

THE HIDDEN SCROLL



Paul vs. James:

the Battle that Shaped Christianity and Changed the World

an historical reconstruction

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Prologue

A Journey into the Angry World of Early Christianity

This work recreates the world of Jesus' first followers led by James and those of Paul the Apostle in the 1st century. It's told through the perspective and experiences of Rabbi Mattai (Matthew). Mattai is a fictional representation of one of the many now-nameless individuals who remained faithful to the teachings and practices of Jesus of Nazareth after his trial and execution in the early 30's C.E.(A.D.).

Jesus, Paul, James and Mary Magdalene along with early Christian leaders such as Evodius and Ignatius are individuals from the historical record. This historical reconstruction is based on what we now know of 1st century Judaism and Christianity from ancient sources and contemporary scholarship.

The original names have been preserved. Jesus was never called 'Jesus' in his lifetime. That's a Greek rendering of his name which he likely never heard. His name was Yeshua. His brother was Ya'akov – we call him James. Peter was Cephas, the Rock. Mary Magdalene was Miriam ha-Migdal (Mary the Tower).

The historical confrontation of Paul with James is mentioned briefly in the New Testament book, The Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15. This encounter likely took place around 48 and it was a pivotal moment: it decisively separated two religious movements – the followers of Paul from those of Jesus and James. The Book of Acts was composed some 40 to 50 later, by someone whose main agenda was to glorify Paul.

It was an historic confrontation. On the one hand there was Ya'akov – James and his supporters, Yeshua's first followers. They were Jewish, Torah-observant, waiting for the Kingdom of God to materialize and convinced that Paul was a false teacher. On the other hand there was the charismatic Paul and his delegation. Paul considered Ya'akov and his followers to be satanic (2 Corinthians 11: 4-15). Thus the stage was set for a bitter division. Ya'akov and Paul were not soul mates united in peace, harmony and love. Rather they were fierce opponents, each battling for the truth of religion as they saw it.

Mattai's hidden scroll represents an historical reconstruction of what might have occurred during that confrontation.

It determined the fate of Christianity.

It changed the world.

Fall, 68 C.E.

Fear was running rampant in Jerusalem in fall, 68 of the Common Era (C.E./A.D). Powerful Roman forces were sweeping down the Jordan Valley fresh from their brutal pacification of the Jewish revolt in the Galilee. The ominous unending rhythmic thump thump thump of the marching legions could be heard for dozens of miles down the Great Rift Valley sending shivers down the spines of even the most patriotic of Jews. The ancient city of Jericho would be the next target. And just a few miles further south lay the arid headquarters of the sect of the reclusive Essenes, Qumran, on the northwestern shores of the Dead Sea.

Anticipating the worst, the Essene scribes scurried to bury their precious scrolls in caves before fleeing for their lives. Qumran would be decimated within hours and their scrolls left in jars for future generations to discover. Little did they know that almost 50 generations would come and go before their library would be re-discovered.

Soon the dreaded Romans could be counted on to turn westward, their sights set on Jerusalem, to destroy the heart of Jewish nationalism. Ruthlessly. Decisively. Punitively. Everyone in Jerusalem knew what was coming. The only issue was, when?

Fear, dread, panic – that was Jerusalem in 68 C.E. Every one anticipated “the end” – no, not the long-promised messianic kingdom but the coming Roman victory over the Jewish people. Death by sword and by crucifixion. That’s what everyone knew they could expect.

From Jerusalem to Antioch

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Waiting for Sundown

It was going to be the longest Sabbath Rabbi Mattai had ever experienced.

That Friday had witnessed intense preparations around the modest house he shared with his aging wife, Rachel. Their four growing children were all named after famous biblical figures -- daughters Rebecca and Sarah, and sons Yosef and David. All were young adults in their teenaged years. According to the custom of the times, ordinary times that is, the two girls should have been married by now. But these were exceptional times.

The Sabbath evening meal had been carefully prepared, a modest meal of bread and lentils, with some leftovers for sustenance during the long Saturday ahead. Rabbi Mattai had paused for a few minutes late Friday night, to make love to his wife. He whispered to his wife, "This will be the last time we'll be able to do this here in Jerusalem." And they both shed a tear for all that they'd miss.

"We've been here for generations," sobbed Rachel, "and now we have to leave."

Friday morning and afternoon before the onset of Shabbat in the evening had witnessed a flurry of activity around the Mattai household. These feverish steps were carefully hidden from their neighbors and the marauding bands of thugs who trudged up and down the narrow streets of Jerusalem in Fall 68 C.E. The two grey and white donkeys had been carefully fed and watered for their upcoming journey. A few prized possessions had been carefully packed in leather bags that could be thrown over the donkeys' backs at a moment's notice. Just the essentials. Some dishes. A cutting knife. A few carefully preserved coins. Clothing and bedding. Couple of pillows. A couple of utensils for cutting leather, for that was Rabbi Mattai's main occupation: making tents, sandals, belts and straps. Not much else could be taken on the upcoming journey. All in all, not much of value.

There were, however, two items of considerable worth to Mattai.

"Rachel," Mattai called out quietly, "are you sure you have packaged the scrolls carefully?"

As she had earlier on that day, Rachel assured him yet again that she had. She thought to herself, how could he imagine she'd miss these precious items? She dismissed his persistent questioning as a symptom of his anxiety over what they had to do.

One scroll was of Deuteronomy, that fabulous last book of the Law that told of the speeches of Moses speaking before all Israel. The Law – the Torah – was the bedrock of Judaism. Everything depended on it – all of life, in fact. It represented the words God had spoken to Moses, being nothing less than the constitution of Israel. It regulated what to eat, how to behave and times for rest. There were ten major commandments and hundreds of other obligations, all oriented around the worship of the one God. “*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one,*” Deuteronomy chanted and this had become the rallying cry of Judaism, the *Shema*. No other gods were permitted and this was exceptionally strange in a world that saw no problems with a multitude of deities.

The Torah provided a way of life, a framework for living, and its interpretation occasioned much debate amongst members of Mattai's own faction of Judaism as well as those within other schools, the great Pharisaic teachers and scholars and the reclusive Essenes heeding the words of their authoritative Teacher of Righteousness. All revered Torah, the written Law, however much they might disagree upon its precise interpretation and application.

Mattai had consulted this scroll of Deuteronomy so often that he had memorized most of it and he used it with his students in the small yeshiva -- or school -- that he ran from his home. Very few individuals possessed sacred scrolls – that was the privilege of the very wealthy -- and this one had come down to him, father to son, from his great-grandfather. Mattai, son of Yosef, son of Simon, son of Yona. No one knew how his ancient ancestor Yona had acquired this great treasure copied meticulously by some unknown scribe generations before. Perhaps he, too, had been a revered teacher.

There was, however, one other precious scroll. It was shorter than Deuteronomy, and not biblical in nature. This one was also well known to Mattai. He himself had very carefully written it some twenty years earlier and it, too, was tenderly wrapped in linen. Some day, Mattai was sure, he'd have reason to refer to it. But not yet. It was tenderly tucked away for another day. Hidden until needed. It was the transcript of a momentous event and Mattai had the only copy so far as he knew.

The teenagers had been called together and cautioned by their father. “Tell no one,” Mattai said to them somberly. “No one can know we are leaving. Or where we are going.”

Like all young people, they relished the clandestine secrecy. It was a bit of a game to them and they did not really understand the dangers that awaited them. Nor did they really comprehend the terrible fate that would soon befall Jerusalem. For them, Roman presence and warring Jewish factions was all they knew. Killing, looting, the slaughter of

innocents was commonplace in their young lives and they had developed a street savvy that had kept them out of harms' way, at least so far. They were sad not being able to tell their good friends what was about to happen, especially those who studied Torah with their father late in the afternoon as they sat cross-legged in a corner of their small family room. Yosef and David's friends would not know that that Friday would be the last time they'd all be together.

Nor would their masters in the pottery shop know they were gone ... until early Saturday night when the Sabbath was over and the work week would begin. Then they would just fail to show up for work as apprentices. They wondered if they had learned enough to be able to set up their own shop in another city. Had they really learned enough?

"Will we ever see our friends again? And the shop keepers?" they anxiously asked their father.

"Perhaps," Mattai answered stroking his nearly white beard, "perhaps."

Mattai and Rachel, too, had maintained a long silence, not telling their neighbors, especially the Essenes among whom he dwelled, what they had in mind although they suspected that they were not alone in their plans.

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They had chosen to live in the Essene quarter of the old city of Jerusalem. It was crowded. Small rooms. Communal latrines just outside the city. Noisy. Dusty. With sheep and goats running every which way and the stench of animal excrement omnipresent, so much so that most people no longer noticed the foul odor. Yet they found it congenial there, for they shared many of the same beliefs and values as their neighbors did -- a sense that dramatic things were about to unfold on the world stage. A sense of excitement that, suddenly, the whole world would be turned upside down. Maybe, just maybe, this would happen within their lifetimes and they would live eternally in the Kingdom God had promised to his people, Israel.

But they also sensed that things were not turning out the way they had dared to dream. Like their Essene neighbors, Rabbi Mattai shared the hope that someday the Messiah would appear and liberate the righteous observers of the Law, those who had remained faithful to the sacred Torah given by God to Moses centuries before at Mount Sinai. The Messiah would come, they hoped, freeing them from Roman oppression. Like their neighbors, Rabbi Mattai held firmly to the view that the Torah should be observed strictly, not making compromises with the needs of the foreigners inhabiting the land -- no selling them goods on the Sabbath, no exchange of money, no cooking them roast pork, for example.

“Not like those rich Sadducees,” he often muttered, referring to the priestly clans that lived higher up on the hill. They were the ones who usually controlled the Temple, the trade, the finances, and the government – in fact, everything that mattered. “They were just puppets of the Romans,” he would say to anyone who would listen. “Mere puppets,” he emphasized. But he knew, too, that many had been forced to compromise their beliefs – theft was common as was prostitution in these dire economic times.

Desperate refugees from the north had swarmed into Jerusalem, seeking safe harbor from the slaughtering Romans. Bands of militants had also stormed into Jerusalem, different factions of the Zealots who like true ideologues had no regard for life or property. These thugs had looted the Temple treasury several times, rampaged through the narrow streets confiscating goods and food. These extremists had also killed many moderate leaders who had dared to stand in their way. For them, it was either fight the Romans or die trying. No accommodation. No discussion. No debate. Many of the Sadducees had been killed in their wealthy neighborhood enclave just west of the Temple. So, too, had many of the Pharisees, that group of outstanding and well-educated teachers who had yeshivas all over the city. While they concentrated on teaching ordinary people the Torah, as did Mattai, some could not refrain from denouncing the nonsense of Jew killing Jew when the real enemy was the Romans.

But the Zealot factions would not listen to reason. One nasty group, the Sicarii as they were called, used long curved knives to kill off their opponents. You couldn't see them coming for they hid their weapons under their long flowing garments.

It was Jew against Jew. For many people this was worse than Romans against Jew. People were afraid. Food was scarce. Most people had trouble making a living. And, it was rumored, a faction of the Zealots now controlled even the Temple itself with its round of daily and weekly sacrifices to the Lord. Blood-stained bandits in charge of the holy Temple! What had the world come to, Mattai wondered, but he had the good sense to keep his thoughts to himself.

But there were larger – much larger -- troubles brewing on another front.

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A week earlier, one of Mattai's Essene friends had rushed to bring the Rabbi some disturbing news.

“Mattai,” his friend, Yehuda, had breathlessly confided, “we're in terrible trouble. Jericho was taken a few days ago and from the Romans sent out a foray a few miles south. They've utterly destroyed our headquarters at Qumran. Smashed the walls. Decimated the watchtower. Destroyed our tents. Broke every dish. And without any mercy killed everyone they could find. I doubt if the Master survived.”

Yehuda had been down at Qumran temporarily. He had left his family behind for a while as he studied the sacred writings with the Master and pitched in with the daily round of chores. In fact, he had been high up on the hills above Qumran, out attending the flocks of sheep and goats, when he saw the Romans marching determinedly towards the settlement below. He heard, too, his fellow members desperately raising the cry “flee for your lives!” as they scampered to the west and the south, away from the relentless advance.

“We were vastly outnumbered,” Yehuda noted, “we didn’t stand a chance. We aren’t warriors.” Abandoning the herd, I just ran away through the hills back up here to Jerusalem, to be with my wife and children. Some members of the community may have made their way south to the stronghold of Masada. Most, I fear, were hunted down and killed. Only a few managed to get here.”

Yehuda wondered if Jerusalem was next.

Qumran was just twenty miles east of Jerusalem on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. It was one of the centers of the Essene Movement, although there were followers of this form of Judaism in most of the larger towns and villages throughout Israel. But these were uncertain times. Everything was in turmoil, especially in the Galilee where Roman troops had brutally crushed the rebellion. Its leader, Vespasian, assisted by his son Titus, had achieved such fame that both would eventually become Roman emperors. Many people were uprooted and some Essenes in their enclaves in the north had swarmed south with their families, into Qumran and Jerusalem, to get away from the murderous Roman soldiers.

But to no avail. Led by Vespasian and later by Titus, the Roman legions had swooped down the Jordan Valley after having quelled a series of uprisings in the Galilee, not too far to the north. They were furious at the strength of the rebellion and were determined to make an example of these Jews fighting for an independent state. Sixty thousand troops were under Vespasian’s command. “No quarter,” said their general. “Just throw the wounded into the briny Dead Sea and see how long they survive!”

“At least we had time to hide our scrolls in caves around Qumran,” Yehuda added. “Someday, the few of us who survive the current debacle will retrieve these sacred writings – not just the biblical writings but our own Community Rule, our unique commentaries on the Prophets, the Damascus Scroll, the Temple Scroll, and all our psalms -- all the writings that tell us the real meaning of these terrible times when Satan rules the world. Maybe Jerusalem and Masada will be spared the Roman sword.”

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Yehuda put his trust in the Lord to right the wrongs of history. He had read and re-read the Essenes’ community’s *War Scroll* which he believed was divinely inspired.

Someday, the scroll assured its reader, God and his Messiah and all the angels would lead his righteous troops into battle against all the unrighteous. Then Lord would triumph and everyone in the world will finally acknowledge the sovereignty of God. But that expectation, he dimly perceived, was a long way from reality.

“On that day,” Yehuda said solemnly quoting his favorite prophet, Zechariah, “the Lord will become king over all the earth. On that day, the Lord will be one and his name one.” But when was “*that day*” going to happen? When was God going to triumph and when would his name be worshipped by all humanity? When would God become king over all the earth? If not now, when? Was this not truly the worst of all times? How could anything be worse than the present evil times? Surely God would have to intervene in human history, so Yehuda thought to himself, before all the Jews – not just the Essenes -- were killed by the Romans. He knew that genocide was a real possibility.

Rabbi Mattai did not share his friend’s confidence and feared for the worst. He knew, as did Yehuda, that the Romans would not stop at the Dead Sea but would eventually turn their sights on Jerusalem itself, the pride of all Israel and the last remaining bastion of Jewish nationalism. That was the prize and it was there, in the capital city with The Garden of Gethsemane cent gleaming white Temple atop Temple Mount, that the war would come to an end. The wolf was at the door and the Jerusalem lambs were ready for slaughter, fighting amongst themselves like drunken sailors on a sinking ship. It was a nightmare. Mattai knew that the Romans would stop at nothing to quell this rebellion once and for all.

But Mattai also knew something else, something that Yehuda in his eagerness for Garden of Gethsemane, Mount of Olives a had forgotten. The ancient prophets of Israel had referred to the time of the Messiah as a dreadful and fearful period in world history. Not something to be wished for. The Great Day of the Lord, he knew from the sacred scriptures, would be absolutely awful. It would be a time of tremendous terror and devastation unlike that the world had ever seen.

But was this in fact the dreadful period in human history that the ancient prophets had predicted? Was this the time the prophet Zechariah had predicted centuries before? The Cardo, Jerusalem is prophet had forecast that in the last days of this present corrupt age, foreign nations would come against Jerusalem with much bloodshed, rape, looting and destruction. Yehuda certainly thought so: all the signs were there. He looked forward to the day when “this world” would be replaced “by the world to come.” He longed for and welcomed the advent of the Kingdom of God when the Lord would triumph over all enemies – Roman, Greek, Egyptian, Persian, whatever.

Rabbi Mattai was growing old. He was now 38 and had seen too many upheavals in (reconstruction) The Second Temple, Jerusalem short for his generation, almost 4’5,” a slim build, and he was proud that he retained all his hair. That was turning white now and he knew he had lived longer than many of his fellow Jews. He was, for the most part, rather laid back and this was the one personality trait that he valued. He did not stand out in the crowd, although

he was one of the most educated people of his generation. Like a fellow rabbi, Yochanan ben Zakkai, he knew Hebrew as well as Aramaic and he possessed a firm grounding in the books of the Torah, the Prophets and the Psalms. He knew the Law, its written and its oral tradition, much of it by heart.

Growing up, Mattai had come to everything later in life than had his friends. He had postponed marriage until his late teenaged years, giving priority to studying the scrolls. His advanced age for marriage – 19 -- was remarkable for his generation, and it had caused his aging parents considerable stress and no end of ridicule. Most of his friends already had children who were married, with families of their own, but his were only in their teens – the girls 17 and 16; the boys, 15 and 14. Several children born earlier had not survived for more than a couple of months. Still, the girls had both surpassed the age when they should have married and this was of great concern to Mattai and Rachel. Where would they find suitable husbands for their children in such dangerous times? The boys, too, were coming up to the age when they were expected to form their own unions. Most women were married by age 14. For men, it was later, 16 or 17 was not uncommon. That is, that's what happened when young adults married in normal times. But these days were far from normal. Mattai harbored a secret fear that in time his sons would be swept up by the reign of lawlessness, to become brute Zealots and anarchists like many in Jerusalem, rampaging, stealing and killing.

Mattai was less confident than Yehuda that this was the time of the End. After all, others before him had confidently announced the Kingdom of God. Hadn't Yeshua, that famous teacher from Galilee told of its coming? Soon? Within our lifetimes, he had confidently proclaimed. Yeshua had assured his audiences that some standing with him would not taste death until they saw the Kingdom of God made manifest on earth. Bitter sweet thoughts in 68, Mattai thought to himself. Yeshua had devoted his life in the Galilee to proclaiming this kingdom, to warning people to prepare for God's historic intervention in the affairs of humans. Had he not sent forth seventy ambassadors into all parts of the land, to proclaim this coming new reality? Did he not have twelve *talmidim* – rabbinical students -- devoted to the teachings and practices of their revered teacher? Did he not have many others who had faithfully followed him wherever he went, teaching people of the Kingdom and challenging them to live a truly righteous life?

Mattai was just being born when Yeshua had entered Jerusalem in 30, some thirty-eight years earlier. He was too young to have seen him enter Jerusalem, symbolically upon a donkey – a royal monarch come triumphantly into the city to herald his rule as King David's successor. He was not there with him in the Temple, where he caused a huge disturbance that brought him to the attention of the Temple guard ... and the vigilant Romans. That was probably his undoing, whatever that ruckus on Temple Mount. Neither the Sadducean priests nor the Romans could tolerate such insolence and insubordination. Why had Yeshua drawn such attention to himself, he sometimes pondered, for that seemed strangely out of character. Nor could Mattai have heard him cry out so agonizingly on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Everyone then and now was

so painfully aware that the promised kingdom had yet to appear. Yeshua, too, Mattai had often thought, must have recognized that even as he was dying. He probably died bewildered that the proud boast he had made had not come to pass. Clearly his timetable was not that of God's.

There had been others, too, who had made such promises. Would-be messiahs announcing the messianic Kingdom. The list was getting crowded in these exceptional times.

As Mattai recounted to Yehuda, "Don't forget Judas the Galilean. He actually led a revolt but not much came of it. A lot of death and destruction, but nothing that lasted although his children and grandchildren carried on his subversive activities. He was similar in many ways to our own Yeshua."

"Yes," added Yehuda, "And then came Simon of Perea who gathered quite following."

"Don't forget Theudas of recent memory," Mattai continued. "He gathered a band of followers down at the Jordan River, promising that he'd part the waters. All he got for his troubles was a severed head. After him was the Egyptian prophet, whatever his name was. He gathered, it was rumored, over thirty thousand people and they wandered around the Mount of Olives, ready to pounce upon Jerusalem and take it by force. The Romans got them all. All of them, dead. And even your own Teacher of Righteousness, more than a century ago, your own inspired interpreter of the Torah – he could have been a Messiah if only he had put himself forward. He was wise enough not to have done so and so your movement remained hidden away from full view of the conquerors. There have been so many people who would be Messiahs."

Yehuda nodded in assent. "Sometimes in my darker moments I think that the Kingdom of God is farther away than ever. Maybe it will remain just that, a distant hope for a better world, *some day* but not *today*."

"Some fools even think that Vespasian is the Messiah!" Mattai added, "Can you believe that? The bitter enemy of the Jewish people as the Messiah? All on some vague promise that the Messiah would come out of the eastern Roman Empire. Don't they know what the ancient scriptures promised?" Mattai clearly recognized that these idiots were just playing up to Vespasian, trying to save their lives by misusing sacred scripture by flattering his ego.

Little did Mattai realize that Vespasian would quickly become emperor and that the Jewish general and later Roman sympathizer, Josephus, would eventually write an account of the Jewish Revolt against Rome. In that work, he proclaimed Vespasian the Messiah. A strange perversion of scripture -- one Mattai and Yehuda would not have countenanced.

The world turned upside down, with a Roman as Messiah, a conqueror of the Jews as the promised Jewish prince, the anointed one of God. Surely these were evil times.

But, in spite of his forebodings, Yehuda clung to the hope that maybe these dreadful times were all part of the plan. Everyone was in agreement that extraordinary bad times for the Jewish people would act as a catalyst for God's intervention in human affairs, to bring about the long promised Kingdom. But Yehuda failed to understand how the destruction of his beloved Qumran with all the deaths of his fellow community members could possibly fit into God's plan for Israel.

"That I don't understand," said Yehuda shaking his head. "I just don't understand it at all."

Mattai was more skeptical and less certain of Yehuda's daring hope. He'd wait and see. But he had also hatched a plan, one so dangerous he could not share it, even with Yehuda. He sensed that the Romans would eventually march from the shores of the Dead Sea up the steep incline to Jerusalem. He knew they could take easily take the city so swollen with recent arrivals. And he had heard awful stories of what they did to citizens of the cities and towns they had taken. He was well aware that they would conquer Jerusalem without mercy or compassion. He did not want his wife and daughters to be raped and sold into slavery. Or his sons killed, likely by slow crucifixion. He knew that he could not face that future. And so he plotted.

This Sabbath would see his plans materialize. He waited all Saturday afternoon for Shabbat to end, fretting and anxious in a way he had never experienced before. Hour after hour had dragged on, ever so slowly, ever since the hastily prepared meal the night before. By early Saturday afternoon Mattai was frantically pacing up and down, waiting for sundown. Clearly he was nervous. Tension filled the home as everyone hung around, waiting and waiting for nighttime to arrive when they would put their plan into action. Normally he had welcomed this pause, but today he was too anxious to enjoy the day of rest. No tranquility for him – or anyone in his family – not today, and, perhaps, not ever again.

Mattai and Rachel would be leaving old friends. They knew they'd miss their old friends Yehuda and his wife Rebecca dreadfully. Mattai belonged not to the Essene faction of Judaism, nor that of the Pharisees, although he shared much in common with both these sects. He was a Nazarene, a follower of Rabbi Yeshua, the famed teacher from Galilee who had been crucified in Jerusalem in the early 30's on trumped-up political charges. The leaders of the Temple – the hated Sadducees -- had feared that a new king of the Jews had emerged. They dutifully reported him to Roman authorities as an unwanted troublemaker, especially at Passover when huge crowds had swarmed into the city for the celebrations.

“King of the Jews” was not a title to be taken lightly. It dripped with strong messianic overtones, for the anticipated Messiah would be a Davidic king who would throw out the occupying colonists and reestablish the independence of Israel. God and his Messiah would bring about an era of everlasting peace. People from all over the world would then flock to Jerusalem to worship the God of the Jews. Herod Antipas coveted the title. Yeshua claimed it. Only Agrippa won it, bestowed on him by Roman authorities a few years back. But where was the messianic kingdom? The world after these individuals looked the same as before.

No, not really. In fact, the world was much worse. Much worse.

The fortunes of the Nazarenes had waxed and waned over the decades since that tumultuous year – year 30 of our calendar. The members of this brand of Judaism called themselves “The Way.” Later followers would call Rabbi Yeshua “Jesus,” but that wasn’t his name. He would not have turned around had anyone yelled out, “Jesus, Jesus, come and help me.” Ya’akov – Jacob or James in our language -- Rabbi Yeshua’s powerful brother, had been the undisputed leader. A towering presence, his righteousness, insights and strength matched his tall stature. He was a stern figure, confident of his status as brother of Yeshua. He was nothing less than the prince regent of the new movement, awaiting the return of the King. Then he and the disciples would be leaders of the restored Israel, the head of all the tribes in the Kingdom God had planned from the moment of creation, the world as he intended it to be. That was his dream and while Yeshua had been killed for talking about it, Ya’akov knew that what his brother had said would undoubtedly come to pass.

Like his cousin, Jochanan ha-Matbil – the one we call John the Baptizer (or Baptist) -- Ya’akov had taken a special religious vow, that of the Nazirites. This mysterious undertaking was a privilege reserved for only a very few. “Super-Jews” as they were laughingly referred to in the streets of Jerusalem. In accordance with his vows, he kept the Sabbath rigorously, worshipping in the Temple every day, and avoided meat and alcohol. He never shaved nor bathed. Some said that he had even entered the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctuary of the Temple reserved for the Presence of God and the high priest.

As a sign of his special mission, Ya’akov vowed strict observance of the Torah and avoidance of contact with the dead. Even Yeshua had not taken that step.

And what was that mission? Nothing less than the greatest coup d’état of all times. Like his brother, Rabbi Yeshua and his cousin Jochanan, Ya’akov thought that God would soon take a hand at reshaping human history. God could be counted on, Ya’akov thought, to turn things around. He would reward the truly righteous who had persevered during the many times of adversity and who had honored God’s commandments with dignity and compassion. The righteous were those who took the Torah of God seriously, who rested on the Sabbath, as God himself had rested from the activity of creation. They kept the dietary laws, avoiding pig meat and food sacrificed to the idols that the Romans loved and

worshipped. They got along well with other people, being generous with their goods and well intentioned in their dealings with those with whom they came into contact. These were the righteous, the true remnant of Israel. They were the friends of God who valiantly withstood pressures to assimilate.

Ya'akov was a resilient man who encouraged his small group to keep the Torah strictly while waiting for Yeshua to return to establish the Kingdom he had promised would come. Even though it had not come in Yeshua's lifetime, as he had hoped, Ya'akov assured everyone that it was right on the doorstep.

Rabbi Mattai had often talked with Ya'akov as well as with others who had been with Yeshua in the Galilee. This included a mysterious wealthy woman, Miriam ha-Migdal, another commanding presence within the group in Jerusalem. She was called "ha-Migdal" (Mary the Magdalene or Mary the Tower) because she was a "tower" of strength. She was vocal and her opinions counted, effectively bossing around the Yeshua's pupils as wayward children. She was Yeshua's closest associate, his constant companion, his "partner" throughout life. She was with him throughout his mission, at his crucifixion and, as his closest female relative, it fell upon her to go to his temporary tomb to prepare his body for burial.

Alongside Ya'akov's steadfast belief that Yeshua would return, Miriam ha-Migdal's quiet inner resilience helped keep the hope alive. A community had gathered around her after Yeshua's death and while she was in Jerusalem Mattai found in her a source of insight and inspiration. Perhaps even more than Ya'akov, she knew Yeshua the best and Mattai took her words seriously. She was a strong beautiful woman, a force to be reckoned with, a businesswoman of independent means – something exceedingly rare for the time. Mattai knew that along with several other wealthy women, Miriam ha-Migdal had funded Yeshua's mission, no mean feat.

Miriam -- Yeshua and Ya'akov's mother -- had been there in Jerusalem. She had seen a lot of tragedy in her life. Her husband, Josef, had died not long after the long trek to Jerusalem for Passover when Yeshua was in his thirteenth year. Josef had shown signs of fatigue on that long journey back, complicated by the fact that Yeshua had dallied in the Temple. They thought that he had left with all the others, going the long descent from Jerusalem down to the floor of the Great Rift Valley. They had to backtrack to retrieve him and perhaps that strenuous return journey up to Jerusalem had added to Yosef's toll.

Both Miriams had moved on, however, to other places around the Mediterranean, long before the troubles of the 60's. They were better off, Mattai mused to himself. Miriam, mother of Yeshua and Ya'akov, was rumored to have gone to Ephesus with the disciple John. She'd be safer there. But he was less sure about the whereabouts of the Miriam ha-Migdal ... Ephesus? France? Egypt? Who knew? There were many rumors. But wherever she was, Mattai was confident that she'd be safe and would promote the message of Yeshua with compassion and healing.

Yeshua's pupils had also been there – disciples or apostles we sometimes call them – but pupils or *talmidim* they were, taking in the insights and teachings of their rabbinic master. Many of them, too, had moved abroad. Mattai knew that there were now members of “The Way” in Syria, Babylonia, the Roman province of Asia (part of modern-day Turkey), Greece, Cyprus, Crete, Italy, and, of course, Egypt. All around the Mediterranean. Yeshua's brothers were in Jerusalem as well – Simeon, poised now to take over leadership of The Community of the Way, along with José and Judas. The whereabouts of Yeshua's two sisters – another Miriam and Salome -- Mattai didn't know. Had they married? Did they have children, nephews and nieces of Yeshua?

Over the years since Yeshua's death and in spite of Ya'akov's murder and the departure of so many of the original group, their branch had grown considerably even in Jerusalem. While Mattai did not know them all, he suspected members of their movement probably now numbered around a couple of hundred or so. Maybe more with many assemblies scattered throughout the city. Not a large number considering the huge population of Jerusalem. All were devout Jews, serious about the Torah as interpreted by Yeshua, plying their trades and making a meager living in uncertain economic times. Others like Mattai were teachers operating their yeshivas in the narrow streets of the capital city, studying the Torah, singing the psalms, worshipping in the Temple and treasuring the sayings of Yeshua their inspired leader.

Another group, however, had become influential in Jerusalem during these years, Greek-speaking people who had come into the city speaking of “a Christ.” Ya'akov and members of The Community of the Way generally avoided these people. Their arrogance offended them as they aggressively tried to convert Jews to their Gentile religion. As Jews, the natural affinities of the Nazarenes lay more with the Essenes and the Pharisees with whom they had much in common -- not these pagan pork-eaters from Roman centers around the Mediterranean.

Ya'akov himself had been killed six years earlier. During a period of turmoil, the Sadducean High Priest had had him stoned to death. It was the greatest of ironies – one of the greatest defenders of Torah, Ya'akov, had been hastily charged with disobeying the Law and summarily executed, without evidence – thrown over the southeastern walls of Temple Mount and then bombarded with rocks and huge boulders. Members of his movement along with the Pharisees tried to stay the execution, but, because of the mob, they were unable to do so. Mattai knew where Ya'akov had been buried. It was in the Kidron Valley, not far from Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives. His successor had yet to be named, although Simeon stood a good chance of becoming the leader.

Mattai thought to himself, would his departure from Jerusalem weaken the Nazarene center? Would “the Way” continue to flourish, especially with one of its prime teachers – Mattai – gone? What was God up to? Where was the promised Kingdom? No one seemed to know why there was such a delay. It just didn't make sense in this, the

worst of days, with the destruction of Jerusalem imminent. These unsettling thoughts reverberated in Mattai's mind as he paced up and down his small room, that dreadful Shabbat – his last – in Jerusalem.

2

On the Run

It was late in the day on Saturday when Mattai's sons, David and Yosef, went outside, to look up at the clear darkening sky, to count the stars.

"Are there yet three stars in the sky?" asked their father Mattai anxiously.

"Not yet," they replied, "but it won't be long."

In the world before clocks and watches, the sighting of three stars was the signal that the Sabbath was over. Everything was prepared. Everything packed. The two donkeys ready. The teenagers rested. The valuable scrolls secure in their leather pouches. Everyone was really tense. This was zero hour. Mattai prayed silently, "*We thank you, O Lord our God, who has brought us to this day.*" And he pleaded for safety on their arduous journey.

He went over in his mind the route they'd follow. They'd travel west from Jerusalem, descending from the relatively cool mountains down to the warmer coastal plain. From there they'd turn northwards and walk up the Mediterranean coast to Antioch, following for a while the ancient highway that hugged the shores, linking Egypt with Mesopotamia in the north east. True, they could take a small ship from the port city of Caesarea Maritima up to Antioch but Mattai thought that the Romans would be carefully monitoring traffic at that strategic coastal town.

