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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE SON

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In those days, I was the one who came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the River Jordan. And the Gospel of Mark would declare that on my immersion by the Baptist, so did the heavens open, whereupon I saw "a spirit like a dove descending." Then came a great voice and it said: "You are My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." According to Mark, the Spirit drove me into the wilderness, and I was there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan.

While I would not say that Mark's gospel is without flaw, I would even offer less for Matthew, Luke and John. They gave me a host of pious sayings never uttered by me, and sometimes I am described as gentle when I was pale with rage.

By the time each of them had written his gospel he could only repeat what old men had told. Such tales are to be leaned upon no more than a bush that is cut away from its roots and is blown about by the wind.

So I will give my account. If there are some who would ask how my words have come to this page, I would reply: Look upon all that is here as no more than a small miracle; my gospel, like others, is also an account of miracles. Yet if I am going to speak of matters already told, I will tell more. Mark, Matthew, Luke, John and many other gospels by other men were looking to enlarge their fold. Some would speak only to Jews who were ready to follow me after my death; some preached to those gentiles who hated Jews, yet had faith in me. Because each looked to give strength to his own people, how could he not fail to combine what was true with much that was false? Yet, no matter how stories about my life wandered far from what I did, one church grew more than others, and having prevailed, this church chose to accept but four gospels, declaring that all the others placed "immaculate and sacred words" next to "shameless lies." And this was said by Pope Clement. Could he understand that

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whether four gospels were sanctified or forty, no number,
large or small, would suffice? For where the truth is with
us in one place, it is buried beneath lies in another. What
is for me to tell remains, therefore, neither a simple story
nor without surprise.

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In my early years when I was an apprentice to Joseph the carpenter, our first work was to split logs. With the head of an axe we would drive a wedge forward until it divided the trunk along its length. Then we would split the trunk again, and again, until we had cut many rough planks, and it took a good carpenter to guide the wedge correctly.

Yet, when our boards were shaped by much trimming, we were ready to find communion with the wood. For none of us could forget that apples from the first tree in Eden had possessed knowledge of good and evil; often did it seem that good and evil were still in the wood. A fine piece worked upon for days could betray the tool at the smallest mistake, and sometimes, despite our care, the wood seemed to split by itself. In truth, I believe it acted so from knowledge of good and evil, (and much desire to do the latter). But then an evil man could not pass by a fine tree without saddening its leaves.

Some wood, however, was like a friend, and there was wisdom to be found in doing fine work. When the task went well, I was at peace. The scent of a good chest properly shaped cheered me greatly, and I could feel a spirit present between the wood and my hand. I do not know how else to say it. My family, being Essenes, did not speak of such matters. Of all Jews, we were the strictest in our observances of the one God and had scorn for Roman religions which believed that there were many deities and each with separate powers. It would not have been fitting to speak to my family of the spirit in the wood. Indeed, such an attitude might be called pagan, and I had been raised to be as devout as my father on earth, Joseph the carpenter. He wore white robes when he was not working, and washed those robes frequently, often with difficulty when our wells were low; the aim of each Essene was to live with much cleanliness. Therefore we seldom married, and if a man did, he had union with his wife only when God told him to make a child. That multitude of Jews who were not Essenes spoke of us as a sect that must make converts or soon die out.

So it can be understood that from childhood I was taught

neither to approach women nor pursue them. We were warriors for the Lord, and a warrior was not to lie down with a woman; such acts would weaken him. On this, one could rely even if the war lasted for all of one's life.

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My apprenticeship under Joseph lasted for fourteen years but, by the age of thirty, I was a master. If it be asked whether in my youth, other apprentices were jealous of me because they looked upon Joseph as my father, I would answer that Joseph believed he could serve God by treating all of his workers with as much respect as he gave to the prime wood from which he made cabinets. When I was scrupulous in my labors, Joseph would nod, and say, "You would make a good carpenter if God had meant for you to be one." What did he mean? As he said such things, he turned his head away, pressing his lips upon a fearful secret. He had told me this same secret, which was the true story of my birth, when I was twelve, imparting it to me on our journey back to Nazareth from the Great Temple in Jerusalem. But now, being old, his memory was weak and he could not recall what he had told me.

Nor could I remember what I had heard at the age of twelve. For soon after our return, I had fallen into a long

fever and all that Joseph had related became elusive and like a dream. It was only after eighteen years had passed and I was thirty and mourning Joseph's death that I could recall his words with exactitude, but then, the fever may not have made me forget so much as that I did not wish to remember. The story gave cause for fear.

Still, on the death of Joseph, his words returned, and I even lived again in the warmth of the desert through which we had passed on our journey home to Nazareth.

In those years, my family, together with other Essenes from Nazareth, rich and poor, would walk to Jerusalem in the week before Passover, and all of us were dressed in white to show our dedication to the law of the Lord. We would go in such numbers that we did not fear thieves on the road. The journey took three days from dawn to dark over the hills and down into the valleys and deserts between Nazareth and Jerusalem; my parents went to this Feast of the Passover every year until I was twelve, and then they never went again.

For, on that visit, when they passed through the last gate of Jerusalem on their way home, I was no longer with

them. I cannot explain why, but I had slipped out of our procession and had run back to the Great Temple. Since all the children who had come from Nazareth were in a group, my mother did not notice my absence until she and Joseph had part of a morning on the road.

When they failed to find me among the children or among kinfolk and neighbors, they had to return all the way back to the Great Temple and there I was in one of the courtyards, sitting among priests and doctors, Pharisees and scribes. I was asking many questions, and to the astonishment of my parents, was comfortable with these wise men and behaved as if I were learned.

In those days, it was debated whether the Word had always been with God. Now, who does not know that the first sentence of the Gospel of John says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." But that was only written later. When I was twelve, this question was already in dispute among the priests of the Temple: Had the Word of God created our flesh, or, had God made our flesh to be like the flesh of animals, and so there was no need to utter the Word.

I listened to noted doctors that day in the Temple and they were certain that the Word had created our flesh. Otherwise, how could we be more than the beasts?

I began to speak. According to Joseph and Mary who had, by then, entered the courtyard, my utterance, was wisdom equal to the sayings of a prophet, and therefore they decided that the Lord must be speaking through me: a miracle. What could I have said to move them so?

Later, in my thirtieth year, after the death of Joseph and my pilgrimage to John the Baptist, in that time when I came back to Nazareth and began to preach, I would ask my mother what I had said on that day in the Temple when I was twelve, and she would claim my words were so holy that she could repeat them no more than she could speak the name of the Lord aloud. Yet even as she refused, so did a clear memory return to me of what I had declared, and indeed, I had told the priests and doctors that before the Word was flesh, the Word had lived in water, even as the winter air will issue from one's mouth like a cloud, and in a cloud is moisture.

Just so was our breath like a small sea. Thereby the

Word must be one with God for all the waters are His--even as all the rivers go down to the sea.

My mother would claim that she could still see the faces of these priests, Pharisees, and scribes for they had told her: "God has blessed the fruit of your womb. Never in one so young have we heard such wisdom and glory." And I would suppose that it was because of such praise that Joseph decided on our return to Nazareth, that he would tell me the true story of my birth.

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There had been no illness in my first thirty years so severe as the fever that burned in me after our return from Jerusalem, and it is true that I have only to recall the suffering of that fever and whatever is in my thoughts will disappear. Yet, in the moment when Joseph's words came back to me as I prayed beside his dead body, I could even recall how much strain had been on his face. For it was on that occasion that he had to tell me how he was not my father.

A year before I was born, Joseph, a widower, and many years older than my mother, had asked her if they could be espoused. Being most cautious, he declared that he would respect their difference in age and so would act first as her guardian. In this time of waiting, however, the angel Gabriel came down to Galilee and entered her bedchamber where he said to her (even as Mary later told Joseph): "The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women." And by the light in his eyes, she felt admired. Yet my mother was an

Essene, and her mother guarded her virtue. Yet, Mary was looking upon the angel Gabriel, handsome and radiant. The white of his garments was like the light of the moon; so could she see that he was an angel.

She felt weak as if all of her virtue was in flux, and all that she knew had left her. It was then that this angel, so near to her in that small room, said, "Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favor with God. Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Highest, and the Lord God shall give to him the throne of his father David and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there shall be no end." These words come from the gospel of Luke who believed that they were uttered out of the mouth of the angel Gabriel, although according to my mother, who would tell me at last, after Joseph's death, of subtle matters concerning this, the angel had said little. Where Luke would have it that the angel also told her, "The Holy Ghost shall be with thee and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee. Therefore that which is born of thee shall be called the Son of God,

and is holy," she confessed to me that she had seen the glory of the Lord if but for an instant, even as the angel rose and departed without touching her. So, did my mother know that her soul had felt a heavenly trespass and she was with child. For the scent of the air was sweeter than any garden.

Now, when Joseph learned that she was pregnant, he had thrown himself upon the earth and wept bitterly. "What prayer can be said on her behalf?" he asked. "For she is a virgin and I did not protect her. Indeed, who was it who came to know her, and in my house? Who has set this trap? As the snake was to Eve, so was this person to Mary." And he asked, "Why did you bring this shame on yourself?"

She began to cry. "I am innocent," she told him. "I have never known a man."

"Then how can it be?"

If Joseph concealed her sin, he would violate the law of the Lord. Yet if he told the priests, she would be stoned to death. Whereupon he decided, "In quiet, I will put her away from me," and he made plans to hide Mary among his relatives in another town. Yet now another angel of the Lord came to Joseph in his sleep, and told him: "Take Mary as your wife.

For it was not by a man that she is pregnant, and so her son will save our people from their sins."

Joseph awoke from sleep with a conviction that they must be wed, and he took Mary as his wife and was scrupulous. He knew her not, nor did he desire to know her until I was born. And they named me Jesus, which in Nazareth, by our rough dialect, is Yeshua, and that was still my name when I went to visit John the Baptist and was blessed by him and spent forty days on a mountain in the wilderness. Then did I go down from such a mountain to travel forth with my gospel. But of that there is much to tell.

