



# The JUSTUS Scrolls

Recollections of an Almost Apostle  
Scroll I: Let There Be Light

Paul David Morris  
with Bonnie Gaffney Morris

*The*  
***JUSTUS***  
***SCROLLS***

*Recollections of an Almost  
Apostle*



**The First Scroll**  
*Let There Be Light*

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## ***For All My Children***

*How can we present Jesus Christ to the world in a way that is simultaneously authentic and relevant? A double discipline seems to be needed, negative and positive. The negative is to rid our minds of all preconceptions and prejudices, and resolutely to renounce any attempt to force Jesus into our pre-determined mould. In other words we must repent of Christian 'procrusteanism.' Procrustes, in Greek mythology, was a brutal robber who compelled his victims to fit the dimensions of his iron bed. If they were too short, he stretched them. If they were too long, he chopped off their feet. The Christian "Procrustes" exhibits a similar inflexibility, forcing Jesus into his way of thinking and resorting to ruthless measures in order to secure his conformity. From Procrustes and all his disciples, good Lord deliver us!*

John R.W. Stott  
*The Incomparable Christ*

*My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.*

Joseph Conrad

## *Exordium*

Earth had yet to bathe in first dawn. Coruscating flares glistened immense in reaches of crystal purple. Beyond other earths, moons, eons of light posturing spirals, fulminating furies, on the other side of black night, before the first instance of time, breathed the living Word, a vital supremacy, pulsating rhythmic cadence,

The Word was with God.

The Word was God.

αΘω

Celestial, vacant and vast, created by the Word who lives outside; external, in transcendent reality incomprehensible, and in unearthly dimension, unimaginable. Into this created expanse, he placed all it now contains, a womb; a tangible place of nourishment for that which he would create in his own image, a world prepared as a home fit for the *Imago Dei*.

From an infinite array of assembled specks of brilliance, he selected one. From its sea sand of luminous bodies, he selected the light that rules by day. From that light's orbs, he selected yet another. From the soil of that orb, he formed a man.

In the Image of God created he him.

αΘω

The Word implanted life into the man he created and the man became a living person, yet unfinished and incomplete. Creation was *not yet good*. Therefore, the Word created woman and the woman and the man were one as he is One. *Perfection!* Male and female created he them. Male without female, female without male are each in their uniqueness, incomplete. Together, they are one. Together, they are *good*.

An image is a reflection, a one-dimensioned, but otherwise exact copy of the original. So elegant, so complete this Image, it reflects the power to make its own choices. The Word has that power, and in creating man and woman in his Image, the two of them also had that power—the power to make their own choices. They were reflections of him, yet they were unique. They were the same, yet they were unique; different from him and different from each other. In the quality of their uniqueness, they also reflected him, for there is none like him. This may

seem a paradox, but when considered deeply, you will see that it is not.

They could now choose independently of the Word's choices. And this they did. He chose to have them live together in love, sharing intimacy with him and with all that he had created. They chose, however, to grasp for the knowledge of right and wrong, to draw distinctions between good and evil. In impact and in substance, they became creatures of law. A distance larger than that which separates the stars is that which separates the value of a life lived in hallowed love from a life lived in constraint to law. In making this choice, darkness entered the man and the woman. With darkness came death.

The life of the Word became light to the man and when light shines in darkness, darkness cannot extinguish or resist it. The Word penetrated this darkness with light. Its function is to redeem, to release and reclaim the person, the created soul and body, the effervescent spirit formed in the image of God. What is so familiar, the ant, the worm, a soft breeze, the violet, the urge to move your bowels—all appear insignificant and tellurian set against the backdrop of the Infinite.

Yet from this resplendent palace of unspeakable purity, beyond and larger than the eternal, the Word came to live in this world—in a body that *could* die. Such a consequence as to encompass the Eternal God in perishable human frame is incomprehensible. It blinds the mind, turning it to coal and pith. The result is black. Because of this impenetrable darkness, we who live in this world did not—*could not*—recognize him for whom he was. Still, the genius of his power penetrates the impenetrable, reaching any and all malleable souls, any and all who would dare to believe. This marvelous Light of his infinite life permeates and illumines, reaching to the extremities of hopes and dreams, and the gift to be a child once again becomes his irrevocable warrant; a child of the Eternal God, a child born not of natural descent, but born of God.

αΘω

We honor the credibility and affirm the noble magnificence of him who came from God the Father, this Word so full of Grace and Truth. From the great reservoir of his Grace we have all received *life*, and life's continuing benefits, giving reason for perpetual celebration. From the fullness of Truth, we have received illumination, dissipating the darkness of relativism and uncertainty. To teach men the futility of trying to live by knowing good and evil, religious and civil law came through Moses. The

Enlightenment and Life that comes by Grace and Truth, however, comes only through Jesus Christ. No one with earthbound eyes, has ever seen God the Father. But this *Word* who lives in the Father's heart has now lived among us. He lives among us still. It is he, who has revealed the Father to us.

## *October, A.D. 60*

Creaking under the weight of a copper-sheathed wooden box and the elderly man it carried, a makeshift wagon bumped and rumbled its way across a cobbled-stoned quay. The driver held loosely to the reins as the sweating mule moved wagon, driver, passenger and box, down the jarring waterfront where a ship was being laded. Recently, the ship had sailed from Alexandria, and after a circuitous voyage of more than two thousand miles, would thence return. Or, at least, that was the intention of its owner, and the obligation of its captain. But these leagues were yet ahead of its prow, and who is to know the future or, who is to know what lurks in the mists of the deep?

A dock worker, his full, red beard matted with dried spittle, approached the wagon; his body thick, hands like a troll, covered with hair, two fingers missing along with several yellow teeth, one was eye closed. “Oove y’ ‘orse over ‘ere,” he commanded, dropping his consonants, and pointing what remained of his fingers to a spot on the wharf. A large hawser hung from the wooden beam of a crane, an iron hook attached to its business end. As the wagon pulled into position, the dock-walloper yanked the heavy hawser to suspend directly over the box, now strapped with ropes in order to lift it. He slipped the hook into the O-ring and turned to the crane operator, giving a universal, thumbs-up sign.

“Careful how you handle that box!” cried the old gentleman. “It contains precious, fragile cargo.”

“Min’ yer own earwax, yer ol’ mule-fart!” replied the dockman, “an I’ll min’ mine!” The copper box swung up and over the gunwale of the ship, and down into the blackness of the hold. The old man looked concerned, but turned and made his way up the gangplank.

“Yes,” muttered the object of the dockman’s scorn. *A mule-fart?* thought he. *More like a fly-fart in a gale. Such is the consequence of my life.* He had no justifiable reason to take such a view of himself. He was a man of honor and integrity. In fact, he had done much in his life for which to take satisfaction, and much for which to feel pride. Yet, he was continually nagged by the notion that he was unworthy. He was met at the gunwale by the ship’s clerk who examined his credentials, checking them against the ship’s manifest, and who advised him of his assigned berth.

After stowing his gear, the elderly gentleman wandered out again

on deck. It was a beautiful day on a substantial ship, perhaps 230 feet long and 75 feet from beam to beam. White clouds scudded through bright blue skies. She was constructed of mortised plankings, cedar and other woods, using trenails (a wooden dowel pin that swells when wet) to fasten them together, and pitch for caulking the seams, in the manner of superb Egyptian artisanship. Two masts, a large one set just forward of amidships, and another smaller set aft of the foc'sle, a single canvas on each mast. Above her prow, curved the sleek neck of a white swan, crafted to the very image of the real thing pushing through serene waters, perhaps a talisman to conjure a promise of smooth sailing. Together, there were ample quarters for almost 300 souls, including the rowers below decks, and 30 tons of cargo. Most of that, it seemed, was great stores of wheat.

He stood at the rail, adjusting his robes, when a disturbance occurred on the quay. Three soldiers and a centurion, by the look of him, were escorting a man toward the gangplank. There was a crowd, shouting and surging around the man. Some seemed to favor him, others in angry opposition. The old man narrowed his eyes. A vague awareness of recognition came over him. Looking deeper into the crowd, he recognized a second person. The first was the celebrated evangelist, Paul, formerly known as Saul of Tarsus, and the other was Lucian, the physician. Although he was not shackled or in chains, Paul was clearly in the custody of the Roman centurion. They were surrounded by a mob of thirty or forty men, shouting and shoving. The soldiers had their hands full.

The centurion strode up the gangway and addressed the ship's clerk at the rail, "I am Julian, centurion to Caesar." The clerk dipped his head in respect. "I bring with me Saul of Tarsus, also known as Paul, a leader of the Christian sect. He is my prisoner and I escort him to Rome for audience with Caesar."

"Prisoner?" inquired the clerk, somewhat frightened. "Why is he not in irons?"

"This prisoner is no flight risk, nor is he a threat to anyone. He is but an expounder of annoying words." The centurion seemed impatient with the clerk's question. "He will cause no trouble aboard ship. Here are my credentials for passage." He handed the clerk his documents. Again, the clerk examined his manifest.

"It says here that the prisoner is to be manacled and quartered in the brig."



“He will not be manacled while in my custody,” said the centurion flatly. “Nor will he be quartered in the ship’s gaol. He remains with me, in my sight at all times.”

“You will be mindful, sir, that the Captain of this vessel will make such decisions.”

The centurion smiled sardonically. “Then you will summon him here.” The clerk appeared unsettled and confused. “Now!” Then the ship’s man found the good sense to know that he had heard the voice of authority.

Still, he hesitated, “I must . . .”

“Move!”

The clerk disappeared toward the aft cabin. In a moment he returned with a burly looking fellow, full-bearded and with the epaulets of captaincy on his shoulders. He took one look at the centurion and cried, “Julian! What in the name of the fires of hell are you doing on my vessel?” The captain was grinning as though he had encountered a long, lost friend. Which, indeed, he had.

αΘω

As he adjusted his robes, he could not help but notice how threadbare they had become, how gray from repeated washings. Thoughts came at random. He thought of the events which had led him to this hour, this place. He had spent the last fifteen years of his life writing about it or, was it sixteen? He couldn’t remember. It had started one day when he reminisced, enjoying a few memories of his time with the Master. He remembered that it was evening and growing dark outside, that he had lit a few candles, retrieved some blank parchment, dipped his quill and begun to write. So long ago, it seemed, and the memories he penned? Even longer.

Now, as the ship’s prow pointed southwest, sails filled with wind, and as the quay receded in the distance, his mind returned to this amazing coincidence of being on the same ship with the man called Paul. He believed, that with God, there were no “coincidences.” This inevitable encounter had to be divinely arranged. He wondered where it would go? *A step at a time . . . We’ll see . . .* The horizon beckoned, winds soft, almost non-existent; an occasional luff in the sails, the ship creaked gently, the splash of its prow a comforting sound.

The day passed uneventfully. The next day, the day after that and the day after that. Sight of land was lost, but at the imperceptible rate the

ship sailed, it couldn't be far off to starboard. Myra, the point of embarkation, had disappeared days ago. The ship continued to loll about in almost calm waters. Sails, ruffling. Seabirds hanging motionless in the air. Sweating men straining against oars dipping rhythmically, biting the sea. Lethargically, the ship loitered through the waters.

At length, a breeze picked up, sails filled and the white swan dipped her breast into dancing whitecaps. Headway began. But then the wind shifted. The ship jibed. The wind shifted. The ship tacked. The wind shifted yet again. Waves, confused by the changing wind, crashed into one another. The ship lurched and wallowed. Strong winds, navigable, but strong, began to blow. Unrelenting, they shifted yet again, and again after that. Going was difficult, perhaps, impossible. Ship, passengers and cargo were getting nowhere. After days of seeming floundering, the island of Crete was sighted in the distance. Tiller angled for land, oarsmen commanded to pull, and at length, the ship put in at Good Harbor, which served the town of Lacea.

Almost everyone disembarked, glad and grateful to get their feet accustomed once again to solid ground. The elderly passenger stayed aboard ship. "Come, old fellow!" said one of the departing crew to him, "Come, and let us rest from this infernal sea. Come, and break a skin of good wine."

"You go, sir. Enjoy yourself. I stay aboard ship until I reach my destination."

"And where might that be?"

"Alexandria, Egypt."

"Alexandria! By way of Italy? This ship sails for Rome, old friend. You will be sick of her by then. You should be sick of her now!"

"I have cargo," replied the old man. "I do not wish to leave it." Mumbling to himself about the shrunken world of the elderly, the crewman made his way down the gangplank to the quay.

He did, indeed, ask himself why he had chosen such a circuitous route to his destination, instead of the more direct route across the Great Sea. It was hard to determine a good reason. He loved life on board ship and often wondered why he did not choose a life at sea. But, with favorable winds, this voyage should only take a little over two weeks of actual sailing, not counting time in ports of call. He looked forward to the journey and the smell of sea and salt.

And then he thought of what he had done. He often wondered how God valued what he had done. It was the culmination of his entire life, especially those four years with his Lord and friend. Now, it was all recorded. These scrolls and the time he had invested in them meant more to him in terms of the purpose of his life, than anything else he had done. It was, he believed, God's intention and purpose for his existence.

Now, for their preservation, he was taking them to the great library at Alexandria, Egypt. Of course, he knew that the library had burned thanks to the carelessness of Julius Caesar over a hundred years ago. Caesar had deliberately set fire to his own ships in an attempt to thwart the treachery of one of his own generals. The fire from one of the ships docked too close to the library, accidentally setting the great repository of ancient literature afire. Countless documents had been destroyed, but not all. Many priceless scrolls were saved and stored in a Temple known as the *Serapeum* where scholars continued to labor among the cherished texts. It was among these that he thought to place his own. *This is the place they should live*, thought he. *Here, in this daughter library, they will be preserved until someday, perhaps, someday . . .*

αΘω

Owing to the season, (the autumn solstice had passed), they anticipated treacherous seas. Wintering on the sea was not a pleasant prospect. There was much discussion among the crew as to whether to winter in the harbor or continue on. The prisoner, Paul, who was not being treated like a prisoner, weighed in on the issue: "Cast out to sea, and the ship is doomed. We will all perish, every mother's son of us." This made us all feel better.

The ship's captain rolled his eyes and looked at the man of God with the tolerance one gives a child who believes he can command the waves on the beach. "What do you think?" asked the centurion of the captain. "I think I prefer the opinion of a sea-faring professional, than that

of a religious philosopher.”

“He is right about one thing,” said the captain. “The going will be rough. Still, I have never seen the storm that could best me and my crew, not to speak of my ship. She’s Egyptian. She can deal with any Euroclydon this sea can offer. The swan will guide us. We sail at daybreak!”

## αΘω

*Religious philosopher?* The thought provoked disdain in the old man’s mind. *This man Paul is more than a religious philosopher. He may be the 13<sup>th</sup> apostle! Or, so some think.*

“May I intrude on your thoughts?” The question interrupted his reverie as he had been watching the swelling waves, watching the seabirds hover, watching the clouds scudding darker and darker. He turned to see who had spoken.

*You!*

“I may be a prisoner, sir, but I will not harm you. It is for what I preach that I am in the custody of Rome. I am not a robber, thief, or a murderer—at least not anymore,” he thought quietly.

He calmed himself after the initial shock that the apostle had spoken to him. “I know you to be none of these things, sir. I know who you are.”

“Have we met? You do seem familiar.”

“We have not met. At least not formally. I was present when you were introduced to the apostles in Antioch. We barely made eye-contact.”

“Yes! You were there! I remember seeing you. You were . . . we both were younger then.” The old man smiled at the apostle’s observation.

“I am older than you might think, Paul of the Epiphany. I know how you have served the Lord all these years. I know you bear his scars; scars I am ashamed to say, I have not borne.”

“The disfigurement and scabs I bear, dear friend, are but badges of honor in my service to Jesus Christ. And your shame is unfounded, sir. Though I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus, that you have none is no sign that you are one whit of less importance to him, or God forbid, that you are loved less.”

“I long most to be his servant; no matter the cost, no matter the consequence.”

“Paul of the Epiphany?” responded the apostle with a smile. “So you know of my experience on the highway to Damascus.” It was a statement, not a question. “Then, indeed, you were there when I met the twelve. You know of James, the Lord’s brother. You know of Peter, John and the others.”

“Yes, I not only know of them, brother, I know them all personally and intimately. Or, at least, I thought I did.” His eyes turned down and away.

“I take it then, that you are a follower of The Way.”

“If that is what you wish to call it, yes.”

“What would you call it?”

The old man seemed lost in thought for a moment. Pensive. Observing, evaluating the undulating horizon as if it had something to say. “I am a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, sir. He is my King, my Lord, my Savior and my God. He was, he is my friend, my brother, my kinsman.”

“Then we have much of which to speak.”

“Perhaps, sir, but not now.” The old man rose from his seat, leaned on his staff which he used to steady himself and began to move away. “These bones are old, stiff and sore. The brain I carry in my head is tired. It needs rest.” And with that Paul the apostle was left to wonder.

αΘω

Beneath the baggage, and buried under other assorted passenger paraphernalia, the copper-encased box rested. Three feet square, the box was completely encased with copper, a durable, but malleable metal. There was a lid, or a cover, which separated from the main body of the box about eight inches down from the top, the seam being filled with molten tin and allowed to harden. In order to open the box, the tin had to be melted again with an iron, heated to red-hot. The flashpoint of the wood beneath the seam, had only to be slightly lower than the tin. This was an excellent method of sealing the wood beneath a coating of copper. It would allow

no entry of insect, rodent or pest, or humidity, or even briny water. It was, indeed, effectively sealed.

Inside the box, packed in washed sand, there stood fixed a large, impressively adorned urn, its lid tightly sealed with resin. And inside the urn, wrapped in dry cloths, was the old man's treasure of memories, more important to him than his own life.

Sails fill again with whistling wind. Whitecaps send ocean spray into the air. *Taste the salt on your lips.* There are fewer trailing seagulls. Swells in the water become larger. Troughs deeper. Clouds darker. There is a serious, almost ominous tension among the crew. The captain is often seen observing the weather, a look of concern, if not worry, on his face. Were you standing near him, you would strain to hear him say, perhaps sense him thinking, "*Eurochydon.*"

αΘω

A knock on the door of his cabin. The apostle looked at the opaque passageway. "Come," said he. The door opened and the old man entered the small room that served as quarters for the apostle's voyage. Paul smiled. It was good to have a brother believer with him. Perhaps they could talk. Perhaps they could pray together. Without waiting to be invited, the old man sat down at the table, his gaze looking deep into the eyes of the famous prisoner.

"Why do you do it?"

"Why do I do what?" responded Paul, a bit nonplussed at the old man's directness.

"Why do you go about organizing believers? Why bishops and elders? Why do you place men in authority among the sheep? Are they not all sheep? And do flocks of sheep have bishops among them?" Paul's eyebrows lifted. The questions did not seem accusatory. The old gentleman seemed truly curious. Still, Paul felt his emotions shift. The questions elicited a measure of discomfort. The ship lurched.

“Flocks of sheep need a shepherd,” replied Paul.

“True, but the shepherd is not a sheep. Did not Jesus declare himself to be the Shepherd?” The older man was not done. “And why men with short hair, and women with long hair? What possible relevance can the length of one’s hair have to one’s relationship with God? And, why, if, in the beginning, God created man and woman to become one flesh, do you relegate marriage to a secondary, or an inferior way of life? And why, after accusing Peter of dissembling, did you do the same thing with our brother, Timothy?”

“You appear to know me better than I know you.” The apostle’s brow furrowed. “You have read my writings. Then you must know, I am not a perfect man. I am not our Lord Jesus.”

“Apparently.”

“I am the chief of sinners.”