Mattai had walked to Antioch-on-the-Orontes before and remembered the route well. But he was younger then -- by some twenty years. In the late 40's he had been sent on a special mission by Ya'akov. The Community of the Way had heard rumors that a leader by the name of Paul had been preaching a strange new religion that seemed to have some links to their Rabbi Yeshua. Mattai, along with some others, had been sent up to Antioch to find out what was going on. It was an important fact-finding mission. But that was so long ago. Paul had died just a few years back, in the mid 60's, in Rome it was believed. And, of course, Ya'akov had himself been killed in Jerusalem in 62.

"Three stars," muttered David and Yosef. "In fact, thousands of stars have suddenly illuminated the sky. The heavens have lit up. That's an auspicious sign, don't you think, father?"

Mattai did not answer but he hoped for the best. In the distance they could hear the sound of the trumpeter high above the city, perched on the southwestern corner of Temple Mount, signaling the end of the Sabbath. Work could resume and people began to

go around their daily chores. The marketplaces would open. Fires would be lit. Food would be served. Everything done under the watchful eye, of course, of the Zealot militants who patrolled the city streets.

They wasted no time. It was a warm, clear evening as dusk settled. They quietly went out the southwestern gate, the Essene Gate as it was called locally. They crossed over the western ridge and walked down the slopes of the Hinnom Valley, that ancient pit where the Canaanites had sacrificed their children to Moloch and which Jerusalemites of Mattai's time used as a garbage heap. Soon the Temple and city receded from their view, hidden by layers of corrugated hills and valleys as they descended, lower and lower, towards the broad coastal plain.

Mattai thought bitterly to himself that there were no songs about leaving Jerusalem. That was odd, he mused to himself. There were many songs, of course, for pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the three annual festivals that brought hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world into the city. He sang quietly to himself the ballad of the returning exiles, *"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'the Lord has done great things for them'."* But now the Lord was silent, Mattai thought somewhat bitterly. Immediately one of the great Songs of Ascent crept unbidden into his mind, *"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!' Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem - built as a city that is bound firmly together. To it the tribes go up...."* And here Mattai stopped abruptly, overcome with grief. He realized to his sorrow that as he had been singing these songs of joy, his feet were no longer within Jerusalem's gates. They were now firmly on the western slopes, moving ever farther and farther away from the holy city and the great Temple of the Lord and the daily round of sacrifices.

"Will we ever come back?" the boys and girls quietly asked. "Maybe, God willing," Rachel added. "We are leaving our homestead, the house of our ancestors for countless generations. This is not how we Nazarenes thought that life would unfold. We pictured a much better future than this." She paused for a moment and then added to anyone who'd care to listen, "This is some messianic era!"

But no one was listening to her skeptical recriminations. The boys - Yosef and David - were much more preoccupied with their own thoughts. We have no weapons. What happens if we encounter Romans? And the girls - Rebecca and Sarah -- were lamenting that they had not been able to pack all their treasured herbs. What will happen if we cut ourselves? Or sprain our ankles? To herself and to herself alone, Rachel mused bitterly that their rabbi, Yeshua, had promised everyone much too much, raising false hopes and expectations. She hoped she was wrong but the world really did seem much worse now than when he had been alive.

And so the ragtag group of six ploughed on. They noticed, however, that they were not alone. Others were quietly exiting the city, some with donkeys and some just trudging along, carrying their meager possessions. All seemed to be headed down to the coast of the Great Sea, the Mediterranean. Mattai thought to himself, “Hmmm, we’re not alone in our plans.” Soon they found themselves in the company of many other Jerusalemites leaving behind the homes they had known for centuries to pursue an uncertain destiny and hopefully peace.

The small Roman force that had occupied Jerusalem had been forcibly evicted some two years earlier. While they put up a brave resistance, the various bands of Zealots eventually overpowered them. Many of the hated occupiers had been killed. The few survivors had fled down the coast to safety in their camp at Caesarea Maritima. There they hoped to join up with Vespasian’s forces. So it was fortunate that Mattai and Rachel did not have to fear the Romans as they left Jerusalem. Most of the Roman fighting force was currently preoccupied mopping up the resistance in the Galilee and heading down the Jordan River towards the Dead Sea. That would soon change, however. A year later, Jerusalem itself would be surrounded by Roman legions which would ruthlessly kill everyone trying to flee. Mattai could not know that he had chosen the *only* window of opportunity to escape.

But there were other worries – bandits, Zealot marauders and refugees from the north desperate for food, clothing, in fact, anything of value with which they could barter when they reached Jerusalem. The last group was known to be particularly dangerous and Mattai took care to give on-coming travelers a wide berth – not, of course, that they had anything valuable for looting. Well, except for the two scrolls that Mattai valued above all else.

*

Antioch-on-the-Orontes River.

That’s where Mattai and his small family were headed, some three hundred miles northwest of Jerusalem. It was located up the Mediterranean coast, almost at the point where the Middle East curves westward along the northern rim of the Great Sea. A picturesque setting, Antioch is nestled beneath a short mountain range overshadowed with three rounded peaks.

There they would be safe, he hoped. He’d establish a leather-making shop, he thought, and so earn a meager salary but enough to support his family. Perhaps, too, he’d set up a yeshiva in his home, just as he had done in Jerusalem. But much depended on what other Jewish leaders were doing. There his near-adult children would grow up in peace, establish their families, have their own children and ply their trade as potters. Antioch would be their new home as Jerusalem had been for centuries, he supposed.

Antioch was then the third largest city in the Roman Empire, after imperial Rome itself and the great cosmopolitan center, Alexandria in Egypt. Antioch's population was probably around half a million. Mattai knew from his previous travels that there were many Jews living in Antioch and he had noted its many synagogues. Several hundred years earlier -- around 300 B.C.E. -- the Greek rulers of the Near East, the Seleucids, had encouraged Jews to settle there. They offered major incentives and many Jews eagerly responded. They were granted full status as citizens alongside settlers from Greece and other centers around the Empire. Their privileges had been written upon tablets of brass and these were carefully guarded by the Jewish community. Jews had flourished in this city, becoming traders, small shop keepers, importers and exporters and expeditors of all sorts of goods that had come overland from the exotic east towards the Roman west across the Mediterranean. From time to time, they enjoyed favors from the Seleucid rulers who bestowed impressive gifts on the synagogues.

Relations between Jews and their Gentile neighbors were generally cordial in Antioch. There were tensions that flared up from time to time, but, for the most part, they lived in relative peace. Almost a century before Mattai, Herod the Great had embarked upon a massive building campaign throughout the Middle East. In Jerusalem he expanded the Temple Mount platform to make it larger in size than the Acropolis and Parthenon in Athens. He hollowed out a mountain, the Herodion just southeast of Jerusalem, with secret passages that allowed defending troops to exit at various points up the slopes. He built luxurious palaces atop Masada down by the shores of the Dead Sea and filled it with provisions that decades later the Zealots would find and use. He created the jewel of the eastern Mediterranean, the impressive seaport of Caesarea Maritima. In Antioch, Herod constructed an impressive showcase street right in the center of the city, paved with costly imported marble. Nearly two miles long, this wide boulevard boasted fashionable shops and boutiques along the street, the Rodeo Drive of its time. Statues of emperors and famous Roman citizens dotted the street. Intersections were well marked. Each featured four decorative arches, one on each corner, and from their tops smaller arches jumped out that met right in the middle of the street. This was the place for people to shop, converse and congregate. This was truly a modern city that had patrons with sufficient funds to beautify the city in such a grandiose fashion.

When war broke out in 66 between the Jews in the Galilee and the Romans, the Antiochenes did not rush to side with the Romans by persecuting the Jews. In time, those cordial feelings would be strained, but that had not yet happened. There were, of course, resentments -- the special privileges accorded the Jews, not having to worship the Roman emperor being one. And there were tensions that flared up from time to time. The rebellion that had started in the Galilee in 66, pitting Jews against their Roman overlords, had the potential to raise hostility in a political and military center like Antioch. For most Gentiles, however, the Jewish community had blended in well with the rest of the population and generally its members were respected. Many spoke Greek and not just Aramaic. Most had adopted the practices of Gentile society making them appear less

distinctive than, say, Jews in Jerusalem at the time. Moreover, there was no whiff of rebellion by Jewish leaders in Syrian Antioch.

So Mattai was confident. As he turned to his family he said, "We'll soon be in a better place. Free from war. Free from the fear of being killed." He knew in his heart that Antioch was a place where Jew and Gentile could work together and prosper, each in his own way, maintaining differences but sharing much in common.

Sensibly, the kids blurted out, "But, Abba, we aren't there yet. Antioch is far away and we won't be safe for a long time to come." The teenagers, less attached than Mattai to the words of Yeshua and Ya'akov about future promises, concentrated on what was immediately in front of them – the sad farewell to their family hometown, the friends left behind, the wearisome trudging step after step, the dangers that lurk at the side of the path and the loss of all they had known.

"Mattai," Rachel called out, "having the others along the route is a good omen. We're not likely to be attacked by thieves."

Mattai agreed and Rachel clutched her two daughters as they began the long slow descent from the heights of Jerusalem down towards the coastal plain. Her thoughts were not on the ancient songs or the social circumstances of the Jews in Antioch, a city she had never seen and had only heard about by visitors. Her impressions were mixed and she was filled with apprehension. Would they really be able to survive there? After all, they knew no one. Well, maybe Mattai knew some. Maybe he could locate some of the people he met some twenty years earlier, *if* they were still alive. And *if* they remembered him. True, he had been an important emissary from Ya'akov himself, but time and the pressures of simply staying alive took its toll, she knew, on peoples' memory. What could she now remember of events some 20 years ago, before she had her four surviving children? When she was young and had just married Mattai who was six years older than she was? So many things had happened since that time that drowned out ancient pleasant memories. So much turmoil. So many troubles.

"How long before we get there?" David shouted. They had been over this before, but David probably wanted to break the silence, to reassure himself and everybody that things were fine and going according to plan.

"About three weeks, if we're lucky," Mattai responded. He knew that they needed to cover fifteen miles or so per day and that the pace of the six of them, coupled with the slow moving donkeys who didn't share their haste, would vary considerably.

So they walked in silence, mile after mile, the lights of Jerusalem having faded in the background. The canopy of stars above and a distant moon low on the western horizon brought an eerie shadowy light to the landscape. They were fortunate that they had not met any Roman troops along the road. Mattai could not know that within a few short

months the Romans would encircle Jerusalem and that they would capture fleeing exiles, crucifying them and their families to create sheer horror at the fate that awaited those that sought to escape their noose-like net. Then the landscape through which they were nervously walking would be filled with men, women and children, all dangling from the cross and hoping for a quick death – hundreds, even thousands, of crosses would dot the hills around Jerusalem – the Mount of Olives to the east, the hills to the south and the western ridge to the west. No one would escape Roman butchery.

But that was not their fate.

As they began to look for a place to settle down for the night, behind them, in the distance, they thought they could make out the outlines of Yehuda and his family. Just shadows in the clear moonlit landscape. Probably just wishful thinking, an evening mirage.

Or was it? Could that really be Yehuda?

Day One on the road came to a close about midnight. They found a grove of trees to rest up for a more ambitious day following. They fastened the donkeys, gave them food and water, grabbed a few blankets to fend off the evening's chill, and settled down to whatever sleep they could manage under the stars above. A few shooting stars had been seen in the distance, and they had pointed northwards. This, too, they took to be a good omen for a successful trip. Surely God was on their side and would bless their journey.

*

Day Two started abruptly with a surprise. Mattai and Rachel were startled to find Yehuda and his family had come up alongside them. "Why you old trickster!" Yehuda shouted out to Mattai. "What are you up to?"

Yehuda was very glad to see Mattai and his family and he, too, had not mentioned his plans to his old friend. They walked on, delighted they could share a final precious moment together. Soon they would part, however, for Yehuda had devised a different plan than Mattai. Once they reached the coastal plain, he and his family would head south, along the ancient coastal highway to Egypt. "We've got some friends there," Yehuda confided, "a group called the Therapeutae. They are similar to us in many ways and I've heard that some of the members of our movement escaped there from Qumran. Besides, there are a lot of Jews in Alexandria. It's a strong community with ancient roots, although many of them do not share our strict beliefs and practices. That's a danger we'll have to face – compromises everywhere with the dietary laws and the laws related to the Sabbath. Why, one of their leaders, Philo, has even rewritten the Torah as a Greek allegory. He says that the wanderings in the wilderness during the Exodus really represent stages in the soul's mystical progression towards God. But that perspective, so different from our own, probably won't concern us. Hopefully we'll be safe there from the marauding Romans. It's just our fellow lax Jews that we'll have to look out for."

“Well, we’ll all be safer in Alexandria or Antioch than in Jerusalem,” Mattai responded encouragingly. “I’m sorry we’ll part. But ancient ties are being broken every day and we are really fortunate we have our small families intact.”

The day grew hotter and soon they were out of the leafy trees that shielded them from the sun. The heat of the coastal plain would be fierce. Mattai knew that from bitter experience remembering the intense sunburn he had experienced some twenty years earlier. “We’ll need to make some shade for ourselves and to do as much walking in the early morning as we can” he announced to anyone who cared to listen.

Yehuda and Mattai mused about their fate, knowing that tomorrow would be their last day together. They shared their sorrow and disillusionment that perhaps, after all, they had been lied to.

“Yehuda,” Mattai said, “your Teacher of Righteousness promised a better future for you and your group. And yet even he suffered at the hands of the Wicked Priest and was betrayed by someone within your own community, the one he called ‘The Liar.’”

“Yes,” said Yehuda. “We were promised a world in which we, the righteous remnant of Israel, would rule and prosper. That was the ancient vision of the prophets and his inspired interpreter, our great Teacher of Righteousness. A whole new age. God recreating the world. A restored Eden. That remains our most cherished hope.”

Yehuda was silent for a while but went on eventually to add, “You, too, have shared much of our vision, Mattai. Your rabbi, Yeshua, announced that this better world was on our doorstep, just a few weeks or months away, certainly during his lifetime and ours. And, yet, he too suffered horribly during his last days – beatings, scourging, mockery and crucifixion. Have we all been taken in? Sometimes late at night I wonder about this.”

“I have entertained those suspicions, too, Yehuda. It’s now some thirty-eight years after Yeshua’s death. That’s a long time to wait for his promise to be fulfilled. The world is now a worse place today than it was back in his day. I think we can both be excused for wondering if the promises will hold true. I certainly don’t think I’ll live to see them fulfilled in my lifetime. Do you?”

“No,” Yehuda responded, “not in my lifetime or even my children’s lifetimes. The Romans are powerful and they hold the world in their armed fist. This is truly the darkest hour of human history.”

“Even though I walk through the Valley of Death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” The stirring words of confidence the ancient song-writer of the Psalms welled up spontaneously in Mattai and Yehuda’s minds. *“Your rod and your staff comfort me.”* Maybe that was sufficient, knowing that God was present in their lives. Maybe the hope was really

that *“surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the House of the Lord for ever more.”* Maybe that was all God really promised – his Presence, comfort and eternal life. Perhaps all the rest about the Kingdom of God was just hype.

Rachel and Yehuda’s wife, Anna, walked hand in hand. They had shared many a meal and dozens of family occasions marking significant passages in their lives...the circumcision of their boys, their coming of age and taking on the obligations of the Torah, festival celebrations as they pooled their meager resources and chanted the stories of Israel’s glorious past. Even several deaths -- she shuddered to remember her early married years and the bitter disappointments they had all experienced.

Rachel knew the Torah almost as well as Mattai and that was very surprising for a woman of her generation. After all, she had heard him recite and teach passages in their living room over and over again. If pressed, she could quote long passages from the Torah in the ancient tongue, Hebrew. And she could recall Mattai’s interpretations of these passages in their modern language, Aramaic. That was a real accomplishment, gained so easily while busying herself with household chores while Mattai taught his small group of students.

In her quiet moments, however, she thought that both her husband and Yehuda were dreamers. They were always focusing on the future and not on the present. That was the problem she thought with all this business about God’s special agent, the Messiah; the Kingdom of God and a better world coming soon. These were dangerous delusions that took people’s minds off the present...the humdrum routine of life, making ends meet, helping others through their ordeals, seeing to the needs of growing children, planning special foods at the festivals in so far as their meager budget would permit.

“Such foolishness,” she confided to Anna, “this whole craziness about a Messiah. It’s really consumed our entire generation. And your group thinks that there will be two Messiahs, a priestly one and a political one. But what good are these empty promises when we all live in constant fear for our lives...and those of our children. Besides,” she added, “what difference does it make? It’s just that – promises that fill our heads with unrealistic expectations.”

For Rachel, she and her people would be saved not by pious hopes and grandiose cosmic visions but by keeping faith with the time-honored traditions of her people. Love justice and be fair to all people, whether Jew or Roman. Show mercy and refuse to jump to conclusions, especially negative ones about other people. Observe the Sabbath as a special day of rest and contemplation – God’s gift to the Jewish people. Keep Kosher – as if that were a problem in her society! Where would she get pork, or shellfish, even if she could afford it! Bring up your children properly and care for your family. All this she had tried to do all her life.

Anna nodded, for she, too, had reservations about Yehuda's constant preoccupation or obsession with the Teacher of Righteousness, the Master, and all the hopes they had spawned.

"What good has been all the biblical study and piety of the brethren at Qumran?" she asked Rachel. "All they have done is nurture unrealistic hopes in Yehuda's mind. Sheer escapism, if you ask me. Dangerous escapism this whole messianic dream," she mumbled to Rachel.

"You're absolutely right, Anna," Rachel nodded in agreement. "All this nonsense about a coming Messiah is just a fantasy. It's just not very practical and it's the last thing our religion needs. Moses fortunately had the good sense not to get caught up in all this end-time speculation."

Anna was in firm agreement. While not as familiar with the Torah as Rachel was, she thought that the pursuit of a world of righteous perfection was simply a wild goose chase.

"Consider," she said to Rachel, "our husbands are chatting about a wonderful never-never-land when we're concentrating where we are walking, wondering about our food supply, and keeping a sharp eye out for thieves along the roadside who could prey upon us. Their heads are in the clouds waiting for this great day of liberation."

"If God really cared about his people," Rachel ventured, "he would have sent his Messiah long ago. Instead God just sends prophets our way, to tease us every hundred years or so with these false promises. Promise after promise after promise. I'm fed up with all this messianic talk. Why doesn't God stop talking and just send the Messiah instead?"

"In fact, Anna," Rachel went on somewhat bitterly, "Your Teacher of Righteousness was no better than our Yeshua. They're responsible for having led us down this terrible garden path. At least that's what I think when I'm being honest and not just catering to Mattai's fond illusions. That's what I really think."

Anna shared Rachel's pragmatism.

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Disillusionment had begun to settle in for the Essenes and Nazarenes. The promises of their inspired leaders just didn't seem to be materializing. Even Mattai and Yehuda dimly sensed that but they dared not abandon the hope that had sustained them most of their lives. It would be like admitting that their lives were built upon a mistake. Perhaps, after all, the Teacher of Righteousness and Yeshua were just like Judas the Galilean, Simon of Perea, Theudas and the Egyptian Prophet. They were false prophets who had tried to take the world by storm. Sure, they could speak well, quote the prophets and gather a group of devoted disciples. But when it came to real action, they had all failed.

Mattai and Yehuda were not alone in their sorrow. Simeon, the reputed successor to Ya'akov in Jerusalem, was also concerned. As the incoming leader of The Community of the Way, he was growing older and he wondered why his generation was passing without any tangible sign of the Kingdom. That great radical trio who had taken on the Roman world – the three dedicated shepherds -- Jochanan, Yeshua and Ya'akov – had all met tragic ends and yet God had not seen fit to make good on the promises he delivered through them. The Essenes who escaped slaughter at Qumran also wondered, was all this for naught? Had they given their lives over to an empty promise? Six or seven generations of Essenes had lived since the Teacher of Righteousness had formed the community. Enthusiasm was waning, to put it mildly, in the promises. How long can a community wait for its promises to be fulfilled? Yehuda wondered to himself.

The Essenes had faced powerful opponents in the past. The “Wicked Priest” in Jerusalem had chased the Teacher of Righteousness back to his encampment, almost killing him on the solemn Day of Atonement. One of the Qumran scrolls bitterly denounced him for this. The Teacher had also faced opposition from “the Liar” – whoever he was. A renegade member, he had broken with the community over the strict interpretation of Torah, preferring an easier way. Some said he had even advocated the abandonment of Torah altogether. But the Teacher had stood firm, convinced that God was on his side, and most of the community rallied around him. His successors at Qumran, the various Masters who held sway over the community, preserved his teachings....and his practices.

The Community of the Way was not all that different. In fact, Rabbi Yeshua was very much like the Teacher of Righteousness, strict in his interpretation of Torah and firmly convinced that God's Kingdom was about to be made manifest on earth. But Mattai and Yehuda's minds were not on this. They were anxious what the steady advance of the Romans – drawing ever closer to Jerusalem -- would mean for the future of the Jewish people and their religion.

Well, actually, religions. Since the mid 2nd century B.C.E., Judaism had fractured into various branches -- notably the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots and now “The Way.” They were all Jews, but they all differed in their objectives and how Torah should be understood and practiced. The Sadducees and Pharisees had even waged an intensely bitter civil war against each other in the early part of the 1st century B.C.E. The Essenes thought that all the others were wrong, including the Pharisees whom they despised for teaching easy interpretations of scripture. They thought that they -- and they alone -- possessed the inner key to understanding what sacred texts meant for their generation, the words of their inspired Teacher. The Pharisees, too, thought that they had the inner track on biblical interpretation, having at their command the Oral Law alongside the Written Law. By means of the Oral Law, they had the advantage of knowing what the Written Law actually meant. Or so they claimed. The Zealots disagreed with all moderates.

Some of the more extreme members of this faction, the Sicarii, didn't hesitate to dispatch moderates and collaborators with the sharp curved blade of a sickle.

In time, some of the nuances of these differences would be lost to history. All upheld the importance of the Torah, but interpreted it in vastly different ways. In time, a gospel would be written to reassure the wavering followers of Rabbi Yeshua that his promises were true and would eventually come about, the Romans notwithstanding. But that had not yet happened as Mattai, Yehuda and their families trudged wearily, step after step, down towards the coast.

The Gospel we call "Mark" would not be penned for several years, not until after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple. Mark – whoever he was -- faced an enormous challenge. He had to address the growing uncertainty and doubt all of Yeshua's followers felt. That's perhaps why that gospel begins with Jesus announcing that the Kingdom of God was at hand.

"At hand"? Surely he jests, many of Mark's first readers would have scoffed. "At hand" when it was already close to forty years later and the world had descended into hell for the Jewish people, a cauldron of death? For many this "at hand" timetable was a bitter and ironic message that simply did not ring true.

Mark had to answer that question – why the delay? And, in so doing, he created a whole new genre of literature – a gospel – the sayings and doings of the adult Yeshua all tied into a historical framework. Well, at least the last few years of his life, from his baptism by his cousin Yochanan in the River Jordan up to his death in Jerusalem.

The creation of a gospel was a remarkable feat, but still, the "at hand" schedule raised more questions than it solved.

The Nazarenes, too, had their "liar," a figure somewhat associated with their movement who had called into question the teachings of Rabbi Yeshua. This charismatic leader, Paul his name was, had eagerly and tirelessly bounded through the Jewish Diaspora with a message of liberation all in the name of a Christ. An easy path, Mattai surmised. No requirements. Nothing like the burden of Torah. All this from a person who had never met Yeshua, never spent time with him, never bothered to learn his message and rarely consulted with those who had known him firsthand. Paul was aware that his opponents referred to him as "a liar" and in many of his letters to groups he had founded, he had stoutly defended the view that he was not. Why, Mattai recollected, once he had even heard Paul himself speak and he began by saying, "I am not a liar."

Mattai shook his head and confided to Yehuda that this man might very well be their undoing. Sometimes liars are believed, especially those offering an easy route to salvation. For Mattai, this man and his message were to be shunned. For some time they walked together in silence. They had begun to reach the point where the hills were less

steep and broadened out towards vast vistas of the plains. Far in the distance they could see the blue Mediterranean. They paused, set up camp, prayed together for their mutual safety and slept a fitful sleep.

Unbeknownst to either of them, their mutual friend, the revered and learned Yochanan ben Zakkai who had studied with Hillel himself, would also manage – eventually -- to escape from Jerusalem. But he almost left it too late, to a time when the Roman army was already throwing up a barricade ringing Jerusalem so that no one could escape. Fearful of any encounters with Roman troops, Yochanan ben Zakkai pretended to be dead and was carried outside the city in a cart by some disciples. In time, Mattai and Yehuda would hear of his accomplishments at Jamnia down by the coast where he and some followers would begin the reconstruction of Judaism, without its Temple. But all this lay in

the future.

Along the Mediterranean coast.
Photo credit: Shira Benson

*

Day Three arrived far too early. The sun had peered over the hills while everyone was sound asleep. They threw off their blankets and stiffly began to awake, drinking some much needed water. Mattai checked the donkeys making sure that the pouches containing the scrolls were still safely in place. The dismal conversation the afternoon before had left him feeling drained of energy. Some day, he knew, these scrolls would come in handy. Some day but not yet. Not today.

The parting was not long in coming. They had descended from Jerusalem following the road to Emmaus – again fortuitously. Just a few months later the Romans would station one of their prime legions there. Then over to Jamnia and up to Joppa (modern day Jaffa). There the route joined up with the coastal highway built long ago – who knew when – a route that had seen the armies of the Pharaohs, the Hittites and the kings of Assyria, Babylonia and Persia and the rulers of Greece and now Rome. At Joppa, Mattai and his family would head north. Yehuda would head south, traveling a bit inland, following the caravan route past Ashkelon, Gaza and finally into Egypt to Alexandria itself.

Before turning south, however, Yehuda and his family hugged Mattai and his, wishing them well in the name of God. “Good health, long life and safety,” they said to each other knowing that they’d never meet up again. The moment had come and ancient friends went in separate directions.

Mattai and his family headed northwards, skirting the edges of the Mediterranean, trudging up the road where someday in the future a huge modern city would be erected, Tel Aviv. Right now there were only the plains, flat land, rocks and sand dunes off to the left where the Mediterranean lapped the shores of Israel, and a few sparse trees and bushes to break the landscape. They knew that they’d have to find water along the way as they were running short. Supplies they had for another week. They saw caravans coming and going up and down the coast, with merchants and their entourage carrying goods of

every description – precious spices, stone carvings, feathers from tropical birds, monkeys, colorful woven fabrics, salt and probably some unfortunate slaves. Rest areas had grown up over the centuries along the route, with supplies of water, dried fruit, figs, dates, honey, lentils and bread to comfort weary travelers.

Day after day they walked, carefully avoiding the beautiful Roman city of Caesarea Maritima, a powerful military headquarters filled with Roman troops.

For the most part, the Romans did not pester travelers along the highway: they were after fiercer game, up north. There they were chasing the surviving enclaves of resistance in the Galilee and the northern reaches of the Jordan River valley. In time they would make for the holy city of Jerusalem itself but that had not yet happened. That, they thought, would be where the “great revolt” would be decisively crushed.

Past Dor, Ptolemais, Tyre and Sidon Mattai and his family sojourned wearily, stopping only to rest at night and, of course, on the Sabbath.

3

Antioch-on-the-Orontes

Mattai's plan was to look up an old friend whom he knew from twenty years earlier, a devout man by the name of Onias. He was named in memory of a faithful high priest some two hundred years earlier. A revered figure, that Onias had resisted the Hellenizing influences of the ruler of the time, Antiochus Epiphanes. Early in the 160's B.C.E., Antiochus tried his hand at forcibly converting Jews to Greek ways. Antiochus probably thought the process would not be all that difficult. In fact, he likely thought most of his Jewish subjects would welcome incorporation into the world culture of the Mediterranean. After all, many of the most prominent Jewish leaders liked Greek habits, especially those who had bribed themselves into positions of power. One even built a gymnasium in Jerusalem and wanted its citizens to become Greek citizens, just like those in Antioch. Onias the high priest had resisted his attempts to make the Jews give up the Sabbath, their dietary laws and the practice of circumcision. For all his efforts to stem the tide of assimilation, however, Onias was deposed and spent the last days of his life in Egypt. But he was well remembered and traditionalists often named their children in his honor.

As Mattai told Rachel and the teenagers, "I'm sure we'll be able to count on Onias." Like his famous and revered namesake, Mattai knew that Onias would be a stout defender of Judaism and faithful to their shared convictions as members of The Community of the Way. They had been allies in the mission on behalf of Ya'akov and had shared some good times together as young men in a large city.

Rachel, ever the skeptic, was not so sure. "Much has likely happened to them as it has to us," she noted. "After all, it's been twenty years since you last saw him. You don't even know if he's still alive."

Mattai put these skeptical thoughts away at the back of his mind. He remembered Onias as a strong, healthy, large, handsome man, a person who enjoyed life and delighted in taking walks throughout Antioch. There wasn't an area he hadn't explored. Bouncing from rock to rock he climbed up the various mountain peaks above Antioch to look out to the Mediterranean in the distance. He had walked along the winding Orontes River from Antioch down to its port city, Seleucia Pieria, some dozen meandering miles to the west. He had pushed his way through crowded streets and marketplaces out to the countryside where Jewish farmers engaged in large agricultural enterprises. He had trekked up to the wealthy residential suburb named Daphne to admire the grand villas of the rich and famous. Jewish presence was everywhere around the city – in a section of Antioch called

Epiphania that lay in the shadow of the mountain, in the agricultural suburbs, in wealthy Daphne and Seleucia Pieria on the coast. In all these places there were synagogues and long-standing Jewish communities.

Antioch was surely a great city to enjoy and explore. Boasting a population of half a million, it was a major center of commerce and trade, government and the arts. A great multicultural society had blossomed there in the wake of overland trade from the Mediterranean to the exotic east. Emissaries had come through Antioch on their way to Rome even from as far away as India. It truly was the nexus for travel and trade – eastward to the influential city of Edessa across the Euphrates River and ancient Harran where Abraham had tarried eons ago on his way to the Promised Land, and points beyond. Going overland from Egypt and Israel in the south, travelers and caravans had to go through Antioch in order to curve around the Mediterranean and enter the Roman province of Cilicia.

Many travelers and traders preferred to use Antioch's port city to venture further west, to Ephesus, Athens and even Rome itself, thus cutting off an extensive and arduous trek over the mountains across the vast expanse of modern day Turkey into Europe beyond. Although originally from Tarsus in Cilicia -- just around the bend in the land mass from Antioch -- Paul often preferred to take a ship from Antioch to reach the western shores of Asia and Greece.

Mattai even recalled an amazing story Onias had told him, of a very wealthy Jewish expatriate from Babylon who had come to Antioch in style. Along with over one hundred family members, he arrived with considerable fanfare and a huge retinue. It was said that he had over five hundred horsemen who could shoot arrows while riding on their horses – not a particularly useful skill in Antioch, Onias thought. The name of this flamboyant traveler was Zamaris. How he had gained his fortune, no one knew. His entourage settled for a while just outside of Antioch at a place called Oulatha. Onias was not sure where this was because no suburb by that name existed in his day. Apparently they had moved on, being induced by King Herod the Great to relocate in a town further east, but while they were in Antioch, they had gained considerable notoriety.

Animals and spices not seen elsewhere were readily available in the marketplaces and colonnades for the wealthy to enjoy. Every now and then a captive lion or tiger could be spotted in their cages, captured in the hills above Antioch. These huge wild cats were becoming rarer in Syria the 1st century, but they still posed a danger to the lone, unwary traveler venturing off the beaten path. Once an elephant from India had been exhibited, Onias recalled, and exotic strange-looking monkeys were glimpsed from time to time. Tales were told of wonderful beasts that lived in other countries of the world – a tall animal that could eat leaves off the top of trees, a monstrous pig that lived in water and a massive animal with an upturned nose which would charge headlong at every noise it heard. Food stands serving every form of ethnic cuisine dotted the edges of the bazaars, drawing people into the stores along the narrow streets.

Antioch was a noisy, bustling city, this vibrant metropolis of the new Roman world. It was also a political and military city, the capital of the Roman province of Syria presided over by a legate and backed by Roman legions. Roman officials had several palaces, one in Antioch itself and another one in the wealthy suburb of Daphne. Those officials of sufficient rank and who could afford the lifestyle resided in Daphne. A person knew he had “arrived” when he was permitted to settle in that town high on the plateau overlooking the plain on which Antioch was situated.

Onias had taken it all in and on Mattai’s visit to Antioch some twenty years earlier he had shared some of his favorite spots with him. Every now and then these younger and more agile men had climbed up the northernmost peak above Antioch, not a difficult climb for the rock outcroppings seemed ready-made for human ascent. Over the years, much of the topsoil and vegetation had been washed away, carried down the slopes of the mountains, coming to a rest on the outskirts of the city itself. In fact, this “wash” from time to time caused problems for local inhabitants. Crews with rudimentary shovels had to dig out and remove wet muddy debris that threatened to spill over onto residential streets and homes.

