

14 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Yeshua, ²and he said to his attendants, This is Yohanan the Immerser; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him. ³Now Herod had arrested Yohanan and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, ⁴for Yohanan had been saying to him: It is not lawful for you to have her. ⁵Herod wanted to kill Yohanan, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered Yohanan a prophet. ⁶On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced in the midst of them and pleased Herod ⁷so he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. ⁸Prompted by her mother, she said, Give me here on a platter the head of Yohanan the Immerser. ⁹The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and those who sat with him at the meal, he ordered that her request be granted ¹⁰and he sent and had Yohanan beheaded in the prison. ¹¹His head was brought in on a platter and given to the damsel, who brought it to her mother. ¹²His disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Yeshua.

commentary

14:1 At this time – At the time when the feeding of the five thousand took place. This is according to the author's narrative to set up the next block of Galilean narratives. The gospel of Mark places this incident after the sending of the twelve disciples (cf. *chapter 10*). From this chapter onwards Mattai and Mark's timeline coincide, though.

14:1 Herod the tetrarch – This is the son of Herod the Great. He ruled over Galilee and Perea – the fourth part of his father's dominion – as a client state of the Roman Empire. He was known as "Herodes Antipas" and "king Herod," even though he never officially held such title.

14:2 This is Yohanan the Immerser; he has risen from the dead! – These things were heard from among the masses: That Yeshua was the reincarnation of Eliyahu the prophet, or some other Biblical prophet who had risen from among the dead, or Yohanan the Immerser who had returned (cf. *Matt. 16:6; Mark 8:15*). Herod's belief that he was the Immerser may have been an out-of-panic reaction, but it elucidates for us his beliefs' background. He either believed it was a full resurrection of body and soul or perhaps he thought it was an ibur (i.e., Yohanan's soul reincarnated and joined Yeshua's own soul). One belief was very common while the other was mystical, but neither of them matches the beliefs of the Sadducees, so he certainly was not a Sadducee. For lack of a better word, Herodians were like "secular Pharisees."

14:5 they considered Yohanan a prophet – Like the prophets from Scripture. That is why they thought Yeshua's miracles came from him.

14:6 the daughter of Herodias – Josephus calls her Salome (*Antiquities 18:5:4*). She danced in the midst of the guests at the banquet, as they reclined and stared. Such was the decay of Israel during Roman occupation, that its leaders engaged themselves and their daughters in the practices of the heathens. The Immerser represented the very opposite, the integrity of the small remnant. He went against the current of the world, did not succumb to peer pressure and boldly denounced the misbehavior of the nation, even of its leaders. Sadly, he died for being the only one in the story who did the right thing. This is a sign of what is to be expected before the advent of Messiah: opposition, darkness and people forgetting the Torah: "Insolence will increase... the government will turn to heresy... the wisdom of the scribes will rot" (*Sotah 9:15*).

14:8 Prompted by her mother – This implies this was not Salome's initiative, but she did what she learnt from her mother. While honoring our parents is a mitzva (*Exod. 20:12*), a son is obliged to try and make his parents reconsider their ways. A son must at all times speak to their parents with honor and respect, unless they are inciting people to sin and corruption, as it is written (*Deut. 13:9*): "You must not spare nor conceal him," because Divine honor overrides honor to the parents (cf. *Sanhedrin 85a*).

¹³When Yeshua heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴Yeshua went forth and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick.

commentary

14:13 he withdrew by boat – Mark and Luke’s version place this passage after the disciples return from their mission. It says they were so overwhelmed by the multitudes they did not even have time to eat (*Mark 6:30-31; Luke 9:10*). Mattai, however, emphasizes that Yeshua’s need for solitude was rather because he wanted to mourn Yohanan’s death. The Immerser was very loved by the masses, so much that every trouble Herod experienced afterwards was thought to be a retribution for this sin (cf. *Antiquities 18:5:2*). Some theologians propose that perhaps the two cases happened at the same time, namely the disciples arrived from their mission – the masses overwhelming them – and simultaneously the news of Yohanan’s death reached Yeshua. In later verses Mattai mentions the crowds overwhelming them as well, so the need for solitude because of mourning is specific of this author.

14:13 a solitary place – The Shem Tov manuscript adds “the desert of Judah.” But Luke (*9:10*) says the place was in Beit-Saida. Luke makes more sense here as all these chapters happen within or around Galilee. It perhaps was the Beit-saida of Gaulonitis, where Herod had no further jurisdiction, for it belonged to his brother Philip, and so they could rest with no fear of being arrested. There were two coastal towns called Beit-Saida; the name means “house of fishing” **בית צידא**.

