

**SEPPHORIS (U3041)**

*He...came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.'*

Mark 6.1-4

Three balls and two strikes the count, two men out. One man on third, the tying run. Jesus stood outside the batter's box and stared at his bat. His hands wrung the handle as if he were trying to wear it away. Shouts from the stands, his teammates, the opponents' bench had faded to the periphery. In the center, just a boy, twelve years old, head hung slightly, talking to his bat.

"Hey, ben-Yosef! We're *waiting* for you!" someone called out.

"C'mon son," the umpire waved him up to the plate. Jesus looked up from his bat. "3-2 count, 2 down," said the ump to Jesus and then addressing the fielders yelled, "Play ball!"

Jesus stepped back into the batter's box. He kicked at the dirt, as if trying to get a good foothold, yet more like a kitten looking for a warm, quiet place to take a nap. He looked into his own dugout. His teammates clapped and cheered. In the crowd his mother gave him a raised fist to

say, "I believe in you." His brothers and sisters stood up, trying to encourage the Nazareth crowd to do the same.

If the pitcher would just throw another ball, he could draw a walk and this weight would pass from him. Or perhaps he could just hit enough of the pitch to send the ball trickling between the first and second basemen, bringing in the tying run. At least he wouldn't lose the game that way. But he hadn't gotten a hit all day. Or all week, for that matter. It would have to be a walk. Or maybe the pitch could hit him. That would be just fine.

"Don't screw this up, you little bastard!" came from the crowd.

Mary punched Joseph in the arm, "Are you gonna let him say that to your son?" Joseph looked at her and then slowly back to the plate.

The whole town had turned out for this, Nazareth's best chance to beat mighty Sepphoris. This annual showdown between Nazareth and its nearest neighbor, over 100 times its size, had never ended well for the little burg. Nazareth was hardly a town at all and disparaged by Jews across the countryside as the home of a large Roman garrison. Not even the Nazarenes had much reason to believe that much good come from their own town. All that could be temporarily forgotten--if Jesus could score the runner on third and perhaps score himself.

The Sepphorite pitcher took the ball and touched the rubber. He bent forward, low at the waist, squinting in at his catcher, who gave him the signal. Jesus could feel the sweat roll down his

back, Nazareth's expectations weighing on his shoulders, pressing the air from his lungs. The sounds around subsided again until he could only hear his own pant. He took two quick, short practice swings as if telling the pitcher, "Throw the ball right about *here*."

The pitcher straightened, bringing ball and glove to his chest. As the pitcher lifted his front leg--his left, Jesus tightened his grip, brought his bat back, raised his right elbow. Rocking onto his right leg, the pitcher then lunged forward, firing in the pitch. Jesus raised his right elbow higher, tightened his grip more. Watching the pitch come in, Jesus lifted his front leg slightly, licked his lips, clasped his jaw—then set his foot slowly down.

"Stee-rike Three!!!" pierced Jesus' ears as the ball popped the catcher's mitt. He loosened his grip, let the bat fall to the ground, and hung his head. Staring at the ground, the world around returned to his ears: boos, jeers, a smattering of applause. As Mary and Joseph descended the stands, a man yelled, "Joe, you must be proud. Your boy's a real hero."

"Not my son," Joseph muttered under his breath as he walked away.

After that no one in Nazareth had much time for Jesus. Men sneered at him, or knocked into him with their shoulders. Women, worse, ignored him entirely. Jesus laid the blame on a lot of things. He blamed Joseph who, as a mason and carpenter, helped build the local Roman garrison, earning the ire of the neighbors. He blamed the ump for calling strike three. He blamed his Roman nose. He did not, however, blame himself.

By the time he was finishing junior high, the relentless teasing, as children do, eventually broke the boy. It's hard to say which nickname he disliked more: Sepphorite, carpenter or bastard.

Following one such taunting, Jesus allegedly cursed two classmates, killing them. Out of fear of him, the principal decided it warranted a few days of detention rather than outright expulsion.

Neither at school or at home did Jesus have any friends. Most of his family stopped speaking to him. He quit school, hoping to begin a career. As for carpentry, he showed no aptitude. Even in his later teachings, he would avoid the topic of drywall or cabinetry, preferring parables of sheep or seeds. Joseph tried to teach the boy a trade, but, having died a few years back, he could not continue Jesus' training. No one else in town would deign take him on as an apprentice.

So Mary asked his uncle if he could take the boy on his merchant vessel for a few years, figuring he might make a better merchant than mason. It was abroad that a miracle occurred. Jesus finally showed real talent—a penchant for religious study and renaissance.

