

The following day was a repetition of what had happened before. The crowd waited and eventually, the Baptist reappeared like a shaggy animal from his den on the other side of the Jordan. He harangued the crowd, repeating the same message: One who was to come who would be greater than he - whose baptism would be of fire and the Holy Spirit.

As soon as he had appeared, Marcellus became alert. he signalled to Lucian to descend the slope, easing through the crowd who were condensing at the river's edge. So it was, that they had a good vantage point for what was to follow.

On this day, Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth, found the man he had been seeking. The long walk from Nazareth culminated on the ridge of the hill overlooking the scene of John's activity. The edge of a great crowd washed around him, some going down the slope to the water and others, soaked to the skin and with their clothing clinging to them, climbing back to the ridge.

The difference in attitude was marked. Those going were anxious, newly resolved to place themselves under the ministration of the frenziedly active prophet. They moved urgently, impatient with any delay - caught up in an urgency which the fiery words of the Baptist had created within them. It was as if they expected a cataclysm to overtake them if they didn't hasten to accept an opportunity to express their repentance.

Those returning were in a different mood, some exultant, waving their arms to heaven and shouting praises to God - others weeping in relief, some

supported by friends or relatives.

Jesus stood on the ridge and watched for a while, and the ebb and flow of humanity ignored him and passed by. There came a moment when he slowly continued his movement down the slope to the water's edge.

John suddenly paused in his task of plunging men and women under the water and pointed to him. He cried out loudly.

"Look! There is the Lamb of God. He takes away the sin of the world!

This is the one I told you about!

I told you that after me a man is coming who takes rank ahead of me.

Before I was born, he already was!

I didn't know who he was, but the real reason why I came to baptise with water, was that he might be revealed in Israel!"

John turned to the Jesus.

"Why do you come to me? I should be baptised by you!"

Jesus responded quietly.

"Let it be the way it is, we must conform with all that God asks of us."

From back in the silent crowd, Nebat watched as John baptised the newcomer and as Jesus came up out of the water, a dove fluttered down and settled on his head. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, but there was a rumble like thunder, which rolled around the hills and in it was a voice which said:

"This is my son, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests."

John cried out loudly.

"I saw the Spirit come down from heaven like a dove and it rested on him. I didn't know him, but he who sent me to baptise with water has told me:

'When you see the Spirit coming down upon someone and resting on him, you will know that this is the one who is to baptise with the Holy Spirit'.

I saw it myself and I have borne witness - This is God's Chosen One!"

Nebat looked around, quite close and staring intently at the scene, was the old Pharisee with two companions. Nicodemus didn't take his eyes away from the tall man in the peasant's dress of Galilee, as he walked back out of the water. He melted away into the crowd, with John staring after him and then, the Baptist resumed his activities, but it seemed to Nebat that he did so with less fire than before.

Lucian and Marcellus lost sight of the Galilean in the crowd and they returned to the ridge where they had made their camp. Their two slaves were waiting for them, ready to pull out.

"What now, Marcellus?"

The response was slow in coming.

"I suppose we could pull out and go back, although we've learned precious little. How do you feel about staying for another day. Pilate likes his reports to be complete and I'm curious about that little incident with the Galilean. I want to find out more about him, we might have seen the start of a new agitation!"

Lucian stared at him.

"You must be joking! He was just another peasant getting a well needed wash - except that he had an argument about it."

Marcellus didn't respond to the humour.

"Obviously, it didn't register what was said!"

Lucian admitted blandly.

"My Aramaic is a bit limited."

"Then, I suggest you'd better improve it - that is, if you want to bargain with these people - they tend to despise the use of Kloiine.

To go back to your flippant comment. The so-called argument was nothing less than a declaration of a new leader - now, whether it was to do

with the Zealots, or yet another of their Messiah's, I don't know - that's why I think we should stay and find out what we can."

Lucian had had enough of watching people being forcibly washed, but he shrugged agreement.

"I don't mind, have it your way!"

Marcellus scanned the crowd, but still couldn't see the Galilean.

"If I was a suspicious man, I would say that he's shown himself to those who matter and now he's made himself scarce."

Lucian was reclining on the ground. He asked lazily.

"Explain to me a Messiah."

Marcellus glanced down at him.

"You really are a self-opinionated, ignorant Roman clod!"

Lucian shaded his eyes and mocked him.

"And you sound as if you've contracted Judaeian fever! It's the talk of Rome - where cultured men don't allow themselves to become disturbed by unimportant agitations in remote provincial backwoods of the Empire!"

Marcellus nodded grimly.

"And that attitude might be the beginning of the end for our mighty, invincible empire!"

Lucian responded with lazy confidence.

"The Roman world will never pass away - it will last another thousand years - and longer!"

"You've been listening to too many propagandists, who've convinced themselves - and others like you, that the sun will never set on the divine Caesars!"

It was a strange conversation to be having on the side of a Judaeian hill. Marcellus, sounded gloomily pessimistic - and for no reason, so far as

Lucian could tell. He changed the subject.

"You were going to tell me about Messiah's - an Aramaic word, I suppose?

Marcellus responded abruptly.

"Hebrew! A Messiah is an Anointed One - according to their obscure religious rites, their ancient kings were anointed with oil to indicate that they were the chosen of their god to lead the people into a prosperous future.

As with most concepts, this one has grown over the years, to mean that it endows the one so anointed with superhuman powers, and in our time, one capable of overthrowing the Roman yoke and driving out our presence from what they declare to be their godly given land.

These people come and go, and we usually have a fight on our hands before we suppress them and crucify their leaders. About twenty years ago, there was one called Judas, who - it so happens - also came from Galilee - and now, the Baptist has nominated another man from Galilee - I think Pilate will be very interested."