“No, brother Paul, you are not. You are no more or less a sinner than any of us.” The apostle did not know whether to be indignant and defensive, or to face these issues squarely, or to feel comforted.

“Since you know me so well,” Paul’s tone tainted not without an edge of sarcasm, “please advise me of what I really am.”

His visitor did not hesitate. “You are likely the most brilliant and spiritually sensitive follower of Jesus Christ among us. You have seen things, whether in body or in spirit, that no one else has seen. You are one of God’s chosen servants. You bear in your body the marks, the cost of following our Lord. I deeply admire you, respect you, and brother, though we are just beginning to know one another, I feel deep affection and love for you.”

“Then why do you question my teachings?”

“Are my questions not legitimate? Are you not a man? By your own words you confess to being a sinner like the rest of us. Do not sinners sin?”

“I sin. I sin indeed. Every day, it seems, I deal with sins I cannot shake. But if you have read my letters, then you know that I trust in his grace and forgiveness. I believe his strength is made perfect in my weakness.” The wind outside the cabin shrieked through the rigging. The ship heaved and rolled. Shouts outside, interrupted and truncated by things crashing, shattering, splintering on deck.

“I do know that, dear friend. I also trust in his grace and forgiveness. Like you, I have also written words of him, and I often

struggle with the likelihood that I have written things prompted by my own biases, than prompted by the Spirit of God.”

At this, the apostle smiled. “Then, with all my heart, I embrace you, old friend.” Paul’s eyes seemed as if they were about to fill with tears, as if finding at last a brother who understood both his writings, and himself. “It has just occurred to me, I do not yet know your name.”

“I am Joseph, son of Sabbas. My friends call me Justus.”



# *Prologue*

## *Joseph bar Sabbas<sup>1</sup>*

Shadows on the wall dance in syncopated rhythms with the flickering of lamps I have spread before me. I have several, you see. My eyes are failing somewhat and the light they provide enable me to write with legibility, if not clarity. The shadows have become friends. They seem alive and energized with silent force, watching me write words that speak of him. It is about all there is left that I can do. Once I held forth in preaching and teaching. Once men listened to me instruct them of him. Some were important men, supposedly. Governors. Senators. Others appointed to high office by Rome. But no more. I speak no more. I am applauded and appreciated by crowds—no more.

I confess to you that I am not bitter. I can say that without rancor and in honesty with myself. Admittedly, I often long for another platform, especially when I hear others speak, some better, most worse than I did. I am ashamed to say that I am truly fond of the plaudits, of the well-wishers, of the expressions of gratitude. But they are gone now and it is not constructive to linger among such memories, not to speak of useless.

I have a new profession now: word craft. I love to find just the precise word to express meaning, feeling, intelligence. I want my reader to enjoy the pleasure they bring. Just reading the word itself will produce a quality of pleasure or pain. And if by God's eternal grace they breed closeness with him, then I have chosen well. I know, because I read and reread these words myself, desiring to choose an even better word, a more eloquent phrase, a paragraph potentate. In this reading and rereading, I often weep.

The words I write tell of him. There are no words, in any language, equal to this task. Words written of him are holy, set apart from the usual concourse of words. And as this scribbling chronicles the hours he moved among us, I deeply sense that it is not I who scratches away beneath the shadows in some lonely vigil, but some *Other*. Whether my

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1 Acts 1:21-26

sensing has any connection with reality or not, I do not know. He has not chosen to let me know that I speak for him. But I can tell you this: from the day I first met him, from that day until my last breath—I am his servant, if he will have me. If not, then I spend my life wishing to possess what I am denied.

I clearly am not selected to be among his choicest servants, although I knew him from the beginning. From the day I saw with my own eyes the feathered embodiment of the Spirit light upon him, I knew that I must follow him. I knew then that I would rather cease to exist than be without him. It is an amazing consternation to me that such devotion can be affirmed or disenfranchised by casting lots. But so it was. And so it is. So now in these fading days, I comfort myself with words.

— *Joseph, bar Sabbas, called Justus*

# *Gone Forever*

## *October, A.D. 60*

*From the Diary of Joseph bar Sabbas, called Justus . . .*

The wind shrieked through the rigging like a raging, maniacal spirit that appears as a sign that all who hear her voice are about to die. Sails rent, torn in tatters flailed in the stinging, howling, rain-swept gale. Despite anchors thrown from the stern of the ship, the vessel careened in the storm like desultory flotsam tossed by relentless, swelling surges. The anchors caught and held, lines snapping taut and rigid. The storm bore down from the northeast and by anchoring from the stern, the prow of the ship pointed downwind southwest, directly toward land. The crew feared that should the lines break, we would with certainty, founder on the rocks. A mammoth wall of water assaulted our stern, lifting it high in the air and then crashing down into the trailing sea-trough. As the aft-end of the ship descended, another undulating surge loomed above, lifting it precipitously, straining the lines to the anchors. Suddenly, there was a sharp, vibrating *twang!*, as one of the four lines snapped. The other lines, absorbing the strain from the broken line, quickly gave way as if the wind and the waves had severed them with a razor. The ship surged with the waves, free of restraint.

Timbers creaked loudly. Hemp lines cascaded across the decks in chaotic array. Mountains of water fell athwart the beams. Spars and yardarms dipped, as if yearning, seeking to find comfort in the sea. Loud thumps, crashes from the ship's hold gave verdict to loose and tumbling cargo slamming against weakening bulkheads. A shattering thud! Dull noise of cracking timbers. For a split second, there was no movement—no movement at all—a shock of eerie silence amidst raging cacophony. Arrested momentum threw the bodies of crew members and passengers alike against bulkheads with jarring force. Screams of panic and despair. The ship was doomed, barely four hundred yards from the shores of Malta.

Recovering my consciousness and adjusting from that terrible, bone-crushing halt, we wallowed perilously amongst the waves. It took no intelligence to discern that the ship had struck a rock, or rocks—and we were going down. I rushed to the port side and stared into the rain, driven

by black, angry clouds and gale-force winds from above, trying to see what I hoped was land close by. What I saw was a gigantic rock protuberance impelling itself from the depths thirty feet into the air above the churning surface, its top painted white with seagull droppings. This is what we struck. Another massive bank of water slammed the wreck hard against the rock and when it had passed, the ship began to slip back into the ocean, its port rail, where I was standing dipping low, bending for the water.

Instantly I leaped back, in pathetic effort to save myself from drowning. The deck tilted into an unscalable wall. My foot slid on the wet. I grabbed for something, anything to hold onto and save myself. My fingers wrapped around the edges of a container, a wooden box, or a lid of a box, I couldn't tell. Yet another mountain of water struck the ship, driving it up once again against the rock. More bursting timbers. The lid came loose and in seconds I skidded across the deck untethered, and into the dark maw of cascading depths. The wood jerked from my grip as I impacted the water and plunged beneath the waves. In a moment I emerged, my lungs afire, sputtering and choking on salt water. Not a soul in sight. The ship heaved ominously above me, a giant shadow of impending death. Something bumped and I turned to see the lid of the box which had, thankfully, pursued me into the water. I reached and grasped it with both hands, pulled it against my chest and held on for the dearest moments of my life.

The sea was relentless, tossing wave after wave, and tossing me into a somersault and away from the ship. As my head emerged from the water again, I watched in horror as the vessel broke free of the rock and was blown toward land—now lost to sight, I was alone with my solitary piece of debris, my old flesh and bones screaming agony and affliction. The water was ungodly cold and I seemed to drift in and out of consciousness. I saw the ship one last time as I drove past her on my life-saving box-lid. She had run aground, her prow stuck firmly in whatever sand or clay that counted for an ocean bottom in these waters. She was breaking up. Men were scampering into boats and jumping overboard.

I wondered how many would survive. Surely I would, myself, perish, and my treasure; my precious treasure would find its permanent home at the bottom of the sea, forever sealed from the eyes of those I had yearned to behold it. My cherished cargo, my Gospel of my Lord, gone forever.

## *June, 1993 A.D.*

On June 23, 1993, Raul Maduse, in full scuba gear, scudded across the bottom of St. Paul's Bay on the island of Malta, his girlfriend, Serena, close by his side. He glanced quickly at the depth gauge on his wrist; 27.4 metres. He noticed a large crab making its way across the bottom. Removing the knife from its sheath strapped to his leg, he plunged the blade through the crustacean, killing it instantly. Such an act revealed gross immaturity and ignorance, yet he felt compelled to impress Serena, to whom he held up his victim for her to approve. She did not.

It had been named "St. Paul's Bay," owing to the fact that Biblical scholars identified it as the body of water in which the apostle Paul's ship foundered, almost 2,000 years previously. It is now a bustling resort, where its year-round population of 16,000 swells in the summertime to over 60,000. On this day in June, a boat filled with scuba-diving tourists were exploring the depths of the bay in search of adventure and spear fishing. Some hoped, perhaps, to find ancient relics from civilizations inhabiting the island in lost millennia past.

But such thoughts were remote to the minds of the young couple 15 fathoms down, quietly examining the reefs and underwater flora, their exhalations floating softly to the kelp bed above. Gigantic kelp stalks spring from the bottom creating forests of green beneath azure waters. Through these stalks swim myriads of bright denizens, including moray, shark and an occasional misguided jellyfish. Among them today swam Raul and Serena. Raul looked at his watch to check his bottom-time, noted that they had about 12 minutes dive time left, and motioned for Serena to follow him. He swam close to the rock whose base, at this depth seemed beyond measure. Inspecting the crevasses for spectacular fish, or whatever he may find, he saw an odd-shaped rock protruding several centimeters above the bottom sand and pointing like a pyramid to the surface.

Owing to its odd shape, he stopped to look. Brushing the fine seabottom sand away into a small cloud, he saw the pyramid shape emerge. On closer inspection, he discovered that it was not a rock at all. Once again taking his knife from its sheath on his leg, he scratched at its surface. It resisted the blade, yet yielded a spoonful of accumulated debris. He tried a second time; this time with a little more force, and a chunk of the debris loosened and fell away, leaving a glint of the color of copper where the

point of the knife had struck. It was then that Raul Maduse knew that he and Serena, might become famous.

# The First Scroll

## *Let There Be Light*

*In the beginning, God . . .*

*created the heavens and the earth.  
The earth had no form and was empty of life,  
blackness touched the countenance of the deep,  
and the Spirit of God enveloped the waters.*

*God said, "Let there be light,"  
and there was light.*

*God affirmed the light as good,  
and divided the light from the darkness.  
The light God called "day,"  
and the darkness he called "night."*

*There was evening.  
There was morning.  
Thus began the first day.*

—Genesis 1:1-5



# Chapter I

*6 B.C.*

## *Censer Priest*

*Being a priest is not all it is said to be.* This thought amongst others of less magnitude addled the old man's brain as he shuffled toward the Temple. He resented the designation, "*idiot-priest,*" accorded to him and others like him by rabbis, scribes and interpreters of the Law. Benign contempt? *Hah! Consummate fools! Condescending . . .* He thought for a moment, searching for the appropriate word, then smiled with satisfaction . . . *Pig droppings!* Then laughing cynically to himself added, *diarrheic pig droppings!* He had been a priest of the Division of Abijah for his entire life and now wondered if he had wasted his time here on earth. For years, decades, had he stood quietly by and seen other men chosen. Older men when he was young. Younger men now that he was advanced in years. Never him. Random chance made choosing a Censer-priest fall to God himself. Didn't it? *Randomness* as the very purpose, the absurd protocol for giving God his way! Isn't that how we settle how God thinks? The whole fashion nauseated him.

To be chosen as Censer-priest only occurred once in one's lifetime. The natural inference that to be chosen at all is tacitly equivalent to God's setting his seal of approval on you, that God thought you of importance, that God recognized you as a man of character and worth. It lessened the taunt of the rabbis. To be chosen while you are young implies that you are anointed, destined for greatness. Many priests live their entire lives never to be chosen.

There is no record that this particular priest had ever violated his trust in office. Those who cared enough to observe him thought him "righteous." He, of course, knew differently. So did God. That is why, he concluded, he had never been chosen. Not to be chosen logically provoked the ominous question, "What is wrong with you that God has not chosen you?" Cruel question; richly undeserved. It wasn't difficult for him to imagine why God had not chosen him. He, himself, knew well of his sins.

*Elizabeth understood. How grateful I am for her.* His wife believed in him, loved him, encouraged him when all others failed him. Like all priests

he had married, seemingly, he thought for his entire life. *How long have we been together? God help me! I think I have forgotten.* He did not regret one moment of it. Elizabeth! The only person in the world who he knew loved him, despite the shame that they had no children. Almost everyone blamed her. *Elizabeth is barren!* Supposed friends said this in sometimes not so hushed tones. Again, he knew better. It was not she. It was he. God had rejected him. That is why his prayers for a child, a son, had gone unanswered, unheard. *Idiot-priest, indeed!* Perhaps the rabbinic fools were right.

αΘω

The time had come once again for his division, the Division of Abijah, to care for the priestly services of the Temple. The lot is taken to select the Censer-priest whose duty is to burn incense on the altar in the Temple of God. Once, the altar stood before the Veil in the Temple of God. No more, not in these days in Herod's Temple. The altar did not stand even in the Holy Place. Different times; nothing stayed the same. Incense, supposedly, symbolized the prayers of the nation to God. Indeed, the Censer-priest came to offer such prayers. Two relatives assisted him, one to remove what remained of the previous day's sacrifice, the other to rearrange the live coals on the altar of incense. Zechariah had long since laid aside any expectations. Too often he had wondered why God had granted him life. Why live, especially as a priest, when one is not allowed to serve? Why live when your life would end, leaving no son, and having no purpose? Why live at all?

Once, he looked forward to the lot, hoping to be chosen, wishing to be chosen, living for the day when he would be chosen. Not anymore. Today, as in recent years, he thought it all tedious, a wearisome, vexing bother. He was too old to bother, too decrepit to care. His knees ached. There were shooting pains in his hip. He wearied with life. There was no thought, no expectation at all that he would be chosen.

Hence, on this day he was.

αΘω

At first, the realization that it had happened amused him. *Well*, he thought, *the old man finally gets his day*. He thought it not unlike eulogies at funerals. Since you are dead, how can you enjoy them? He was less than impressed.

When the reality of his doing the services of Censer-priest began to seep into the cisterns of his self-esteem, tired cynicism yielded to childlike joy opening the dawn of a percipient day. Like the taste of exquisite wine, he rolled it around in his brain, letting it bring to life the calloused taste buds of jaded emotions. He allowed himself to enjoy the inebriation—at least, partially. The other pain, that at his age he would never see a son, he did not think about, at least not today. It was pleasant and perhaps more significant, after a manner of speaking, to be chosen when you are old. Could it be an endorsement of his years? The rationalization amused him; perhaps all had not been a waste. For now, he would humbly serve. This provided him a semblance of peace.

The first week of October, Zechariah stood facing the altar. At his left, stood the table of showbread. To his right, the seven-branched candlestick. Before him stood the golden altar of incense on which red coals glowed. Deep notes of the Magrephah filled distant corners of the Temple summoning priests and people to whatever holy service awaited them. Still the old priest waited as were his instructions, until the signal came to spread incense on the coals. The signal came; the incense spread and rich aromas filled the candlelit room. *Is it not odd*, thought Zechariah, *that sensate faculties in one's nostrils titillate one's sense of worship?* The whole scene struck him as sublime and absurd at the same time. The warm musical notes, the smells, the stunning visionary beauty of the altar, the candlesticks; the hidden mystery of the Veil. *Since God lives in the heart*, thought he, *of what worth are these trifles? Does the Creator have the slightest interest in the smell of pleasant odors?* Despite his doubts, he loved everything about this service.

αΘω

It became for Zechariah, a wondrous ceremony; an old man who had long since lost his capacity for awe. His head bowed, his eyes closed, his hands postured in prayer, when involuntarily—he blinked. A soft glow, brighter than that warranted by the candlestick, illumined the marble floor where his gaze fell. His pupils focused for the slightest of instants as if examining the masonry patterns in the floor. *Whence comes this light?* Anxiety

elevated as slowly, he lifted his head.

αΘω

A man stood between the golden altar of incense and the candlestick. Clearly, he appeared no ordinary man, his clothing iridescent as a prism dancing rainbows on the walls, his expression serene and in command, his bearing unnatural. He felt his knees begin to weakly tremble.

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah.” Instantly, his spirit was comforted. At these simple words, the old priest felt his heart enlarge, his blood pound, his lungs fill. Every nerve in his body resonated. His posture strengthened.

*Their eyes engaged!*

Suddenly, and for the first time in decades, his arms felt as if he could bend steel. In tones soft and holy, the man continued, “I am sent to tell you that God has heard your prayers.” The priest tried to digest this. “Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son.” Despite his empowerment, the old man’s heart staggered.

*Merciful God!*

The man continued. “You will call his name John.”

*Merciful God!*

“He will give you gladness and many will celebrate his birth. He will be great in the eyes of the Lord. As Samuel and Sampson, he will be a Nazirite and will never drink wine or strong spirits. While he is yet in his mother’s womb, the Holy Spirit will fill him. He will turn the hearts of many in Israel to the Lord their God. He will act with the spirit and power of Elijah and he will prepare the people for the Lord.”

Zechariah listened but absorbed none of this. He was much too stunned to absorb anything beyond the simple—*preposterous!*—announcement that he may have a son.

“How can this be?” The priest had found his tongue. “Don’t you see? I - I am an old man. My wife has long since passed the age of bearing a child.” Conflicting thoughts invaded his brain. *Could the miracle done for Abrahams’s Sarah happen again? Those were holy times, with holy men of old. Such miracles no longer happen!* He shook his head. He is hallucinating. His mind is finally going. This cannot be happening. He needed something to drink; a strong spirit would do nicely. He wanted to believe but he was too old. He had been kicked in the groin by unrequited prayer too many times. Again and again he had prayed. A thousand times again. “Perhaps a sign? Perhaps something miraculous that I can see? Some credentials? Please?” He was whining he knew. *I need something to hold on to . . .*

αΘω

“I am *Gabriel!*” The sentence seemed laughable to the old priest, yet it compelled him to take note of the obvious and, at the same time, announced a hidden reality. *“I stand in the presence of El Shaddai! I am sent to speak to you!”* The daring pronouncement provoked him but he remained unconvinced. Why would God wish to speak to him? He was not illiterate. He knew the scriptures. Is this man, for all of his distinction, claiming to be *that* Gabriel? “I am sent to tell you wonderful news,” he continued, “but since you cannot accept it, your sign will be this: you will be unable to speak until the day your son is born.”

“Poor Zechariah,” his friends gossiped, “he was so overcome at being Censer-priest that he can no longer speak.”

Elizabeth, however, became pregnant.

## Chapter II

### *Mary's Place*

Nazareth did not fit. An independent-minded community, considered with some scorn by stricter Jews, Nazareth annoyed the religious climate. Residents took perverse pride in being different. This irritated the religious leadership as far away as Jerusalem. Nazareth was a creature to itself, a rogue community. It lay outside the mainstream of Israelite life. Except for several trade routes that ran near the town, it stood to itself, alone and outcast. Located midway between the Sea of Galilee and Mt. Carmel and just south of both, the village lay along the slopes of the lower hills of the Lebanon range quietly overlooking a spreading plain.

A short walk from Nazareth, a clear, cold spring seeped through a precipitous embankment and formed a small pool. Surrounded by trees that gave shade; moss, fern and lilies flourished. Here, morning wetness and gentle mists greet awakening dawn. Here, dew mantles the meadow with glistening drops of crystal. Here, sunlight dances in innumerable droplets of condensation. In evening hours, familiar, unbroken sounds of small creatures announce the creeping softness of approaching silence. Here, in the afternoons, she came.