14:14 and was moved with compassion – “A father who has true compassion on his children will involve himself with Torah and mitzvot... and nobody has more compassion on his children than the tzaddiq” (*Kitzur Shulkha Arukh 143:21*). Yeshua was tired of dealing with all these crowds, of running from the Herodians and the news of Yohanan’s death certainly impacted him; he wanted to do hitbodedut (self-isolation), like when he stayed forty days in the desert. These moments of spiritual refreshment are necessary for everybody, especially when our lifestyles become hectic and oppressive, and it is easy to forget our spiritual calling. The crowds kept following him, though, and demanding more of his work. In a way, these followers were his spiritual children, for he brought them forth from among the lowest of society into the wings of the Shekhina. As the text said earlier, they were like sheep without a shepherd (*Matt. 9:36*), and so he was moved with compassion, because one of the greatest characteristics of a true tzaddiq is his ability to walk in somebody else’s shoes. The command to be empathic is straightforwardly found in the verse: “Do not mistreat a stranger... for you were strangers” (*Exod. 20:22*) and again: “Love your neighbor as yourself, I am Hashem” (*Leviticus 19:18*), which the sages call “a very great command” for the entire Torah depends on it (cf. *Shabbat 31a; Sifre Qedoshim 7, 4:12*).

¹⁵As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, This is a desert place and the time is now past. Send the multitude away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food. ¹⁶Yeshua replied, They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat. ¹⁷We have here only five loaves and two fish, they answered. ¹⁸Bring them here to me, he said. ¹⁹And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he blessed and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.

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14:17 We have here only five loaves and two fish – This miracle is also narrated in Yohanan’s gospel, which hints us to an underlying spiritual meaning. In the fourth gospel the one who brings the five loaves of bread and two fish is a mysterious child (*John 6:9*). This child also appears in mystical texts and is described as a kid who knows Torah, a non-human child, whose father is riding on a donkey (*Zohar 3:186b*). This kid symbolizes Divine Providence and holy inspiration. Yohanan adds that Passover was near, which for some people it suggests the incident took place somewhere near the feast of Purim. If that was the case it would make sense, because about Purim it is said that one should not give less than two gifts to the poor: “some would supply bread and wine, and some would supply bread and fish” (*Sofrim 21:4*). The five loaves of bread in our story are the five books of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This is the bread from heaven, as it is written: “Man does not live by bread only, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of Hashem he lives” (*Deut. 8:3*). The Torah is called “bread,” as it is written (*Proverbs 9:5*): “Come, partake of my bread” (*Bamidbar Rabbah 13:16*). The fish in Kabbalah is the creature that lives in the concealed reality, in the mysteries of the Torah, as it is written about the future: “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as waters cover the sea” (*Isaiah 11:9*). There are two types of fish from which the people must eat in order to receive spiritual nourishment: the first is Moshe, the author of the Torah, who was born on the 7th of Adar (the fish) and is compared to a great fish, as it is written: “For I have drawn him out of the water” (*Exod. 2:10*). The second is the hidden tzaddiq, who is called “nunei yama,” the fish of the sea. A hidden tzaddiq swims in the waters of wisdom, rooted in the hidden reality of the world and delivers the spiritual essence of the Torah for everybody else to eat. He who learns from these tzaddiqim and learns the mysteries of the Torah “has domain over the fish of the sea” (*Zohar III:42a*). Figuratively speaking, they eat the tzaddiq.

14:18 Bring them here to me – The Torah was brought to him, to teach it and to interpret it. That is why it later says, “he gave them to the disciples and the disciples gave them to the people.” It refers to Yeshua’s teachings which were passed down to his students.

14:19 directed the people to sit down on the grass – In the likeness of the verse, “May my discourse come down as rain... like droplets on the grass” (*Deut. 32:2*). The Sifrei Devarim interpreted here: “A man who starts learning Torah does not know how to proceed until he has learned two orders or two books, after which it pursues him like droplets on the grass” (*Sifrei Devarim 306:30*).

14:19 he blessed and broke the loaves – This is the customary procedure before eating bread. The blessing for bread is called “hamotzi” (the one who brings forth) and it says, “Blessed are you, Adonai, our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth” (*Berakhot 38a*). According to Jewish law, “one should recite the blessing and afterwards break the bread” (*ibid. 39b*), and this is what Yeshua does. Mirroring this, we recite a blessing before reading from the Torah too (*Mishna Megillah 4:1*). Breaking the loaves and sharing them reflects what is written, “And they read in the book, in the Torah of God, distinctly, and gave sense and explained the reading to them” (*Nehemiah 8:8*).