They waited out the rest of the day, watching the crowd, but not catching sight of the man in question. In the evening, Lucian had a sudden thought.

"You said that these - Messiahs - are anointed with oil - I presume, by one of their priests. The Baptist tried to drown him - or what ever it is that he does! I didn't see any oil - and the Baptist doesn't look like any priest I've ever seen!"

Marcellus had relaxed a little as the day had progressed. He laughed softly.

"I suppose you're right, it was the conversation that interests me - and what the Baptist called out to the people. In my book, it was a clear

incitement for them to follow this new leader. So far, I haven't seen any sign of it, but that doesn't mean it won't happen."

"So, you think its a cover for the Zealots?"

"Probably - the Baptist is a known agitator."

"Why hasn't he been arrested?"

"I expect it's a case of seeing who else is implicated. Pilate would like to net some of the big fish - the ones who provide the money and arms - I think he's hoping to snare some of the High Priest's crowd - or even Herod!" Lucian whistled.

"A high level conspiracy?"

"Maybe - Pilate would relish the opportunity to show himself worthy for greater things - how better, than to implicate Herod or the Priests and earn the undying gratitude of Caesar!?"

They watched until it was too dark to see into the crowd. Lucian privately considered it to be a waste of time - if there was a conspiracy, it wouldn't be flaunted around under the eyes of possible informers. One thing he had picked out from the crowd was that they weren't all ignorant peasants. Here and there were some who were obviously of a better class and they appeared to be as watchful of the Baptist as Marcellus.

On the following day, late in the afternoon and long after the wild man appeared from his haven on the far side of the river and after he had harangued the crowd with much the same message as the previous day, before continuing his routine of baptism, Marcellus pointed suddenly.

The tall Galilean had reappeared from somewhere, he walked down to the water's edge. They watched but they couldn't hear what was said, except that the Baptist called out in a loud voice for all to hear.

"There is the Lamb of God!"

He pointed and the attention of the huge crowd was directed towards him. The man took no notice and walked on and was immediately followed by two men who had been helping the Baptist. Marcellus breathed.

"Galileans! Like the first one - I wish we were close enough to hear what they're saying.

Watch where they go, Lucian, they could give us a lead to the Zealots!"

They watched as the lone Galilean turned and confronted the two following him, but they couldn't hear.

Jesus turned to John's disciples and waited for them catch up with him.

He asked:

"What do you want from me?"

The older one answered a little nervously - and kept it formal.

"Teacher, where are you camped?"

Jesus looked at them steadily for a moment before answering.

"Why don't you come and see?"

They followed him to where he had made camp for himself away from the main body of the crowd. He gestured for them to sit down and asked again.

"What do you want from me?"

John was the younger of the two and little more than a youth, together with Andrew, he had been following and helping the Baptist for some time.

"We heard what the Baptist said and we heard the voice in the thunder - and we would like you to tell us what it means."

They stayed with him for the remainder of the day, after which they returned to their own camp. It was well past the time when the Baptist returned to his solitude across the river and so, they were left to talk about all

they had seen and what Jesus had told them during the afternoon. Andrew, the older of the two, insisted doggedly.

"I tell you, John - if all we've seen and heard is true, we must go back to Capernaum - we must tell the others!"

John was silent for a moment. The others were their family and brothers and friends who from time to time entered into fierce debate - one of the main topics had always been the deliverance of Israel.

"But, how can it be true? Jesus is my kinsman, his mother and my mother are sisters - how can it be possible that he's the Messiah? He's visited us so many times in Capernaum, and there's never been a hint of it. We've traded with him and his brothers and with his father, Joseph, when he was alive."

Andrew stared at him.

"Do you want to argue about what we both saw and heard - and the testimony of the Baptist? Can you throw aside what we were told today - I tell you, I could sit and listen to him for hours!

I ask you a straight question - How can you measure whether a man is the Messiah, simply because your two mothers are sisters? Even a Messiah has to have a mother - and that mother has the right to have a sister! Don't you like the man - or do you hold back simply because he's your cousin?"

John stared at him.

"I've always liked Jesus - and I've always enjoyed his visits. I admit, he's always been someone special in our family - but that doesn't make him a Messiah!"

Andrew's response was very deliberate.

"You might be right, John! - but, the voice of God and the words we



heard, makes him THE Messiah! You heard it, you heard what was said - it wasn't only the testimony of the Baptist! - or do you want to tell me you only heard thunder!?"

John shook his head.

"I heard it - and I can't deny it - and there's nothing I would rather have proved right than that we have met the Deliverer of Israel - but, we have to be sure! This is too important!"

Andrew got to his feet.

"We'll take him back with us! Let him talk to Simon and to James and Thaddaeus - and the others too! Let him talk to them all! He will convince them, just the same as he has convinced us!

We'll go and find him now - and tomorrow, we'll set out early and in two days, we can be home!"

John pulled him down.

"It's too late, Andrew - we'll talk to him in the morning. Tomorrow will be time enough - we can start out after we've persuaded him to come with us."

Andrew subsided and stared into the darkness.

"I suppose you're right - To be honest, I'm not sure I could find him again in the dark."

They settled down for a restless night and in the first light of the following day, they picked their way through the sleeping shapes littered over the slopes around cold camp fires and tried to find where he had led them on the previous afternoon - but he wasn't there. They waited for a while, but he didn't return and no one could tell them where he had gone. So, disappointed, they set for Galilee and Capernaum, wondering when they would next meet the one who would alter their lives in ways they couldn't

possibly imagine