This was Mary's place; a solitary place where she came when she felt the need for quiet meditation, for closeness with God. Here in late afternoon, she smiled at bright butterflies bouncing in puffs of gentle summer zephyrs. A small beauty with blue streaks in butter-yellow wings lit upon her hand as if stopping to gossip. Captivated, she watched as it sat between her thumb and forefinger, slowly moving its wings to some silent rhythm. Nature often accommodates the delight of those who hold her in awe. Mary wondered at the bees buzzing above the blossoms, legs heavy with pollen. She spread herself on the grass gazing at giant white cumulus explosions in the sky, thinking about how it would be to soar among them like the eagle, imagining their shapes with people that were familiar to her. "That one looks like old Uncle Elimelech," she laughed. And here, in early morning or evening vesper hours she came to pray; this place, hidden in the hills, her private sanctuary.

Evening airs still and cool. She stood where the slopes fell sharply to the Plain of Esdraelon, watching lights below reflect in the deepening

panoply above, the light of day fleeing to the place opposing from whence it will come in the morning. Waters from the spring gurgle into a pool so clear it seems invisible, trickling down lush slopes, forming part of a watershed quenching the thirsts of caravans on Roman roads below.

Still lights twinkling in the valley plain and in the deepening vault above. Sweet Jasmine fragrances. The urgency of parental concern flitted about her consciousness tugging at her thoughts, at her compulsive want to stay in this place. “Oh God,” her heart exclaimed, “Let me live here forever.” She did not expect an answer, but one came.

“Mary.”

αΘω

The man simply appeared. He had not approached by foot. She had heard no one coming and surely she would have. He appeared there as if he had preceded her, waiting for her. But she had not seen him, or heard him. She was afraid. She wanted to flee but her legs would not move. He made no attempt to touch her, he just stood there, looking at her as if— as if it were she and not he, who had suddenly and mysteriously appeared, as if it were she who were the apparition to be feared, as if she, not he, were the subject of awe. *What beautiful eyes;* Mary thought without fear.

He spoke, “Be comforted, child.” He appeared to be about ten years her senior. Not a man of ancient years, although he was. Not a man of maturity and command, although he was that, too. He bore no semblance of opulence, no airs, no attitude of superiority. He was simply a man, unspectacular, unassuming. Intuitively, Mary knew this was no ordinary man. “God has chosen you above all women, Mary,” he said quietly. He waited as the soft sound of the brook splashed and rippled. It was an appropriate sound, making itself heard with poignant moment. “In this you are highly honored. You are favored as no other.” The magnitude of this simple declaration did not register for the child.

“I - I do not understand,” she stammered. “Who are you?” Even more important, her heart inquired, *What are you?* Unanswering, his eyes danced with the twilight. He smiled. Whatever anxiety may have stalked her retreated, replaced with expectancy. *Why have you come?* A question of thought, reluctant to make its way to her tongue.

Sensing her expectancy he said, “I have splendid news for you, child.” He spoke to her as a father, yet he was not. He waited. He wanted her to hunger, to seek, to demand what he had to say. It did not take long.

In the pressing necessity of her heart, she begged, peremptorily:  
*Please!*

αΘω

He had thought of a thousand ways in which what he had to say could be said. He wanted to announce it to the sound of trumpets and the race of stars across the heavens. He wanted to make an *event* of it. These urgings stirred powerfully in his heart but in the end he stated simply, “You are to bear a child.” Mary’s heart stopped. Questions, unformed, unintelligible, bubbled in her mind. “A son. You will call his name—*Jesus!*” She had been standing but at this, she dropped to her knees and then sat on the grass. She was confused, undone and terrified. It was not his appearance, nor the tone of his voice that unsettled her, but the import in his speech. Weakly, she stammered,

“I cannot . . .”

“Mary,” he continued, each syllable in sweet velvet, “Your son will be very great. He will be the Son of the Most High God.” And then the man appeared to succumb to transcendent ecstasy and uttered words that seemed to her as lyrics of a song, soaring beyond her comprehension,

*“And the Lord God  
will give to him  
the throne of his father, David.  
He will reign  
over the house of Jacob forever  
and of his kingdom  
there shall be no end!”*

It was then that Mary realized that this man is something other than a man. An intimation? A subtle emanation? A verisimilitude of



superhuman life? However construed, it caused her to cry out within herself, "*He is an angel of God!*"

"Um!" She swallowed hard in adolescent agitation. "Um!" Again. The emotion of the moment took her voice away. Questions came hard into exclamations, "I have never been with—a man!" This, the premise upon which all else was considered. Mary, just preparing to visit her sixteenth year, knew how babies were made. *I am betrothed!* Instantly, she thought of Joseph. Whatever the angel meant, she somehow understood that Joseph was not a part of it. "How can this happen?" said she. *How can this be?* She inquired not of the possibility, but of the process. But in her heart, she visited deference and in that submission, discovered acceptance.

He, as actuated by emotion as she. This, his highest moment, the zenith of the purpose for which he had been created in lost millennia past. However restive his exultation, his words did not betray him. With perfect lucidity he proclaimed, "The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, child. And the power of the Highest will overshadow you." He took a deep breath, "That *holy thing* born of you shall be called the Son of God." Mary could not speak. A moment passed. They sat quietly. The soothing stillness of evening, like a mother's reassuring hand, extended its calm.

He spoke again in words more subdued. "The wife of Zechariah the priest has conceived a son. She is already in her sixth month." *Elizabeth? I've not seen or heard in months . . . ?* He took a few steps and sat upon a rock. Resting his hands on his knees he continued, "She is very old. For how many years has she been taunted as barren by ignorant, unfeeling people! Now she is with child. You must believe, Mary, nothing is impossible with God."

The child had nothing to say, nothing to ask. She felt compassion for this sweet man, this angelic creature

who had brought her such words. Silent moments passed between them, he, sitting on the rock, she upon the grass.

In her face one could see signs of resignation. Hesitating, she put her hand out to him, touching him, “Let it be done to me as you have said. I wait on the Lord—as a bride—waits for her husband.” Only the Father could know what Mary was thinking. How would she become impregnated? It no longer mattered. If this is what God wanted, if He chose to honor her in this manner, she was ready. She withdrew her hand. His head lowered, hands squeezing his knees, relaxing and then squeezing again. “What is your name?” She asked softly. He lifted his eyes and looked at her, seeing the light of love in her eyes. She smiled, as sweet as rain upon a violet.

He sat erect and as if answering the question of royalty instead of that of a peasant girl. He spoke, “My name is *Gabriel*.” And with that, he was gone.

αΘω

Mary’s thoughts flickered through her mind like the butterflies she loved. *How was this to happen? When?* How would she explain it to her mother? Her father? And Joseph? How would he—*how could he!*—react to news like this? She felt trapped between unspeakable ecstasy and terrible convulsion.

A quiet girl, yet playful, quick to laugh, content with simple things; the angelic visit still vivid in her thoughts, she relived, she tasted each delicious word. She found herself repeating over and over “*How can this be?*” Her eyes lay softly upon the stars peeking through purpling evening song hushed. She wondered what lived beyond the stars.

It was not abrupt, nor disruptively sudden, but it *was* instantaneous. Softly, tenderly, Mary felt warmth surround her as if her mother had just covered her with a blanket on a winter’s night. In her body, in her soul, in the very focus of her being—that eternal part of her—now touched *Something* beyond anything she had known or ever would know again.

Beyond the stars, from a point somewhere in Eternity, he moved toward earth. The world, life and human history waited. It would never be the same.

Jacob was once touched like this and became a cripple. Mary became pregnant, knowing only that she had been known.

αΘω

Her mother's worried eyes. Her father's frown. Of course they had worried. She would herself one day understand what it was like to fret over the disappearance of a child. Her mother's chiding words were, of course, compulsory, but distant and ineffectual. She quickly sensed her child's serenity and yielded the need to disapprove. Questions could wait until morning. Mary was home and safe. That was all that mattered.

Just before slumber claimed the child, as her eyes watched the crescent moon through her window rise toward its zenith, a thought came. The fulfillment of all time had begun, *in her*.

Her secret was secure for the moment.

### III

## *Disgrace*

She is a harlot!” Shriill accusation. “Stone her!” Swift judgment. She had been only eleven when she watched the men in town kill Zephorah. The memory survived through the years with poignant terror.

As girls do, she had combed and braided Mary’s hair many times in their moments together. Mary had come to look upon her as an older sister. They lived in adjoining houses. Their families had often dined together, especially on feast days. Although they had played together since Mary’s toddler days, they were actually quite different. Mary seemed shy, deferential and demure; Zephorah daring, inquisitive, assertive. It struck some quite odd that two so different should become so close. Rarely had they argued, Mary content to let the older girl decide what games they would play, or what they would do on any given day. This resulted more often than not in daily trips to the town well, a popular place for adolescents to meet and discuss their interests, which almost always concerned the opposite sex.

Zephorah, a shapely fifteen-year-old, flirted and blushed, playfully teasing the young men loitering there, a lively sport for all concerned. Her olive skin, brown almond eyes, lush auburn hair, clothes which clung to her shapely form; she had become the main event among the young stallions at the well. On the way home she amused and entertained the younger girl with lengthy biographies of each boy. It seemed to Mary that Zephorah knew *something* about every young male in Nazareth. “We must not speak of such things, Zepha,” spoke Mary, uncomfortably titillated with her friends’ romantic fantasies. But the older girl just rolled her eyes and giggled.

“Just wait, little one. One day you will understand.”

αΘω

Mary had not understood. What had happened? How did her friend suddenly turn “bad?” How could she have run away with this boy and leave her family to grieve? Three days later she came home alone, afraid and ashamed. Her lover had returned the day before with a good story to tell his friends. He would be admired now. He would be thought

manly—experienced. To his father, of course, he told of how she had seduced him. He was a good boy from a good family, his father a priest. So the boy would not suffer. No punishment greater than a sacrifice offered. With that, it would be over. “Why is it,” thought Mary, remembering this event years later, “that when a man has his way with a girl, he is thought manly, but when a girl does it, she is a harlot?”

Who would throw the first stone? This honor naturally fell to the one who had been violated. Since he was a mere boy, his father took stone in hand, a broken, jagged piece of thick pottery. But instead of casting the piece himself, the older man thought for a moment and then handed it to his son. This confused the boy, frightening him. The eyes of his father-priest, however, were demanding, unforgiving. His son looked at Zephorah weeping in the street where she had been harshly thrown, her hair filthy with dust, her eyes streaming dark tears, pleading. Somewhere in the back of the crowd which stood more than ten deep, a mother screamed, “She is but a child!” The eyes of the boy's father prevailed. With a force strengthened by fear, his hand traced the arc. The stone struck between the eyes just above the nose. Blood spurted. Zephorah fell. Seconds later, dozens of stones rained on the girl. A heavy stone struck her in the head, mercifully crushing her skull. The boy watched. Someday, he would be a priest himself.



The basket fell from her hands as Mary shuddered, remembering the brutal death of her friend. Her mother had reacted to the news of her encounter with the angel in disbelief. She was now two weeks late and the questions were tense and fearful. When she told her mother that she had been chosen by God, she was met with anger and tears; but how could a mother be expected to understand a thing like this? “And that is not all, Mother.” Mary continued tearfully, “The angel said that Elizabeth is also with child—and she is *old!*”

Her mother looked at her, stunned. “Hush, child! We do not speak of such things.” Mary's mother thought, *How could she have known? My cousin has been in seclusion for more than six months.* Elizabeth had not publicly announced her condition. Nine months is a long time to wait for a promise. Anything could happen. Only trusted friends and relatives knew. Of course, her mother knew of the special circumstances of her cousin's pregnancy. *But Mary could not possibly know, unless . . . ?* As the truthfulness of

her daughter's claims found credence in her heart, she reached for the child and held her to her breast. "You shall *not* be judged, my lamb. No indeed," she held her tighter, smiling through wet diamonds, "you shall not be judged."

Abruptly she ended the embrace and held her daughter tightly by the shoulders as if she might escape. Mary's eyes widened. "You must go to her!" With urgency. "Yes! That *is* the thing to do! You must go to her now. I will get your things." Instantly her mother began preparing Mary's things. She continued talking, instructing, "You're not to worry about anything. You will be safe there. You will be in a priest's own house!" Words cascaded. "I'll deal with your father--*and Joseph. I'll see to them both!*" Her mother was now in command. "*Hurry!*"

*Mary, dumfounded at her mother's actions, and frightened.*

αΘω

In a letter to her cousin Elizabeth, Mary's mother wrote:

*My Dear Cousin,  
Please be kind to accept my daughter into your home.  
She is with child . . .*

The letter explained all that Mary's mother knew, all that her daughter had revealed. The dispatch-bearer left ahead of Mary and would reach the house of Zechariah well before the girl's entourage. Elizabeth would be waiting, anticipating her arrival.

The trip took almost a week and the path, as always, arduous and chafing. Down into the Esdraelon Plain, across the Jordan fords to avoid Samaria, down the eastern bank of the river, crossing again at Jericho, the climb back up to and through Jerusalem and out into the Judean hill-country until the house of Zechariah came into view. The strain of the trip evaporated as hopeful expectations rose in Mary. Barely within hearing, she began shouting "*Elizabeth! Elizabeth!*"

At first, the sound was as faint as that of a distant bird. Then at last, she clearly discerned her name, "*Elizabeth!*" in a girl-child's voice. The swelling in her stomach visibly moved. Her body responded in an enchanting sensate awareness of something rich and full and beautiful. Ecstasy seized her. When at last her aged eyes saw her young cousin she shouted. "*Oh, Mary! How blessed you are among all women! And blessed is the*

*child you are to bear!* The two women met and embraced. Tears of consummate joy for Elizabeth. Tears of relief and comfort for Mary. An old woman and a child. A woman long past childbearing yet with child, and a woman who has not known a man also with child. Wondrous *enceinte!*

Elizabeth took Mary's face in her hands and said, "And how is it permitted me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Hm?" Mary's eyes glistened. "Did you know that the moment I heard your voice the babe within me leaped for joy?" She paused to let the words have their effect. "Oh my child, your mother has revealed to me all that has happened to you. I am so proud of you for believing the things that were told to you by the Lord. You are so richly and deservedly blessed!"

Mary at last found her speech, "*Cousin Elizabeth!*" Letting her hands meet in front of her, the girl-child erupted, "*My heart is exploding!*" A not un-butterfly-like pirouette. She flounced to her knees. "*Oh how I love the Lord! Oh God my Savior, how my spirit soars!*" Everything was an exclamation. "*He's chosen me, Elizabeth! Me! I am nobody! I am not a princess! I am poor. How is it that he has chosen me!? Elizabeth!*" She reached for the older woman embracing her vigorously, "*Elizabeth, the angel told me that from this time forth all generations will call me blessed! Can you imagine? God has done a great thing to me! Holy is his Name!*"

Beyond her understanding of historical and national events and far beyond her adolescent comprehension, using her voice, her lips, the Spirit within her exulted in jubilant song . . .

*“His mercy goes forth to all who love him  
from age to age to age!  
He has shown his strength  
by scattering the tyrants  
in all their imaginations.  
“He has put down mighty men  
and exalted a poor woman-child.*

*“He has filled the hungry  
with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.  
“In remembrance of his mercy,  
he has come to Israel  
as he promised to Abraham  
and his seed forever.”*



## IV

### *Forerunner*

Elizabeth. *Barren* Elizabeth! Elderly Elizabeth gave birth to a son. Over the past several months she and Mary shared their feelings, their experiences with God, and held long conversations about their soon to be born babies.

Early before the sun had begun to awaken the skies, Elizabeth awakened Mary. “It is time,” she whispered. “Go, find Alathia.” Mary, her blood pounding, driving sleep from her eyes, dressed quickly and ran to wake the midwife.

She observed, carefully, every detail as she busied herself being useful. Hours drained the color from Elizabeth’s face as Mary watched her stomach rise and then relax, her body pushing the babe into place. She watched as Elizabeth rested between pains. She watched as the baby’s head began to show and then suddenly made his entry into the sunlit room of mid-morning. She watched the cutting of the cord and heard the first cries as his little pink body was washed and wrapped tightly in soft blankets.

The infant was handed to exhausted Elizabeth. Tears of joy filled her wrinkled cheeks, falling into the baby’s tiny hand. As he wriggled inside his blanket, she felt the same movements that she’d felt for months inside her body. “I know you,” she smiled as his tiny eyes gazed, unfocused, into hers in seeming wonder.

Zechariah had been watching patiently, but could wait no longer. He went to Elizabeth, kissed her on the forehead and put out his arms to hold his son. Elizabeth laid the baby in his awkward old arms. He thought his breath was being drawn from him. He held the baby high over his head. The reality had struck him like a sudden wind. *This --this is my son! I have a son! I have a son!* Had he been able to speak, he would have been heard all through Judea and into the next country. Alas, his heart soared in silent gratitude to God for his mercy to an old man such as he. He staggered at the reality of new life.

Sensing the private intimacy between the new father and mother, Mary made motion to leave the room. “Wait,” spoke Elizabeth softly. And then to her husband, “Give the child to Mary for a moment, my husband, and come, sit here next to me. It’s been a trying day for both of us.”

Mary held the child tightly. *How small and perfect he is*, she thought, wondering what her own baby would look like. As he stretched his little body against the tight blankets, Mary felt a flutter in her stomach for the first time. Not wanting to take anything from this special day for Elizabeth and Zechariah, she said nothing. "*Cousins*," she thought and smiled knowingly.

Elizabeth's friends, confidants and relatives came to be happy with her. The secret of this astounding event was out. The word had spread. Ancient Elizabeth, thought well past the time of childbearing, has given birth to a son. They brought food and wine. They danced and played. Women clucked and cooed over the infant. Those first days took the shape of a week. The child would be circumcised tomorrow.

In the Temple, the babe shrieked as the priests performed the service of Abraham. "My," quoth one of the women in great humor, "young Zechariah has the voice of an ass."

Everyone at the Temple service laughed. Elizabeth, her voice as clear and uncompromising as steel, said simply, "His name is John! His voice will proclaim the coming of the Lord!" Her tone arrested attention.

Laughter ceased. In the embarrassed silence that followed, a close relative said quietly and with respect, "Elizabeth . . . come now; there is no one in the family by that name."

Zechariah sat mute as all had come to expect of him. Still, he was this child's father. They gestured to him. Ignorance is monstrously embarrassing. Zechariah could hear every word everyone had said. Though he could not speak, he could hear as well as any of them. It is remarkable, he thought, how people think that because one cannot speak, one also cannot hear. Stupidly, they made signs at him. They mouthed the question, "What will you name the child?" hoping he might understand their question. Zechariah dropped his head in exasperated resignation. He rubbed his eyes. He had not spoken a syllable in nine long months. He gestured with his hands to make way. The people parted to allow him room to maneuver. On the wooden table lay a tablet. Taking a writing instrument the doddering old man wrote, "His name is John!" He held it high over his head passing through each point of the compass. More embarrassed silence followed until he completed the circle, all eyes on the arc of the tablet.

Then came a shout, "*His name is John! Praise to God Almighty!*" an exclamation of commanding power.

To say that all were surprised is to understate the case. They were dumfounded and frightened. Zechariah's shout had forced the issue of the tangible, miraculous *Presence!* And to Jews who were not permitted so much as to speak or write his name, this was a fearsome thing.

How *does* one speak or write of such things? Not even the Scriptures can adequately explain the awful fear that came upon the prophets of Baal when, *alas*, the fire fell. Who can describe the terrible angst of the Egyptians as they furiously drove through towering walls of water in futile pursuit of the Hebrews? Or the thoughts of King Saul when a solitary stone from a boy's sling struck down the giant? When the miraculous unfolds, when the unfamiliar and unexpected comes before one's very eyes, fear is rational.

