

Overcoming her objections, Yeshua sent Neomiv back to En-Nazira to explain to his family that he would be gone into the wilderness, living on grasshoppers and wild honey as Yohanan taught him to do. After watching her and the donkey leave, Yeshua set out. He walked into the desert alone, with the papers Yohanan had given him and a staff. This was the wilderness east of the Khyldan, where he had never been before. The farther he went from the river, the more barren the land became. There had been many trees, mostly oaks and terebinths, along the river; here there were mainly sparse clumps of brushwood and patches of ankle-high grass, dotted now and then with wild flowers. There were a few cypress and juniper trees, but they were stunted from lack of rain.

Eventually Yeshua came to a cliff, overlooking many yokes of sand, and there he sat down to think. He chose it because when he walked through the tufted grass, grasshoppers leaped out to escape him, and because one of the gnarled cypress trees harbored a colony of honey bees.

The very isolation of his position was protection enough from wolves, which stayed nearer towns where they could find sheep to eat. Once he was indeed approached by a wolf; but by coincidence the only humans he saw during the entire period, a trading caravan going southward along the base of the cliff, came by at the same time and frightened the animal away. It seemed to Yeshua that Elaha must have sent the caravan to protect him, but at the same time he was amused to consider that his saviors were totally unaware either of his own existence or of the wolf's.

There was more danger from the horned viper than from wolves; during the weeks Yeshua stayed in the desert he saw several. He remained very still, and they did him no harm. Even more common were the venomless colubrine snakes; one came so near him that he attempted to pick it up to make a pet of it, but it slithered away from his touch. There were also lizards and geckos which darted across the sand; one curious gecko watched him for several minutes one day.

He ate the grasshoppers and wild honey that he found, thanking Elaha after each meal, and he read the pages Yohanan had given him, memorizing some passages which appealed to him. He thought of the sorrow of his people; the sadness and suffering of humanity; the pain and anguish of the world. Hebrew patriotism had little interest for him; simply to rid the Promised Land of goyim did not appeal to him, because they were only a part of the problem. Yohanan had shown him that the Romans were more than mere usurpers; they kept wages low and prices high for their own profit, squeezing palaces and golden trinkets from the conquered people, so that much of the suffering he saw in Israel was caused by the Romans. But Yohanan had also shown him that the Hebrews themselves were almost equally to blame, the wealthy oppressing the workers and peasants. It was true; something had to be done. Yohanan thought that Yeshua was M'shihagh, the Anointed One, the leader who would unite the Children of Israel and drive the Romans into the Mediterranean. Yeshua was not sure that Yohanan was right, but he was also not sure that he was wrong.

Weeks passed. The days were hot, and the nights were cold. The mornings were cool because of the west wind, blowing from the sea, but during the day the wind changed to the east; it became a khamsin, blowing in hot air from the Syrian desert. During the days there were times when Yeshua was so thirsty that he thought of going back down closer to the river; but there was enough juice in the grasshoppers he ate that he kept his thirst under control; and sometimes when he woke up in the morning there was dew on the grass and the leaves. During the nights he wrapped himself in his cloak, but sometimes he awoke shivering even so. Alone as he was, far from any town, Yeshua became more and more aware of the scents and sounds of his surroundings. Even the red earth itself had a smell. He became fond of the fragrance of brushwood. The scent of the scattered wild flowers was inebriating. The calls of the birds perched in the cypresses and junipers were intensely musical.

He sat, staring at a scrubby bush, and saying the word over and over to himself: "M'shihagh, M'shihagh, M'shihagh, M'shihagh." If he truly were M'shihagh, he had decided, repeating the word

would bring him the knowledge. Gradually he felt peace growing within him, beginning as a tiny speck and then growing to fill his entire consciousness. The bush seemed to glow red, then yellow, then white—and then it became a piece of blue sky, a portal through the world to whatever lay beyond. Frightened, Yeshua blinked and drew back, and the bush became a bush again. The peace, however, was still within him; it was a floating ball of assurance and confidence in his heart. That, he suddenly knew, was Malkutha, the Kingdom of Elaha; the freedom that Yohanan was talking about was not outside, was not freedom from the Romans or freedom from Herodes, but was inside, the freedom to know what was true. The sign, then, was that he was not M'shihagh.