First he sailed west with his uncle to the Tin Islands. Then he sailed east, to the land beyond even Alexander's reach. He showed little proclivity for commerce. However the eastern faiths captured his attention. Over the course of several years he read every sutra and Veda he could. Sages taught him the non-violent principles of the Jains and the material detachment of the Buddha. In Persia he learned of the cosmic battle between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. He was born with an ability to comprehend and synthesize the religion of the Hindus.

Uncharacteristically of a Hebrew boy, he began to see himself in streams, trees or fire. Fire he favored. In fire he was the element of change, the creator of the ashen soil of rebirth.

With the breath of gods at his back, he decided to leave his uncle and return to Palestine. Instead of returning to Galilee, he sought out a new life in the Judean capital, Jerusalem. In Jerusalem no one knew the failure he had been. “Here, I can find a new life.”

He found a people unsure of whether they should embrace the world or retreat from it. The Romans held sway in the streets, even though there was a nominal Jewish monarchy in place. Many a Jew walked by a Roman soldier, head down, cursing under his hood. Certainly more cosmopolitan than even Sepphoris, Jerusalem showed elements of Roman, Greek, Jewish and even a little Egyptian culture. Phoenicians from Tyre and Sidon, masters of science and mathematics, designed much of the grand architecture. Traders from all directions traveled through on their way to parts east and west.

With hardly a denarius in his purse, Jesus searched for meaning in the capital. As a Galilean, the Jerusalemites viewed him as an alien, barely a Jew at all. Moving from house to house of worship, he searched for a spiritual guide and true freedom—freedom from want, the Romans, his own past. He sought teachers and preachers, wise men and blind women. He slept in parks and alleyways, eating from dumpsters. He wanted a people to call his own. Everywhere he looked, the people of Jerusalem appeared in lust with power and money.

Jesus walked past the shops, filled each day with goods and shoppers. Every day for week he walked through the streets to see almost every shop filled each day with patrons. In the windows, filled with images of jewels and young people wearing nothing but their underwear, it

occurred to him covetousness was no longer a sin but a necessity. For how could these shops thrive if not filled with shoppers? Where would the shoppers go?

To the synagogues? Jesus had walked by a few of these as well. Empty for most of the week, on the Sabbath the temples bustled with a market intensity. Men showed in their finest suits and power ties, while women spent hours making themselves look as if they were going to a picnic. In the front of the temple a man would stand, warning the worshipers of falling prey to the wolves of this world, the evils of money and commerce, of ignoring your fellow man. Then there would be the clink of coins and the rustle of paper before the people would run off to the rest of their week.

Walking in a park one day, a young man rode past him on a bicycle. “Man, why do these people worship with their lips but not with their lives?”

“What?” Jesus asked, surprised that the young man should be speaking to him. “What did you say?”

Circling back, the stranger spoke to him as if they were resuming an old conversation. “What do these people think they gain by tithing to God but giving the rest to Molech? by praying to the god of mercy for Mammon? Our people, freed from the bonds of slavery and delivered into this land have chosen to live in service to the Evil One.”

The young man invited Jesus to sit in the park and talk with him. For the next seven hours, Jesus and the young man, named Pur, discussed scripture and the state of the Jews in a rambling, disjointed fashion that spoke directly to each man's heart. "Yeah, Pur, man, as in 'humble,' ya know?" He had an easygoing disposition and an unsophisticated manner, yet his words at times betrayed a deep knowledge, if not understanding, of theological concepts. At the end of the day, as the sun hid amongst the trees and then disappeared over the horizon, Pur invited Jesus back to his house for supper.

He lived with several others, who called themselves Essenes, in a vacant, decrepit house on the outskirts of Jerusalem. At first it seemed their evenings were always spent on the most central points of life in faith. No one back in Nazareth, even the town leaders, spoke with such depth and passion about God. The Essenes did not appear as obsessed with money as the city around them. They lived simply, communally.

They also held the scriptures in the highest regard. For instance, when a question of military conscription arose, they consulted the scriptures for their answer, instead of using the scriptures to justify their preconceived notions.

After time, though, this was decreasingly the case. The profound turned to the paltry. The Essenes sat around plotting a war against the Romans though they had no resources to fight. They sat around arguing over whether government picture IDs constituted idolatry. They debated the merits of tithing part of their "grocery runs" to a local food bank (they decided against the proposition). Regardless, they bowed to the law. On stolen bicycles they rode about

the police-patrolled streets and begged for change on street corners from tourists and shoppers. They lived free of the government and earthly authorities, so long as the authorities ignored them and the people's generosity held.