Yet, an elderly woman giving birth to an infant, or an old man's speech after more than nine months of silent muteness; these things are hardly on the magnitude of parting the Red Sea. Is it because these friends, these well wishers, these celebrants had never in their lifetimes seen such things? Here we chronicle angelic visitations and the impregnation of old women and virgins, and speech withheld and speech released in paeans of praise. Are these things mere tremors of the earthshaking to come? Perhaps rather, it is the question that provokes fear, "What do these things mean?"

## V

### *Prophet of the Highest*

The ancient priest was not done. Lifting his hands to heaven and gazing at the ceiling he said,

*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has redeemed and visited his people! Salvation has come to us from the house of his servant, David—just as he promised it would. We will be saved from those that hate us.*

No one doubted the prophetic character of Zechariah's oration. This priest had always been a quiet man, not given to mere self-aggrandizing showmanship. All conceded that the Holy Spirit possessed him. The news had an effervescent effect. Smiles appeared. Elation accompanied thoughts of deliverance from Roman rule. *Is this child the long-promised Messiah?* Then the old man's prophecy took a different turn.

*There is purpose to this deliverance! There is reason! There is rationale! We are to become a merciful people. Remember his holy covenant that he swore to Abraham our father? He has saved us from our enemies, yes! But he has saved us to serve him without fear, in righteousness and holiness for the rest of our lives on earth.*

Zechariah spoke with power and certainty. As long as he spoke of God and his mercy, those who heard were attentive. But when the subject turned to personal responsibility for mercy, when it turned to the people themselves, thoughts turned elsewhere. They were wondering what all this had to do with the birth of his son. *"What of the child?" they cried.*

It did not take much to persuade Zechariah to be taken with his son. He lifted the infant in his arms and held him to his breast. Then he held him at arm's length. Gazing happily at the baby's face he proclaimed,

*My son! My little one! You will be called the prophet of the Highest. You will go before him. You will prepare the hearts of the people to receive him. You will reveal the heart of God's mercy in*

*bringing Salvation to deliver us.*

In benediction, the old man turned to those standing by and proclaimed,

*The Dayspring on high has dawned upon us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death; to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

*Dayspring!* Such a magnificent word!

A story is told of a caravan lost in the wilderness of the desert sand. Its constituents, overtaken by the blackness of night, sit down to wait for death. Hopelessness drones through the cold. Helpless hours in darkness; when suddenly their eyes behold a spectacle of matchless beauty. A daystar springs from the eastern horizon and begins its climb toward the heavens. As it does, the sky following it brightens, and the great orb of shining gold takes its first glimpse of a prescient day, bringing illumination and warmth upon the earth. The caravan, encouraged, rises with this Dayspring star, this brilliant antecedent of coming dawn, and goes its way, and over the rise, over the crest of the hill, they find that for which their hearts have longed—Zion, the City of their God.

Without full understanding, Zechariah was telling that his child, his Dayspring, refers not to Jesus Messiah, but to John. He it is who brings the hope of dawn to a people who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. With the rising sun, this lovely morning star is obliterated and is seen no more. Such is the story of our beloved John who himself declared, *“He must increase, but I must decrease!”*

The old priest turned prophet sat down. *“Water!”* he muttered. His eyes focused on something distant, on nothing, on everything. He appeared stunned. Someone brought him a cup of water. Zechariah wept.

αΘω

She sat still in the night. The house quiet. The babe had awakened, cried and then quieted at Elizabeth's swollen breast. All were asleep, except this young, pregnant virgin. Her belly had begun to increase in size, for this was her sixth month. In these quiet hours of very early morning, she thought of Joseph, she thought of her parents, she thought of Nazareth, she thought of her quiet place by the spring and what had happened there. It was time to go home.

αΘω

The days that followed stretched into years of happiness for Elizabeth and Zechariah. Almost from his birth little John lived and breathed in the ambiance of the Hebrew Scriptures. Since the events surrounding the angelic visitation, Zechariah had become more than zealous in raising his only child as God intended. A razor never touched his hair and it grew until it fell to his waist. John did not grow up as did the other children. As one in preparation to be a Nazirite, from the beginning his differentness alienated him from friends he might otherwise enjoy. He seemed withdrawn and sad to those who didn't know him well. If the truth of the matter be told, he laughed and enjoyed himself more than most. His parents thought him happy and well adjusted. John simply didn't need to be around others as much as other boys needed their peers. Content to draw his companionship from within himself and from his feeling of God's care for him, John's character formed into a pillar of internal rectitude. After his parents died, he left the family home to live a solitary existence in the wilderness of Judea. They would never know how their son came to his grim end at the scheming of Herodias, her daughter Salome and the cowardice of Herod Antipas.

## VI

### *The Dream*

*H*ow could she have done this? Who has she been seeing? What should I do? He thought in the dark, agitated and pained by the discovery of his beloved's pregnancy. His head hurt. Terrible, jealous thoughts of her with another man flooded his brain, relentless and torturing. Impossible to sleep! He knew that to make much of this would accomplish nothing but embarrassment and disgrace. Despite the shock, the agony, the humiliation, he loved her still. He felt robbed. He felt robbed of his rights as a husband. He felt robbed of her virginity. He felt robbed of his wife. He felt robbed of the very love of his life. In his pain and his rage he thought, *She has done enough already to disgrace herself—and me!* The possibility of stoning entered his head. This he could not endure. He considered a quiet divorce. He would have to write a letter. He would need at least two witnesses. Who? What would become of her? What does a pregnant woman with no husband do?

Joseph made things from wood. Over the years of working with his father, he had become an extraordinary craftsman who could make a beautiful toy for a child, or a prized piece of furniture for a Roman home. Carpentry was his talent, but it was also his business. Joseph's trade, as long as he was healthy, guaranteed his income. He was not rich, but neither was he among the poor. The best thing that had ever happened to him was this lovely *virgin*, the most beautiful, gentle creature he had ever known. Mary possessed his heart, his every thought. The desire to build her a home and for her to have his children consumed him. Knowledge of her pregnancy staggered him beyond endurance, shattering his dreams and along with his dreams, his heart. His mind tortured and pained, drew him into a vacuum of agonizing loneliness. The pit in his stomach turned into stone, and from stone into the excruciating lava of pain.

αΘω

Shattered dreams are the cruelest torturers. They lurk behind visions of contentment as hungry scavengers. They sear the heart with agony unimagined. They destroy life. They make one pull away from something good for fear that it will be taken away. It is easier and less

painful to pull away from your dreams yourself than to have them ripped from you. It is easier to avoid the risk of rejection than to actually be rejected. That is why so few dare to dream, dare to risk, dare to try.

Woman? She is hardly more than a child. *What is wrong with me? I thought she loved me. Why would she seek comfort in the arms of another?* Outside a cricket chirped. Stars leisurely pirouetted, preparing to meet the dawn. Wearily, his body shifted into a position of quiet, somniferous breathing . . .

*“Joseph, son of David?”*

Words that made his eyelids tremble. He glanced toward the casement before closing his eyes again. *Still dark outside. Not yet time to get up.* He felt himself sink deeper into his bed. At last it felt good, like a womb. In a moment his hypnotic breathing returned.

*“Joseph, son of David!”*

*Son of David?* He hadn’t thought of himself in those terms for years. The words comforted him. His breathing deepened. Words whispered quietly into his dreams.

Words emitting no sounds, only thoughts. Words permeating his mind.

*“Joseph, son of David!”*

Strange thoughts formed as he slept,

*“Take Mary to yourself . . . as your wife . . . not to fear that she is with child . . .”*

The corners of his lips teased into a questioned smile.

*What is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit . . .*

*She will give birth to a son. God’s Son—your son . . .*

*You will give him a name . . . give him the name, Jesus, He will save his people from their sins . . .*

*Remember the words of the prophet Isaiah . . . ‘A virgin will conceive and be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel,’ which means, “God with us . . .”*

*. . . your son, Joseph . . .*

He awoke with an enormous sense of release and peace. *Mary still a virgin?* He loved her more intensely than ever before. *Can it be?* More than life, he wanted her to be his. He needed no further encouragement to do what his dreams had released him to do.

Dreams do have a way of colliding with judgment.

αΘω

Mary’s mother opened the door to let in the morning air. There



stood Joseph. The surprise of his unannounced presence provoked her. Their last conversation had been tense, accusative. Despite wanting to believe her daughter's story, she had wondered if, in truth, Joseph and Mary had yielded to their sexual urges. Now look at the mess they had on their hands! Joseph, of course, had been overwhelmed at the news of Mary's pregnancy and outraged at her mother's accusations regarding his integrity and his good intentions. He had left the house in anger and hadn't returned until now.

"I am sorry to startle you." Joseph ventured, "but I wanted to tell you that I know that Mary is with your cousin, Elizabeth." The mother's hand went to her mouth in alarm. "I am leaving this morning to get her. Please make the wedding plans while I am gone." She took a deep breath that betrayed her relief. Her face allowed a cautious smile. She knew the law. She knew that Joseph could easily put Mary away, voiding the contract between them, perhaps even have her stoned, if he had chosen.

"Dear mother," he continued, "an angel came to me in a dream last night. He told me that this child is of the Holy Spirit. That it is a boy and that his name shall be called,

*"Jesus!"* They spoke the same word at the same time. Each stared at the other, aghast. She had told no one of the baby's name, especially Joseph. Knowing, deeply knowing that a thing is true, despite all contrary natural evidence, is indeed, a thing of awe. This was such a moment. This was a moment of knowing.

"He will be born into the house of David," Joseph spoke as though the statement was prophetic. After a long reflective pause, he put his hand on her shoulder and smiled. The tension between them had evaporated. "I'll be back in about two weeks with Mary—*and your grandson.*"

αΘω

So Joseph took Mary as his wife—*gladly!* He knew that he loved her and that was exactly what God required of him. Joseph and Mary were quietly married. He took her to his home and there they waited as her middle continued to swell. Though his desire was to share pleasure with his wife, they had no union until she gave birth to her son—*his son.*

## VII

### *Rome: The Senate Chambers*

My Uncle Julius!" Octavian surmised. "One of his most . . . what shall I say? . . . elegant accomplishments?" He referred to the *descriptio orbis*, the Great Registration ordered by Julius Caesar which had taken thirty-two years to complete. Octavian also held the title, *Caesar*. Under that title, he had actually finished his uncle's work. Under that title, he had defeated the forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. Now he had been accorded the designation, "Augustus Caesar," emperor for life.

"It is in our obvious interest, don't you think, that the empire should be appraised as to the extent of its tax resources?" The Roman Senate robed in white trimmed in gold and red, reclined in their respective places of honor. "The precedent has been set by Caesar himself. I shall therefore build on this precedent by ordering a decree that every male in the empire be valued as to his profession, his fortune, and as to his wards."

This decree came to be known as the *Breviarium totius imperii*, written on skin parchment in Augustus' own hand. In addition to the number of citizens, both freedmen and slaves, it provided information on the empire's allies under arms, the nature and composition of the fleets, of the kingdoms, provinces, and of the *tributes*, or taxes. When Augustus died some fourteen years later, the actual count of this registration was made public for the first time. The Roman Empire, vast beyond comprehension, counted more than twenty million souls, yet had no sense of humanitarian function. There were problems. Chieftains, Clan leaders, Sheiks, Shamans, Satraps and Kings tended to rebel or have their own way of caring for these matters of state. Of these, a powerful king in the region of the Hebrews, Herod the Great, enjoyed the greatest power and influence.

The states under the rule of Herod were among the allied kingdoms, or *Regina reddita*. However influential his reach, he could not have refused to submit to and be a cooperative part of this registration. All of the coin in Herod's states bore the image of Caesar. He had no choice. He must comply.

Augustus continued, "I shall appoint twenty of the most able and trusted officials who are rigidly devoted to administrative procedure, to accomplish this task. They shall travel to every state governed by Caesar

(referring to himself) and shall cause to be registered every male in his home with his property. They shall assemble the required staff necessary to accomplish this task and shall do so under the decree and authority of Caesar.”

“What of Herod?” This from one of the senators representing the eastern provinces.

“What of Herod?” replied Augustus. He considered the question by repeating it. “What of that disingenuous old fool? How many wives has he had?”

“I think the latest count is ten,” remarked another. Laughter.

“And how many of them has he had killed?” asked Caesar cynically. “And his sons! How many of his sons did he dispatch?”

“Three! He has killed three of his own issue.”

“Poor bastards,” replied Caesar. “I’d rather be Herod’s pig than his son.” More laughter. “Do you anticipate a problem?” He remembered with no small revulsion the Jewishness of the Hebrew potentate. Though Herod was not a Jew in the strictest sense of that term, he was thought of as such by Roman authorities. “He may be insane, but is he not a Roman ally?” The implied threat was clear.

“Just a complication, Caesar. He will want to carry out the registration of the Hebrews as they have done it for generations.”

Augustus appeared irritated. He looked at his polished fingernails disinterestedly. “And just how is that, Pontius? I am sure you are expert in such matters?”

“Eminent Emperor,” responded the senator acidly, “I am merely your servant, but yes, I have lived among the Jews.”

“You are to be envied, Pontius.” A twitter of laughter.

Ignoring the slight, the senator continued, “The Hebrews return to their place of birth for such things. They like to connect their odd existence to their ancestral roots.”

“How the census is taken is of small importance to me, Senator. However, I do require thoroughness and accuracy. Let Herod do it his way, but I will instruct the field governor to watch him. Enough of this! Let it be done! Bring me the seal.” And thus it was that the decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the entire world should be registered.

## VIII

### *Labor Begins*

No one completed the trip from Galilee to Judea in less than three days. With a pregnant woman approaching the birth of her infant, it took much longer. She did not complain but the expression on her face betrayed her. The lurching of the ass caused her back to spasm. Tributaries of pain explored her muscles as she stiffened against the motion. Her husband walked beside her, his hand massaging the small of her back. Often she laid her arm across his shoulders for support at which time their faces met and lip touched lip in a gentle caress. When it became unbearable, she walked. This helped for a time but soon she felt exhausted and once again mounted the donkey. Even in the cool of winter, sweat dripped from Joseph's brow as concern for Mary grew.

At the Jericho fords, inns and commercial eating establishments crowded with travelers; so many people, returning to their place of heritage. Herod had ordered it, or was it Caesar? As if everyone in the country was on a forced holiday; camels, carts, asses and oxen trampled dense dust into rasping lungs. Damp cloths draped or held over dry, parched lips. Walkers. Thousands of Jews walked great distances to be registered so Caesar could fill his coffers.

Joseph's career as a carpenter had yet to materialize. His father had not given him much to get started. His family was not rich, but Joseph's "inheritance" had been unnecessarily meager. His father thought him foolish to marry a woman already with child. "I cannot invest in a son so given to throwing away his life. What do you think will become of your business when others discover your wife's *adultery*?" His father's generosity truncated, Joseph left with nothing but the tools of his trade, a solitary ass, modest clothing and enough money he had saved over the years to—hopefully—begin a new life for himself, Mary and the child. The inns along the way had taken most of what he had. He hoped it wouldn't be too difficult to set up shop in Bethlehem; if not Bethlehem, Jerusalem. He preferred the smaller community of Bethlehem. *Yes, Bethlehem, the city of my fathers, be kind to me.* But would it support him and his family? Such questions haunt the thoughts of young adventurers.

The uphill journey from Jericho to Jerusalem had taken its usual toll. Mary felt faint. Through the city and out the western gate, Joseph walked beside her, shoulders sagging. The sun settled quietly, golden and red, its radiant crown disappearing over the rising horizon. Deepening twilight crept across the Judean countryside. A soft glow from the light of Bethlehem lay in the distance. A welcome sight to both of them. “There it is my darling,” said Joseph quietly. “Our new home. I hope there are enough consumers and critics of wood in this town to support us.”

“God will support us, Joseph,” scolded Mary playfully. Exhausted Mary. How could she laugh? “Where is your faith? Do you think He would ever abandon his Son?” A prophetic question, ominous with portent.

Joseph, of course, could not have recognized any prophetic portent. “I am glad to see you are still in light spirits,” he smiled. Mary smiled back. Smiles were becoming to her. Despite her distended abdomen, perhaps because of it, her smiles were radiant and beautiful.

The lights of Bethlehem drew closer. You could hear laughter now. Torches penetrating the night. People moving about. Though the day crept toward evening, the crowds were restive. Family and friends who hadn’t seen each other for months or years were joyfully reuniting. Merchants and concessionaires, followers and hangers-on of human traffic, hawked their wares. The surrounding countryside spoke of peace and solicitude. The city spoke activity, energy and commerce. “Now to find a place to spend the night,” said Joseph with the naive expectation of a young, inexperienced traveler.

“*Oh!*” from Mary. Joseph, alarmed at her tone, looked at her quizzically. Mary grasped her abdomen. “*Oh!*” again. Her face grimaced. Joseph did not need to be told what was happening. “*Oh Joseph!*” this time in anguish, “*My water!*” Each word, each syllable she spoke was an exclamation followed by sucking breath. He could see the clear liquid dripping from the flanks of the ass. Abruptly, Mary’s eyes rolled up into her head with the intensity of the first sharp pain, “*Oh my Lord God! Joseph! Please! Hurry!*” Joseph looked at her as all men look at their wives at this moment, helpless and afraid.

αΘω

No one along the road seemed to notice what was happening. No

one stopped to help. No one paid attention to the young woman on the ass, leaning against her husband lest she fall. No family, no aunts or uncles, no grandparents, not even a supportive friend. No one to hold them up. No one to sustain them. Mary and Joseph were alone, lost in a world of humanity scurrying about their own concerns. She began to weep. “Please, God?” she whimpered. Joseph was no veteran father. He, too, was young and inexperienced in these things. He was not much help. Slowly, the instruction of Elizabeth came seeping through the walls of pain and loneliness. “Joseph, we must find a place for me to lie down. Now!” Her dazed husband looked at her again, as if wondering how she could be rational at a time like this.

αΘω

“An inn!” Joseph’s reason asserted itself. “I must find an inn.” He reeled forward, yanking the reins of the ass to make it walk faster. Mary lurched, but held on.

As it is in so many towns and cities, places to stay the night were erected near the perimeter of the city. One of the first structures they approached happened to be an inn. Joseph entered the door and found an innkeeper sitting at a table pushing around tablets and looking stressed. “I need a room for the night,” said Joseph, “My wife is . . .”

“You will not find a room in this town tonight, young man. Can’t you see Bethlehem is flooded with travelers? This is David’s city. Everybody wants to be of the house and lineage of David,” he went on with practiced disdain. The shock on Joseph’s face did not register with the innkeeper, bewildered and stupefied by the question, *What to do!*

“My wife,” he stammered, “My wife is with child.” Then urgency gripped him. “Please,” he implored the innkeeper, “My wife is giving birth to a baby. She is in pain. *My God, man, isn’t there something you can do?*”

The innkeeper sobered thoughtfully, not a heartless man, but what could he do? “Already I am overcrowded. I cannot take away someone’s room who has already paid. I’m sorry, there is not much I can do for you.” An embarrassed pause. “I don’t know what to say.” Resignation. He hoped Joseph could comprehend the obvious.

“You have nothing? Nothing at all?” *This cannot be happening*, thought Joseph anxious and panicked.

“Not unless you want the stable,” responded the innkeeper lifting his hands, shrugging his shoulders as if explaining an absurdity. Joseph saw

no absurdity at all.

“Yes!” he said in relief, “Yes! The stable! How much?” The innkeeper just stared at Joseph. It was only a few seconds but to Joseph, it seemed longer. “How much?” he demanded.