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Joseph was proud of his ancestors. He was descended from King David, and these generations were many. For David was father to King Solomon who begat Roboam who begat Abia who begat Asa. And after nine more fathers and sons came Amon who begat Josias, father of Jechonias, who lived in that time when the Jews lost a great war and were carried away to Babylon in captivity. Yet Joseph's ancestry still descended from Jechonias to Salathiel to Zorobabel and during these generations many Jews came back to Israel from Babylon, so that the son of the son of Zorobabel would beget Eleazar who begat Matthan who begat Joseph the husband of Mary and my father on earth. Thereby was this carpenter also a son of the house of David, and that gave fire to Joseph's wish that his wife give birth in Bethlehem for that is the city of King David. And so proud was Mary of Joseph's ancestry that no matter how heavy she felt in her womb, she was ready to travel for three days south from Nazareth in Galilee down to

Judea in order that her first child be born in Bethlehem where King David had been born, and Joseph. This is the truth of why we took such a journey. It is not as Luke would explain that each Jew, by edict of Caesar Augustus, was to be taxed once a year in the city of his birth. That would have caused many journeys everywhere each year and many disruptions. Indeed, the Romans had no liking for that out of their fear of disorder.

Still it is true that I was born in Bethlehem and was delivered by the light of a candle. So was it also true that my mother gave birth in a manger because, as all know by now, there was no room at the inn.

I cannot say if that is why the smell of hay and gentle animals brings peace to me, yet love rises into my hand from the hide of such beasts, and I offer what is warm in me for return. Later when I obtained the power to bless, I often put such gifts of the spirit upon barns and mangers. But then, who has more need for favors from the Lord than the husbandman in his labors?

Now, that is the story of my birth. There was not a host of angels to surround the hour. No more is true than

that a few shepherds were guarding their flocks in the fields surrounding us and they came upon the manger soon after I was born. My mother would assert that the moonlight on that eve shone more than on other nights, and in later years, she would speak of an angel who told the shepherds: "I bring you tidings of great joy for unto you this day is born Christ the Messiah of the Lord." Once again the Gospel of Luke has the angel saying more, but Luke was, by then, allied with Paul in founding many churches to worship my name, and so Luke would add much to simple matters, and would have had it that these shepherds made my birth known to all. Yet my years were quiet when I was a boy.

Nonetheless, it may be that the shepherds did speak of the angel in places near to Jerusalem. For it is true, as Joseph would soon learn, that Herod, King of Israel, told his chief priests of a holy birth in a manger girded by the hills of Bethlehem, and declared that this was vexing to him, since the babe was attended by an angel and so might yet become a king. Herod had no need of other kings.

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In the year of my birth, Herod was already old, but when young, he had been mighty, and more than brave. All agreed that he had been the greatest warrior in Israel, and was so full of lust that he took to himself ten wives.

His Hebrew people had not loved him. For he was an Idumean from south of Judea and a Jew only in name. By his heart, he was pagan; Caesar had made him emperor over all Jews by declaration from Rome. Therefore, Herod was hated by many, including all who were most devout among us, and he put graven images of the Roman eagle on the gates of our Great Temple in Jerusalem even if such a sacrilege was forbidden by the Commandments. Moreover, Herod had a life with many unclean hours; of all his deeds none may have been so ugly than the execution of his wife, Mariamne, his most beloved. Her death came because he was afflicted with suspicion and could not trust her fidelity. Convinced that she would yet destroy him by treachery, he struck down his Mariamne.

Afterward, he mourned her, and gave large favors to the two sons he had had with her, but neither of them could love him; they sought to murder their father for the slaughter of their mother. Whereupon, they laid plots, and were discovered, and beheaded. In Rome, it was said by the Emperor Augustus: "Better to be Herod's swine than his son." That was much repeated among the Jews.

Later, as Herod grew older, he lost more of his reason until, as my mother told me, the greatest of his fears was that the babe who had been born in a manger would replace him. He sent three of his wise men to Bethlehem, and told them: "Search diligently for the young child and when you have found him, bring me word that I may come and worship the babe." Therefore did these three wise men leave the Great Temple for their short journey to Bethlehem. And on the first night, a star in the east passed above them and moved to the south and they followed the star until they came to our manger and fell down before Mary and Joseph and worshipped me. So is it told in the Gospel of Matthew. And by Matthew it is also told that the wise men opened chests with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh--but that may

not be true. For Joseph and Mary never spoke of such presents.

Of course, it can be said that the wise men did offer a gift of great value; they gave warning to Joseph that he should not live in any country governed by Herod. Indeed, these wise men were also quick to leave the land of Israel in the hour after recognizing my birth.

Nor did Joseph, once the wise men had spoken, wait until morning. In stealth, he took his small family away from Bethlehem and we traveled far into Egypt and lived there until the death of Herod which came to pass before another year was spent.

Yet, in that time, Herod exacted vengeance on many others. In his madness he was so in terror of his evil acts that he sought to bury them with deeds even more vile. When the wise men did not return to his court, he sent forth executioners to Bethlehem with a command to slay all male children born in the days of my own birth. And the words of the prophet Jeremiah were fulfilled: "Lamentation and weeping and mourning, and Rachel was weeping for her children and would not be comforted because they were not."

So it was only after Herod was dead that Joseph would dare to return to Nazareth and make a family with my mother, and they had two sons, James and John, my brothers. Yet in later years I did not feel as close to them as to the children who died in Bethlehem. I recall how on our journey home from Jerusalem when I was twelve, I grieved for those children of Bethlehem. Even as I now remembered all that Joseph had related to me, so did I also ponder over how I could demonstrate such powers before the priests of the Great Temple, and concluded that much of this wisdom had come to me from the spirits of those infants who had been slaughtered because of me. And I knew that I was left with a debt to which I must now be faithful for they had given great gifts back to the Lord by such early death.

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In Nazareth, we lived like others, and Joseph spent much time in our small synagogue and often studied our few scrolls. He could even read in the language of the old Israelites. I was sent to school in the house of prayer, and by the age of five, knew the laws that had come down to us from Moses. They were many since each commandment had given birth to another ten and over a thousand years to another ten hundred; by the year of my birth, the law of the Jews was a compendium concerning prayer and diet and sacrifice on the altar. And we also studied the five books of the Torah which are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and the book of Deuteronomy.

I was also given to read the prophecies of Elijah, and Elisha and Ezekiel and Isaiah, and much that was not in our few scrolls was remembered by our elders and teachers, so that knowledge was passed on. By such means had I not been wholly unprepared to talk to the priests of the Great Temple

in Jerusalem, having long studied the miracles wrought by Elijah and Elisha. Indeed, I even said to Joseph on our trip back to Nazareth that the Lord could not be pleased with the people of Israel since He had granted no miracles fitting to our needs, not of late. Joseph had replied: "We are under the yoke of the Romans, and it may be that we are repaying the Lord for our sins."

"When the Messiah comes," I asked Joseph, "will he drive away all Romans?"

"Yes," said Joseph, "but tell me. When comes the Messiah?"

If through the circumstances of my birth, Joseph had always treated me as worthy of respect, it was not until the day I spoke aloud in the Temple that he saw me as more than ordinary. Now, on our lonely return, despite every hazard of meeting a brigand, Joseph seemed full of joy. He said to me with much light in his eye, "You, who know, tell me when we will see the Messiah."

"That will be," I answered, "when God believes that it is time to change the hearts of men."

"Yet all powers are possible for the Lord," Joseph said.

I replied: "All but the power to change the hearts of men."

"You speak," he said, "but you do not know." And his good spirits were gone, as if to tell me that I must now be silent for fear of displeasing the Lord.

Yet I said to myself, "I will try to change the hearts of men." A peace came upon me then as if an angel had heard what I did not say aloud.

When we returned to Nazareth, I no longer knew what to believe. I could not understand why the Almighty would choose His woman from a simple family. It was Joseph, after all, not Mary, who could speak of David the King. So I could not see myself as the Son of the Lord.

Moreover, I was in awe of the Lord's majesty and I was in fear of His wrath. Speaking of the days of the flood, the words of the scroll had said: "God saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth and the Lord even said, 'I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast and the creeping things.'"

With such thoughts, I could also hear the great cry that arose out of every house in Egypt on the night when the Lord

slew all the firstborn, from the firstborn of Pharoah even to the firstborn of the poorest Egyptian. There was not an Egyptian house where there was not one son dead. And I repeated His words: "I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and to the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me." And I knew the Lord had thought often of laying such destruction upon His own people. I remembered how the Lord had said to Moses, "Behold, these people will rise up and go a-whoring after the gods of strangers, and will forsake Me and break My covenant and then shall My anger be kindled against them." And He had also spoken of the limitless fire that "shall burn unto the lowest hell and shall consume the earth with her increase and shall set afire the foundations of the mountains. They shall be burnt with hunger and devoured with burning heat and with bitter destruction. I shall destroy both the young man and the virgin, the suckling also and the man with gray hair. Indeed would I scatter them into all corners were it not that I feared the wrath of the enemy."

And that left me in much confusion. I wondered how any enemy could feel equal to a Lord who was so immense and

beyond measure. Why did God see Himself in contest with other gods?

I do not know if it was His wrath for having such thoughts but the great fever came down upon me then, and I was ill and near death in my twelfth year. So it happened that I was left without memory of everything that Joseph had told me concerning my conception and birth.

When I recovered, I was again like other children, yet also a young man, for I was thirteen. I began my labors as an apprentice in the shop where Joseph was master carpenter and spent seven years as a simple apprentice and seven again as a full apprentice and by then had become a young master. And my two younger brothers worked also in Joseph's shop.

And the first seven years were spent acquiring the wisdom of how to make mud-bricks for walls, and to put up framing for roofs and doors and windows. And I also learned how to build beds and tables, stools and cabinets, boxes of all sizes, and plows and yokes for oxen. In my second apprenticeship I worked, however, in Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee, and it was an hour on foot from Nazareth. There I learned more of my craft in fine houses with walls of stone

needing good furniture to be fashioned, and Joseph taught me much for he knew many arts.

Here, too, lived Herod Antipas, the son of Herod, and this Herod Antipas was now King of Galilee, Idumea and Judea. When I would see him pass in procession, I did not know why my heart raced like a steed who bolts upon seeing an evil spirit in his path. Yet in such manner my heart did speak to me whenever I went by the palace of Herod Antipas in Sepphoris.

