

Tosca Lenci



DELILAH

(Proposer of the U. S. State Department's
Multi-State Solution, who asked: "How differently might borders be drawn,
if by power of the *feminine*?" and, "Where did Palestinians come from?"

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Part One

THE ASSIGNMENT

Delilah peered out the window of the plane making its pitch black descent into Amman. All that could be seen beyond the runway were a few wide-spaced lights in the distance....

Amman...capital of Jordan...ancient Rabbah...capital of the Ammonites--where King David had commander Joab set Bath-Sheba's husband, Uriah, for certain death, in the front line at siege of the city wall....

David's force ultimately felled the Ammonites, along with their Maachahite allies—*Maachah!--the name of only one set of biblical women nothing's heard about!* Delilah thought vehemently...*Maachah who bore four children to Caleb; Maachah, Syrian wife to Josephite Manasseh's first son, Machir, father of Gilead; Maachah, daughter of Talmai, King of Geshur--Geshur, which King David also won, its daughter becoming mother of Absalom—*

Oh, Absalom! Delilah's thought echoed Division's Chief, Maxwell: *Had your politics only been paternal....*

The pilot killed the engines, sudden silence the signal all could jump up and draw down luggage. Not Delilah; she would be last to debark. Maxwell had promised a car and driver to take her to her hotel, and Maxwell didn't hire anxious people. Compact bag at her feet, she sat placably as the line to the door shortened; but cabin activity failed to dislodge thoughts of "Maachah," in the history of the lands into which she was about to become immersed....

Maachah, wife of Jeiel, 'father of Gibeon'; Maachah, mother or grandmother of good King Asa; and the very first Maachah, daughter of Nahor, Abraham's brother (or half-brother?)

It was of biblical record that Terah, their father, had at least one child by a mother different from Abraham's).

Finally descending to the tarp, Delilah found little activity inside Queen Alia Airport in the middle of night. She hoisted her bag from right to left shoulder to easier access her passport. No problem there; it bore no Israeli stamp, and her "scholarly" identity was solid. A quick check and she was approached by a slender and tall, olive-skinned young man of seemingly mixed heritage.

"Max will be pleased to know you had a safe trip," he said, relieving her of her bag. Thick smooth black hair, well-groomed back from a heart-shaped hairline, emphasized his chiseled length of nose and full lips beneath. The jumpsuit and snazzy sport shoes he wore undoubtedly would be recognized by someone interested in fashion, but what impressed Delilah was how he wore them with the indifference of a celebrity. "Welcome to Jordan," he said, his smile revealing enviously white, even teeth. "I know you are Delilah. My name's Talmai."

Talmai?...now there was a coincidence.

In the taxi along a lampless highway Delilah caught glances of stone houses at wide intervals, houses with artful keyhole windows, the families behind them in deep night's sleep.

Delilah never ceased to marvel, during her studies of biblical history (a double major with Physics), at the various names worn over time by different areas of so small a part of earth's globe. Historically, regions of what now was called "Jordan"—like all Middle East territories--had known many different hegemonies and configurations. There was a pattern to be seen there, she believed: forward from family unit through clan, tribe, dynasty, monarchy, and empire; into over-expansion and decline, back through dictatorships, tribes, clans, as family units became separated. Who could nail the ultimate dispersions?

“Take your time,” Maxwell had said. “Learn as much as you can for me.”

Delilah’s eyes were heavy. She hadn’t slept much on the plane despite having consoled herself she would be able to. Last minute personal details had taken longer than hoped, all *after* yesterday’s exhausting meeting with Maxwell, particularly that last bombshell—

A plot to blow up Temple Mount?--

“My *god*, Maxwell!” Delilah had exclaimed--terrorism wasn’t part of their Division’s work!

As a rule Maxwell didn’t blink his dove gray eyes much, but his stare then had been owl-like. “I know--appalling,” he had said finally, turning his desk chair toward his office window.

Delilah’s eyes had gone blank, face drawn in an incredulous frown. Unselfconsciously she took a strand of her long hair, gray but still liberally streaked with chestnut, and wove it through her fingers. Her eyes fixed past him, past the window and over the trees north to Georgetown University, seeing none of it, the words ricocheting in her head—

Appalling thought indeed! Yet it had caused an unexpected surge in her core--*to call death on Religion?* Not to people’s faith in finding Reason; in sheiks and kings, princes and papacies; headdresses, staffs and robes of fine linen--Man on the naked threshing floor, rebirth decreed of *human* legacy! How might Humankind be, if robbed of that ancient relic? She thought; *Man relying on his own divinity!*

Maxwell had continued speaking but Delilah (fully cognizant of works of good people in the name of their religion; but, equally, of eons of fanaticism) was surprised by what her mind continued imagining....

All of ‘God’s’ women joined to me, my eyes dusted by memory of their powerlessly suffered history: Hagar, Keturah, Tamar, Azubah... Adah, Maachah and Ephratah....

Narah, Shuah, Elisheba and Dinah--all forced to endure slaughter; lifted from one huge sandy grave: the Spirit freed to speak through The Daughter!-- Jaladah, Rizpah, Ahinoam, Zeruiah; Merab, Michel, and the wife of Uriah!...

Every tile, every bush, the roots of trees; stones and rocks spewing history; prophecies, icons, satanic furies; atoms of sin and molecules of bone—vengeance would be OURS this time, oh Lord: no more of our children to die for a soulless home....

Talmi was only a silhouette behind the road-searching headlights, as Delilah in the back seat found mind rerunning the whole of yesterday's meeting.

"Does anyone living have any *idea*, beginning with the biblical record, how many times so-called 'borders' changed in that region?" Maxwell had pushed from his desk and jumped up so excitedly his chair sped against the window ledge with a bang. He ignored both impact and sound, circled the desk, and went to a large map on his office's left wall.

The map ranged from Greece east to Persia. 'Map,' singular, fell far short to describe its construction, all Maxwell's own. A permanent base map had no demarcations apart from mountains, rivers, and seas. At bottom of the frame a horizontal row of rollers reached toward the floor, each holding another map, a transparency that could be raised and secured at the frame's top. Transparency heights were calculated so that, when unrolled, each added map covered the base perfectly to show territorial hegemonies at different periods of history.

At that moment all transparencies were rolled, the base map uncovered. Maxwell looked across the room at Delilah. "Want a crash course?" he had asked.

It wasn't the sort of question admitting negative response. *He's humored me enough in the past*, Delilah thought; *the least I can do is be polite*. She stood and joined him as he pulled up the first transparency and fastened it over the base.

"We begin here, Egyptian-controlled territory about 1450 b.c. Its pharaohs had control of as much territory east of the Jordan River as on the west to the Mediterranean." He ran his hand over corresponding parts on the map--"all of old Canaan land, up through present Syria and as far as what's now a big swath of coastal Turkey."

He reached down, lifted, and secured the next transparency. "Now here we have the kingdom of King David and successor-son Solomon, up to around 1,000 b.c. Its vassal states extended east and southeast of the Dead Sea, over ancient Moab and Edom--roughly present Jordan; down over the northeast half of the Sinai as far as the Gulf of Aqaba; and," he moved his hand upward the map, "north over what's now Syria--that would be ancient 'Aram'--and east as far as the Euphrates River."

He took a deep breath, bent, and drew up the next transparency. "*That* brings us to the 'Period of the Kings,' after Solomon died around 926 b.c. There followed a *brouhaha*--"

"I know that part," Delilah couldn't help interrupting. "Solomon's successor son, Rehoboam, refused to bargain with the oppressed north tribes led by one Jeroboam. Solomon had been after Jeroboam's hide; he had taken refuge in Egypt. But he came back after Solomon died, led the north, and North and South split into two kingdoms--'Judah,' in the south, and 'Israel' in the north."

"Right," Maxwell said but paused, catching something in Delilah's expression. "What?"

"Nothing." She gave her voice a little convincing lilt; but her thought had been, *I've always wondered whether Rehoboam and Jeroboam weren't half-brothers....*

“Not bored, listening to a lot of stuff you already know?”

“No.” Again, the reassuring lilt. “Review’s not going to hurt--if you don’t mind my having a cigarette?”

“So long as you don’t hesitate to fill in any gaps,” Maxwell replied with a knowing look. Delilah laughed, grabbed the large ashtray from his desk, and pulled a chair near the map.

“Well, as *we* know,” he continued, “after the split the south kingdom’s name ‘Judah,’ was after the major tribe there. But why call the north kingdom ‘Israel,’ since the ‘Good Book’ says God renamed Jacob, progenitor of all 12 Hebrew tribes, ‘Israel?’”

“I’ve wondered that myself,” Delilah responded, lighting up. “But back to the period of the kings, it lasted some 400 years; that is,” she added diplomatically, “if I have that right,” knowing that she did. “Aram was the major foe over the first 200 years of that period, during which Egypt made an incursion or two.”

“Taking us to the Assyrian empire.” Maxwell bent to bring up that transparency. “By about 725 b.c. Assyria had all of Israel kingdom’s major cities east and west of the Jordan. But didn’t Israel’s king ally with Aram beforehand?”

“Poor sucker—his last hope I guess. Meanwhile, Judah’s King Ahaz in his hopes emptied Jerusalem’s treasury to get Assyrian support; but Assyria did more: it put an end to Aram, conquered the Galilee, and took Damascus. As your map shows, Assyria’s empire extended south from what’s now the south part of Turkey all the way to Egypt and along both sides of the Nile to Thebes—“

“And eastward,” Maxwell picked it up, his hand moving across the map as he spoke, “eastward, over both the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and adjacent territories, almost to the Caspian Sea; then down through most of present-day Iraq and an eastern portion of what’s now

Iran. The Judah kingdom remained servile to Assyria; but, as *we* know,” Maxwell paused for effect, “around 722 b.c. Assyria conquered the north’s capital of Samaria City, and put an end to that kingdom.”

He reached for the next transparency. “*Now, you Old Testament scholar you, tell me who came next?*” he asked with a smile—actually, a beguiling grin that Delilah was sure had disarmed many a fair maid. She didn’t respond, refusing to continue a ‘who knows more’ competition.

Maxwell hesitated. “If you will excuse the professor a moment, he thinks it’s time for a cigar.”

Delilah knew Maxwell allowed himself only two cigars a day; it was early for the first. She swung around in her chair and watched him at his desk. He was so damned good looking, like a screen idol of the forties or fifties—a Robert Taylor type: average height, not overtly muscular yet still exuding manliness; soft eyes under dark brows in a benevolent face; and dark hair--not thinning, given his age, but aristocratic graying strands at the temples.

She knew his brand of cigar—“La Aurora,” made in the Dominican Republic. “*Very reasonable in cost,*” he had told her once, lighting up after a dinner together. “*A brand over 100 years old, the choice of aficionados*”

“You know,” he said then over to Delilah, as if he had read her mind, “to really appreciate a cigar one must smoke slowly and draw infrequently, else it heats up and spoils the taste.” He struck a match and held it to the clipped tip. “This’ll take at least a half hour to do it justice—“he blew out the match--“until it gets down to about two inches. That’s when to lay it down, to avoid the overheated aftertaste.

“What if I have some coffee sent in?” he asked after the first long draw. “We can finish the ‘lecture’ afterwards, if you can spare the time.”

“Coffee sounds good and yes, I have the time.” Delilah returned to the seat in front of his desk, while he used the phone and ordered coffee from the building’s cafeteria.

“Nice prerogative for us guys up here,” he said, replacing the receiver. “The fact the cafeteria staff gets paid pretty well keeps me from feeling guilty.” He leaned back in his chair, drew gently again on his cigar and stared across the desk at her.

“What?” She finally was moved to say.

“Oh!” He shook his head and smiled. “Just wondering how you manage to stay so lovely.”

“Oh com’ on, Max.” It was Delilah’s turn to shake her head—not, however, against the compliment; against a memory at that moment she knew was shared, an awkward moment after she had quit teaching and contacted him about a job.

They had met several years before, when he was guest lecturer in Political Science one term at the college where she had taught. There had developed quickly what on her side was a keen friendship, but she had been aware of Maxwell’s eventual romantic feelings. Then one night he unexpectedly had dropped in at her place after her divorce. He had embraced her, held her so tightly she could feel his arousal but pretended not to.

“Some things simply are not meant to be,” she remembered him saying, when he released her and tipped her nose, after the lack of response.

“What kills me,” he resumed then at the meeting, spinning off their unspoken recall, “is how that part of the world is captive of the whole sex thing; but I think I understand why. I think it has to do with evolution of consciousness. I mean, look how long it took here, for average

man to withstand...,” (the imp of the perverse in Maxwell’s alter-ego saw pun-potential there but avoided it), “for man to deal with female sexuality undressed, so to speak--you know; women everywhere in fitted skimpy clothes.”

Delilah extinguished her half-smoked cigarette. “Takes a bit of steeling of the male mind, you mean. Yes, good point. But I wonder whether it doesn’t hark back, too, to the ancient importance of mother blood, and establishing progeny’s life blood as ‘legally pure.’”

Maxwell took another puff off his Aurora and looked lovingly at its burning end. “As referred to by first century historian Josephus, as to who was a ‘legitimate’ successor to a ruler? What was the word he used?--*genuine*, that was it—“

“Because of the numbers of wives and consorts had by kings and rulers, consequently a passel of half-related brothers--yeah!” Delilah, when exuberated, was known to lapse into vernacular of her youthful San-Francisco-street days. “And that word, *adultery*--how Time screwed *it*, when Jesus’ reference was to adulterations, *of* bloodlines. *Plenty* of history by his time, of the effects of factionings inflicted on the people by competing half-sibling sons, like Adonijah—“

“And Absalom?” That was when Maxwell had intoned, *Oh Absalom, my Absalom!*” followed by a timid knock sounded at the paneled wood door. “Ah. Coffee about to be served. Come,” he called, placed the cigar carefully in the ashtray, and cleared space on the desk.

A small, church-white tea cloth was laid over to hold carafe, cups, and condiments. There were cookies, too--fruit-filled. “I really appreciate this, Harv,” Maxwell heartily thanked the employee. “Give the folks in the kitchen my love.”

“Will do!” the young man answered, shutting the door quietly with a smile.

“I don’t know about you,” Maxwell poured and handed Delilah a cup, “but I’m riddled by fear, just waiting for the next disaster. It’s no wonder that people need to hold on to a god; the state of the world still is more than a truly thinking mind can bear. Without a god belief, what’s there to hold on to?” He sat back in his chair and stirred sugar into his coffee. “*I* still like to believe, however,” he said after taking a sip, “that Humankind eventually will evolve into a nobler collective consciousness, even if it does take another hundred generations.” He put his cup down hard, showing his emotion. “If *I*, having had a decent livelihood and life, can feel this way, how clear can it be why so many lives saddled with unresolvable miseries end in suicides, murders, and mayhem—“

“*Us* now so vulnerable to the latter?” Delilah put her cup down and sat back, arms crossed. Maxwell almost was sorry to have spoken such, for the sad look it had brought to her face. “Be nice if we could retreat, wouldn’t it,” she said wryly, followed by a hissed, “*and how ignorant was it?*--dropping like a monolith into the custard of tribal society.” She shook her head. “No going back on *that*.”

“I know. But maybe, just *possibly*, our division might be able to make a meaningful contribution--help avert more drastic confrontation between neighboring regions.” He acknowledged her doubtful look with a shrug. “Okay...call me a dreamer.”

“I will allow...,” Delilah bit into a cookie and chewed thoughtfully a moment. “That is, to risk sounding like a bigot, we’ve the same communication problem with Islamists—*different*, mind you, from ‘Muslimists’—found not only between Hebrewists and Christianists but sects within them.”

“You hit it on the head. *That’s* where we need to get up to speed; get the *terms* straight--separate religion, for ‘God’s’ sake, from blood lines and ethnicities—*from* Religion. You and I,

both children of immigrants, received freedom as full-fledged citizens in a nation that provided the best of what this globe then could offer. *For* that, our parents--gladly with gratitude--gave their greatest labors, having sailed past that symbol of the founding principles of co-existence—*give me your poor, your hungry, your weak.*

“What care have you and I ever had about *our* ancestral progenitors? How do we relate to persons who *do*, all the frigging way back to biblical times.” It was rare for Maxwell to lose self-control to a rant. He swiveled his chair around toward the window, displeased with himself.

Normally Delilah would have been following his words with emotion, adding many of her own. Instead, her sight again traveled past him through the large window. At the moment the sky over Foggy Bottom, contrary to the area’s name, was a clear blue; but it almost had been true to its name before eight that morning, mist off the Potomac, as she walked from her hotel to the meeting. Foggy Bottom’s name, however, was believed derived instead from industrial smoke of glass and brewery plants, situated in the Washington, D.C. settlement back in 1763.

Foggy Bottom was a hub of D.C. activity and favorite haunt of students of nearby Georgetown University. Earlier in the week, Delilah had sat in on a class in “Decision Making,” being taught by Professor Madeleine Albright, former Secretary of State.

“Over and over and over!” Maxwell swiveled back around, his voice gathering force again despite effort against it. “Self-indulgence and apathy at home, colonial and military over-extensions--history’s replete with examples of declination of dominant societies. But where?--where *one* example even--of the slide being perceived in time, and averted by knowledge *gained from history?* Seems how Humankind’s destined to lose wisdom repeatedly, as if a dark age by necessity has to precede one of enlightenment.”

“When things fall apart, people revert to tribes,” Delilah responded, there being little she could add.

“And why?” Maxwell slapped his desk, “because ideals don’t manifest without collective voluntary costs; because alternately vested world powers repeatedly have mangled borders; because historically-related persons, squeezed and divided in-between, without resources to grow food or water to keep it and them alive, are left under competing area factions, like it or not.”

Good lord, Delilah thought. I’m going where the very fundamental factors of the rise and decline of empires are at the wire again. Do I really think I can bring back comprehensions that will yield worthwhile effects?