But what was Elaha's plan for him? He began repeating another word, a plea for divine guidance: "Elaha, Elaha, Elaha, Elaha." Since he wanted to contact the Nameless One, and since obviously the Nameless One did not want to be addressed by His name or He would not have hidden its vowels from men, Yeshua would address Him by His title: "Elaha, Elaha, Elaha, Elaha." The peace was there again, within, like liquid moonlight, as if he were a jug and Elaha was pouring him full. The bush swam again before his blurred vision, glowing with light. He looked around him; the entire world was bathed in light, washed in light as Yohanan washed people in water, dripping with light, light running down slopes and forming into puddles in low places in the desert. "Elaha, Elaha, Elaha, Elaha." He felt weightless, as though he were floating up off the sand. Then he lost consciousness and pitched head forward.

The shadows were long and the sky was cool when he opened his eyes. The hot sun was a reddish ball, low in the west. He sat up and considered himself. He was full of power; he felt it. It was as though he had died and had been reborn. Was he M'shihagh? The question had no meaning any longer; he was Yeshua, and Yeshua was now filled with power from Elaha.

Hungry, he looked around for food. A nearby rock was round, like a loaf of bread, and without thinking he reached out for it. As soon as he touched it, he realized the trick his mind played on him, and he smiled.

Yohanan had said that Elaha could turn stones into the children of Abraham. If that were true, He could certainly turn this stone into a loaf of bread. Yeshua attended once more to the power he felt surging through him, prickling in his arms. Perhaps he had the power to turn stone into bread; if so, it would be a sign that Elaha wanted him to drive out the Romans and become King over Israel, establishing a system of existence so that all would have food and there would be no hunger. He touched the stone and concentrated on turning it to bread.

It remained hard and unyielding. That, then, was a sign that Elaha did not intend him to become the King of Israel in the sense that Yohanan and so many other Children of Israel meant the term.

No, he must be intended to lead the Chosen People into Elaha's Kingdom in some other way—in that other way he felt in his illumination, when he knew that Malkutha was within him. In that moment he had been one person with Elaha. What he could achieve, others could as well; he must help them to find Elaha's Kingdom, with its peace and freedom, within themselves. Then no matter what happened to them outside, they could live; whether they had bread or not made no difference, they could live without bread if they had to, as he had lived on grasshoppers and honey for these however many days.

It came to him that much human misery arose from people's desire for more than was necessary for them. There was abundance if they would only be content with what was available. Elaha had provided a rich larder, a world filled with food for the hungry. It was unnecessary for anyone to worry about where the next day's bread would come from; Elaha would provide it.

Yeshua stood up, his head dizzy from the experience and from lack of food. He swayed, looking down over the cliff to the reddish desert below, farther below him than the ground was from the highest

point of Koaygh Aelhys in Yerushalom. He had power. Did he have the power to cast himself down and still live?

For a moment the power he felt coursing along his veins made him believe that he could, and he was tempted to try it. He stood, looking down, wondering whether he would float down or hurtle to a splash and crunch at the base of the cliff. He remembered that feeling of lifting into the air just before he fainted. The conviction came to him that he would float. He took a step toward the edge.

And then the thought came to him—like someone else’s voice speaking in his head—that merely to test his power was to doubt it. The conviction that what he felt within himself, that silver glow, would sustain him in a literal sense, might be true or it might not. If he doubted it, it would not be true; the belief must be complete. To test was to doubt. He must believe it so fully that he could turn around, now, and walk back from the lip of the cliff, leaving the power unproven, knowing that he had it, knowing that it would be there when he wanted it, without needing to try it out.

And so he tottered away from the brink of the cliff. Strange to feel so weak in body and strong in soul. With the strength he felt within him, he knew that he could draw people to him just as Yohanan had told him he could; he knew that he could speak now with authority, with assurance, with confidence; and that people would follow him because they believed what he said. Perhaps he could reach even beyond Israel—even to Children of Israel elsewhere in the Empire.