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Joseph used to say: "Where wood is joined to other wood by a carpenter who cares for the subtlety of the joint, so will the first board cleave to the second as in a marriage that is blessed. But planks joined by nails fall apart when the nail rusts even as a marriage is corroded by adultery."

I do not know if it was for such a reason, but I was never given tools made of iron until after I had served my first seven years with tools of bronze. And Joseph spoke often of the trials of carpenters in other lands from ancient times: he would tell how the Egyptians could fashion small chests with great delicacy, yet these Egyptians had no better wood than acacia and sycamore, or fig and tamarisk, and such woods were fibrous and knotty, so that each surface had to be finished with paint and gold leaf. It was only when trade with Lebanon had commenced for cedar, cypress, and with the land of Punt for ebony, that these Egyptians could make their renowned chests, but by then they how knew to cut ivory for

inlay and could excise all knots in inferior wood, and cover such defects with a veneer of small chips. The work of Egyptians, then, if limited by bronze tools, was still more beautiful than our own despite the softness of their chisels. Even to make a round hole in wood required much care, and their bow drills were not the equal of the iron brace drill Joseph would employ. The Egyptians, nonetheless, had been masters of the art of mitred joints, and the use of hard wood for dowels.

Now, for our work, we had iron and it took much apprenticeship to work with this metal inasmuch as we began with great fear. All Essenes know of the fourth beast in the visions of Daniel and how the teeth of this monster are of iron and terrible in their strength.

All the same, we knew how to work with such tools and with the use of lead, learned how to smelt iron into steel. We would see swords and fine cutlery that came from foundries as far away as Damascus. And steel was more costly than gold.

In Sepphoris, we also had many woods with which to work: maple, beech, oak, yew, fir, lime, and cedar, and we would

select oak, whose wood was hard, as framing for a door, and maple, which was supple, for beds, keeping cedar that was sweet-smelling for chests. Wild olive, being very hard, was chosen for tool handles. And citron wood, like steel, was more expensive than gold; we used it only for the veneers of chests.

I had friends in other workshops who had learned to plate fine objects in gold and silver; some of us even spoke of travelling to Rome so that we might apprentice our skills to great masters. But this was no more than the chatter of apprentices, and I was often mocked by others for the serious manner in which I observed our numerous Essene practices of purity, whereas Rome was, by every account, full of license. It was said that the Emperor and Empress indulged in lewd sports about which none of us dared to speak for fear that vile sores would visit our tongues. And I suffered from onslaughts of lust which were much at odds with my beliefs in cleanliness.

Yet, for most hours, my trade was enough. I was proud of the tools in my box, a rasp, a plane, a hammer, an auger, a gimlet, an adze, a cubit rule, a saw, and three chisels for

paring, as well as a gouge; all such were mine. And in the last year of my second apprenticeship, I acquired my own lathe. I was also adept with brace and drill, a claw hammer, and a draw knife, and learned how to season wood by stripping the bark from moist trees to hasten their drying before they were felled. Yet I also knew how to store dry wood beneath fresh manure, so that when worked, it did not split.

When we used fir for flooring, prayers had to be offered that it not burn. For fire seemed attracted to fir. And other prayers were to be said over winter oak, turkey oak, and beech, all of which were liable to decay. Alder was excellent for the foundations of small houses since the wood was so pure in nature that it would not rot beneath the earth. And cypress was blessed; it resisted the worm.

Joseph also instructed us on many ways to put up walls of stone for large buildings. He understood much about red basalt and cream limestone from Tivoli, and travertine marble which cracks in fire yet is immune to ice, (and ice did come upon us in winter in the hills of Galilee.) Although I never saw it for myself, Joseph told of a substance called pozzolana, an earth from the volcanos south of Rome; this

pozzolana, once mixed with lime, became a cement. Which led me to think of the wisdom of the Lord who knew the earth so well that heavy soil thrown far from its bed by a volcano could find some new nature for itself, and thereafter be ready to hold all stones together. Often would I ponder on the nature of the Lord and of all the resources of His Kingdom that we worked upon with our hands.

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In the year I became thirty I also began to dream of the Great Temple in Jerusalem, and wondered if it were late for me to learn how to cast in gold and silver, and so be able to enrich the altar by gilding its candlestick and its pouring vessels and censers, and other golden ornaments. Yet at such times I also felt much greed, and it was stifling to the throat; I had to wonder whether working with gold was wise for those who would be modest. Still, I was ready to look for change.

Soon, Joseph died, and I mourned him, and was distraught. For his death brought back to me all that he had recounted about my mother and the angel. Yet if I knew again that the Lord was my Father, He remained distant. I had need to look for the wisdom of others. There was much in me I could not name, and it must be brought forth; whatever was not brought forth, could yet lay waste to oneself or to others. It was then I decided to make a pilgrimage to John

the Baptist.

Of him, much may be told. It could even be said that I knew him before I saw him; he was my cousin, and many things had been remarked about him in my family. I had often heard that he was a prophet, and a holy man, yet suffered from ill-repute among the Pharisees in our temple. These Pharisees of Nazareth were, in the main, devout, although never equal in piety to those wearing the white garb of the Essenes; many Pharisees, however, being merchants, grew fat even as we Essenes grew thin. And some of these merchants with large families became rich enough to move to Sepphoris where they built fine homes. Still, they would come back often to our small temple for prayer; when they spoke of John the Baptist, there was little to be heard about him that sounded agreeable to my ear. I did not know John, but I felt near to him; between his birth and mine were likenesses.

His father, Zacharias, an Essene priest, was related to Joseph, being also a descendant of the family of David. And the wife of Zacharias, Elizabeth, was of the daughters of Aaron; her ancestors knew Moses. Both Zacharias and Elizabeth were as thin as those tall blades of grass that

grow dry in summer drought; each was like an Essene of the Essenes. For both believed that the body was a living temple, and so one's prayers could wage holy war against the powers of evil.

On such understanding had Zacharias and Elizabeth been married for many years and remained childless. And Elizabeth mourned that she was barren, and no longer young.

Yet, on a day, it happened that Zacharias stood alone by the altar performing a priest's office, and saw an angel appear. Indeed this angel was that same Gabriel who would speak to my mother in another six months.

Gabriel said: "Do not tremble, Zacharias. Elizabeth has been heard by the Lord and she shall bear thee a son. You are to call him John and he shall be great in the sight of the Lord."

Now, Zacharias lived by observance and prayer; he saw little of visions. So he said to the angel: "How can I know of this? I am an old man and my wife is near to me in age." Whereupon, the angel grew angry and said: "Because you do not believe my words, I will strike you dumb until the day that Elizabeth bears her child." And when Zacharias came out

of the temple, everyone wondered. For he could not speak. He sought to utter a few words, and nothing was heard but the straining of his throat.

He returned to his house and was silent. Soon, he would marvel. For on that same day he was able to give issue to his wife Elizabeth, and she conceived, and was then so fearful that she might lose what had been given her that she hid in her home and bed for five months.

It was in the sixth month of the pregnancy of Elizabeth, that Gabriel visited my mother. Afterward, even as Joseph was wondering how to hide her among his family, Mary decided to go up into the high hills where Zacharias lived.

In that moment when Elizabeth beheld Mary, so did Elizabeth feel her babe leap in her womb, and for the first time. She spoke out with a loud voice: "Blessed art thou, Mary, and all generations to come shall call you blessed."

These words were so fixed in my mother's ear that her pride later became as great as her humility. Nor was it easy to contradict her will. She would say: "He that is mighty has done to me great things." Naturally, it was my mother's belief that she was blessed and all she spoke was the truth.

Now, after John the Baptist was born, it was thought by neighbors and cousins that he would be called Zacharias, but his father, still unable to speak, took a table and upon it wrote down these words: "His name is John." Then they all began to marvel, for at that moment the mouth of Zacharias opened, and his tongue grew loose, and he spoke. And he gave praise to God for the deliverance of his voice.

Yet when these relatives returned to their homes, so did many say: "What manner of child shall this be?" For none of their kindred had ever been called by the name John. Yet, Zacharias, having regained his speech, was mighty in voice and blessed his son, and said, "Thou shall give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, even as I have been given remission from my sin of doubting the words of the angel."

And when John grew up, and was lean like his father and mother, he began to live in the desert and he preached near a ford in the River Jordan where he would remonstrate with those pilgrims of the people of Israel who came to visit for fear of their sins. He preached with such determination that the High Priest sent Levites out from Jerusalem to ask: "Who

art thou? Art thou the Christ?" For in those years Christ was the Greek word for the Messiah. And many from Jerusalem spoke in Greek and said it was Christ who would come to save the Jews.

But John said, "I baptize with water. I am not the Christ."

"Then who are you?" they asked. "Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I walk in the steps of Elijah but I am not that prophet. I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' and those are the words of the prophet Isaiah."

Now these Pharisees said to him, "You perform baptisms yet you are not Christ nor Elijah nor Isaiah?"

And John replied, "I baptize with water, no more. But there is one coming after me whom you do not know. He is preferred above me by the Lord, and I am not worthy to unloose the straps of his sandals." And this was said by John on the day before I went on my visit to him, even as he would tell me.

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Much curiosity had grown in me about the nature of this cousin. For he would only give baptism in the wilderness. He stayed out to the east of Judea by the River Jordan, and all who came to him had to confess their sins if they wished to be immersed by him in the river. Yet many said that this baptism would change people's hearts.

And they also said, and it was true, as I could see when I met him, that his clothes were of camel's hide, and he had but one girdle of such skin to conceal his loins. Thereby he was so naked to the sun that he was darker than anyone who came to visit. I had also heard that he was not only a thin man but had a thin beard and ate nothing but locusts and wild honey for meat and wine inspire thoughts that are host to demons. So John ate the food of the poorest of the poor. Yet these locusts may have given him the power to strip many fields of disbelief in the hearts of those who came to his ford by the River Jordan. And the wild honey gave warmth to

his voice when he repeated the words of Isaiah: "The crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Yet I also heard that his countenance was severe. When multitudes came to be baptized, so would he greet them by saying, "Generation of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth, therefore, fruits worthy of repentance."

The people would ask: "What shall we do?" And John the Baptist would answer: "Let him who has two coats give one to the man who has none." He would always speak of the man mightier than himself who was yet to come, and this person would be Messiah. This person would not baptize with water but with the Holy Ghost.