Maxwell picked up his cigar again, contemplated but didn’t light it. “It only was yesterday we got knocked out of the Web if our pc was quiet for a while. Now they’re talking of maximum net load potential; and they’ve yet to get back to the old Greeks, to say nothing of the conjectures of ‘Saint’ Poincare.”

Delilah thought, *there he goes, using a simile few men in power would apprehend.* She realized again how his handsomeness drew attention from the deep knowledge he possessed. Publically, Maxwell was a securely married man, a family man devoted to his children; but since her joining the Division she still sensed bottled-up sexual energy in him, and what he *imagined* she represented....

“Harrumph.” It was a choke of his throat almost. “Not the first time East and West have reached imbalance; only the area is larger. Maybe all of us still are living the effects of the Great Flood--humankind spreading away from its centers of origin, meanwhile also still propagating as proverbial rabbits. Ever think that you as a coastal Californian might be on the brink?”

No, Delilah hadn't thought that. But she recalled a frightening dream once, of being caught in a flood, humanity swept along by that strongest visible earthly force. No, she didn't relish the thought of being pushed off the end of land into an endless body of water....

"Children, born repeatedly into the crucible of warring societies," Maxwell put the cigar back down. "Is it difficult to understand their reactions to the stupidity of it all?--" he asked rhetorically--"the immutable anger of youth, with good reason, in a life that has sentenced them, their parents, and grandparents to never a moment's peace on sides of not just two lines, lines within lines."

Only one answer here: too easy to understand, thought Delilah—she whose mind could not bear thought of a child of hers in danger; so much less, her heart, the blow of a child predeceasing her. Had it been necessary to civilization's evolution, she often had asked herself, that man be able easier to accept death in war? Yet in creating another living being, wasn't man's power equal to any god's?

She took a surreptitious look at her wristwatch. Maxwell had warned that the meeting would take at least two hours, but she still had last packing to do and family calls to make. "The coffee break was pleasant, Max; but what say we get back to the map."

"Of course." He pushed away from the desk. "I'm sure you have things left to do, before takeoff." Delilah followed him back to the map wall.

"We were down to almost 600 b.c., weren't we?" He lifted and fastened the next transparency. "The Babylonian empire came next, but Assyria's downfall wasn't overnight. Asshur, Assyria's capital, first was here on the west bank of the upper Tigris, about two-thirds distance between present Baghdad and the Armenian foothills. To the east," he continued to point as he spoke, "had become unified territory of the Medes. Their territory ranged north as far

as the Caspian Sea, and east and south to Parthia and Persia. Median unification had got underway about 700 b.c.—do I have that right?”

Delilah nodded. “And within some 75 years the Medes were well established under Cyaxares the First. Meanwhile, factioning in Assyrian territory was accompanied by rise of the Babylonian dynasty of Nabopolassar--father of good ol’ Nebuchadnezzar. Then, around 612 b.c. Cyaxares and Nabopolassar joined up and took Assyria’s second capital, Nineveh, where it had retreated. After Nineveh’s fall, Assyria essentially ceased to exist.”

Delilah was hopeful Maxwell wouldn’t need to cover everything in-between, like Egypt’s Necho the Second’s advancing to aid the Assyrians after Nineveh’s fall, on the way taking Gaza and defeating Judaeon King Josiah at Megiddo. Again, however, she had to wonder whether Maxwell wasn’t reading her mind, for then he said, “Well, you know there’s a lot maps can’t show--all the inter-entity politics, alliances, and battlings.”

What Delilah surely knew was the pride Maxwell took in his maps, a true labor of love she felt moved to acknowledge. “But these maps are great, Max--such a clear focus on how consistently quarried was the small piece of territory variously called old Canaan, Palaestina, or Palestine; regardless the name, in Roman measure a mere 1300 stadia north to south and 650, east from the Jordan to the Mediterranean.”

Maxwell laughed, “‘Stadia’?”

“Can’t say why I remember that better than miles. The Roman *stadium* equaled just shy of 607 English feet, although the Greek unit ranged as much as 738 feet.”

“You show-off, you.”

“Oh, get on with it.”

“Okay--” he turned back to the map--“Babylonia: smaller than was Assyria; similar on the west but less territory east of the Tigris. Essentially its hegemony ran from the Sinai up through old Canaan over what’s now Syria, slightly into south of what’s now Turkey, and around and down to the Persian Gulf.” He put on his signature grin. “Why don’t I let *you* cover the next one?”

Delilah tilted her head and placed her left index finger against her lips, elbow resting on the other arm hugging her waist, a signature gesture of her own. After a moment she swung the finger away. “How did you know that Cyrus the Great was my favorite hero of all time?”

“*Was* he now.”

“Uh huh; he comes across as one of the most sensitively intelligent figures of history, no two ways about it.”

“And birthed in ‘Elam,” Maxwell added; reminding Delilah again how well read he was. “Wouldn’t it be interesting to know with certainty the ancient spawnings and movements of ethnic populations. We’ve no concept of generational distributions over the centuries.”

Or the exponential number of unnamed mothers, Delilah kept from expressing, saying instead, “Contradictions in descendancies begin post-flood. Per the *Old Testament*, Noah had Shem who had Arpachshad who had Shelah, while *Luke* adds a ‘Cainan’ between Arpachshad and Shelah. Regardless--Shelah or *Shalach* had Eber; but notice--” she couldn’t refrain this time, “no *mothers* are named in any of it.”

She rose and went to the desk for her cigarette pack and the ash tray. “*However*, to continue,” she returned to her chair near the map, “it’s with Eber’s two sons, Peleg and Joktan, that the *Old Testament* reports the ‘earth’--that is, the land-- ‘was divided;’ and the lineage splits

off through Peleg five generations to Abraham. Joktan reportedly had 13 sons, whose east and southeast territories one theory puts as far as present Yemen.”

She paused to light a cigarette, balancing the ash tray on her lap. Maxwell held his patience, temporarily abandoned the map, and took a chair near it himself.

Delilah was on a roll. “Shem had four other sons besides Arpachshad.” Delilah was on a roll; “Lud—can’t tell you anything about him; Asshur—“

“The name of Assyria’s first capital?”

“Also used in the biblical record as another name *for* Assyria. Then there was Aram--”

“Another name for roughly Syrian territory,” Maxwell supplied.

“Yes. And lastly....” If possible for Delilah, her glance at Maxwell bore a bit of triumph, “there was Shem’s fourth son, *Elam*. ”

“Aha! Working down to Cyrus the Great, ay?”

“Well, Elam’s sons aren’t specified. *Genesis* simply says something like, ‘according to their families, tongues, and nations.’ But scholarship has equated Elam roughly with southwest Iran, the fertile plain east of the lower Tigris and north of the Persian Gulf. The record even mentions Elam in Abraham’s time, when its’ King Chedorlaomer led an alliance against a rebelling coalition of Canaanite kings. I remember a comment by Isaac Asimov: ‘If “Eden” is taken as ancient Sumer, then Elam would be biblical ‘east of Eden’--”

“Sumer being *Ur!*--” it excited Maxwell to be able to add--“from where Abraham began his journey with his father Terah, his nephew Lot, and sister Sarah—“

“*Half*-sister,” Delilah let herself say it, “*and* per the record; their mothers, however, not being identified.” She shook it off. “Sumer.., Ur--a region known also as *Susiana* and, in classical Greek, *Elymais*. Elam’s capital, Susa or Shush--which you show there, west of the

Indus Valley--was some 225 miles east of Babylon city, where the famous Hammurabi Code was discovered.

“Elam..,” she mused--“a focal trading point and renowned for metal work; vied over by both Mesopotamian contenders. In the eighth and seventh centuries b.c. Babylonia variously had dominated Elam or allied with it against greater Assyria, followed in the sixth century b.c. by the Nebuchadnezzar siege and destruction of Jerusalem.”

She snuffed out the cigarette. “Susa was part of an independent state, the Elamite kingdom of Anshan, ruled by the *Achaemenid* dynasty (in Persian, ‘Hakhamanis’), Cyrus the Great’s paternal family. Anshan gained regional dominance after Assyria, and Susa became the residence of Persia’s kings.”

“I know that Cyrus united his Persians with the Medes,” Maxwell interposed, leaving his chair; “and, as this map shows,” he drew it up, “after conquering Babylonia they went on to command the greatest Asian empire yet. But girl, you’re killing me,” he acceded with a smile of surrender. “I had no idea I was that good at selecting someone for this assignment.”

Delilah was pleased with the compliment but bypassed it. “You know?” She smoothed the length of her hair between her hands, lifted it from her shoulders and let it fall again. “It’s possible to fall in love with a literary figure; and I confess, I did, with Cyrus the Great. Look how he cornered his uncle Cyaxares II of Media, who had asked Cyrus’ father for Persian aid against the Assyrians and Babylonians.

“Cyrus was sent as Persia’s commander and became prime strategist--ultimately taking over, training, and gaining complete following of the joint Median/Persian armies. All through his history one sees high intelligence, wise tolerance, and a great capacity for *reasoning*.”

“His uncle was a Mede?”

“Yes; interesting family relations there. Cyrus’ wife, Mandane, was daughter of Median king Astyages, who Cyrus incidentally nicely deposed. And Cyrus’ father, Cambyses I, was the first king of Anshan, its capital being Persepolis. Very interesting is the report of how Cyrus took Babylon, around 538 b.c.”

It was a story Delilah especially liked and, settling back, let herself tell it. “The only named wife of Nebuchadnezzar on record was Cyrus’ aunt, Amytis, another daughter of King Astyages. The *Book of Daniel* doesn’t name the queen mother *at* Babylon, when Cyrus’s forces entered the city; but it would have *been* Amytis there, with ‘Belshazzar,’ either a son or a son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar.”

“Oh, yes, yes--” Maxwell came alive again--“the mysterious ‘writing on the wall--”

“*Mene, Mene, Tekel u-Pharsin,*” Delilah recited in a strong low whisper. “Very loosely rendered, ‘you have been weighed on the scale, found wanting, and your kingdom shall be divided.’ One can’t help but wonder what role Amytis played; it sounds like a coup. No children of hers are mentioned, while politically she was in a position to aid her relatives.

“All that’s recorded is that there was a grand, distracting festival and feast going on at Babylon city, and that Cyrus and his troops took it essentially without battle. He’s better known in his first year over Persia’s empire for authorizing rebuilding of Jerusalem’s temple, and ordering return of gold and silver taken by Nebuchadnezzar.”

Intrigued, Maxwell let himself be lost to Delilah’s knowledge. “When did Cyrus die?”

“Some nine years after taking Babylon. His son, Cambyses the Second, went on to take Egypt; but he apparently wasn’t the stuff of his father, or highly favored. Political factioning around Jerusalem led him to halt reconstruction. Then a coup in his absence made Darius the First the ruler of Persia, and Darius ordered the construction resumed.”

“Then what?”

“Oh, Max, there’s so much stuff in *Herodotus*’ history, along with the biblical record!”

Maxwell, however, simply waited for her to resume.

Delilah took a deep breath and blew it out so hard her lips flapped almost. “Okay, briefly the main events: attempts of Xerxes, Darius’ successor, to take Greece; the rise of the Nabataeans in what was ancient Edom; Hebrew Esther as Persian queen; and the subsequent Ezra/Nehemiah repatriations and reformation at Jerusalem. Variances in names and dating-- maybe fifth, maybe fourth century b.c.--leave open *which* Persian king made Hebrew Esther his queen. During the reformation, Susa men and other men with ‘foreign’ wives were denied priesthood.”

Delilah shook her head. “All those centuries...all the exiles and relocations of population previously by Assyria and Babylonia; Nebuchadnezzar alone exiled thousands. Think of the women taken captive by conquering soldiers. *Poor* Nehushtah,” she finished softly.

“Nehushta?”

“Wife of one and mother of the last kings of Jerusalem of that period. Her husband, King Jehoiakim, received ‘Nebu’ into the city, expecting no harm if he submitted--wrong! Jehoiakim was slain instead, along with a large number of other notable citizens, and his body was thrown before the city wall. Queen Nehushta held out against Nebuchadnezzar for a time, eventually was forced to surrender and taken to Babylon, with at least one young son—“

“It being common for conquerors to take some desirous royalty home.”

Delilah nodded. “Matter of fact, it seems that a young Daniel was among those taken then. Altogether, 13,000 were displaced in two Nebuchadnezzar assaults, before his captain led

Jerusalem's destruction. Makes one wonder, about the ethnic redistributions after just that time." She looked again at her wristwatch. "But enough of that."

"So here we have the enormous range of the Persian Empire." Maxwell was back standing at the map. "Over here, east," he pointed, "it ranged to the Indus River and up almost to the Aral Sea, into what's now Georgia and Russia; westward, over all of Media and Babylonia, up and over 'Syria' and down through Palestine. By 343 b.c. it had mastered Egypt, along with this westward swath along Africa's Mediterranean coast. North it ranged over all of present Turkey as far as the Black Sea and past, to the Hellespont, covering present Bulgaria"—*using ancient terms*, Delilah's mind added, *including Cappadocia, Cilicia, and Phrygia....*

"God." Maxwell dropped onto his nearby chair. "The exponential number of armed forces throughout all this history boggles the mind. Evolutionarily, it's like population attrition via self-destruction."

"That's been explored in the social sciences, and not as silly as it might sound, to some," Delilah reacted. "Persia certainly was well organized, with governors over 20 *satrapies*, provinces, subdivided further into districts. Subjects were much better off than they'd been under Assyria and Babylonia. Palestine was part of the fifth satrapy--*Abar-Nahara*, 'Beyond the River,' which included Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Syria territory."

There was one rolled transparency left. Delilah tilted her head, smiling sweetly. "Now do I get to see the Macedonian Empire of dear Alexander the Great?"

"Another imaginary lover of yours?" Maxwell chided, bringing up that last transparency.

"No-*oh-oh*," Delilah drew it out with a laugh. "Alexander's more like a son--a beautiful, sensitive, ambitious son, from whom Olympias, his real mother, drew great devotion. He took her side, you know, over father Philip II, especially after Philip took on a young Cleopatra,

daughter of a Macedonian general named Attalus, although Philip had had other wives and children before.”

Maxwell had given over entirely to Delilah’s input. “So Philip was quite a man himself,” he said invitingly.

“Absolutely. During the early 300’s b.c., Persia was struggling both with central government and outlying provinces—“

“We’ve good indication these days ourselves, of what happens when an empire grows beyond the bounds of management.”

Delilah just rolled her eyes and sighed in agreement. “Anyhow, lots of changes were happening in and around the time of Alexander the Great’s birth: in Greece, civil strife, lack of colonializable outlets for surplus population, rebellion in outlying provinces, and large numbers of Greeks ready to serve as mercenaries. Persia, more and more cut off from the sea, suffered problems of dynastical succession. Upshot was, Alexander’s father Philip gradually achieved Macedonian dominance over a league of Greek city states.

“By the time Alexander was 16 he already had governed in Philip’s absences. Then, when he was 20, Philip was assassinated by one of the court. Afterward, Olympias had the Cleopatra and two children she had borne Philip put to death—“

“With no one left to contend Alexander’s legitimacy?”

“You got it.” Delilah paused to light another cigarette. “All of Philip’s generals declared for Alexander and before long he was elected general of the Grecian league. As commander-in-chief both of both its’ and Macedonia’s army, he invaded Asia. Talk about armies! If I recall *Herodotus* correctly, when Alexander crossed the Dardanelles, his army included more than

30,000 foot soldiers, 5,000 horse, 12,000 Macedonian infantry, and 12,000 infantry of Greek allies and mercenaries.”

Maxwell flourished a hand toward the map. “And here’s what *he* achieved: the Macedonian Empire; all of Persia’s essential territory with the addition of central Greece states; and,” he pointed, “more up here at the farer northeast--country that included Sogdiana, south of old Scythian territory, and Bactria, present southeast Turkestan and northeast Afghanistan.”

”*Bactria..*,” Delilah went pensive. “During Alexander’s eastward campaigning in that region around 327 b.c., he acquired as a wife one Roxane, daughter of a Bactrian noble. Four years into the marriage Alexander was dead--either by some contracted ague or, it’s conjectured, poisoned by sons of a General Antipater that Alexander in his absence left as governor of Macedonia and Greece.”

Delilah shifted in her chair as Maxwell reseated himself. Perhaps she was over speaking? Yet his facial expression seemed one of dedicated attention.

“Not surprisingly after Alexander died,” Delilah let herself continue, “imperial and military politics got hot and heavy--court intrigues and competitions among his territorial generals. Roxanne, pregnant by Alexander when he died, had a son that the military officers supported to be king. But the autocrats instead raised another son of Philip, one Aridaeus, reportedly an ‘imbecile,’ under the ‘protectorate’ of a General Perdiccas.”

She uncrossed her legs, got up and paced around her chair. “Listen, Max. There’s way too much that can be told here of all the intrigues.” Maxwell silent, again just waited.

“Okay,” Delilah reseated herself. “Okay, but it’s going to be short. Essentially, omitting all the intervening conflicts, Alexander’s empire got divided between generals in the territories. By 312 b.c. General Seleucus was established in Babylon, beginning a dynasty centered in the

Near East, the entire region from Phrygia to the Indus becoming subject to it; by 301 b.c. Seleucus had control of eastern Anatolia and north Syria. But by mid-second century b.c., Parthia, centered in northeast of present Iran, had conquered major parts of Seleucid territory and was an empire itself. The Seleucid kings held on to Syria territory until Rome, on the rise, had the end put to that in first century b.c. by Roman General Pompey, who made it a Roman province.

“As to Egypt,” she took another noticeable deep breath, “after Philip’s death, his General Lagos in Egypt had taken to wife an Arsinoe, one of Philip’s later wives and the daughter, it appears, of another general. Arsinoe was pregnant by Philip when he was assassinated; and their son, Ptolemy I *Soter/Lagus*, became king of Egypt. He began the dynasty there that would end with the famous Cleopatra--who, by the way, was seventh to bear that name, one having been a Syrian queen.”