And the image of kingship came to him again. Once more he remembered playing king as a child, giving orders to his playmates. But once more he remembered how they shunned him as a consequence. No, kings came to think they were gods; if he became the King of Israel it would not be long before he was demanding the same pomp and state as Herodes, before he was causing the same sorrow to his people that the present king did. And so, knowing that the power of command which had been given to him in his moment of enlightenment could have made him the M’shihagh Yohanan had desired, with a thrill of excitement and a pang of regret, he thrust the idea of kingship away from himself forever.

He remembered something Hermes had once told him about Zarathustra, that the prophet had withdrawn to a cave where he was tempted by Ahriman, the evil spirit, who promised him worldly power and wealth; but that Zarathustra had rejected the temptations. Yeshua wondered: Had he just been tempted by Shaitan, Elaha’s adversary, in the same way?

He sat, musing. What had all this betokened? Now he knew what he was nót meant to do. But what was his purpose? He looked around him. After his vision, everything looked new to him, as if washed in lambence. This must be the way children saw the world, when everything was new, as if it had been made just the moment before they looked at it. Yes, it was as if in some way he had been re-born and was a child again. It was as if the old Yeshua had died, and a new Yeshua had been born.

And now that he was in possession of this new self, what did it matter what the Romans did? Let them have the land of Israel! He had become a king, and his kingdom was inside himself. It was a liberating feeling. Why should he feel repressed, suppressed, oppressed by the goyim? They were outside him! As long as he felt this freedom inside, let them do whatever they wished! They could not imprison him, because in his soul he was free.

Could he help others to have this same feeling, teach them to have this interior freedom, to see the world anew as he had seen it? Yes, he could, and if he did so that would give him the purpose he had been seeking. And, he realized, this was a feeling that anyone could achieve.

The P’ryshaya believed that in order to live a religious life it was necessary to obey every yot and tittle of the Law, a task which was impossible for most ordinary men, who did not have time to study Towragh as assiduously as the rabbis did. Hillel had told him that that was not necessary. And he

knew now, from his own experience, that what the P'ryshaya said was not true. He had seen the world as a child sees it, and a child has no knowledge of the Law; a child does not care a fig for the Law. Yohanan believed that for a person to be pure, it was necessary to be washed in water. Well, Yeshua had been washed by Yohanan; but men and women bathed themselves every day, and no matter how much cleaner they were outside, not all of them were purer inside than they were before they entered the stream.

Yeshua knew what his experience had been, and he knew it was real. He had in fact been born again. Because it had happened to him, he knew that it could happen to anyone, no matter how sinful they had been, no matter how many times they had broken the Law. He could bring this rebirth to the Children of Israel and thereby free them in their souls, which were more important than their bodies, from Roman domination.

And it was necessary to do this. Elaha would not have allowed the goyim to seize control of His land if the Children of Israel had not strayed from His path. Time and again in the past the Children of Israel had departed from the true way, and Elaha had punished them by allowing other nations to enslave them. Only when a prophet came to bring the Children of Israel back to the right way had Elaha allowed them to become free again. The P'ryshaya believed that theirs was the only right way, but the whole nation of Israel could never be brought to live by the strictures the P'ryshaya demanded. Nor could an armed insurrection be successful against the superior arms and organization of the Romans. No, the way Yeshua had found here in the desert, the way that Elaha had opened up to him, was the only way in which the Children of Israel could return to His path, and when they did, Elaha would find a way to take the feet of the Romans off their necks. The dove Elaha had sent, and the visions—these showed Yeshua that he was the one ordained to be that prophet.

And then he knew he was ready to return to En-Nazira.

Now the sun was down, the short twilight was over, and the stars seemed to spray the blue-black sky with a mist of light. Yeshua looked at the stars and thought that they and he had both been made by Elaha; they were his brothers. And then he lay on the ground and fell asleep.