Yet when I first saw him, I wished to hide my face from John. For I knew that he would not be long among us. And I knew this as if I had heard a beating of wings overhead.

I had come with many people and could stare at John before he saw me, and so was able to watch all the pilgrims who were baptized and then departed. I remained. Even in the loneliness of this place in the desert, he could not see

me for I had concealed myself in the shadow of a rock. It was only when the sun became hot upon me that I walked forward, to which he said, "I have waited for you."

In his eyes was more light than the sky yet they were paler than the moon. His beard was long. The hair that grew from his ears was matted and so, too, was the hair that grew from his cheeks. The wing and the leg of a locust were caught in his beard. I wondered how this man who bathed others and washed himself numerous times a day could still have such leavings. Yet it was not unfitting that his face was like a forest and small creatures would live within.

Looking at me, he said, "You are my cousin." And also said, "Today, I knew that you would come."

"How," I asked, "can you know?"

He sighed. His breath was as lonely as the wind that passes through empty places. He said, "I have been told to wait for you, and I am tired. So it is good that you are here."

I felt much emotion when he spoke and soon confessed my sins--which I had never done for another. I confessed to moments of disrespect toward my mother, and of my battles

with lustful thoughts. There had been greed in these thoughts and unkindness when judging others. Yet, in no way had I sinned beyond these matters.

"Well," he said, "repent ye still. With sin it is always more than we know." And John the Baptist came behind me as I entered the water and with the strength of a desert lion, so did his hand seize me by the nose, and, with his other hand pressing upon my forehead, he thrust me back into the river. And passing this quickly did I pass from air to water, I was gasping at loss of breath and all the water swallowed. Still I saw many things in this moment as if heaven had opened and the holiest of spirits was descending in the shape of a dove. It was as if a whole fountain of the Holy Spirit had descended on me. And when I came up from the water, the dove was on my shoulder. I felt as if much had returned to me from all that had been lost before this day. I was one again with my soul, a poor man but good. And then I felt more. I knew of future glory. It was as if a million, nay, a million million of souls would follow me and have understanding so soon as they could feel this instant when God's angel was near.

I heard a voice come out of the heavens. It was in my ear and it said: "Thou art My beloved Son and in thee am I well pleased." That way the word of the Lord came to me, and He spoke the same words He had used with Jeremiah: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee, and I have been waiting for you to come." Fear and exaltation were in me then, and the eyes of John the Baptist gleamed with illumination. I raised my face to the heavens and said, "Lord God, I cannot speak for I am like a child."

And again the Lord uttered the same words He had used with Jeremiah. I heard: "Say not 'I am a child' for thou shalt go to all places that I shall send thee and whatsoever I command thee, shalt thou speak, and be not afraid of men's faces." And was it His finger that blessed my mouth even as the beak of the dove touched my lips? For the Lord also said: "Behold, I put My words in your mouth. This day I set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms to root out and to pull down, and to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant." And His Word was not only in my heart but like a burning fire in my bones. Now, John withdrew his hand from my head and we stood in the river. Away went the dove. And

John and I spoke to each other. I will tell of that, and soon. For when I took my departure, I knew that I would never see him again. He began to sing even as I left, but it was to the River Jordan, not to me. And the taste of that brown river was still in my throat and the dust of the desert in my nostrils as I set out on my long march home to Nazareth.

-11-

It was late in the afternoon. By that light many rocks about me turned to gold and they lay there much as the overthrown walls of a temple open to desert vultures. I could still hear John the Baptist. He knew no song and the music of his throat sounded like the voice of a ram.

I walked with much strength. For I was not like other men and my legs took larger strides than before. I had been blessed and the Lord had been near to me.

A great cloud came over the sky as I walked and there was downpour. A rainbow rose from one end of the desert to touch the other end, and above me was the radiance of the Lord. Soon it dazzled my eyes and I lay down in this hot damp sand and heard His voice. He said: "Son of Man, stand upon your feet."

And the spirit entered, and lifted me, and He said, "Once I spoke to the prophet Ezekiel and he saved our people in Babylon. Now, these words once given to Ezekiel are for

you: Son of Man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a nation that hath rebelled against Me, even unto this very day for they are impudent children and stiffhearted. I shall send you unto them and you shall say unto them, 'Thus saith the Lord God.' And they, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear to hear, yet shall know that there has been a prophet among them. And thou, Son of Man, be not afraid of their words though briars and thorns be with thee and thou must dwell among scorpions, but get thee into the house of Israel and speak My words unto them for thou art not sent to a people of a strange speech and of a hard language whose words you cannot understand, but to the house of Israel. Surely had I sent thee to strangers they would harken to thee. But the house of Israel is impudent and hard-hearted. Behold, I will make thy face strong against their face and thy forehead strong against theirs. So, fear them not, and neither be dismayed at their looks."

Then this voice said into my ear: "Those were My words to Ezekiel. But to you I say: You are My son. You were conceived by Me and you will be mightier than a prophet, yea, even mightier than the prophet Ezekiel."

I still had many hours to travel across land I did not know well. Again, I knew exaltation, and I knew fear. I was also weary. The scrolls I had been studying since childhood were not as near to me as the words of this high Lord, my God, yet I could only fear Him now that He was near. For His temper was as loud as thunder and the sound of His voice was like the echo of great rocks when they reverberate in their fall. And I did not know how to serve a Lord who could leave boils upon the flesh of every man and beast in the land of Egypt, and cast hail to blight every herb of the field. He had set fire in the grass until every tree of the field was consumed and broken. I raised my hands toward heaven as if to ask whether I was truly the one to exercise His force considering that He was a Lord so vengeful. And God said to me, "Since you are not yet strong, do not return to your home. Go up rather into that mountain which is there before you. And in that wilderness, fast among those rocks broken by My lightning. And drink the water that is beneath the rocks. But sup on no food.

"Before the sun sets on the last of your days of fast, you will know why I have chosen you for the Christ. As My

Messiah, will you be anointed. For," said the Lord, "no mountain is equal to this mountain without a name."

He knew whereof He spoke. As I climbed, darkness came, and I had to take my rest on ground covered by serpents and scorpions. Yet none came near. And in the morning I climbed further and for much of the day upward on this mountain. And it was worthy of the lamentations of the prophet Isaiah, for one could say that the cormorant and the bittern possessed it.

I saw much emptiness in every direction. And on the ramparts of the rock, the vultures looked down on me, side by side, every one with her mate. It was then I thought of how John the Baptist in saying farewell, had asked: "When I immersed you, did the light of the Lord appear?"

And I had said: "Is it not death and destruction to see Him?"

He replied: "For all but the Christ." And then said John: "Once the Holy Spirit came to me. And was so near that I put my hands before my eyes. But the Holy Spirit said: 'You cannot see My face, yet I will turn away and you can gaze upon My back,' and He allowed me to see that His

back was noble, a noble back." Then, John grasped my arm. "I have known since I was a child that my cousin must replace me. For my mother spoke of your mother." He kissed me on both cheeks. "I baptize only with water," he said, "and can cleanse any and all souls who have truly repented, even as water can extinguish fire. But you will baptize with the Holy Spirit and so bring God's mercy to dispel evil and heal the sick." And he kissed me again.

I thought of this conversation before I slept, and was shielded in slumber from serpents and scorpions. It was hard not to remember the breath of John the Baptist when he embraced me for it was full of all that is in the odor of an exhausted man. And indeed, no matter how often one seeks water to soothe the flesh, such an odor cannot be separated from the flesh inasmuch as great fatigue speaks of all that has been lost to one's striving. Albeit, his skin was honest in its scent and full of the loneliness of the desert and its rocks. And so did he smell also of the waters of the river Jordan and the heavy wisdom of its mud and its silt.

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The summit of the mountain was like a place where many had been buried; even as one climbed, the rocks stood about like tombs. Treacherous were some of the steps between. It was midday and the heat of the sun was on me.

At the summit I sat in the shadow of a great stone and looked out on the lands of Israel, upon Galilee to the north and Judea to the south. Peering through the haze, and it was of a golden hue, I wondered whether spires of gold were rising from the hills of the holy city. Yet I was also hungry and did not think long on Jerusalem; my stomach was eager after living without food for a day and receiving so much in the way of blessing.

Yet I also knew why the Lord had sent me to the summit of this mountain without a name. For it was not enough to be His son, and cousin to John the Baptist. I must suffer. I must pass through trials. Indeed, the first test must be that I do not eat. Yet, even as I said to myself, "I will

not take food until sundown," the Lord said, (and neither could I see Him nor feel His presence other than that His voice was in my ear) but He said: "You will fast until I tell you to go back to food."

So I was without nourishment that day and the next. And by the fifth day when the pangs of my stomach had given way to a grave emptiness of spirit, I felt weak, and no longer knew if enough strength remained to climb down from this mountain. So I said aloud, "How long, oh, Lord?" and He replied, "Long. It will be long."

Since I was not there for dispute, but to follow His will, fasting grew easier. I shielded myself from the sun and came to love the taste of water and the forgotten wisdom that is found in the shadow of rocks, until they grew too cold at night for any wisdom. And the air in the middle of each night was chill, for no warmth came to me from within. And no plants grew on the summit of this mountain. Which was as well. For there were hours when I could have supped on their thorns.

In the second week, I had visions of the ancestor of Joseph, King David, and knew that he had committed a great

sin. I could not recall the offense, but I did remember that in a dream the Lord had appeared to the son of David, King Solomon, and asked: "What shall I give thee?"

And Solomon replied: "Oh Lord, my God, I am but a little child. I know not how to go out nor to come in and Thy servant is in the midst of Thy people, a great people that cannot be numbered nor counted. Give therefore Thy servant an understanding heart that I may discern between good and bad, for who is able to judge this, so great a people?"

And I recalled that this speech so pleased the Lord that He said to Solomon: "Because thou hast not asked for a long life nor for riches nor begged for the death of thine enemies, but asked for discernment in judgment, then, behold, I have given thee a wise and understanding heart."

And God gave Solomon all that he had not asked for, both riches and honors, until there were no kings like Solomon in those days. And Solomon had great wisdom.