Delilah stopped and extracted another cigarette from her pack. Maxwell waited until she had it burning. “And?” he prompted

“On the female side alone, in the early washout after Alexander died, it’s reported Roxane had one of Alexander’s wives put to death--one Statira, who he had married at Susa. Mother Olympias ordered the death of an Alexander son named Philippos, mother unsaid; and subsequently Cassander—that is, *Kassandros*, first post-Alexander ruler of Macedon—put to death Olympias herself, along with Barsane, another Alexander wife, and Barsane’s son, Hercules; *and* Roxane and her infant son, Alexander IV.”

“Jesus!” Maxwell was given to exclaim.

“Yes--lots of movies to be made there. Now,” Delilah crushed out the barely smoked cigarette, “as for the Macedon Empire, it fought a series of wars with Rome in the second and

first centuries b.c., major losses ultimately yielding its defeat. It became a Roman province around 147 b.c., and Jerusalem became Rome's tributary around 64 b.c." She put her hands to her neck and massaged the back of it. "So what was the point of all *that*?" she asked around an unexpected yawn.

"Well, we know that Alexander's empire inaugurated 'Hellenism,' which had far-reaching effects in Palestine. And all of it figures in the 845,000 square *stadia* this meeting's about."

"Oh!" She laughed. "Now *you're* the *math* whiz."

Maxwell grinned then pointed to the map. "So now take a look at old Canaan land *underneath* all the transparencies."

Delilah hadn't realized how carefully Maxwell had chosen empire colors on the transparencies: yellow for Egypt; light red to make orange for Assyria; more red over orange to make deep red for Media and Babylonia; blue over the red for purple Persia; and pale yellow resting lightly over all, for Macedonia. Not all empires covered the same territories. One small part, however, consistently was covered by all of them.

Delilah rose from her chair, and both she and Maxwell returned to their chairs at the desk. From a small cabinet to the right he brought forth two small crystal glasses and a decanter of brandy. "How 'bout a drink for the road."

"Are you supposed to have that here?"

"Ummm...don't rightly know. He turned wearing that grin. "I've never asked...what do you say?"

"Yes."

“Palestinians didn’t come from outer space,” he said as he poured. “Their history is convoluted as hell.” He came around the desk where Delilah sat relaxedly, leg crossed over so that her skirt raised to the knee. He tried not to notice the fine curve of calf leading to the slim ankle and handed her a glass. “We drink to your assignment. We need it in simple language people can understand, if we’re going to avoid the worse. He raised his glass. “Know what I mean?”

“I do.” The brandy was smooth in her mouth. “What I don’t know, Max, is if this time you’re dreaming the impossible.”

“What else am I here for *but* to dream? Else,” a lift of his eyebrows meant to convey facetiousness, “where would any idea *come* from?--the ‘idea man;’ that’s what I was hired to be.”

Maxwell had been raised Quaker. Quakerism didn’t teach human nature as inherently sinful. It was opposed to sexism, racism, religious intolerance, warfare, and the death penalty; and it doubted culture’s ability to tackle fundamental questions of belief. Maxwell may have abandoned institutional practice long before, but he nonetheless continued to manifest human characteristics of simplicity and pacifism.

He had been perfect choice, to head the newly created Division of Global Socialization under the umbrella of the nation’s Department of State. Delilah remembered words from their early friendship: *Life itself is a sacrament*, he had said. *I was young enough to avoid being drafted during Korea and Vietnam but, had I been, I definitely would have claimed conscientious objectorship.*

Back in his official seat, Maxwell removed an envelope from the drawer and placed it dead center the cleared desk top. “One last thing..,” he looked straight into her eyes, drained his glass, and set it down. “There’s a new wrinkle I need to tell you about your assignment.”

Delilah frowned. Something was up....

Maxwell hesitated, reluctance obvious, then said, “You know Intelligence has some purview of our Division’s work.”

“Of course; I went through all their clearances before my first assignment.”

“Right. Well, they’ve asked that this second assignment be expanded.”

“Expanded how?”

“To gather more than just social data.”

Delilah’s spine stiffened against the back of her chair. “*Intelligence* work?”

“I guess I have to say, strictly speaking; but it comes with extra pay if you’re willing.”

He put an elbow on the desk and rested chin on palm, eyes narrowed at her.

“What’s it all about, Max.”

And that was when he had told her, that Intelligence had got wind of a potential plot against Temple Mount.

Delilah’s cool rarely got arrested, but Maxwell knew her well enough to see then that momentarily it had. Her self-absorption gave him the chance for a long unobserved look at her. He picked up a pencil and held it against his lips, waiting. *How old is she now?* But his mind queried what in fact he should have been able to answer, for he never had failed sending birthday wishes....

Still, there's that thing about her...that mixture of womanhood man unconsciously wishes for: one minute exuding a subtle innocent kind of sexiness; the next, the caring look of a devoted mother, capable of piercing the cynical crust of the most entrenched disillusionment....

Delilah's stream of consciousness behind furrowed brow was running a different course. Her assignment, as proposed initially, was to get a first-hand grasp on regional cultures and personalities—*subjective* data, to aid the Division's defined role of suggesting new language and attitudes for diplomatic negotiations. Now, she was being asked to engage in *espionage*??

"So..." Maxwell broke her self-absorption by tapping his pencil against the edge of the ash tray. "Whaddyah think?"

"Sorry?"

His fingers were toying with the envelope. "What do you think about an expanded assignment." He refrained from adding, *what else?*

"Wouldn't I need a different cover?"

"No one thinks so. You're already scheduled to meet with that inter-cultural group about joining American U's Partners Abroad program. By the way," his look went a bit sheepish, "while I appreciate your literary award for the piece reclaiming Jesus as an *historical* man equal to Socrates—"

"As a pacifistic *human being*, you mean: a *philosopher*; pitting Reason against sophistry; led by Reason to willfully, willingly accept death than deny his principles? You don't need to caution me, Max. I know not to refute any beliefs others may have. But what more *am* I expected to do?"

"Just do your divisional job, but keep your eyes and ears open; see what if anything extra you might find out." He slid the envelope toward her. "In there you'll find three photographs,

men that it's believed are involved. Study the photos. After you've had a good look, destroy them."

He hadn't said it outright; it wasn't a matter of choice. It was, take the assignment as 'expanded' or refuse it altogether, which she knew Maxwell knew she was loath to do. "I'm not sure what those guys may be after," he nodded toward the envelope, "if indeed they're after anything. But on the premise that a two-state solution eventually could be effected, Temple Mount remains a crux, wouldn't you say?"

Hearing the symbolic Christian word *crux*, Delilah was given to conjecture precisely what the word 'Christian' meant. Perhaps it was a matter of capitalization?--*let's see: one of any race or ethnicity yoked to a Christian sect is called 'Christian'; yet, couldn't one not joined to any sect but observing the same tenets of Christ also be called 'Christian?'*

Maxwell, unsure at her purse-lipped silence, looked away until finally she spoke. "As I remember, a few years back a proposal was floated, I don't know by whom; that the Mount surface, structures and landscape could be granted to one party but the underground, to the other?

"Part of our interest...." He paused, and Delilah thought, *love that word*, our! "Part of our *concern*," he began again, "is whether a considerable amount of precious metals really is—"

"Buried there?" Delilah couldn't squelch herself. Maxwell had been somewhat supercilious about her earlier report on the subject of the "copper scroll; apparently others of the State Department thought differently?

"Yes," Maxwell cleared his throat, "*vis-à-vis* the--if you'll permit me still--the *dubious* copper scroll. Intelligence would like you to keep your ears open about that, too."

“Sounds reasonable.” Delilah, nodding, chose not to rub it in. She picked up the envelope, bent and slipped it into her briefcase resting against the baseboard of Maxwell’s desk. Then she sat back and looked him squarely in the eyes. “Anything *else* we haven’t covered?”

Maxwell shook his head. In the silence that followed he felt an icy anticipation of her imminent absence, and how much her presence mattered to him—the joking pokes in the ribs when he got too dejected; the home-baked muffins that showed up on a rainy day. He went to reach for his cigar, lying cold on the highly polished mahogany, but stopped his hand.

Maxwell’s aborted act didn’t stop Delilah from lighting up yet another cigarette, however. She lifted her eyebrows as she blew out the first drag. “I’m to hit two birds with one stone, so to speak; except one of the ‘birds’ is a group of three.”

This time he didn’t stop his hand, nor did he speak until the cigar’s end was glowing. “Look. This division is on brand new territory. Even if we do need at times to act in concert with the investigative branches, that doesn’t alter our fundamental aim. Too many politicians look at mid-east parties as if they ought to be able to change overnight and think socially the way we do.”

“Rather than, you mean, as inheritors of ancient theocracies, governed by codes taken as direct commands of God respectively interpreted.”

“Exactly. And you possess everything necessary to make our Division’s first dip there a success. It was hell getting Congress to establish us; it’s incumbent on us to prove the merit.” He debated, but caution compelled him to say the next thing: “You don’t need to be reminded to watch what you say.”

Delilah, amused, dropped her cigarette into the ash tray without snuffing it. “I’m to avoid, for example, discussing issues such as the death of Arius back in the fourth century when

Constantine governed the Roman Empire from Istanbul—that is, Constantinople—and found ‘Christianity’ so useful for unifying his rule. Or, along with Arius’ martyrdom, those books then extant not included in the canon?—which canon, by the way, hasn’t changed one iota since; and *especially* any discussion of the nature of Jesus relative to the ‘Creator.’ But can I talk about the Buddhist’s eight neural pillars of wisdom?”

“I thought the Bible said seven,” he quipped back, aimed at reviving Delilah’s gamesmanship; “but my brain’s not good at untapped correlations. I only know that, if anyone’s capable of bearing truly altruistic interest in the peoples we need to learn about, it’s you.”

That managed to bring a chuckle out of Delilah. No reason, she decided, to take out her frustration on him. “You think I possess altruism, huh?” She tilted her head and pursed her lips to keep from smiling.

“I think your brain possesses the required total harmony in its electrical circuitry.”

That brought a laugh. “Okay, Max. You can quit being solicitous; I know you’re not responsible for ‘expanding’ my assignment. And as far as ‘altruism’ is concerned,” she laughed outright then, “experiments in evolutionary psychology show it to be the most stubborn of human development on the genetic level.”

“How so?” Maxwell plied, happy to be over the awkward hump.

“An altruistic female, it’s said, is more likely to mate with a ‘selfish’ male who offers family security, versus some good fellow who’ll give away his only coat to a suffering stranger. In keeping *with* my assignment, experiments indicate that a consciously altruistic life embodies qualities ordinarily defined religiously—you might say, ‘wisdom of the book’ or wisdom of *a* book—“

“Or wisdom of--not *the--a* god?” he offered, knowing it from their past to be another comment that would grab her.

Delilah stood up, adjusted her skirt, and hoisted her briefcase. “You know, I love you, Max. Sweet of you, to send me away on ‘The Word’ from the *Book of John*.”

“We had a good time that night, didn’t we.” He rose from his chair. “I remember how your eyes lit up when you explained that the word translated *word* at the Book’s beginning actually was *logos*—reason; and that the line was supposed to read, and Reason was a god.”

“Wouldn’t it be great if all Christians apprehended it.”

“Com’on now, Delilah. You’ve been over the mental territory too many times to forget the proverbial forest for one tree. Before the umpteem sects agree on *that*, you and I long before will be reduced not to dust but quanta. And more than western sects are involved. North of Mosul, north of Khorana, I’ll bet we still could find descendants of the Yezidis revering not just the *Old Testament* and *Koran* but accepting the *New Testament* too. However, it’s the Imaum who’ll have jurisdiction over Kurdish-speakers—“

“To whom the Yezidis, I take it, belong? I take your point. Since antiquity, every family’s had its own ‘God-rule’ scenario--clan chief, patriarch, temple—“

“With all the varying linguistic interpretations--“

“And on, through all interim oligarchies and plutocracies—“

“And where is the world now?—only at the beginning of hurdling all the subjective labels in-between, before a doubtful macro leap to collective equalization.”

Delilah did that finger-pressed lip thing and knitted her eyebrows.

“What?” he wanted to know.

“If we talk much more about all this I may wind up not giving a damn.”

“Ah! Progress, Lady Amytis?”

“Well, look how our biblical scribings—the West’s most ancient written words—*aren’t viewed historically*, when Greek histories—*mind* you, of people who held a pantheon of *12 principal deities*—are.”

“Like I said before, sub-continent of psyche can’t be dragged overnight into a secular realm, from tribal theocracy into democracy----as some who shall remain nameless incredibly thought could be. We could use a miracle. Absent that, I’m afraid our society’s going back to people growing their own food, chickens in the yard, the home sewing machine...back through a redistribution which, unfortunately, historically has included inevitable attrition. *Quot homines, tot sententiae*--that is going to be the state of things, for a long time to come.”

“As many men, so many minds,” Delilah silently translated. *And far beyond us is the time when Abraham’s history will exist accurately in them all....*

“Well, that’s it, I guess.” Maxwell sucked in his cheeks and popped open his lips, putting a period on all subjects. “Manny in Acquisitions has your itinerary, budget, and tickets; and he’s ensured lodgings to suit your purpose.” His expression then turned dead serious. He leaned over and laid both hands firmly on the desk. “I’m trusting you to stay safe. I’m not about to see you a candidate for a Jesu de Galindez file.”

It wasn’t just his using the personal pronouns—I’m trusting; I’m not about to see-- instead of *we* or *our Division is not*. Delilah felt his deep personal caring as if it crossed the desk tangibly, saw it in his eyes, heard it in his voice. “Now don’t you go and get mushy on me,” she teased, and put a hand across the desk over his. “I’ll be careful. I’m simply going to make some new friends; I promise. I’ll avoid even mentioning how sad it is, that the man variously called

Yehohshua in Hebrew, Iesous in Greek, Jesu in Latin and to us, Jesus—so few left of what must have been many, many words he spoke--didn't have an amanuensis like Plato."

Maxwell shook his head with an exhale that *did* flap his lips a bit, then laughed as he came around the desk. "You're hopeless," he said, secretly happy to hear the old Delilah fully restored. He went toward the coat stand for his jacket. "I'll walk you back to your hotel. How about a hotdog on the way? The sun's shining and we both will be fools if we don't avail ourselves of an Omar Khayyam respite."

"Just a minute," she said, rising from her chair and going to Maxwell's bookcase. "Where's your dictionary?"

"There, middle shelf on the right. What now?"

"Want to look up 'attrition.'"

Maxwell took the opportunity to visit his water closet.

"Interesting," Delilah remarked when Maxwell reappeared. "Of course reduction in numbers through death is given, although *through war* isn't specified. But listen to this last definition: 'Repentance for sin motivated by fear of punishment rather than by love of God.'" She replaced the book. "How weird is *that*. Let's see.... Say I've committed a 'sin.' Doesn't matter what it was; but I feel really bad about having done whatever it was I did, which by my religion's law required a specified observance to mitigate the debt on my life record."

Maxwell, meanwhile, had picked up her briefcase and was maneuvering her toward the door.

"But the reason I *do* feel so bad isn't out of *love* for, but because I *fear* the punishment that the Administrator of the All will invoke as retribution—"

“C’mon. c’mon!” He slapped her gently on the butt. “The festival season’s over, but we still might see some last of the cherry blossoms. We’ll stop down the hall at Manny’s office on the way out. Then, lunch under the blossoming bough and I’ll let you go.”

Five floors down and out the west exit, across the paved gray and red granite forecourt to 23rd Street Northwest, the sun indeed was shining. The building left behind was part of an enormous complex that represented more than 50 years of national history. Its vast number of offices was second only to the Pentagon--hundreds of State Department undersecretaries, bureaus, and managers. The complex’s original part, completed in 1941, was for the War Department, which quickly outgrew the space and led to the Pentagon’s construction.

In 1960 the site was extended. Although commonly called the State Department, in 2000 it officially was titled the Harry S. Truman Federal Building. Its sumptuous diplomatic reception rooms (tours available) were replete with decorative arts of the 18th and 19th centuries. Within stone throws south and southeast were Kelly Park, the National Academy of Sciences, and the National Mall; to the west, the Kennedy Center of the Performing Arts.

Maxwell gently held Delilah’s elbow guiding her north on 23rd. Passing students recalled to her Madame Albright’s words: *a fully knowledgeable approach is the only way to understand what is going on in a highly complex world”....*

“It’s been a while since I checked in with the Columbia Plaza Hog Dog Cart,” Maxwell cut into the thought, “up just beyond your hotel’s street. One can get two all-beef hot dogs, a bag of chips and cold soda for just \$4.50.” They skipped the chips and soda, munching away the hot dogs the last block or so to the State Plaza Hotel.

“Know you’ve lots to do.” In the hotel’s gleamingly glamorous lobby Maxwell almost stammered. “I’m sure there’s no time for a personal visit just now,” he finished, unable to keep wishfulness out of his voice. Delilah was glad for the proffered excuse; it would be risky to be alone with him at this point. He gave her a bear hug and backed away. “You keep in touch, now.” She nodded and kept smiling until he got out of sight.

She felt blessed, reaching the ordered quiet of her room--actually a suite of sorts, complete with a tiny terrace. Not as pricey as it seemed, Maxwell had assured her, given its proximity to the State Department.

Her day had begun with contemplation of an afternoon nap, a notion now dismissed. She paused in front of the gilt-mirrored umbrella stand in the suite’s entryway, her mind working backward in time....

Air departure, 7 p.m.; arrival Amman tomorrow, around 2 a.m. Boarding time, probably about 6:30; no luggage to check. I’ve asked the desk for a taxi here at 3:30--only some 30 miles to the airport; is 3:30 too early? But no way to gauge commute traffic or time for check-in procedures; and it would be good, anyway, to have time for a little supper at the airport. Manny’s envelope’s in my bag, cash ready in my wallet for the taxi--probably close to \$100 bucks with tip.... Call the ‘kids’; a little bit of face cleanup here; last toiletries into the small pouch....

