

Chapter 3: Voices in the Cave

“One person brings forth good from the treasure of his heart; another person brings forth evil from the evil treasure in his heart, and he speaks evil.”

– Gospel of Thomas

After wandering in the wastelands east of Jerusalem, the man found a shallow cave and went inside, seeking shelter from the intense noonday heat. Crossing his legs, he leaned back against the relative coolness of the rock. He sat and sat, looking out at the infinity of cliffs and hollows across the desolate land. His name was Yeshua.

He tried to form a plan of action, to focus on what he should do next. But his empty belly intruded upon his thoughts. He grew hungry; then very hungry.

Outside, the air shimmered with buzzing insects. Ravens and crows circled high above, their strident calls echoing along rocky cliffs. Occasionally the man heard a pitiful squeal in the distance, perhaps an animal being killed for prey. Lizards scurried from one spot of shade to another. The man pondered that even in this inhospitable place, life could survive, even thrive.

An alien thought drifted into his mind: perhaps under his own power, he could “heal” the land. Could he make it green and lush by wishing it so? Could he command the water to flow into this dry valley, or call upon rain clouds to soak this dusty, baked earth?

In his heart the man suspected these things might be possible. And yet...

The hot buzzing air waited, as if anxious to know the man’s will. He sat rocking slightly, sweaty and pensive. He watched a scorpion crawl from under a crevice. With black claws held high, tail bristling, the scorpion had its own daily business to attend: searching for food, for a mate, for shelter. Yet it was so different from the gentle creatures in the green hills of Galilee.

The man felt a wave of compassion for the humble scorpion. Who among the sons of Adam could judge whether a scorpion’s task was less worthy than a human’s?

The man began to sing. No creature interrupted its work to listen. The sound of a human voice were a mere breeze rustling through the canyon. After a while the man dozed.

When he woke, his garments were soaked with perspiration and clung to his body. His joints ached from sitting in the same position for so long and his stomach roiled with hunger. His lips were parched and cracked from thirst. He allowed himself one drop of water from the wine skin he carried. That one drop multiplied into a full, soothing draft as it passed into his throat. He savored the cooling wetness, tasting each individual component of the water.

The molecules of water also seemed to be waiting for him to give a signal. At his command, he sensed they would joyfully multiply, gathering more like themselves from hidden folds in the air. The man swallowed his drop of water without making any further demands upon it. He sighed and wondered if prolonged fasting might derange his mind.

Darkness crept over the canyon. In spite of his stomach which seemed to gnaw him from the inside, the man dozed again, this time through the hours of darkness. He woke when the first shafts of daylight streaked across the gray sky. Somewhere in the distance a raucous bird complained bitterly about the coming day, with its plentiful heat and scarcity of food. The man was ravenous now, his hunger so intense it overwhelmed his thoughts. He spied a loaf of bread and stared at it stupidly, wondering if some angel of mercy had left it there beside him during the night. But when he stretched out his hand towards the loaf, he realized it was merely a rock.

At this folly, he laughed, his voice emitting a cracked splintery sound. What was he doing here in this wretched place? Why not go back to the caravan and petition them for food and water? Why not go back to his land and his people, where he could find sustenance and comfort? The fields of Galilee had generously provided for all of his earthly needs. Why was he denying himself his rightful place in the family as firstborn son?

As he contemplated his probable future back in his home village, a shudder of horror swept through him. His expanding mind became aware of his brothers' new venture and

the knowledge that it would come to no good end. He knew of the dispersal of his family, felt their individual pain as his own. He could see Judah in a dark cell and knew the boy's new companions would require a terrible sacrifice. He watched little Miriam climb fearfully into a cavern and he wanted to reach out and comfort the child. He saw his mother's helplessness as she tried to keep her family safe while the world collapsed in disaster. He saw his brothers arguing and blaming one another for the misfortunes they had brought upon themselves. Then he witnessed his father's final agony and felt his own heart convulse with sorrow.

What could he do? How could he help them?

If he returned to his home village he knew that people would not be satisfied with his simple cures. They would expect more.