Each night they came back for dinner and shared with others what food they had "found". Jesus knew for a fact that it was often stolen, having witnessed a grocery run first-hand. Not that he ever stole. He was but an accomplice to "God's bountiful grace". The leader, a man so highly regarded by the others, treated them with the contempt they perhaps deserved, seeing their blind allegiance to him. But his hypocrisy infected the group. Even Pur's heart hardened in the few months Jesus knew him.

The Essenes really had no time for God, for all the time they spent arguing over him. Their morality was their own. Their self-imposed poverty led them to crime. And so Jesus left them. His family would have to come from elsewhere in Jerusalem.

Of the upper crust of Yahweh's people were the Sadducees, and Jesus was never going to be in their favor. No one but a priest (or an aristocrat) could sit in their rarified air. The Sadducees held that the only law that mattered could be found in the Book, and, of course, that which pleased their Roman overlords. The whims of their overlords changed from time to time, as did the teachings of the Book. From their perch on the Temple mount, the Sadducees owned the exclusive rights to the written law and its interpretation. They had the money to make the handwritten copies of the Law and the education to read them. The common folk had no way to dispute their interpretations.



The Sadducees also held sway over the comings and goings of the Temple. What came were pilgrims from all about Israel. Those same pilgrims departed, unburdened of their gold and firstborn unblemished of their flocks. Some of this gain went to the Romans. By its legislative graces the Sadducees maintained their seats high above the vulgar stock.

The Pharisees, jealous of the Sadducees' power yet impotent to possess it, dressed in robes of self-righteousness. The Sadducees won influence by birth and bribe. What were the Pharisees to do, since they invariably came from less fortunate situations than the Sadducees? They tried to sell the common folk on the idea that they, not the up-nosed Sadducees, knew God's will. It was not, so they claimed, only the written law that God meant for the Jews to follow. For them tradition and oral law filled in the gaps left in the written. Who held the patent on the whole of the oral law? Why, the Pharisees, of course.

And yet, when you studied the Pharisees closely, as Jesus most certainly did, you might find that where one's heart is, there also will one find one's hands. The Pharisee's hands slipped into the pockets of the average Jew. Then they took their ill-gotten gain and reinvested it. Eventually they owned all of the media outlets: television, radio and Internet. Over cables and airwaves they preached their message. Soon they had more influence than the Sadducees, who spent their days aloof, separate from the people.

You can learn a lot about people by what they *don't* say. Or, perhaps, by what they allow others to say in their stead. Jesus watched Pharisaic programming from TVs in shop windows, replete

with prayers answered, cripples healed, and prophecies rendered. They painted the proper picture of caring, loving souls just trying to reach out for God's people, nursing them through this painful rehearsal for the afterlife. So black and white their depictions of the world—follow our way and prosper. All else was of the Devil. Jesus heard their sermons, their prophecies of doom for those following the Sadducean teachings. And then they would run a series of commercials.

He caught the general tenor of their commercial breaks. “In uncertain times, invest in gold!” “Hypernius root! to cure all your aches and pains.” “Come November, a vote for Cohen is a vote for God.” What is it you people say? You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar. No one pays for the truth. They pay to escape it. But they always pay.

The Sadducees held the high holy ground, but the Pharisees, with their TV stations and discount shopping chains, controlled both message and messenger. You couldn't walk into a brothel and not feel their presence.

And yet these were not the mass of people, the people on the street, those from whom the Pharisees stole. Most of them lived subsistence lifestyles and therefore could not afford the time for education or the money for scrolls. In prayer, not priests, they had their conduit to the Most High. Those people prayed hourly to God. They didn't need Essenes, Sadducees or Pharisees to deliver them from evil. They asked the Lord directly to deliver them cheaper booze, lower property taxes or a late-inning home run. For what good is it to be righteous if there are no goodies in return?

This city was not Jesus' home and it was no home for God's people, who invested increasingly in it. He was at home nowhere in his own country. He might be *in* this country, but not *of* it. That which he could easily intuit about God the Father everyone here struggled to understand. By day he poured over the holy books in the city library, learning something new from the texts each time he read them. He walked the streets of Jerusalem, listening to every street preacher and sitting with every congregation he could, shuffling their philosophies with his favorite bits from the East. At night he returned to the hollows of the park, to let his day's thoughts coalesce in dreams.