“Keep your money,” from the innkeeper. “You can stay there without charge.” Not a man lacking in kindness, *Young people!* He thought, as he rose from the table shaking his head, “Follow me.” Joseph did as instructed. He plodded through the door and around the corner of the building, Joseph in his train. A low structure loomed in the darkness. For all the troubling features of this scene, the innkeeper felt a satisfying sense of warmth. *God help them*, a prayer again, of mere thought.

αΘω

It appeared incongruous for an inn to boast of a stable. Stables were usually the province of farmers and shepherds, housing animals of the field and pasture. The more popular inns, however, maintained such stables for the animals of their guests. They were populated with the usual conveyances, camels, donkeys, an occasional ox. Located at the rear of the inn, this stable stood separate from the main building, adjoining it a large sheepfold where shepherds lodged their sheep for the night. The air hung heavy with the usual smells of animal waste, hay and the body odors of the animals, smells both pleasant and unpleasant. It was a stable. Creatures crowded, both inside and outside. Three camels lay squatting on the ground around the entrance to the stable, their nostrils blowing cloud puffs into the cold evening air. Within, Joseph found a small enclosure, filled it with fresh hay, spread robes and blankets on the hay and there Mary, with difficulty, laid herself down.

An hour passed. Then two. The scurrying about outside in the streets had subsided to an occasional inebriated soul who had imbibed too much wine. Dust from the day had settled. Airs grew cooler, a blessing not lost on the birthing young mother whose brow beaded with sweat. People asleep. Inside the stable it was warmer. Not much, but enough. The body heat from the asses and oxen made life slightly more comfortable. An occasional chicken perched here and there with peeping eyes signifying an end to the day's scratching and clucking. Quiet scurries of small creatures. Mary lay sweating and wincing, her chest heaving, her abdomen contracting.

## IX

### *Shepherd's Campfire*

Coals from the campfire glow hot and red from yellow flames recently fallen. Bright flickers still spurt here and there, settling softly among the embers. Still the fire crackled, sending sparks like tiny shooting stars. The air adorned pleasantly with the smell of burning cedar. Lemuel hugged his thick wool cloak around his shoulders, his eyelids drooping with approaching sleep. Stars hung above with uncommon presence against purplish black velvet. Lemuel, however, was not thinking about stars. His head nodded with thoughts envisioning the lovely Sheililah. He thought of her eyes, her golden hair, the fullness of her lips and just as his thoughts began to consider the rest of this quean beauty, Ahiam spoke,

“Aaah!” It was loud enough to open Lemuel’s eyes and twitter his heart. The first thought of a startled shepherd is, *An attack!* His hand reached with automatic practice for his staff. But it was not an attack. Ahiam, who was not preoccupied with blood-surgng dreams of Sheililah, was taken rather with what appeared to be an anomaly in the heavens. Ahiam’s exclamation sounded as if the breath were knocked out of him. *No alarm amongst the sheep*, Lemuel’s second thought. An eerie incandescence enveloped them. It was not soft and glowing. It burst upon them, bright and abrasive. Gleaming. Frightening.

Young Jesse, a mere boy, emitted a high-pitched wail. Lemuel stared at him, agitated. Veteran shepherd that he was, he felt his presence of mind slipping. He thought he might urinate. The fourth member of the group, Elieazar, began to flee. Unheard of among shepherds. Shepherds were known to die protecting their flock. Elieazar suddenly stopped, confronted by an apparition which nailed him to the earth. His muscles could not work. He froze where he stood.

Lemuel had seen just about everything his calling had to offer. He had confronted and defeated predators of every description, animal and human. Lemuel was not easily awed by the events around him. There was the time for example, when a drunken centurion attempted to make sport of him. The officer had drawn his short sword as if to decapitate him. Lemuel stood straight, galvanizing the man with his eyes, almost daring him to strike. When the blow came, Lemuel caught the soldier’s wrist with his



hand and held it as if in a vise. Then abruptly, he laughed. The officer's colleagues saw the humor of the event and also laughed. The embarrassed soldier desisted and lowered his sword. Lemuel was not a man of whom one easily made sport.

This light, however, jolted him. He did not rise to the moment with detached coolness. He, too, was afraid. His stomach recoiled in a wave of mild nausea. Perspiration wept through trembling, clammy skin. What he saw was totally unknown to him—indeed, unknown to all living men.

The “apparition” that had so arrested Elieazar emanated a brilliance that permeated this theater on the hillside. It was human in appearance, yet inhuman. A man. A creature. A source of unimaginable light. After a moment of silence, it spoke. *“Do not be frightened.”* Despite his appearance, despite the supernatural tension of the moment, his words, indeed, were soothing. If it is possible to go from intense fear to calm expectancy in an instant of time, it happened in the terror-stricken hearts of these peasant shepherds. *“I bring you good news of immense joy.”*

αΘω

Joy is the result and the essence of a love fulfilled. It is one of the many reasons for the gift of life. We may count it useful or productive to live one's life in the service of another, or of God. This is another reason for the gift of life. But it is the simple things of joy, the smile and laughter of a grandchild, the lifting of a cloud to the heavens, the smell of jasmine, the announcement of a birth; all of these also are reasons for life and living.

“What is this news? For whom is it intended?” The words struggled to emerge from Lemuel's mouth. Despite his dumbfounded condition, somewhere in the back of his consciousness lurked the question, *“Why is a messenger from God bringing news to insignificant, unknown shepherds?”*

Why indeed? Why does God invest himself in the insignificant? With the whole of Creation from which to choose, why choose earth? From among all the peoples of the earth, why choose a tiny sect called Jews? Why choose Abraham? Moses? Elijah? Why choose a slight youth to slay a threatening giant? Why choose Bethlehem? Why choose a manger, a stable of animal smells, in which to birth his Son? Why does God, as he moves events among men, have the perversity to make small men large and large men small? Why this delight in the unimpressive, the

insignificant? Why his strength made perfect in weakness? Is it because he is attracted to humility and put off by the proud strutting of human arrogance? God holds sway over the heavens. Men of power and influence have no power or influence with him.

This is perhaps exciting news to the disenfranchised, the governed, for those whose lives are dramatically affected by the whims of other men, men who except for status are just like them. But that is hardly the point. It could be argued that the impoverished have stronger character, are less pretentious and full of themselves. Alas, character flaws, pretentiousness and pride are as ubiquitous among the poor as among the rich. The poor are as quick to take unwarranted advantage of a weaker neighbor as are the rich. There is no honor among beasts, whether rich or poor.

It is, nonetheless, a fact that pain is greater among those without the resources to make life more pleasant. Suffering is more prevalent. Babies die quicker and more often. More violence and murder. Hunger. The nagging feeling of being in need greater. The struggle for survival more intense. The malaise of will and determination more accepted and understood. More of their lives spent in prisons. Though many cry out against the terrible Fate that decreed their poverty, God is still more readily received among such people. They seek him for they have discovered that mankind does not love them, does not know what to do with them. They have no place else to go. If God does not help them, they will perish.

Of course, the verdict of the affluent and sufficient is that these pathetic creatures need a God. They invent something, someone larger than themselves, larger than anything they know in order to help them survive in an adversarial, competitive world. Poor things. That is obviously why their God favors them, is it not?

Lemuel, however, could not think beyond *Why?* Simple man. For him there was none of this insufferable, pedantic reasoning. Lemuel, a man of whom not even Rome made sport, was afraid.

αΘω

*... news of great joy to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ, the Lord!*

The words had yet to have much meaning to Lemuel and his friends. They were still reeling from the spectacle of the angel's appearance. While God's angel spoke of peace and comfort, while he spoke of the

coming of a Savior, their hearts pounded with excitement. When suddenly, there was with the angel myriads of heavenly creatures. The scene caused the three men and the boy to fall to the ground. Ahaim cried out, "God help us! We shall be slain!" But they were not slain. The heavenly beings instead began to sing,

*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and goodwill toward men!*

And as suddenly as they appeared, the angel and the heavenly creatures were gone. The happy angelic rejoicing hushed. Sounds of night quickly descended. Fire coals snapped. Sheep heads lowered. A frog croaked in a distant stream, the sound carrying to their ears as they looked at one another, each clinging to the ground as if they would fly off it, their minds so dazzled they were sore. "Will they come back?" whimpered the boy.

The question hung unanswered for a passing respite until Lemuel spoke, "I think they have left us." Silence settled upon them like a sweet syrup. "Now," he whispered, "Gather the sheep. We go to see this great thing that has come to pass."

Lemuel, Ahaim, Elieazar and Jesse with their combined flocks of sheep descended the grassy slopes of the hills surrounding Bethlehem. In the darkness of early morning, the woolly creatures bleated their way into the sheepfold adjoining the stable. There they found Mary and Joseph, cuddled together in the hay, and the baby sleeping next to them.

αΘω

*From the Sanctuary of Eternity  
He came.  
From hallowed halls of holy heights  
He came.  
Through Andromeda, Pisces and Orion,  
Through Sun and Moon this Scion  
Of Omnipotence came.*

*Only shepherds were told.  
In the night wintry and cold,  
They nestled their flocks  
As the embers glowed  
And angels knocked  
At the hearts of children,  
He came.*

*To a stable small,  
To hay and smells  
Of animal tells,  
He came.*

*To a virgin, to a man,  
To all men He came.*

*What shall we then do?  
How then, shall we answer?*

αΘω

## X

### *The Birth of Jesus*

The shepherds could not be contained. They told everyone they saw about what happened to them the night before in the hills and finding the child in the stable. Most laughed at them. Too many nights in the wilderness make men odd. Some did listen and came to see for themselves. Those who came found the stable busy with people scurrying about. The birth of a child was a big event. Women now attended Mary. They helped bathe the infant and wrapped him in blankets. As the first day of the child's life stretched into the next, the news spread. A special child, born in the inn's stable in the town of Bethlehem. A remarkable star had appeared overhead. An omen of rare and significant beauty. Who might this child be? Eight days later, Joseph presented him to the priests to be circumcised and, as the angel had said, they called his name

*JESUS.*

αΘω

Despite their silent compliance, Jewish women did not always consider being "unclean" for bodily functions over which they had no control, a compliment. Since the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph had been received in the home of Julia and Hermas, two compassionate people who would not hear of Mary and the child "spending one more hour in that horrible stable." Hermas ben David had lived in Bethlehem all his life, his father a Jew, his mother gentile. He had married a Roman woman, not an uncommon practice for Jewish men. Yet they lived as Jews. Julia more tolerated Judaism than embraced it. She had little patience for some Jewish teachings, especially as they regarded women. Still, they were a devout family, and hospitable.

For the first week of Jesus' life, his mother was considered ceremonially unclean until his circumcision. While her unclean status found its basis in Moses, and ceremony, and in the eyes of those who were not unclean, there was no substantial difference between Mary's condition and that of a leper. Julia found this unnecessarily cruel for someone who had

just gone through nine months of discomfort and braved the pain of childbirth. “Shameful,” she would say, “Even God gets his day of rest, but for us women? Not so much as a grunt of appreciation from the so-called righteous men of this world. Shameful, I say.”

Hermas smiled at his wife’s complaint. “She’s right, you know.” He remarked to Joseph. “It is much more difficult in this world to be a woman than to be a man.”

“It does seem insufferable that women should be so demeaned as to be considered ‘unclean’ for any reason connected to childbirth. I do not understand the ways of priests and Levites,” agreed Joseph. *Especially for this child*, Joseph thought.

His mind still recoiling from the previous night’s events. It did not seem right for his son to be born in *this* way. Mary should have had the best midwife in the village. Her mother should have been here. He struggled with some guilt, as any man would, for not doing more for his wife at this delicate time.

But there was no midwife, no women to assist her or care for her needs, to advise her during her labor or about their own child-bearing, no mother to encourage her. Only the dim memories of Elizabeth’s labor and, of course, Joseph.



It is not appropriate for men to be present at the time of childbirth. It is just not done. But besides Joseph, there was no one else. Despite this cultural disgrace, another feeling consumed him, a deep inner secret spoken to him by an angel in a dream he would never forget. He had, out of sheer necessity, taken part in the most amazing thing in his young life; the birth of his son. He had been the first to see him—even before Mary. Joseph was all too aware of the origins of this child, but now he was also his son!

For an additional thirty days Mary was forbidden to touch hallowed things and in that time was not permitted even to enter the Temple. After forty days, she was required to offer sacrifice for her purification. *Purification?* She thought. *Purification from what? For having this child?* The incongruity appalled her. Purification after a birth required a sacrificial lamb, or if a family could not afford that, two turtledoves or two young pigeons. Joseph, ever mindful of his dwindling purse, watched as the priest broke the necks of the birds and offered them to God. *Now*, he mused

acidly, *she is clean!* Joseph found the whole process revolting.

At this time also, Jesus, as their firstborn son, would be presented to the Lord for service as a priest. According to tradition and ceremony, they would then “buy him back,” or redeem him for the price of five shekels. Joseph rolled his eyes heavenward at the Levitical considerations that had brought the young family to the Temple in Jerusalem when Jesus was barely six weeks old. They dutifully deposited their shekels in the third Trumpet near the raised dais where ordinarily the women worshiped.

### αΘω

As they turned to leave, a man robed in religious vestments stopped them. It was difficult to tell from his clothing, or his manner, what he was doing there, but he seemed as if he belonged to the Temple. The robe was drawn over his head so that its shadow fell over his face. His dress gave the appearance of an official. His demeanor, however, was different. “Please,” he said unobtrusively, “just a small moment of your time.” There was something in his voice. Age? “May I please look upon your child?” When Mary nodded approval, tentatively, tenderly, he reached his hand and removed the baby’s blanket, exposing the infant’s face. At the same time, the hood fell from the man’s head exposing his face as well. The wrinkles in the corners of his eyes deepened as pleasure splashed over his face. Lines from years of life deepened into exhilaration, his almost white beard of grand length trembled. His voice, choked with emotion rattled, “May I hold him?” Without reluctance, Mary held Jesus out to him. He held the babe close to his breast, hugging him. Jesus smiled back in obvious delight, his little hand unconsciously grasping the old man’s beard. Old eyes lifted toward heaven and closed. Wet streams coursed down his cheeks as he whispered, “Now Lord, let your servant depart in peace.”

*Strange comment,* thought Joseph. *What could he mean? Who is this old gentleman?*

“My name is Simeon.” It was a simple, quiet declaration. “I live here . . . well, I almost live here—in the Temple. The Rabbis and priests treat me as if I were a candlestick,” he said with a not so wry grin. He looked at the child he held as his finger touched his face. “I have spent years praying for this, waiting for this, hoping for this.” He smiled at the young parents. Then again he lifted his face to heaven and said, “And now *my eyes have seen* your Salvation!” The sparkle in his eyes danced the dance of a field of yellow poppies swaying in the wind. It seemed as if welling

emotion would burst from his veins. “Oh,” with embarrassment, “I must be making a fool of myself. Please, you must humor an old man,” as he gently shifted the child back into Mary’s arms.

As Mary held the baby close to her breast, Simeon placed his right hand on the child’s brow. He looked first at Joseph and then gazed directly into the eyes of the young mother. “Your son is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel,” he stated. His features sobered. His wrinkles worked in concert with his mouth as he spoke, “This child will be a sign against which men will speak.” Mary’s eyes widened. His veined hand lifted from the face of the babe to caress the face of the mother, “My sweet daughter,” he said, “A sword shall pierce your own heart also.” Mary’s breath drew in and caught. “That the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed . . .” She heard nothing else. Her eyes, even her thoughts had blinded at his words. As suddenly as the old man had appeared, he was gone.

“Where . . .?” she whispered. Joseph put his arm around his wife and guided her away.



# XI

## *Anna*

**M**aking their way out of the Court of Women, they approached an ancient woman sitting at the base of a marble column near a series of stairs leading away from the Temple. Although she had the appearance of a beggar, she did not hold out her hand, she asked for nothing. She did not cry for alms. Her name was Anna and she had sat in this very spot every day since time past remembering. Some said she was over a hundred years old. Here in the Temple, she fasted and prayed, a woman of deep faith. Like Simeon, she waited.

When she saw Joseph and Mary approaching, holding the child, she held up her hand as if asking them to stop. While the young couple was anxious to leave, the commanding presence of this elderly woman compelled them to stop yet again. Stiffly, with no small difficulty, she stood. One hand propped against the column, she beckoned with the other for them to come nearer. Warily, they did. "I wish to see the child," she croaked, her voice weak with years.

She made no attempt to hold Jesus. Her balance would not have permitted that. Yet the urge to do so compelled her to reach forth her hand to touch the infant's cheek. And with that solitary touch her face radiated pleasure. Eyes of amazing blue, clear of the onslaught of age, gleamed at the baby. Her expression changed to one of wonder. Suddenly, inexplicably, she began to sing with the voice of a songbird,

*You are Holy, O Lord!  
Let now your Light  
Precede the flight of angels  
To ease the affliction of  
Your children.*

The notes floated with such crystal clarity that all who heard stopped to listen. The delicate sweetness of each note, punctuated with stately elegance lifted the hearts of all who heard. Amazing incongruity, that a voice which only croaked above a whisper, could sing in such lovely triumph. One by one, others started to join the paeans of praise. Mary and

Joseph looked about ill at ease at the attention. Those who sang with Anna did not know to whom or of what the notes pealed. Still, the sanctity and force of the old woman's song caught them up. She knew. And that, it seemed, was all that mattered.

αΘω

The trip back to Bethlehem from Jerusalem was short—about two hours. On the way, Joseph thought once again of work. Concern for generating income nagging at his thoughts almost preempted the wonder of being a father. When they arrived at the home of Hermas ben David, the women discussed the baby and the events in Jerusalem. Joseph and Hermas spoke of other things.

Hermas ben David was a man of some means. He was known up and down the caravan routes as a merchant of oils, fine fabrics and wines. Gold often crossed his hands, silver and fine jewelry. He and Julia had one child, a son eight years old named Urbanus. He dreamed of being a soldier when he grew up.

“Stay with me, my young friend,” he said to Joseph. “Stay with me until you are established. With your skills, I see no reason why you shouldn't soon flourish.”

Joseph found it difficult to believe that a stranger, especially one who is half gentile, would make such an offer. It wasn't that Joseph hated Romans; it was that he had learned what treatment to expect from them. Hermas could see the wary embarrassment in the eyes of his new friend. Being almost ten years his senior, perhaps a firm elder brother approach might be effective.

“I quite insist, Joseph,” he ventured. “You have no choice but to stay with me and Julia. Mary and the baby need Julia's help at this difficult time.” Joseph had to agree. “Further, I would enjoy assisting you in setting up shop. It's been a long time since I've helped start a business.” He sat back as if the arrangement had been concluded. Joseph remained silent. “Joseph,” said Hermas almost pleading, “Let me help you. For the sake of the Lord God, for the sake of that wondrous child, let me help you. Do not be blind to the possibility that God has put me in position to care for you.” Joseph buried his face in his hands and nodded his head. He didn't know how to express his gratitude.

αΘω

Aside from being the birthplace of King David, Bethlehem was also known as the burial place of Rachel, beloved wife of Jacob ben Isaac, and mother of Joseph and Benjamin. The town and its environs were often called “the land of Benjamin.” When Rachel died, Jacob erected a stone edifice there later to be known as the pillar of Rachel. Of this place Jeremiah prophesied,

*Thus speaks the LORD: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

These words burned fiercely in the hearts of all Israelites who longed for hope in the promise that followed:

*Thus speaks the LORD: “Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope in your future, says the LORD, that your children shall come back to their own border.*

The people of Judea, indeed all Israelites began to view themselves as the “children of Rachel” and waited for the promised deliverance. And when the prophet Micah prophesied,

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One who is to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.”*

It was not an impossible leap of logic for the Rabbis and teachers to conclude that Bethlehem would be the birthplace of Messiah, the One to deliver Rachel’s children from the terrible bitterness of her tears.