Onias had heard rumors that an image had been carved into the face of the rock in the mid 2nd century B.C.E., as a charm against a nasty plague that was afflicting the city. Apparently this image had worked, for the problem disappeared and the face was left incomplete. Known as “Charonian,” Mattai and Onias had often sat down in the clearing below her chin, and stared out, as she had done for several centuries, at the Mediterranean in the distance. They would have laughed at a later suggestion that she represented Mary, Mother of Jesus, for this was a carving that predated by two hundred years or so the arrival of The Community of the Way. Nor had she likely passed this way, being connected both with Jerusalem and with Ephesus far to the west. Underneath this dour-looking face, they they’d eat a modest lunch -- a few vegetables, some lentils and some bread.

So, Mattai said to himself, I have every reason to expect that Onias will help us out. I wonder if he looks back on the time we spent together with as much enjoyment as I have recalling those exploits alongside the serious business of investigating matters for Ya’akov.

But how was Mattai to find Onias in such a large city, bigger than Jerusalem even with its burgeoning population?

They were reaching the outskirts of the city, the place called Daphne, a satellite city where many of the richest people resided. These wealthy individuals had constructed huge homes with colorful mosaics. Floors, walls, passage ways were decorated in brilliant ceramics that were guaranteed to stand the test of time. Little did they know that centuries later these would be lovingly lifted from the ruins of their homes and featured in a fabulous museum in modern day Antioch – Antakya as it is called in today’s Turkey.

Scenes of colorful birds, flowers and animals were favorites as were scenes of the ocean complete with the gods of the sea riding above the waves complete with dolphins and many species of fish. There were, of course, heroes from Greek antiquity – the gods, goddesses, nymphs and even Socrates sitting at his reclining bench perhaps ready to consume the hemlock. Haunting faces of people of all races whom we cannot now identify were also prominent. Scenes from sports and common pastimes like juggling, swimming or fishing also abounded throughout the rooms of these fabulous homes – on the walls and on the floors of their atriums.

This was indeed a wealthy community, rich through trading, politics – the cream of Antiochan Roman society.

An intoxicated Dionysius

“We’ll be there,” Mattai confessed to Rachel and the teenagers. Everyone was not at their best. Tempers had grown sharp as day after day passed, even though they were grateful that there had been no incidents along the way. God had answered their prayers and had brought them safely to their destination...well, at least almost their destination.

The boys and girls wanted to know more about Antioch. “What’s it really like?” they asked their father. “Will it be like Jerusalem?”

Their father paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. “Not entirely,” he began to say, “Not entirely. For one thing, we will be part of a minority within a large Gentile city. We’ve never experienced that before. We’ve always been in the majority. We’ve been fortunate up to now to have taken our dietary laws and Sabbath observances for granted. After all, most people more or less followed these in Jerusalem. That won’t be the case, however, with most of the people where we are headed.”

“Will there be enough Jews for us to marry,” said the girls, for that issue was becoming pressing. In their mid teens, their biological clocks as well as social pressures were mounting for them to get married.

“Of course,” answered Mattai. “While a minority, we are a large minority. There are many synagogues and we’ll have a chance through my friend Onias and others that I’ll recognize to meet other families, I’m sure, with sons your age.”

“There’s another difference, however,” Mattai added. He hesitated, for he was not quite sure how to put this. “While there are many Jews in Antioch, they do not all believe the same things or practice their religion the way we do. Even more than in Jerusalem, we’ll find Jews who have become like Gentiles, assimilating and adopting Gentile ways. They work on the Sabbath, eat unclean foods and scoff at us who keep the traditions. We’ll also find Gentiles who have become Jews. They are converts to our religion who bravely underwent circumcision and voluntarily took on the obligations of Torah. And we’ll find people in the middle -- Gentiles who like our teachings and our way of life but who

haven't made a commitment to become Jewish. We call these pious individuals, 'God-fearers.' They remain Gentile but they are sympathetic and interested in our religion."

"Oh," said the children. "That sounds even more confusing than having Essene or Pharisaic neighbors. At least they honor and respect our traditions while disagreeing with us on other matters."

"Well, there will be a few Essenes there, certainly some Pharisees and, of course, members of our own branch of Judaism. Even more confusing, however, will be another group -- Gentiles who claim to be descended from our religion but who will have nothing to do with our beliefs and practices," Mattai added. "They are a strange lot."

"But that's ridiculous," injected Rachel. "That makes absolutely no sense at all. They claim to be descended from us and yet they do nothing that we practice. That's like a horse claiming to be a camel. It's just not the same thing at all!" Rachel liked clear-cut distinctions and found this blurring of the lines absolutely absurd. The children wholeheartedly agreed with her.

"I know, Rachel," Mattai said in agreement. "But we will run across such people, individuals who despise the Law, who ridicule the Sabbath and the dietary laws -- all those special gifts from God that we Jews treasure. And yet they claim to be children of Abraham, descended from him through faith or having been adopted by their Christ. Mark my words, Rachel, they will be our biggest problem in the city."

Mattai couldn't have known how prophetic these words would be.

*

Meanwhile, they were walking through Daphne. They passed by many fine spacious villas on either side of the road, with lots of land around these houses, immaculately landscaped with laurel trees and grass. The courtyards were full of beautiful mosaics, only hinting at the wealth inside the homes.

"Look at that," Rachel said, "each one a wonderful oasis."

"Will we be living in such a fine place? If so, we don't mind having walked all this way," chimed in the boys.

"No," said Mattai. "That's not our lot in life. But I'll find plenty of work in the leather trade here, as you will in making fine pottery. Perhaps some of your handiwork may, in time, end up right here, in one of these houses."

The beautiful residential town of Daphne had been named for a Greek nymph. According to an ancient story that Mattai told to his family, Apollo had become enchanted with this beautiful nymph. Apparently Eros, the God of love, struck him with a love-arrow.

This was in retribution for Apollo having made fun of Eros' ability in archery. Eros had his revenge, for he smote only Apollo with the love-arrow, not Daphne. She was not at all enamored by Apollo's advances and so she prayed to the God of the river to hide her from him. He changed her into a beautiful tree, the laurel tree. As they moved silently through this beautiful town, they could not help but notice the many laurel trees that grew there, providing shade and conveying a sense of beauty, calm and peace. All remembrances of the shy nymph, Daphne.

"We're almost there," Mattai shouted. Daphne was only about five miles or so from the southern gates of Antioch. "And the walking will be easier. It's all downhill from here." So the six of them descended from the elevated plateau on which Daphne was situated down to the plain below. They could see the gates of Antioch off in the distance.

In his weariness, Mattai could not conjure up any word of encouragement. Finally, as they were descending on to the plain, he noticed the mountain range on the right. Well, he said to himself, at least that is similar to Jerusalem. And then the words of Psalm 121 sprang into his mind – the question: *"I will lift up my eyes unto the hills. From where will my help come?"* And then he recalled the resounding answer from the psalmist: *"My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth."* Those words of reassurance comforted him, especially as he recalled the last verse of the song, *"The Lord will preserve you from all evil. He will keep your life. The Lord will preserve your going out and your coming in, this time and for ever more."*

Yes, he said to himself with considerable satisfaction. This will work out.

Mattai had a plan. He remembered vaguely where the synagogue was to which Onias belonged. It was where members of The Community of the Way had worshipped twenty years ago, although by now, he thought, they must have several meeting places. It was a modest two-storey structure. There the Nazarenes would read and study the Torah, listen to the words of the inspired prophets, chant the psalms and ponder the interpretation of Torah given by Rabbi Yeshua. A synagogue was, of course, much more than a prayer hall. There they'd also meet to decide community issues, settle disputes and make decisions concerning how to expand their numbers and persuade other Jews to consider the words of their inspired Rabbi. Jews from other synagogues were welcomed to visit and were, in fact, encouraged to do so. Every now and then they'd entertain men from the Essene community or from the yeshivas of the Pharisees who had many such schools throughout Antioch. Or Jews who were just not affiliated with any of these identifiable groups would drop in from time to time.

We should not think of synagogues in modern terms, like churches belonging to various denominations, united in belief and practices. They were not part of a network of congregations affiliated with some central organization. Things were much looser back then, for all the different factions of Judaism. Synagogues were voluntary associations. Anyone could set up an association, for whatever purpose, and synagogues fell into this

category. Any community of like-minded Jewish individuals was free to establish its own place of meeting, to talk, pray, discuss, study, complain, whatever. Mattai and his family would soon discover how complex the religious scene was in Antioch, a cauldron of Greek, oriental and Jewish movements.

They had been traveling for eighteen and a half days, ever since that hasty Saturday evening exodus from Jerusalem over two weeks ago. They had rested on both Sabbaths, making do with the food they had brought with them and a few fresh items they had purchased the day before along the way. So, all in all, they had been walking sixteen and a half days. They were tired and exhausted. If they hurried, Mattai thought to himself, they'd make it from Daphne to Antioch in time for the Shabbat celebration. Hopefully there, in that synagogue of the community, he'd find people who'd remember him. Maybe even Onias.

"Come, everyone," he said encouragingly to his family, "we're nearing the end of our journey. God has given us good weather, health and sufficient food. We are safe and soon we will be in our new home. Come, let's rejoice that we have made it to this day. The day after tomorrow we will feast and join with others in Antioch in welcoming our third Sabbath away from Jerusalem."

They reached the edges of the city at noon on Thursday. Mattai and his small group gradually neared the Daphne Gate located on the southern side of the walled city. To their left they spotted the Orontes River that meandered through the plain as it descended to the Mediterranean Sea some ten miles or so to the west. As they entered the magnificent Daphne Gate, they sensed that this was a city to be reckoned with. They walked along the central colonnaded street, the jewel of Antioch that Herod the Great had built. They marveled at the many fine stores and shops along the way but were too exhausted even to wonder if, someday, they might have commercial space here themselves. They just wanted to find a place of rest, perhaps even a softer bed than the ground and a couple of thin blankets. And a decent meal and water!

They spotted people of many different nationalities walking and shopping along this central boulevard. Most of them spoke Greek which Mattai did not know.

"We're almost there," exclaimed Mattai. "It's just as I remembered."

"Will we have to learn Greek?" asked the kids anxiously, especially the boys who were wondering how they'd be able to get customers in their pottery shop.

"Yes," answered their father, somewhat taken aback by this startling question. "At some point, you'll have to be able to get along in Greek. That's the majority language here. I guess I'll have to learn it, too." he added rather reluctantly. That was a new thought to him. While he had planned the escape from Jerusalem carefully, including the route, it had

never dawned on him that in addition to the Hebrew and Aramaic he already knew, he'd really have to learn Greek to do business with most of the population.

Not too far along Herod's broad boulevard, they turned right, towards the mountains. Soon they heard people speaking their language, Aramaic. Here they were in the Jewish section of the city and pretty soon they were immersed in sounds they had last heard only in Jerusalem.

To Mattai's great satisfaction, not much had changed in the Jewish quarter in twenty years. The streets were still narrow, the pavement uneven and livestock mingled with people darting in and out of alley ways and entrances to the homes. Fortunately the city was laid out mostly on a grid, so streets did not meander too much this way and that. He passed by the synagogue of The Community of the Way and found his bearings. Now everything was familiar. It all came pouring back into his mind, as if he had never left. Finally, a few blocks away, he found the house he remembered as the home of Onias. Would he still be there? After all, he was not married when they last met? Were his parents still alive?

Bounding out of the house was a person about Mattai's age, older, shorter and more rotund than Mattai had remembered. It was, indeed, Onias. Mattai would have recognized him anywhere. Onias and Mattai stared at each other for a moment and then rushed to embrace. It was a heart-warming moment as they looked into each others' eyes, questions welling up inside and ancient memories stirring up the remembrance of former good times.

"Mattai," Onias said. "I always knew that someday you'd return and I often wondered how you had fared up in Jerusalem, especially after the tragic death of Ya'akov a few years ago. So come in, sit down, rest, you must be weary. Introduce me to everyone in your family."

The words kept tumbling out as Onias wanted to get caught up on everything within a minute. But he let them sit, catch their breath. Then Mattai introduced everyone in his family. And Onias did the same with his family. It turns out that he had married a local girl by the name of Judith and with her had six children, all of them healthy and still alive. They were roughly the same ages as Mattai and Rachel's flock.

"What brings you here?" said Onias. And Mattai had to confess that this was not just a short visit, nor a passing one. They had decided to leave their ancestral home and meant to start a new life, fresh in Antioch.

"Well, you can certainly stay here for a while," Onias and Judith quickly said, "at least until you get yourself established. We have a couple of rooms upstairs you can use. They're small but they'll do nicely. And much better than the conditions you've had on the road!"

So mid afternoon Mattai and his family arrived at Onias' home in Antioch. Judith prepared a modest meal which they all shared and once again Mattai gave blessings to the Lord for having brought them safely to this day, to this welcoming haven, amongst good friends he could count on. They talked long into the night and finally they went upstairs, took out their blankets and put them on top of the straw. Finally, they all thought, a bit more comfort than the harsh solid ground.

While roosters started crowing at 4.30 in the morning, no one in the Mattai family took notice of them. They slept as they had not slept for the weeks they had been traveling. A lovely, restful, sound sleep. Mattai had a wonderful dream filled with the sound of chanting, like a heavenly choir, he said in the morning. It was, in fact, one of the songs he had heard so many times from some of his Essene friends in Jerusalem, one of the songs for the Sabbath sacrifice. *"Sing to the God of power a song of heavenly joy, a celebration for all who are holy, a wonderful song for all eternity. Sing to the God of strength, praising him throughout nature and in his holy sanctuary. Praise him, O heavenly spirits. Praise him, O holy righteous ones."*

With this uplifting song resonating throughout his mind, he felt joined to all the righteous in paradise and a strange peaceful sensation came over him. Yes, here he felt secure. Here they'd all make a life for themselves. The future would be far better than it could ever have been in Jerusalem under Zealot anarchy and the threat of Roman capture and massacre.

4

Confusion in Antioch

They awoke with a start. It was already early morning and a cacophony of sounds bubbled up from downstairs, from the street and from the upper rooms of nearby homes as people were getting themselves, their families and their livestock ready for the day. Mattai hadn't thought through the next steps very clearly and was taken aback when Rachel inquired. "So, what do we do first?"

"A place to work, first. Then a home," he replied. "We'll need Onias' help with both."

Rachel couldn't refrain from injecting, "And forget about all this Messiah talk. We're no longer in Jerusalem and you're not surrounded by hordes of Essene fanatics. Let's focus on making a new life for ourselves without all that nonsense. It's just baggage. We have to work for our future -- not rely on God to make it all suddenly better!"

Mattai didn't argue and he sensed she did have a point. There were a lot of practical matters to sort out in just a short time, he admitted to himself. Plus he had to learn better how to concentrate on the present and not so much on the future. He wasn't good at living in the moment and he knew that Rachel had often called him "a dreamer" both to his face and to others. True, Onias and his family had been very generous indeed, but squeezed with their family into three ten feet by ten feet living quarters would lead to some friction from time to time, even for people accustomed to living in cramped quarters.

Onias had already recognized what Mattai would need. Onias was a silversmith by trade and had a shop in a street just off the Colonnade. He knew just enough Greek to get by with his customers. He made bracelets, rings, medallions, pendants, broaches, and fine silver decorations for the homes of the wealthy. They often asked him to fashion custom-designed silver pieces. Eagles, lions, tigers, horses and wreaths were favorite requests although his clientele was growing more sophisticated. They wanted something different, something unique. Elephants, giraffes, monkeys and other exotic beasts. Eagles with a hare in its mouth. A human grappling a lion by the throat as if to throttle it with his bare hands. A fisherman who caught a huge whale. Silver cups ornately designed. Platters of all sizes. And, for the religious, replicas of the nymph Daphne was a favorite as were statues of Artemis, Zeus and Apollo. Would he have room for a leather maker in his place, he wondered to himself and then quickly answered it in the affirmative. Yes, of course, he

could, he muttered enthusiastically. At least it's a start until they get their feet on the ground.

After a light breakfast, Onias broached the idea with Mattai who eagerly responded. He took out his tools and scraps of leather and followed Onias to his shop. Soon he was out on the street, making his services known to everyone...that is, everyone who understood Aramaic. To his great surprise, though, he found that many Greek-speaking people also understood some Aramaic. At least they could make out from his excited shouting that a new leather maker, direct from Jerusalem, had landed in their city. And what could Mattai make? Well, for instance, all kinds of sandals. The basic plain ones, just a leather sole and one strap. Fancier ones, too, with heel support and several bands of leather across the top of the foot, for greater comfort and security. Elegant ones for women with straps criss-crossing each other part way up the leg. Boots. Soldiers' marching boots.

Soon he had orders and with their deposit, he secured appropriate leather that had been carefully cured and prepared. He paused for a while, allowing himself the luxury of dreaming ahead. Eventually he'd have his own tanning salon and a whole stockpile of leathers ready for customer inspection – cowhide and the skins of goats, sheep, wolves and bears. Perhaps even lion, tiger and hyena leathers for the demanding aristocracy ever in search of the new and the exotic. And he'd have a larger product line-up. Perhaps shields for the military. Tents for travelers. Leather straps. Leather water bags. Leather caps. Leather awnings. Well, he realized, all those ambitious dreams lay in the future. Right now, it was time to return to reality and a successful first day as an entrepreneur in Antioch. By late afternoon he had secured enough down payments to procure his first supply of leather.

Friday afternoon had come quickly while Mattai was rounding up business. He wasn't really aware of how low the sun was setting down over the Mediterranean. As dusk approached, Mattai thought, we're nearing the seventh day and we rest, just as God himself did. Hopefully Rachel and Judith would be preparing a good dinner they'd share with their families and with others.

In time, Mattai had sufficient funds to be able to afford to rent a modest house, farther away from the city's core than Onias' and a bit of a walk to the synagogue to which they both belonged. It was a start, he thought to himself in a pleased fashion. Rachel was happy with this turn of events and the boys had managed to find positions as assistants in Reuven's pottery shop. In time, they'd become masters in their own right and would be able to set up their own shop.

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It was Onias' and his family's practice, as members of The Community of the Way, to gather in the synagogue to celebrate the Sabbath. They would eat together, a

communal Shabbat dinner to which everyone brought something to share. These Friday nights were noisy affairs – kids running everywhere, teenagers mimicking the seriousness of their elders, women serving and men trying to pray over the din of the proceedings. No one objected to the noise and commotion. This was God's house and this was a meal that was shared by the whole family, the entire group of Torah-observant followers of Yeshua – all in the Presence of God who wanted people to enjoy life and good times together.

As we picture this scene, our eyes should not be blinded by the many portraits of the Last Supper with Jesus and the Twelve solemnly seated around three sides of a long table. Those depictions with no women or children present, no one serving food, and not much food on the table represent an unlikely scenario at best! The Sabbath meal in Antioch's Synagogue of The Community of the Way was not like that at all. This was truly a festive meal and the social highpoint of the week. People dressed for the occasion. It was a joyous, raucous welcoming in of the Sabbath, greeting it as a welcomed guest into their lives, a day God had graciously given to the Jews in perpetuity.

Some parts of Torah said the Sabbath was in remembrance of God's work in creation. Creating the Sabbath was God's final and greatest act according to the first Torah scroll, the one we call the Book of Genesis. Honoring this day of rest, this writing maintained, was built right into the structure of creation itself. By observing this day, God himself is honored and his creation, time, is sanctified. By ceasing from creative action, Sabbath observers participate with God in his energies and purposes, sharing a moment to savor and value that which has been achieved up to that point.

Many found the Sabbath a good time to look back upon the week that had passed, to take stock of their lives and what they had achieved – or failed to achieve -- and to ponder the direction for the week following. For others, observing the Sabbath injected a sober note to existence. It was a special time, a period set aside each week to become aware of time and the significance it holds for decisions made and actions performed. Everyone agreed that of all God's gifts, this one was one of the most important. All it took was preparation.

And the willingness "to let go" of cares, troubles, striving and doing -- at least for one day.

Other parts of Torah said the Sabbath was a memorial to the Exodus out of Egypt so long ago, as a day to remember freedom from subservience to human masters, from the hurried pace of existence, from all the necessary pursuits that provide for one's self and for one's family. It was a day to commemorate liberation, free the mind, allow the spirit to soar and to contemplate the eternal purposes of humanity.

Whatever the reason for celebration, the Shabbat meal was fun for everybody. Everyone looked forward to the festivities. "Shabbat shalom," people cried out as nightfall descended, wishing everyone the peace of the Sabbath. From all over the neighborhood,

members of the Synagogue of The Community of the Way darted out from houses as they brought the food they had prepared. Others were going to their synagogues, for this was a happy time among Jews of virtually all traditions. Favorite dishes from recipes from Jewish mothers and grandmothers from all over the Empire – from Babylon, other parts of Syria, from Greece, Cyprus, Crete, the Galilee, Jerusalem and from a dozen other communities. Every dish made in accordance with Jewish dietary law. The table would be properly set and two candles prominently displayed, and these would have been lit ahead of time, just prior to dusk as best one could judge.

The Sabbath routine never varied. People assembled and as a sort of quiet descended the leader would stand up, asking God to forgive everyone their sins committed by neglect of his law. He would then raise the Kiddush cup – the cup of Sanctification – filled with wine and says, *“Blessed are You, O Lord our God, for the Holy Vine of your servant David, even Rabbi Yeshua, your faithful servant.”* Everyone – the men, the women and the kids would then all join in, saying, *“Amen”* or *“All glory be to you, O Lord our God.”* At times when resources permitted and wine was plentiful, every adult would have their glass of wine and all would partake. Sometimes everyone would share from the Kiddush cup. At other times, in times of economic hardships, only the leader drank a modest amount of wine on behalf of everyone present.

A simple prayer. Everyone blessing God for what he has given them. The wine, symbolic of the Davidic heir, their leader Rabbi Yeshua. Not much different from the blessing given in other Jewish synagogues – *“Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe who creates the fruit of the vine”* – except “vine” was interpreted metaphorically by the members of The Community of the Way, as referring to the Davidic vine with Yeshua as David’s successor.

After the blessing over the wine, the leader would then continue and say a prayer over the loaf of bread that had been placed in front of him. *“Blessed are Thou, O Lord our God, for the life and the knowledge which you have conveyed to us through Rabbi Yeshua, your faithful servant.”* Again *“Amen”* or *“All glory be to you, O Lord our God.”*

The bread represented all that sustains and here it symbolized the life and knowledge conveyed to the participants through the teachings of Rabbi Yeshua. The leader would continue, saying as he tore the loaf of bread into many pieces, enough to give a portion to each person, *“Just as this bread is many pieces but one loaf, so, too, may your community, O Lord our God, be brought together from all parts of the world into your holy Kingdom.”* And, indeed, here in Antioch they had come together from all parts of the Roman Empire, to be one community, sharing in one hope and one vision for the future.

Again the blessing over the bread used in the synagogues of The Community of the Way differed little from the blessing used in other Jewish synagogues – *“Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”* Life and nourishment from the inanimate and inert. The Community of the Way interpreted ‘bread’

metaphorically, as the spiritual nourishment brought about by the life and teachings of their leader, Yeshua.

The meal would then take place. Shouting. Sharing. Conversing. Debating the hot topics of the day. Reprimanding an errant child, coaxing or cajoling others. After dinner, as the clamor died down, there were some concluding prayers which thanked God for spiritual food and drink along with the gift of eternal life. Then they would all say, in Aramaic, "*Maranatha*" – come again, Rabbi Yeshua.

So the meal celebrated the past and looked forward to the future, when the words of their Rabbi would come true. Then all would see the Kingdom of God on earth, for all the righteous of the world to share in.

That was the meal Mattai remembered and it was close to what was said in Jerusalem at their communal celebrations. As with all Jewish Sabbath prayers, the wine was blessed first and then the bread, symbols of sustenance, both material and spiritual. It was just that: a celebratory meal, a testimony to the power of God to create and bring forth life and joy. It was deeply moving and spiritual, to be sure, but not mystical or other-worldly. In time, the liturgy would be written down and we would become familiar with it in a writing we call "*The Didache*."

The Essene ritual Mattai knew was not much different from theirs, only they honored the life and knowledge made known to them through the Teacher of Righteousness. For them, too, the meal looked towards the future, when the Kingdom would come and the needs of all the righteous would be fully met and they would live in harmony, one with another, without fear for their lives.

Certainly the Sabbath meal for both Nazarenes and Essenes was nothing like the kind of gory celebrations some of their neighbors liked – eating the flesh of the God-human and drinking his blood, whether Dionysius, Mithras or the Christ.

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As with all newcomers to a strange place, Mattai and his family noticed the differences most at first. People were more focused on business here, less on religion. There was no one central religious institution dominating the environment as there had been back in Jerusalem with its massive Jewish Temple towering above the city. True, there were many religious shrines found throughout Antioch as befitted a prestigious Roman multicultural center. Great temples to Artemis, Dionysius, Pan, Apollo and many other deities as well. Not only to Greek gods and goddesses but also shrines to Persian religious figures like the savior Mithras -- and Egyptian ones like the Temple of the great Goddess Isis. The large amphitheater was devoted to Olympic Games and dedicated to honoring the pantheon of Greek gods....and the imperial cult, the divine-human emperor himself. The tapestry of cosmopolitan Greek and Roman culture hit everyone from dawn

to dusk, in the language, the law courts, the architecture of the major buildings, the colonnaded street, the goods for sale and the bustle of providing accommodation and food for travelers coming and going to all parts of the Empire.

But there were other differences, too, especially within the Jewish community and these were more pronounced than in Jerusalem. There were “traditionalists.” Some groups, like Onias’ and Mattai’s Synagogue of The Community of the Way, the synagogues of the Pharisees and those of the Essenes followed traditional Jewish practices and used the scrolls in the original Hebrew language. Because most people by the 1st century C.E. had forgotten that ancient language, commentators within the synagogue would then provide oral exposition in Aramaic for those now unfamiliar with the old, sacred tongue. Some of these were, in time, written down and we refer to them as “targums,” explanations of the Biblical text in Aramaic for those who did not understand the ancient Hebrew. They prayed and discussed things in Aramaic. Issues were decided, celebrations shared and disputes settled – all within the synagogue fabric – much as they had been done for centuries. For these traditionalists, the Torah was paramount and little compromise could be made with its ethical, dietary and spiritual requirements. God was God and had to be honored as such, even though the world had moved on and was no longer primarily Jewish.

For some, interacting with modern life created tensions. The dietary laws were particular onerous and, in practice, most traditionalists were vegetarian. Meat would have to be obtained from religious centers devoted to the worship of other gods and goddesses and so would be tainted, a violation of the first commandment to have no other gods but the Lord.

Some Jews, however, did not speak Aramaic but Greek. They were primarily Jews whose families had left Israel generations ago and had made their way within the growing Jewish communities of the Diaspora, in many instances settling in towns and villages along the ancient trade routes from Europe to remote corners of Asia. Many Greek-speaking Jews had come to Antioch, having originally settled there centuries earlier or who had migrated from other parts of the Roman Empire. Their synagogues used the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. This was referred to as “the Septuagint” in the belief that seventy-two scholars had produced a uniform translation of the Torah in Alexandria, Egypt, sometime in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E. In time translations were made of the writings of the Prophets and the other writings such as the Psalms, that great song book of Second Temple Judaism and the backbone of religious devotion.

The Septuagint had also come to include other writings not found within the Hebrew Bible. Of great interest were the books of the *Maccabees* which recorded the heroic resistance of the Jewish fighters in the mid 2nd century B.C.E. These tough freedom fighters had managed to sweep away the forces of the powerful Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, who had tried to outlaw Judaism and convert everyone to Hellenistic ways in 167 B.C.E.

Another favorite book was *Judith*, the story of a Jewish heroine who single-handedly saved her nation. This writing, like the companion scroll of Esther, showed how a resourceful person could play a crucial role when the community as a whole was threatened with genocide. These were influential writings. For a minority somewhat under threat of cultural or even physical annihilation, they provided reassurances that righteous Torah-observant people with goodwill, intuitive resourcefulness and a bit of luck could survive.

The Septuagint therefore contained more writings than did the Hebrew Bible. Mattai and his group were unfamiliar with these additional works. Nor did the Pharisees consult these writings. Neither did the Essenes. The Essenes, however, had their own set of additional writings which other groups did not recognize – the *Community Rule*, the *Damascus Document*, additional psalms, a long *Temple Scroll*, a *War Scroll* and commentaries on various prophets. These they interpreted as pertaining not to the times when they were first composed -- often centuries before -- but to their own day, in the 1st century. They even possessed a *Copper Scroll*! Immense buried treasure with the locations provided, all banged out on a rolled up copper sheet. Because he had lived so long in an Essene neighborhood, Mattai knew some of these works but he treated them with less authority than the generally agreed-upon writings. Still, he valued their perspective, for the Essenes, too, were a messianic Jewish community.

Thus the Jewish community as a whole was divided in terms of what writings should count as “sacred” or “authoritative.”

The Jews who did not speak Aramaic but rather Greek tended to be “modernists.” They not only read the scriptures in Greek but they also prayed in Greek and discussed matters in that language. Mattai knew of some who were like that in Jerusalem – “the Hellenists” as they were called -- but there they represented a small unrepresentative fringe on mainstream Judaism. Here, however, they seemed to constitute the majority of Jews. They had come to grips with the fact that the world had changed fundamentally, that Rome was the central power and with it, Greek, the main language of the eastern portion of the Empire. They wanted to speak the language of the powerful, knowing that their livelihoods depended upon it as they interacted with Gentile clients and with the Syrian political and military officials.

Many of these Greek-speaking Jews, Mattai noticed sadly, had abandoned most of their ancestral ways. They worked on the Sabbath, ate pig meat and patronized Gentile food outlets such as the Temples. There meat was butchered as a religious act, just as it was done in Jerusalem, but here it was in honor of such gods as Jupiter, Dionysius or Apollo. For traditionalists like Mattai, this was not permitted -- the food was tainted by association with pagan worship. He also knew that Ya’akov in Jerusalem had many a decisive pronouncement for members of his faction in Judaism – a resounding “no, don’t do it. Don’t do it at all.”

But the modernists did not see it that way. After all, if they didn't actually worship the gods and goddesses of the Greeks and Romans, what possible harm was there eating meat available from these outlets? Besides, there were no other choices other than becoming vegetarian. It was just being practical, many said.

So there were many synagogues – not only his, but also those belonging to Pharisees, the Essenes and many other groups within Judaism which went by names we no longer know. Some were Greek-oriented; some, Aramaic-oriented. A complex religious landscape filled with options.

As with any religious association, whether Jewish or Gentile, there were hangers-on, associates who were interested in the teachings but who didn't want full membership. Many synagogues, Mattai's included, attracted its share of Gentiles, individuals referred to as "God-fearers," that is, non-Jews who liked the high moral teachings of the Torah and the prophets of Israel. The prophets in particular had offered a critique of society and envisaged a time when justice and peace and fair play would become dominant just as Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics said years after the prophets had lived. The Gentile God-fearers also liked the ethics of the Torah as well as the ancient story of the family of Abraham as it moved throughout history. Best of all, they liked the long history of Judaism. It was an impeccable ancient lineage ... something Roman culture valued ... a heritage a thousand years older than the Greek philosophical and literary traditions.

God-fearers located themselves on the fringes of synagogues of all types. Mostly, however, they tended to congregate in those associations that were modernist in orientation, the ones which used Greek as the language of the sacred texts and discussion. Still, from time to time, Aramaic-speaking assemblies would attract Gentiles who knew that language. God-fearers were interested participants in Jewish worship and the study of Jewish law and ethics. They did not, however, wish to convert to Judaism. That step involved male circumcision as well as baptism. The former was a serious deterrent in the 1st century C.E., a major medical procedure, with all sorts of safety risks. And besides it was a procedure that was abhorrent to Romans as it had been to Greeks before them.

Like many of his Jewish contemporaries, Mattai found religious pluralism troubling. "There are just too many choices," he said to anyone who cared to listen, "choices both between our religion and all the others. But now there are also choices right inside our religion itself. It didn't used to be that way, at least according to our writings. They never mention factions that are at loggerheads with each other. So many different paths! How do we know which one is right?"

However personally distressing pluralism was to Mattai, it was not a problem to his Gentile religious neighbors. They could easily participate in the worship of Olympian deities at the games in the Amphitheater, join in the enthusiastic processions of Dionysius, frequent the healing center of Artemis and meditate in the Temples to Isis. For a

polytheist, all religion was interchangeable. Only the names of the gods and goddesses changed. And that's how many regarded Judaism, with its one God equated with Zeus/Jupiter.

But there was another religious option that deeply disturbed Mattai.

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"The Congregations of the Christ." These were Greek-speaking associations composed largely of Gentiles. They included many God-fearers who had formerly been associated with Jewish synagogues, whether Greek or Aramaic-speaking. From what Mattai could tell, they claimed to be descendants from the Jewish patriarch, Abraham, but not biologically. Spiritual descendants, they thought, adopted because of their faith in "the Christ." The Christ was their spiritual figure, a person who had communicated through Paul and his mystical visions. The Christ was a pre-existing divine being who had become human, a person who would act as the savior of humanity to all who believed in him. In making this promise, the members of the Congregations of the Christ were just like the followers of Mithras and Dionysius who also promised salvation to their membership.