Still, I heard the voice of the Lord also saying: "Solomon did not keep My commandments. Solomon spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs were a thousand and five.

All people came to hear the wisdom of Solomon for he exceeded all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom. And these kings brought him silver, ivory, apes and peacocks. But," said the Lord to my ear, "King Solomon loved many strange women: the daughter of Pharaoh and the women of the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Edomites, the Sedonians and the Hittites, whereas I had said unto the children of Israel, 'Ye shall not go in to them. For surely they will turn your heart toward their gods.' But Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines and when Solomon was old, his heart was not perfect with Me. I had given him too many gifts. So," said the Lord, "I will not give you riches and you will never tarry with a woman or you shall lose the Lord."

And it was then I knew that He had given me Solomon's sins on which to meditate and that was an advantage not given to Solomon. And I, being without food, had no desire for a woman, nor did I feel at odds with the Lord's decision. My fast continued.

The prophets were often with me in these weeks: Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Daniel and Ezekiel. For I recalled

these prophets' words as if they were my own, and soon I had a dream where I was with the prophet Elijah, and had contests with the prophets of Baal. I became the equal of more than forty such pagan prophets who came to make a sacrifice of a bullock while crying aloud and lacerating themselves with knives and lances to show their devotion to Baal. Blood spurted from the wounds of these prophets, yet no voice answered; the God Baal could not speak. And being equal to Elijah in my dream, so did I restore the altar of the Lord that these prophets of Baal had torn down. And I took twelve stones to stand for the twelve tribes of the sons of Jacob, and with those stones I built an altar and dug a trench about it. And put wood on the altar and cut the bullock into pieces, laying the raw flesh upon the wood. And I also filled four barrels with water and poured it on the sacrifice until water ran into the trench around the altar.

And with all of this water soaking into the sacrifice on the altar, I said to the prophets of Baal: "Hear me, O Lord, that this people may know that Thou art the Lord God."

And the fire of the Lord consumed the sacrifice of the bullock and the sopping wood and the wet stones and licked up

all the water that was in the trench. And I was able to slay these forty prophets of Baal with a sword.

Now it came to me that I was dreaming. I was not Elijah; I was remembering the scroll of Elijah. Yet by this dream I knew that my fast would continue until forty days and forty nights had passed. And I understood why I was here. For my people of Israel were in peril and in much danger of God's final judgment if they did not change their ways.

And I saw how my youth had passed with more thought given to the wood with which I worked than to my people, and I remembered how Joseph would say: "All share in the sinfulness of Israel because we make no effort to overcome it."

I was yet to learn that I would care for sinners more than I would love those who are pious, and would yet believe that sinners might be of more worth in their saving, especially if one would speak of those who sinned with a light in their eye. For that light, even as they stole back into sin, belonged to the eye of God. But for now, since I would live with the wisdom of Isaiah, I quoted his words to myself: "Though Thy people Israel be as the sand of the sea,

yet a remnant of them shall return." And there in my fast in the fifth week and nigh unto the sixth week, full of the spirit of Isaiah, I had hope that with this remnant of good Jews I might recover all that had been lost in the nation, and I would repeat the sayings of Isaiah aloud, speaking even into the eye of the sun until my eyes burned and I was obliged to return to the shade. I pondered over these prayers I would use with sinners and knew I would tell them, as did Isaiah: "Your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, plead for the widow. Come now and let us reason together, sayeth the Lord."

And it was the fortieth day. The Lord said to me as evening came, "Tomorrow you may step down from the mountain and take food," and hunger came back to me at His words, as if all I had not eaten in forty days had now become ravenous.

Yet, even as I was beginning to await the satisfaction of my appetite, so did the Lord also say, "Tonight, remain on the mountain. A visitor will come."

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I do not know what understanding was between Them, but the visitor soon arrived. And he was as handsome as a prince. He had a gold ornament on a gold chain about his neck, and in this ornament was the face of a ram, bestial yet handsome, more handsome than any ram I had seen. The hair of this prince was as long as my own and lustrous and he was beautiful, indeed, a man of much beauty.

I said to myself, "The Devil is the most beautiful creature God ever made."

Since the visitor was dressed in robes of velvet that were as purple as the late evening, and he wore a crown as golden as the sun, he could be no other than who I thought, and indeed he soon introduced himself. I was not surprised. For he had climbed the mountain yet there was no dust on the robes of Satan nor sweat upon his skin.

His first words were: "Do you know how the prophet Isaiah met his death?"

I was overcome with silence and so was obliged to hear him say: "Isaiah was killed by a Jewish king, the pagan Manasseh, cohort of Amon. A vassal of Assyria, was Manasseh, and a bad Jew." And the Devil nodded as if he, too, were a Jew (which I knew he was not, but must be pagan.) Then he held up one finger and spoke more: "This Manasseh, wishing to destroy the religion of his fathers, sent out a royal order that Isaiah, who was much revered and of much culture and lived with comfort in the city, must be uprooted from his home and hunted like an animal. And Isaiah, hearing of this, fled from his city, and the soldiers of Manasseh set out to chase Isaiah into the wilderness. There, the prophet, desperate in his peril, looked for a tree that would contain a hollow large enough to allow a man to stand within. This sanctuary," said the Devil, "was found in a stout oak with a rotten center, and this the prophet chose for his hiding place. But the officers of Manasseh discovered this concealment, and they brought a great saw to the tree and cut it in half even as Isaiah was hiding there. In this manner, did Isaiah die. And he screamed in his death. Did you know?" asked the Devil.

"Not of such a death did I hear."

Whereupon he laughed. "For gods, as for men, knowledge is but the part of a part."

I felt weakened by this story more than by any deprivation of the fast.

He, however, was comfortable, and kept speaking. "The manner in which Isaiah met his death need not give you large concern," he said, "since you are not a prophet but, indeed, the Son! To my recollection, which is not small, the Lord has performed an act of a new kind. And it is much to be contemplated upon."

Saying which, he looked at me fondly. His eyes were as black marble, but there were lights within like stars. He said, "Are you hungry? Are you in need of drink?" And he brought forth a jug of wine and a leg of lamb, well cooked, which I would not have known were beneath his robes yet he produced them. And approached me closely, so closely that I took in the spirit of the wine by my nostrils and the gravies of the lamb, yea, even the smell of the Devil himself, although I could only perceive it through a small cloud of perfume rising from his neck, his armpits and out of the

folds of his robe. Despite all such scents, so could I also perceive how greed came forth from his body. For that was kin to the odor which lives between the buttocks and rouses offense in us. Therefore did I refuse his food, even as the odor of his body entered into my appetite, but such odor was like the savory that comes from an oven when food long roasted is ready for the table. And he, seeing such deliberation, smiled once more and said, "But of course, you have no need of this. Being the Son of God, you can as easily command these stones to be bread. Which is proper food for an Essene. However, your garment is neither clean nor free of dust. Indeed, that you are the Son of God," said the Devil aloud, "is a surprise to me. Why did your Father choose you? Say to Him when next you converse that I salute Him. For, do you know? Your Father and I have had much traffic and some dispute, and so we are always eager to obtain word of the Other and His doings. Indeed, on those occasions when We meet, I tell Him that men and women are the crown of all He has conceived among the animals and the plants of the field, but that it is I, not He, who has the better understanding of this Creation. For His work has

given issue to many small gods and creatures and spirits that He does not know as well as myself. Of course, I was once His servant, His most trusted servant. Contemplate then how well I understand Him. As above, so below. But what lives below knows better how it is for those above, than those above can know below."

I was amazed by this Devil. He did not inspire fear but comfort. And by such comfort did I know, as I had not known before, how it might be to feel like a sinner in a low canteen drinking wine. The labors of this last day of fast now became as balm to my limbs; I could talk to the Devil; he was comfortable. If his odor was in part disturbing, it was also not without sympathy for desires in me I had not yet known. Yet, having granted this much, I could not allow that God, the Lord of the Universe, did not understand His creation better than my visitor. "Not ever is it possible," I exclaimed. "He is all-powerful. The heavens and the earth, the stars and the sun, bow down to Him."

I had given vexation. For one moment, Satan snorted like a horse unwilling to accept the bridle.

"Your Father," said the Devil, "is but one God among

Many. You might take account of the myriad respected by the Romans. Are we to take no account of the will of the Romans? Why, your Father does not even have the power to command His own Jews even though they see Him as the only One. You would do well to consider the size of His rages; they are unseemly rages for a great god and are swollen in proportion. He issues threats, but they are too many. He cannot bear disputation of mind or spirit with Him. Not from those He would call his own. Whereas I confide to you that a hint of disobedience and a whiff of treachery are among the joys of life, and are to be ranked with its spoils rather than its evils."

"Never so," I was able to answer. "My Father is God and of many dimensions, and of all dimensions."

But the Devil replied, "He is not in command of Himself!"

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"Your Father," said the Devil, for he did not cease to speak, "does not have the right to seek whole and complete obedience from His people. He does not comprehend that women are creatures other than men, and being much unlike men, live with separate understanding. Indeed, your Father has no inkling of women; His scorn for them is shared by His prophets who speak, so they claim, with His voice, and indeed He does not often reprimand them. Look to Isaiah! Declare to me that Isaiah does not speak out of your Father's heart when he says: 'Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with stretched-forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet: therefore the Lord will smite with a scabbard the crown of the head of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will discover their secret parts.' Their secret parts!" repeated the Devil. And he continued to speak with the words of Isaiah: "'The Lord will take away their attires like the

moon, the bracelets and the bonnets, the ornaments of the legs, the earrings, the rings and the nose-jewels, the fine linen, the hoods and the veils. And it shall come to pass that instead of sweet smell there shall be stink; and instead of a girdle, a rent; for lovely hair, there shall be baldness, and burning instead of beauty."

"My Father was speaking of the nation of Zion," I said. "So was it taught to us."

"No," replied the Devil. "He pretends to speak of the nation of Zion. But it is women He calumniates. For when He would address the nation of Israel, He speaks only to men: 'The indignation of the Lord is upon all nations, and His fury upon all their armies: He hath utterly destroyed them, He hath delivered them to the slaughter. Their slain also shall be cast out and their offal shall come up out of their carcasses and the mountains shall be melted with their blood.' What causes such a rage in your Father? Is it not inchoate? His failures burn in His heart. Does He not suspect that He may not be all-powerful? But, no! He does not have enough sufficiency of spirit to say: 'Yes, I have lost, yet my soldiers were honest and fought well.' No, He

is vengeful. It is all beyond measure. 'The palaces will be forsaken,' says Isaiah, 'the forts and towers shall be dens forever, until the Spirit be poured upon us from on High.'