What they needed was a cure for their spiritual ailments. But petty greed and jealousy and lust and simple selfishness mired them in the same destructive conditions, day after day, year after year. They were like foolish people pouring water onto dirt trying to free themselves from mud.

A wave of despair came over the man. His people were ever looking for a leader, a savior, someone to deliver them from their folly. But he knew they would not heed his council. They did not want the truth.

Instead they sought wicked men, more like jackals and foxes than men, who would enslave them to their appetites, rewarding them just enough so that they preferred slavery to freedom. How could Yeshua convey what had to be said? He stood up and stretched his aching muscles.

“Master...” said a voice.

Had someone followed him here? Yeshua glanced around the cave. There was no one. He must have imagined it.

“Master, if you are hungry, then why not eat?” said the voice.

Yeshua looked down into the canyon, but he was alone. With a chill he realized the voice came from within his own mind.

“Be gone!” he shouted. And the voice was silent, for a while.

Later in the day, when the sun-baked stones turned the canyon into a vast oven, his brain seemed to boil with uneasy thoughts. Queer new shocking ideas rose up in his mind; ideas he would have once dismissed as insane. The voice returned.

“Master, why do you retreat from your destiny?” it said. “Why not accept the honor of other men? They want to venerate you. At one word, they would fall down on their faces and adore you. They would fight among themselves to become your most cherished disciple. They would obey your orders, satisfy your every desire. Why do you deprive men of that joy? Your tribe is waiting for a king. Your people are oppressed. They seek deliverance. Will you not take up the yoke of duty to liberate and avenge your kinsmen?”

Yeshua was angered by these words. Standing on the rim of the canyon, he sang the most beautiful song he knew. His own clear voice echoed back from the distant rocks. His heart was uplifted as he sang. But then he realized he could still hear that other voice between every syllable. Finally, exhausted, he stood teetering on the edge of the canyon. He knew he must confront the voice or it would grow inside him like an invisible disease, becoming his own spiritual ailment. He listened.

The voice had not spoken any specific lies. Indeed the words contained strands of truth. But somehow the truth was being twisted, confused; like threads tangled into knots instead of smoothly woven into fabric.

And yet, the voice was strangely beguiling. The harder he tried to ignore it, the more he craved to hear it again.

“Why not test yourself?” it whispered. “Throw yourself down into the canyon. You will be protected by the hands of angels.”

Yeshua looked down to the rocks below. He felt a sense of being safe, no matter what.

“Surely the Divine One would not allow you to die here like this.” said the voice. “Surely the Divine One has great plans for you.”

“Tempt me not.” answered the man.

“Why not turn the stone into bread?” asked the voice. “Is it not right for a man to eat so that he can carry out the Divine Will?”

Yeshua stretched his long hand toward a nearby stone; his fingers tingled. Once again, he sensed that the inner particles of the stone actually yearned to reconfigure themselves into bread for him. His mouth salivated at the thought. But somehow he refrained from making the command.

“Be gone!” he shouted, then in a softer tone, as if explaining to a child, he added, “A man does not live by bread alone.” Again the voice was silent.

Yeshua opened his mouth and took another precious drop of water from the wine skin. As it spread over his tongue and entered his throat, the water was like light within his body, at once refreshing and illuminating him from within. In that single drop of water, Yeshua felt his kinship with every part of creation, from the smallest mite to the greatest mountain, from the vastness of the sky to the depths of the sea. He sensed an intimate contact with the Holy One who hid inside every facet of creation.

“What is my path?” he begged the air, “What am I to do?”

He waited for something – anything – to change. But all continued as before. There was no sign, no answer of any kind from Heaven.

With shame Yeshua realized that in the mind of the Creator, his own demand for signs and omens was somehow unworthy, coming from the same place as the infernal voice that tormented him. Salty tears burned his eyes but did not spill down his cheeks.

“Men are fools,” said the other voice. “They are blind men trying to instruct deaf men. They need your vision. They would pay handsomely for your guidance. They would worship you as their king; they would make you into a god...”

“Depart from me!” shouted Yeshua. “Now and forever!”