²⁰They all ate and were filled, and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full. ²¹The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children. ²²Immediately Yeshua made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴and the boat was already in the midst of the sea, tossed by the waves because the wind was contrary.

textual variants

14:24 and the boat was already in the midst of the sea – In other manuscripts the verse reads: “the boat was constrained many stadia away from the land.” The two versions convey the same idea with different words. A stadium (the singular of stadia) was a Greek unit of length, corresponding to nearly 600 feet or 180 meters. This unit is rarely used in ancient Jewish literature, found mostly on Greek texts such as Josephus (cf. *Antiquities*) or 2nd Enoch. It is widely used in the gospels of Luke, John and the book of Revelation, but in Mattai this would be the only instance. It is most likely that the original rendering was “in the midst of the sea,” as most manuscripts and Eusebius suggest. Eusebius rendering of this verse is significant because he registered the fact that the original of Mattai was written in a Semitic language, not in Greek (cf. *Ecclesiastical history* 3:39).

commentary

14:20 They all ate – There is a desire within the heart that cannot be satiated with anything of this world. A tzaddiq, who connects us with the worlds above, is true food to the soul of his disciples, as it is written: “Moshe said to them: This is the bread” (*Exod. 16:15*). “The word ‘this’ refers specifically to Moshe himself, because it was in his merit that they ate manna” (*Liqutei Moharan 58:2*). It is, therefore, written: “My own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread” (*Psalms 41:10*). According to the sages, the expression “ate of my bread” means “he studied Torah with me” (cf. *Sanhedrin 106b-107a*).

14:20 they took up the fragments that remained twelve baskets full – The twelve baskets full are Yeshua’s twelve disciples. The students of a tzaddiq are filled with his wisdom and their baskets are full for anyone to partake and learn.

14:21 was five thousand men – That is probably a literal or estimated number of the crowds who followed Yeshua, although a symbolic meaning should not be easily discarded. The word for thousand “elef” can also be read as aluf (champion or trained). Five thousands are elef times (i.e., one thousand times, or trained ones-times) the five loaves of bread (which is the Torah). These were the ones who studied the Torah and understood Yeshua’s teachings, not counting women and children, i.e., those who are not obliged to study or too young to understand.

14:22 go ahead of him to the other side – We have already mentioned that the “other side” is a kabbalistic allusion to the realm of impurity.

14:23 After he had dismissed them – After healing them from their sins and filling them with the bread of Torah, he sent them back to the daily world, where Torah must be put into practice.

14:24 tossed by the waves because the wind was contrary – These are the spiritual forces of the Other Side, which are in constant opposition against the children of light, causing them to doubt, to stumble and fall. The Sea of the Other Side is this materialistic selfish world, which uses our ego and our doubts to drown our spirituality. “Doubt,” safeq ספק, has the gematria of Amaleq עמלק, hence it is written, “Hashem is at war with Amaleq from generation to generation” (*Exodus 17:20*). The name of Hashem will never be complete and at harmony until Amaleq (the spirit of doubt) is blotted out (cf. *Midrash Tanhuma, Ki Tetzei*).

²⁵In the fourth watch of the night Yeshua went out to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified. It is a ghost! they said, and cried out in fear. ²⁷But Yeshua immediately spoke to them saying: Take courage! It is me. Do not be afraid. ²⁸Keifa replied and said, Master, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water. ²⁹Come, he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Yeshua. ³⁰But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out saying, Lord, save me! ³¹Immediately Yeshua reached out his hand and caught him and said, You of little faith, why did you doubt? ³²And when they climbed into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³Then those who were in the boat prostrated before him, saying, Truly you are the son of God.