"But when," asked the Devil, "will the Spirit be poured upon us and from on High? Your Father would send you forth to improve the hearts of men when His own heart is caked with the blood of those He has slaughtered. His love of all He has created is choked by the curses He has laid upon women. If His rages are mighty, yet do they never accomplish His desire; His language is burdened with too much adoration of the grandeur He pretends to despise.

"Discover the face of your Father in these words of Ezekiel. For Ezekiel, mark you, heard them from the Lord! How then can you tell me that your Father is not filled with an adoration of women that He hides from Himself even as He hates their power to entice Him: 'I swore unto thee and entered into a covenant with thee,' He says, 'and thou becamest mine. I washed thee with water; yea, I thoroughly washed away thy blood, and I anointed thee with oil. I clothed thee also in brodered work, and fine linen, and I covered thee with silk, with ornaments, and I put bracelets

upon thy hands and a chain on thy neck, and earrings in thine ears, and a beautiful crown upon thine head. Thou wast decked with gold and silver; thou didst eat fine bread, and honey, and oil: and thou wast exceedingly beautiful, and thou didst prosper into a kingdom. And thy reknown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it was perfect through my comeliness, which I had put upon thee.' These," said the Devil, "are the words of your Father. Listen to how He complains: 'But thou didst trust in thine own beauty, and played the harlot because of thy reknown, and poured out thy fornications on everyone that passed by, and multiplied thy whoredoms. Thou hast also committed fornication with the Egyptians, thy neighbors, great of flesh; and hast played the whore also with the Assyrians because thou wast insatiable.

"Wherefore, O harlot, because thy filthiness was poured out, and thy nakedness discovered, therefore I will gather all thy lovers with whom thou hast taken pleasure; and will gather them round about against thee, and give thee into their hand, and they shall throw down thine eminent place, and shall strip thee of thy clothes, and shall take thy fair jewels and leave thee naked and bare, and they shall stone

thee, and thrust thee through with their swords. And they shall burn thy houses with fire, and execute judgments upon thee in the sight of many women: and I will cause thee to cease from playing the harlot.'

"Why," asked the Devil, "must all of this take place? Is it in order to scorn Jerusalem? Say rather that your Father's language reeks of desire."

"Your words are pollutions."

Satan answered: "Yes, yes, the Lord says not to fornicate. Yet His tongue is as ripe with lust as my own."

I was in great confusion. Could I deny that my Father could be as cruel in His language as Satan, by repute, was in his deeds? No, it was worse. My loins had quickened as I listened to my Father's language.

Now, the Devil said to me, "Do you think of yourself as a man who sits on the summit of this mountain? Rather, you are sitting beside me. Look, we are above the holy city."

His embrace of my vision was so complete that I now saw the city of Jerusalem and, indeed, it was beneath us. I felt vertigo. For we were seated on the highest dome of the Great Temple in Jerusalem. At that moment, the Devil said to me,

"If you are really the Son of God, feel free to throw yourself down from here. Leap! Cast yourself out. Your Father's angels will bear you down, and softly."

I felt a temptation to jump.

An abyss was below me. It would be there for all generations to come. They would stand on a height and live in the wind of that unruly spirit who also lives in our breath, and has great fear of the leap. So did the Devil look at me again with his dark eyes and the points of light within his eyes were like a night of stars; he would promise glory. "If you stay with your Father you will labor for Him, and you will be consumed. Jump! You can save yourself. Jump!"

By the light in his dark eyes, I knew that I would not be saved. I would be smashed. Yet such extinction would be brief. My return to the living would be quick. The Devil did not have to utter one more word. He had taken me into him. I could know his speech even when he did not utter it.

He was telling me of a life to come. It would be bountiful with riches and the joy of women. "All is mine!"

cried Satan.

Indeed, I saw that greed was godly to him; from crude greed could be brought forth works of great power. "Those who have gained loyalty to me," said the Devil, "sit upon the earth with such command that they would never leave behind those little turds, fit for a goat, that are pinched out from the bony cheeks of your friend John who will not even shit on the Sabbath, and on other days must carry a small hoe to cover his leavings."

If I jumped, the Devil could possess me; I would have gone to my death at his bidding.

At this moment, he opened his lips and said aloud: "In secrecy will you be reborn. God will not know. I have the power to distract."

And I, in this same moment, wondered whether I could perform a miracle. Could I leap but not fall? Could I fly? By powers given to me by the Lord, could I fly?

Could I know? Satan now stood between my Father and me. Might he not have the power to steal the wings of His angel? So I did not jump. Instead, I said: "It is written: 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.'" But I did not know

whether I spoke out of my own heart

Then the Devil led me from the spire of this Great Temple on up to an exceedingly high mountain, higher than all, and I would have shivered if it had been the peak of a true summit for we were surrounded by snow. Yet it was but a vision. From this height, he could show me those kingdoms of the world that were to the north, the east, the south and the west. I saw wonders. Yet so much passed in procession, and so fast, that I knew such promises need never be kept. Moreover, did I want his gifts? I was an Essene. Was it not too late to enjoy greed, and the desire for riches or women? And I had an inkling of why God had chosen Mary and Joseph to be my family. So, I said, "Get thee hence, Satan." If my voice was weak, I repeated it, "Get thee hence, Satan," and it was stronger, for now it was ready to draw upon the strength that comes from emptiness (it being the wisdom of the Lord to show how even in fasting is strength). And I had the power to look into the dark eyes of Satan and say: "It is not you I want. It is my Father."

Satan gave a cry like a wild goat just wounded by the herdsman's spear. "Your Father," he cried, "will destroy the

His own universe. And for too little!" And he left. Behold, I had another vision of angels. They gathered about to minister unto me and bathe my eyes. I slept.

In the morning I awoke to see myself on this same mountain where I had lived for forty days and I was ready to come down. The road to Nazareth proved long and empty. Yet the next day and the next, no brigands attacked. Which was as well for my hour with the Devil had left me spent. My breath was foul. Nor did I feel that I had escaped altogether.

Yet I was not distraught. For as I marched, so could I recite the words of Isaiah: "Unto us," I declared, "a child is born; unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders; and his name shall be called wonderful, counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the prince of peace." And if I were too insignificant for such words, I had to suppose that God had chosen me for His son because I had been born and I had lived in the midst of common people, rather than like a king. Thereby I had understanding of many small virtues and weak habits in others, and if I could increase in my powers (and I knew that He would pass on many

powers to me), perhaps the world of men might also multiply in virtue. So, I believed in my Father; for Him I would labor. Soon, He would come to save Jerusalem. He was Lord of the Universe. For Him I would labor, and with joy. Through Him, comfort would come to those who were sorrowful and the hungry would be fed, yes, and those sinners in greatest despair would find their sins remitted. Even unclean gentiles would be admitted to the table. And I felt such joy at these thoughts that I could not believe they were my own. Indeed, the Devil must have scraped me sore in my judgment for I was now ready to invite unclean gentiles to the table. But then I was not much in fear of Satan. He had captured but a small part of me. I had been tested, I had proved loyal, and now my tongue felt clean.

Yet, I was obliged to wonder. Had the Lord permitted me to be left alone with Satan in order that I might be scourged of an excess of piety? Before long, I would learn that there might be truth in this. Much truth.

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I returned to Nazareth and entered the house where I lived with my mother. On greeting me, she was much relieved. In those forty and more days that I had been away, she had supposed at first that I had gone on a journey with my cousin. But then she heard fearful stories concerning John (and they came to pass while I was on the mountain). The son of dead King Herod who was King Herod Antipas had much distrust of John the Baptist. Like his father, the king suffered from dreams and thought the prophet would inspire people to rise against him. So, he had had John shut away in a dungeon in the fortress of Machaerus which rises from the high cliffs over the Dead Sea near Perea. So, I knew that the time had come to leave Nazareth and take up a life of preaching to emulate what John had done.

Yet when I spoke to my mother, she thought I should not be a preacher. She did not care to think of me wandering on many roads to give blessings to strangers; better, by far, to

become a good Essene. So she wanted me to join the desert community at Qumran where the most devout were gathered. But that was not my desire. Men who desire to live at Qumran must first confess all guilt and all sin. Indeed, only those who were accepted by the community of Qumran were true Essenes--so was it seen in Qumran.

Indeed, one must give all that one owned to the brethren at Qumran and live among them for years to be perceived as pure. One swore whole obedience to the leaders, and did not speak in their presence unless invited. Purification took many years.

Since my mother knew why the angel had come to her, I did not understand how she could want such a life for me. Was it not the Lord to whom I should submit myself for tests, rather than the high priest of Qumran? But then, my mother was not a woman I could often understand. If she was proud of my origin, still she was fearful for my well-being and rare was the day when she did not expect a catastrophe to befall me. Fear lived like a night animal in our small house. One could all but hear the scurrying of this fear in the dark.

Moreover, if Mary was modest, she was also vain, and I would suffer by both, for her will was as graven in stone. Yet she did not see herself as strong but as frail. So she saw me as unready to go out into the world. And I, knowing all that I must now attempt, was not pleased that she placed little confidence in me.

I did not tell her what I had done for forty days, but she must have known that I had been near at last to my Father. Yet she appeared to want no part of that. She had a heart large enough to fill the breast of a queen, but like a queen, she did not enjoy what she could not understand.

Yet she was also a mother and knew me very well. It was not only my Father who had been with me, she could surmise, but the Other. If the Devil owned the powers of darkness, then I must be guided by a community of the most devout. So she did not make my way easier. I was unhappy with her forebodings. Indeed, she had the power to foretell many events.

Yet in the midst of quiet but unyielding dispute, there came a diversion. A marriage was taking place in Cana, a town not far from Nazareth. The father of the bride, a

wealthy man who had once hired Joseph and his carpenters to construct a fine house, now invited to this wedding my mother, and myself, and my brothers, James and John. And it was the first time Mary left her home since Joseph had died. Indeed, she remained so doubtful of whether to go, or not go, that when we arrived, it was late, and the ceremony had concluded. My mother, most embarrassed, looked about sharply and asked, "Are they without wine?" So many had come from the village to celebrate that all the drink had been consumed.