That left the mysterious photos to look into...

She continued to contemplate her reflection. The oxford gray suit, its three-quarter length jacket over an oyster silk, turtle-necked shirt would stay on. Except for the toiletries, her soft leather carry-on bag was ready to go. She removed the jacket. First she would call her children; then, exchange the day’s dressy shoes with the flat-heeled ones. Those were in the side

pocket of the carry-on, which was resting against the arm of the suite's coral hued sofa. She dropped herself near it. Changing shoes with one hand, with the other she put through her first call.

Twenty minutes later, shoes changed, face fixed, and both calls done, she took out Maxwell's envelope and laid it on the room's desk. Then she visited the mini-bar, fixed a brandy, seated herself, and lit a cigarette. She reached for the envelope but paused....

I did over-speak a bit at the meeting (only a bit?). It had been a defense, she realized now, against letting Max see the true excitement in her. I'm actually on my way to where Christ himself walked! Had she shown her enthusiasm about that, Maxwell might have suspected some messiahnistic bent. In one not exactly Virtue's perfect model? Her internal conversant chided. Besides, in the female case, wouldn't it be messiahNAHnistic?

Facing blatant self-cognition, one would think Ego would drop out of the running gracefully; but Delilah knew that a psychical constellation wasn't eliminated simply by recognizing it. Besides, she really never thought of herself as 'Him;' more as His sister--a female who grew up with a totally loveable, loving, thoroughly pacifistic big brother only to see his body crucified in one life, and his human reality mortified in countless ensuing others.

You're aware that-at least one story's been written already, about Jesus appearing in female form, mind taunted. Probably portrayed with pious un-made-up face and beatudinous smile! Self retorted. 'Messiah' originally may have been interpreted to mean an empyreanly-sent savior-commander like Samuel, but it was whoever had earthly power who decreed that the smearing of 'confirming' oil by human hand was according to divine authority. All that that Old Testament 'anointment' really meant was appointment--like when in 9th century b.c. Elisha decided to make Jehu the man!

Delilah, who never spoke such things in public, drained her glass and slid a fingernail under the envelope's flap....

Cool woman, that Jezebel--putting on her royal colors, making herself her most beautiful for death; ready for Jehu's gallop up to the castle; dispassionately looking down to ask, "How goes it, slayer of your 'lord?'--meaning, of course, her legitimately succeeding son-king....

Inside the envelope were three smaller, separate, unlabeled envelopes, each containing a colored photo. One-by-one she stood each against the wall at the desk's back and studied the faces. First, she memorized features and colorings; then, concentrated on the eyes--there was where true recognition would lie.

Satisfied, she took the photos and her cigarette lighter to the kitchen sink. She watched the glossy papers curl and blacken into ashes. Scooping up the waste with a paper towel and flushing them down the toilet, her thought returned to Jezebel....

No supplication! Not the least fall to fear in those last moments, before Jehu had her thrown from the balcony to be dragged by dogs. Nor did he kill just her son and her. He killed 70 other sons of the North; and, as the truth is known, a lot of other potential opponents--herding them into a building under false pretenses, then ordering his men to the massacre.

The Bible could be a disgusting thing!

Part Two

THE PAST

Manny had chosen a perfect Amman hotel a couple of blocks south of the French Embassy on Zahran Street, in a quiet residential-like neighborhood. Small and impeccable, it had a family-type atmosphere. Manny also had dictated the taxi driver that met Delilah's arrival. That was another part of his job, alerting Division 'recruits' eager to provide transportation to visiting personnel. Thoroughly vetted, neutral drivers like Talmai on their part could rely on gratuities equal to their accommodation.

Khaled, the night clerk, was as affable as his round, cherubic face immediately gave one to believe. Delilah wasn't the first State Department staff to know the hotel's hospitality; and Talmai seemed a virtual adjunct of it, given the instant comradeship she saw between the two men.

"You see I *told* you--you doubting Palestinian, you—your labors here would be rewarded fully some day," Khaled teased Talmai. An implied compliment, while Delilah was aware, eyes red from fatigue, that she scarcely looked her best. Talmai turned away with a shy smile and took a seat on one of the intimate lobby's easy chairs. Meanwhile, Khaled had accessed Delilah's reservation on the registration desk's laptop. He turned toward her. "Only three days, Professor?—not near enough time, to see all Jordan has to offer."

"I know, but I'm scheduled for some business in Jerusalem. I'm lucky to have even brief time for my own pleasure."

"Well, we shall see that you make the most of it. Right, Tamai?"

Delilah turned from one to the other. “What would you suggest, for the time I do have?”

Khaled jumped in first, looking to Talmai for confirmation. “Definitely Jabal al-Qa’la, and the amphitheater?”

“Jabal al-Qa’la?” Delilah echoed.

“The hilltop citadel of the old city,” Khaled was happy to explain, “the acropolis of ancient Rabbath-Amon.”

Of course, Delilah kept the thought to herself—southernmost of the Greco-Roman league’s 10-city Decapoli region; renamed Philadelphia; and some 75 years after Christ incorporated by Emperor Trajan into what then was Rome’s province of “Arabia.”

“I think the desert loop and Umm Qais,” Talmai offered.

“Umm Qais?”

“Up in Jordan’s northwest corner, capital of Gadara of the ancient Decapoli.” Khaled responded. He hesitated, expecting Delilah to ask about “Decapoli,” then eagerly continued. “To the west it overlooks the Sea of Galilee, and north you can see the Golan Heights where the borders of Jordan, Syria, and Israel meet.”

Delilah turned to Talmai and asked, fairly certain of the answer, “Would you be available to drive me to Petra, too, later?”

“Of course. What say we begin tomorrow with the citadel and amphitheater. I can pick you up about 11--after you’ve had a good rest?”

“Perfect.”

“That’s settled, then.” Khaled came round from the desk, first picking up a slip of paper lying there, and lifted her bag. “Come. I’ll show you to your room.”

Delilah followed Khaled after smiling a pleased good night to Talmai; three days with that Palestinian would be a good beginning....

Small but well appointed, she later scarcely would remember the room, only the relief finally alone with a clean bed nearby; but Khaled paused at the open door. "I'm sorry," he said, handing her the sheet of paper he had carried with him. "It's an e-mail that came for you yesterday evening. I'm afraid you will find it is sad news." He shut the door softly behind him.

Had something happened to Maxwell? Was her assignment aborted for some reason? Delilah looked down at the message and her breath stopped as it fell from her hand—*the Bishop....* Dead! Despite rebel attacks on outlying villages, the Bishop had insisted he was in no danger.

She sat down heavily on the bed.

Mind started to think *I should not have left; I should have been with him.* But then she shook her head against false conscience and let tears fall. *What good would it have served, had I died with him? How many times, the last week of that first Division assignment, had he insisted that 'God' had something more intended for me....*

She had arrived feeling her time had run out, ready to cast in *bas relief* the end of her original quest to wreak full female potential. Even in her grief she felt a smile, recalling how he had salved her wounded ego. "Not *if*, when your theory eventually is proved true many a professional status will drop a few pegs--just you wait and see!" A new Physics?--one that turned everything upside down but still met existing laws; *crazy*, that's what her academic colleagues had said. All, that is, except one; and all that he had said in private was "stay away from the math." *So I was wrong there, prematurely trying to fit the theory onto Einstein's formula. But that doesn't mean that it can't be done!*

She hadn't been aiming at being a new age Copernicus--he who rendered certainty to the thoughts of lesser-recalled scholars preceding him in antiquity--*Phallus and Heraclides...Ponticus...Archimedes and Aristarchus of Samos...*and Omar Khayyam, too, if all truth be told! All that Delilah had asked was that her 'peers' think outside of the box. Failing and shunted, she simply had walked out of academe—a life she had sacrificed to achieve--self-exiled herself much as the Bishop, himself, had fled 'authority' as far from *it* as he could go, to a small clinic in a third world country. She saw him in her mind's eye, short and compact but with a swiftness of action that belied both. Memories were almost palpable....

The smell of the oil stove; steam from boiling water stifled as it tried to rise against the humid atmosphere; the inadvertent touches of hot steel as she removed disinfected implements....

She felt that he had loved her as much as one could love—*agape*--that love apart from the physical, the quarter-century difference between them a bedrock admitting no violations of spirit; at once child and parent: she with Woman's wisdom of common human experiences borne; he, with that derived from disallowance.

"Not the first time one's been catapulted by his or her nature from total disillusionment into humble service," he had remarked, head bent over a mortar of basil leaves.

"Sounds as if you don't believe in free will," Delilah had prompted.

"Depends on what you mean by 'free.' Whereas, there *appears* nothing to stop one from an act, what decides *willing* it depends on all that has gone before. And," he had lifted his head then to look straight at her, "I mean *everything* that goes before: genetic constitution; the circumstances into which one is born; and every word, touch, and experience from that day forward. Any choice made is predetermined by the *nature* thus created." He chuckled. "Does away rather nicely with guilt, don't you think?"

The word, *sweet*, was insufficient to describe the Bishop's unabashed lovingkindness, a rare living example of that *New Testament* word. "This will make an excellent nausea-alleviating tea, I think," he had said as he resumed the pestle's rub.

She would remember him all the days remaining of her life, and she would choose to do so as they were together her last day in the village. "Look!" He had exclaimed, pointing toward the tiny clinic window. "It's raining and our garden is ready for it. Too soon will begin the thirst-increasing weeks of summer; but should we worry about that, *this* moment?--this perfect day-after-another-Mother's Day May day?"

His words had brought back memory of the May altar to the Madonna that her mother, sister and she would erect in the telephone niche of the family flat's hallway, which held a telephone only during the last days of mother's pregnancies. It was homage to the concept of the unique *female* spirit, the epitome of a living materiality to which her own femininity unconsciously had soldered itself.

It wasn't that the Bishop believed in dying for a cause.

"Anciently," he had told her previously, "when men had no choice but fight for those in command, if it grew obvious they were being insisted into a massacre, it became a matter of 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.' That's not the case here. There are leaders, yes; but on both sides they and the men they lead are fighting for the very land that means survival of them and their children. Land means crops and crops mean cash. It doesn't matter—it's quite separate, you see—that off in some distance somewhere there are two bigger powers, interested only in the crop, that don't care which side wins...."

He had paused then to dunk bloody fingers into the warm water basin on the wood stove. One of the villagers had come in with a rotten tooth and red-veined swollen jaw. How for granted she had taken dentists to be, Delilah had thought as she handed him the pliers.

“The cash comes from the north,” he resumed, drying his hands as if it were they receiving all concentrated thought. “One group--criminals there, warlords here—only are interested in the cash, while the other power wants to stop the crop altogether. You must be well familiar with the latter.”

As well she was, and that the earth surrounding the Bishop’s flock was crop-perfect for cannabis; essentially a weed. By ancient literature and archeology, it had a world history as old as recorded humankind: found used by Assyrians and Scythians in the fifth to second centuries; evidence of wide use in the Middle-East; employed by ancient Chinese herbalists; carried by conquistadores to North America; carried by Napoleon from Egypt to Europe; taken from Paris to London for various female ailments (reportedly, Queen Victoria herself used it for insomnia)--traces even found in pipes dug from Shakespeare’s home garden, leading to speculation that it was Sonnet 76’s “noted weed.”

One didn’t need to abandon one’s beliefs, to remain neutral, the Bishop maintained. Instead of giving life up for a cause, one secretly could live to work toward it in the midst of chaos. But his neutrality mattered not there, on the river border; and, where ferocity of intent was concerned, his clinic was on the wrong side.

He knew the reason for Delilah’s sojourn at his compound, the purpose for her ‘cover,’ none of which was of interest to him. He had made it clear at the beginning. He had no wish to discuss her job of gathering data on regional involvements, or hemp’s status and politics related to it in the United States or anywhere. “A source of cheap, effective medicine,” he dismissed the

issue, “which both mercenary interests and common ignorance keep barred from efficacy.” To him, the swift usefulness she had made of her hands in his infirmary were ‘God’s’ real purpose for her presence.

Was it true? Delilah had pondered. *Had the 1937 passage of the Marijuana Transfer Tax Act, which prohibited U.S. production of hemp, really been due to invention of the “decorticator,” which could make hemp a cheap substitute for paper pulp?--a threat to Randolph Hearst’s extensive timber holdings and Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon’s heavy investment in DuPont’s new “nylon,” also displaceable by hemp?*

As wished, she had avoided discussing the subject, silently making notes of the region for dutiful delivery on her return, meanwhile becoming subject as the days progressed to the bond developing within her as he matter-of-factly made her hands second to his, from boiling water to swabbing skin eruptions. Priest he may have been, but first and foremost Man; Man ruled by a human grace worthy of Sir Launcelot du Lac. With literature his Excalibur, he flayed the notion that the present world was more tolerable than the world that had been, pitying men’s warring not as evidence of godly wrath, but evidence of their stubborn human juvenility. And even there, where human frailty was concerned, his love, in Malory’s words, was not constrained.

Delilah knew she had to get off the bed, get on her feet, remove the clinging clothing worn more than 24 hours....

The Bishop, dead....

His “tortured” body (Maxwell’s email didn’t say, *what was left of it*), had been found floating on a raft, miles downstream, by a merchant ship at the river mouth.

How she had dreaded leaving him! But he refused to listen to any warnings, astonished at even suggestion that he might leave his flock. “Thomas Wolfe was correct,” he had remarked

the evening before her departure. “One can’t go back to young dreams, to know again escapes of time and memory. But one *can* go home *in Spirit*.” And jovially he had teased her. “Before I know it, it will be Christmas! And what do *you* hope to find in your stocking, or in your shoe outside your door? *I* shall be having some fun and laughter, and special foods, with my little world family.”

Delilah took off her jacket and slung it over to a chair, dropped the skirt and did the same. She removed slip, bra and briefs, took them to the bathroom sink, and put them to soak in warm water and soap. Tomorrow she would wear the alternate fresh set. But she could not, consciously would not fight memories. It seemed right, somehow, that she remember him as much as she could right now, in the stark presence of loss.

He had been interested in hearing about her children. “I don’t know what it is like, having descendants,” he had commented. “The last time I lamented that, I recognized quite startlingly that I was the last of a dynasty.”

“Really?”

“Well, of a family that came to the western continent, moving in the same direction as earth, sun and moon, carrying with them the highest of principles of human existence. Their disappointment, after a lifetime struggle to achieve the best life had to give, was that their only child provided no progeny to benefit from it.” He tilted his head and looked heavenward with a wry smile. “Such is Fate. For some reason Mind cannot give, God manded that I be born to be celibate, and brought into this.” His words echoed Jesus’ words to Rome’s Procurator, Pontius Pilate: “*I was born and brought into this so as to bear witness to the Truth.*”

Delilah pulled back the bed covers. Exhausted, she crawled between them, a rare instance of foregoing brushing teeth or at least washing the face. “*What is Truth,*” Pilate had

asked. Jesus' reply was lost to time; but a portion of that exchange in the *Book of John* had been saved over centuries, a scrap of codice cherishly guarded over the centuries--the "Rylands fragment," discovered in Egypt in 1920.

The Bishop's family, commensurate with their religious culture, had placed their only son in seminary at age 13. He could not have been of more antithetical intelligence, but deep love for his mother had held him fast. By the time she died his mind was fixed on the only path possible to it: he would hide his apostasy, use his position as effectively and as far from institutional sovereignty as possible. That, he had done for four decades--doctor, teacher, and beloved father figure in the impoverished village he chose to serve. It had not been difficult for him to escape the church hierarchy—his swarthy complexion, pockmarked from severe acne, was not the pleasant face most desirable at top of church steps.

"If one is lucky," he had finished, "nothing is left but to serve that anonymous entity called Life while one can, wherever one is; but most importantly, to let Mind be where God leads and places it, whether far from or right next to you."

Delilah never would know, how before his murder he had drifted toward consciousness in a drugged reverie of her...*my amanuensis.... eyes like light rebounding on a clear spring day;* that suddenly his eyes had opened--grainy, difficult to focus. He went to lift himself but—*wait! My wrists and feet are tied?* Recall had kicked in with a sickening lurch. *How long have I been unconscious?*

How long *had* it been, since his awakening on his cot before light to mayhem, to innocent child faces frozen in terror before saber slashes? *NO!* His head twisted at the horror. Old peers would not have believed the seminary's pious youth capable of his next thought: *NO!--I DO NOT BELIEVE GOD GAVE ME THIS SO I WOULD LEARN SOMETHING!*

But he *had* learned something. Witless slaughter dredges a human desperation that only vengeance can relieve; not against naïve faithful, against Faith's *institutions*—*professions* perhaps the better word--aspirations straightened by private fears for security redounding sheep-like into arbitrarily unfounded scriptural interpretations. *Words can be executioners!* His anger was unbounding. *Words! Twisted from the mouths of even the sincerest of believers seeking the Truth of which Jesus spoke to Pilate, those words vaporizing with the speaker, like Giordano Bruno, on the stake.*

The Bishop's psyche joined that of the youthful Peter then, who pleaded, *pacifism be damned! For all our sakes, lift your arms! Lift your arms and let us kill them!* After all (as Peter would have been gratified, could he have known, as the good Alcuinus later would uncover, that the original commandment was 'thou shall not *murder*'. 'Killing' was left open in defense of family and the principles of 'God'-given civility. Hadn't Jesus said of *his* god, "*Those who come to me come to the Patrios?*"

Aahhh.... The Bishop had nearly swooned then; thought-pain combined with body's taking him to the brink of heresy. *Hebrewism and Islamism! Christianity and Mohammedism--every of all the selfish sects derived from them, and their millennia of competitions to corral God as their own!*

He struggled to a sitting position, bit his tongue against the hurt. Useless, trying to see anything in the dark hut, just one of which no one ever hears details of atrocities there performed. Then the branched thatch door had opened--hard, as if kicked; and a silent figure stood featureless against full moon light, which caught and silvered the tip of a long blade curving backward from the hand....