"That's the key," Mattai said to Onias one day, "belief. They *believe* and do not think they have to *act* in accordance with what we take to be the revealed word of God. They despise the Torah, the Sabbath, the dietary laws and scoff, like Romans do, at circumcision."

Some of their leaders claimed that the Christ was the resurrected, spiritual Yeshua who spoke to them – and, it seems, to them alone -- post-death. And this was one thing about their movement that troubled Mattai. Why place such emphasis upon Yeshua after death? And why would Yeshua deign to speak through their leaders and not to and through those who had known him throughout his life? This simply did not make sense to him at all. The mystical Christ who spoke after his death was nothing like the Yeshua who had walked the earth and who communicated his message through his brothers, disciples and, in fact, anyone who would hear him in Galilee and, briefly, just before his death, in Jerusalem. "It just doesn't add up," he said to Onias, shaking his head in astonishment.

Mattai never doubted that Yeshua would be resurrected but he thought of this within a vastly different framework than did the Christ-worshippers. All good and righteous persons, he thought, would be resurrected and have a share in the world to come. So, too, Yeshua. Like Abraham, Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, Isaac, Joseph, Aseneth, Moses, Amos, Ezra, Isaiah and a host of others from antiquity. But gaining salvation was not an issue for Mattai. Like other Jewish leaders of his time, he was convinced that all righteous people, regardless of their religious affiliation, would have a share in the glorious world that would eventually dawn – that Kingdom of God that Yeshua had said was just about to materialize. The Pharisees and probably moderate Essenes would share these views as did members of The Community of the Way.

All righteous people, he said to himself. All righteous people, he stressed, regardless of their religious affiliation. What counted was righteous behavior ... and, of course, God's compassion and mercy towards those who observed his Laws. Why were these people sowing discord, confusion, controversy? he wondered to himself. What was their motivation?

What bothered Mattai the most was this movement's aggressiveness. They were gaining in strength and were not the least bit shy about raiding synagogues, seeking out God-fearers - as well as Jews - who could be lured to their places of assembly. Poaching, that's what it is, said Mattai to himself, sheer theft. Modernist and traditionalist synagogues were all fair game to these people who were contemptuous of Judaism and its practices.

Plus they had the annoying and arrogant habit of targeting Jews, denouncing Jewish practices as just "plain wrong." They thought that they and only they had the correct religion, the one true path. No other Gentile religion claimed that. Nor did most Jewish movements except for some of the most radical members of the Essene group. Moderate Essenes just said that they represented the one true way of following Judaism. But thoughtful Essenes had now begun to question everything. There was the recent debacle and a path of death and terrible devastation at Qumran, their headquarters, the ensuing flight for the fortunate ones to Masada and Egypt.

Then, too, there was the failure of the Kingdom of God to appear. That was on everyone's mind. Where was it? Why had God's promises not come true? Especially in these dire times, the worst in human history? Why was God not acting when his intervention was needed most?

5

What Mattai Remembered

“Shabbat shalom.”

Everyone greeted the other members of the Synagogue of The Community of the Way with this heartfelt salutation as well as neighbors on their way to their own synagogues. This simple greeting expressed the wish that they would enjoy the peace of the Sabbath -- that great tranquilizing experience that comes from letting go of doing ... and freeing oneself from all the chores of daily life. All the normal routine of life stopped in the Jewish quarter of ancient Antioch. At least in that nook of the city it was quiet and calm in a way that few contemporary people have ever experienced.

On Saturday morning Shabbat worship at Mattai and Onias' synagogue was followed by study. They mulled over the meaning of the Torah portion they had read and they pondered sayings of Rabbi Yeshua they remembered. One Shabbat the leader had the good sense to ask Rabbi Mattai what he remembered of Yeshua's teachings. Interestingly enough, Mattai had never written these down and he promised that he'd think through these sayings and would write them down during the week.

It's curious, he mused to himself, that no one in his generation had written down the sayings of Yeshua.

For that matter, no one that Mattai knew had provided an explanation that made sense why Yeshua died before the Kingdom had arrived. That was not the anticipated scenario. Moreover, no one had yet explained to his satisfaction why the Kingdom had not yet appeared almost forty years later! He knew that his wife had had the honesty and courage to admit the brutal truth: the Kingdom was not coming, not now ... perhaps not ever. Yeshua had been wrong, another in a long line of failed prophets. But Mattai was not ready for that conclusion. He still hoped that it would, although, he had to admit, what his wife said made eminent sense.

After much thought and deliberation, he began to write. But what to write? How to organize all the bits and pieces he remembered from Ya'akov and other leaders in Jerusalem? People who had travelled with Yeshua and who had known him well. Mattai only knew the bare outlines of Yeshua's life -- that he had grown up in Nazareth, observed the annual round of Jewish festivals and had taught in various centers around the Sea of Galilee. He used Capernaum as his home base and it was there, and around the Galilee,

that he taught his students the meaning of the Kingdom of God. His students came from ordinary occupations.

What's more, Mattai recalled, Yeshua enjoyed a wider circle of friends than just the regular pupils – associates, both male and female, who had eagerly flocked to his message. There were, of course, many others. There were, for instance, “the Seventy” he had sent out to every nook and cranny of Israel, or so it was reported, telling everyone to get ready for the Great Day of the Lord. That must have been a truly massive undertaking, to recruit, train and disperse these messengers. What had they reported? Had the people awakened to the new reality about to dawn in their lives? Had they changed?

So many questions rushed into Mattai's mind as he prepared to compose his account of Yeshua. But more questions than answers began to emerge. Mattai wasn't sure he had ever encountered any of these seventy ambassadors. Where were they now? he wondered. And there were countless others – probably thousands -- who had heard brief snippets of Yeshua's public teaching as he made his way from village to village around the Sea of Galilee. Everyone knew what he stood for: he was the messenger to the people of Israel, announcing to all who would listen that God's Kingdom was about to be established on earth and that people should prepare for this life-transforming and world-changing event. But where were those people who had eagerly cheered him on as he passed through their villages? What did they now think?

Mattai knew that Yeshua went up to Jerusalem every year to celebrate Passover, as had his family before him. In time, it appears, Yeshua had made friends in a small village not too far from Jerusalem, just over the Mount of Olives in a town called Bethany. It was here that Yeshua stayed on his annual pilgrimage to celebrate Passover. He recalled Mary, Martha and Lazarus and their hospitality to Yeshua, but he himself had never been to Bethany, although it was just over the rise, a little bit to the southeast of the Mount of Olives, less than half a day's walk from Jerusalem. Now, of course, he'd never get there.

Mattai did not have enough information to be able to construct a historical biography of Yeshua, nor was that his interest. Writing Yeshua's life story in terms of where he went and what he said and did where he went probably never occurred to him. History wasn't important. That was stuff from the past. What preoccupied Mattai was the future, and, when he could force himself to confront it, the present as well.

Mattai decided to organize his thoughts around three great Kingdom topics – who would be part of God's Kingdom, what was required and how to prepare. There were probably other recollections Mattai could recall, various stories or parables, but he didn't commit these to writing. He wondered to himself, how did Yeshua compose his public teachings? Did he have a set speech? An agenda? Did he say the same things over and over again? Or did he say different things to different audiences? How often did he change his presentation? Did his message evolve or did it remain the same?

Indeed, he wondered to himself, what did Yeshua convey to his inner core, “the Twelve” as they were referred to, students who had studied and traveled with him? What more did they know? Had they studied the ancient Hebrew texts together? Did they develop a timetable? Did Yeshua convey to them why he thought that the Kingdom was at hand? And why hadn’t any of them written something down? Where are the scrolls from Peter? Andrew? John? Bartholomew? Thomas? And the rest? And where were all these privileged people now? The ones who had had the advantage of a three-year training program with Yeshua? Why hadn’t Ya’akov written anything down ... after all, he and Miriam ha-Migdal probably knew the Master better than anyone else.

And yet, they hadn’t. Although, in time, unbeknownst to Mattai, somebody would write down a gospel and attributed it to Miriam, the companion and life partner of Yeshua. And sometime after the death of Ya’akov someone within The Community of the Way would pen a letter to the synagogues in the Diaspora, warning them to beware of the preacher who falsely claimed that faith and faith alone was sufficient for salvation. We call that letter “the Letter of James” and it is included in the New Testament. It is unlikely that Ya’akov himself wrote it however much he would have agreed with its message. It was aimed squarely at the false teachings of Paul.

He saw Rachel busily tidying up the rooms and getting the next meal prepared. So he decided to ask her: “Do you have any idea why Ya’akov didn’t write down everything he knew before he met his death?”

Was it just because everyone was lulled into thinking that the End was so close that there was no point to writing down the message?

“I don’t know,” she responded to Mattai, grateful that he was asking her a serious question. “As I’ve said all along, perhaps there is no Kingdom. Perhaps Yeshua came along to lift up our spirits and to let our imaginations soar with nice visions of what might be. Just that ... and nothing else.” She had no time for such frivolous speculation and wished Mattai would settle down and focus on matters close at hand.

Mattai never did resolve these troubling questions and turned to the task at hand – organizing and composing his “*Recollections of the Teachings of Yeshua*.” First, he thought, there were Yeshua’s blessings upon the righteous. That’s a good place to begin, on a strong positive note. Lure people into the Kingdom. Don’t scare them. Mattai didn’t pretend that he knew the absolutely exact words of Yeshua. After all, they had come to him in various forms over the years as people who had known Yeshua recounted what he had said. Yeshua himself probably said these phrases on countless occasions, but in differing ways, to many groups of people. So it is not surprising that the precise wording was a bit loose.

He wrote,
“*Yeshua said,*

Blessings upon those who are spiritually humble, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.

Blessings on those who mourn, for they will find comfort.

Blessings upon the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessings upon those who wholeheartedly seek righteousness, for they will find fulfillment.

Blessings, too, upon the merciful and compassionate, for they, in turn, will receive mercy.

Blessings upon those who are pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessings upon those who strive for peace, for they will be called 'God's children'."

These are the kind of people who will be found in the Kingdom of God, Mattai thought, people who have the right attitude and who follow the right path of mercy, peace, humility and compassion. These were words that members of The Community of the Way ought to heed. And these were the words whose meanings members of his group pondered from time to time. But words like "the meek" and "those who mourn" were difficult words to understand. Who were "the meek" and why should they, with that mild submissive attitude, "inherit the earth." And what did "inherit the earth" mean anyway? So, too, he had heard the first blessing expressed differently – as a blessing upon "those who are poor in spirit." But what "poor in spirit" meant was, in his judgment, difficult to grasp. "Spiritually humble" was his guess and so he wrote that down, interpreting as much as he was remembering. Had Yeshua explained these words to his Twelve? If Mattai had lived later on in history, he would have known he was not writing a transcript or a tweet: just recollections.

Troubling questions, these. Now, as he began to compose, Mattai wished he had spent more time questioning Ya'akov, Cephas, Miriam ha-Migdal and others who had known Yeshua well. But until he began to write, these questions had not occurred to him. It was one thing for him to understand Yeshua's message. It was quite another matter to capture it in written form so as to pass it along to others.

Much clearer, however, were phrases like "wholeheartedly seeking righteousness." That meant keeping focus on the Torah and putting it to practice in daily decisions, conveying the lessons of the law to children and using these principles in deciding community issues. It involved attitude, willingness, and, more importantly, engaging in right behavior and actions each and every day.

Secondly, Mattai wrote down several sayings that related to what Yeshua had said God required of his true followers.

"Yeshua said,

Follow the Law and the Prophets. Torah is the path and it remains so in perpetuity, until the end of time.

Interpret the Torah broadly. When you hear it said, 'you shall not murder,' for instance, that includes emotions likely to produce murderous thoughts and possibly actions. So the commandment 'you shall not murder' includes 'don't be angry with another human being.'

Similarly, when you hear it said, 'you shall not commit adultery,' that includes thoughts that might tempt you to engage in illicit sexual activities. So this commandment includes, 'don't even think about committing adultery.'

Similarly, when you hear it said, 'you shall return an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,' I set before you a higher standard, practice mercy and compassion by forgiving others.

Be more rigorous in your observance of Torah than are the Pharisees.

While you should study and practice all of Torah, remember that the two greatest laws are these – God's injunction in Deuteronomy that 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and might' and the Lord's commandment in Leviticus, 'love your neighbor as you love yourself.' All the rest of Torah depends upon these two fundamental principles."

All these sayings reinforced the teachings of Deuteronomy. There correct behavior and the right attitude went hand-in-hand with following the path of righteousness. The great Jewish sage before Yeshua – Hillel -- had said something similar, Mattai recollected, and that revered Rabbi had then gone on to encourage his followers to go and study Torah. Likely Yeshua did as well but, for some reason, Mattai didn't write that down. He took it for granted that everyone would know what Yeshua was really saying. Wasn't it evident from the saying that his followers should be more rigorous in their observance of the Torah than were the Pharisees, the esteemed teachers of Torah?

He smiled as he thought of that last phrase, to be more Torah-observant than the Pharisees. He thought that many Pharisees would agree with him and would applaud Yeshua's insistence upon rigor. Yehuda and his group would applaud Jesus for moving Torah interpretation more in their direction. Members of the Community of the Way enjoyed excellent relationships not only with the Essenes but also with the Pharisees. Many Pharisees had supported members of The Community of the Way in Jerusalem when they ran afoul of the Sadducees and the Temple priests.

As Mattai wrote these words, however, he knew that other members of the Synagogue of The Community of the Way would press him for further examples. How else should the Torah be interpreted? He could hear them saying. What about the laws relating to the Sabbath? What did Rabbi Yeshua say about honoring this special day? Everyone

knew not to engage in work on Shabbat and to eat only what had been pre-prepared. But what else was involved? Mattai prayed, "O Lord, help me remember." He knew that his good friend Yehuda would have known what the Teacher of Righteousness had said about observing the Sabbath properly. The Essenes had a long list of things that were prohibited on the day of rest. And he was ashamed that he could not remember their specific prohibitions. And now Yehuda and his family were miles farther south, hopefully in Egypt, their intended destination. Nothing more came on this topic. He couldn't remember more, although he wished he could.

What does it mean to follow the Kosher dietary laws? Did this only apply to the food? Or did it perhaps also pertain to the plates, cutlery, cups and serving dishes as well? Mattai was well aware that members of the Pharisaic faction had had extensive discussions about these matters. In light of all the Gentiles living and working in the land, the Pharisees were well down the path of saying that the whole manufacturing and distribution process had to conform with Kosher principles so that there could be no possibility of contamination with forbidden foods. This would eliminate Gentiles from the production process, for it was quite conceivable that a Gentile worker might contaminate the process by using hands or utensils that had come into contact with, for example, pig. And so, Mattai wondered, had Yeshua tackled this issue? After all, he must have engaged the Pharisees in debate and they, with him. He could not recall, however, and wished fervently that his old friend Ya'akov were still alive and nearby so he could call upon him.

But Mattai was on his own. There was no one in Antioch who had walked with Yeshua. No one there who had been his pupil. There were no writings. Mattai knew that these words would provoke lengthy and thoughtful discussions as they wrestled with the Torah as interpreted by Yeshua and applied to their own day. If only he could have remembered more.

It was clear, Mattai thought, that in citing the two fundamental principles of Torah, he was not abolishing the Law. Yeshua was not suggesting that Torah could be reduced to two and only two laws. His point was simply that these were the fundamental principles out of which all the other laws derived. The Law included the Ten Commandments, all the festivals, as well as the entire ethical, social and legal fabric of society. To abolish all this would be absurd. He toyed with the idea of adding a line to make crystal clear what Yeshua had meant but, for Mattai, its teaching was clear. Torah stood intact. In fact, if anything, Yeshua had made Torah requirements much more stringent, extending behavior to underlying attitudes. This, of course, was implicit in what Deuteronomy had taught, as Mattai had made clear to his pupils, but Yeshua brought its whole meaning out into the open for all to see.

Finally, there was the matter of daily prayer. Like other Jews of the period, members of The Community of the Way said the *Amidah* or "Standing" prayer, preferably twice a day, wherever they happened to be. This long prayer, also known as the Eighteen Benedictions (*Shemoneh Esreh*), covered a huge territory of concerns. After the praise and

sanctification of God's name come many petitions -- for understanding, forgiveness, healing, the gathering in of the exiles, the reign of God, the messianic king and for peace. And much more besides. Shortly after Mattai's day it would be extended to include a nineteenth petition, to exclude sectarians from membership. Included in the sectarian category were Jews who followed the teachings of the Congregations of the Christ.

But Rabbi Yeshua had added his own prayer which he encouraged his followers also to recite. It, too, began with the praise and sanctification of God's name. This prayer made central the petition for the advent of God's Kingdom, corresponding to his own emphasis that it was coming soon, within the lifetimes of his hearers. Shorter than the *Amidah*, it focused on five central petitions: the Kingdom, doing God's will, daily sustenance, forgiveness of others and the avoidance of evil As Mattai recollected, it went as follows:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, our Father in heaven. Sacred is your name. May your kingdom come. May your will be accomplished on earth as it is in heaven. Please grant us our daily bread. Forgive our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us. Grant that we do not succumb to the evil inclination that might cause us to stray from your path. Amen.

Was it, Mattai pondered, "May your kingdom come"? Or had Yeshua said, "May your kingdom come *quickly*"? He couldn't recall. Perhaps the latter was what Yeshua had really prayed, but, since the kingdom had yet to come, he left the timeline vague.

Mattai also remembered other snippets of teaching. Sayings like not storing up material treasure in this life but to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. Not being hasty to judge other people. He also remembered another summary of the Law, to do unto others as you would want them to do unto you. That, too, would have to be written down. Mattai also made a mental note that he'd have to include some of the parables that Yeshua had spoken. The separation of the sheep and the goats he remembered vividly but what about the others? Some were now only stories vaguely remembered ... some day, some time, he'd get to writing these down, as he found the opportunity. And as he recollected.

Mattai did not know that with the passing of the generation that had walked with Yeshua, others were also beginning to write down their recollections of what he said. This included at least some of the sayings included in what we now call "*The Gospel of Thomas*" and another list of sayings referred to as "Q." Undoubtedly others had their lists but they have been lost to history. When the author of the Gospel of Mark - whoever he was -- would come to write his gospel sometime after 70 C.E., he may have used some of these earlier lists. But Mark did not just list sayings, nor did he just group them as Mattai had done into topics. He had the creative genius to construct a narrative, creating an historical framework. This contextualized the sayings of Yeshua, linking them to specific places within his journeys and making Yeshua into an epic hero on an adventurous journey from the Galilee to Jerusalem.

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Mattai's words written down on a short scroll in Aramaic would come to have a rich history that far outreached any impact he could ever have imagined. The scroll would stand the test of time, albeit in a much larger format than he ever contemplated. This short scroll would eventually form the nucleus of the gospel we would come to know as the Gospel according to Matthew, a document that was written and re-written by at least five or six different hands over the ensuing decades and centuries, and transposed from Aramaic into Greek.

This was not unusual for the time. Other texts had evolved over time, as had the Torah itself. We should not envisage any gospel writer being just one individual who sat down at his desk, with a few manuscripts before him, and penned the document that we now have. Scrolls were community property and, from time to time, other anonymous authors updated and edited the manuscripts, to accommodate current concerns and interests. And, of course, to reflect the perspective of evolving theology.

Thus we have a long history of writing and editing before we arrive at the Gospel of Matthew as we now have it. Mattai's recollections in Aramaic formed the basis of this new document. Some later writer put these words into the framework of a sermon, "a Sermon on the Mount," an important distillation of Yeshua's core teachings. Mattai knew nothing of any sermon nor did he really think of Rabbi Yeshua as a new Moses. But someone later than Mattai did and thought it appropriate that Yeshua should address the crowds on a hillside.

Still another hand, perhaps a century later, bitter at the Pharisees and their way of looking at scripture, inserted contemptuous passages into "Matthew" that denounced these popular leaders angrily. Mattai would have shaken his head in dismay had he ever read such statements. For one thing, he and members of his community got along well with the Pharisees. They weren't bitter rivals and they shared much in common. Mattai also sided with them in some practices. For instance, Mattai had remembered that Yeshua's followers had not washed their hands before eating, unlike the Pharisees who did so out of purity concerns. Mattai thought that the Pharisees were right on this matter and did not fathom the rationale practiced by Yeshua's students or how this potentially unclean practice could have been condoned by Yeshua. Mattai personally washed his hands before eating and encouraged other members of his community to do so. In practice there was much give-and-take between The Community of the Way and the Pharisees and disagreements were discussed honestly and with civility. Enmity between the Congregations of the Christ and the Pharisees was a later, 2nd century development that Mattai would have soundly denounced.

Moreover Mattai would have thought that bitter denunciations of anyone would reflect poorly on the Rabbi's character. Here was a Yeshua who according to this later

writer called the Pharisees “hypocrites,” “blind guides,” “whitewashed tombs,” and the like. This writer – an angry editor, whoever he was -- did not stop to see the implications of this highly negative and unflattering portrayal of Yeshua. Here we have a Yeshua who simply “loses it,” an angry man who ferociously attacked these well-educated teachers and exponents of traditional Judaism. Without any evidence, it would seem -- just malicious name-calling. Mattai would have wondered how this later “concocted Yeshua” could ever have proclaimed these curses in light of the blessings he remembered the real Yeshua proclaiming. How could he have ever uttered these nasty words against the Pharisees while also encouraging his followers to love one another? To forgive? Not to judge? Utterly contradictory Mattai would have thought, reflecting poorly upon the Rabbi. A false representation of Yeshua by someone who did not understand him. Just not the Yeshua he knew.

And yet we have those hateful words inscribed in *our* Gospel of Matthew.

With the Pharisees lambasted and a Sermon on the Mount created, the scroll was now ripe for further additions. Another hand found Mark’s gospel and merged it with the “Matthew” scroll he had inherited. He probably hoped thereby that no one would need to have recourse to the Gospel of Mark. It would be relegated to the dustbin of history and his scroll would be the one that would be read. And he succeeded, for while Matthew was the second gospel to be written, it is included first in the New Testament – it’s the gospel that sets the tone.

Somebody else – or perhaps it was the same person who spliced in ninety percent of Mark -- added in sayings from another list of Yeshua sayings, the source we call “Q.” These were short, pithy sayings – don’t judge others lest you be judged yourself; take no thought for tomorrow; and the like. Q represents material that is common to both the gospels of Matthew and Luke that does not come from Mark. Maybe the later gospel Luke used Matthew and he had included the Q-sayings thinking they were Matthew’s contribution. If the author of Luke didn’t use Matthew, as some think, then the Q-source represents another early collection of sayings.

At some point, someone put the whole document into Greek, but when, no one knows. Clearly this translation was done for the sake of members of the Congregations of the Christ, for they were the ones who favored Greek writings. It was perhaps this anonymous translator, too, who added in the material on the trial and execution of Yeshua and, in so doing, blamed the Jews rather than the Romans for the death of the teacher. No member of The Community of the Way would have seen matters that way. Nor did they make any pretense of knowing the details of his trial since there were no eye-witnesses present who were favorable to the community’s cause. All had gone into hiding in Jerusalem or had fled the city. Yeshua had been left alone to face Roman authority. They would never have imagined either that “the Jews” would have been responsible for his death or that there had been anything like a legal Jewish trial. After all, crucifixion was a *Roman* method of execution reserved for *political* prisoners. The Romans were

responsible, they were sure, for the murder of Yeshua. They thought that his Kingdom message implied that he would be King of the Jews, a clearly seditious claim and a challenge to Roman authority.

But still, what we have in our Gospel of Matthew contains this account, based on unspecified evidence, no eye-witnesses and procedures that violated established Jewish law. It was a narrative skillfully designed to appeal to potential *Roman* converts who would not have taken kindly to Yeshua's death blamed upon *their* leaders and representatives in the area. This constituted yet another indication how the leaders of the Congregations of the Christ targeted Jews.

But that was not the end of the matter. Today we are aware of several versions of the Gospel of Matthew that circulated in ancient times. Some versions circulated with no virgin birth narrative. But another writer -- one who knew nothing of the Hebrew Bible or the Jewish context -- inserted into his manuscript the mythological story of a virgin birth. He used a phrase from the *Greek* version of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint -- about a virgin giving birth -- so as to concoct a story about Mary being a virgin who conceived Yeshua through divine intervention. A "virgin" was a mistranslation of the original Hebrew passage which refers only to an ordinary young woman. The prophet Isaiah was trying to reassure the king that before a young woman had a child and before that child could discern right from wrong he'd be free of the military forces pressing down upon Jerusalem. Thinking this message would refer to events some eight hundred years later would make absolutely no sense to the king and would have provided no such reassurance.

A virgin birth story was needed, therefore, in the late 1st or early 2nd century, to reinforce the claim that the Christ was a God-human. Hence he must have had a human mother and a divine father. This was, of course, theology dictating history. That bit of fancy footwork would have enraged Mattai. He would have found this Hellenistic pagan symbolism just blasphemous -- much more suited to the divine-human emperors than a revered Jewish teacher. Certainly not biology, not history -- just myth-making propaganda.

However much Mattai esteemed and revered him, Rabbi Yeshua was human. He was born; he lived as we live; faced challenges, temptations, triumphs and disappointments as we do; experienced sexual urges; suffered hunger, thirst and sleep deprivation; and he died. There was no cult of Yeshua amongst his first followers any more than there had been for Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David, Amos, Isaiah or Ezra. These were all great leaders, teachers and some were prophets. But that was all so far as Mattai was concerned.

This hand who inserted a virgin birth introduction into the Gospel of Matthew was undoubtedly someone from a Christ-worshipping congregation. That person likely reworked the whole evolving "Matthew" scroll to fix a missing dimension favored by this movement: the belief that Yeshua was a Christ, a divine-human savior of humanity. This creative writer, likely inspired by Paul, even added in a mystical ceremony towards the end

of this longer document. It involved the sharing the body and blood of the Christ figure. This is something the Yeshua of history would never ever have uttered given traditional Jewish teachings, reaffirmed by his brother Ya'akov, against the consumption of blood. That was strictly forbidden: taboo. But there it is, in our document we call "Matthew." But it makes no Jewish sense.

So the Gospel of Matthew we have inherited is really a composite document, written and re-written by people bent on interpreting Yeshua and his words for their generation, in light of their circumstances and in keeping with their own evolving theology. They would have seen nothing wrong with this updating and revisionist process. Nor did they see anything untoward burying most of the Gospel of Mark within its framework.

Mattai, however, would have found this portrait of the teacher virtually unrecognizable, save for the few passages he penned, still preserved intact in their new home inside a Sermon on the Mount. For this we should be grateful, for much of what Mattai remembered was not found in other writings. Scholars call this material unique to the Gospel of Matthew "M."

Paul on Trial

6

The Peace of Shabbat – Shattered

Life had become relatively routine for Mattai and his family, approximating what life had been in Jerusalem but without the fear and dread that they had experienced there. The boys worked as senior apprentices in the potter's shop. The girls helped their mother with the household chores while waiting eagerly for their parents to make suitable marital connections. Rachel kept the house in order and began making friends amongst the women in the neighborhood and market. Mattai's leather-making business was prospering and soon, he hoped, he would outgrow the space in Onias' shop. True, he hadn't yet had time to set up a small yeshiva, to take on eager youngsters and transport them into the fascinating world of Torah study. That was his true passion and he was itching for that opportunity. It would happen, he knew, eventually.

One Shabbat, as was his custom, he went to synagogue early Saturday morning. He looked forward to the contemplative prayers, the joyous psalms, the uplifting Torah reading and the ensuing study. "Study" seemed too refined a word to describe what transpired as members debated and argued over the meaning of the passage. How did it apply to their lives? they constantly wondered. What were the underlying principles? How did ethics apply in a cosmopolitan urban environment? What were the boundaries of permissible interaction with Gentiles? How did one survive as a minority within a much larger society, especially when that society overwhelmed and threatened, as it tended to do from time to time? How to help those still trapped in Jerusalem? These were deep questions and the men of the synagogue argued their points with vigor and power.

Mattai was in fine form, happy that things were working out so well in Antioch. He and his family eagerly joined up with Onias, his family and others as they headed down the narrow streets towards the Synagogue of The Community of the Way. Mattai was gaining a good reputation within The Community of the Way in Antioch and with others in synagogues of other forms of Judaism, the Pharisees and Essenes in particular. He was becoming a respected elder, a teacher, a rabbi, level-headed and not prone to rash judgments. He was invited from time to time to lead prayers at the Shabbat services, to read the ancient Hebrew scriptures and to give commentary in Aramaic on their relevance to modern life.

As they approached the synagogue doors, they noticed a few strangers who had gathered outside the building – about seven of them, Mattai counted. That was strange. What were they doing there? One or two Onias thought he recognized as coming from the Gentile area of the city, members in fact of a group known as the Congregation of the Christ. Clearly they were speaking Greek and they seemed to be waiting for a sign.

Something was up. Mattai and Onias both felt sure of that. They were uneasy and approached cautiously. A few more had gathered and Onias thought he spotted Evodius and Ignatius in their midst. Evodius was an older man, portly and clearly in charge. Ignatius was much younger, lean and he looked like a hawk about to grasp its prey. Their eyes darted to and fro as they watched members of The Community of the Way gather and enter the synagogue. Mattai wondered why they weren't at their own place of meeting until he realized that they met on the first day of the week, Sunday, and not on the Sabbath.

There was, in theory, no problem with visitors attending any synagogue. Most times they were welcomed but this appeared to be a delegation, perhaps even a group up to no good. Why were they here? they wondered.

Onias said to Mattai what he already had intuited. These were not Jews. They were Gentiles, maybe God-fearers who had had some exposure to the beliefs and practices of the Jews. Perhaps they had been persuaded by Paul and Barnabas into switching their affiliation away from the synagogue to the Christ meeting house. The early missionaries of the Christ Movement were notorious for that. Onias recalled some unsettling times in Antioch. Early Christ-worshippers had used a cave, up on Mount Staurin, the northernmost peak of the mountain range dominating the city of Antioch. The cave itself connected to a system of escape tunnels and inner chambers within the mountain, complete with “windows” high above the valley that provided excellent look-outs for marauding Roman troops. Now, emboldened by numbers, the Christ-worshippers had several assemblies scattered throughout the city.

Onias, Mattai, their families and some others entered the synagogue building without greeting the strangers. Since they did not honor the Sabbath, saying “Shabbat shalom” to them seemed somehow inappropriate. It was, however, an awkward moment.

The men and boys sat, as was customary around three sides of the room. The entrance way was from the north with the southern wall facing Jerusalem. Here a table stood, a “bimah” it was called, and on it the scrolls were read and behind it, facing the members of the assembly, the synagogue leader led the prayers and service, occasionally turning around to face Jerusalem to the south at the most solemn moments. As was customary, the women sat upstairs in a balcony that overlooked the room below. Because it protruded out from the walls, the women could peer down at the center of the

synagogue and see those leading the service or reading from the scrolls. But they couldn't see the men and the men couldn't see them.

"May God's great name be blessed forever and ever" the leader chanted and the service was promptly under way.

As this was taking place, the group from the Congregation of the Christ also entered and took up seats, sitting together in a bloc, around one side of the room. They acted respectfully and Mattai thought to himself that this was a good sign. Maybe they were here to learn and to praise the Lord and to hear his word from the Law and the Prophets. Oddly enough, both Evodius and Ignatius – and some of the others – had no trouble with Aramaic and – somewhat surprisingly -- they joined in in the praise of the Lord.

The service continued with the Shema – *"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God. The Lord is one"* – and the Amidah prayer. Psalms were sung expressing confidence in God – *"Let all nations praise the Lord, Praise him everyone. For great is his mercy towards us. The Lord's faithfulness is everlasting."* Mattai was entering into his usual relaxed meditative state, contemplating God's goodness, trustworthiness, mercy and righteousness, and he began to focus more on his own thoughts and petitions than on his surroundings.

Prayers were said for the Temple in Jerusalem, that God would protect it in these tumultuous times and for members of their community still resident in Israel undergoing Roman warfare and civil war. This was a somber moment for the word they had received from Judea was not good: the Romans were encircling the city, setting up camps and killing all who attempted to flee, as Mattai and his family had done. Then came the time for taking the Torah out from an enclosure called "the Ark," behind the bimah. *"The Lord reigns,"* said the leader and the congregation responded, *"the Lord reigns for ever more."* *"God's kingdom,"* the leader continued, *"is an everlasting kingdom. The Lord will give his people strength. May the Lord bless his people with peace."*

"Out of Zion shall go forth the Torah and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem," chanted the leader of the synagogue quoting a passage from Isaiah the prophet. And with that, the sacred scrolls were taken carefully out of the Ark.

The scrolls were placed carefully on the bimah. First there was a reading from the Torah. The passage was *"Lekh L'Kha."* It concerned the opening portion of the saga of Abraham, how he was called by God to go forth from his father's house in Harran near the Euphrates River – not too many miles east of Antioch -- and proceed to a land that God would show. There, God said, he would make of him a great nation, bless him and make his name great. He promised to bless those who would bless him and curse those who would curse him. And finally, God promised, all the families of the earth would be blessed by Abraham.