Joseph wandered to the edge of town. Later people would know, or thought they knew, the precise spot where Rachel was buried. But in Joseph’s time, they knew only that it was “a little distance” from Bethlehem in the town’s surrounding environs. “Somewhere out here,” he thought, “is where Mother Rachel is buried. Oh, if she only knew, if she only knew.” His thoughts began to excite as his feelings enlarged. “This is it!” he

exclaimed. “This is the place where, with Hermas’ help—with God’s help—I will build my home, where I will earn my bread with the skill in my hands.” *I will take upon me the trait of Mother Rachel. I will never give up! I will not despair!* The story of Ruth took place here. Nearby was where Samuel anointed David. So, Joseph dreamed and planned. Such is the way with men—but not with God. As it is with most men, he was not really aware of what God was doing. Above him in the eastern sky, a distant star glinted unnoticed.

## XII

### *King Astrologers*

Sands shift softly in hissing winds. Night falls cool upon the desert. Scurrying creatures of darkness venture from their lairs, obtain a quick meal and hurry back to the familiar amenity of hole, cave or crevasse. Flames dance and coals glow as learned men gather around the firelight, peering over parchments. “There is no such star listed in any of our charts,” one of them observed.

“Do you always feel the need to state the obvious,” responded a colleague. Sarcasm and irritability were inevitable. They were embarrassed. They were educated men who had encountered something within their field of expertise they could not explain. Such an event was close to shameful. Intellectual arrogance has forever been the hallmark of men of science. Often they speak with insufferable objectivity of the “things we know” and the “things we don’t know.” Yet no matter how absolute their answers on either side of that equation, time all too often proves them wrong and they are embarrassed. It is unacceptable for those who deal with natural phenomena to be mistaken.

They could not surmise the origin of this unnatural phenomenon. It was at first thought to be a “meteor” tracing a trail of flames and vapor across the expanse of early evening. A wondrous thing to most, to these men? No. Watchers of the sky as they were, they had observed meteors many times. The uniqueness of size and shape, the distinctness of its flaming trail challenged their expertise. Of course, it held some portent. Such an event happened not without some meaning to interpret. Then something spectacular occurred. The “meteor” slowed in the sky and then stopped, as if the Creator were adding a new ornament to an already glittering meadow of lights. It might have blended with the rest of the stars of the night sky, but for its brilliance. And something else: If you stood absolutely still, you could see distinct and uncomplicated movement. Pulsating, as if it were alive.

Many were drawn by the phenomenon, but only these astrologers chose to heed. Only they followed, their caravan auspicious but modest in size. Their raiment laced with gold and silver. Jewels on their fingers, around their necks, affixed to their robes. Harnesses of their camels richly

appointed. They were First Advisors to the King, Magi, magicians, scholars of the night. The celestial anomaly was something that evoked curiosity in the sophisticated and fear in the superstitious. Thus the caravan consisted of men far above the mass of curious onlookers. These men represented an elite. They were wise. Shaman, Savants they were. They would not be followed, yet many wondered what they would discover.

αΘω

Time. Much too little time to prepare. What to take with them? How long would they travel? How much to provision? Since they were carrying treasure they required protection, a military cohort. The caravan had begun to swell with soldiers, camel attendants, slaves, tents and all the accouterments necessary to a long journey. Because the phenomenon could be observed better at night, that is when they traveled, stopping only for an occasional conference which usually determined their next move. When they moved, the “star” moved. When they stopped, the star stopped. It led them west and south. The familiar sound of the camel’s feet plodding on sand and earth, labored breathing, sweat dampening stinking flanks. No matter the night cool, travel by camel back was work for rider and ridden alike. Hours passed in silence. Swaying, creaking, lost in reverie and time. What were they looking for? What lay ahead of them? Where was this star leading them? How would they be received along the way?

αΘω

“I never believed omens could be so compelling!” The exclamation mixed with the sounds of the train. These men knew that much of their art was pure chicanery. They were not fools. The notion that stellar phenomena foretold anything concerning human endeavor held little credibility in their disciplined minds. For all of their genius, however, they were practical men. Men of the world. They knew what royalty wanted to hear. And since it was royalty that held the power and gold, it was prudent to regale them with wonders of magic intended, of course, to enhance the royal persona.

“It is no simple matter to discover a new star. One must use one’s imagination. A simple stratagem to make us richer—and no doubt, safer.”

“That is why they call us wise men, is it not?”

Others were not amused. This was no cleverly invented canard, no practical joke to play on a witless king. They knew that the star they

followed reached for them, leading them, nourishing them. It waited upon them more certain and pure than the sun and moon.

αΘω

He had spent the last hour preparing the caravan to be on its way yet once more. He could hear the gurgle of the Jordan waters nearby as he observed the star—or whatever it was—hanging low in the western sky just above the horizon. He watched pensively as his slave cinched the saddle on the dirty beast upon which he had ridden this far. He was weary. He despaired of ever finding whatever it was they were looking for, wherever this thing was leading them. Perhaps they had been foolish. Perhaps the study of astrology, however ancient, was a hoax. Yet, he mounted the camel and tried to steady himself against being jerked back and forth, as the animal got to its feet. He fixed his eyes on the star, as they had come to call it, and spurred the beast into line. The caravan was on its way again. Although his eyes followed the star, he didn't think about it. He had long since become accustomed to its presence and no longer felt anything at all about it. His mind wandered without direction or purpose, and while in its promenade, the star concluded its movement.

He watched for several minutes more. For months, the brilliant phenomenon had distinctly moved in relation to their travels. Now it appeared stationary. Having left the small town of Jericho behind them, they moved up the steady incline toward the Jewish city of Jerusalem. He spurred his camel and pulled abreast of the caravan's leader.

“Welcome, my brother, the night is yet interminable and my bones ache beyond description.”

“They may not need ache much longer; look.”

The other man glanced again at the familiar star and remarked, “So?”

“Look closely.”

Abruptly, he reined his camel. Since he led the caravan, all stopped. Weariness vanished as his face frowned and then relaxed in quiet elation. “It is stilled,” he whispered.

*The star came and stood over where the young child was.*

αΘω

Although less than an hour into this night's journey, the decision

was quickly made to halt the caravan and reassess the approach to the mission. Night had fallen softly upon the countryside. Clouds above reflected light from Jerusalem causing eerie vapors to seem luminescent. Unseen shepherds, one standing solitary, watchful and alone tending sheep in the distance, the others asleep waiting their watch.

“We shall abide here until morning.”

As the slaves began building a fire, men of science and wisdom conferred together once again.

“This is the land of the Jews. How shall we approach them? How can we learn why we have come among such a people? How shall we explain ourselves?” The astrologers were not unfamiliar with Jews. Indeed, many Jews lived in their own country, descendants of an ancient captivity.

Flames flickered brightly. Settling themselves upon cushions arranged in a semi-circle by slaves, food was served. Figs, grapes, olives, assorted meats, wine and goat’s milk. Perhaps no feast to these wealthy men, but to the hungry it might appear over-indulgent. This did not concern them.

“I have studied much on Jews,” one of them ventured. “They have been a part of our own culture since the days of Nebuchadnezzar.”

“Have you studied their Book?” asked another.

“You refer, of course, to the writings of Moses,” said his companion, as if the question were absurd.

“They call it their ‘Torah, God’s Law.’”

“Do they not have books of poetry also?”

“The writings of David, Solomon and others. Other prophets arose during the time of captivity. Then of course, there was Daniel. He looms larger than all in our history, yet he was a Jew. Yes, and I have studied their rabbinical writings, Hillel and Shammai as well.”

“And now our star has led us to their land.”

“A king, then, is born among them?”

“Exactly. And their God whom Nebuchadnezzar, Darius the Mede, Cyrus the Great and Ahasueras, all acknowledged, has brought us here to honor him.”

“You jest.” Flat. Cynical.

“I do not jest.”

“Merely honor, or worship?” More cynicism.

“We do not know. Perhaps we will find out when we find him.”



“And just how shall we do that? We can’t parade the whole caravan aimlessly through Jerusalem.” This seemed a legitimate, practical consideration. Having come this far, they were now faced with the issue of how to approach dwellers in a land foreign to them. Language was not the problem. Each of them spoke fluent Aramaic. But their dress, the armed guard, the ostentation, the impression they would make would skew, or perhaps mitigate, any meaningful information they might gather.

“We stay here. We do not bring the caravan into the city just yet. We send our Aramaic-speaking slaves among the people. Let them inquire. Surely, the common folk will know. Then we follow.”

It took some arguing and deliberation but, at length, they agreed on this procedure and slaves went out among the streets of Jerusalem asking, *“Where is he that is born king of the Jews?”*

## XIII

### *Herod the Great*

Herod the Great is King of the Jews. That title accorded him by Mark Antony himself and confirmed by the Roman Senate without a dissenting voice.

Word of the travelers spread like the wind among the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Priests and Levites were alarmed. The whole city was troubled. Inquiries from the astrologer's slaves did not take long to reach Herod's ears.

"From whence did they come!" demanded Herod.

"It seems they are Armenian Magi, my king. It seems they seek one recently born king of the Jews."

"They would travel this far for that?" he asked. "Why, for God's sake? What possible interest could they have in a Jewish king?" He paused as if considering the question. *War?* Their armed cohort was clearly defensive . . . obviously to ward off robbers. *Gifts? Treasure?* The thought passed through his mind that they might have come to honor *him!* But then he remembered the qualification, "*born*" King of the Jews. They were seeking a child, perhaps an infant. Possessing a natural distaste for children, the thought disgusted him.

"By God, *I* am the Jewish king!" An advisor, an elderly scribe, then made a mistake. Turning to a colleague, he mumbled something indistinct to the king's ears. Herod did, however, hear the word, "*Messiah!*" The king was incredulous. "What did you say?"

The scribe had lived too long to be much impressed with a king's self-importance. Evenly, he replied, "I said, majesty, that perhaps they are scholars investigating our scriptures."

"You said, *Messiah!*"

"I did, majesty. It is possible they know of him. It is possible they seek him."

Herod stared at the scribe as if weighing the impertinence. His initial thought was to insult the old man. Then the plausibility of his suggestion intrigued him. "*The Blessed One? Now?*" He was not ignorant of the prophecy; no Jew was. Herod considered himself a Jew, despite the fact that his mother was Arab. He did not, however, care enough to know the

details. *I am not ready for this!* “How can you suggest such a thing? It is not yet time! *Is it?*” This king could not know. His massive ego could never permit him to give it serious thought. “Where exactly is this Messiah to be born?”

“In Judean Bethlehem, my king.”

Herod was aghast. The town was practically within the environs of Jerusalem. He paced back and forth, his mind scheming. At last, he ordered, “Send the palace guard! Bring these star-struck fools to me immediately!”

“Is that wise, my king?” asked the chief priest, demurely. These men had compelling reason to fear Herod. He had once put the entire Sanhedrin to death. Although this religious body had been reconstituted under the king’s watchful eye, he mercilessly intimidated them, yet they enjoyed a certain royal sanctuary. So on occasion what appeared to be an unseemly presumption was allowed.

“Wise?” the king reacted. “Have I not a reputation for wisdom?” The priest lowered his eyes in deference. “No matter. How is it, as you say, unwise? Why should I not command that these strangers be brought before me?”

“It is known that they have soldiers themselves,” the chief priest continued. “No doubt, ours will overcome them, but there will be an engagement. You can be sure Rome will look into that. There will be an official inquiry.”

Herod laughed loudly. These blind idiots would never grasp the reality that as far as the Jews were concerned, he held Rome in his hand. He was a friend with both Augustus and Mark Antony. Although he was not pleased with the latter’s cavorting with *that mongrel bitch* in Egypt. “Accompanied by a contingent of military, you say? That can only mean that they are important, or that they carry treasure.” His eyes narrowed. “Perhaps you are right.” As Procurator of the region, Herod held no fear at all of a small security force. With two Roman legions at his command, he held little fear of an invading army. He could and would destroy these Magi should he possess the whim to do so. They did not call him “The Great” for nothing.

“No!” commanded the king, changing his mind. “Send a secret messenger,” Herod continued ignoring the priest. “*Ask* these Armenian adventurers to come to my palace. I desire an audience with them.”

Urbanus, son of Hermas, had also heard of the Armenian caravan. His father maintained a rented room in Jerusalem from which he conducted most of his business. Since the room often contained considerable amounts of denarii, Eh-Ret, a Nubian slave, stood guard at the door while customers came and went. In addition to being a large, powerful man, Eh-Ret was also friend to young Urbanus. Often he entertained the boy with stories of his homeland in the desert south of the land of Egypt.

“My people are archers,” he told the boy. “By the time the testicles of our sons descend, they are able to split a grape at twenty paces.” The eyes of the boy widened. He had never held a bow, let alone actually used one. “When I was fifteen, I killed a lion with my bow. Shot him in the eye as he was killing a goat. See, I still wear his fang.” He touched the polished, gold encrusted lion’s tooth suspended from a gold necklace around his neck. Urbanus listened, entranced.

“Even girls?” he asked.

“What?”

“Can girls kill lions, too?”

“Why do you ask such a thing? Women do not touch the bow. This is a man’s skill. In Nubia, women are not persons. They are women.” Eh-Ret said this without emotion, as though it were the natural order of things.

“But you marry them. They are the mothers of your children.”

“I’ve had many wives,” said Eh-Ret irritably, “and even more children. Some are older than you. Warriors.”

Urbanus thought about that. He knew the Romans sometimes had more than one wife. Almost all of the Roman men had other women with whom they dallied, to the sometimes not so quiet chagrin of the women to whom they were married.

“Do you ever divorce?” The boy’s curiosity seemed inexhaustible.

“We do not divorce our wives,” said the Nubian. “We care for them as long as they live. If we tire of them, we simply get another wife.” Eh-Ret was smiling now. “But we do not send them away. That would be cruel. They would die of starvation.”

The boy responded, “That is a very strange custom.”

“If you lived among my people, you would think differently.”

“If I lived among your people, I could split a grape at twenty paces,” laughed Urbanus. “I could kill a lion!”

“You will kill, my little friend,” spoke the slave. “In your time. In your place.”

αΘω

“You seek him who is born king of the Jews?” It was a statement couched as a question. Its irony was not lost on Herod. He hoped it was not lost on these opulently dressed intruders. He had asked the question with a smile, patronizingly, condescendingly, and if the feeling in his heart was known, contemptuously.

“We have followed his star from the east. We have been traveling for many months.”

“How many months? *Exactly* when did the star appear to you?” Herod’s desire for accuracy seemed odd to the astrologers. The star had been there for all to see. Surely, news of the phenomenon in the east had traveled this far. Of what was this Jewish king so curious?

“We are not certain of exactness, King Herod,” this was a lie. These men could tell you to the portion of the hour when the orb was first seen. “After our first observation, there was some deliberation in the decision to follow it. That took time. Those chosen to journey took time. Preparation took time. We had no concept of how long we might be away, so we prepared for the worst. All of this took time. Now we have been traveling these many months in diminishing hope that we might ever reach our destination.”

Herod was ignorant of the potential for precision from these magicians. Herod was ignorant of much. He did not trust them. Men such as Herod the Great were very frightened men. Nervous men, agitated by any possible—real or imagined—threat to their security and power. “It is said in our scriptures that a Messiah will be born, we know not when, in Bethlehem of Judea, a short distance from where we now stand. Perhaps you will investigate. And perhaps you will be kind to come back and inform me of this great event—should it actually have happened.” *A Messiah from such a place as Bethlehem! How utterly disinteresting!* Herod paused; hoping yet not hoping the astrologers would surmise his incredulity. “Of course, I should wish to pay him homage as well. *Of course*,” he muttered quietly.

αΘω

It was still there. Quiet. Pulsating. Magnificent. Returning to the

caravan, the Magi moved south and west, following their obsession. Their hearts pounding in anticipation, the distance to Bethlehem seemed invisible. Its beams reaching for the ground, the star locked in stillness, as if to select the very dwelling of its resolve. At last, the caravan halted.

The house and the nearby structures bathed in light. The wise men did not call upon their wisdom to know that they had reached, at last, the end of their long trek. Even the camels seemed to know as they settled awkwardly to their bellies without being commanded to do so.

Men of erudition, men of fame, men whose wisdom had the ears of kings and princes, these were the men who entered the modest but well-appointed home in Bethlehem, viewed the babe suckling at the breast of his young mother and fell to their knees in worship. They had come a long distance; they had come anticipating this very moment. However rampant the stories of celestial omens regarding the birth of kings, never in recorded or oral history had it been seen or heard that a star—or whatever it was—would lead men such as them to the feet of a babe such as this.

They brought their treasures. A chest filled with the gold of the realm. For such a child, for such a king, it was no extravagance.

Frankincense. These were men of prayer. Scholars, some of whom had studied the Hebrew Scriptures. They knew the stories of the ancient kings of their country, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Great, Ahasuerus. All of the prophecies of Daniel had happened. This they accepted as fact. To each of them, this new king might well be a priest, a Messiah sent by the Hebrew God. Frankincense, a gift appropriate to that possibility.

The physician among them brought a tankard of the oil of myrrh, considered by Jews to be the balm of Gilead, an expensive perfume, used by kings and lovers. It had other uses, but these were not in the intentions of the Magi. To them myrrh was apropos owing to its value, in some cases, exceeding that of gold.

To the young family, these gifts were welcome. The financial benefit alone stunned them. The gold and myrrh were enough to sustain them through the next few years of their lives. Enough to establish Joseph in his trade. Being an anesthetic, myrrh would sooth the red rash so common to infants who frequently soiled their clothes. It was used in this manner by the very rich.

Bel-Tar slept fitfully that night. The visit with the child and his parents had left a penetrating impression in his Eastern mind. To some, it might have seemed anticlimactic to see a mere infant after so long a journey of anticipation. But for Bel-Tar, it was a most satisfying end to their trip. The baby had actually smiled at him and held his finger. And in those child-eyes, he had seen something that he had never seen in the eyes of such a small person. What it was exactly, he could not say; perhaps unusual intelligence, perhaps something deeper and more personal, perhaps; *was it recognition?* Whatever it was, it made him deliriously happy. It filled him with a triumph he could not form words to describe. He could see that the others were similarly affected.

Just when it seemed that slumber would claim him, a vision flooded his mind that compelled every particle of thought. An enraged Herod the Great in the presence of the child. The king meant to harm the child, not pay him homage. *Herod? Pay homage to a child? Herod the Great . . . Pariah?* Not likely. Instantly he knew, they must not report back to this monster, this sadist. Suddenly, every fiber in his body tingled with urgency. Sleep was now impossible. He thought of the king's guard coming to demand their presence. He could envision their being escorted back to the palace.

His senses gathering in alarm he went to each of his companions. "Arise," he demanded softly, shaking each one, "Awake, We must be off—*now!*"

## αΘω

Joseph's sleep was also troubled. He had slept through the noise of the departing caravan, but now his mind seemed alert to the nuances of the night. A creeping sense of dread paralyzed his breathing. Next to the sleeping young mother, the babe twisted and flailed.

*"Joseph."*

It was not a sound, yet his eyes fluttered as if he had heard something.