It had been early, the morning Delilah left the compound. On board a skiff sent to carry her to the main port she had trembled, her body registering the resoluteness of menacing sounds drifting across the water. The Bishop had stood at the water's edge, his thin white hair lifting in the breeze, waving her off with a big smile. She could not see, only imagined the blessing of his green speckled, light brown eyes. She tried to match his smile but felt it freeze to a grimace, like the look her mother never had been able to master, no matter how much she wished to keep perception of fear from her brood—

Fear! The fear of which Ernest Becker had written: that impervious core knowledge of living vulnerability subconsciously ever present; the degree one mastered it, each day's awakening, had no effect on what the day might bring.

It was now as if Death lay beside Delilah's head on the pillow. She already had borne her mother's, but she had been almost 100. Delilah's certainty of existence, however, had died 45 years before; fatalism's shroud had descended on her with the loss of her father: non-complaining, soft-spoken immigrant tradesman who had given his life not just to wife and children; to sisters, brothers, and eventually his own aged mother, all for whom he had been the family cornerstone in the "new world." But after her father's withdrawal into illness and then death, Delilah had not been like the woman in the case discussed by Jung; she had not retreated from the world, or suffered psychosomatic illness.

She could not recall the psychologist best known for posing two types of aging, psychological as well as physical. Over the past decade especially, however, she knew herself a testimonial to it, mind contemplating mortality sooner than body's age belied. She contemplated words possibly being said by former associates who had known, or rather *thought* they had known her... *Such a good person!--selfless, creative, cheerful, positive, devoted to family.* And

how they would question each other: *What drove her to leave her academic position?--some mental derangement, do you think?* What *could* they consider, having known only a revealed half of her.

There were mornings on awakening she would think to ‘say to herself,’ “Death wishes you good morning,” followed always by the thought that silently ‘*saying* a thought’ to oneself was nonsensical. *Even if spoken, there are not two of me*, she’d think, *one to speak and the other to receive the sounds; speaking thus would be to the air*. That, inevitably, was followed by the thought that there was no such *thing* as ‘air.’ At such times, diplomas aside, she reminded herself that she no longer was physicist and philosopher in the world; merely left with a mind that bore a particular prescience of perception of existence.

Yet how strangely glorious it could be!—to live each moment through the end of all moments, immersed in the now, extracting from it—*giving to it!*—total volition: absorbing and committing to memory experiences that count in human existence— a day sloshing through the tide in youth’s body beautiful; by one’s sleeping child’s bedside; at joyous family table; watching births of grandchildren!—for she had grandchildren, to be sure, having begun motherhood in her teens (although not, she would note, as early as had the mother of her imagined eternal brother--*motherhood at age 14?* How little consideration was given, to the tender ages at which ancient daughters became mothers!)

She could imagine herself the UPS person, the trash collector person, the nursing home aide, and on and on and on--any one of society’s servants; for she had been one in her youngest years—a Social Security card at 15; daughter of immigrants, ultimately one of the last to live the “American Dream” in a totality of possibilities sadly seemingly never to be afforded again.

The truth simply was that immortality in men's minds was nothing to be desired. The heart and soul of anyone who achieved it only fell victim to endless posthumous creative writings about an imagined being, inner truths of the real person evaporating at death as surely as cessation of the breath that sustained them. And how swiftly posthumous references faded! People talked for a brief while; but life itself quickly took away speech from the subject of death, naturally willing freedom from it.

In that self-indulgent pragmatism, however, she had felt so alone, never more than with academic 'peers.' Until, that is, the Bishop. And there she knew enough psychology to recognize he had replaced in the flesh the long-lost father figure archetype that could moor her mind.

"It's downright stupid," he had exclaimed, the only time he revealed any repressed doubts. "Human beings have needed a Divinity to sustain belief that earth's unending atrocities can be recompensed in a glorious afterlife. *Stupid*...to accept unending atrocities as God-forced, outside human control! If all of God's children shared fairly in existence, none would need to fight; they'd all be living next door to one another, each with the same number of cows or cars, not giving a hoot as to in what manner each gave thanks, or to what or whoever each imagined the thanks given.

"Incredible!--" he had given a disgusted grunt, "how many incarnations of spirit still will suffer before one *iota* of equality collectively comes to exist. If world resources were distributed *fairly*--a word definedly different depending on one's ego!--there would be ample room for all to have their own home and plot of ground." He looked away, then, and Delilah saw he was embarrassed at such uncensored speech. But he looked back again and held her eyes. "You and

I are alike, I think. We refuse to give up the dream of an eventual marriage of democracy with one, open-ended theocracy.”

Delilah was longing for sleep but it would not come. Instead, Memory vomited one of the last times she had dared speak her mind freely as an academic....

If it were taken as established that the Universe is a closed system--all constituted of one sub-atomic “constant”(for want of a better word)--it further could be postulated that Consciousness, also, was constant; and, on the premise beginning to be evidenced relative to genetic development of Consciousness, Consciousness itself must evolve in concert with material evolution. Zombie-like under the bedcovers, too tired even to toss and turn, emotions of past personal ‘deaths’ mingled with those of the present....

How hard it had been after the divorce, the decision to begin a new life away from academe!—leaving the 100-by-60-foot plot of land and warm little house, where were spent life’s most vital years while her children were being raised. She had been a different person then, beneath the oak’s curving grace; pausing in her gardening to watch a squirrel shimmy the wide trunk and disappear among summer leaves, before returning attention to the lavender and pink harmony of forget-me-nots, cineraria, and geraniums. When finally she did fall asleep, she dreamed it away....

She was standing before a steep drop. The house was behind her, enclosed all around by a high fence; but the fence was made of cardboard. It would be easy to go back if she wanted. Instead she reached up, straightened a leaning portion of the fence, and took a long last backward look only to make sure she was leaving all in good order. Before her was barren landscape; yet that too was unimportant. She merely had to do each next thing as it had to be done, and that was the end of it--

She awoke with a start. It felt as if a thorn had been plucked out of her psyche. That past no longer could have anything to do with the *present* her! The sleep that followed was a true rest, deeper dreaming which focused mind on future's purpose, striking to the very heart of that into which she now had been led....

People all around were speaking about 'tents' of their religions, while she was bent on expressing how each was so 'religiously' zealous to hold, as their own, fundamental principles supposedly held in common. "Most of us who inhabit the earth are walking handicapped," she said to the crowd. "You say that we agnostics have 'phallasized the intellect,' and you give dollar psychology developed 'round the idle rich when what the masses need is two-bit help that hasn't been spawned yet. Like churches' guidance of the spirit—awful words!—the same old double standard: put a hundred dollars in the plate every Sunday, get a personal handholding every Saturday; come in hoping for a quick shot of pure grasp of real reason between digging ditches, listening to crying kids, and wondering where next season's shoes will come from, and hear a lot of platitudes you can't make heads nor tails of; then going out wondering but knowing (--and hating it so, it won't even come to the surface of thought, because God 'has his reasons,' doesn't He?--) that for the poorest there is no relief, no place in the grander schemes, from philosophy through psychology to death....

When she awakened again, a strange word hovered in dreaming's twilight...*hyssop*....

Delilah knew its definitions: an ancient sacrificial herb; a remedy for bruises. *There are bruises of the soul, as well as of the body*, she thought; but then another thought came, transcendental in its clarity. Her Consciousness had reached nexus at the vertex of two natures: male, denied his true history, and female sequestered in the process—the first, made last vestige

of a god extending beyond his domain, and (she failed to bite her mental lip against the next, an heretic thought!), mystically through the second, producing a hybrid being!

Consciousness newborn was neither male nor female. Its' respective associations were the effect of conditioning dictated by *form of body* containing it. Fortunate, persons that could conceive their true eternal anonymity. And pity those two magnificent individuals--the pacifist with willing forces, who refused to raise his arms to begin one more futile, sacrificial battle against collective consciousness's immaturity; and the naïve 'vestal' virgin, known carrier of the seeds both royal and high priestly, secretly chosen to produce a legitimate heir for an already lost kingdom's future salvation.

She tossed aside the blanket and headed for the shower, but the train of thought dragged after her.... *Why is it that those 'in the know' don't know, that the word given as angel—Greek aggelos--originally meant messenger or envoy? Who determined to translate 'angel,' thereby denoting a spiritual, not a human being? Such as!--Delilah's private unconscious refused to desist--such as for the Gabriel who contacted Mary, who assured her she would know no 'heat of lust,' when the 'power of the most high' overshadowed her!* Nor would such thinking be stifled even by the bliss of the shower's hot water....

What a bunch of crap the world is! Has even one modern-day aristocrat cleaned the toilet of an 88-year-old man who lived in a small mobile home without family or any help until found finally (mercifully!) no longer in existence except for the dirty, smelly body (he couldn't help it!), lying on linen that hadn't been washed for months? For a period after the divorce, Delilah had been that 'trailer's' next tenant, where three-quarter-inch, age-encrusted yellow crystal adhered to the toilet bowl took hours of chipping and scrubbing to remove.

But she got that toilet pristine, by god!

Part Three

THE SYRIAN

Everything one's Ego directs, Delilah was certain, has to do with identity; and usually each person knows only one, a combination of imagined public and private unconscious estimations. Years before she recognized she had two potentially distinct psychical personas, each capable of seizing Ego; only recently had she grasped how to use one or the other *consciously*. She also had come to accept that, in truth, all identities were transient, none destined to endure past death. She would look at the faces *now*, listen to the voices *now*, knowing they were here only *for* the now, the only 'now' for her. She would love *now*.

That morning she clothed the domestic mother-figure; Talmai, after all, really was but a boy....

Young people require meaning in their lives, Maxwell had stressed; it had been worth hearing re-expressed. Life meaning, he had said, is gained in a myriad of subjective ways that depend on individual culture. A person gains self-respect, meaningful value, as measured against his or her social culture. Where 'terrorism' was concerned, he had emphasized, world was dealing with disadvantaged sub-cultures where members only could gain self-value through release of violence.

Delilah considered the contents of her strategically packed bag. *It could get hot today*, she thought, *although thankfully not as it would be, in summer, when temperature here can climb to 115 Fahrenheit.*

Double-knit elastic-waisted slacks, plain white cotton over-blouse, walking sport shoes, no makeup--that would do, as soon as she wound up her hair and pinned it into a bun. She went to the mirror that hung over the room's empty bureau. Fiddling with her hair, she contemplated useful topics she might broach with the young man--*how had he, Palestinian, come to be in Jordan?* She reviewed what data she knew that might apply to the day's effort....

Jordan, the Hashemite kingdom, a constitutional monarchy, the heart of the Middle East. East to southeast of it were Iraq and Saudi Arabia; north, Syria; west, the "West Bank" and Israel. Arabic was its official language, but English was spoken widely. Since 1989 the politics seemed headed toward more democracy. However despite reforms by King Abdullah II aimed at improving living standards, after his 1999 ascension to the throne, rumblings in the north threatened demonstrations for quicker, more real changes.

With one of the smallest economies in the Middle East, two major, intertwined elements impacted Jordan's progress. Low in important natural resources, it relied heavily on foreign assistance, mainly of United States investors. It exported fertilizers, chemicals and pharmaceuticals; but vital products--including crude oil, wheat, sugar, meat, and machinery--had to be imported.

The second of Jordan's two-horned dilemma was Palestinian population. Over the preceding generation alone it had absorbed three major influxes of refugees from Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. More than 50 percent of its entire population was Palestinian, almost six million living in Amman refugee slums. A very large number of Palestinians had lived in Jordan more than one generation, and it also was home also to immigrants from other surrounding regions such as Iraq and Lebanon.

The current minimum wage brought some 110 Jordanian dinars a month, about \$156.00 U.S. Of particular interest to Delilah, of course, was that of the 48 percent female population only 12 percent of it was represented in Jordan's economy. A strong working class party yet had to be forged between trade unions and the youth movement to offset the ruling elite; the rate of unemployment was high among youth. With some two-thirds of the population under age 30, a recent young activist 'Movement for Change' was not surprising.

While middle class sectors were being drawn into the struggle for democratization, major difficulties were posed by the Islamic Action Front, initially the government's main opponent. Connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, IAF representation of both Palestine immigrants and Jordanians of Palestinian descent, together with its' attraction of military retirees and civil pensioners, complicated the working class movement....

Hair all pinned, mind recaptured, Delilah turned abruptly from her reflection. No matter her image's externalities, there always remained something in her eyes that betrayed yet a third identity--the soul, perhaps; prisoner between being and being. She lifted the slim strap of her shoulder wallet over her head so that it crossed her breast, reminding herself of a need to exchange some dollars for dinars.

By 10:15 a.m. Jordan time, Delilah sat in a corner of the hotel's intimate patio restaurant, watching sun coins through lightly breezed leaves dance on her small table's starched, white cloth. At the moment, she was the only patron.

There was look of heavy sadness on the face of the waiter, who was middle-aged and light complexioned with skimpy graying hair. When he brought Delilah's coffee she skillfully drew him into conversation. Yousef, being his name, was a displaced Iraqi intellectual Christian. "I lost everything in '91"--he confided, lamenting his losses under Saddam's aggression—

“*everything*; more than 150,000 dinars.” Here in Jordan, he said, he worked 14-hour days, seven days a week; had hoped for but been unsuccessful at obtaining a U.S. visa. Now he was considering he perhaps might find more fitting employment in Saudi Arabia, were he able to get there.

“People should value life first, and work together to stop the killings,” he vouched, unable, however to hide bitterness. “I don’t believe wealthy powers really *want* to see the ‘Palestinian problem’ solved. Exiled Palestinians here in Jordan, like in Kuwait, are the main labor force. All of them like myself, would return to their homeland if they could.”

Yousef hadn’t noticed, but Talmai had arrived and was waiting politely for the waiter to finish speaking. “Morning, Talmai!” Delilah cocked her head to look around Yousef, who immediately resumed a formal air. “Excuse me, sir. What may I bring you?”

Talmai’s sporty apparel looked as if it had been delivered by a dry cleaner that very morning. “I’ve had breakfast, thanks; just coffee, please.” He gracefully lowered his lean, sinewy body on the chair opposite Delilah at table. “Let’s face it,” he said, once Yousef was out of hearing. “‘Empires’ better themselves on the backs of immigrant labor and imported resources, which allows *their* citizens to live Life’s greater joys. History’s repeating itself; except now not only regionally but worldwide.”

“I know,” Delilah said, proffering her open cigarette package and moving the small box of waxed matches toward him. She studied the face opposite her. The great variety of middle-eastern faces and skin colors offered no discerning clues of descendancy. She had been made conscious of her olive skin and ‘Roman’ nose, when a family move in her last year high school year found her in what then was termed a “WASP” school. But nothing about Talmai spoke

‘Arab’ in the stereotypical sense. Dark brows and hair, yes; but wide-set eyes, and hints of auburn in the close-cropped dark curls that hugged a high forehead and met almost in a proverbial “widow’s peak.”

He nodded thanks at the cigarette offer and lighted up. “All one can do against current insanity is to keep mind occupied. What I do is, read everything I can get my hands on.” He gave a self-conscious laugh. “I like imagining a petition at the World Court at The Hague--” he took a deep inhale of smoke, “a ‘Petition for Formation of an *Ad hoc* Chamber to render an Advisory Opinion Regarding the Establishment of the Historicity of that Person, Named in the *New Testament* Record, Various Known as Yehohshua, Iesous, Jesu, and Jesus.’”

“That’s a mouthful,” Delilah forced a laugh, privately astonished at Talmai’s reference to Jesus. *Got to explore that, she thought; this Palestinian’s heritage has to be very interesting.* But now was not the time. “What’s an ‘*Ad Hoc* Chamber,’” she asked, instead, as Yousef arrived with Talmai’s coffee.

“Usually just three to five judges. Chambers meet more often, and an advisory opinion by one is a way to get the attention of the full 15-member World Court. But you’d have to be a member state to get access.”

Delilah decided to enter the fantasy. “Let’s say you were a member state. What, my dear, would be the ‘Statement of Facts?’”

“Ah. There’s the problem.” Talmai took a long sip of coffee. “There’s no *secular* historical record about Jesus’ existence, you know.”

Delilah did know that the only mention of Jesus apart from the *New Testament* was a brief mention of him in *Josephus*’ history; but that had been advanced as a later scribal addition,

not by the author. “You mean, no non-scriptural record like there is, as for example, about Muhammad?”

Talmai pressed his nicely formed lips together a moment. “Interesting, though, isn’t it?--” he tilted his head and paid closed attention to snuffing the cigarette--“how as to another issue critical to this region, the *Old Testament* is relied on as an historical record.”

She knew precisely what he meant and he knew she did; but he respected her decision not to pick up on it. He looked at his wristwatch and smiled agreeably. “Seems how we’ve talked beyond our planned departure time.” He waved to Yosef for the bill. “I’m parked just out front.”

Delilah pocketed cigarettes and matches. “Just give me a few minutes,” she asked, needing a visit first to the rest room. “I’ll meet you out there.”

Traffic was bustling along Prince Muhammad Street. The thoroughfare, just east of Amman’s downtown area, was like a cleft in history--shops on one side, the restored Roman amphitheater on the other. “I’ve seen the amphitheater enough times, and there’s some personal business I can do in the meantime,” Talmai confessed, leaving Delilah out front. “I’ll be back in about an hour.”

The amphitheater had been cut sometime in the second century a.d., into a hill once serving as a necropolis. Standing before it, Delilah could imagine imperial chariots drawing up before the entry’s pillars. An aged and slightly built, dark-skinned man stood beneath the portal. In his red-checked *kaffiyeh* and long white robe, Delilah knew he was judging the proper moment to offer a tour. Knowing, too, that she would accept, she slipped a 500 dinar note--some 70 cents U.S.--into the side pocket of her slacks.