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14:25 In the fourth watch of the night – The night is divided in four watches (*Berakhot 3b, 39b*), the first watch begins at sunset, around 6 p.m. It is written: “Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches” (*Lam. 2:19*), and David says, “I rise at midnight” (*Psalms 119:62*) and “my eyes forestall the watches” (*Psalms 119:148*), implying there are two more watches after midnight, giving a total of four watches. While Rabbi Nathan disagrees and says there are three watches in the night (*Eikha Rabbah 2:22*), the Hallakha follows the opinion of the four watches (*Tosefta Berakhot 1:3*). It may be that one opinion reflects the physical world, whereas the other opinion reflects the spiritual world, for the angels in Heaven have different shifts to sing at night as well, three shifts in total, paralleling the opinion of Rabbi Nathan (cf. *Bereshit Rabbah 78:1*). There is one shift for every time they say “Holy” (*Hullin 91a; Isaiah 6:3*). The fourth watch of the night was when Yaaqov’s wrestling with the angel came to an end, as the angel says, “Let me go, for the dawn has risen” (*Genesis 32:27*). Yeshua had been praying on his own during the night, paralleling Yaaqov, who was also alone during the night when the angel appeared (*ibid. 32:23, 25*). Both stories, together with Israel fighting Amaleq, represent a spiritual battle against the forces of evil and doubt, a search for God’s blessing when the forces of the Other Side rise in opposition.

14:25 Yeshua went out to them, walking on the sea – Yeshua ישוע (i.e., salvation ישועה) approached them walking above the entire ocean of the forces of evil. This is the inner redemption that Yeshua was offering to his followers, not a national redemption against Rome, but a spiritual redemption against Amaleq.

14:26 It is a ghost! – ghosts appear in TaNaKh coupled with familiar spirits (*Lev. 20:27; Deut. 18:11*); they are the spirit or residual energy of a dead person. The sages tell stories about Rabbis who saw ghosts (cf. *Kallah Rabbati 2:9*), so they are part of pharisaic folklore. The literal meaning is that Yeshua’s white robes made him look like a ghost as he approached them in the stormy night walking on the water, and they were terrified. The allegorical meaning is that, because of the waves that this world’s raging sea rams us with, we tend to believe that redemption is dead, being nothing but a ghostly desire. There seems to be no hope in this world, and many times we will fail to see a way out of our situation. But the spirit of Messiah, which is the light of redemption, tells us that we should never be afraid, because even this is for the sake of redemption. “Take courage, it is me, do not be afraid.”

14:29 Tell me to come to you on the water – “If it is true that it is possible to escape this world’s chaos, I will walk on it, without being drowned by it, and I will reach my redemption.”

14:30 beginning to sink – He began to be assimilated by this world’s system, which is under the forces of the Other Side.

14:32 the wind ceased – See my commentary on Mattai 8:27.

³⁴When they had crossed over, they came into the land of Gennasar. ³⁵And when the men of that place recognized Yeshua, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to him ³⁶and begged him to let the sick just touch the hem of his garment, and all who touched it were healed.

commentary

14:34 Gennasar – All Hebrew manuscripts render it Ginneisar גניסר (Gennasar in Aramaic), which means the garden of the prince. The implication is that after defeating the forces of the Other Side (meaning of: “when they had crossed over”), the soul reaches a spiritual state called the Garden of the Prince. The original sin, which was caused by unbelief, drove man out of the garden; i.e., man lost intimacy with the Creator as a consequence of choosing “knowledge” over faith. “When Adam sinned, he drew upon himself countless evil forces and guardians of judgment, before all of whom he trembled, overwhelmed” (c.f., *Zohar I:53b*). The true challenge of mankind is to return to that state, as it is written, “the upright will dwell in your presence” (*Psalms 140:14*). The Messianic consciousness dwells in a hidden place of the Garden called “the Bird’s Nest.” When it descends into our boat, i.e., down to this materialistic world, we bring back into it the light of the Shekhina and Malkhut (the kingdom) is transformed into the likeness of the Garden (which is Binah). The bird’s nest in Hebrew is called Qein Tzipor (*Zohar 2:7b*). Qein קין derives from Taqein תקין, to correct, to do tiqqun [on the world]. Tzipor צפור is a hidden name for Messiah, as it has the gematria of זה משיח “this is Messiah.” One of Messiah’s names is “Prince of Peace,” Sar Shalom (*Isaiah 9:5*). This is the mystical reason why the place in the story is called Gennasar גניסר, the Garden of the Prince. The Talmud tells a story about someone who was climbing a tree, to get the eggs from a bird’s nest. In fulfillment of the mitzva, he released their mother, but this person died shortly after, so the sages explained that when the Torah promises “that you may live long,” it does not refer to this world, but to the messianic era. It is no coincidence that this Talmudic story takes place in Gennasar as well (*Yerushalmi Hagiga 2:1 [9b]*). The Greek “Gennesaret” is perhaps a verbal corruption of derivating Gennasar from Hinnereth (*Joshua 19:35*).

14:36 the hem of his garment – This was explained on Mattai 9:20.