*"Joseph, arise!"* The voice was urgent, irresistible. Joseph could not yet open his eyes, yet he could hear and comprehend. *"Herod is conspiring to kill your son. You must go away—far away. Far enough that the king will not attempt to follow you."* Joseph listened to each syllable, the spit evaporating in his mouth. His limbs twitched. He tried to move, to get up; to run but he could not. In his dream, he poured all his energy into action, but felt as

though locked in muck. *"You must escape to Egypt!"*

He awakened, his night clothing damp with perspiration. He glanced first at the child and then at Mary. Both were slumbering comfortably. He started to dismiss the nightmare . . . some intuition coerced him to investigate. His mind fell upon the caravan, the camels, the Magi. He arose and plodded his way to the door of the house. Peering outside into the small hours of the night, he could still smell the animals, but they were gone. No one was in sight. They had vanished.

*You must escape to Egypt!*

The urgency of the appeal, no; the *authority* of it frightened him. *Why Egypt?* Questioning confused him.

While Herod the king had assisted Julius Caesar in conquering the reaches of Egypt, his memory of Cleopatra's hatred held him from further adventures there. Though dead now these thirty years, yet she lived in the hearts of all Egyptians, however subjected to Roman rule. Herod also knew that he could not trifle with the Roman Empire, however secure his position in Israel.

Joseph, young peasant that he was, of course, knew none of this. He had no way of knowing that Herod would not dare follow them to Egypt. The agitation he felt bewildered him. *Where did they go?* He could not understand why the Magi would leave without telling him. *The baby!* He hurried back to where the child lay. The infant was asleep on his pallet next to his mother. Joseph considered the peaceful scene of child and mother and wondered how he could have been so fortunate. *This beautiful and special Child*, he thought. *Herod seeks to destroy him? Why?* The sense of dread had not left him. He moved closer to his wife. He was not sure if he should wake her or go back to sleep himself. He lay back down. His eyes open. He tried to close them. He tried to sleep. At length, he turned to Mary. Shaking her gently he said, "Awake, my darling."

Before the first rays of light tiptoed through the night, another caravan departed in the cool quiet of darkness. Against a backdrop of starlight, an ass carried a mother and child, an ass carried a father and an ass carried their provisions. Egypt awaited them, for the herald of holiness has spoken, "*Out of Egypt have I called my Son.*"

αΘω

Crashing against palace wall, dark liquid forming explosive patterns on stone, a wine goblet disintegrated into a thousand shards. The chief



priest and other members of the Sanhedrin cowered. Slaves stood immobile, invisible, which was the way they wanted it. Filling his hands with folds of silk drapes, he yanked them from the wall, cascading around his feet soiled in spilled wine. Screaming incomprehensible epithets against the Magi, against God, against anything and anyone that entered his inflamed brain. Spittle formed at the corners of his mouth. Eyes bulged. Veins protruded. Sweat flowed. Herod the Great succumbed to madness.

“Sons of swine!” he screamed. “Dog vomit! Ass droppings!” On he railed. His mind searched in futility for the vilest names he could conceive. His vitriolic rampage knew no boundary. He could think of nothing that would sate his hurt, nothing that would absolve the insult. At length he fell silent, sitting on his throne, black clouds brooding in his eyes. No one spoke. No one moved. No one attempted to comfort him in the fear that he might suddenly resume venting his spleen. Nothing good could come of this. Herod was a tyrant of ungodly adolescent passions. This night, blood would be spilled.

“Leave me.” It was a subdued, mumbled command, but a royal command nonetheless. The priests, his advisors, the slaves all left him alone. Herod brooded darkly. Hours paraded with little pomp and ceremony into the night all the way to the first grey light of dawn. The king slept not. His temples pounded with scheming outrage. His nostrils dilated, went dry and sent him into spasms of sneezing. His anxiety knew no respite. He screamed and his personal aide appeared.

*“Fetch me the Captain of the Guard.”* His eyes were red, but not from weeping. His voice low, even, malicious. *“Fetch him out of bed. Fetch him from the joint of his bitch’s thighs! Fetch him before me this instant! Fetch him now!”* The aging king, nearing 70. Labored breathing. The servant left quickly.

αΘω

The young mother stirred from sleep softly, as if to touch the day with velvet. Noise outside. Horses. Chariots. Shouted commands. Soldiers. The door to their home succumbs to relentless pounding with a loud crash. Her husband’s terrified eyes snap open. Cold military professionalism; eyes of steel match that of the steel drawn in his hand. Father sits erect in his bed. Soldier’s eyes searching. Father’s eyes fearing, glancing first at his wife, then at the sleeping form of his infant son. Soldier’s eyes following father’s fear. Bronzed, powerful hand takes hold of infant blanket and pulls. Naked child rolls to the floor, exposing male

genitals. He awakes in whimpering infant wail, which becomes bloody gurgles as pointed steel is shoved through his heart. Mother's screams are heard in this house and throughout the dwellings of Bethlehem.

*“ . . . because they are no more.”*

## XIV

### *Death of a King*

The king lay in his bed with trembling chills. Attending physicians labored grimly. Cool towels applied to his feverish forehead one after another. A nurse held a spoon of cool water to his parched lips. The king was unable to open his mouth to receive the liquid. His face grimaced in pain. Moans, deep and terrible, emit from his diseased body. Foul odors saturated the room. Those attending him wore damp cloths over their mouths. It did little to help.

“Is there nothing we can do?” asked one physician.

“Nothing,” responded another. “The king is dying. Each hour he grows weaker.” Herod opened his eyes. One eye stared off into space. The other pupil rolled out of control into the corner of its socket exhibiting virulent red veins. Breathing labored and gasping. He tried to speak, but the words were lost in aching moans. His eyes closed tight, his jaw clamped as if warding off the agony. His body convulsed and then relaxed.

“He cannot last much longer.”

“Doesn’t anyone know what is wrong with him?” The physicians were frustrated, confused. They had never seen this disease, or whatever it was, before.

“His bowels are dead.”

“What?”

“His bowels are dead and rotting inside him.” The voice came from the shadows of the room. It was a young voice but authoritative, educated.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Lucian, physician to the family of Seth.<sup>1</sup> My name is not important, but I can tell you his bowels are dead. I have seen this before.”

“But you are a doctor, then?”

“Of course, I am a doctor. Look.” The young man strode to the

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<sup>1</sup> Father to Annas who later became High Priest who also had a son, Theophilus, to whom Lucian penned his gospel and the acts of the apostles.

bedside and pulled the coverings back from the king. He lifted the king's skirt to expose his abdomen and genitals.

"How can you dare so expose the king of the Jews?" This from one of the elders.

The young man looked with contempt at the priest. "You fools concern yourselves with the king's modesty when the man will be dead in a few hours." He turned back to the attending physicians. "Look at his abdomen." It was bloated, distended, gaseous. "For reasons we do not understand, the blood to his intestines has stopped. They have died and are decomposing within him." The clarity of the diagnosis and the young man's demeanor persuaded the other physicians. The priests were incredulous.

"How can one so young know . . .?"

"What can we do to save his life?" asked an attending physician.

"Nothing. He will die soon and there is nothing we or anyone else can do to prevent it."

"You blaspheme the king?"

Ignoring the priest, the young physician continued, "If you surgically incise his abdomen, you might relieve his suffering."

"Cut his belly open?"

"Of course." The young man reached for a small leather case. Untying its strings, it opened to what appeared to be medical instruments. From these he selected a small, sharp scalpel. "Observe," he remarked clinically.

"Stop him!" shouted the priest.

No one moved. Again the doctor, ignoring the priest, deftly inserted the instrument just deep enough to penetrate the abdomen wall. In less than an instant, he had made an incision the entire breadth of the king's body. Gases escaped and the bloating receded. The king, unable to feel the pain of the blade for the pain within his body, sighed in blessed relief. The stench was unbearable.

The doctor toweled his hands of blood and remarked, "Give him heavy portions of wine mixed with myrrh. And cover the windows," he ordered. "Flies. The king will be dead by morning." Abruptly, he turned and left the room. Incredibly, Herod the Great rested comfortably.

The attending physicians looked at one another, stunned. The priests were helpless.

"Who was that?"

“He said his name was . . . Lucian.”

αΘω

The young doctor was wrong. Herod lived three more days before he succumbed. That night, everyone left the king in peace except for the slaves. Sitting by the bed in waning candlelight, the slave awoke to the sound of intermittent buzzing. No one had remembered to close the windows. Since the slave had not heard the young physician, he did not do so. It was not long before Herod’s exposed intestines were covered with flies. This condition continued for hours through the next day before someone thought to cover the patient’s stomach.

Two day’s later, just before the king breathed his last, he awoke screaming. His mouth covered with foaming, bubbling spittle, his words incoherent, his eyes glazed with fear and approaching death, he could not stop screaming. One of the physicians thought to examine the incision. Perhaps, he thought, it was encrusted, causing additional pain. He removed the coverings and the loose-fitting bandage. The stench staggered him. He turned his head in futile attempt to reach fresh air. Turning again to attend the monarch, he viewed the wound for the first time in almost three days. Instantly gagging, he vomited. The king’s belly was crawling with maggots. Herod the Great died in his physician’s vomit, worms writhing in putrescent tissue.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A similar death occurred to Herod’s son, Antipas. See Acts 12:23.

## XV

### *Return from Egypt*

The weeks in Egypt passed pleasantly stretching into more than twenty months. Once again, they were housed in another's home. The baby walked now, calling Joseph, "Abba." Mary sat for hours playing with the child. It seemed she lived only for him. In her diary she wrote,

*My life revolves around him. I wonder if it is more blessed to be a parent or to be a child?*

*Things are a pleasant havoc with him near. Everything has changed. One sweet smile, a hug or even a coo can make a day complete. I burst with emotion when I try to explain the way I feel. Love is not a strong enough word. Maybe adore or cherish.*

*As I held him for the first time, I did not feel worthy. I look into his newborn face seeing greatness and strength. I wonder if all mothers feel this way or if my baby really is destined for greatness.*

*I want to help him skip the small steps and boost him into higher things in life but I know he will have to struggle his way through things in order to make him strong. He will have to do almost everything by himself. I constantly fall short of all that I expect from myself. I often feel I have no idea what I am doing. I wonder if he will learn from me or I from him?*

*I know he is changing me because of the way I feel. He is such a precious gift. The discoveries that are waiting to be found. The potential for joy that one little face holds. His eyes are a clear, empty innocence. Knowing that he will look to me fills me with a need to strive for excellence within myself. I am pulled to him. I revolve around him. He is my sun!*

αΘω

Joseph's thoughts were of a different genus. He was not caught up in the rapture of fatherhood. His musing took a more practical direction. He had protected Mary from the awful news of Herod's slaughter of the male babies in Bethlehem. *How many had there been?* He did some mental

calculation. *It could not have been more than fifteen or twenty children*, he thought. This does not make it more acceptable, nor does it ease the horror of the event in the least. But that beast of a monarch could just have easily included the whole of Jerusalem.

Joseph had labored hard through the day in the shipyards of the Nile. Building ships did not tax his skills as much as creating wooden furniture for the homes of the wealthy, but it brought in an income. While he still had the wealth of the gifts of the Magi, he did not want to squander it by not working when there was work to be had. So, he worked and at night, he joined Mary and the child in the home where they stayed, exhausted but feeling good. Life here was not unpleasant. Sated with wine and good food, sleep came easily and sweet. The Egyptian night crept into wee hours. The moon slid down the western sky and disappeared into the horizon.

“Joseph.” A familiar voice. In the periphery of his consciousness, he knew what was happening.

“Joseph, it is time. He who sought the young child’s life is dead. Arise, and return to your homeland.”

It was as simple as that. He did not get up immediately. He lapsed into a deeper slumber and did not open his eyes until the day was several hours old. Mary and the babe were still asleep. His place at the shipyards would be empty that day. There would be no pay. It didn’t matter. Gently he stroked his wife’s hair until she smiled and fluttered her eyes. They were a deep, sapphire blue. Joseph’s were brown, his skin tawny, his face handsome, ruddy and well defined, his beard well groomed. She reached for him, wetting his hairy chest with her milk.

An angel, unseen in the shadows, smiled.

αΘω

Joseph was not a man given to anxiety. As the family neared Bethlehem, however, a feeling of foreboding fell over him. His purpose had been to settle there with his friend, Hermas ben David. He had been born in Bethlehem, he had registered there, he had hoped to build his business there instead of Nazareth where his father worked. There would not be enough business in Nazareth to sustain them both. It was much too economically deprived. His lips crinkled into a caustic smile when he remembered the popular slur, *“Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”* Yet, how could he return to Bethlehem now? After what Herod had done? It

seemed impossible.

The son of Herod the Great, one Archelaus, now rules in Judea. He is no less a tyrant than his father. It was well known that of all of the sons of Herod the Great, the character and temperament of Archelaus was most like that of his bestial father. Like his father, he was hated by the Romans; yet unlike his father, he held far less power. Later the Romans would depose him, banish him and place their own procurators in power. Joseph feared that Archelaus would attempt to continue the slaughter of children that his father had initiated. Bethlehem was no longer an option. He must lay his hopes and dreams aside for now. The safety and protection of his family preempted all else. That night as he dreamed, his decision was confirmed by the whispers of an angel.

When he reached the borders of Bethlehem, he did not stop. Nor did he stop in the great city of Jerusalem, nor Jericho. Up the eastern banks of the Jordan, they traveled all the way to Galilee and ultimately back to Nazareth. Joseph, Mary and the child were home.

In Nazareth, with the funds provided by the Magi and that of his trade, Joseph could afford a home larger than that he would have had in Bethlehem. Jesus, nearing four years old, bounced about the rooms with abandon. As the weeks, months and years passed, his little body changed into that of a small boy. He became stronger and seemed wiser and brighter than others his age. It was thought by his neighbors and family that he basked in the radiance of God's favor. There was little doubt that he was a special child.

*Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and of the wonder of the LORD.*



## XVI

### *Boyhood Adventures*

In the spring following the eleventh birthday of Jesus, came the Feast of Passover. Since the days of Hezekiah, each year the Feast is held in Jerusalem where the Temple is the center of activity and the site of the ritual slaughter of the paschal lamb. Every male from the age of twelve and older was expected to attend Passover in Jerusalem. From all over Israel, hundreds of thousands of men with their families descend upon the city of David. The vast Temple grounds could accommodate in excess of 200,000 worshipers. Filled with the mayhem of celebration, children galloping hither and yon, fathers praying and attending sacrifice, mothers gossiping and tending their babes, the great edifice of Herod the Great swarmed with celebrants.

Excitement crackled through the family like small rivulets of lightning. Jesus would attend his first Passover this year. The family assembled the things they would need for the trip and set out with many others who also made the week-long pilgrimage to the City of David. The highways leading from the region of Galilee south to Jerusalem crowded with people and animals. Clouds of dust rose over roads, and the city itself appeared enveloped in brown mist. This was the High Holy Day. It recalled the most important day of Jewish history, the day in which they were delivered by the hand of God from the oppression of the Egyptians more than one thousand, four hundred years ago. It was a day celebrated each year since then.

αΘω

The sheer size of the Temple and its enclosure overwhelmed Jesus. Struggling with overloaded emotions, he wanted to explore, but did he dare? Suppose he got lost in this monstrous place?

“Have you ever seen such a place?” he shouted to his friend, Eben.

One year older than Jesus, this was Eben’s second Passover. He assumed the attitude of an experienced participant, “You haven’t seen anything yet. Wait until you get inside. There are doors so large that ten grown-ups standing on each other’s shoulders could not reach the top.”

Jesus did not doubt it.

“Why so large?”

“Well,” said Eben with authority, “You have to have large doors to let God in.” Jesus looked at his friend marveling at his obvious stupidity.

“God doesn’t live here!” he declared.

“Does, too!” Eben shot back.

“Rabbi Abjo-ram said that ‘God does not live in a place built with hands.’”

“I don’t care.” Eben couldn’t think of a rabbi to quote, “My father told me that God lives behind the great veil in the Holy of Holies.”

Jesus persisted, “I don’t see how the God who created the whole world and the stars and stuff could live . . .” the argument escalated as they passed through the gate and into the courtyard.

αΘω

Approaching twelve years of age, Jesus already had three younger brothers and one sister. The next eldest, James, would be eligible to attend Passover in two years. For this occasion, all but Jesus stayed behind in Nazareth. Eben and Jesus, living next door to each other, had “grown up” together, playing together, doing all the things boys did together. They were “best friends.”

While somewhat contemplative and withdrawn, Jesus lived in all respects as a normal child. Joining his friends playing caravan, skipping pebbles on ponds, and chewing on weeds, he sometimes went off by himself to be alone. A casual observer might conclude that the boy was melancholy or morose. This was not the case. Jesus did seem to spend an inordinate time in prayer for an active boy and often surprised adults with penetrating questions or observations that made them look at each other in amazement; never precocious but different; playful, but rarely frivolous. Coarse references in which all boys were prone to engage, for him came less frequently. Other children in the neighborhood liked and accepted him as one of them. Sometimes, one of the larger boys would try to bully him. Jesus did not fight, but he never showed fear. The larger, more aggressive boys left him alone. He never “ran home” to relate his story of woe to his mother. For this, he won the respect of the other children. Most of the children sought to play with him. Some of the older boys were jealous of this respect and wondered that if he would not fight, how could others want to be around him so?

Jesus accepted this respect as though it were an obvious thing for others to offer. It never occurred to him that he was special or, God forbid, that he was unusual. There were, of course, the whispers about how he was born. Jesus did not understand these things and did not care at all to discuss them. On those rare, quiet moments with his mother or father, or perhaps with them both, he would ask, “Why do I feel so different from everyone else?” Or, having heard the rumors about his birth he would wonder, *Do I not have an earthly father? Am I really adopted?* Or, when some of the darker rumors would surface he thought, *I am Joseph’s son! I am not a child of forni . . . fornication!* These things passed through his mind as a boy. But the questions did not generate anxiety nor apprehension. He was a secure child. Secure with others. Secure with himself.

αΘω

“Look!” cried Eben.

A covey of sacrificial doves had escaped, forming shapes in the sky among the columns of the Temple as they beat white wings in graceful flurries of motion. How they knew to change direction, all at the same time, how they managed to dodge the many protuberances of Temple architecture, was an amazement and wonder to the boys. Each thought, “If I could only catch one, I would take it home and give it a name, and I would get to keep it!”

People were everywhere. The boys were jostled more than once by unthinking grown-ups, oblivious to their presence. They were bumped, cursed at, frowned upon and ignored. They looked around and discovered that their parents had—*disappeared!* At first, they panicked. Looking about, they searched frantically. To lose their parents in a place like this is frightening even for almost grown-up boys. Still, their panic subsided as boyhood curiosity returned, distracting them.

Wandering through the wall of bodies, they came upon a drainage grate in the pavement. It was ajar, exposing an aperture that gave way to darkness beneath. Jesus wanted to investigate. Struggling, the boys managed to pull the heavy grate open just enough for each of them to squeeze through. Stepping-stones had been chisled into the walls of the cavity that allowed them to descend into its darkness. It was not deep and at its bottom stretched a long, dark tunnel just high enough so that the boys had to get down on their hands and knees rather than crouch.

As their eyes adjusted to the poor light, they noticed another light

in the distance down the length of the tunnel, indicating yet another opening to a grate above. "Com'on, Let's crawl to the other grate," Jesus said, excitedly.

"What if we get caught?" responded Eben circumspectly. "We are not supposed to be down here."

"Who's to know?" asked Jesus.

"GOD will know!" shot back Eben.

Jesus smiled, "Yes, that's true, now come on!" With that, he started to crawl toward the next shaft of light. It seemed natural to Jesus that, rather than God punishing them for this adventure, he would be with them and protect them. There wasn't much that frightened Jesus, and as for getting caught doing something of which adults would disapprove, well . . . In a few minutes they were there. Voices and noise from the floor above drifted down eerily.