Her voice could as well have said that when a nuptial feast is dry, all happiness will depart; it is an omen of misery for a new husband and wife. So I thought to try such powers as might belong to me even if I had as yet exercised none of them.

Before us were large stone jars of water, six in number, and on a table was one red grape, no more, and that grape I ate slowly and with much contemplation of the spirit who resided within. Indeed, I could feel an angel at my side. In that instant I knew the water in the jars had become wine, and all this accomplished by no more than the clear taste of

one grape.

I felt near to the Kingdom of God. For now I knew that this Kingdom was composed of bounty and much beauty and so my Father was not only a god of wrath and judgment but could offer tenderness as gentle as the concern that rests in the touch of one's fingertips. Yet I was close to sorrow as well. For I had a vision of a great feast that I would never see. Before long, therefore, I chose to depart, and left it to James and John to take my mother home.

But even as I left I could hear the toastmaster speak to the bridegroom: "Every host sets forth good wine at the beginning, but when all are drunk, then wine which is not as good is presented. Yet you kept your best wine for the end and so your marriage will be blessed."

That was the commencement of my miracles and took place in Cana of Galilee; I was not quick, however, to offer praise to myself since the angel sent by my Father whispered into my thoughts: "Even as a barrel overflowing with honey is soon emptied, so does the foolish son scatter his store of miracles." So I did not tell my mother. She was merely pleased that there was wine after all, and was of slightly

better heart concerning my departure next morning. I left with no more than a staff, a cloak, my sandals, and her tears.

I had thought of something in desperation, half a day's walk from Jerusalem, and it is between Jerusalem and Hebron, beyond all that the Devil had told me concerning Jacob's death, I still dared to think of the promise to my first wife, and to her written that "my eye of the sea beyond Jordan, in valley of the gentiles, the people who sit in darkness see a great light." So, I chose Capernaum. It was in the sea of Galilee which, in truth, is a lake as large as a pool and the River Jordan flowed south from there to the south. Like other preachers, I wanted that I hoped to arrive at the Great Temple with all the power of all that I could learn of what to say.

Before leaving for Capernaum, however, I thought to say a few words at the synagogue on my last morning in Nazareth. In a surprise, my temple had shown no facility equal to the will of my heart with words when it came to the teaching of words. I needed the Lord to give me speech. What I offered

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I had thought of preaching in Capernaum, half a day's walk from Nazareth, and it is between Cherazin and Magdala. Despite all that the Devil had told me concerning Isaiah's death, I still wished to think of the prophet as my first guide, and he had written that "by way of the sea beyond Jordan, in Galilee of the gentiles, the people who sat in darkness saw a great light." So, I chose Capernaum. It was on the Sea of Galilee (which, in truth, is a lake as large as a sea) and the River Jordan flowed south from there to Jerusalem. Like other preachers, I confess that I hoped to arrive at the Great Temple with all the power of all that I would learn of what to say.

Before leaving for Capernaum, however, I thought to say a few words at the synagogue on my last morning in Nazareth. As a carpenter, my tongue had shown no facility equal to the skill of my hands with wood; when it came to fine fittings of words, I needed the Lord to form my speech. What I uttered

by myself was halting. So, I thought that I might ease such a stricture by making a small preachment where some, at least, would know me.

At the synagogue, when I stood to address the congregation, I could say at first no more than: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Unless we repent, the end is near." But these words brought back to me no more than silence. How could people wish the Day of Judgment to be on them soon? And indeed, it was a sunny morning in Nazareth. I, full of my new thoughts that faith, no matter how severe, must still be as natural as breath, said also (and I spoke in our words of ancient Hebrew): "I thank Thee, O Father, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes."

Later I would see what was written in the Gospel according to Luke, and his account is rank with exaggeration.

"And all they in the synagogue when they heard these things," wrote Luke, "were filled with wrath. And rose up and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of a hill whereon their city was built that they might cast him down headlong. But he, passing through the midst of them,

went his way."

Such was said by Luke, but he was not a Jew, and he was full of wrath against Jews. Because I was speaking in the small synagogue to which I had gone for all of my days, none were ready to laugh aloud at me. Still, I could feel laughter creep out of their feet. Such derision was like mice scampering silently over my toes. Indeed, I could hear the whispers before they were spoken: "The carpenter tells us to repent." And others said, "What does the Lord hide from the wise and prudent that He offers unto babes?"

So I knew that I must preach in places where I was not known. If the Son was simple, still he would strive to do the Lord great honor. So I vowed and told myself that I would be full of joy. Yet, as I took the road from Nazareth to Capernaum, so did I come to understand that my heart was still bruised by all that the Devil had dared to say against the Lord. My Father had neither defended Himself, nor loosed His lightning upon the mount.

On that instant, in the midst of such thoughts, I stumbled on the road. It was a misstep most uncommon. I was lithe of foot, yet I fell heavily. A strong arm had hurled

me to the earth. And a strong voice spoke into my ear: "The words of the prophets are not My words. My prophets are honest but full of excess."

I only said: "My Lord, I feel weak for I am well disposed toward men."

"Too well disposed," He said. "Learn that only a portion are worth saving."

"Nor am I with eloquence."

"Yes," the Lord said, "so did Moses say: 'O Lord, I am slow of speech and with a slow tongue.' I told him as I tell you: 'Who made man's mouth? Am I not the Lord?' Therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and I will teach you what to say. Your words will not fall to the ground. And when you preach, if you are seized and taken before magistrates of the Romans, take no thought what to answer. The Holy Spirit will teach you in that hour what to reply."

Given these words, I now felt less uncertain. My Father also said, "You can do well in Capernaum. Say but one thing many times. For these people are like stones and deaf, therefore tell them again and again: 'Thus saith the Lord God.' Do not be concerned with whether they hear. Words are

also My creatures and they travel by many roads."

As I came to my feet, so did I feel the Spirit lifting me higher. My heart was greater than before; this was like the Lord's reward for forty days of fasting.

And I heard the noise of living creatures flying about me. They were invisible, but I could hear their wings and then the sound of a thousand chariots, a noise of great rushing that came to me as if from the other side of a hill, and the Lord spoke to me again: "When you believe in Me, miracles are in your hands, your eyes, and your voice."

Yes, the hand of the Lord was strong. And I came to Capernaum.

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As my feet passed over the pebbled shore of the Sea of Galilee, I saw two fishermen casting their nets. They were powerful men and large, and with large hands. The oldest of the two, who looked yet younger than myself, was, I would soon learn, named Simon and the other was his brother Andrew. And I also saw how Simon, once he had drawn in many fish, came upon a tear in his net and with strips of rawhide he mended this flaw with dexterity, and quickly.

I thought to myself, there is need of a man who can mend nets. If by one skill he captures the fish, by another does he prevent losing them. And I said without caution, and yet my voice carried across the distance it would take to cast a small stone, I said, "Come with me and I will make you fishers of men." I said it with great merriment for I realized that to be without one's fellows for forty days is also a fast. If I had seen men and women at the wedding and in the synagogue of Nazareth, still they were not of my

choice, not friends nor hard workers.

So I looked upon these two fishermen as good men, and liked how they cast their nets with enough skill to put a small spell upon the sea in order to bring back many fish. Being a carpenter who knew less of water than of wood, it was still clear to me that fish would be protected by the spell that lived with them in the water; so must a fisherman have his own wisdom of spirit if he is to take such creatures into his net.

And so, "Yes," I said, and was like a man of wealth in my enthusiasm, "come with me and I will make you fishers of men." Between their eyes and mine passed an agreement across this space of water, and I could feel how God had enabled me to steal a few skills from the devil.

For one, I could employ Satan's manner when speaking to many. I could address them with the finest courtesy and the most intimate exhilaration, as if we shared among ourselves, and only among ourselves, the wonder of many things unsaid.

And I recalled how as Satan departed, he had said to me, "Having high regard for you, I would like to touch your hand." I had done so. I was anxious for him to depart.

Therefore I touched my right hand to his, and thereby surrendered a share of the Lord's protection.

It was a small share and I was certain that God had also taken much from Satan. For no sooner had Simon and Andrew, his brother, brought their boat to the shore and cast their catch into bags of cloth, than they came with me down the road to a small house where I was introduced to James the son of Zebedee and John his brother (even as I had two brothers with such names) and this might be an omen that was favorable. So soon as Simon called to them, they left their father Zebedee alone with his hired servants, and came along with us. James and John were the sons of a rich man, and I had to wonder if they were more ready for diversion than for prayer. Yet Simon vouched for them and Simon would be my rock. So I decided. Soon I began to call him Simon Peter, inasmuch as Peter is a name for rock. And Peter would be with me in all hours but one.

To Capernaum I now marched with these four followers, and as I looked at each of them, saw more to honor than to distrust. As we walked, Peter drew me aside and said: "Two nights ago our nets were so heavy with fish that our boat was

foundering. But I prayed and we were saved. I would tell you: in my prayer I saw your face."

Peter now fell on his knees, and declared: "Do not take me with you for I am a sinful man, O Lord." But I took his hand and told him that he was good, a good man as well as I could measure it. And I also said that his presence would strengthen me in Capernaum. So there we went, and straightaway to the synagogue. And on this morning I preached the wisdom of John the Baptist.

It was the Sabbath and many were there and I understood that if I had found Peter and Andrew and James and John at their labors on the Sabbath, it was because they did not keep a mark of each day, nor of the days on which work was forbidden, since fishermen know only when the waters are ready. So I also knew that they would not be learned enough to preach with me. Not on this day. Yet I was eloquent after all, and by myself.

I spoke of God's heart and how it was heavy. Out of the multitude of men and women that the Lord had created, He had selected His own chosen people, His Jews. Now, in these days, some were faithful but many were not. Many were

sinners. God had prepared a heaven, therefore, to take in for those Jews that He could judge with happiness. Only such Jews would He accept after their death in His Kingdom.