The leader quickly summarized the passage in Aramaic so that everyone could understand. Mattai, grasping the Hebrew immediately, loved that passage, for it provided a great mandate for the Jewish people, proclaiming a future that was yet to unfold, when all the nations of the world would be blessed through Abraham. Presumably, he thought to himself, this is something that will take place in the age to come, when God's Kingdom will be founded on earth. Sadly, however, that day had yet to appear he allowed himself to think. But there was no time to dwell on those morose thoughts.

The reading from the Torah was quickly followed by a passage from one of the prophets, this time, from the inspiring poetry of Isaiah. It began with God promising that those who trust in the Lord will renew their strength. They would soar like eagles. They would run and not grow weary, God declares, they will march and not grow faint. Israel is God's servant, the one he has chosen. The reading climaxed with the declaration that his people will rejoice in the Lord and glory in the Holy One of Israel.

Again the passage was quickly expounded in Aramaic by the leader that, surprisingly, was almost as poetic as the original. Mattai and many others were clearly caught up in the moment, transfixed by the power of the words and the vision – no, the utter awesomeness of the responsibility with which they had been charged as God's servant people. This was a huge mandate which would find its fulfillment only in the future, when God will restore the earth and establish his great kingdom.

Next the service would turn to the newly-composed "*Recollections of Rabbi Yeshua*," the words and teachings they remembered, and, which Mattai had written down for the benefit of the synagogue. Then the Lord's Prayer. Following which, they would break for a few minutes. Then would commence the study of the readings from the scrolls, including the recently composed *Recollections*. Well, that was the way it was supposed to happen.

These passages will surely excite, the leader thought. There's so much to ferret out here. What did the promise to Abraham really mean? What was Israel's role truly? Were the people of Israel God's servants? How was that mandate to be carried out in the contemporary world filled with such turmoil and trouble? We'll have a great discussion today, Mattai thought.

But the service did not unfold that way.

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Mattai's soaring thoughts were quickly brought back to earth with a resounding thud. Before anyone else had had a chance to stand up and comment on the readings, however, he noticed that Evodius had stood up from his place.

Addressing the assembly and speaking in near flawless Aramaic and with a booming sounding voice that commanded attention, Evodius said, “We have come here today to invite each and every one of you to our place of assembly, our *ekklesia*, our church. Just as you took the ancient sacred writings out from the Ark, you said that out of Zion would go forth the Torah, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. We, too, share that conviction but we believe that a new word has gone forth from Jerusalem and that it has freed us forever from the tyranny of Torah.”

Several bristled with this put-down of Torah, but Evodius continued, “You observe Torah and you honor your teacher, Yeshua. But you are missing the point. Our new community honors Yeshua resurrected, the Yeshua who is now with God and who has given us a message of salvation, to you as well as to us Gentiles. We all have much to gain – our salvation in fact – by heeding this message from the risen Yeshua whom we call *Christos*, “the Christ.” We’d like to invite you to our congregational meeting tomorrow so that you can share in this knowledge and find salvation through Christ.” And with that, he sat down.

The implication that no one in the room – except for the members of the Congregation of the Christ – could be saved did not go unnoticed and this caused great consternation. “What is he talking about?” many demanded? “Why is he doing this here?” others asked.

The leader who had respectfully given Evodius the floor and his chance to speak without interruption, tried to gain control. “We thank you, Evodius, for having come to our place of worship today. We hope you have heard – truly heard and understood -- the words of our readings. We do not think of Torah as tyranny but look upon it as a gift from God. It’s a solemn obligation binding on us Jews from generation to generation, no matter what group within Judaism we belong to, whether Essene, Pharisaic or our own Community of the Way. Or even the Zealots. Torah is not something that can be so lightly set aside. We had expressed before you our joy in Shabbat – you have been witnesses to that – and praised God through the words of our received ancient texts inspired by none other than God himself. We cannot accept your invitation and do not share your outlook that everything we value and treasure can be discarded.”

Mattai noticed that young Ignatius was restless and eagerly wanted his turn to speak, but he held back out of respect for his elder leader. Evodius stood up again and continued, “We know what you believe, for we were God-fearers for many years prior to becoming liberated through Christ. We know the synagogue. But we have embraced freedom, the gospel of salvation for Jew and Gentile alike. We are all one in the Christ. You offer us obligation. We offer you salvation.”

“And, yes,” young Ignatius brashly added, “*that’s* the point. There is no other way to salvation but through the Christ. He died for your sins, making atonement for everyone here in this room. That’s what we want you to see ... if you are not too blind to see.”

At this there was a lot of murmuring amongst the members of The Community of the Way at this snide comment. They did not understand Yeshua as “an atonement.” “What’s that all about?” some inquired. “Only God can forgive and he does this as people repent, making good as much as possible on their infractions that have caused pain and suffering in others,” added others. “And on the solemn Day of Atonement when all Israel collectively confesses its sins before God,” another noted. There was, therefore, no perceived need for atonement – that happened annually – and certainly a sacrifice was not needed -- especially not a human sacrifice. That would be abhorrent. Totally repugnant.

“With all due respect,” the synagogue leader continued, “we don’t see salvation as an issue. We believe that righteous Jews and righteous Gentiles will all have a share in the age to come, in God’s kingdom. You will find a place in the World to Come as will we. The only difference is this: we, as Jews, must – and I stress *must* – follow Torah. That is our mandate, our solemn responsibility, given to us by God, as God’s servant people. But that does not give us any advantage when it comes to salvation. All the world’s righteous will be redeemed by God in the age to come.”

With this, Ignatius could not contain himself any longer. Coming across as a young punk, he had been itching for a fight and his language was less refined than Evodius’ impeccable Aramaic. In strong arrogant terms as befitted his youth and immaturity, he bellowed before everyone, “Let me read to you from our scripture written by our beloved Paul, once a teacher in this city, so that you can put away these foolish beliefs and traditions of your tribe. Embrace the new world where all can share in the blessings God clearly promised to Abraham that”

Ignatius didn’t get very far with this impetuous speech and never got around to reading whatever passage he was going to read from the writings of Paul. This time, Mattai burst in, “We wait for that time, too, when God’s promises to Abraham will be fully realized and the whole world will be one, worshipping the one God in unity. But that time has not yet come. Yeshua announced it was coming soon, but it hasn’t arrived yet. The world is not yet one nor is God’s name one. We don’t have peace and the Romans are at the gates of our holy city.” And with that Mattai sat down, not sure that his outburst had done much good.

Other members of The Community of the Way joined in sarcastically, saying to Ignatius and his cohort, “Are you blind? Do you think we live in a perfect world? Is this the messianic era? Far from it! Get a firm grip on yourselves. It’s time for a serious reality check. The world today is far worse than it was in Yeshua’s day. Far worse. We can’t imagine a worse time.”

The leader of the synagogue chimed in, “And we think that when the Kingdom of God is made manifest on earth, when the righteous will be truly rewarded, the dead

resurrected, the Messiah on the throne of Israel and the nations judged – when all these wonderful things happen -- then the world will share in the blessings of Torah. But, Ignatius, we have yet to witness those earth-shattering events.”

“Show me where in your scrolls it says anything like that,” spluttered Ignatius. “We know that the Torah was given just because rough necks like you couldn’t contain yourselves. It was a way of keeping you unruly fellows in line. We, on the other hand, have reached maturity,” Ignatius confidently asserted. “We,” he emphatically bellowed, “We have embraced the freedom we have been given by Christ. Freedom! Not tyranny.”

Rachel and the other women upstairs in the balcony were taken aback by this mob scene that had the potential to desecrate the Sabbath. This was not how the peace of the Sabbath was supposed to unfold. It was intended to be a time for serious reflection, study, prayer – not bitter confrontation and confusion.

Rachel said to the women, “There they go again, talking about the future. This time it is the afterlife or sometime in the remote future! That’s not the purpose of religion. It’s in the here and now that our religion must make sense, in what we do this afternoon and tomorrow, how we look after our families and our community, in the daily decisions we make. It’s the present that religion must focus on, not the future!”

Most of the women nodded in agreement. For them true religion radiated out from their sphere of concern, themselves, their husbands, their children, in time their children’s children, the community and then -- but only then -- the world at large. Immediate present concerns, who we care for and look after – not wild pipe-dreams like some ideal place or state or end point in history – and to carry these responsibilities out with righteousness, compassion and forgiveness. *That* was the task given by God to each human being.

Meanwhile Ignatius was trying to push his way up to the bimah from the milling crowd that had left their seats along the edges of the room and were beginning to fill up the floor of the synagogue. He was shoving aside the scrolls of the Torah and the Prophets and trying to open up his much smaller document, Paul’s letter to the Christ congregations located in Galatia. It was in Greek, however, and Ignatius knew he faced the challenge of having to make a loose Aramaic translation as he went on. That would show them, he thought to himself. Paul decisively refuted the validity of the Law in no uncertain terms.

Mattai, however, had not forgotten that Ignatius had challenged his interpretation of the scrolls concerning the Kingdom of God. He knew he could cite passages that talked about the perpetuity of the Sabbath, circumcision and, indeed of the Law itself -- from this generation forth unto a thousand generations! But he chose instead to focus on words from the end of the scroll of Zechariah, that great passage that thundered forth, “On that day.” That day was the Great Day of the Lord when God himself would break into human history, transforming the landscape and bringing out a new era for all humanity.

“At the end of the scroll of Zechariah,” Mattai pointed out, “when the earth will be one and God’s name one, worshipped in common by all humanity, people from all the nations of the world will still troop up to Jerusalem to observe the Jewish festival of Succoth. That shows that in the age to come, in the Kingdom, Torah will be honored.”

“Besides,” Mattai quickly added, “who is Paul to set aside the revealed word of God?”

There, he thought to himself in a self-satisfied manner, that should shut Ignatius up. But, of course, it didn’t. By now there was much pushing and shoving, yelling and screaming, as members of the community tried to retrieve the scrolls of the Torah and Prophets from Ignatius’ impure and disdainful hands. Members including Mattai and Onias were crying that these interlopers were destroying the peace of the Sabbath, that they were Torah-deniers who were desecrating the synagogue. Ignatius was yelling back that they should give up these foolish fables and myths, tying themselves up into knots trying to keep all the commandments. “Look at Abraham,” Ignatius shouted, “he was chosen by God and yet he did not keep Torah. It hadn’t been given in his day. It only came later, generations later, at the time of Moses. Abraham was a man of faith. So, too, should we be people of faith – faith in the power of the Christ to save.”

Someone at the back retorted, “Yet Abraham observed circumcision. That was part of God’s Covenant with Abraham. You can’t deny that. He wasn’t just a man of faith: he was obedient.” But this point was lost in the din. Ignatius returned to one of his original observations, that everyone stood in need of salvation. “Christ,” he trumpeted over the uproar, “Christ has made an atonement on the cross on behalf of all humanity. Accept the sacrifice he made and be saved.”

Mattai was aghast at this suggestion. They revered Yeshua, treasured his words and tried to live the life of Torah in keeping with his outlook. They mourned his death and thought it tragic. Yet never did it occur to them to think of it as anything other than the death of a truly righteous man. During a momentary lull, Mattai spluttered, “Yes, remember Abraham indeed, Ignatius. Abraham is a good example. When in obedience to the divine command he almost killed his son, God providentially provided a ram instead. This shows that God does not require human sacrifice. Never, never again would a human sacrifice be required. Your insistence on Jesus as a human sacrifice to God seems to forget Abraham’s lesson. The sacrifice that’s required is not that of a person but a contrite heart and true repentance, a willingness to face up to God by admitting our all-too-human faults and missteps, and a devotion to sharing in God’s plan for restoring the world by performing acts of righteousness done with a true spirit. That’s what God requires of us.”

Ignatius was quick to reply, “But you forget everything, that Yeshua himself was resurrected. That changes everything – everything he said and did. He was not just a teacher. He was the savior of humanity, the one who frees us all from the shackles of sin. God accepted his sacrifice and so now we live in a new era.”

“Yes,” said Evodius, “there’s a whole new reality before us, something that changes the old landscape forever. Can’t you see this of your revered teacher? He opened up for us possibilities that never before existed?”

And with that Evodius and Ignatius returned to their seats. The synagogue leader waited until decorum return. He spoke briefly – and tactfully -- saying, “You are our guests and we thank you for coming to our Sabbath services. But we differ. We honor Yeshua, to be sure, but he is truly honored for what he said and did. He was a human. Yes, we believe he died, but that was a tragic death, not a sacrifice and not what you call ‘an atonement.’ Yes, we believe that he was resurrected but we don’t attribute anything more to it than just that: he is with God, in God’s heavenly kingdom. All truly good and righteous people will be resurrected, as the psalmist of ancient Israel said, ‘*You will not allow your faithful one to experience corruption.*’ Similarly, we express utter confidence in God’s power to save and we find it in our ancient psalm, ‘*The Lord is my shepherd.*’ Can you not affirm that song with confidence? Trust in God’s willingness and power to save? He leads us, renews our life, guiding us on the right paths, anointing us in the presence of our enemies and, finally, assuring us that we will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever more.”

The clatter and commotion continued on for a few moments and gradually it died down. Mattai went to the bimah. Facing the entire congregation, he began, “hear me out on this.”

“You say you offer salvation. You say you have words of Yeshua after his death. You say the promises to Abraham for the Gentiles have come true in our generation. And you deny us the right to observe Torah, even as Yeshua himself observed Torah, as did his brother Ya’akov, as did his cousin Jochanan and his disciples such as Cephas. You challenge our right to follow the words we have heard from the Rabbi himself that not one stroke of the Torah will be altered until all of God’s plans have come to pass. We *know* you lie as did your teacher, Paul, before you.”

Ignatius and Evodius and their entourage were somewhat taken aback. The charge that they were lying seemed to strike a responsive chord, something that made them strangely silent. “We lie not,” they eventually retorted, “Nor did Paul lie.” But they seemed, for a change, willing to listen to Mattai. What did he have up his sleeve? they thought to themselves. He seems pretty confident of himself.

“We know you lie as we know Paul himself lied. What’s more, he knew we knew he lied,” Mattai continued. “All this was demonstrated for the whole world to see some twenty years ago.”

“How so?” they demanded to know.

“We have proof. Well, actually *I* have the proof.” And here Mattai began to recount a life-altering episode which occurred when he was much younger. “As you may recall,” he started to say, “some twenty years ago, a group of us were sent from Jerusalem to Antioch on behalf of Ya’akov. He was receiving disturbing news from Jewish travelers from the Diaspora that a certain individual, Paul, was moving through Jewish communities with disastrous consequences. It appears he was trying to woo Jews and God-fearers to a new religion, a new assembly, one that took them away from the traditions of our people.”

“Even more importantly,” Mattai went on to add before they could holler, “what proof?” “Even more importantly,” he reiterated, “Ya’akov was concerned that somehow Paul’s teachings about the Christ were being confused with the teachings of our Yeshua. There were strange reports – hard to believe for many of us – that somehow – don’t ask us how -- the dead Yeshua was speaking to and through Paul to the Gentiles. We, however, were the custodians of what he taught during his lifetime. We knew what he stood for. And here was Paul telling people something vastly different, all in the name of the dead Yeshua. You can imagine the consternation our community felt! Our good friends and neighbors, the Pharisees and the Essenes, were raising difficult questions. Just who were these people associated with Paul? Were they part of The Way? Or not? Were they a group within our movement that was not Jewish and which did not follow Torah? That’s what we had to answer. Paul was spreading massive religious confusion. And who was this ‘Paul’ anyway, a person we had heard had been ‘set apart’ or ‘ordained’ by none other than a member of the detested Herodian family, Manaen? Was he a political appointee, and, if so, for what purpose? Those were difficult questions and we had to answer them urgently.”

“And so it came to pass that along with some others, I went to Antioch. Our purpose was straightforward. We wanted to persuade Paul and his entourage to visit Jerusalem for a high-level conference. As I say, we were very distressed that he was preaching a religion about the Christ whom he equated with the resurrected Yeshua. More than that, according to him, the now very-much-alive Yeshua was telling him heavenly secrets. Likewise, we found that he was distressed at what he thought was our recalcitrance, our blindness – why, that’s a word you even brought up here a few minutes ago – our spiritual poverty. And so he found it in his interest as well to honor Ya’akov’s request and travel the three hundred miles up to Jerusalem.”

“We know all that,” said Evodius, “and Paul acquitted himself nobly, or so we’ve been told.”

“Well, that wasn’t exactly how things unfolded. I was there, Evodius. I was present at the meeting with Paul. It was a three day meeting with his group and the heads of The Community of the Way, the revered “pillars” of our movement. Ya’akov presided at the meeting, but Cephas was there (you call him Peter) and Yochanan (John) and some others. I, too, was there and my responsibility was to act as the scribe.”

“What do you mean, ‘scribe’?” asked Ignatius impetuously. “Do you mean to say that there were notes made of this meeting? If so, where are they now? Locked up in the Temple Archives in Jerusalem? A fat lot of good that would do with the Romans about to destroy Jerusalem! Everyone knows that Jerusalem is doomed. Likewise, the Temple. Its day is finally over.”

And with that a shudder ran around the room and the atmosphere turned frosty. Ignatius had that effect on people and his self-righteousness galled everyone who came into contact with him. Years later he would be sentenced to death by the Romans for being a Christian. As bishop of Antioch, succeeding Evodius, he was arrested. While being escorted from Antioch through Tarsus, along the Common Highway through the Roman province of Asia (in modern-day Turkey) to Smyrna (modern-day Izmir) and Troas at the eastern seaboard of the Aegean Sea, he'd write letters to fledgling Congregations of the Christ scattered here and there. He seems to have left nobody out – the congregations at Ephesus, Magnesia-on-the-Meander River, Smyrna, Tralles, Philadelphia and even the group in Rome. His self-confidence in his own rightness and self-importance would effuse from these letters. He was an authoritarian bishop and in that exalted position he expected his priests and laity to obey him as if he were God himself. He begged others not to interfere with the Roman sentence and so – quite possibly -- he engineered or at least collaborated in his own death. He was adamant that he wanted to share in what he'd call “the Passion of my God.” But all this lay some forty years in the future. Right now, his condemnation of the central symbols of Judaism -- the Temple and Jerusalem itself -- was not winning him any friends in the synagogue.

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Mattai knew the time had come to reveal to the world what only he and Rachel had shared. He had the scroll, the record of the meetings with Paul, the scroll that had been lost to a generation of followers of both Yeshua and Paul. Safely transported from Jerusalem to Antioch, hidden in a leather pouch, it was probably the time, now some twenty years later, to divulge its contents.

“We know what Paul said and what he actually stood for. And it was very different from what our movement believes and practices.” He paused for a moment, waiting for absolute silence, “We have the scroll,” he announced quietly.

“What?” demanded Evodius and Ignatius all at once. “The scroll of what?”

“We have the scroll, the scroll hidden for some twenty years waiting the right moment to be brought to light. It's the record of what was said at the conference in Jerusalem between Ya'akov and Paul in 48.”

“What does it say?” the members of the Congregation of the Christ cried out almost in unison.

Mattai pondered for a moment and then said, "We'll be pleased to share this with you. I propose that we meet at the beginning of the first day of the week -- at the end of next Shabbat, just after we see three stars in the sky. Saturday evening," he added, just to make sure they understood when Shabbat ended.

"I'll read the scroll to you and you will see how truly different your religion is from ours. In fact, since the scroll is in three long parts, we'll have to meet for three consecutive times, next Saturday, Sunday and Monday evenings, after sundown.

Ignatius and Evodius and the others quickly agreed. This was too important to be ignored and it threw a wrench into their plans to turn the Synagogue of The Community of the Way into yet another Congregation of the Christ.

"So we meet, one week today," Evodius affirmed, "just as evening begins. Here."

Everyone filed out of the synagogue to return to their homes. Rachel was livid with everyone -- Mattai, Onias, the leader of the synagogue and especially with Evodius and Ignatius.

"Nothing good will come of this," she confidently predicted, "Nothing good at all. All you dreamers are just stirring up old troubles in the name of religion. We need desperately to get along, to focus on earning a living and doing the best for our families. All this has to do with the words of a dead Yeshua and dreams about a better life somewhere, sometime. We all know the dead don't speak, so why all the fuss? Why pander to these troublemakers?"

Onias and Mattai were discussing something else and did not immediately pay attention to what Rachel was saying. They could not miss the fact that Evodius and Ignatius had come prepared, not only with an invitation but with ammunition for disputation. They had arrived armed with their scroll of the words of Paul their leader, his letter to the Congregations of the Christ in Galatia.

"They probably have more writings, all stemming from Paul the apostate. All we have, Mattai," confessed Onias, "are the ancient texts: the Torah, the Prophets and the Other Writings. We don't have writings of Yeshua. For some reason, he didn't make any. And we don't have writings from his early students, the disciples. They didn't make any either. It probably never occurred to Ya'akov, Cephas, Jochanan or any of the others to jot down what they remembered of their teacher. Strange, but that's the way it is. And we are really disadvantaged by this. All we have is your *Recollections*, Mattai, and that, we've got to admit, is pretty slim!"

Mattai agreed wholeheartedly. "Yes, I saw what a powerful weapon having a more recent writing could be. We'll have to have copies made of my *Recollections* by a local

scribe and share it with the community in other centers. Maybe this will prompt them to write down what they remember.”

“Still I wonder,” Onias said, “why none of Yeshua’s family members or students recorded the teachings of the Rabbi. That’s strange indeed. All the ancient prophets seem to have written scrolls – Amos, Isaiah, Zechariah, Malachi and the rest. Why not Yeshua?”

At this point Rachel couldn’t contain herself any longer. “Are you two blind?” she charged. “Don’t you see that there were never supposed to be any writings? Yeshua, Ya’akov and the disciples were right all along by not writing things down.”

“What do you mean?” Mattai and Onias interjected, for once taking her seriously.

“The reason is simple,” Rachel noted. “Yeshua promised us that the Kingdom of God was coming soon. We are all supposed to be living in Paradise by now, not running for our lives while the Romans destroy our city, our religion and our way of life. That’s why there are no writings: Jesus promised us a whole new world. Writing about the Kingdom isn’t the same thing as the Kingdom itself.”

“One more thing,” Rachel added speaking directly to her husband. “Mattai, when you write your *Recollections* you are thereby acknowledging that the dream didn’t come true. A new scroll isn’t a new society. Sad to say, your writing these remembrances down is clear testimony that the promises of the prophet failed to come true.”

Onias was silent, not sure what to make of her insight and unwilling to admit that it might all be for naught. Mattai didn’t respond either but thoughtfully reflected on what she had said. Rachel was a realist and she had a point he had to admit. But still, he argued with himself, there must be a point to writing Yeshua’s words down. Perhaps in some future generation, his vision will come true. Eventually, if not now. Unlike Rachel, he wasn’t willing to say that Yeshua was a failed prophet.

And with that they parted, Onias and his family to their home, Rachel and the chastened Mattai to theirs.

Shabbat shalom. It had been anything but a peaceful Sabbath.

7

Mattai's Mood

The following Shabbat, everyone was nervous. Rachel was still mad at Mattai and had been so all week. She knew that little she said would deter him from his mission, to prove Evodius and Ignatius wrong and that their religion was built upon the visions of a liar. She also knew that he was brooding over her point that by his writing down the words of Yeshua in a scroll signaled a failure ... a failure of Yeshua's promise to come true.

"Why does religion always bring out the worst in people?" she asked Judith? "Why is there all this wrangling? Why not simply let the Christ-worshippers believe what they want to believe and let us follow our way? Why does one of us have to be right and the other wrong? That makes no more sense than us trying to convince our neighbors who worship Isis and Dionysius that they are wrong. Surely all this is God's business, not ours."

Judith tended to agree with Rachel that arguing with members of the Congregation of the Christ was unwise. There were more Gentiles than Jews, not only in Antioch but around the world. "Why rock the boat?" she inquired of Rachel. "Nothing positive will come out of this evening's debate."

That whole Sabbath morning, Mattai's thoughts were distracted. His mind dipped in and out of the Torah reading, "*Va-Yera*." The portion continued the saga of Abraham that had commenced the week before. This particular segment dealt with hospitality. It pitted the gracious actions of Abraham in receiving three unexpected visitors versus the inhumane treatment of visitors practiced by those in Sodom and Gomorrah. This unruly mob just wanted to abuse Lot's guests sexually. They were the unrighteous who did not obey God's laws. They did not know how to behave sexually or how to treat strangers fairly and graciously.

Mattai nudged Onias and whispered to him, "This is truly prophetic," he muttered, "God killing all the unrighteous who flout his holy laws. Evodius and Ignatius and their whole crew are just the same as the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. They make setting aside the Torah a hallmark of their movement: they have no ethics. They, too, will be destroyed."

Onias was not so sure that the parallels were exact, but Mattai was adamant and he quickly continued, "The problem with Sodom and Gomorrah was not that just a few people were wicked. The whole community was evil. That's why they were all punished."

So, too, with the Congregations of the Christ. It's not as if just a few people disregard the Torah. They all do. And they tell others to do the same."

Onias, however, didn't pursue this line of thought but he had the courage to admit that *that* was one lesson that could be derived from the Torah readings. But there were other messages as well. Embedded in this section of scripture was extremely good news: one of the visitors announced to Abraham that his wife, Sarah, would have a son within the year. But Mattai was not receptive to this perspective, he knew. So he took the opportunity to remind Mattai that the readings focused primarily on hospitality, how to make visitors and strangers welcome within the community. And that's what he chose to emphasize in his response to Mattai.

"We have to make Evodius and Ignatius feel welcome," he said. "That's what I get out of our readings this morning. We can't be rude to them. That won't get us anywhere."

"Besides," he went on to say, "theirs is a much larger community than ours here in Antioch. We really can't make enemies of any Gentiles. Above all, we got to keep the peace with them. You're the newcomer here, Mattai, and you really don't know how fragile our social arrangements are. Just the slightest match can set off a huge conflagration."

Onias had lived in Antioch all his life and had a better grasp of the *realpolitik* of daily living than Mattai. He had seen it in his life. Relationships between Jew and Gentile had flared up from time to time, and the Jews always suffered the most. But hospitality wasn't the least bit on Mattai's mind and his mood had turned ugly. He had not been saving his precious scroll for twenty years just to seek accommodation. He was boiling over with anger at the sheerchutzpah of these aggressive missionaries. "Fellow religionists? Fat chance! They have plagued us for decades. Perhaps now we can stop them in their tracks. We have the proof that they lie."

The reading from the Torah was over. Mattai was too preoccupied with his own internal anger to have heard another message from the Prophets, this time from II Kings. A wealthy woman in Shunem had thoughtfully provided the prophet Elisha with food and accommodations – a bed, table, chair and lamp stand. In return, Elisha announced to her that within a year, she would be embracing her own child. A child was born, just as Elisha had predicted. Unfortunately, a few years later while out with his father in the field, the child grasped his head in pain. "My head, my head," he shrieked in agony. He died. Elisha came and miraculously restored him to life. Somehow both readings from the ancient sacred scrolls had tied in the themes of hospitality and good news. It should have been tremendously uplifting.

But it wasn't. All this escaped Mattai who was focused on his own inner turmoil. The service then turned to discuss Yeshua's teachings including Mattai's *Recollections*, but he sat silently throughout the whole proceeding. His thoughts just weren't on the

discussion even when the members of The Way mulled over the meaning of the saying about the blessings upon the peacemakers, that to them belonged the Kingdom of God. This was not a peacemaking day as far as he was concerned.

Everyone returned to their homes and ate a light lunch from food they had prepared ahead of time before the commencement of Shabbat. "Calm down," said Rachel, "you must be diplomatic in your speech. They may not like what they hear. We cannot afford to send them away full of recriminations."

She could not be sure if Mattai had listened but he seemed to her somewhat calmer. But he really wasn't. Seething inside, he said to himself, this was a day for revenge. This was payback time for all the commotion these troublemakers had created. Somebody had to stand up to these people, to defend Torah and with it, biblical revelation.

Yes, he mused, that was what was at stake, nothing less than the validity of biblical revelation, God speaking to his servant people, Israel. But soon other thoughts entered his mind, unbiddingly. Had God truly revealed his will to the Jewish people through Torah? Were the ancient scrolls right?

And that ever-present nagging thought surfaced time and time again, why hadn't the promises of Yeshua come to pass?

Or, perhaps, was Paul right after all and should all this should be set aside? As if God had changed his mind ... or even could! That seemed to be what Paul was saying. But God was God. He had made a deal with the Jewish people. Who was Paul to cancel the agreement? Unilaterally! Surely that made no sense. But many people did seem to follow Paul's teachings and the Congregations of the Christ were growing in numbers and that perplexed Mattai. His mind was beset by so many questions, so many complex issues. Maybe Rachel was right and all this Messiah talk was just nonsense.

Shabbat shalom. Once again the peace of the Sabbath had eluded them all.

8

The Hidden Scroll – Day 1

Shabbat finally came to an end, as evening descended. Three stars appeared and then dozens of others blazoned in the darkening sky overhead. Everyone from The Community of the Way scurried back to their Synagogue. Even though they had farther to come on foot through the city, Evodius and his entourage were already waiting. They had set out well before the Sabbath had ended, but honoring the day of rest was of no concern to them. No one had ever heard the contents of the scroll Mattai had safeguarded throughout all these years and they were curious what it might contain. “This is much ado about nothing,” Ignatius confided to Evodius who concurred. Members of The Way were just as eager to hear its contents as were the congregants of the Christ. As customary, the men sat on the lower level, the women in the balconies above. This time, rather than socializing, the women leaned over to make sure they heard every word coming from the floor below. Members of the two communities sat together, separately. As might be expected, there was no intermingling.

When everyone had assembled, the robust leader of the synagogue stood up behind the bimah and welcomed everyone. He set a tactful tone. “Blessed are you,” he started, using an ancient prayer of welcoming, “Blessed are you who come in the name of the Lord. We wish to share with you Evodius, Ignatius and elders from the Congregation of the Christ the message from an important scroll, one that Rabbi Mattai made now some twenty years ago and which he has treasured all this time.”

Everyone was quiet as the leader diplomatically continued, “We believe that the contents of this scroll will help shed light on why our two movements are so different and why we believe yours is a fundamentally distinctive religion, one that has nothing to do with ours. We hope it will shed light on the differences between those of us who follow the teachings of Rabbi Yeshua as well as the ancient scrolls of Judaism and you who do not value either. You follow the sayings of a Christ whom you say is the same Yeshua as ours, only you treasure his words *after* he died. We share this scroll with you so that we may honestly arrive at an understanding of how our respective communities differ. We are not one and the same but we respect our mutual differences. We seek to end confusion – your Christ-worshipping movement with ours, and our Yeshua community with yours. We earnestly hope that this may foster better feelings between our two groups and that we may live in peace. Not together, but honoring separateness, differences.”

Evodius stood up, and equally tactically responded, “That is our fervent hope, too.” He paused for a moment, perhaps thinking through what he was about to add. He

continued with his response, “although I don’t think we are as distinct as you make us out to be. With all due respect, we view your group as part of our much larger movement. We hope in time you will come to embrace our new perspective as a fulfillment of your own. Torah cannot coexist with Christ.”

There was some murmuring around the room and balcony as Evodius said this, but he seemed respectful and receptive to the hidden scroll’s contents. Onias could not be sure of young Ignatius, however. If he had his way, Onias suspected, he’d forcibly convert everyone in the room right then and there!

Mattai slowly took the floor, stood behind the bimah and carefully took the precious scroll out from its hiding place, the old leather pouch he had guarded so well. He spread it out carefully on the table’s surface. He began by uttering an ancient prayer, “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, who has brought us to this day.”

To which Rachel silently added, “And may you, O Lord our God, guard his lips and his heart, that he may speak the truth with compassion.” She also thought to herself, “May this day come quickly to an end. And may nothing evil come about as a result of this discussion.” Rachel remained adamant that this interfaith gathering would bode ill for them and their smaller community.

Onias quietly offered up his own prayer, “Be charitable, Mattai, practice hospitality as Torah commands. Do not let anger take hold. Remember the words of Yeshua, how he cautioned us against anger.” Clearly there was much at stake in what Mattai said – and how he said it. Onias knew from experience living in Antioch just how dependent the small Jewish community was on the good will of the Gentiles.

“Before I begin,” Mattai said, “let me tell you about the circumstances that led to this writing. It was some twenty years ago. I was much younger then when all these things happened. Along with some others I had been sent by our great leader, Ya’akov, brother of our Rabbi Yeshua, from Jerusalem here to Antioch. We had heard rumors in Jerusalem that a certain individual -- Paul his name was -- was causing great consternation in the synagogues of the Diaspora. Not only our synagogues but also those of the Pharisees and other Jewish groups. We heard that Paul was developing a new religion, one that focused on the Christ. That, however, did not disturb us any more than if our Roman neighbors were to introduce a religion devoted to a new god or goddess. If it had just been that, it wouldn’t have concerned us at all.”

Ignatius, ever impatient, interjected, “Well, what then did you find objectionable? Get to the point.”