For ten years he searched for a family, for God's family. When he had opened every door and listened to every word in Jerusalem, he set out for the countryside. Perhaps the simpler inhabitants there would accept him.

Though he entered each town a stranger, it would not take him long to find someone with whom he could relate on some level. And then another, and another. For on his journey to the East and back again, he had gained some knowledge on a great many topics by speaking with a diverse array of people. He spoke with fishers and farmers, shepherds and miners, merchants and soldiers.

He developed an affinity for parables, a way to speak to each person he met as to their own experience and knowledge. In parables they could see for themselves that they had known the

truth of the Lord all along. There was the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the leaven and the rich man and Lazarus. He loved the one about the Prodigal Son. Still, no drywall.

Yet after a few years along the dusty roads, he came across no one bringing the people together. No teachers, no leaders preached anything but every man for himself, it seemed to Jesus. It was during his travels in the Judean countryside that he heard about John the Baptist, teaching and baptizing in the Jordan. Word of John spread like wild fire. Was he the one?

Jesus decided to hear what the Baptist was preaching. As he approached he saw the Baptist standing in the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He wore a garment of camel hair and a leather girdle around his waist. He was a loner, for sure, but this teacher was pure and holy in Jesus' eyes.

Jesus approached the Baptist and began to speak. Before he could, the Baptist put two fingers to Jesus' lips. "My son, you need not confess your sins to me, for I am not your judge. You must confess them to yourself." Immediately he took Jesus behind his head with one hand and held his nose with the other. He submerged Jesus for what seemed an awfully long time. Jesus felt the Jordan wash over him, his heart racing, pulsing in his ears. As he was raised out of the river, Jesus gasped for air and opened his eyes, air shocking his lungs full as car airbags. The sun shone directly in his eyes, bright as the visage of God himself.

"Your god is pleased with you, my son. Go and be perfect henceforth," the Baptist said, pointing Jesus to the shore. Jesus stood at the shore, new and fresh but unsure of his cardinal directions.

He stumbled about a bit, taking in the light, the color, the sound of a world freed of sin. Nothing like this could be found in the din of Jerusalem.

He stood at the bank, head swimming, watching the bathers praying and chanting in the Jordan. Jesus admired their simplicity but they lacked...community. Jesus felt clean but more alone than ever. He felt as if he needed to get his head together. In this orientation he set off desertward for a bout of heavy thinking.

After a while of walking, he felt sufficiently removed from the world so he sat down and addressed the faceless sky. Recalling the story of the Buddha under the Bo tree, "Either you tell me, Lord, what I am to do or the buzzards and scorpions carry me away by bits!" And so he sat. And sat some more.

One of the great truths of the desert is that at some stretched point of one's wits, things *will* be heard and seen. When one's mind is on Scripture, Buddha and idle stomach acid, the Powers that May or May Not Be eventually find you interesting. And after a period of days they came to play with Jesus. As did his personal adversary.

A particular voice rang in his ears. This voice was not his own, not the voice of the Almighty. This was the voice of the Evil One. The Evil One pushed relentlessly for hours, tempting Jesus to ask God for the power to save himself from hunger and want. Presumably Jesus could save the world from these ills as well, but a man starving, alone in the desert, might be expected to be preoccupied with his own survival. So on this weakness the adversary pressed his advantage.

With the Evil One on his side, Jesus could rule the world. He might even be able to remake it in his own image. He could feed the hungry and raise the poor. But Jesus shook off the devil's attempts to snare him. It was not power he truly wanted. Power would not make him happy, not make him feel whole. He wanted his people to be a family, with God as its father. And he began to think that he, the hated and ignored one, might be the person who could make it happen.

He would not listen to the voice inside that would lead him astray, down a path he wished not to travel. He had fought off the curves and sliders of the adversary. And when that devil came with his last-ditch hard-and-high one, Jesus drove it over the fence.

Many more voices ride a lonesome wind. How does one decide to which to listen? Jesus decided to wait for silence. When silence came, at the end of his 39<sup>th</sup> night, he blinked into the sun. The rains that had watered him during his sabbatical were nowhere to be seen. The dry heat cooked him like an oven. The desert quiet surrounded him like the immediate aftershock of a bomb blast, enveloping his ears in a muffled wave. Thus far he had survived, worse though for the wear. His faith, however, his armor against temptation, had swollen. This was his sign that he was ready.