Those, however, who betrayed the law, who denied the presence of God, who chased after sin or were full of folly, would suffer. It would be a judgment of many depths. For as the stone steps of the dungeon descend ever lower into cell beneath cell, so are there sinners who do not repent at being brought into hell, until they learn the sides of the pit, step by step, as they go down. Even as the earth can tremble in earthquake, so do they recognize, and too late, that the power of His hand can bring downfall to a kingdom. Even as a mouse is trodden underfoot! Words of great strength were in me, and I spoke with the force of a man who hefts a sword.

"Repent," I said, "and you will have remission of all your sins." And by uttering this doctrine of John the Baptist, I was able to speak as one who had authority. My voice lifted above the singsong of Pharisees and scribes. In this synagogue of Capernaum, as in all other synagogues to which I had gone, the Pharisees and scribes would read from the scrolls in a weak and whining song, even with a droning

of the spirit as if their throats were dulled by years of much compromise within themselves. Now they could only speak from the dying coals of their spirit as it hissed forth. Whereas my voice was full.

I said, nor did I know I would say as much until my voice rang forth: "Come unto to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am meek and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. Yet I would also say,"--and saying this, felt as if new powers were being granted to me-- "if you ask, 'Lord, will you cast out devils?' then they will be cast out."

And it was as I said. A man came forward from the midst of the congregation and I could see that he gave fear to others, and looked much like a brigand. His nose was broken, and scars were on his face, an old brute with a spirit so unclean that the stench of his body came before him. Yet he cried out, "What have we to do with you, Yeshua of Nazareth? Are you come to destroy us?"

And I saw that his features had once been noble but were now thickened with the blows he had received in payment for

the unrest within him. So I stood in my place as he approached. I stared into his eyes and said, "Hold your peace." And he did not move.

I knew that his foul spirit had to be drawn forth from his heart even as a small beast is torn from a burrow, yet I also knew that he had come to me so that this foul spirit could be lifted from him. Nor did I have need of a magician's ring nor of secret herbs to place beneath his nostrils. With one breath, I said no more than: "Evil spirit, come forth. Come out!"

A demon tore itself out of his throat. And it cried aloud in a bestial voice.

Invisible was this unclean spirit, yet all could see that it had been cast forth into the midst of the synagogue, for empty benches fell over and there was a wind on the floor, and dust. Then, all such disturbance was gone.

The good Jews of the synagogue were amazed. They were pious people and their greatest uneasiness, and none greater, was to share a room with unclean spirits. They did not know how to resist them; therefore, they would have no traffic with people who were ready to war with evil. So they now

said: "What new doctrine is this? Does he command unclean spirits?"

In that moment I felt as if I had hurled a great stone far into the midst of the Sea of Galilee and ripples had travelled to every shore. Word of my deed would pass through all the regions of Galilee.

"Ask," I said to them who were in the synagogue.

"Ask, and it shall be given unto you.

"Seek, and you shall find.

"Knock, and it shall be opened to you."

My new friends Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John came out of the synagogue and went back with me to the house of Simon Peter.

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So alive was I with the strength of these matters that when we came into Peter's house, and the mother of his wife was lying there sick of a fever, I had only to take her by the hand; that offered her new strength to rise from the bed. When she stood, her fever had left and she was much heartened and cooked for us and we were well fed.

In that evening, friends of Simon and Andrew and James and John came to the house with a few who thought themselves possessed of devils and I felt ready for many missions.

That night, cures came quickly and brought me happiness.

I had no more than to put my hand upon a man, or kiss him on the cheek, and out came many small devils, and thereby was the person before me able to say farewell to his disease. And the devils, much frightened, did not even have to speak as they came forth--which is just as well, for they make a terrible sound when they protest.

Then, in the morning, Peter said to me, "All men hereabout seek for you now and I fear they will be too many. I would caution you against the curious. They wish to witness miracles. They will form a throng, and bring great attention to you. But will that give you more power to change men's souls?"

Feeling much impressed with such wisdom, I told him so, and he told me how after many years of laboring as a fisherman, he had been waiting for a sign from the Lord; on seeing me, he had known at once that I was a prophet.

His speech gave me cause to think of John the Baptist in the dungeon of Herod Antipas. On my next breath, pain came like a knife to my chest. For if the Lord had given me great talents, I would also be open to acts of vengeance from those who hated the Lord. Therefore, I encouraged Peter and Andrew and James and John to leave with me. We must move on to other synagogues in Galilee and cast out devils there. It would be better to do the deed and leave each throng with wonder than to remain in one circle until such wonder became our noose and we were choked with dissension. And I knew I was now thinking with the wisdom of Peter.

In the courtyard of another synagogue in another town, a leper came to me and asked, "Can you make me clean?" When I was silent, he said, "Until I am clean, I cannot enter the synagogue. Yet, if I cannot enter, how can I become clean?"

I did not know. To cure a leper was a miracle of high order. Yet I could not turn away from the pain in his eyes. So, I whispered to the Lord, "Grant me this power on this day."

As I looked at the leper, I was able to remember the rod of Moses. In the scrolls it had been written that God had said to Moses: "Cast it on the ground." And when he did so, the rod became a serpent, and Moses fled. But then the Lord said: "Put forth thy hand and take it by the tail."

And when Moses caught the serpent by the tail, it became again a rod in his hand. Now, the Lord said: "Put down thy hand unto thy bosom," and Moses did as he was told, and when he took his hand out, it was as leprous as snow, whereupon God said, "Put thy hand in thy bosom again," and Moses did, and plucked it out, and behold, it was like his other flesh.

Now I heard God say to me, "Do it, and it shall be done," and I knew that the powers He had given to Moses were

also mine.

So, I put forth my hand and touched the leper, and said no more than, "You will be clean."

The leprosy left him. He was clean. This was so great a miracle that I told him: "Say nothing to any man."

But he went out and in the hour began to cause so much excitement in the multitude by speaking of his cure that I knew it was time to go back to the desert before there came an inundation of lepers. Nor did I need the Lord to tell me that there were grave obstacles to curing all at once.

Indeed, it did seem true to me that the diseases of man, much like the angels, were ranked in a hierarchy of powers. To cure the highest disease, which is but another way of saying the lowest, or the worst, was to ask the Holy Spirit to descend by ten more dimensions into the pit. And I was weak from curing my first leper. Could it be that God might be diminished as well? It was by the aid of the Holy Spirit, after all, that I had brought forth my cures. And what was such a Spirit but the bond between my Father and myself?

I fled to the desert and told my followers that I would meet them in Capernaum.

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For two nights I was with snakes and scorpions and did my best to live among them and feel no fear. Yet in such a practice I was not wholly successful, though often I would tell myself that John the Baptist could pick up a scorpion and talk to it, and it did not sting.

My return to Capernaum proved better. The first man to speak to me was a centurion in his armor and he had an eagle on his helmet. This Roman stood before me, a proud man; who could say how many had been killed by his sword? Yet he was polite, saying, "Lord, my good servant is sick of a palsy and grievously demented."

Without pause, I replied: "Let me come and heal him."

To increase my respect, the centurion gave a surprising reply: "Lord, I am not worthy for you to come under my roof. But if you will speak the word, my servant shall be healed. I am a man who has the authority to command a soldier to go, and he will go. To another, I say 'Come,' and he does come.

So, my sick servant will do what needs to be done if you give me the power to tell him."

And this centurion had tears in his eyes. I marvelled at that, and I turned to my followers: "Where, and this early, have I found greater faith in anyone? Not in all of Galilee." And I said to the centurion, "Go! Your servant will be healed."

And he was. Others told me. And by this I knew that if all was well, I could send God's power to others even if they were not Jews, and I felt much elation at this, and was pleased with the warmth of those who welcomed me on the streets. Many men paused to greet me and their mouths were ripe with color. It was then that Simon Peter told me how Capernaum, though only a small city, was favored by men who did not know women but other men. So did I also learn that such men would cover their lips with the juice of red berries, and in the taverns, they would speak of how the bravest of the Greeks were Spartans who were great warriors but lived only in each others' arms.

To which others would dispute as follows: "So did these Spartans also live with the sword. Whereas you live with the

coloring that women choose for their lips."

Nonetheless, I felt affection for these sodomites of Capernaum. They were tender in spirit, and we would congregate beneath a tree because they were not welcome in the temple.

There, each day I preached of the incarceration of John the Baptist in the dungeon of Machaerus. Since he was with me in spirit, I spoke with the clarity that comes when one's thoughts are full and no word must search for the next. And more men gathered each day at the synagogue until there was no bench to receive them, not even in the vestibule nor outside the door. One day, four men tried to bring another to me who was paralyzed but they could not come near because of the crowd. In desperation, these four men took a ladder and climbed to the roof where they broke a hole between two rafters in order to lower the man who was paralyzed (and his bed) down to where I spoke. I knew that if his bearers had this much concern, then their man must be worthy. Without pause, I said: "Thy sins be forgiven thee." And he rose from his bed. I knew why. Those who came to me had undergone much torment and so were ready to accept the weight

of their sin. Thereby they were ready to be cured. This paralyzed man had become equal in his suffering to the evil he had wrought, and so I could forgive him, and without hesitation.

The scribes were affronted. I heard one say, "Why does Jesus speak blasphemies? Who can forgive sins? God only."

I understood then the mistake of speaking so openly. Yet it was growing difficult to be patient. The most pious were the most noxious now to me. The smell of their sanctity was close to the odor of shellfish when such creatures lose their lives on the shore of the sea that once nourished them.

Therefore, when asked how I could forgive sins, I said: "Why seek to reason these things? The man was paralyzed, yet he carried his bed out of the synagogue; if he staggered, it was only by a little." So, they were much amazed.

Each day I came to understand by a little more why the Lord must have chosen me. I could see how my Father would be tried for patience with His creation considering how we consumed His charity and kept repeating our sins. So He must need me to listen to men's errors. Even as I had felt close an eternity of emptiness when I fasted, so could I now

comprehend those waste-places in our hearts where pride cannot stir, not even in contemplating one's good deeds; the soul is like a void before the memory of its sins. How full was my compassion in that moment for those who sin. And I prayed that the Lord would always speak through me. For then my tongue was ripe with felicity and my mind showed prowess I did not find at other times. And I knew happiness even if my utterances were with peril for me. There were so many words my heart would not have dared to utter if unsupported by the Lord.