“Paul wasn’t just developing a new religion but he was promoting it in a way we found obnoxious. It seemed to us that he was trying to build his movement on the back of ours. He was actually coming into our synagogues as well as those of our friends, the

Pharisees. No problem there but during our services and study sessions, he attempted to recruit new members. Blatantly, right in front of our people! He wanted to woo members of our synagogues – and others – to his new religion. ‘Poaching’ was how some described his methods. ‘Thievery’ others said. He was quite aggressive about it, we were led to believe – he just wouldn’t shut up or go away. Polite requests had no effect on the man. While that bothered us, it wasn’t what disturbed us the most.”

“Well, what was it that troubled you and your leadership, then,” snapped Ignatius. “Let’s get to the point.”

“We began to hear rumors about his message,” Mattai went on not the least bit flustered. “We found out that he was telling Jews and our Gentile associates -- the God-fearers -- all around the Mediterranean world that everyone should disregard God’s Torah. Plain and simple: Torah was passé. He was urging everyone to dismiss all of biblical revelation, our pathway of righteousness.”

“Even more distressing,” continued Mattai, “was that we heard that he was somehow linking his message of *your* Christ with *our* Rabbi, Yeshua. We weren’t clear on exactly what he was saying on this topic, but we knew that this kind of message would cause confusion. We know it did because our Pharisaic neighbors in Jerusalem, and the Essenes as well, wondered what we really stood for. ‘Was Paul one of your teachers?’ they rightfully asked, ‘and, if so, did we agree with his message about non-Torah-observance?’”

“Some others had reported that Paul was saying that Christ was some sort of divinity, akin to Dionysius and Mithras.”

“So, as you can see, we really had to sort things out. When we went to Antioch we approached Paul and some of his followers – Barnabas and a few others from Cyprus as I recall. We pointed out to him that we really needed to settle the matter. Was he one of us or not? We certainly didn’t think so, but his insistence that he preached Christ and Christ crucified and that this Christ was the same as our Yeshua made the matter imperative.”

Mattai paused to make sure that everyone in the room understood what had created such a fuss in Jerusalem two decades before. “There were four charges: *First*, raiding our synagogues and those of other Jews for new members. *Second*, teaching that Torah observance was no longer required on the part of anyone, Jew or Gentile. *Third*, introducing a new deity, a God or a divine-human, and saying that somehow this being was our Rabbi Yeshua. *Fourth*, claiming that his religion was somehow connected to ours. All this created the need to act.”

“So we invited Paul to come up to Jerusalem for a high-level conference, to establish once and for all what he believed and taught, and how it accorded with our beliefs and practices. He readily agreed to come with his entourage. He, too, thought it was time to ‘clear the air’.”

Once again Ignatius interjected, "Why did he agree to come? What was in it for him?"

"Hmmm. That's an interesting question," Mattai said to Ignatius slowly. "I wondered about it at the time. Perhaps he thought of this as an opportunity, a chance to persuade us as to the truth of his teachings. It probably was as simple as that. Maybe he optimistically or naively thought he could convert all of us to his new way, in one fell swoop. That would have been an amazing coup! So he had much to gain and nothing to lose. He probably thought of it as a possible opportunity to take over the whole Community of the Way."

"At any rate, he agreed to visit Jerusalem, some twenty years ago, back in 48. Ya'akov and other of our leaders were there, Cephas (Peter) and Yochanan (John) and a few others. Paul was there, of course, along with some members of his movement as witnesses to the proceedings.

Mattai allowed himself to think back to that opening session some twenty years ago. He could recall vividly everyone who was there, where they sat and how they seemed to regard the proceedings.

Ya'akov was tall, lean and serious in his demeanor. In the late 40's he was at the height of his powers, conscious of his role keeping the fledgling community hopeful of imminent world transformation. He was a stern, dedicated individual, and, as a Nazirite, never drank unlike his brother Yeshua. He went daily to the Temple to pray – some say that he wore white robes and even entered the Holy of Holies like the high priest to pray for forgiveness. Like some righteous Jews before him, perhaps he thought that only when the people – everyone – repented would God bring about his sovereign rule over all the earth. Pharisee and Essene alike respected him as a truly righteous person, one who faithfully kept the Law. In time he would become known as "Ya'akov *ha-Zaddik*," Ya'akov or James the Righteous – the highest title of reverence for a truly great human being in ancient Judaism – just like the Essene Teacher of Righteousness.

Only the priestly Sadducees disliked him. The reasons were evident. They felt their power base threatened by the other groups, especially the Essenes and The Community of the Way, who held political beliefs about a coming messianic era. These messianic Jews clung to the ancient views that someday – someday soon – the Messiah would arrive, sweeping away all the unrighteous, reforming the Temple and claiming the throne of David. The Sadducees rightly felt that the messianic Jews considered the priestly elite to be part of the ungodly, doomed to destruction. How right they were!

It didn't help, either, that the Pharisees, Essenes and members of The Community of the Way all believed in eternal life. That was a foolish dream, the Sadducees thought, and allowed these delusional Jews to ignore the present Roman-dominated world and to take refuge in some sort of afterlife.

So the powerful Sadducees had good reason not to like any of the opposing factions. Belief in the coming Davidic king was a pious -- but dangerous -- religious myth. Dangerous -- because the belief wasn't just *religious*, but *political* as well. A king of the Jews? An independent Jewish state? The overthrow of the Roman government? Why that would threaten their cozy arrangements with Roman authorities as well as their priestly livelihood.

In contrast to Ya'akov's height, leanness and serious demeanor, Paul was much shorter and with a heavier, sturdy frame. He gave off the air of someone who really enjoyed debate, even playing the "devil's advocate" if the occasion suited him. He was a bit younger than Ya'akov, just in his early forties, well built and in good shape from all of his travels. A feisty individual, thought Mattai, feisty but a skilled orator well experienced in persuading people.

A later, 2nd century writing, *The Acts of Thecla*, would remember Paul as an energetic short man, bald head and with bowed legs. This influential writing recollected that he had eyebrows that met over his eyes, giving him a rather menacing appearance. What Mattai remembered most about him was his assertiveness, his eagerness for the cut and thrust of debate and his utter self-confidence. This was not a man who entertained any doubts about what he held and what he represented.

Mattai quickly returned from his reverie.

"Let me stress," Mattai added thoughtfully, "these proceedings were conducted with civility and due respect for each other's positions. At no point did rancor or recriminations ever enter it. It was a fact-finding session. And you - all of you - will be utterly amazed at what came out of this."

"How come *you* have the scroll?" Ignatius impetuously demanded to know.

"Very simply," Mattai said. "I was the scribe, the recording secretary. I took notes during the proceedings and then wrote up the account on the following day. It is an accurate recollection of what took place."

And, with that, Mattai carefully took the scroll out of its leather pouch where it had rested for twenty years, spread it out across the bimah much like the sacred scrolls from the Ark behind him. He was just about to begin reading in Aramaic when he remembered that that language was not the first language of his hearers. Hospitality demanded that he make the following announcement before proceeding, "If any you of our distinguished visitors do not understand what is being said, let me know and I'll pause so that Evodius can translate the sense of the Aramaic into Greek."

Evodius appreciated the courtesy but thought to himself that this would likely not be necessary. The members of his group were chosen in part for their ability to understand Aramaic ... as well as to their firm commitment to the Christ. Above all, he did not want this to become a reverse missionary situation!

“Here begins the scroll,” Mattai indicated.

*

[48 C.E. in our calendar]

It was Day #1 of the Jerusalem Conference. Ya’akov, Cephas, Yochanan and five elders from The Community of the Way were present. So, too, were Paul and six members from his movement. The session was held in the Synagogue of the Way on the Western Ridge in Jerusalem.

Ya’akov began.

Ya’akov

Blessed are you who come in the name of the Lord.

With this traditional greeting, we welcome you, Paul, along with your associates, in the name of the one God, the Lord, sovereign of the universe. We have heard stories about your great success in the various Roman provinces to the north and west. You and your movement have been truly blessed.

But we have also heard reports about the nature of your enterprise and the content of your message. Your habit of entering synagogues – ours and those of our fellow Jews who belong to other associations – distresses us, for it appears that you are bent on converting them to your movement. We have also heard it said that you teach Jews as well as Gentiles not to follow the Torah given to us by God on Mount Sinai. Some have said, too, that you have introduced into your new religion a new God -- a Christ -- like Dionysius or Mithras or a host of other Gentile deities whose Temples are all around us.

We are also concerned that you have somehow become associated with us – whether by design or by accident we do not know – but your language has led others to imagine that we are members of the same religious association. We do not see your way as identical to ours, nor, we suspect, do you see your movement as reflecting our path. So we welcome this opportunity to clarify matters.

We suggest that we look at three matters over the course of the next few days. We’d like, first of all, today, an account of who you are and how you derived your message. Secondly, tomorrow, we’d like to examine your views on Torah observance. Finally, on the day after, we have some other questions, mostly related to salvation. You, in turn, may have questions you wish to ask of us. Hopefully by the end of this process

we'll have a clearer view how your organization relates to ours so that we both may go forward, not causing distress among our fellow Jews who look at us askance.

Paul

Ya'akov, we welcome the opportunity to be here, to share our views with you and to persuade you to modify your practices so that they may better conform to the gospel we have received from the Lord. We know your revered status among your people and wish to prevail upon you to consider another way, one that accords with the teachings of the Christ, him crucified by the people of this city not so long ago. That was a decisive event, as far as we are concerned, and it has implications for how we honor him and seek salvation which has come now to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews.

So, Ya'akov, we welcome the opportunity to answer questions, and your threefold agenda is comprehensive and fair, but we reserve the right to ask you questions in the hopes of persuading you to lead your community into the true path of righteousness. We encourage you to join with us in the new movement which embraces the Gentile as well as the Jewish world. We are living in the time God spoke to Abraham about, that through his heritage all the tribes of the world will be blessed. We see that blessing everywhere in evidence.

Ya'akov

You know our lineage, Paul. Yochanan, Cephas and I were with Yeshua throughout his mission. We know what he was like, what he stood for and what he proclaimed.

In particular, I was his brother. I've known him longer than anyone in this room, even longer than Simeon, our younger brother. Along with our cousin, Yochanan ha-Mabil, Yeshua and I formed a special task force some twenty years ago now – the three of us went to proclaim to all Israel that the time was ripe for God to establish his Kingdom on earth. Yeshua attracted twelve students whom he instructed in the inner meaning of scripture. We went around the Sea of Galilee, talking to everyone who would listen. We had a huge entourage – family, friends, relatives, wives, brothers, sisters, uncles, children, well-wishers. Everyone was enthusiastic about the coming new world. Miriam ha-Migdal, Yeshua's closest confidant, was with us everywhere the Rabbi went. She was a tower of strength whose presence calmed us throughout enormous difficulties. Aided by seventy ambassadors, Yeshua sent a message to all corners of Israel. Everyone was warned to prepare. The great day of the Lord was coming.

Both Yochanan ha-Mabil and I took Nazirite vows. While Yochanan was killed a couple of years before Yeshua, I plan to continue this strict practice until the day dawns when we awake and experience a whole recreated environment. This new world will see the demise of the wicked and the redemption of the righteous. Yeshua will be here, the messianic king upon the Davidic throne in Jerusalem. The exiles will be gathered in and all the scattered tribes of Israel reunited. The disciples will be the princes of the restored community. Israel will be the pre-eminent nation and then all the tribes of the earth will be blessed through her. None of this has happened so far.

In the meantime, we wait, observing the Torah, praying for forgiveness and staying faithful to the teachings and practices of our Rabbi, Yeshua. We hope that day is not far off and that we will all live to rejoice in God's reinstatement of Paradise, the new 'Garden of Eden.'

Tell us about yourself.

Paul

Born into Diaspora Judaism in Tarsus, I came to Jerusalem in search of my ancestral roots that I could not really find in a Gentile world. As a youth I was zealous for the traditions of our people and favored the Pharisaic interpretation of Torah. Because your Community of the Way introduced the teachings of Rabbi Yeshua alongside the Written and Oral law, I resisted the spread of your movement. All this you know.

One day – on the road to Damascus -- my eyes were dramatically opened to a greater reality, to good news taught me by Christ himself. That experience took me in a vastly different direction. In light of the freedom brought about by Christ, I now look upon your Community of the Way, the Pharisees and the Essenes with the eyes of a stranger. You all seem to me to be preoccupied with the Law in a way that is not open to the realities of the modern world. You are closed communities that have nothing to do with Gentiles who constitute, after all, the greater mass of humanity. You have no message for them. But surely they are included in God's plan for humanity. God has shown them grace and favor and I am pleased that reports of our movement's success has reached your ears.

But I digress.

Ya'akov

You've just said that you underwent a remarkable experience, the day that your eyes were open, to a greater reality, to good news concerning what you call 'the Christ.' Tell us more about that and what it meant to you.

Paul

I was on the way to Damascus with some companions. Why? it no longer matters. A blinding light. A voice. A shattering moment that shocked me and shook me to the core of my being. It's a bit of a blur now as I look back upon it, but all of a sudden, I saw that my current path was wrong, that I was doing all the wrong things – trying to keep the Law and being vigilant about others doing the same. What was needed was a new direction, one that would embrace everyone in the world -- Jew and Gentile, male and female, free people as well as slaves. That remarkable insight turned me around and I became a new man.

I can't do justice to this remarkable experience. It was mystical, life-altering and it shattered all my previous views. I sensed that I was given this insight to be the missionary to the Gentiles of this new vision, one conveyed to me by Christ himself.

Ya'akov

What do you mean, "conveyed to you by Christ himself?"

Paul

I mean that the new sense I had of myself – my new self-understanding -- and the path I must follow I learned from no human being. Absolutely no one. Not you. No one in Jerusalem, as you know. No one in Damascus. It was a divine revelation, communicated in and through me by Christ.

Ya'akov

What did you do after this remarkable experience?

Paul

I wanted time alone, to think through what this new direction meant. I mean, I didn't know what to do, whom to tell, where to go or how to shape my subsequent life. So I sought solace in the Province of Arabia – where, it matters little – plying my trade and testing out my ideas on various groups of people. Petra was a good place for my fledgling message. It was the trading headquarters of the biggest of all trading routes – the passageway from the Mediterranean through the Arabian peninsula to the Indian ocean and the exotic countries beyond. I found there in this Nabatean society a multicultural world unlike any other. People from all over the Roman empire, India, Africa and the Arabian peninsula, all colors, shapes and sizes of human beings, all polytheists, all passing through with their goods moving from west to east and south and vice-versa. I was granted a new vision, one movement that would unite everyone in the world so that no more would there be divisions. There would be "a new humanity," all created by means of Christ's death upon the cross, a sacrifice, an atonement.

After a while I returned to Damascus. Then, after a further three years of reflecting, I returned to Jerusalem briefly, but I returned as one who was a stranger to the Temple and the rites of Judaism. The only persons I met from your movement were you, Ya'akov, and you, Cephas. You know that, I was here in Jerusalem for just over two weeks. Not to learn more, not to receive instruction and certainly not to confirm my vision – nothing of that sort. The Christ had given his all to me and through me to the rest of mankind. I needed no authentication from anyone here in Jerusalem: I was 'nobody's man.' I was not beholden to any human being. I was a free agent, commissioned by Christ and directed by him, without any intermediaries.

That was the beauty of it. I was privileged to have had a whole new path laid out for me directly from the one who is now with God. I then went into the provinces of Syria and Cilicia, talking to people while practicing my leather-making craft, converting people to the new movement, entering synagogues to open the eyes of individuals who ought to have known what the ancient promises to our people really meant. Wherever I

have gone, I have established an association in that city or town – an ‘ekklesia’ we call it in Greek – a church. These churches are the backbone of my new movement.

Some of my members were once members of your movement. Others have come from the Pharisees. The bulk of them, however, come from the God-fearers, who, I must admit, were more receptive to my message than fellow Jews.

I am now citizen of the world with a world-transforming message. I am like the Christ to the Gentiles.

*

At this point in the reading, Mattai paused, sought some water and noted the murmuring that was going around the room. Members of The Community of the Way were clearly troubled by this message but, at the same time, strangely relieved. It seemed clear that whatever Paul was preaching, it was a different message than theirs. That was abundantly evident. Yet, they confided to others, he does have an interesting perspective. Some thought it strangely appealing – it was, after all, a religious perspective that was open to the whole world in a way they were not. But -- a *dead* man speaking? That seemed far-fetched even to the most devout. Something new. Something unbelievable. Something with no biblical precedent ... had any of the great leaders of Judaism ever spoken to anyone from beyond the grave? Abraham or Moses or Elijah or Isaiah or Ezra? Surely not.

Onias intercepted Mattai as he was about to return to the bimah, “What do you make of this approach? One new world religion? Is such a thing possible?” Mattai didn’t answer.

Evodius and Ignatius were clearly impressed with the defense their Paul had made some twenty years earlier. They had never heard his message so eloquently put. “Yes, he was a citizen of the world, the new multicultural world in which we live,” Evodius said to Ignatius. “He and he alone realized that we Gentiles could not be excluded from God’s promise to Abraham and he was the instrument for that message. That’s the message of grace, of our adoption into God’s family, that’s what we treasure. I hope the others in this synagogue get the message. Things are going our way for sure.”

Mattai resumed his position at the bimah and started to read from the scroll again.

*

Ya’akov

Paul, before you start on another lengthy digression, let me ask you, did you ever meet our Rabbi Yeshua, the one who was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, used Capernaum as his headquarters, taught around the Sea of Galilee and then ended up in Jerusalem just a short time before he was put to death?

Paul

No.

Ya'akov

Do you ever quote him?

Paul

No. As I say, that's not my focus. My teaching has to do with the message Christ conveyed in and through me after his death. What happened before is totally irrelevant.

Ya'akov

Do you mean to say that you never refer to his mission?

Paul

That's right.

Ya'akov

Do you ever tell your members about his teachings concerning the 'higher righteousness,' the command to keep Torah ever more strictly than do our neighbors, the Pharisees?

Paul

Certainly not. That's clearly at odds with our movement's direction and tenor.

Ya'akov

What about his prayer – the one we call 'The Lord's Prayer'? Do you or do your followers pray that prayer daily, as we do?

Paul

I'm not familiar with that prayer.

Ya'akov

We recognize that you do not observe the Sabbath but congregate on the first day of the week to pray, study and discuss. But even that day you do not refer to as 'your Sabbath.' Am I correct?

Paul

That's absolutely right. We have dispensed with Torah – all of it!

Ya'akov

Does that mean you and your followers do not observe the traditional Jewish festivals, that great round of observances including Passover, Succoth, Hanukkah and all the others?

Paul

That's right. We do not observe any of those festivals.

Ya'akov

What about the Ten Commandments? Do you observe them – well at least the other nine? We've already established that you violate one of the Ten Commandments, to observe the Sabbath.

Paul

That is a harder question to answer, Ya'akov. No, we don't observe or teach the Ten Commandments. They're an integral part of Torah and we reject all of Torah.

But that's not the whole story. It is not just that we reject the Law. Look at what we affirm. We believe that for a person whose life is led in the Spirit, these practices would come naturally. A person who is truly in the Spirit would not murder or commit adultery or be envious of a neighbor's property. That's not the fruit of the Spirit but of the flesh.

Ya'akov

Do you practice male circumcision, honoring our ancient covenant with God through Abraham? Do you require this of your converts? Do you require it of male children who are born in households of members belonging to your movement?

Paul

No. No. And no.

Cephas (Peter)

Allow me, Ya'akov to pose a question.

It's clear, Paul, that you follow no Jewish practices or beliefs. Yours is not, then, a Jewish religion in the sense that we are. Or the way in which the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots constitute parties within Judaism. Your religion, it seems to me, is not a Judaism – not a Judaism we'd recognize. There is no form of Judaism that dispenses with Torah, however much we disagree as to its interpretation.

Paul

Again, that is a difficult question, Cephas. The simple answer is that we are not in any sense a Jewish religion. Ethnically I was born a Jew but today, spiritually, I'm not. We are a new movement that has transcended the limitations of being Jewish. That's the point: it's the religion for the whole world, for all the adopted sons and daughters of Abraham to share in.

*

Again Mattai paused to allow this radical departure from Judaism to sink in. Members of The Community of the Way were clearly puzzled by all this. Exactly what kind of religion was this that did not honor the central tenets and practices of Judaism?

Judaism was defined by obedience to God's word revealed in and through Torah. It set boundary markers. It mandated practices. It was a religion more based on behavior than on pious wishes or vague sentiments.

As angry as she was with Mattai for introducing the hidden scroll, Rachel was livid with Paul's perspective. "It's so loose, this new religion. If there are no Sabbaths and no festivals, how are families brought together? What binds them together as a people, sharing values and traditions? A tradition-less religion – it's surprising that anyone would opt for this!"

Most of the women in the gallery agreed. This had nothing to do with their sense of what religion was all about: family, the celebration of good times, wonderful shared memories, supporting one another in times of difficulty, looking after the sick and the elderly. That was the heart of Judaism as far as they were concerned.

Ignatius nudged Evodius, "he's right. We've never ever referred to our day as anything but 'the Lord's Day.' It is not the Sabbath and we are not prevented from doing the things we would like to do on this day. All these people can do is go to their synagogue or sit home and do nothing. That doesn't sound the least bit appealing. We must make sure that our people never ever lapse into this kind of indolence ever again. Some, I know, even within our own congregation find the idea of a day of rest appealing."

Evodius concurred. "In time, Ignatius, perhaps you will address this in one of your powerful sermons. It is not just enough to talk about the Spirit-filled life. We have to be very specific about ancient practices creeping in to contaminate our religion. No more Judaism!" Echoing Paul, Evodius quickly added, "We can never ever return to a life of slavery."

Ignatius tucked this thought away in his mind, and, in a strange way, years later while he was on his way to Rome to be martyred, he took time to caution members of the congregation of the Christ in Magnesia-on-the-Meander river not to observe old nonsense including keeping the Sabbath.

After this brief pause, Mattai returned to reading from the scroll.

*

Cephas

If I may, Ya'akov -- may I summarize what I've heard so far.

You, Paul, are not interested in the Yeshua we knew, the one who embarked on a courageous movement around the Galilee and surrounding territories, eventually ending up in Jerusalem – the one who announced that the Kingdom of God was just about to arrive. You are not interested in his words, his teachings, or his message. You claim, moreover, that you learned the tenets of your religion, not from any one of us who were

with him throughout his mission. You have renounced the religion that he himself practiced and encouraged his followers to do.

Paul

Yes, you are absolutely right.

Cephas

I commend you for your honesty. I take it, then, that you are more interested in the words of the dead but resurrected Yeshua more than the words he spoke when he was alive?

Paul

Yes. Absolutely. That's all that counts.

Ya'akov

Let me intervene, Cephas. Paul, your position presents us with some grave difficulties. For one thing, how would you explain that what you have heard the dead Yeshua say – the being you call 'the Christ' – does not correspond to what we all heard the living Yeshua say? Why is there this discrepancy? Why, for instance, did he tell us to observe the higher righteousness, clearly focused on the Torah, while you tell us not to keep the Law, presumably because your Christ figure has communicated that position to you?

Paul

I only know what Christ has told me. I have no knowledge of what you think you heard Yeshua say.

Ya'akov

Secondly, there is another problem. You claim that Christ, the dead but resurrected Yeshua, has spoken in and through you. In that sense, you are a kind of mediator for his instruction. But how would you explain that he has communicated nothing of the sort to us – his family members, his disciples, Miriam ha-Migdal – all the ones who knew him best?

Paul

I have no idea why he chose me. Perhaps it had to do with the mission to the Gentiles with which I have been charged. Perhaps this is Yeshua's message to them, just as the living Yeshua's message was to you Jews.

Cephas

A curious slip of the tongue there, Paul, 'you Jews.' Clearly you no longer identify with us as a people, a religion, living in our homeland.

Paul

You're right. I once was Jewish but now no longer am. As I say, I was born a Jew. That's all. I do not preach any form of Judaism. Nor do I encourage my followers to do so. That religion has been bypassed.

Ya'akov

So what you're saying is that you have a message from the Christ, whom you think is Rabbi Yeshua, words that differ from what he has told us while he was alive.

More than that, what you're saying is that you've had a vision and that this vision is enough for you to reverse Yeshua's teachings and practices, the whole conduct of his life, and a repudiation of the entire biblical revelation to the Jewish people. You're putting aside the ancient agreement, the covenant with God involving promises on the part of both parties to the deal. For our part, we are to keep Torah. For his part, God promises land, health and eternal life, keeping faith with those who are dead as well as those who are alive, forgiving and accepting us as his children.

What you are also maintaining is that all this can be set aside on the basis of a vision. Let me emphasize: just a vision. A momentary happening. That's incredible and it flies in the face of Yeshua's three-year mentoring process with us. He carefully chose his followers, his talmidim, his pupils. He instructed us, corrected us, and involved us in his mission to awaken all Israel to the imminence of the Kingdom of God. If what you are saying is correct – that all it takes is a vision – then what was the purpose of this three-year mentoring process? Are you saying that Jesus' historic tutoring process was an abject failure?

Paul

All I know is what I have experienced and I have lived through what the Christ wishes to convey to all humanity now. I have no knowledge of what Yeshua said or did before he was crowned with glory.

Quite frankly, I don't think it is at all relevant.

Ya'akov

And is it true that you harass teachers from our movement out in the Diaspora, calling them names -- 'false apostles,' 'leaders who will lead you astray' -- and probably worse.

Paul

That is my position. Your movement, Ya'akov, is founded on a false premise, that Christ wants Torah to continue. He doesn't. Plain and simple. For no one. Not Jew. Not Gentile. Not male. Not female. Not free citizens. Not slaves. We are all one in Christ.

Ya'akov

I think we have covered enough for this session. We've clearly established that your ways are not ours and your focus is not ours. We have heard quite different things – Christ's words to you differ significantly from Yeshua's words to us while alive. From

our perspective – the perspective, don't forget, of those who knew Yeshua personally over the course of many years -- you lie about what he was and what he represented.

Moreover, you are clearly at odds with the things he taught us while he was alive. So we doubt your Christ figure is in any way related to our Rabbi Yeshua. Just not the same person and you are simply sowing confusion with this imaginary association.

Yeshua was human in all regards. He had a normal birth, had hopes and dreams, experienced hunger and thirst, suffered bitter disappointments and enjoyed his triumphs, he died and was buried. Like all righteous he was raised by God from the dead who has received him into his heavenly Kingdom. He was righteous. He was inspired. He galvanized us into working for the Kingdom of God. But he was human, not divine. To say otherwise would be to violate the commandment to have no god besides God.

Paul

I lie not, Ya'akov, in spite of what you think.

Ya'akov, there is more to Yeshua's death and resurrection than you give him credit for. His passion – his suffering and death -- is the gateway to heaven, the means of our salvation. By participating in his death we can experience his resurrection so that we, too, may achieve immortality. He made atonement for sin and thereby liberated the entire world from slavery. His death changed everything: what happened before his death and resurrection counts for nothing. We're into a whole new world, a whole new situation, now that he was raised from the dead.

Ya'akov

Note how you put it, Paul – 'was raised from the dead.' Passive voice. That's very significant. Only God can raise the dead. Yeshua, like all human beings, did not possess the power of self-resurrection.

Our movement does not see Yeshua's death and resurrection in that light at all. We are not looking for a savior but for a Messiah, not liberation from this world but for the eventual transformation of this world.

And we certainly don't accept the need for human sacrifice. That's absolutely abhorrent and makes God into some kind of monster. God forgives the person who is truly repentant. We are forgiven as we forgive others. If you were at all familiar with the prayer Yeshua taught, you'd know that.

Paul

And just where is this Kingdom you say Yeshua promised?

Ya'akov

Admittedly we are somewhat perplexed by the fact that Yeshua died before the Kingdom of God materialized. He was the announcer. Some of us speculate he may even have entertained the notion that he would somehow be God's instrument in helping to

bring about God's Kingdom upon earth. That is, some of us think that he may have thought of himself as a Messiah. I myself think that, but until world transformation occurs – that is, until the unrighteous are destroyed, the righteous rewarded, the Davidic king ensconced upon the throne of Israel along with universal peace -- then he remains a prospective Messiah. We long for the day when God will make good on his promises to Israel.

You, Paul, seem to overlook what is meant by a 'Messiah.' Why, in our expectations of what a Messiah must do and be, it was not even necessary that he die let alone be resurrected. We never anticipated that it would be a two-stage operation: we thought that when the Messiah would appear that God would then use him to help usher in the Kingdom of God on earth.

Paul

As I have said repeatedly, we see the death and resurrection of Christ as the gateway to salvation. And that is just not your focus. I also place little emphasis upon the traditional notions of what it means to be a Messiah. But all this misses the point. The Spirit has entered the world, shattering all our usual preconceptions and Christ himself has established powerful new possibilities. We would like to help you understand this new way of looking at things.

Ya'akov

All in good time, Paul, all in good time. In the meanwhile, I think we have demonstrated very clearly that your religion and ours differ in fundamentals. We are not saying the same thing. We are not branches of one movement. We're not even related. In light of what you have said today, we continue to be very very concerned that your use of Yeshua confuses people in the marketplace – our fellow Jews, and, I'm sure, your neighboring Gentiles.

Tomorrow evening we discuss why you reject the Torah. That you have abandoned Torah – and teach others to do the same -- you have made abundantly clear. You'll also have to make clear how your call to forget Torah isn't simply a call for us to assimilate: to become as you are, Gentile Romans.

*

It was the end of a long day as Mattai and his family went home along with Onias and his. They walked mostly in silence. There was much to ponder. No one dismissed the outright sincerity of Paul and his conviction – based on his vision -- that he had been chosen to promote a new world religion.

“Another dreamer, this Paul” was all Rachel could volunteer. For her, that summed up the proceedings.

“Worse than that,” responded Judith, “just you wait and see. This man is very very dangerous. He'll have us all killed.”

And for once Mattai and Onias concurred with their wives. “A very dangerous man,” they declared, “very dangerous indeed!”

9

The Hidden Scroll – Day #2

The following day, the first of the week, was preoccupied with mundane matters for Mattai. It was off to work, obtaining supplies, dealing with customers, taking new orders, fulfilling existing ones and all the while keeping a sharp eye out for space for his own workshop. He was clearly outgrowing Onias' quarters and he was eager to have an establishment of his own. Once that was set up, he allowed himself to dream, then I'll be able to set up my yeshiva in my house. Just like in Jerusalem. That's what I really like doing – opening students' eyes to the power and beauty of the Torah.

But he could hardly concentrate that Sunday. There was too much to think through for the evening's discussion in the synagogue. What would Evodius make of Paul's arguments? And Ya'akov's counter-arguments?

Mattai turned to Onias in the shop, "Do you think the Christ-worshippers will be convinced? Will they abandon their pagan ways and embrace Torah?"

Onias was more far realistic than Mattai, being more used to the Christ-worshippers than Mattai. He entertained no such hopes. "No," he said, "They likely continue on a separate path. They are a non-Jewish religion, Torah-free. They worship a God-human, the Christ. They've set up a different infrastructure, outside of Judaism. They eat pork. They buy their meat from temples dedicated to pagan deities. They are unclean. They are just like the followers of Dionysius."

"True," said Mattai, "but somehow people confuse them with us."

"That's really perplexing," said Onias. "They are so different from us. And yet they want to be like us and to steal from us our Rabbi Yeshua and change him to suit their own purposes. It just doesn't make sense."

"The only link," Mattai went on to say, "is that they say their Christ is our Yeshua, ignoring his life and all that he taught and practiced. Don't people see how absolutely absurd all this really is?"

"Well, at least the Dionysius-worshippers haven't done that, and they are more numerous," Onias responded. "It's strange that the Christ-worshippers are want-to-be Jews without embracing what Judaism stands for."

Mattai thought for a while. “We’re about to be decimated by the Romans in Jerusalem,” he said to Onias. “They’ll spare no one, not us, not the Essenes, not the Zealots and not the high priests. We’ll all suffer for being Jews. But are they, the Romans, our only enemy? What about these Christ-worshippers? Are we going to be overrun by these pseudo-followers of Yeshua? Are they out to get us? They are, after all, Gentiles, and we have learned from bitter experience not to trust them. Or are they benign, just different but confused? Do we really have much to fear from them?”

A shudder rolled through Onias’ shoulders. “They are aggressive, that’s for sure. And they are certain they are absolutely right. They’re gaining strength in Antioch and farther afield from what I can tell. In time I’m sure they’ll pose a huge threat to us. They are up to no good.”

Onias could not have known how prescient he had been.

Meanwhile, the members of the Congregation of the Christ had met briefly that day, to celebrate the Lord’s Day. They gave thanks to God for the powerful words of Paul that shone through in the scroll Mattai had read from. They were impressed by its clarity and how he had defended – successfully, in their minds – the vision of a new world order.

“Imagine,” said Ignatius, “they want a political leader when we have a savior who has redeemed the world.”

Evodius had preached on a similar theme, emphasizing the cosmic dimensions of the Christ, how he had battled the forces of evil, even death itself, and so opened up a whole new door to eternal life for his followers who believe in him and in his power to save. They eagerly looked forward to hearing Paul’s arguments against Torah that evening, a debate that happened right in the shadow of the Temple some twenty years earlier.