Once past the formalities, the guide Elias replied to Delilah's first question. "Oh yes, the theater still is used today, for cultural events." He swept a hand upward the imposing outdoor seating. "Today it seats more than 5,000; in *Roman* days, however, only 4000." His comment struck Delilah not as to Roman portliness, as to the obesity issue in the current 'western' world.

Elias moved Delilah toward a small, enclosed theater at the northeast side--the "Odeon." Boys were playing in the coolness under its arched ceiling, where Elias explained that musical concerts were held now just as they had been during Roman occupation. In an outside corner across from the Odeon, Delilah paused to run her hands over a sculpted stone torso of Hercules.

At finish of the tour Delilah took pictures—a couple of Elias, too, of course. Waiting for Talmai, she enjoyed watching the busy city life beyond the amphitheater grounds. Within 15 minutes he returned on foot, having left the car in a parking garage. "It's easiest to walk to the next place," he said, taking her hand to cross Prince Muhammad Street. Once across, he walked Delilah at a steady pace uphill to the ancient acropolis.

As they stood overlooking the Citadel's wall toward Damascus, Talmai recounted (unnecessary for Delilah, who refrained saying she knew) the various conquerors of Rabbath-Amon, before Rome took over the heights: Ammonites, Babylonians, Hebrews, Nabataeans, and Macedonian Greeks. "Absolutely!"--he assured her when she asked--"native Jordanian generations have Greek and Roman blood too."

The Citadel "mount" (*jebel*) is one of seven mounts on and around which the present metropolis of Amman is built. As the acropolis hill falls away, the densely-built city dips before it and rises again to the horizon. Seeing Amman from there reminded Delilah of overlooking San Francisco from one of its hills; but here the sun was hot; the sky such a light blue it was almost white; and the architecture, all stone or concrete flat-roofed buildings with lots of colorful

laundry hanging from apartment windows.

Parts of the ancient, stacked-stone walls still stood on the citadel's east side. Delilah imagined it as it was three thousand years before, when beneath it Bath-Sheba's husband, Uriah, fell in battle with the Ammonites. Off to her right gigantic stone pillars were all that remained of Alexander the Great's temple of Hercules. Also nearby were remains of a temple where, it was claimed, Herod Antipas placed John the Baptist's head on display.

Seven thousand soldiers were housed in the Citadel in Roman times, Talmai told Delilah, pointing out niches inside the wall where sentries stood guard. A sauna room, with openings in floor tiles for heat to emerge from a sunken oven beneath, all still was visible. Talmai gallantly held Delilah back from the edge of a deep cistern once filled by a spring, a sure water supply to foil the common enemy tactic of thirsting a walled city's surrender.

Something about the way Talmai steadied Delilah as they explored took her attention away from the view. Often in her working life she had noticed male co-workers' lapses of concentration if she stood too near them. And she was reminded that a youth's unsatisfied sexuality was unaffected by a woman's age. Although the thought bothered her, it could become useful....

She walked back to the Citadel's east wall and imagined herself a queen standing at that high parapet at the center of the horizon's circumference--*waiting...watching...* across rock upon rock of that color that is black gold in bright sunlight...*wondering...* on which segment of that circle of sight would the shadows appear?--small at first, then spreading like a horde of ants, men of a different language who would camp a safe distance beyond the wall, and busy themselves with their siege weapons.

The siege was not to be led by their king, however--a great man of Jerusalem who may have seen himself advancing civilization. Albeit he would kill her husband and beloved brother, both of whom would fight to the death as Man must, apparently, on Humankind's path to infinity. But oh, that Queen would be attractive enough, as soldiers' appetites went; but it would not be herself of whom she thought. She was of that persistent ilk of femininity unstrapped; thus always would it be of her children of whom she would think. *I can see her standing here,* Delilah thought, *back straight, her robe flowing in the soft wind...*

She turned and looked south, as if lines of focus could curve over the cliffs all the way to Petra—as perhaps would have the queen's, toward her father and family whom she had so missed, having been taken from them at such an early age, the last-born virgin of that rock city's dynastic lineage. Her thoughts, however, would be of how her city's soldiers had to be kept fed before the citizenry; that the food supply was near-exhausted, while the poor at the city extremities already were dying—

In the end, what was served? What was it that drove Man to ever more try to put on that greater being he believed himself destined to become?—

It was only a matter of Time, the Queen would think. Should she go to the subterranean room in the walled city's center? But to modify Time by the word, *only*, had become a crime to the soul; every moment spent with her young son, all the more precious.

It was down there, Delilah thought, peering over the citadel wall, that Uriah was killed in the initial facade of a skirmish provoked by Joab... *Joab, Zeruiah's son, who followed his orders in the field while, supposedly, the King back at his castle was dallying between parapet and a nearby roof....*

But then, historically speaking, didn't Woman's provocativeness always take the blame? And David was no fool; evidence enough existed of *that*-- at least not enough of one to not be looking out for national interests before his own fancies. Lest you forget!--Delilah would point out sharply, to whomever had un-luck to raise her ire to soapbox level-- Bathsheba brought much more than a good roll in the hay to David's harem: a desirous bloodline and its following, as did Saul's Ahinoam and Nabal's Abigail...

"I think you'll find the little museum up here of real interest." Talmai, who had come up behind her, stopped Delilah's fantasizing. "It has archeological items from the Bronze Age forward."

They were alone in the small museum's dim coolness, and Delilah couldn't believe her luck. She was allowed to take photos, which she did-- among them, a large stone façade of Artagatas, Nabataean goddess of fruits and fertility, wearing an eagle headdress; a statue of Apollo that was found at "Sebaste" (the name Herod the Great gave Samaria City, when Rome granted it to him); first century carved stone heads from Petra's main temple; and a mottled clay statue, believed the earliest ever attempted, dated 8000 to 6000 b.c.

Lastly, at back of the museum, Delilah was astounded by a phenomenal find: a metal reproduction in a glass case--sections of the Copper Scroll! Mesmerized, Talmai finally had to nudge her. "With what I've planned for you today, we'll be getting back very late tonight if we don't move on. Don't know about you, but I feel the need for reinforcement before we head north. Breakfast seems a long time ago."

Delilah rested her hands on Talmai's shoulders as he led their descent from the citadel by an original stairway carved into the rocky slope. At a restaurant nearby on Prince Muhammad

Street they lunched on *fasooliyah*, a mid-east staple stew of green beans, lamb, and tomato served with a side of saffron rice. There, Delilah had her first experience with a “squat” toilet, its opening flush with the tile of the floor. Managing with slacks was inconvenient. She chuckled to herself; thenceforth she would confine herself to a skirt.

Talmi, conscious of schedule, had wolfed down his lunch, gone for the car, and retrieved Delilah in record time. By 1:15 they were back on the road, headed north toward the country of the Gadarenes and the southeast region of the Sea of Galilee, from where word of Jesus’ preachings went out through the Decapoli. Their first stop, Talmi said, would be some thirty miles ahead at Jerash, the ancient Roman city of Gerasa, known also as “Antioch on the Golden River.”

Delilah had chosen to ride up front. That made for easier conversation.

She began with personal words, which she frequently found a good entre for gathering facts. “You know?—it’s impossible for me to get a clear idea, so far, about people’s heritage here. I mean, supposedly I’m of Italian extraction; but who knows the mingling of ancient tribal bloods that I possibly may be carrying. Maybe I go back to the Sabines, the highlanders whose virgin daughters the legendary Romulus told his soldiers to help themselves to—“

“‘The rape of the Sabines,’” Talmi interjected—another indication of how well read he was.

“Yes.... Or, maybe the Etruscans. Or even a daughter of the Trojan Aeneas, after he reached Latium. Fanciful, I know,” Delilah acknowledged with a coy smile, “but so many ancient cultures and languages have intermingled, who can tell? Matter of fact, I’ve wondered at times if my ancestry doesn’t share Hebrew blood. Religion-wise, my family in recent generations was ‘Catholic,’ but some of its cultural practices mirrored Judaism’s.”

“As our family story goes--” Talmai, finally drawn in, offered--“my great-to-an-nth-degree-grandmother was Aramaean.”

“Aramaean?--all the way back to Abraham’s time? Why, the Bible *tells* that when Abraham left Ur with Sarah and Lot he made for Aram, the same name as one of Noah’s grandsons. As history’s been written, ‘Central Syria’ is the term that Time’s made of Aram; but in fact it embraced at least the north half of present Syria and overlapped Turkey’s present border. And two of Abraham’s brothers, Nahor and Haran, had cities in Aram named after them!”

Delilah was glad that her ‘cover’ allowed her to reveal knowledge of biblical history; it felt good. “Some words Jesus used were Aramaic,” she continued. “Syriac’s a dialect of ancient Aramaic; and Aramaeans appear in tablets from Mari as far back as 1900 b.c.--about the time Abraham and company made their trip.” She resisted, however, adding that the Mari tablets also carried the names Peleg, Serug, Nahor, Teharan, and Haran; that, in some places of the biblical text’s lineage from Abraham, the name “Aram” appeared between Hezron and Amminadab during the “Hezronic period” of the Exodus...

Amminadab, father of Elisheba; Elisheba, who wound up Aaron’s wife, her blood carrying forth the High Priesthood line; but, poor Nada and Abihu! Nor would she elaborate the descendancies from Aram in Abraham’s time...his brother Haran’s daughter, Milcah, who married his other brother, Nahor, and gave birth to Bethuel... Bethuel, “the Aramaean,” “the Syrian”--father of Rebekah, whose mother’s name is lost to the record.... And the later kingdom of Aram-Maachah that King David initially battled; but “Maachah” persisted, down to the name of the wife of Rehoboam, David’s successor-son king...

At that point Delilah decided to venture, “So you’re a ‘Syrian-Arabian Palestinian?’”

Talmai blew out something between laughter and disgust, as he passed a car not moving at what he judged was sufficient speed. “What’s ‘Arabian’, anyway? ‘Westerners’ couldn’t be more confused about *that* than what Jesus really was about.”

The ‘Jesus’ thing where Talmai was concerned mystified Delilah. She took out a cigarette and lighted up, wondering how best to pursue it. In the end, she took the direct route. “Forgive me if I’m being too personal, but you talk like a Christian.”

Talmai gave a true laugh this time, reached for and took her burning cigarette, turned to her with a beguiling grin and took a deep drag. “That’s because I partly am.” He handed back the cigarette. “How else would I know so much about the ‘bible?’”

Talmai neglected, however, to explain further. “Joking aside,” he began instead, “what average people know about *humans* who lived biblical history is...well..,” this time he grinned like a witty Irishman, “I was going to use a vulgar American term that begins with ‘Jack;’ but what I’ll say is, *precious little*. What do they know, for instance, of Alexander the Second, Miriam’s father, beheaded on order of Roman Pompey when competing with Julius Caesar? Not the *first* Miriam who was...well, it’s said, Moses’ sister; the way scriptural sentences go, she well may have been his *half*-sister—Jochebad’s daughter, not Levi’s. Who knows?

“No, I mean the *second* Miriam, last flower of Ashemon, the end of the Hasmonaeans that began with Mattathais of Ashemon. And *that’s* another thing--the way names change along the way. No wonder no one can learn biblical history straight.”

Delilah kept silent and watched the road as Talmai groped his pocket for his own cigarette pack. “I *meant*,” he paused for the initial inhale, “Miriam whose grandfather fell to Herod the Great. *Then--*” he exhaled, “after buying off Mark Antony, the Great had her uncle, Antigonus the Second, beheaded; but was that enough? Oh, no--couldn’t have the threat of

residual legitimate bloodlines around. Miriam herself had to go, via a contrived accusation, so that the Great could marry the daughter of the man he next made High Priest. Next to go was Alexandra II, Miriam's mother--payback for all her attempts to circumvent Herod. She had tried early on to escape in a coffin, by night to her ally Cleopatra VII ('the Great'), with Miriam's brother, Aristobulus III, but was betrayed.

"To top it all off, the Great eventually secured the murder of the two sons Miriam had *by* him—Aristobulus IV and Alexander III, lingering popular Hasmoneans who hated him, the murderer of their mother and kin--"

"Herod the Great *did* go somewhat nuts toward the end, didn't he--changing his will, imprisoning a son by a different mother, and having *him* killed just days before he, himself, died, sometime between 4 b.c. and 1 a.d. *And*, previously having had John the Baptist's father, High Priest Zechariah, murdered for not telling where infants John and cousin, Jesus—legal heirs to the throne under The Law—were hidden!"

Talmai nodded but didn't respond, seemingly concentrating more on the road. The part of the Fertile Crescent through which they then were passing was home to Jordan's densest population. Delilah turned her attention to the Gilead mountain scenery beyond, letting mind revisit centuries before Herod the Great....

After Alexander the Great's 323 b. c. death, the Ptolemaic, Seleucid and Macedonian dynastic descendants of his territorial generals vied for regional supremacy, in the so-called "wars of the diadochi," Palestine ever caught in-between. By 168 b.c. Rome had done away with the last Macedonian contender, Perseus, and divided Macedon into client republics. At about the same time, the eighth post-Alexander Seleucid, heavy-handed Antiochus IV, was

fighting brother-in-law Ptolemy VI over Palestine regions, but was thwarted by Rome in an attempt to take Egypt.

Returning with his army, Antiochus IV took Jerusalem and strictly imposed Greco-Hellenistic customs on the region, against which Mattathais of Ashemon made his famous stand of 167 b.c. Ensuing defenses fell to Mattathais' high priest/commander sons (the "Maccabees"), plagued also by competitions by factions of the Gerizzim temple in the heart of Samaria and the Jerusalem temple, variously supporting the Maccabees or one or other Seleucid contender. Son Judas ("the Hammer") sought league with Rome, which initially offered only sympathy.

Judas was killed in 155 b.c. battling Seleucid Demetrius I. Brother Jonathan, took over; but famine caused many to gravitate to the Seleucids, who established garrisons in cities. Jonathan and third brother Simon Matthes were drawn into sequential aggressions of more Seleucid contenders: Bala, Bala's son Tryphon, and Demetrius II.

Demetrius II, however, ultimately allied with the Maccabees and in 141 b.c granted independence and confirmed Simon Matthes as High Priest. Then, two years later, Demetrius II responded to pleas from Greeks and Macedonians in Mesopotamia/Babylon regions, for aid against Parthians, and wound up captive of Parthia. Tryphon, taking the advantage, sent a force against Simon.

Simon was compelled to make league with Seleucid contender Antiochus VII, against Tryphon. Simon, advanced in years, turned over command to eldest son, John Hyrcanus I (the yet-unborn Miriam's grandfather--father of her mother-to-be, Alexandra II. Antiochus VII turned coat, however. After Tryphon was ejected, Antiochus extracted tribute and certain cities from Simon on pain of war. Simon pursued Roman league, petitioning for regional authority.

Rome finally returned a directive that any troublemakers in the region were to be handed over to Simon....

Treachery might still be the name of the game in some world quarters; in the ancient world it was rampant. In 134 b.c., High Priest/Governor Simon and two of his sons were assassinated by a very son-in-law of Simon (an undesignated 'Ptolemy of Abubus'), setting the stage for Seleucid takeover. Hyrcanus I, forewarned, saved himself, however; and so began the last era of a millennium that had begun with King David's reign, an extensive theo-democratic empire of peoples variously trampled and disseminated by Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, Macedonia, and Seleucia. Its' heart--old Canaan land, referred to by 5th century b.c. historian Herodotus as "Palestine"--would, in the end, belong to Rome.

One was deceived, reading history. Names took hold to become connected with present-day borders, as if ancient events were dictated by countries and their governments instead of by armies of men whose very livelihoods relied on autonomous generals concerned primarily with their own spoils. Local officials, too, allied secretly in accord with *their* personal fortunes....

But the poor female subjects of combatants!--how many there had been; few known, and then usually only if scandal or seduction could be attached to them. Years, years, years...wars and exiles, love and sex, births and deaths; male names, names, names--sons of sons of sons of sons, as if they possessed uteri and procreated unigenesisly! And how facilely historians applied the word 'married,' implying free will in relationships into which females helplessly were thrust by events and overseers!

Who knew, for example, anything about Cleopatra VI Selene, the Seleucid queen, to whom no notoriety legitimately was ascribable; or, of her mother, Cleopatra III Thea? What unimaginable lives! Cleopatra III Thea, daughter of Cleopatra II and Ptolemy VI, was only one

of seven named Cleopatras, often confused. Only three were recorded with given names, their numberings no indication of respective births and ages. Even Delilah, after her years of study, could not be sure she had the ‘facts’ straight....

Thea first gave birth to a son by uncle Ptolemy VIII when she had to be not much more than a child, before his later rise to Egypt’s throne. Her first reported ‘marriage,’ however, was at age 14 to Seleucid contender Alexander Balas--part of a Ptolemaic treaty when Balas succeeded in making himself king over part of Seleucid territory from 150 to 146 b.c.. Thea bore Balas a son, Antiochus VI Dionysus.

When Ptolemy VIII finally got to power in Egypt in 145 b.c., sequentially he first killed one Memphitis, son of an undesignated Cleopatra; pretended he would marry Queen Cleopatra II and make her infant son Ptolemy VII the royal heir; immediately afterward repudiated her, “killed the boy in her arms,” and married another younger daughter of hers (Cleopatra “IV”). Cleopatra III finally fled to daughter Thea....

Ptolemy VIII had much in common with Ptolemy Ceraunus, his predecessor some 150 years before. Half-brother of Egypt’s then widowed Queen, the Macedonian Arsinoe, Ceraunus also ‘married’ her, usurped the throne, murdered her two young princes, and banished her.

On the Seleucid side, some sources say Demetrius II defeated Balas in battle, when instead it had been by force of Thea’s father, who switched support from Balas to Demetrius and received fatal wounds in the fight. Demetrius II then became Seleucid co-ruler, it being surmised he killed the boy Antiochus VI. Then came Demetrius’ capture by the Parthians. Before that, however, Thea had two sons by *him*--Seleucis V Philometor and Antiochus VII Grypus, each of whom eventually would sit on the throne (and, History says, she “*may have had*” a daughter by him, named Laodice).