Standing up for the first time in days, Jesus looked down at the place he sat. Leaning against the rock he'd used for shelter, knees a bit shaky, he looked back where he'd lain and imagined he saw a huddled mass, a boy he'd left behind with the voices. From now on *he'd* be the voice to which others bent. He was a man, now, of action.

So he stumbled away from that place bolstered by ambition. If he could hold the devil at bay, he must, he figured, possess the power to create his own family, his own people who kept the Lord foremost in their minds.

When he'd gathered his strength, he began to walk through Galilee, to spread his teaching: the lessons of the desert. He began to attract a team, selecting his inner circle, calling them by twos. First he found the fishing brothers, Peter and Andrew. They were astounded by his knowledge of fishing, though they only knew him as an itinerant preacher.

“Cast your nets over there.”

“But Rabbi, we've been out all day, and in this very place twice!”

“Cast your nets. You will see.”

They, of course, assumed he was unfamiliar with either sailing or fishing and so they were amazed. The brothers hauled in enough fish to keep their father fed for a year and still have some left over. So they left to follow the great teacher.

Then he called those Sons of Thunder, James and John. They were the muscle every traveling troupe needs. Soon followed Philip and Nathanael, a couple of heady boys. And three more couples followed until there were twelve by his side. He taught them the messages of his father,

their father--their *real* father. Who needed father, mother, brother, or cousin when they had the Lord?

They went through the countryside, preaching and gaining followers. They healed the sick and gave comfort to the poor. At times it seemed they had whole communities at their heels listening to his words. He was far from the only hated and ignored one in Palestine. More and more of them followed him. The family of followers sang his praises and told tales of his deeds. He was Moses. No, he was Elisha. Or even...the Messiah.

“Is this the one who changed the water into wine?” someone asked, referring to one of his famous works.

“Did you hear that he fed thousands with a mere five loaves and two fishes?”

“I heard four thousand,” said one.

“I heard five!” said another.

“He raised a girl from the dead!”

Whence came such miracles? Jesus couldn't say. Some were mere rumors, imagined to have been seen. Some were not. Jesus was unsure whether his power came from his faith in God or God's faith in him. The people, however, put their faith in Jesus. In Jesus the people had their



champion. A people waiting since the fall of Goliath had their David, the least of these, had their savior. The people gathered together, an army of such size so as to rival any Roman cohort. In Jesus they had their general. From town to town he would perform miracles and hold the ear of the people there. And they would follow him.

But this was Nazareth. Standing naked before his former fellows, he was here to tell them that he'd arrived, the deliverer for whom they'd been waiting. He stood before them for an hour, telling them about his new kingdom that included the poor and disadvantaged.

“No longer will the Sepphorites belittle you or the Jerusalemites ignore you. No! The Lord God loves you not for the works you perform, but only because you love him. He has never stopped loving you, though you may wander away from his side. We are all his children, the Romans, the Sadducees and Pharisees, as well. But he will bring the greatest of them low and raise the least to his side. We are all brothers and sisters in the Lord. And he has sent me to tell you that we may all have eternal life with him. And it won't be sold to the highest bidder or stolen by the mightiest army.”

But as he looked out over the entire village he'd once known, the name of every villager known to each of the others, he did not see the acceptance he'd gained across the countryside. Even his own family sat in the audience, pleading with him to stop speaking and come home with them. The crowd took turns jeering and booing him.

“Isn’t this the little bastard who killed those two sweet boys?”

“Yeah, that’s Mary’s boy. See her over there with her and Joseph’s kids? It must be him. And they seem to think he’s lost his mind.”

“Lost ‘is *balls* is what he lost. Lil coward couldn’t find none o’ his own kind here so he up and run off to the city.”

“Is that where he got such knowledge? How does he do such works as they say?”

Finally one of the men in the crowd stood and bellowed over the others, “Hey, boy! Show us somethin’. Do one of them ‘great works’ these folks talkin’ ‘bout. Hope it’s better ‘n them tables yer daddy made.”

He attempted many great deeds, but was unable to perform them. Perhaps it was for the disbelief of the people. Couldn’t they see that they were preventing miracles from being performed in their midst? He came to them transformed in glory and power, a man of the one true gospel. He was a son of the town. Why didn’t they recognize him? He came to teach them about love. Why wouldn’t they listen?

In the heat and haze of the day, through the din of their questions, protests and catcalls, he realized why they could not see him for what he was. All they saw was the same child of

questionable parentage, the one that let them down so long ago. They saw a little boy, bat at his feet, head hung low. All they could hear was “Stee-rike Three!”