Evodius recognized, too, that many of his members knew nothing about Torah. It had been so long since anyone in his community had inquired about the Sabbath, Passover or the dietary laws. Certainly no one brought up circumcision, sheer mutilation as far as most Gentiles were concerned. It was difficult to imagine, they thought, how anyone could attribute religious significance to such a barbaric act.

Moreover, Evodius also recognized, most of his members knew very little of the Hebrew Bible. Why would they? Sure, some of them were familiar with passages from the prophets, parts of the story of Abraham, but likely no one knew much about Moses, the giving of the Law, the Exodus out of Egypt, the sojourn in the wilderness or the entry into the promised land. The great kings of ancient Israel -- Saul, David, Solomon – no one would have recognized those names let alone Ezra, Zechariah, Esther or the Maccabees. Just not on their reading list of their assembly’s growing lectionary. Just not relevant.

So, “purely academic” – that was how Evodius summed up what he expected from the coming evening’s discussion. Regardless of its outcome, no one would ever imagine reinstating Torah. This was an opportunity: a chance to convert, to show them the errors of their ways, to free them from the shackles of Torah, to embrace the new humanity God had given the world.

For their part, both Rachel and Judith were skeptical. Rachel turned to Judith and muttered, “Why bother with this ancient history? Why try to get the members of the Christ Movement to see the merits of Torah? Why debate this topic with them any more than with the worshippers of Dionysius? The Dionysius-worshippers have their own rituals, a communion of bread and wine participating in the life-giving sacrifice of Dionysius. Why don’t the Christ-worshippers merge with them instead of bothering us?”

Judith agreed, “Indeed, why try to persuade them to do things they don’t want to do? It’s not as if they were once Jewish and we’re trying to get them to return to Torah. They are Gentiles and Torah is simply not meant for them. It’s simply none of their business what we do. All we ask is that they behave like decent human beings and let us observe our customs as we let them follow theirs. Can’t they ‘do unto others as they would want others to do to them’?”

Meanwhile both women busied themselves with the household chores, getting meals ready and discussing where Rachel’s family might move to. In such close quarters, everyone was feeling squished and from time to time tempers frayed. But tonight was a time for level heads. How would the evening unfold? they wondered. “Why couldn’t the Christ-worshippers have left us alone,” Rachel nudged, “in peace to pursue our own way of life?”

“And why now,” she continued, “when the Romans were about to kill thousands if not hundreds of thousands of Jews? Why, all of a sudden, this Gentile onslaught? Is this the worst of times when the Messiah will appear? Does it fit somehow into God’s plan?”

Judith concurred: “the timing is suspicious. The Gentiles are rising up against us. Here and in the Galilee and in Jerusalem. Why can’t Mattai and Onias see this? Why can’t they focus on ‘the big picture’ and get rid of Evodius, Ignatius and their horde of swine-loving friends?”

Everyone had assembled by sundown, eager for the next installment of the hidden scroll.

After the usual pleasantries, Mattai went to the bimah, carefully opened the scroll and began reading in Aramaic.

*

[48 CE in our calendar]

It was Day #2 of the Jerusalem Conference. As on Day #1, Ya'akov, Cephas, Yochanan and five elders from The Community of the Way were present. So, too, were Paul and the same six members from his movement. The session was held in the Synagogue of the Way on the Western Ridge in Jerusalem, not far from where Yeshua's last supper had taken place.

Ya'akov began.

Ya'akov

Bless are you who come in the name of the Lord. Welcome once again. We look forward this evening to hearing your interpretation of Torah, Paul.

Paul

It's not an interpretation of Torah, Ya'akov, it's a complete rejection.

Ya'akov

A complete rejection of Torah?

Paul

Absolutely. It no longer has any validity.

Ya'akov

Are you perhaps saying that the Torah has no validity for Gentiles, whereas for us Jews, it remains mandatory? If that is the case, then we're likely in agreement. All the Gentiles have to observe are the seven Noahide laws, don't murder, don't steal, worship one God, and ...

Paul (interjects)

No, that's not at all what we're saying. We're saying that Torah does not have any validity, for anyone, Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free. No one.

Ya'akov

Let's be clear about this fundamental point. Are you really saying that all of Torah, I repeat, all of Torah, has no validity? Or are you just objecting to some parts of Torah, say the dietary laws or the purity requirements, but keeping the ethical parts of Torah, the festivals and the like?

Paul

No, absolutely not. The entire Torah no longer has any jurisdiction over us. Christ has set us free from the Law and anyone who remains bound by these restrictions has forfeited grace.

Ya'akov

This is a very strong contention, Paul, for it sets aside God's covenant with us, his revelation on Sinai, the whole basis of Judaism. While we might debate the meaning of certain laws, for example, what 'keeping the Sabbath' really means, no Jew has ever suggested abandoning Torah. That takes you, Paul, immediately outside of Judaism, rejecting its foundational principle and the covenant with God.

Paul

We are well aware that this takes us outside Judaism, and that is our intent. Christ has created a new set of circumstances, one in which Gentile and Jew, Jew and Gentile, have equal footing and an equal right standing with God. There is no need for Torah. We have found a more liberating lifestyle that incorporates all of humanity. Christ is in the process of creating a new worldwide religion, not a tribal one like yours.

Ya'akov

Well, Antiochus Epiphanes tried to do that by force some two hundred years ago, killing those of us who were circumcised, burning our sacred books, desecrating the holy Temple and putting to the sword those who faithfully observed the Sabbath. Some heroic brothers were even fried alive in front of their grieving mother. At least you aren't trying to do this by force. But, note, Paul, your objective remains the same as this Hellenizing enemy of the Jews: to have us become Gentile Romans.

Paul

I know very little about Antiochus Epiphanes and perhaps his aim was correct, joining the larger world. I really don't know. I am a Roman citizen and that is something I value, more, I might add, more now than my Jewish ethnicity. What we offer is a religion for the Roman Empire, one that unites everyone within Christ, which offers everyone eternal life through participation in his suffering, death and resurrection.

Come, Ya'akov, join with us in creating the new humanity, as Christ intended.

Ya'akov

What you are saying perplexes us. The prophets were unanimous that we Jews ought to follow the Law. Amos, for example, railed against people in his day who were following Canaanite ways -- Jews worshipping Ba'al, cheating people, engaging in sacred sex within the Canaanite temple precincts, and probably doing a whole lot worse with rumors of child sacrifice just down in the Hinnom Valley. After the Exile, Ezra reaffirmed our covenant with God and read the Law out loud for all to hear, again not very far from where we are standing. Yeshua, our revered rabbi, followed the Torah, the Sabbaths, the festivals, the dietary laws and he himself was circumcised. He and his followers wore tefillin when they prayed. He taught his followers that we should be even stricter in our observance of Torah than our righteous neighbors, the Pharisees, with whom we share much in common.

So, as I say, your position perplexes us. You are rejecting the whole of biblical revelation. You, Paul, stand opposed to what God himself has revealed through the hand of Moses on Mount Sinai and through our inspired interpreters over the ages who have sought to understand and implement its way of life. You -- the outsider, the one who

never knew Yeshua -- dare to speak in his name and to undo all that he taught. You stand condemned, as a liar and deceiver.

Paul

You have accurately caught the vision, Ya'akov. It forces us to turn in a different direction. The Christ wants us to embrace freedom. Here's one example.

Abraham, you will admit, was a man of faith. Your scriptures oops, our scriptures ... tell us this. He put his trust in God. So he obtained a right standing before God on the basis of his faith – trust. Those who likewise trust in God, who have faith in him, are therefore children of Abraham ... not just the Jews who descend from Isaac and not just the Arabian tribes who stem from Ishmael. All of us Gentiles are children of Abraham and heir to the promises God made to him. Therefore it is faith that counts, not behavior and certainly not the Law which was given hundreds of years later during the time of Moses, long after Abraham's death.

Ya'akov

You are forgetting part of the scriptures, Paul, for Abraham was not just a man of faith but also a man of obedience. God commanded him to be circumcised, not only him but his whole entourage, hundreds of people, as a sign of fidelity to his covenant. And that was a covenant in perpetuity, with Abraham and his descendants.

You cannot really play fast and loose with scripture here, Paul. You may be able to do so amongst your Gentile followers who know very little – if anything – about our sacred writings. We certainly don't expect them to know, but, Paul, you ought to know and remember.

Unless, that is, you wish to deceive and pull the wool over people's eyes.

Why are you trying to justify your rejection of Torah on the basis of Torah to people who know nothing about Torah? That seems like a very strange move? Why claim to be Jewish when you really aren't? Why not simply say that you are offering an alternative to, say, the worship of Dionysius, only calling your deity the Christ?

Paul

We appeal to Torah to reject Torah when speaking with Jews. We want to show you that Torah cannot confer grace or eternal life.

Consider the impossibility of ever observing Torah fully. We cannot live that life – the dietary laws, the Sabbath restrictions, the purity laws, the festivals, compassion towards others. It's an impossible lifestyle.

Besides, Torah says that all who follow Torah are under a curse.

Ya'akov

Just an important correction here, Paul. Scripture actually says that all who do not follow Torah are under a curse. You got that scriptural reference wrong: it in fact condemns your point of view.

You are also forgetting two things about Torah. For one thing, Torah is liberating, freeing, a lifestyle we warmly embrace for its sanctification of all of life. Every aspect of life comes under God's guidance – marriage and sex, food, rest, caring for others and having respect for elders. Every now and then you seem to lapse into strange language, comparing your anarchistic lifestyle with freedom and ours with slavery or tyranny. We don't see it that way – and if you had had a proper Jewish upbringing, I might add, you'd probably not see it that way either. Torah is the means by which we rebuild ourselves into the persons God intends us to be and the instrument through which we help build a better world, alongside God and participating in his creative energies. It's a divine calling, Paul, and you should know this -- it's our sacred mission, as Jews, to use our talents and resources to help God rebuild a better world.

Secondly, you are forgetting the role of repentance, mercy and forgiveness. We believe in a God of infinite compassion. That is why we pray to him as 'our father' – we are all, all of us, sons and daughters of God. We will always fall short but the merit is in the trying and striving for personal and social excellence. That we fail to measure up is real but we trust in God for forgiveness. Only he can forgive. Only he can save. Only he can keep his covenant with the living and the dead, giving the righteous eternal life in his Kingdom.

Paul

You are simply reiterating an ancient stance and have failed, Ya'akov, to see that there is a new dawn breaking in upon the world.

Ya'akov

I'm curious that you mention that it is impossible to keep the Law. And your vehemence in dismissing Torah arouses my suspicions. Is there something you feel you cannot personally atone for? Something for which you think you cannot be forgiven? What's your motivation, as a Jew, to do something no other Jew has ever dared to suggest: get rid of Torah. I think there is something more going on than strict biblical interpretation, something profoundly personal that you are perhaps afraid to mention.

Is it a sin that you cannot give up? Some compulsion? Some youthful indiscretion you cannot forget? Some repetitive pattern of behavior that you cannot change?

What is it that accounts for your anger, your vehemence, your rejection of your entire heritage? Why all the self-hate?

God forgives us as we forgive others. We often say that prayer. You might adopt the practice.

Paul

I'll ignore the intrusive and unwanted advice. I'm not here to talk about my personal life but about the message I have received from the Christ. We have now entered into a new period in human history, a time when Gentiles are incorporated into the family of Abraham through faith. Consider the following. The time from Abraham to Moses was a time of faith. Then came a time of Law, from Moses to Christ, a Law given because we needed instruction and guidelines just as a teacher gives rules and regulations to follow. But all that has passed. Christ has set us free from these restrictions.

You ask about my motivation. Here's what I'm up to. I'm here to urge you to enter the new age Christ has made possible. Come, embrace freedom and the new humanity.

Ya'akov

Your freedom is not rooted in anything but your own personal say-so. It's not rooted in our sacred scriptures. It's not grounded in anything Yeshua conveyed to us. You are espousing a fantasy, Paul, if you think you can have a movement that is devoid of rules, regulations, festivals or guidelines for living you will be faced with sheer anarchy and you'll have nothing to stand on.

Paul

I have all I need. I have the word of Christ who speaks through me. And that word I speak to my followers.

Ya'akov

"Through me"? What are you claiming? Are you some sort of mystic? Some sort of channeler? Are you in touch with the heavenly realm that has deigned to communicate to humanity through you? Is that what you are claiming? Are you Hermes, the messenger of the gods?

Paul

I'll ignore that pagan reference. Yes, I am the conduit for the Holy Spirit, for the Christ, who has chosen to speak through me to the Gentiles.

Anyone who lives in the Spirit will automatically live a life of righteousness.

Ya'akov

I fear you will live to see many different interpretations of your so-called freedom. You will be beset with dissensions, factions, arguments and debates because you have no rules. A Torah-free religion will not free you as you think. You will be enslaved to human passions. Just mark my words.

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The evening ended quickly. Husbands and wives reunited and exited the synagogue. The members of the Congregation of the Christ quickly scattered in all

directions, back to their homes throughout the city. Mattai couldn't tell if they were at all worried by the inconsistencies Ya'akov had spotted in Paul's arguments. Nor could he tell if they were all of one mind or if dissensions had already started to take hold.

A short distance away from the synagogue, Mattai and Onias looked at one other. "Is this man insane?" Mattai inquired? "Those who follow Torah have fallen away from grace? Why, that would, ironically, include Yeshua himself. And our revered Ya'akov *ha-Zadik* -- James the Righteous -- that Nazirite who had taken vows of strict Torah observance. Why, for that matter, even cousin Yochanan who was equally rigorous in his observance of Torah as he went about baptizing people in the Jordan River as a sign of their repentance. What about him? And what about Miriam, the mother of Yeshua? Has she fallen away from grace for her Torah observance? Is that what Paul's really saying?"

He paused for a minute before gathering steam, "And what about Miriam *ha-Migdal*, his closest companion? What about all the disciples, his students? What about everyone who heard him throughout the Galilee and eventually in Jerusalem? Is Paul really condemning all these righteous people? Have they all separated themselves from grace?"

"Evidently," Onias said, "evidently. It's an insidious mess. Why does he bother to deny Torah? Why does he spend so much time rejecting rather than affirming what he really is advocating -- a free-for-all religion in which it does not matter what one does so long as he has faith in the Christ? That's his real message, you know, faith. Not works. He's advocating religious anarchy."

But it was Rachel who in her skepticism picked up on what Paul was really after. She said to her husband, Mattai, and to Onias, "You know, what he's really done is to eliminate all action and behavior from religion. It's not about how we interact with other people or how we prepare meals or how we celebrate time or how we conduct our marriages. It's not about religious practices, good family times, celebrations, resting on the Sabbath, reading and thinking about the scriptures and how they apply to us today. It's not about rejoicing in the giving of the Torah, sitting in *sukkah's* during *Sucloth*, waving fronds of palms, preparing the Passover meal, sitting in solemn assembly during the Day of Atonement, bringing families together for good times and ill. It's all about faith -- belief -- something of the mind or perhaps even of the heart. It's not a religion of the body. It's a mental exercise, squeezing our thoughts into the suffering of the Christ and trying to hold them there."

Mattai and Onias said nothing and it was Judith who continued this line of thought. "Paul's is a religion of death. But our approach is one of life, celebrating and honoring Yeshua for what he taught and what he practiced. It's that simple. Why waste time hearing him out?"

For once Mattai thought that his wife and Judith were on to something important. They had put their finger on what was at stake: family and community life. It wasn't just

that Paul had flimsy arguments and a cursory understanding of Torah. It was that he had no understanding at all of family values, no comprehension of a religion of life.

But nagging in the background of Mattai's mind, and Onias', was the question Ya'akov had posed: what was Paul's motivation? Why was he so angry?

Onias simply said, "What was Paul afraid of?"

"That," said Mattai, "is crucial. Paul's clearly afraid of something and this drives his theology. But what is it?"

10

The Hidden Scroll – Day 3

Mattai was pleased that after all these years, his hidden scroll had come to light. Still, he was not convinced that the Christ-worshippers were taking it all in. Oddly enough, they seemed to be thinking that things were going *their* way, that Paul was scoring points and getting the better of Ya'akov. That was not at all how he saw things. He rejoiced that members of The Community of the Way approved of the manner in which Ya'akov had forcefully stated their position.

But something was eating at Mattai. All day long Mattai pondered Onias' question, "what was Paul so afraid of?" And if he were afraid of something, perhaps the members of the Congregation of the Christ were equally afraid. But what was it? What could they possibly fear?

Were they afraid of the Romans? Perhaps. Their religion had yet to be recognized as legal, unlike Judaism, the worship of Mithras, Dionysius, Isis and about a hundred other cults including the worship of the divine emperor. But, in practice, Romans were lenient about religious matters. Unless citizens blatantly refused to pay homage to the emperor, they were left very much alone. Not much cause for concern there.

Besides Paul was a Roman citizen. But how did he acquire this status, so rarely accorded to anyone, especially a Jewish family? Had his family cooperated with the Romans in some way in the past? Was there some scandal in his background or that of his family's? Was he afraid of exposure?

Were they afraid of the Jews? Hardly, and yet their writings, the letters of Paul that he had heard about, focused on "the Jews" as the enemy. Why? Why that preoccupation? Why that obsession? Why was Paul fighting so hard against the religion of his youth? Why did he feel he had constantly to reinforce turning his back on his ancestral tradition? Did he sense he had to prove something? And, if so, what?

Was Paul, perhaps, hiding some deep dark secret? Something that he never wanted revealed? Was there a skeleton in his closet? Something in his past of which he was deeply ashamed? Was he a closet gay, perhaps afraid of his sexuality or fearful of "coming out"? Was he a sexual pervert? A deviant of some sort? These were all possibilities, Mattai thought, since he knew that Paul was rumored to have been opposed to marriage, and, indeed, it seemed, all sexuality. Was he himself unable to control his

sexual urges? For a Jew, being opposed to marriage was unthinkable and clearly contrary to the first commandment mentioned in the Torah – to be fruitful and multiply. We know, he thought to himself, so little of Paul’s background – how he grew up, his education, his family life growing up, who his friends were, when he came to Jerusalem, his motivation for persecuting messianic Jews.

Was Paul perhaps in the pay of some foreign agent? After all, he was related to the highly political Herodians. Even ordained by Manaen, a Herodian! Did he share the Herods’ ambitious quest for one of them to become “King of the Jews”? Did his royal connections count for something, with the Herods? With the Emperor? Who was this mystery man who had just appeared in Jerusalem, fresh from the Diaspora, making deals with the Sadducean high priest although he said he was a Pharisee but whom the Pharisees did not count as one of their own? Was he on the take? Was he someone with quite a different objective other than the mission he professed? Was the story he told really a cover story? Everything he did served to undermine Ya’akov and the mission of Yeshua’s first followers.

Was *this* Paul’s real objective? To undo the religion of Ya’akov and of Yeshua himself?

And, if so, then truly he was a dangerous enemy.

Yes, thought Mattai, there was more to Paul than meets the eye. And perhaps there was more to his followers that they thought. Perhaps they were not as benign as they appeared. Underneath that obnoxiousness perhaps there lurked a deeper, more insidious agenda.

“Onias,” he shouted early in the morning when they were opening up the shop for the days’ business, “have you ever heard of any scandals connected with the Christ-worshippers? Do they have any secret practices? Any orgies? Any cult celebrations up in the caves in the mountains like the followers of Dionysius?”

“No,” replied Onias, “the only scandal I’ve ever heard is that a few of their members are also members of other cults. That’s not unusual for members of other Roman religions. Why, every Gentile worships a roster of gods and goddesses, as they like and no one thinks ill of it. Isis one day. Mithras another day. And Dionysius when it suits their fancy. But most members of the Congregations of the Christ stick to their own group. And belonging to more than one association is frowned upon. So, not much in the way of scandal there.”

“Clearly something was wrong with Paul,” Mattai retorted. “If only I could put my finger on it.”

The day seemed long and there was much for Mattai to think about. He had forgotten how Day Three had fared, some twenty years earlier. He recollected that at the end of the trial, Ya'akov had made a pronouncement, but he couldn't remember what that verdict was. At any rate, it hadn't settled the matter and the followers of Paul had multiplied in a maddening fashion, in Israel, Syria, Asia, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Libya and many other corners of the Mediterranean world. They were becoming a powerful and unsettling force.

Rachel was very pleased that the last day of this gathering was about to occur. She remained firmly convinced that these discussions in the synagogue were like the original Jerusalem trial, a sheer waste of time. Ya'akov, for all his saintliness, she thought, was an impractical dreamer who wasted his life, just waiting. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting for his brother to reappear. Waiting for God to defeat the Romans. Waiting for the Kingdom of God to manifest itself in human terms. Just waiting. A wasted, boring life, she thought, waiting for a fantasy to materialize.

Paul, she surmised, was a consummate egomaniac, an opportunist, who saw a chance to build a new religion, one that demanded very little: just faith. Nothing else. Just faith with the promise of eternal life. What a bargain! Christ's salesman galore. A discounted religion!

"Oddly enough," Rachel said to Judith, "neither James nor Paul *worked* for a better world. For all their differences they were very much alike. For Paul, good works didn't count for anything. For James, it's hard to recollect any initiative on his part that made an impact on his society. He went daily to the Temple to pray, and, she thought, for the rest of the day, he waited."

"Oh, he did organize some food relief, for those in need," she quickly added, correcting her earlier sweeping generalization. "James didn't just wait but also acted, at least a bit. But still he hung unto a failed prophecy much longer than anyone else would."

Judith concurred, "Everyone wants God to act," she said. "I prefer a religion that says that we have to act. Sometimes I wonder if we are the Messiah. Each one of us, individually, a little piece of the messianic puzzle. We are the ones that have to bring about a better world - well, at least to leave it better than when we entered it. Maybe the Messiah isn't an individual but a collective, every one of us striving to work with God to create the kind of environment and life we were intended to have."

Nighttime came and with it the end of the working day. People were tired as they congregated at the synagogue. The format was now familiar. The Nazarenes sat together; the Christ-worshippers clustered separately. The women members of The Community of the Way gathered upstairs, their heads bent over the railing to catch every word from the bimah.

Mattai wearily went up to the bimah, unfolded the scroll and turned to the recording of Day Three. He was glad that these meetings were coming to an end.

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[48 C.E. in our calendar]

It was Day #3 of the Jerusalem Conference. As on the previous two days, Ya'akov, Cephas, Yochanan and five elders from The Community of the Way were present. So, too, was Paul but today only four members from his movement were in attendance. The session was held in the Synagogue of the Way on the Western Ridge in Jerusalem.

As usual Ya'akov began and he welcomed the visitors graciously.

Ya'akov

I think we've now established that your religion has a different origin than ours. Yours, Paul, is the result of an experiential vision. Ours, first-hand familiarity with Rabbi Yeshua and his teachings as well as practices rooted in ancient Judaism and the hopes and dreams of our forefathers for a world like the paradise of old. However important that vision was to you and however you sense that you channel to your followers the sayings of the Christ, it is different from what we have experienced.

Also your teachings are fundamentally different. You reject Torah for the sake of creating a leveling effect, so that there are no differences between Jews and Gentiles. All people, or so you say, are one new humanity. A new race perhaps, incorporated into Christ and through him and his suffering and death and resurrection, into life eternal. We don't see it that way at all although we agree with you that the death of Rabbi Yeshua was tragic. Very very tragic, indeed. And it occurred before the Kingdom he promised came to pass.

Paul

We'll return to that thought in a moment. Perhaps the Kingdom did appear but not in the way you are prepared to entertain. Perhaps the world is now, as a result of his death, qualitatively different than the world before, the world you knew and continue to inhabit. Perhaps his death unleashed new opportunities for all humanity. Perhaps...

Ya'akov interrupts

You'll have your chance to give this sermon at some other time. But I want to return first to something you said last session. You said that Abraham found right standing with God because of his faith. What's this 'right standing'?

Paul

Abraham was made acceptable to God because of his faith, his trust in God's promises. God asked him to go ... go south from Harran towards a new land ... and he went. He was promised three things: land; that he would become a great nation; and,

finally, that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. That latter promise has come true in our lifetimes, Ya'akov. All the Gentile peoples are now incorporated into God's promise to Abraham, not through physical descent, but through adoption.

Ya'akov

But it's the 'right standing' that concerns me. Why would you suppose that Abraham would not have had a right standing with God all along, just by being human? Are not all human beings children of the same God? Are we not all sons and daughters of God? Do not all humans have what you call a 'right standing' with God? What's this special status you seem to be introducing?

Paul

It's a matter of salvation, eternal life. Only those who have a right standing with God can be saved, saved through Christ.

Ya'akov

Now this is a new teaching. Where did you get it from? For us, all righteous individuals, whatever their religion, have a share in the world to come. When God remakes the earth, then we'll all be resurrected to share in that eternal world. You, your followers, righteous Gentiles, righteous Jews – everyone who is righteous is saved. For us, we must follow the laws set out in Torah. For non-Jews, they need follow only the seven Noahide laws – laws given to all humanity. Perhaps, in a sense, the Gentiles have it easier!

There is nothing in sacred scripture about a special status, a 'right standing' as you call it, in order to gain salvation. This just isn't biblical, Paul. You've introduced a new notion. Why? Why create all this anxiety about who is and who is not saved? Why create discomfort when none should exist? Following the right inclination; making good, sound decisions followed by corresponding actions – that's what faith is really about. It's not something we just think about: faith is something we act upon. If we don't act, we cannot show faith.

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At this point Mattai paused. He looked around the room as a sudden insight washed over him. Here was what Paul feared: **death**. For him, salvation was not a given but was something he had to measure up to. That's what bothered him and it was the fear of death – the quest for personal salvation – that motivated all his actions. He feared death in a way that no Jew fears death, at least not righteous ones who have followed the Torah, prayed for forgiveness and who have exercised compassion in their dealing with other human beings.

Righteousness, he knew, was demonstrated in values – daily decisions and actions that help create a better world. The sacred mission of all Jews was to share in God's creative activity, to help redeem the world, to generate goodness within a world beset with sin and destructive tendencies. All human beings stand before God equally, as

children of the one loving father. There was no special status such as “right standing.” That was something Paul was introducing, something likely that stemmed from his own dark past. Likely there was some sin so great, so powerful, that in Paul’s mind it blocked out divine forgiveness.

Paul didn’t share that comfortable perspective, Mattai thought, that all peoples, whoever they were, so long as they were righteous, have a share in the world to come. That was why Jews did not seek to convert. It made no sense for a Gentile to convert, to take on the Jewish obligations of Torah – 613 laws – rather than the seven incumbent on all humanity. To that extent, Mattai thought, Paul did not have a Jewish sensibility. Unlike most Jews, Paul was extremely worried and upset about his own personal salvation.

Perhaps, he thought, that, too, was what members of the Congregation of the Christ feared as well.

Mattai resumed reading.

*

Paul

But you cannot earn salvation. That’s why good works count for nothing. They are nice and expected as congruent with right faith. But, in the end, for purposes of salvation, it’s right faith that counts. Without that, there is no salvation.

Ya’akov

Clearly you have created a new theology of salvation, one that differs radically from us. For us it is the decisions we make in life, the values those decisions express, the actions that flow from those decisions that either align us with the purposes of God or not. Plus reliance upon divine forgiveness when we fall short in our calling.

Faith, right belief, bottled up inside us, counts for nothing. Without right behavior that flows from decisions that reflect God’s will, there is no way of determining faith from non-faith. It’s simply not in evidence and makes no impact upon the world. All the beliefs in the world don’t change the world...unless they find expression in action. That’s why God expects right actions. The commandments are all about doing – observing the Sabbath properly, eating right, participating in the festivals that recollect the great moments in our people’s history, circumcising, keeping marriage pure, honoring father and mother, forgiving others, showing compassion to the weak, looking after widows and orphans, helping the poor and so forth. All these involve actions. All you have created, Paul, is a mental exercise that avoids involvement with the world.

(Ya’akov paused for a few minutes. Paul remained silent. Cephas interjects.)

Cephas

There’s another element in what you say that concerns us deeply. We who knew Yeshua thought of him as a righteous person ... but he was a person, not a divine or

angelic being. He ate with us. Entertained dreams and spoke to us of the glorious future God was preparing. Pondered options. Fled from Herod Antipas when the going got rough. He was distraught at the death of Yochanan. He hated to see human suffering and wrong doing. He loved those who through no fault of their own were marginalized. He forgave sinners. He healed many people of their afflictions. And, as I recollect, he partied hard at weddings and drank liberally.

He was angry from time to time ... I know that personally when he chastised me royally from time to time. He felt loneliness, sorrow and anxiety. He entertained doubts, as we all do, and sometimes wasn't quite sure what to do next or where to go. He enjoyed his time at Mary, Martha and Lazarus' house in Bethany ... those were good times and it was there that he allowed himself to relax. He was in all ways human, sharing our lot, not a divine being who floated through existence knowing all and serenely passing off life's disappointments and setbacks. He was a truly righteous person, a man who lived the life of Torah to its fullest. But he wasn't a divinity like Dionysius or the other quasi-gods of the pagan religions.

You, however, Paul, it is rumored, think of him as a divine being. It is rumored – just a rumor right now – that some of the attributes we think of as belonging exclusively to God apply also to Christ. You call him 'Lord.' That's a word we reserve for speaking of God. All the prophets said, "Thus says the Lord" and by 'the Lord' they meant God. Only the one God is Lord. By calling Christ 'Lord' you seem to be equating the two. Or at least confusing your hearers. For all his greatness, Yeshua was not 'Lord' in the sense in which we speak of God as 'Lord.'

Plus it has been reported that you talk of Christ as a being to whom all knees shall bow. You are clearly Christ-worshippers, but that's wrong. Absolutely wrong. Worship is for God alone. In saying this – all knees shall bow to Christ – you are appropriating language we use, and the sacred scrolls use, of God. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah says, "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear'." Rabbi Yeshua would never, ever have used such language of himself. He knew he was human and not God. He pointed the way to God.

At best he thought of himself as the messianic agent, helping God with world transformation when the Kingdom would materialize. And he thought of us as princes within that Kingdom, rulers over the restored twelve tribes of Israel. Yes, he had political ideas...and, I dare say, far-reaching political ambitions that would challenge the emperor himself.

Why, he even was baptized by Yochanan for the remission of sin, an admission of the frailty of humanity with our mixture of an inclination towards evil as well as to good. Yochanan urged us to repent, to change our ways and to return to the teachings of Torah. While a righteous individual, Yeshua was not, Paul, without his faults. He was testy at times and frequently corrected us when we seemed obtuse and did not

immediately grab his insights, especially when he was telling us about the Kingdom in terms of parables.

But there is more to the rumor. It has been reported to us that you, Paul, think that Christ in some sense pre-existed his earthly life. That would make sense if you think of him as some sort of divine being. But we who knew him certainly don't think of Yeshua in that way. Not at all. All humans are rooted in history, in our time, our place in God's evolving universe, and he was part of that process, furthering the cause of the coming Kingdom of God which, in time, will take shape and recreate the world. But he wasn't a being out of time, someone who omnisciently knew the past, the present and the future. He was just as much in the dark about God's overall plan, and timetable, as we are.

Because of all these reports, we are concerned that you have somehow divinized a righteous human being. Simply put, we do not share your image of Yeshua, whom you call the Christ, as a divine being. That we reject as a violation of the most fundamental of the Ten Commandments, not to have any god besides God.

*

A murmur ran around the Synagogue of The Community of the Way. The Nazarenes were startled to hear Cephas put the issue so bluntly. They were all too well aware that the members of the Congregation of the Christ worshipped the Christ as a divinity. But connecting that Christ to their revered rabbi, Yeshua, in that way? Outrageous, they thought. One God, one God alone was the battle cry of the Bible, enshrined in the "creed" of Judaism, the *Shema* – "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." It was also the hope that in the messianic Kingdom all humanity would come to worship God as one. Such was Zechariah's ancient vision.

The absolute supremacy and oneness of God: that was the point on which Judaism differed from the other religions of the Roman Empire for whom a plethora of gods and goddesses were taken for granted. How would Paul respond they wondered?

Mattai took his time for the inspiring words of Cephas to sink in. Then he resumed reading from the scroll.

*

Paul

You are right, Cephas. We think there is more to Christ than perhaps meets the eye. He was more than human: he was divine and his coming amongst us was planned long before the creation was ever envisaged.

But here's your problem, Cephas. You and Ya'akov and all your members are locked up in Jewish ways of thinking. You haven't joined the world and realized the wealth of opportunity that exists by bringing Gentiles into the family of Abraham.

Gentiles have no interest in a Hebrew teacher, however much you revere him. You have to present him in terms they understand. They know that the emperor is a divine-human. So, too, are the gods of the major religions of the Empire -- Mithras and Dionysius and a host of others. They are all divine-humans. It's only fitting that we think of Christ in those terms, too. That way we can gain understanding for our religion, and acceptance, too.

If you stick with your view that Yeshua was merely human, then I predict that in time you and your group will wither away. Particularly since his promises – as you understand them – haven't come true.