Parthia kept Demetrius II for 10 years, during which he took to 'wife' Parthian princess Rhodogyne. Two years into his absence, Queen Thea sent for his younger brother, Antiochus VII Sidetes, for support. With him she had two or three more sons and one or two more daughters, not all clearly identifiable; one son, Antiochus IX Cyzenicus, would be Seleucid King in 93 b.c.

About 129 b.c. Parthia commissioned Demetrius II to go against Sidetes. Demetrius established himself at the Antioch capital, but failing full Seleucid support was overcome. Retreating to the Ptolemais capital where Thea was, he was refused refuge. By 125 b.c. he had been captured and killed.

Selene, a daughter of Cleopatra III Thea by uncle Ptolemy VIII, first had been joined at age 14 to Lathryus, a son of Cleopatra IV by said uncle. Sometime before 112 b.c. Selene was taken from Lathryus and given to Seleucid King Antiochus VIII, who then was assassinated. Selene next became queen of Antiochus IX, who bested contender Seleucus VI; next, Antiochus XI, who killed IX; then, XI, with whom she had two children; and, after he was killed, to and with Antiochus X, who drove Seleucus VI out for good.

Selene's troubles were far from over. Antiochus X was killed in battle; contender Philip took Antioch and contender Antiochus XII took Damascus. The latter subsequently was ousted by King Aretas of Nabataea. When Philip's brother, Demetrius III, got his hands on part of Seleucid territory, Selene apparently held out a while on her own at Ptolemais, against Armenia's Tigranes. Tigranes finally took the city, captured and murdered her....

No wonder!-- Delilah's thought jumped ahead again to the days after Herod the Great's death--that Herodias, a granddaughter of Miriam by Herod the Great (and mother of young Salome who historically took the rap for John the Baptist's beheading!)—no wonder, that

Herodias opted to join the dead Great's son, Herod Antipas, who Rome was to confirm as client king of the Galilee—

At that point, 12 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee, Delilah's mind mercifully was relieved of its prolixity. They had arrived at Jerash...*Gerasa*: a Decapolis city prospering during Jesus' time, on the trade route that brought incense and spices from Arabia to Aram....

Delilah could have spent hours wandering Jerash's columned thoroughfares, plazas, and amphitheater, exhilarated by its massive stone construction and soaring arches. Talmai's unconcealed anxiety about time served to remind her. The day's sojourn wasn't all about sight-seeing, but thoughts about a few family gifts did cause her to linger at the site's courtyard bazaar.

"It's not my policy to bargain people down," she responded to one seller's intimation that she could try. "I want to guard my entrance to Heaven." And, when she prompted, "By the way, where is your God's heaven?" other sellers drew near. "No one has seen God," one replied instead. "Moses came closest; it says so in the Qur'an. But we, being only specks, never could see God."

"We still can see God in each other," Delilah smiled; "and I believe when I get to Heaven I'll see you!" The merchants, delighted at the exchange, wound up giving her great bargains--a sand bottle with a desert scene inside, a decorated plate, and a necklace she had not thought she should afford. She gave all of them a kiss. They loved that.

A site caretaker joined Delilah and Talmai as they walked to the parking lot. He was hoping, he confessed, that one day he would meet a needy lady he could serve--one who perhaps would help him "move on..., maybe to Italy." Delilah laughed. "I'm afraid you're some 20 years

too late with me, but I wish you luck!”

“What next?” she asked Talmai as they settled themselves in the car.

“A fortress castle, about 15 miles northeast--” his shoulders moved gracefully as he wheeled the car to the road--“a nice drive.”

Once they had ridden in silence a few miles, Delilah turned from view of thriving olive groves. “When we were talking earlier,” she prodded tentatively, “you mentioned that you’re Syrian?”

“Depends on what century you’re talking. There was a time when what was called ‘greater’ Syria’ included Lebanon and Palestine. But as Time--not people who lived it—might say, names mean little. The Syrian Aramaean blood is from my mother’s side. Her family was from Ma’loul, some 30 miles south of Damascus on a rugged mountainside, kind of to itself and not well known, which probably is why—“

He stopped there and announced instead, “Here we are: Qala’at ar-Rabad, better known nowadays as Aljun. Built in the 1100’s by a nephew of Saladin, it controlled passage to the Jordan Valley as a defense then against Crusaders, who had a Latin Kingdom in the Transjordan. This region also had iron mines.” With Aljun’s commanding views, Delilah well understood choice of the site for defensive purposes.

“Just a minute,” she asked as Talmai opened his door. Wind through her open car window had lodged annoying strands of her hair. Talmai waited while she removed the pins and combed her hair back under a headband, and she was conscious of what felt like a desirous stare.

There was a drawbridge to the castle. Talmai pointed down as they crossed. “Anciently there was a mote all around and a moveable bridge over it.” Above the castle fortress were imposing remains of four corner towers. *Fifteen miles in distance from Jerash, a thousand*

years in time, Delilah thought, as they reached the castle's arched stairway entrance. "I'll wait out here and have a cigarette," Talmai said.

Inside, a maze of staircases and vaults proved to be an endurance test. As Delilah explored she encountered an even more challenged native matriarch of advanced age. The woman proudly introduced Delilah to the three other generations of her family group.

Talmai was sitting comfortably, his back against the bridge rail, when Delilah emerged. "I could have stayed longer," she told him, "but I got some good pictures, I think."

"I remember you mentioned possibly seeing *Bayla*," Talmai said, giving Pella its local pronunciation as they walked to the car. "But we had a late start. I'm afraid if we stop there you would be too rushed at Umm Qais, which really is tremendous. From there we'll have another 70 miles back to Amman."

Delilah *had* wanted to go to Pella on the Jordan's east bank, another Decapolis city but inhabited as early as 5000 b.c. After Alexander the Great's death, Hellenic Pella variously had been under Ptolemaic and Seleucidic rule. Her main wish see it stemmed from a particular interest in Philip of the *New Testament*, and how Pella figured in the site named by that text as "Bethany-Across-the-Jordan." Philip had been a son of Herod the Great by a woman referred to only as "Cleopatra of Jerusalem." For a brief time after the Great's death, Philip had been Tetrarch of the northeastern parts of his father's kingdom....

Philip, who had been espoused in the ancient tradition as eventual husband of young Salome.... Philip, whose half-brother, Herod Antipas--son by the Great of one Malthace "of the Samaritan nation," and Tetrarch of the Galilee after his father's death--had his heart set on much more and ensnared Herodias.... Philip, who brought a Greek contingent to meet with Jesus—

“What say you? Bayla or Umm Qais?”

“Oh. You’re right, I think, about skipping Pella. And we ought to think about some food.”

“Umm Qais has a nice terrace restaurant with spectacular views of the Sea of Galilee and Golan Heights.” He opened the car door for her. “We’ll go there first before exploring the site.”

Umm Qais, in Jordan’s northwest corner, was a 45-minute drive up into and through luscious hill country. Delilah, silent at first, was aware of Talmai’s occasional glances. “I’m sorry about your missing Bayla,” he said finally.

“It’s okay. It wasn’t the site so much I cared about. I just have a kind of special interest in Herod the Great’s son, Philip, especially his mother and his fiancée--”

“Ah...back to the miseries of ancient females,” Talmai teased.

“The last thing I would do is to disparage men,” Delilah responded. “But, yes, I admit I’m obsessed by what females endured in the progression of...I don’t know what to call it. I was going to say, *civilized society*, except that implies such a thing collectively exists--individuals all mutually civil in thought, word, and deed. What sticks with me about what women endured, is how they bore children at such young ages, often sired by men old enough to be their own grandfathers; and of how powerless they were, so often seeing their children arbitrarily murdered.”

He shifted down to take the grade. “Something you feel in your soul, as opposed to mind?”

“Yes, I guess: that ‘I’ naked of the different identities and roles that mind [she sidestepped *and man!*] variously assume and present me to be.”

“Like putting on and taking off clothes?”

“Ah, you quote a great swami there,” Delilah said, remembering Mishra. She busied herself then with items from her bag—a scented wipe beneath her eyes and around her ears, and another comb through her hair, which fell thickly on her shoulders. It caused a sensing in Talmai, some rising of body and blood that his mind was not permitted to register but arrested conversation until they reached Umm Qais.

The walk from its parking lot was rather long or rather seemed so to Delilah, waiting for Talmai to break the silence. “I truly am sorry about missing Bayla,” he spoke finally, taking her arm. “Philip was supposed to get little Salome, wasn’t he?”

Delilah was conscious of the hesitant warmth of his touch. “You little devil,” she laughed, removing her elbow from under his hand ostensibly to nudge him in the ribs. “There’s no *end* to how you surprise me with what you know!”

But she left unvoiced, *yes; poor teenaged Salome--stuck at Machaerus with mother Herodias and Herod Antipas, after they worked out a deal at Rome for Herodias to leave Salome’s father. Per the record (naturally!), Herodias ‘fell in love’ with Antipas--as if a woman with her family history and in her position could be stupidly uncalculating as to how Future’s chips could fall. However, whichever way the story was told, Antipas needed to get rid of John the baptizer, just as he later was happy to have Pilate seal the fate of Jesus—ridding the scene of those two popularly-recognized, lineaged claimants to high priesthood and throne....*

“Pity all women of that history,” was all Delilah said at length. “Capture the princess, if there’s no queen. Like chess: once one had the opponent’s ‘seed,’ one had the game provided being smart in ensuing moves. Capture her and marry her or kill her and her progeny if they threaten your aim. Ninety percent of maternal bloodlines are missing in the progression of

‘races’ through Humankind! Think how differently borders might have been drawn, had maternal blood determined them.”

They were at the restaurant by then, spacious and open-air. Talmai pulled out a chair for Delilah at a white-clothed table near one of the porticoes surrounding the restaurant’s sides. “I don’t know about your body, but doesn’t your mind need a rest? Take a look at that view!”

Thick growths of variegated greens ended at a ridge a short way from the restaurant wall. Beyond the drop, the mount descended through lavender hues to the blue-violet sea, which reached to deep purple on the western bank. Above the western backdrop of distant mountains silk-spun wafts of clouds floated in a true blue sky.

Delilah was happy to let Talmai order for her—a typical Middle Eastern meal called “meze,” he said. “The word probably came via Greek from Ottoman Turk--for *flavor, taste, relish*--borrowed from Persian for taste or snack.”

Delilah’s mind, however, was not on food. *How was it that Talmai knew so much about Christianity and its scriptures?* “Your mother’s mountain village--what was it called? ‘Mallolla?’”

“*Ma’loula*--Aramaic for ‘high place. My maternal grandmother taught in a small school there. My father worked in Amman. He met my mother on a visit to Ma’loula. Her mother was a widow by then. They’re all dead now.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yes.., happens to us all one day.” But he quickly dispelled the sad look and gazed over the terrace wall. “Ma’loula’s an unusual village.”

“How so?”

“Historically, strongly Christian--Muslims and Christians there live in harmony still.”

“Oh *that* explains it.”

“What explains what?”

But appetite temporarily stayed conversation as five assorted dishes arrived, accompanied by fried pita bread. They filled their plates with cheese, mashed eggplant, hummus, seasoned bulgur with tomatoes and scallions—*tabooleh*, Talmai offered--and *fattous*, a mixed vegetable salad.

Later, satiated, as they sat over coffee Talmai tilted his head at Delilah and pursed a smile. “I haven’t forgotten—*what* explains *what*?”

Not immediately sure how to respond, Delilah compressed her lips behind an index finger. “About...” she pointed the finger away, “about how much you *know*--not of just history in general, about Christianity.”

“Matter of fact, my grandmother’s family *was* Christian; and, as I said, she was a teacher besides.”

Delilah already had noted how the color of Talmai’s irises changed with his emotions. Now they took on a dreamy darker hue. “Ma’loula’s a kind of wonder world—mountain beauty, houses clinging to the rocks at different levels. Sometimes their roofs are paths to houses above. Until the rise of Islam and Arabic, Ma’loula’s language was Western Aramaic.”

Talmai paused, noting Delilah’s raise of eyebrows. “Yes, the language of Christ. I was schooled in both sides of a...what should I call it?--‘religious chasm?’ But there’s more than just the big Hebreo-Christian and Islamic one that dominates the media. There still are a lot of smaller ones to be breasted.” He pushed back from the table to uncross and recross his long legs. “So strange, differing accounts of certain things between the western testaments and the Q’uran, like the *sura*--the chapter called ‘The House of Imran.’”

He gave a little laugh at memory. “Caught between the books, I’d ask, was ‘Imram’ the same as ‘Amram?’ You know how the *Old Testament’s* Amram, grandson of Levi, took to wife his aunt Jochebad, and she ‘bore’ to him Aaron, Moses and Miriam? The Q’uran instead says Jochebad gave birth to *Mary*; then the following verses parallel the *New Testament* about Mary being chosen to produce Jesus. Maybe the writings originally referred to blood lines; but *crazy* to try to sort it out. Too much isn’t *in* scripture; God alone would know how much of it was lost, or embroidered, or subsumed over time. I have no truck for any side. If things keep going the way they are, none of it will matter anymore anyway.

“Enough of that.” He drained the last of his coffee, pushed cup and saucer to the side and looked at his wristwatch.

Delilah took the cue and pushed back her chair. “Let’s pay up here and see the site”....

Umm Qais.... Ancient Gadara of the Grecian 10-league Dekapoli founded two millennium-plus back in time—fertile, abundant water, pleasant year-round climate; a confluence of main links between Central Europe and Asia. It had made it through the couple of centuries of fighting between Ptolemies and Seleucids and known the brief Maccabaeian independence, only to be followed by the Romanized Idumean Herodians, followed by the advents and passings of Julius Caesar’s and General Pompeius’ Roman legions.

And, what came after the Roman advance from the west and Asia-Greco from the east?-- after Jesus; after Agrippa the Great?: Roman Empire factioning; the big split of it west and east; the Crusades (God’ the excuse-cum-cause); then Muhammad and Islamism—

Who could keep all of it in head?

As she walked along with Talmai, Delilah stifled a laugh at the end of her train of

thought, more surrender than cynicism: *What fools we mortals be!*

They strolled first to the north overlook where below the borders of Syria, Jordan, and Israel met the Golan Heights. Northwest in the distance, the Galilee Sea was darkening beneath the sun's slanting rays. Like Rabbath-Amon, a parade of history had walked Umm Qais' flagstones, and Talmai kept up a patter like an official guide. Delilah listened uninterruptingly. Apart from what she might know already, he never failed to give her more.

Talmai lifted his sunglasses to rub road-weary eyes, but the caramel matt-finish of his face was cool, the profiled dark lashes caressing smooth cheeks. "Herod the Great ruled here once. He availed himself of a flourishing spa at hot springs nearby."

Delilah cocked her head. "That I didn't know."

"Yes-- Emperor Octavian, the great Augustus, *gave* Umm Qais to Herod as reward for his and his father's valor in the service of Rome, despite the fact that Herod initially had supported Mark Antony over Octavian. But Herod had been especially helpful to Rome by conquering the Nabataeans for control of their regional trade routes. After he died Umm Qais became part of Rome's province of 'Syria' which, depending on when, extended all the way down to the Sinai."

Delilah was feeling the heat and grateful when Talmai stopped talking, as they walked an open stone road toward the lowering sun. On the ridge at the road's end once stood the Tiberias Arch. She hadn't expected the spring of tears evoked by the magnificence of the ruins. As they returned to walk the colonnaded street of the ancient city center, Delilah felt pure awe at the enormity of the contrast between what man was moved to build and driven to destroy. For some moments all her sensing had been absorbed in perception. Reception had to precede perception, she thought; but it seemed in her then that they had become one.

Exiting the site they fell into step with a man with his several children. His family totaled

10, he told them as they walked abreast, and went so far as to show them his pay slip from the refinery where he worked: 416 dinars a month, about \$624 U.S. dollars....

On the road again, south toward Amman, Delilah was near dozing when an oncoming car made a bad pass. As it flew past, seemingly leaving little but the width of a hair strand, Talmai turned toward it. Face showing anger, he took both hands off the wheel an instant, made a scissors-like gesture, and said something that sounded to Delilah like *al-k-other, genitals-genitals-genitals!* Immediately conscious of his 'lapse,' he gave her a quick look. "Sorry about that!"

She giggled. "That's okay; sounded most appropriate--almost as if the Holy Ghost had settled linguistic revelation on me," a reply Talmai found quite hilarious. Shortly afterward they shared laughter again, for during the trip's last half-hour Khaled kept checking on them by cell phone.

In between Khaled's calls, Delilah re-set her mind to "data gathering." "Since you're a native Jordanian," she began, nonchalantly feigning more interest in digging for her cigarette package, "why did Khaled call you 'Palestinian?'"

"Because by ancestry I am. My father was from an-Nasira, Nazareth to you-- currently the largest non-Hebrew city in Israel. He began working as a boy in the textile industry there, but by 22 had been recruited to work for a carpet factory in Amman. His family was Islamic, although before World War II Nazareth had a majority of Arabic-speaking Christians, matter of fact always did have--different sects: Greek Orthodox, Marinate, Coptic, probably others." He braked their speed as cars ahead suddenly slowed. "But the city's non-Hebrew population grew after '48, with displaced Palestinians from neighboring towns. More, as years have gone by; some call Nazareth the 'Arab capital' of Israel."

“But you weren’t born there.”

“No...long story.” It was his turn for a cigarette breather....

“After ’48 and creation of an Israel state,” Talmai resumed after an inhale, “Jordan acquired a large Palestinian population because it, or rather the Hashemite Kingdom *of* it, then had rule over the ‘Transjordan’—the west bank of the Jordan and east Jerusalem--while Egypt had Gaza. Afterward, Jordan granted citizenship to any Palestinian then living in its territory, which included my father. For a long time no distinction was made between Jordanian nationals and those of Palestinian descent.”