"We're exploring a cave," said Jesus as if he had to add imagination to the adventure.

"Maybe we will find some bones or a skull." Eben's imagination quickly caught up. Since they had made it through the tunnel this far, he provoked himself to be a co-discoverer with Jesus.

Another shaft of light beckoned in the distance. Off they crawled. And so it went, from shaft to shaft, from grate to grate the boys explored the tunnels of the Temple until, at length, the next shaft of light was barely discernable in the distance. They stopped. Neither boy seemed eager to proceed.

"I think we should get out now," said Eben.

They sat under the last grate to which they had come. The sounds from above were quieter. They had apparently moved from the center of foot traffic and activity in the Temple to a place of lesser interest.

"This is a good place to escape before we get into real trouble. It doesn't sound like there are very many people around," spoke Eben softly.

Jesus looked above and then peered at the grey light so very far away down the tunnel. "Let's try it, Eben," he grinned.

"I'm not so sure," Eben was afraid but did not want it to show.

"It will be all right, Eben." Jesus coaxed, "God will take care of us." Eben was unconvinced.

"God will kill us!"

"No, he won't!"

"It's a real long way and it looks pretty dark."

“This will be the last one,” Jesus said conspiratorially. “At the next light, we will definitely get out of here.” Eben’s heart throbbed with apprehension. “Come on,” and off Jesus crawled. The other boy had no choice but to follow.

They had not gone far, maybe one-third of the way to the next shaft of light when Jesus cried, “Ay-yah!” and abruptly stopped.

“What happened?” from frightened Eben.

“I don’t know. I crawled on something.” For the first time, Jesus found himself disquieted.

“Is it alive?” Eben groaned.

“No.” Jesus paused as if searching. “There! I’ve got it. It’s, it’s some kind of weapon.” The light in the tunnel was too dim to see much of anything. Jesus felt the instrument with his hands. “I think, I think . . . It’s a dagger!” Both boys shrieked.

“Oh, no!” cried Eben.

“And it’s covered with blood!” cried Jesus.

“Oh, no!” again from Eben. “Murder!”

The boys had not realized it, but the tunnel floor had begun to rise in the direction they were headed. The light they had seen was not the direct light of the next shaft, but the residual light from a shaft even farther up the tunnel. Hearts now pounding with excitement, they crawled faster, knees skinning against stone. From the point where they found the “dagger,” the incline increased sharply until at long last, direct light from above came into view.

“Come on,” said Jesus, “let’s get out of here.” Off he scurried toward the light as fast as he could. Eben followed. When they reached the grate from which the light emanated, they stopped to catch their breath. Both boys were panting.

“Let me see,” demanded Eben breathlessly. The light was enough now to make out the object of such consternation. To their great disappointment, it was merely a trowel left behind by some worker many years ago. When the boys saw this, they breathed a sigh of relief. “It’s only a mason’s tool,” said Eben. “It’s no dagger at all.”

Jesus tossed it aside, a look of disgust on his face. “It could have been used in a murder,” he replied. “That brown stuff on it really looks like blood.”

Light streamed from the grate above. It was a moment before the boys realized that no sounds could be heard. Cautiously, they made their

way up the stones in the wall to the grate. The climb was higher here than was their descent into the tunnel. That combined with the long incline of the tunnel indicated a floor level much higher than the place they entered. Once again, Jesus first. To their thankful surprise, the grate moved easily. In a moment, they were out of the tunnel and standing on—a *marble floor, mirror polished!* The grate opened between two massive tables. There was a large altar with a ramp leading up to a flat surface. A basin, or laver, containing water stood to the left as they faced a flight of stairs. At the top of the stairs there were two golden candlesticks followed by an opening into another spacious room at the end of which hung a thick curtain. The boys approached the curtain hanging wider and taller than anything either of them had ever seen.

Visibly moved by the sanctity of the cavernous structure, the two explorers became quiet. They could hear themselves breathing. The spirit of adventure pounding at their temples, yet not a sound was uttered. His demeanor sober, yet soft, Jesus' face turned serious. He was almost of age, and something inside him exerted itself. He stood looking at the great purple and scarlet curtain. He said to Eben, "Wait here," and without waiting for his friend to protest, he stepped inside its folds. Upon doing so, he instantly encountered another curtain, slightly less dense than the first. In the darkness, the boy calmly bent down, lifted its hem, and stepped under. It was then that young Jesus found himself standing in the Holy of Holies.

αΘω

Except for light filtering in from sources unknown to Jesus, illuminating three stone walls, the floor, the ceiling and the curtain behind him, the room was empty. No furniture, no altars, not even a carpet. Just an empty room. Without realizing why, the boy felt comfortable. He felt as though this were a familiar place very much like home. He knew that this place was a sanctuary, a place for the presence of God, yet there was nothing here. Just an empty, bare room, nothing to suggest even that it had a sacred meaning. He knew intuitively that this room was the heart of the great Temple, the focus and center of worship for all Israel. Crossing his legs, Jesus sat on the floor and promptly forgot about his friend waiting outside the curtain.

αΘω

From the moment Jesus entered the folds of the curtain, Eben felt apprehensive. Only a few seconds passed before he began to call, "Jesus? Jesus . . . ? Jesus!" He dared not call above a whisper. He did not want to be discovered here. But Jesus did not hear. The curtain was too heavy, muffling any voice as tiny as the boy made. Eben waited, looking anxiously at the doorways into the Holy Place. It seemed he waited forever while Jesus remained silent inside the curtain. To Eben, it seemed the giant curtain had swallowed his friend. Then he heard voices. Footsteps coming. He had to hide. Behind the big altar. Sure enough, two priests entered the room and walked directly toward one of the tables. The two men spoke to one another of liturgical arrangements while Eben huddled on the floor behind the altar, hoping he would not be discovered. Would they go inside the curtain and find Jesus? What would they do if they found him? He wished with all his heart that he had not been separated from his parents. He closed his eyes and said, "Lord if you let me out of here, I will never . . ."

Before Eben completed his short prayer, the men were gone. He called to Jesus again. No answer. He wanted to follow his friend behind the curtain, but the fear in him precluded that. He could not move, let alone take a step toward the curtain. *Why doesn't he come out? What's keeping him? Did he leave me and go off on his own? Was he caught by someone on the other side?* "Jesus!" he whispered loudly.

Nothing.

What to do? Since he did not know what had happened to Jesus, Eben made the decision to extricate himself from this situation as best he could. He made his way toward the door through which the men had exited. Peering out into the Court of Israel, he saw people moving about, but no one looked in his direction. He slipped out and down the stairs into the Court of the Women unnoticed. There, miraculously, he saw his father, his mother and his older sister. When they saw him, they were angry.

"Where have you been?" his mother demanded.

"Playing with Jesus," he replied, volunteering nothing more. He still did not know of Jesus' whereabouts. He did not want to betray his friend. Perhaps he was safe with his parents as well. He hoped so.

"Don't you ever wander away from us again," his mother scolded. "You may become lost and who knows who might find you. Some terrible thing could happen to you."

"Yes, mother."

## XVII

### *His Father's Business?*

In the dimly lit sanctuary Jesus sat on the stone floor. He did not feel the cold seeping through his buttocks. He did not feel the ache in his knees and ankles. He did not shift uncomfortably. He seemed mesmerized, out of touch with the reality of his time and place. His thoughts consumed him, thoughts uncommon and beyond his age. Deep thoughts reaching back beyond his time. For the first time in his life, he realized he was as different from the rest of humanity as light is different from darkness.

This room. This place where once the arresting patina of glory shimmered.

*“And there I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim. I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.”*

αΘω

“Where is our son?” Mary was occupied with preparations for the journey back to Nazareth. As was her custom, she checked her mental list of items to be secured before they left. All the clothing and food had been packed. All the children in the caravan—except Jesus—were playing games with the children of other families from Nazareth and from other towns along the way. Mary had packed away the last vessel when she had asked the question.

“Playing with young Eben last time I saw him,” her husband responded. Mary relaxed. Eben’s mother was one of her favorite friends. Often they went to the well together. Jesus was in safe hands. She continued to make ready.

The caravan had traveled most of the day and the sky began to darken. The first star blinked in the waning sunset. Mary spoke to Joseph, “Will you please fetch Jesus now? It is time for him to come home.” Joseph acknowledged his wife’s request and walked away in the direction of their friend’s position in the caravan. When he arrived he saw Eben with his family, but nowhere did he see his son. “Isn’t Jesus with you?” he asked



of Eben's father.

"Why no. The last time we saw him," he turned to his son, "Eben, weren't you playing with Jesus on the Temple grounds?"

"Yes, father."

"Then where is he?"

"I don't know father." The boy was not about to tell on Jesus. Besides, if he did he might get into trouble himself.

"Where did you leave him?" This time from Joseph trying to hold back the rising tension in his concern.

"I don't know, sir," the boy seemed frightened. "We were together in the crowd and then I couldn't find him. We got separated." Joseph looked with alarm at the boy's father.

Joseph quickly turned to go to his wife. "We must turn back."

*"We will go with you!"* assured Eben's father.

αΘω

When Mary heard the news, her face contorted with fear. "Oh no!" she cried. "What has happened to my son!?" Joseph tried to comfort her to no avail. *He is not the child's father. How could he possibly know!?* Her fright combined with frustration that privately and unjustifiably burned toward her husband. She wailed, "Oh God, help him. Perhaps he has fallen into the hands of terrible men." She allowed her mind to think the worst. She knew that slavers sometimes kidnapped young boys for unspeakable purposes. Or perhaps he lay dead or dying in a wadi somewhere. All thoughts of future blessing and prophetic fulfillment evaporated before the accusing specter of parental irresponsibility. "Oh, Jesus, my son!" she wailed.

"Hold onto yourself, Mary. Think! You *know* God will take care of him." Joseph's voice suddenly sobered her. Of course, he was concerned. Joseph had never treated Jesus in any other way than that of a favored son. He loved Jesus as much as she. *Oh, strong Joseph! Thank God, he is at my side.*

"Hurry!" said Mary. "Let us leave now! Let us search. I will not leave Jerusalem until he is found!"

"We *will* find him," said Joseph with determination. "Of that I can promise."

αΘω

Jesus emerged from the sanctuary curtain three days later, yet it had seemed for him but a moment fleeting. He felt different than he felt before he entered the sanctuary. No longer the adventurous boy, but the beginning of a man stepped that day from the folds of the curtain. What had he seen in Herod's empty sanctuary? What had he felt? What had he heard? What had touched him? As he made his way from the Temple that day, he only knew that he had experienced something. Encountered Someone. In the deep, quiet eddies of his spirit he knew he would never be the same.

αΘω

Profoundly affected by his solitary experience in the sanctuary, Jesus moved through the Temple in a straight line, noticed by passers-by, but not disturbed. To them, he seemed a strange looking boy. Perhaps lost. An occasional mother wondered if his parents knew his whereabouts. Jesus was not thinking of his parents. Nor had he a single thought that Eben had not been waiting for him. While his mind was clear, his sensitivity to his environs was overcome by his focus. All he could think of for the moment was, . . . *well, what was it? Contact? In the sanctuary?* He knew something had happened to him, yet he could not grasp it, could not comprehend it. He felt himself glowing inside, almost vibrating with an inexorable quality of transcendence. Whatever it was, it made him feel enfranchised, enabled. He was not afraid. He would never be afraid again.

Soon he found himself among the great marble colonnades of Solomon's porch. He paused, gazed up their graceful lengths and wondered if they might reach to the heights of what he felt inside, and then continued on. In a moment, he heard a voice that penetrated his focus. The sound carried through the door out into the passageway between the columns. It must have been an important voice for Jesus was intensely focused at that moment. He stopped to see. A man with a great beard flecked with grey was holding court with a group of what appeared to be students in one of the anterooms off the side of the porch. Other older men were with them, rabbis and elders no doubt. Jesus listened.

The group consisted of men, or at least, males. Some were boys his age. They sat squirming on the floor, trying to be quiet, but for the most part very bored. The others were a mixture of younger men ascending in age all the way up to the rabbis who to Jesus, seemed quite old. There were maybe thirty in all. They were asking questions about the Feast of the Passover, about why this annual, celebratory trek to Jerusalem.

One young man about eight or nine years Jesus' senior stood, "Did not Moses and the children of Israel eat the Passover in their own homes in Egypt? Did they not apply blood to the posts and lintels of their own homes? Then why must we and our families now come all the way to Jerusalem to celebrate this holy day?"

One of the rabbis, whose beard was black and well oiled, seemed offended at the impertinence of the question and was about to reply with rebuking words. But greybeard smiled. "Do you think the journey too arduous, my young friend? Is such a man of youth and vigor as yourself so easily fatigued?"

Soft laughter from the others. "Do you not recall," greybeard continued, "in the days of Hezekiah, king of Israel, that he sent letters to Ephraim and Manessah, calling all the priests and Levites to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Passover . . .?"

"That is true, rabbi . . ." He was interrupted by a very young voice. All eyes turned toward Jesus who was standing at the rear of the group. "Yet do you not also recall that it was Josiah, son of Amon and king of Israel, who established Jerusalem as the place where all Israel should observe Passover?" The rest of the students were stunned that an inexperienced and uneducated child should respond to the rabbis with such confidence and poise. Some of them sucked their breath in surprise. The rabbis' eyes widened. Blackbeard glowered. Greybeard seemed amused. "For do not the Scriptures say," Jesus continued, "that *king Josiah commanded all the people saying, 'Celebrate the Passover to the LORD your God as it is written in this book of the covenant, in Jerusalem?'*"

"Well, it seems I stand corrected!" greybeard smiled. "And who might this young scholar be?"

My name is "Jesus, Jesus ben Joseph." Spoken with confidence. Spoken perhaps even with a bit of pride.

"Joseph?" said greybeard, raising one eyebrow. "Common enough name." Turning to a colleague, he asked loud enough for all to hear, "Is there a rabbi named Joseph?" He assumed Jesus had learned the scriptures from his father. The implication of the joke was not lost on Jesus and it irritated him.

"*He is not a rabbi!*" responded the boy perhaps too sharply. "He is . . . a carpenter." A ripple of laughter among the students. Greybeard smiled again, marvelously amused. Even Blackbeard smiled.

"Then whence learned you such wisdom?"

“It is not wisdom to remember simple facts from scripture,” replied Jesus. It was not said insolently or disrespectfully. He spoke with the innocence of his age, but now the joke was on the ancient rabbi. More laughter among the students.

“My son!” a commanding voice from the rear of the room. An embarrassed Joseph stood in the doorway, his face revealing relief, anger and shock at what he witnessed. A second later the boy’s mother rushed by his father pushing him aside. She ran quickly into the room taking Jesus by the shoulders. She hugged him and wept. Then holding him at arm’s length she scolded, “Jesus! How is it that you have treated us in this way?” She paused and looked at her son. He seemed totally without understanding of her concern. “Ah!” she cried in strong exclamation. “Your father and I have been in anguish searching for you.”

The rabbis and students looked on in curious silence. They were all waiting for Jesus’ explanation. Perhaps the rabbis would come to his rescue. Greybeard seemed to sense the expectation of the students. After all, young Jesus was something of a hero to them now. He was looked upon with a favor akin to respect. *Greybeard, say something!* “Madam I,” Greybeard was cut short.

Jesus finally found his tongue in response to his intensely emotional mother. “Mother, did you not realize that I must attend to my Father’s business?” asked Jesus shakily. Again, the question would appear insolent and insensitive were it not for the innocent tone in which it was asked.

Joseph, however, would have none of these whimsical, pietistic answers from his son who, as far as he was concerned, had done something serious and very wrong. He had with apparent disregard violated the wishes of his parents. This was unacceptable. Taking Jesus by the arm and leading him from the room, he whispered into his son’s ear, “Father’s business or not, boy, the next time you run off on an escapade like this, you will answer to *this* father!” This time, raucous laughter from the students. Joseph’s big, calloused carpenter’s hand hurt. Jesus could not remember seeing his father so angry. Suddenly, he was a boy again. He knew he would be disciplined, and he knew it would not be pleasant. He had caused his parents much concern and pain. At the age when he was supposed to become a man, this was not good. He knew that he had violated their trust. He accepted the penalty that was to come.

*For, though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience through the things that he suffered.*

His mother, however, despite her fears, pondered the response of her son. It was a response that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

## XVIII

### *Farewell*

In all, Joseph fathered eight children. All five boys were master carpenters. Young Judas could handle an adze better than any of the others. The senior Joseph, clearly the best woodworker in the family, observed that his third son and namesake, Joseph, learned quickly. *This one exceeds the others in raw talent for the work*, his father had decided. Possibly exceeding even himself. A fortunate man, all of his sons worked in the trade and, still, they were unable to keep up with the work. The girls, Milcah, Sarah and Rhoda, were a great help also and especially to their mother, his precious Mary.

The house and family of Joseph prospered, enjoying their reputation as the most skilled carpenters throughout the region of Galilee. Jesus, being the first born, was secretly the pride of his father's eye. He'd often watched his eldest son bent over his workbench and his heart warmed to a gentle smile. *My son! Such a man!* His back was strong, his mind sharp; his work was, well, among the finest.

As for Jesus, he loved the smells of the carpenter's shop. . . the pungent fragrance of pitch, of fresh cuts of aged wood, of the oils used to preserve and reveal the grain of each piece. He loved working with tools, working with his hands and the satisfaction of creating something good and useful. His father had taught him the value of a job well done, whether it was an attractive archway entrance to a home or wheels for an ox cart. And he loved the good fun of working with his brothers and his father, the joking, the teasing and the good-natured insults. They enjoyed the talk of men.

Jesus was, however, preoccupied at times. *He has been preoccupied all his life*, thought Joseph. He remembered with fondness the time they thought they had lost him. *Palavering with the elders in the Temple . . .* Joseph smiled at the memory. It wasn't amusing then.

Over the last several months, his son had become detached from the family business. Joseph understood. He had understood all along. *I will lose him. The time is approaching.* A terrible ache throbbed in his bones when he thought of it, a permeating pain, from which escape seemed impossible.

In the natural and ordinary earthiness of growing up, it had sometimes been hard for Joseph to think of this son as whom he knew him to be. While a happy child with a quick wit and a hearty laugh, Jesus was pensive at times, preoccupied with things beyond his father's ability to imagine. Beyond anyone's ability to imagine. Despite his terrible uniqueness, Jesus had been a fine son, every inch a source of pride to his father and mother.

He was thirty now. Clearly, his heart was no longer in the shaping of wood.

And then . . .

αΘω

"My father," Jesus had begun. They had just completed the evening meal. Joseph at the head of the table, Mary at the other end. Things that affected the family were always discussed together. Even the youngest was invited to participate. And Rhoda never let such an opportunity pass. She was always ready to talk, ready to be—wanted to be—involved.

Jesus reclined at his father's right hand. James, the eldest next to Jesus, reclined to their father's left. Sarah to James' left. *Sarah. Dear, sweet Sarah.* Much like her mother in disposition, humble, self-effacing, quiet; and across from her, Simon, who in addition to carpentry, was the family's hunter. Next to Simon, Rhoda, and across from her, Judas. Judas admired his brother Jesus and emulated him in thoughtfulness. To Judas' left, Milcah, the eldest daughter who reclined at Mary's right and who took charge of everything. The family often fondly wondered about Milcah and her mother as to which was really the "woman of the house." To Milcah's left, the boy Joseph.

When Jesus addressed his father, conversation among the family faded. Even Rhoda quieted. All of them knew what was coming. Like their father, they had sensed it for months. Mary swallowed, held her breath and kept silent, tears a heartbeat away.

"My father, I must leave."