Ya'akov

You've touched on a very sensitive topic, Paul, and, yes, we wait for his promises to come true. Why they haven't is a mystery to us.

Paul

You can continue to wait and wait while we get on with spreading the message of the Christ, that all people can share in the blessings promised to Abraham and through Christ's suffering and death, we may participate in his resurrection and so have eternal life. That's our focus: salvation. Your focus is waiting.

Ya'akov

In this you misrepresent us, Paul – bearing false witness to cite another of the Ten Commandments. Our focus centers on the teachings of Yeshua, the Kingdom of God which we believe is still coming, soon, like he said. One that will replace Roman rule with its so-called divine emperor. Some divinity he is! Ruthless. Cruel. Cunning. But it's unsafe to elaborate with his troops not too far in the distance. And we await the resurrection of all righteous individuals, as promised us by God, through God's forgiveness, mercy and compassion – eternal life for those who follow the path set out for us by God himself in Torah.

You are taking a short cut, Paul, by eliminating Torah and thinking thereby you can bring the whole Gentile world into the family of Abraham through adoption. When the Kingdom of God comes, we expect to see a Davidic king upon the throne of Israel, the tribes reunited from wherever they have been scattered, the world worshipping the one true God, and Torah observed. Even the prophet Zechariah foretold that on that day -- on the day, that is, when God recreates the earth -- people will flock up to Jerusalem to observe the festival of Succoth. We have no reason to suppose that the elimination of Torah is part of the divine plan.

And, quite frankly, neither do you. Except expediency and sheer opportunism, creating an easy religion that makes no demands, celebrates nothing and orients itself around death. I'm surprised you have had much success.

Paul

Speaking of opportunism, you fail to see the world, the opportunity, the new humanity Christ has created. You are stuck in your old ways, Ya'akov, and your group will wither and die.

Ya'akov

For our part, we will continue to observe Torah and to keep the laws strictly, as Yeshua instructed us. The whole Torah – the foundational laws, the dietary laws, circumcision, marriage, purity laws and the laws pertaining to charity and compassion, with outreach to the helpless, the unfortunate, the widows and orphans, the poor and those in need. We pray the prayer of our teacher, asking for forgiveness as we ourselves forgive others. And we pray that we are not brought to the breaking point where we are placed in jeopardy, where we give into temptation, to let our evil inclination take hold and cloud our judgment and actions.

For your part, we suggest that you abide at least by the Noahide laws and teach them to your Gentile followers. That doesn't make you part of our movement in the least. We are different religions – different in origin, teaching and practice. That much is clear. We want no part of what you are doing. No part.

After this meeting, you go your way. We'll go our way. We are not the same religion.

But given that we believe that the righteous will have a share in the world to come, we leave you by encouraging you to teach your followers the basis for true righteousness. They are what we call “the Noahide laws,” laws that pertain to all human beings simply by virtue of their being human, no matter what religion they follow.

Just as a reminder, Paul, the Noahide laws are these. Worship the one true God – no false gods. Do not speak ill of God. Do not commit murder. Do not steal. Do not engage in immoral sexual practices. Be sensitive to what you eat so as to minimize suffering of animals slaughtered for human consumption. Practice justice.

There are more to these laws as a moment's reflection will reveal: they have to be interpreted. But that's their gist. We say these words to you, Paul, so that you may live and have life eternal. As the psalmist put it, “May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.”

The meeting ended. Paul and his associates departed quickly. Ya'akov and members of The Community of the Way returned to their homes.

Recorded by Mattai, rabbi, 48.

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With that Mattai stopped reading and wiped his brow. His voice was hoarse. It took a while for him to realize that he was no longer in the presence of Ya'akov, Cephas and Paul, no longer in Jerusalem, no longer twenty years younger, but here, now, in Antioch, with members of the Congregation of the Christ. He slowly returned to his seat and fully expected the leader of the synagogue to wish everyone a good evening. Mattai clearly saw how different the two movements were – theirs and his – and hoped everyone present shared that sentiment.

Ignatius broke the silence. “Well,” he said, “I’ve never heard of these Noahide laws as you call them and we certainly don’t teach them within our churches. We have no need for these laws having broken free of Torah. I have no idea what your Ya’akov was trying to tell us by insisting on us abiding by these laws. We eat what we want, for instance, including pork and meat slaughtered within the temples of the Roman gods. But we’re in agreement on not murdering and not stealing.”

The synagogue leader got up and was just about to bid everyone a good evening. But Evodius stood up. “Thank you, Mattai for sharing this scroll you have kept intact all these years. But we have a scroll of our own. And we’d like to share it with you. Tomorrow, in fact, in our *ekklesia*, our church. You’ve written down what you think you heard at the Conference. But we have Paul’s own words, and these we treasure and abide by.” So tomorrow it is.

Paul's Surprise

11

Paul's Letter to the Antiochenes

"What does Evodius have up his sleeve?" a wary Onias asked Mattai the next morning. "What do you suppose he's up to? What scroll of Paul?"

"I don't really know, Onias, but he seemed very cocky and confident that it would be very important for us to hear. I can't imagine that it has anything to do with the record of Paul's trial in Jerusalem. Paul certainly didn't come off looking good."

"I imagine, Mattai, that he slunk back to Antioch, a very chastened individual."

"I'm not so sure of that, Onias. He was very arrogant at the trial and contemptuous of Ya'akov's sound words and good advice. We know that since that meeting he has been roaming around the northern rim of the Mediterranean, going into synagogues and detaching those whose commitment to Torah is less than strong. He has set up many assemblies of his own and so has had tremendous success with his message."

"If you ask me, Mattai, his is a religion of ease. A religion of convenience, hardly distinguishable from the pagan religions."

"Have you ever been inside Evodius' meeting place, his *ekklesia* or church as he calls it, Onias?"

"Never," Onias admitted, "but I have been up to the mountain where the Christ-worshippers first met, a cave that overlooks the city and which has escape tunnels into the mountain should Romans take offense."

The day was a long one and members of The Community of the Way wondered what was in store for them. Most of them thought that all the relevant issues had been covered off during the trial of Paul. His was clearly a different religion, one that Ya'akov had decisively rejected. They wondered if any of Paul's followers – or Paul himself -- had heeded Ya'akov's sage advice, to follow the Noahide laws. Oddly enough, Ignatius seemed to know nothing about these. Maybe they thought of the Noahide laws as part of Torah and that they, too, should be rejected.

Sundown came and with it the Nazarenes trekked across the city to Evodius's *ekklesia*. They felt awkward entering that place of worship, although it look very similar to their own synagogue with men sitting downstairs around the walls and women sitting quietly upstairs, a strange feature, many thought, for a religion that proclaimed that there were no distinctions between men and women, Jews and Gentiles and so on. Even the table set up in front of the southern wall was suspiciously similar to their bimah. Like their own synagogue, the people in Antioch faced southeast, towards Jerusalem.

Evodius, their "bishop" as he was called, stood up and welcomed the members of The Community of the Way to their Congregation of the Christ. Ignatius was less than gracious, however, and made snide comments that everyone could hear. He clearly hoped that the Nazarenes would convert on the spot to what he considered to be the true faith.

Evodius continued. "We, too, have a scroll, one that we have treasured and copied for some twenty years now, a letter written by none other than Paul himself, reporting on the Jerusalem meeting in which he triumphed over false brothers and sisters who gave misleading information to Ya'akov. We have circulated this letter to our churches in Ephesus, Corinth, Troas and many other places Paul visited. You should find it interesting for it sets the record straight. We utterly reject your account, Mattai, of what happened. Here's what Paul himself said actually happened."

Evodius began by noting that Paul had written this letter in Greek. Accordingly he read each sentence in Greek, then paused, translating it into Aramaic for the benefit of the Nazarenes.

He began, "Here begins the letter of Paul to us at Antioch, written just as he was leaving Jerusalem in 48. He tells us of his victory and how he effectively silenced his opponents."

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*Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.
To the ekklesia of the people in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ in Antioch.
Grace to you and peace.*

We give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, remembering the support you have given us over the years and especially now, during our trials and tribulations in Jerusalem. You are a bulwark of hope, unshakable in your abiding faith, and are fighting the good fight to ward off those who would disturb your belief and draw you back into slavery and torment. For we know, brothers and sisters, beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit.

You have become imitators of us and of the Lord Jesus, for in spite of criticisms and calumny, you have persisted in upholding the faith. You have become an example to

all the churches of God throughout Syria, Cilicia, Asia and Greece. You are the mother church of all those who are united in Christ, who has rescued you from darkness and brought you into the light of freedom and hope in eternal life.

You know of our recent sojourn in Jerusalem along with several others from the community, how we met with Ya'akov and Cephas and others who were reputed to be apostles but who in fact have failed to embrace the new faith wholeheartedly. We were amazed by their recalcitrance and their willingness to adhere so rigidly to the slavery of Torah. They are blind guides leading many astray, agents of Satan, and we labored intensely with them, to show them the errors of their ways.

You will rejoice in our victory how we were able to demonstrate to them the new wonders that God is working amongst you and among the God-fearers and Gentiles throughout the Empire. To you have come the wonderful promises of God to Abraham, and, through faith, you have been incorporated into the family of that great Patriarch. Through him a great nation has been born. Ours. Through him a great family has been created. Ours. Through him all the nations of the world have been blessed and we are part of that great new creation God is working to achieve. We boasted to Ya'akov of our achievements and talked of how God was doing wonders among the Gentiles.

During our three days with Ya'akov and the other so-called leaders we told them of our gospel. Not that there is more than one gospel. There is only one, the one we preached to you, which you have heard and in which you abide. Even if an angel from heaven were to tell you differently – even an angel, I emphatically say – you should resist those who attempt to confuse you with old traditions and superstitions which have been replaced by the good news of the gospel. That gospel is one of freedom and hope, of sharing in Christ's victory and claiming our inheritance, eternal life with God. In Jerusalem, we put forward our position with clarity and conviction, so much so that Ya'akov, Cephas and Jochanan remained absolutely silent in the face of our God-given testimony.

We emerged victorious, confident we had convinced them of the merits of our position. They warmly greeted us, extended to us the right hand of fellowship and we enjoined upon them the need to repent and to embrace the faith wholeheartedly. Those who spread false rumors about us were banished from their midst. We held nothing back and are confident that those who are Jews will eat and socialize with us as befits members of a new humanity in which the former distinctions hold no sway. Neither Jew nor Gentile. Neither male nor female. Neither free nor slave. All these false distinctions have been put away through faith in Christ.

Now unto him to whom all knees will bow, on earth and in heaven, we give thanks for our victory, even our Lord Jesus Christ who has rescued us from prison and given us the light of eternity. Stand fast in the faith and I look forward to being with you again shortly. I myself wrote this letter and Rufus, our faithful companion, will deliver the good news to you before our arrival.

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Evodius finished and the assembly hall ruptured with cries of “Liar! Liar!” all around: the Nazarenes calling the Christ-worshippers “liars,” and they, in turn, calling the Nazarenes “liars.” Clearly Paul was going to have the last word and nothing Ya’akov had said seemed to have mattered.

Mattai and Onias were thoroughly disgusted by they regarded as Paul’s revisionist history.

They were also appalled at Paul’s use of a phrase hitherto reserved for God alone and applying it to the Christ ... “the one to whom all knees will bend.”

But Rachel had the last word as she confronted Mattai and Onias, “Men, put away your messianic dreams. See what troubles the vision of a clearly disturbed man has wrought upon us, an individual who clearly set aside biblical teachings, put his own message ahead of the Torah and who sought to join his movement with ours. Paul is an extremely disturbed individual. With enemies like the Romans and Paul’s followers, a better world will be a long time coming. Let’s focus on what is before us, the present moment, our growing families and their needs, good times with our friends and honoring God through our ancient religion.”

Mattai, Onias and Judith all agreed. They consoled themselves with the thought that, some day, though, the truth would win out.

12

The War of Documents Begins

A despondent Mattai returned home slowly. He now recognized that Rachel had been right all along, that nothing good would come from this confrontation with the Gentile Congregation of the Christ. They and their leader, Paul, lied, over and over again and had no problems falsifying the historical record. It was small comfort to him to know that they violated one of the most important commandments in Torah -- not to bear false witness. After all, they denied the power, vitality and validity of Torah, so why not jettison this commandment as well? Perhaps Rachel was right, too, about giving up false messianic dreams. What had all those grandiose ideas amounted to anyway?

A week later, however, a calmer Mattai experienced a different thought. What if something good could come from this debacle? Mattai had seen first-hand the power of the written word. His hidden scroll contained the one and only accurate record of the words and ideas James and Paul had exchanged. That was a powerful exposition. But he had to admit, too, that Paul's Letter to the Antiochenes -- however much he disagreed with the contents -- also contained a powerful perspective, one that seemed to clinch the matter, at least as far as the Christ-worshippers were concerned. It said what they wanted to hear, and so they believed this writing, dismissing Mattai's hidden scroll. But maybe, just maybe, there should be more writings about Yeshua and Ya'akov. Maybe through the power of the written word something good might come from this confrontation after all.

Clearly these pagans would not go away, he thought to himself. To Rachel, he pointedly observed, "they are gaining power wherever they go, these pig-eating Christ-worshippers. They're a force to be taken seriously, however much they spread lies about the links between their religion and ours. They've targeted our religion. They are the aggressors and we need to respond somehow. But how do we defend ourselves against such villainy?"

Rachel's mind had been working all week in quite a different direction. "I wonder, Mattai, what Ya'akov would have made of this. Didn't he render a decisive verdict? One that Paul and his cohort should have honoured?"

"Yes," mused Mattai, "they should have gone their separate ways as Ya'akov declared."

Suddenly Mattai stopped and looked at Rachel. "Come to think of it, that's an excellent point, one I had not thought of. What would Ya'akov do in this situation knowing that his word had not been respected and the battle not won?"

Rachel was very pleased that Mattai gave her credit for a good thought. For his part, he spent a long time mulling over Rachel's perceptive observation. Indeed, he asked himself, what would Ya'akov do if he were still alive? How would he handle this new situation: Christ-worshippers claiming Yeshua's inheritance?

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One day, about six months later, in a flash of inspiration, Mattai sat down to write – no, not his recollections of Yeshua's teachings --that had already been done so far as he was able to remember them. This time, he'd write what he thought Ya'akov would have said had he known about Paul's despicable letter and the obnoxious behavior of Paul's next generation of followers towards the community he had guided for over thirty years.

Mattai decided to compose a letter. After all, he knew Ya'akov well, perhaps the best of those still alive. In this letter he would write what he thought Ya'akov would have said. But he went a step farther: he attributed this letter to Ya'akov, as a great honor and a badge of authenticity. It would be Ya'akov's letter: Ya'akov himself would speak from beyond the grave, from his vantage point as Yeshua's brother and addressing the situation of the community in light of the growing success of the Pauline Christ-worshipping congregations.

Attributing a letter to someone more famous than the real author was a common practice in the ancient world. In time, some anonymous writers would create letters and gospels, attributing them to Paul the Apostle or to disciples such as John, Peter, Philip or Thomas. Somebody even had the audacity to attribute a gospel to "the Savior." One letter was said to have been written by another brother of Yeshua, namely Jude. Others wrote documents and credited Plato or other famous Greek and Roman authors as the author. Such attributions were supposed to reflect accurately what the honored author would have said, in the style he would have used, were he to have actually written the work.

So Mattai began to write:

from Ya'akov.

To the twelve tribes in the Diaspora.

"The twelve tribes in the Diaspora" -- that was code language and he knew that his co-religionists in the Community of the Way would get the reference, unlike the members of the Congregations of the Christ. One sign of messianic times would be the ingathering of the dispersed tribes. From far afield around the Mediterranean, along the highways of Europe and Asia, the dispersed tribes would return to Israel, to be the reconstituted nation. The disciples themselves would be their leaders and with the Messiah King they'd reign over the Kingdom of God, in peace and harmony with all human beings.

Mattai continued, recognizing that this it was a time of crisis, not just in Jerusalem and Israel where Jews were being slaughtered on a daily basis but around the shores of the Great Sea as members of the Congregations of the Christ raided synagogues, poached members and arrogantly tried to claim the biblical legacy for their own. Amazing he found himself writing;

When you face trials of whatever sort, consider it an occasion for joy.

Well, he laughed to himself, that's a bit of a stretch -- certainly not the occasion for joy immediately. He acknowledged the immense pain and suffering that occurs when undergoing a time of trial - whatever it may be - but surely, he hoped, some good would eventually emerge from the ordeal. In that sense, joy. Joy eventually. Perhaps he should have said that but his mind was elsewhere. Was the current destruction of Israel and Jerusalem somehow a strange and difficult to discern part of God's plan? Was it the final battle before God would intervene and bring about his intended messianic Kingdom? Closer to home, could some good come from Paul's destructive lies and the theft of their inheritance? If so, what would it be? And when would it come about?

So Mattai, in the name of Ya'akov, urged endurance.

Let endurance persist.

Persistent waiting. That, after all, had been Ya'akov's hallmark, waiting patiently for the Kingdom of God to emerge. Nothing less than "the crown of life" would be the reward for those who persistently endured, he said confidently, their eyes focused on God's promises and the Kingdom of God.

What was at the root of the current crisis? he asked himself. What were he and other members of the Community of the Way faced with? The answer was clear. Lying. Misrepresentation. Misappropriation. All sins of the tongue it suddenly occurred to him. It was 'false speaking' on the part of Paul and his followers that had caused the problems. He remembered Ya'akov stressing the need to bear faithful witness, not to malign other people for easy selfish gain. And in this Ya'akov was similar to the Essenes whose sectarian writings warned members against speaking falsely. So, again in the name of Ya'akov, he wrote the following piece of advice to members of like-minded synagogues around the world:

Everyone should listen carefully and be slow to speak and slow to become angry.

Sins of the tongue went further. Just speaking and not doing. That, too, was a sin of the tongue, thinking that fine speech was sufficient. He continued on with one of Ya'akov's favorite themes:

Be doers of the word, not merely hearers who cloak themselves with wonderful words.

Should he give an example of this? Ya'akov, he remembered, always stressed looking after orphans and widows, and so he added that to his letter:

Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father consists of this: to look after orphans and widows in their time of trouble.

That's what true religion is all about. It's not about nice feelings or cozy thoughts. It has to do with going out of your way to look after people in need. These were timely examples, he thought. After all, during these difficult days in Israel and Jerusalem, there were many orphans and widows who needed consolation, care and substantial material help. Helping them would be one way to fulfill the greatest of all commands of scripture:

You shall love others as you love yourself.

How serious was lying? For Mattai, it was right up there alongside murder and adultery, for the command to bear faithful witness was one of the great Ten Commandments. Those who lie will be judged as if they had murdered or had committed adultery. That's blunt Torah teaching.

For whoever observes Torah in its entirety but fails in one respect has become guilty of breaking it all. For the one who said, 'don't commit adultery' also said 'don't murder.' If you do not commit adultery but you do murder, then you are guilty of breaking the Torah.

The same with bearing false witness. Just because we don't murder or commit adultery, if this command is broken then we're guilty of breaking it all. Paul's failure to bear faithful witness was as bad as murder or adultery. A strong statement from Mattai but one he thought Ya'akov and Yeshua would approved of: observing Torah means keeping all of it all of the time, not some of it some of the time.

Mattai decided to drive the point home. He chastised those who would say that faith and faith alone is sufficient – Paul's teachings. He asked:

"What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?"

Paul would have answered "yes," that faith is sufficient for salvation, faith, that is, in the Christ, the divine-human dying-rising savior. But Mattai – and Ya'akov – asked the question rhetorically, presupposing that the correct answer is a resounding "no." Mattai added:

If someone is hungry, for instance, and you simply say, "Go in peace," what good is that?

And then he penned his famous signature line, the one that would stick to Ya'akov for all generations to come:

So faith all by itself, if it has no accompanying works, is dead.

Maybe, he thought, someone still won't get the point. So he gave another illustration. He challenged his faith-only opponents to prove they have faith apart from their works. How can we tell a person who says he has faith from someone who has none? If behavior is eliminated, what's the distinction between faith and no-faith? As for his own position, he simply wrote:

Suppose you have faith and I have works. Show me how you have faith independently of your works. On the other hand, I, by my works, will show you my faith.

So works count. Works are more than deeds. They reflect decisions that embody values. They are the choices a person makes, showing his true character. Are they aligned with God's creative purposes in working towards a better world or not.

Paul in his Letter to the Galatians had mentioned that Abraham was a man of faith. But Mattai cleverly turned the tables. He noted that Abraham was a person not just of faith but of works as well. Abraham was willing, for instance, to sacrifice his son, Isaac, in obedience to the command he believed emanated from God. He didn't just have faith: he acted in keeping with his faith. So Mattai asked:

Wasn't our forefather Abraham justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? Here you can see that faith was active alongside his works - the two together - and thus faith was expressed in his actions.

Actions, the result of decisions and choices, make all the difference.

The power of the tongue goes farther, for from words come teaching and guidance of others. Paul was a teacher with tremendous influence. Mattai decided to issue a cautionary note:

We who teach will be judged with greater strictness than others.

False teachers in particular bear a very heavy burden. Tremendous responsibility. The tongue can praise God ... or it can convey deadly poison.

Let me make it clear, Mattai thought. Actions aren't just mindless activity. They involve the whole person - the values one holds, the choices one makes, the attitude with which one undertakes a course of action and so forth. Thus he cautioned the recipients of Ya'akov's letter:

Demonstrate by your excellent conduct that your works are performed with humility infused with wisdom.

So the how and why one acts is as important as the action itself.

*

So far so good as Mattai pondered what to say next. He had thoroughly demolished the position that mere faith was sufficient for a religion that claimed to stem from Yeshua, Ya'akov, or, for that matter, anything Jewish. What next?

Mattai recognized that Paul's lies ultimately stemmed from his rejection of Torah. That's what he had argued in Galatians. While Mattai hadn't read Paul's Letter to the Galatians, its contents were widely rumored amongst many Jewish communities for its assault on Torah. For the first time in human history, a Jew had denied the validity of Torah. In his Letter to the Galatians Paul said that the time of Torah was over -- presumably for everyone because he advances a theology of history. The period of human history from Abraham to Moses, Paul had said, was a time of faith; from Moses to Christ, an era of Torah; and now that Christ has come, we have arrived at a time of faith once again. Mattai thought long and hard about Paul's objections to Torah, especially this one. How to answer him?

He could have pointed out that Yeshua was Torah-observant as was Ya'akov and Yeshua's first followers. They knew what Yeshua stood for and it was not the rejection of Torah. But presumably Paul knew -- and either discounted or chose to ignore that fact of history.

He could have asked, who was Paul to change God's agreement with the people of Israel? Unilaterally, to boot! Why, that would be like the beneficiary of a will changing the provisions of a will without the agreement of the person who made the will. You say I'm to receive half the house? I'll change that to the whole house whether you like it or not. An outrageous proposition that would be thrown out of any court.

So much for Paul's argument in Galatians. Any right thinking person would have dismissed it ages ago.

But they hadn't. And that was the situation Mattai had to face.

Suddenly Mattai remembered a point that Ya'akov had emphasized long ago. He wasn't quite sure how that wise teacher had put it, but he knew the point. Anyone who puts himself about the law, Ya'akov had taught, isn't a doer of the law but a judge. As a judge, that person assumes a different role, presuming to judge Torah by putting his own personal opinion above biblically-mandated courses of action such as keeping the Sabbath and festivals, observing the dietary laws and practicing circumcision. Ya'akov had gone on to say, Mattai recollected, that there is only one lawgiver and only one judge, namely God himself. He's what he wrote summing up this line of thought:

Do not speak evil against one another. Whoever speaks evil against another person or judges another, speaks evil against the Torah and judges Torah. But if you judge Torah, then you are not a doer of the Law but a judge. There is one Giver of Torah and one Judge who is able to save and to destroy, namely God. So who are you then to judge other human beings?

What about false teachers? What's to be done about them? Is there hope for them? Mattai wondered. What about repentance and a corresponding change in life? Revising what the tongue says? Reassessing the value of actions for what they are, an expression of one's character and true allegiance? He concluded the Letter of Ya'akov with an encouragement...and an incentive. Whoever brings back a false teacher to the truth, that person – the one who turns the liar back to the path of righteousness – will save the lying sinner's life.

My brothers and sisters, if someone amongst you wanders away from the truth and is brought back by another, rest assured that whoever brings back a sinner from error will save that sinner's soul from death.

And with that Mattai ended the letter. At his own expense he sent it by various messengers to various synagogues around the Roman Empire. Mattai fervently hoped that with the seal of Ya'akov on the epistle it would receive the respect and attention it deserved. He also prayed that it would nip in the bud the spread of Paul's ideas.

*

Mattai's letter was not lost to history. The "Letter of Ya'akov" (the "Letter of James" as it is typically rendered in English) is preserved in the Christian Scriptures as a powerful antidote to Paul's teachings.

It is tucked away at the back of the New Testament -- eight books from the end.

The war of documents had begun, the first in human history.

13

The Aftermath

In 70 C.E. the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and with it, the Second Temple. According to Josephus, they killed over one million people. Many were crucified on the hills surrounding the city, the mountains littered with thousands of decaying corpses visible in all directions. The grim details are recounted in Josephus' *The Jewish War*.

The **Recollections of Mattai** were not lost to history. What he remembered of Yeshua's teachings is encapsulated in what we call "the **Gospel of Matthew**," specifically in the passages found in the Sermon on the Mount – the beatitudes, the Higher Righteousness teaching of strict Torah observance as well as the Lord's Prayer. Without Rabbi Mattai's recollections, all this would have been lost.

The Gospel of Matthew as we now have it is an edited document. It contains Rabbi Mattai's recollections as its base. Then someone added in about 90 per cent of Mark's gospel with some omissions and corrections. This helped give the evolving document a narrative structure. Either that person or someone else inserted some other sayings which scholars call "Q," passages common to both Matthew and Luke, which do not come from Mark. Either Luke copied these from Matthew, or, if he acted independently, Q represents an additional source. Finally, someone prefaced the highly edited book with a story of the Virgin Birth, a narrative which would make no sense in a Jewish context. Somewhere along the line it was transposed into Greek from its Aramaic nucleus.

Mattai's record of the 3-day trial was, however, lost to history. Pauline Christians were not interested in preserving the details especially when this record demonstrated how different Paul was from Yeshua's first followers.

The Community of the Way did not flourish as Paul's religion did. The Nazarenes were faced with many vicissitudes. Their leader or bishop, Ya'akov, the brother of Yeshua, was killed in 62. During the War against Rome in the 60's, many of Yeshua's first followers were killed. A later Jewish war against Rome, the Bar-Kochba revolt in the mid 130's, saw the remnant of their movement dispersed from Jerusalem to other centers around the Middle East. The victorious Christ religion had no use for critiques of Paul and did not refer to them, copy them or disseminate them.

Mattai's friend, **Yochanan ben Zakkai**, became the outstanding rabbi of his generation. With the priesthood decimated and the Essenes and Zealots wiped out, only the Pharisees survived. Yochanan secured permission from the Romans to set up a Jewish

Academy at Yavneh. Here the learned sages developed a Judaism that was not dependent upon sacrifices in the Temple. Judaism was reoriented towards prayer in the home, worship and education in the synagogue and Torah-observance in all aspects of life.

Yehuda the Essene became lost to history, but his writings were saved. He had taken several scrolls from Jerusalem that belonged to the Essene community with him as he fled. One of these, the **Damascus Document**, was copied over the centuries. In 1897-1898 in the storeroom – the *geniza* -- of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo, a copy of this document came to light. Along with this writing – one we now include amongst the Dead Sea Scroll documents of the Essene community – over 200,000 manuscripts were discovered in that treasure trove, many still unstudied.

Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles enjoyed great success in creating a non-Jewish religion which differed significantly from that of Jesus' first followers. Unlike them he denied the validity of Torah, doing away with circumcision, the dietary laws, the Sabbath, the festivals and the whole code of ethics derived from biblical teachings. He also encouraged his followers to worship the Christ figure, a dying-rising savior God-human. These teachings placed Paul's movement immediately outside the orbit of Judaism, his religion being more akin to the various mystery religions that dotted the Roman landscape of the time. The image of the Christ, a divine-human, was familiar to Romans throughout the Mediterranean world – Dionysius, Mithras and many other pagan deities were also divine-human saviors, as were the Roman emperors.

Paul went his separate way, mostly ignoring Ya'akov and Yeshua's first followers and supremely confident of the correctness of his own message. During the late 40's, 50's and early 60's he established many congregations of the Christ on his extensive travels in what is today Turkey and Greece. Paul likely died in the mid 60's in Rome.

Paul's Gentile movement succeeded in a way that James' did not, the latter being beset by wars in the Middle East against Rome in the 60's and 130's. His success resulted in a shift away from the teachings of Jesus to those about the Christ, away from Torah and a religion of behavior to one of faith in the Christ.

Whether Paul ever wrote a *Letter to Antiochenes* isn't known, but somehow he would have briefed them on that fateful meeting in Jerusalem. That he could have written a letter is not far-fetched. We know of other missing letters from his writings included in the Christian Scriptures, for example, his *Letter to the Laodiceans* as well, it seems, some missing correspondence with his communities in Corinth, Greece.

Miriam ha-Migdal [Mary Magdalene] perhaps went to Ephesus or to southern France after Yeshua's crucifixion. The 4th century writing, the *Acts of Philip*, indicates that she returned to Jerusalem before her death. In the Greek of the New Testament, she is always called "Maria he Magdalene," indicating that the word 'Magdalene' is a title. She is *Mary the Tower*. Some think that Miriam was Yeshua's wife. She was the wealthy sponsor

of his mission (Luke 8:2, 3), present throughout his 3-year ministry, stood at the foot of the cross at his crucifixion and, according to the Gospel of John, she was the first to visit the tomb to prepare his body for burial (John 20:1, 2).

Miriam, the Mother of Jesus, likely went to Ephesus along with Yeshua's disciple Yochanan (John).

Ignatius succeeded **Evodius** as bishop of Antioch. Around 110 C.E., Ignatius was arrested by the Romans. While taken from Antioch to Rome for execution, Ignatius wrote letters to various congregations of the Christ. Many of these letters still survive and they testify to his strong character...and strong beliefs for which he was willing to die.

The **New Testament** was slow to develop. By 68, the **Letters of Paul** were probably beginning to circulate among the assemblies or churches he had created – to what extent we do not know. Nor were there **Gospels** in 68. The usual dating has Mark written after 70, Matthew in the 80's, Luke in the 80's or 90's and John in the 90's or later. We do not know who wrote these gospels. These writings are simply attributed to early Christian leaders and we are supposed to think that close associates of Yeshua or Paul penned these works. Other writings, however, were attributed to Miriam ha-Migdal (Mary Magdalene), Thomas, Philip and even one to the Savior himself. All these attributions are deemed "suspect" by scholars today but in antiquity they were likely taken at face value.

There were many different writings used in the first four centuries by Ebionite, Gnostic, Pauline, Marcionite and other forms of early Christian communities. The contents of the present New Testament were determined in 367 by Archbishop Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt, in a letter to the churches and monasteries under his control. In that letter he outlined the twenty-seven books his community considered authoritative. Other bishops around the Mediterranean world eventually concurred. The contents of the New Testament favor the outlook of Pauline Christianity to the exclusion of writings from other early Christian communities.

Appendix

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you characterize Rabbi Mattai's religious views?
2. How was Jesus' core message -- "the Kingdom of God coming soon" -- understood by Rabbi Mattai in the late 60's when the Jewish people were threatened with conquest by Rome? How does the Jewish War against Rome (66-70) fit with Jesus' confident pronouncement?
3. How would characterize the relations between Rabbi Mattai and his Essene friend, Yehuda? What did they share in common?
4. Did Rachel share her husband's religious views? How would you characterize her religious stance?
5. Why did Rabbi Mattai find "the congregations of the Christ" so troubling?
6. What prompted Rabbi Mattai to write down his Reflections?
7. Why do you think that early Christians were so slow to write down their recollections of what Jesus taught and practiced?
8. How would you characterize the religious views of Evodius and Ignatius?
9. What's the hidden scroll that Rabbi Mattai has carefully preserved, alongside his copy of the book of Deuteronomy? What does it contain? When was it written? Do you think that such a secret scroll was ever written?
10. What questions does the scroll raise about Paul's mystical experience? (Day #1)
11. What's Rachel's reaction to the invention of Evodius and Ignatius?
12. What questions does the scroll raise about Paul's rejection of Torah? (Day #2)
13. What does Rabbi Mattai think Paul is so afraid of? (Day #3) Do you agree with this assessment of Paul's religious views?
14. Why was Paul's *Letter to the Antiochenes* such a surprise to Rabbi Mattai and his friends? Do you agree with Paul's account of the meeting in Jerusalem?
15. What perhaps prompted James' Letter "to the twelve tribes in the Diaspora"? Why do you think this writing was ever included in the New Testament?
16. If Rabbi Mattai were present, what questions would you ask him?
17. If Paul were present, what questions would you ask him?
18. Do you agree that the message of Paul differs substantially from that of Jesus and his first followers?

Appendix

Suggestions for Further Reading

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