sin and violence and iniquity that He himself had railed against, but having now caught a glimpse into what could only be the consequences of

that call, I was brought to pause. New orders, I recognised of a sudden, did not redeem the old; nor did they necessarily replace the old. Rather, in due time, they simply *became* the old, only the rituals, the credos, delusions and mythologies differing between them. And this, too, I became apprised of: rather than representing progress upon that which had gone before, the new were oft more primitive still than the old they replaced, for that which in his day were the purest visions of one man became in time the hoary rigid orthodoxies of his heirs, these latter men, through acts bordering on terror, debasement and self-aggrandisement, implementing their own reading of what had been the most divine, sublime and heavenly visions of their saints.

Was this to be the fate of my mission too? — I was prepared to go unto my kinsmen to deliver the Word of the Lord with love, and charity, and gentleness, and to go even unto the pagans, whether in India, Africa, or Iberia, and unto whatever wildernesses brooded in moral darkness both near at hand and beyond the seas. But who would carry the message after me? To whom might my new mentor Yehoshua next appear? And who knew how His Word might be distorted, embellished, manipulated, even falsified by those who in due time succeeded me? The faith of Abraham, Moses and David, too, was young once, as were those of Assyria, Babylon and Persia; likewise, the deliberations of the men of Athens had been the most sophisticated extant and the literature of Rome had been of the foremost rank before each was reduced to the most specious pastiche. To what delinquencies, then, could the disciples of disciples reduce even that which was the most sublime, most selfless and most numinous of causes! And to what abjectness, vileness and heinousness! Oh, God! Oh, God, if I took up the charge so suddenly bestowed upon me, what aberrations, what perversions, what savagery might I not set in train?!

But then were I not to bear witness, and not bring the Lord's teachings unto the peoples, nor attest to the splendrous awesome kingdom that was to come, what then of the possibilities of redemption, resurrection and eternal life that Yehoshua, the

embodiment of God's Word on earth, had promised? Was such opportunity to be passed by? Was I to hover between damnation and damnation, damned if I dared to deliver the Word, damned equally if I did not? To whom, to whom could I turn for guidance? Would that Yehoshua came before me again to tell me clearly what I must do; I should then with the utmost dedication proceed to do it. For, not fame, nor position, nor authority were the issue now, but Truth and Humanity and Life and all the sacred verities for which God, Almighty God, in seeking to save man, had sacrificed His Son. But dared I take up the charge? Or, conversely, dared I instead pass it up? More than ever did I now need God to be my shepherd, my rock, my salvation and my strength.

In my perplexity, I gazed into the valley below and contemplated the stars above, and studied my attendants as they sat warming their hands around the fire, and mused, too, over the sentries who paraded around the perimeter of our encampment. By the light of their faith, they were true, staunch, zealous men all, youths really if truth be told, and the pride of the academies assigned to me on account of their very fidelity and fervency to seek out those who had defected from their elders' ways. They were also sharp, acute and passionate, our past discussions over points of law setting light to lamps that lit up Scriptural paths till then not yet ventured upon. But herein lay their very failing. Their passion was more for that which was written and less for their fellow-man; their concern was more for scriptural precision and less for human need; their zeal too often for casuistry than given to forgiveness of human failing, their bent for the purity attendant upon the rites of Temple sacrifice above the purity of the inner soul which was what God in His heights demanded of them most of all. The Lord, through His Son, however, had indicated another way. Not through legalism or ritual or sacrifice was salvation to be had, but, in the end, through His noblest creation — mortal man.

Just then, one of the sentries came by. He was a slender, straggle-bearded, thin-boned youth of twenty, like my other attendants learned to be sure, but overly-serious, rigid and lack-

ing in humour, sad epitome of what had over the centuries evolved from that once-so-magnificent God-given man-ennobling inheritance transmitted to His Chosen through our Teacher Moses.

For a moment he paused before me, bowed his head in deference, then looked up, by the light of the fire seeming to seek assurance that I was fully restored from my earlier high-noon faint. Then, blinking once, twice, a third time, drawing with lean bony scholar's fingers at an ear-lock, and bowing his head once more, the sentry, not one given to unnecessary speech, said simply "Good-night, Rabbi", and continued on his patrol.

Having the while gazed into his face, I had wanted to wish him long life and health and a brood of descendants unto the fiftieth generation to bring solace and joy to his later years as also to his people — and till that moment, my people, too — forever and forever and forever. I wanted peace for him and holiness and mercy and grace. I did; with all compassion that was in my heart, I did. But what I saw instead as I returned his gaze was death, death and persecution and molestation and flight, over and over, in one place and another, not for himself alone but for all his kin who lived in his time and for all his heirs and their heirs who would in time come after for rejecting the One Who might have been his Saviour. And whether or not I took part in the movement that was swelling, clearly swelling in the wake of the cross, that new wave would gain vigour, gain numbers, gain force, it would spread as water spread, everywhere, over everything, into every hair-thin crevice, inundating all before it, as it had to if the truth — the Lord's Truth — both on earth and in the Kingdom to come were to prevail.

I looked then again into the valley and up once more at the heavens, and down in the valley again and up at the heavens again, and made my choice. And in that moment, having thus made my choice, as I turned to watch the dourly dutiful ear-locked sentry recede, and looked too upon my men making ready to settle for the night, I wanted to embrace them all, embrace them firmly, those kinsmen, and say to them, "Pray for me, my brothers, that I know what I am about to do, pray

that I do it for the best of reasons, and pray that those who come after me will not be too harsh”.

But instead I bit my lips, nodded at the widening space between us as my sentry receded still further, said, “Yes, may the night that lies before us indeed be good”, and, feeling in my cheeks the heat of the fire, turned my face away from them all.