What Delilah did know was how refugees to Jordan had skyrocketed after the June 1967 war of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria against Israel, after the latter’s surprise air strike on Egypt. When the dust settled from that, called by Palestinians *an-Naksah*, ‘the setback’, Israel had gained territory from all three: the Gaza Strip and Sinai from Egypt; West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan; and Golan Heights from Syria—

What was that figure Max mentioned?--that Jordan was host to some 42 percent of the total Palestinian refugee population, most of them in camps?

But Delilah was after *personal* details and now, not having paid attention to passing scenes, she saw that they were well into Amman, already past the third circle on Zahran Street. In minutes they would be past the fourth and to the turn to the hotel.

“And?” she prompted.

“My mother’s widowed mother from Ma’loula and my father’s aging parents from Nazareth all moved to my parents’ family home in Amman. And thus was I, my parents’ only child, born ‘Jordanian’ in the memorable year 1985. But Khaled, as you heard, is a good enough friend to tease me about my ancestry.”

Delilah had done some calculating. “You were born in ’85? Your dad must have been an older man by then,” she prompted again, as Talmai pulled up near the hotel.

“True,” he switched off the engine. “Father was a bachelor of 50 when he married my mother--a sheltered, virginal 30. I was born five years later.”

“Did you say your father was a ‘Muslim Palestinian’?”

“How shall I put it?” Talmai opened his door and twisted his torso to stretch out his legs. “My father believed ethical and moral civility and honesty should be laws of Man, without need of a god to instruct--”

“Or to satisfy?”

“Exactly. When it came to religion, discretion was the key for him. By birth and culture he was an Islamist, yes, but in practice, agnostic.”

“And let your mother’s mother educate you on Christian history.”

“He did; *also* directing, however, that I receive the same full education about Islamism, which I should mention is not the same as ‘Muslimism.’”

“Explain.”

“Not now! Look at the time. Khaled’s kept the kitchen ready for our dinner. We shouldn’t keep the folks any longer than we need to.”

They were alone by candlelight in a warm corner of the hotel patio.

Dinner was a delicious *mansaf*, a Jordanian national dish--this one with chicken instead of lamb pieces, gently braised in a yogurt and almond sauce over rice. By the time Yosef had brought their coffee, the green of the tree leaves above them looked black against the sky.

Delilah stirred milk into her coffee and laid her free hand over Talmai's, resting near his cup. "Now you can explain the difference between 'Islamism' and 'Muslimism.'" Her hand was warm, and she was wearing the sweetly entreating smile that only one familiar with her guises could deny. She gave his hand a small squeeze before removing hers and leaned back. "I know so little about Muhammad and Islamism; you're the perfect person to enlighten me."

"You think so, huh?" Talmai gave an incredulous shake of his head. "As if that could be done in the proverbial nutshell. Names in Islamic history are more confusing than those in western scripture." He leaned back also. "Okay," he agreed finally with a surrendering breath. "I'll do my best."

"Muhammad was of the Bane Hashim clan, that is, of the *sons of* Hashim--a clan of the Banu Qur'aish, the most prominent Arabian tribe--"

"Wait. First, what's the exact meaning of 'Muslim?'"

"'Islam' and 'Muslim' both are from the same Arabic verb, '*aslama*--to surrender. Islam is the name of the religion, of its faith, surrender or submission to God. Muslim denotes one who does submit and practices Islam. If you want to be technical," he allowed himself a mildly supercilious smile, "*Islam* is the infinitive form; *Muslim*, the active participle."

"Grammar's not exactly my forte," Delilah responded primly. "Just the facts will do nicely, Talmai."

"Leaving scholarly niceties aside then," he straightened in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head, "and omitting complicated intervening Arabian names, Muhammad's patriarchal lineage is claimed from Adam down through Abraham's Ishmael, then on to one Adnan--father of Adnanite tribes in the northern region; from there, down to 'Abdul-Muttalib, a Banu Hashim reared in his maternal grandfather's house in Medina. 'Abdul-Muttalib's wife,

Fatima, was mother of Muhammad's father, 'Abdullah." Talmai stopped for a long breath and looked to his coffee cup, but found it empty.

"Shall I call Yosef for more coffee?" Delilah asked.

"No, I'm fine. Hopefully he's gone to rest."

"So who was Muhammad's mother? As to Jesus, the biblical record's sparse; but it does relate that Jesus' mother's blood carried the lineages of both the Aaronic high priesthood fixed by Moses in the clan of Levi, and the royal line from King David."

"Muhammad's mother was Aamina, sister of Chief of the Bani Zahra clan. Father 'Abdullah died before Muhammad was born, and Aamina died when he was still small. At first he was in care of his grandparents; then, when grandfather 'Abdul-Muttalib died, Muhammad was under care of his uncle Abu Talib, the Hashim's succeeding leader. Muhammad lived his first 50 years or so in the regional financial center of *Makkah*, 'Mecca' to you, where as an adult he became a prominent merchant known for unique honesty and fairness.

"At 25 he married a widow merchant named Khadijah. Traditionally, along with her Christian cousin, Waraqah, Khadijah is credited with strengthening Muhammad against his early doubts of being divinely selected—"

"*Christian* cousin??"

"Surprised? In east and southeast Jordan River lands there *were* mixed communities -- orthodox Hebrews along with persons who followed Hebrew law but accepted Jesus as a prophet—a sect called *Ebionite*. Anyway, according to early writings, Waraqah was an Ebonite priest in Mecca. Some scholars naturally want to tie to that Muhammad's embrace of monotheism—"

"What difference would that make?" Delilah allowed herself to question.

“Not a bit for us who accept that cut and dried telescoped histories give no real view of interrelationships throughout the ancient world—intelligence *and* bloods *and* beliefs. You know!--there’s always that pernicious human wont to be first in line.” He reached into his pocket. “One more cigarette,” then I’m going to call it a day.”

“To continue,” Talmai resumed after lighting up, “Muhammad took to meditating for weeks in a cave near Mecca. Around age 40, it’s written, he began having divine revelations and communications from the angel *Jibril*--Gabriel to you—and began preaching monotheistic philosophy publically. Despite a general belief in *Allah* as ‘*the* god’, Mecca’s shrine--the *Al-Ka’bah* or Kaaba--housed some 360 idol statues of various tribal deities.

“Muhammad had known destitution with his widowed mother. His key themes were generous concern for the disadvantaged, morality, ethics, rejection of cheating and avarice, and particularly the abandonment of worship of ‘pagan’ idols. At first he drew derision from conservative tribal leaders but gradually began to win serious converts. Needless to say, conservatives--keen on maintaining their superior societal status—became strongly opposed, as Muhammad’s preachings increasingly threatened their status quo, freeing slaves and interfering with ‘business as usual.’”

“Similar in some respects to Jesus,” Delilah murmured.

Talmai yawned and then pressed on as if reading from a text screen in memory. “As time went on, things got pretty bad; harassment ultimately degraded to torture and exile of Muhammad followers. He himself evaded several assassination attempts, protected at first as a member of the Banu Hashim; but when he refused an eminent position and gifts to quit his mission, hostility escalated among certain Qur’aish clans. Two leading clans instituted a three-year boycott against merchandising and intermarrying with Banu Hashim. When uncle Abu

Talib died, Banu Hashim leadership passed to one Abu Ahab, a fierce Muhammad enemy, and clan protection was withdrawn.”

Talmai looked around as if returning from a dream. “We ought to be going.”

“Not yet; soon; finish the story first.”

“There’s too much. I already have left out a lot.”

“Then ‘cut to the chase,’ as American lawyers are fond of saying. Would a drink help?”

“No.” He pushed his empty coffee cup to the center of the table and fell back against his chair. “*En fin*,” he sighed surrender again, “Muhammad looked for a place for himself and his followers. He found encouragement at *Yathrib*, later known as *Madinah*--Medina to you--an agricultural settlement. People there were familiar to some extent with strict monotheism, because it had a Hebrew community.

“Muhammad urged his followers to emigrate to Medina. Most were successful, although the Qur’aish tried to stop it. A plot was afoot for one man from each clan simultaneously to stab Muhammed, which meant his own clan would need to fight everybody to avenge it. Muhammad’s cousin, Ali, fooled the opponents, impersonating Muhammad while he slipped away.”

Yosef meanwhile, not having retired, had brought another carafe of coffee.

“Bored yet?” Talmai asked.

“To the contrary!” Delilah ignored his rueful look and poured herself another cup.

Talmai’s next words were part of a heaved sigh. “Muhammad’s opponents, fooled, put a bounty of 100 camels on his head; but he took a circuitous route from Mecca and reached Medina . That’s been placed in the fall of 622 a.d.”

“How much of the history is documented?”

“Enough; but hey!” He swept a hand across the tablecloth. “I’m no Islamic *scholar*. All I can tell you is, a young wife of Muhammad named Aisha is credited with preserving the writings of his main associates. She was daughter of Abu Bakr, Muhammad’s closest companion. But not all Muslims accept all of the writings; there are libraries full of dissertations on Islam’s *Hadith* literature—“

“‘Hadith’?”

“‘Narrations’, collected traditions separate from the Qu’ran—“

“Similar to the *Talmud*—“

“Yes. The Qu’ran text, which is claimed dictated to Muhammad by Gabriel over some 23 years, represents Allah’s approved culminating message of the prophets--Adam through Abraham, Moses, David’s psalms, and the *Injil* gospel of Jesus. Abu Bakr, the first *caliph*—temporal and spiritual head of Islam—put the Qu’ran in writing shortly after Muhammad died.”

“A caliph was like a pope?”

“Sort of. Hafsa, a daughter of the next caliph, Umar, and a widow of Muhammad—“

“Muhammad had more than one marriage, like *Old Testament* figures?”

“Oh yes he did. In his fifties in Medina he contracted several, some for humanitarian reasons--widows of men killed in battles, for example--or to strengthen territorial political alliances—“

Like King David—

“After Umar died, Hafsa was entrusted with the Qu’ran, which at the time contained different dialects. Uthman, the third caliph, asked to and used Abu Bakr’s text to produce it in classic *Fus’ha*, now largely the province of scholars.”

Similar to the loss of the original Old Testament codices to Roman destruction, the surviving text being a translation from the Greek copy made sometime around 250 b.c., during the friendship between Ptolemy II and High Priest Eleazar. Eleazar allowed Greek translation of the Temple Law Hebrew codices for Egypt's library, thus preserving it for later re-translation into Hebrew....

“But back to the *Hadith* narrations,” Talmai was continuing. “Those are reported words and deeds of Muhammad that were collected a couple of hundred years after his death. They are referenced in matters of Islamic history and law; but Islam's two main denominations—Shi'ism and Sunnism—don't agree on all of them.”

Like Christian sects—and Hebrew!—don't agree, Delilah thought; then asked, “In what respects don't they agree?”

Talmai laughed, looked away, and laughed again. “I give up,” he said ruefully, returning his eyes to hers with a head shake of total capitulation. “*First*, the holy Qur'an is believed verbatim words of Allah to Muhammad. The *Hadith*, as a source of moral and religious discipline, consists of two main collections: the '*al-Hadith al-Qudsi*, considered Allah's direct messages to, or inspired in Muhammad, but in Muhammad's own words. *Al-Quds* means holy or sacred. The *Nabawi* contains what might be called second-hand reports, passed down by Muhammad companions. Sunni Muslimism recognizes certain of the scholarly writings as authoritative, while Shi'a Muslimism only accepts those traced back to the family of Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. It claims Ali was born at the Kaaba in Mecca.

“By the way, per tradition the Kaaba is said to be constructed around where Abraham originally constructed a building or shrine. Both the Iranian 2000 *rial* banknote and the Saudi

500 *royal* depict the Kaaba.” By this time Talmai’s eyes were drooping. “One more cigarette for me,” Delilah said, “and I’ll let you go....

“ That’s weird,” she drew the lighted cigarette away from her lips, “that difference between sects. What other main differences are between them?”

Talmai raised his eyes to the heavens. “I do need another cup of coffee after all. You’re going to like this,” he said as he poured.

Delilah declined a last refill and leaned forward eagerly. “What will I like?”

“Muhammad had four daughters by wife Khadijah, of which one, Fatima, was his only child that survived. Descendants of Muhammad via Fatima, considered nobles or *sharifs*, are respected by both sects. Now Fatima was wife to Ali who, by the way, was the first *imam*, prayer leader—like a minister. The division between the sects--political, not spiritual differences--date to who legitimately should have succeeded Muhammad. The Shi’a side believed the leader should be Fatima’s husband, Ali. Shi’a is a shortened version of *Shia-t-Ali*, ‘party of Ali.’ The Sunni position maintained that Islam does not prescribe hereditary privilege; that the leader should be elected from qualified candidates. Traditions that Shi’as reject involve differences in some religious practices, but they and Sunnis nonetheless remain *spiritual* brethren in Islam.”

“One big difference, between Jesus and Muhammad,” Delilah offered thoughtfully when Talmai paused. “Jesus refused to raise his arms. Muhammad, on the other hand, became a military commander-in-chief—right?”

“Yes. After the *Hijra*, the migration to Medina--you could call it the Muslim ‘exodus’—the Meccan Qur’aish continued opposition. One turning point after a number of skirmishes was

a battle at Badr in the Hejaz region, in which several Qur'aish leaders were killed. Legendarily, Muhammad and his cause received divine intervention....”

Like during the confrontation between Assyrian Sennacherib and King Hezekiah, during the Period of the Kings....

“Practically,’ Talmai finished, “it strengthened Muhammad’s perceived power; and eventually he succeeded in establishing a kind of co-federation of tribes into the first Islamic ‘state’, drafting a ‘Constitution of Medina.’ Now that’s enough!” He drained the last of his coffee. “If you want to know any *more*, I’ll be happy to supply you with some books. That way, you can make sure I haven’t been wrong on any of it. Besides, there are many little in-between tales I’m sure you would find interesting--like the one about Muhammad’s grandfather, ‘Abdul-Muttalib’s dream.”

“Which was?”

“*Not* going to go there!” He stood and gave his body a full stretch. “Come. I’ll walk you to your room.”

“All right,” Delilah acquiesced. “I apologize for keeping you so much longer than you would have liked.”

“What do you think of T. S. Eliot,” Talmai said out of the clear blue, holding open the door from the patio to the lobby. “*See!*” he stopped and pointed to the look on Delilah’s face. “*There’s* the reaction I always get, when I mention my *real* interests. I’ve asked myself, what makes everyone think I’m dumb? Is it that the very *sounds* of one’s speech determine peoples’ opinions?”

Of course! Delilah’s reacted privately before answering. “I haven’t thought about that for a long time, but I remember my immigrant father--” she reminisced--“very erudite, but he never

mastered English. It pained me how not once did he betray the pain it must have caused *him*, to be taken as ignorant--so different from what his true intelligence and knowledge should have commanded.”

They were almost to her room’s door. Despite Talmai’s weariness, he didn’t want to let her go; didn’t want to be released into the private sad feeling that came creeping out of his core as soon as he was alone. He had no real friends apart from Khaled; and his nature wasn’t the type to seek companionship, particularly female, in common places.

“Linguistics would have been my choice, given a chance for formal education,” he said, as Delilah’s hand reached for the doorknob. ‘It fascinated me, how the very construction of one’s throat and mouth determine the sounds that emanate from it.’”

There’s that ‘Shibboleth’ thing, Delilah thought, simply nodding and opening the door--
brothers failing to recognize each other, not so much because of skin color as by the workings of the tongue...

Talmai looked down and studied his Adidas. “Now I’m sick of the subject. Humankind has produced millions of words but sees each thing as if it came into being *with* its name. And of all the words invented to try and finger Consciousness, none yet has made existence easier to bear. “ He looked back at her. “*You* want to tell me that it’s an evolutionary thing that Humankind eventually will plow through. Right?--that eventually we’ll stop wasting time on silly ‘mysteries,’ collectively grasp our solitary intelligence, and focus on the here and now. Unfortunately, Reason and Purpose can be one and the same for bad as well as good--al-Sadr Jr.’s reasons, following his father’s assassination, equally might explain purpose....”

Delilah stepped into her room but stayed at the threshold, her hand resting on the door jamb. It was one of those times a woman senses in man, self-escape sought through desire.

“Thanks for a great day,” she said.

Talmai put a hand over hers. “I’ve ferried many hotel guests, but no one yet has come close to how much I enjoy being with you.”

Delilah withdrew her hand but gave him a wide smile. “What a fine compliment! And we have another day tomorrow. Shall I meet you at breakfast?” She pulled the door a bit toward her. “What time, do you think?”

Head a bit bowed, Talmai didn’t answer immediately. “Early--” he backed away--“seven too early for you?”

Delilah barely had finished saying, “No, that’s fine with me,” before Talmai abruptly turned and walked away down the hall. She shut the door and leaned against it a few moments, feeling fully her own fatigue. *A shower and climbing into bed...I think I can manage that....*

Luxuriating sensuously, reviewing the night’s conversation as she turned her body under the warm water, she again was struck by the similar functions of Qu’ran and Hebreo-Christian scriptures, beliefs based on one everlasting god, human immortality, and how to win it....

Immortality...didn’t everyone wish it?—maybe not a conscious thought in everyone, but still the ultimate justification for living at all? Jung had been right: humans first needed recognition as a personality in their respective pools, with dignity and respect among peers. It reminded her of what Maxwell had said; reminded her, also, that she yet had to see one of the men in the photos. She brushed that concern aside....

Secondly, Becker’s claim: that all culture—each human nature’s faithful clinging to its own culture and symbols--was in fact Psyche’s defense against the inexorable truth of eventual

death of the material self. Without religious belief (as philosopher Tillich said) all that can be exercised against that was courage....

She draped the wet towel over the bathroom door, pulled back the bed covers and slid between the smooth sheets....

We've had endless expressions--literature and art--of every facet of the human dilemma; what more do we need? Yet we read, and we look, and the same individual thoughts occur ad nauseum, while fifty-four million of us die every year, a major part in most monstrous circumstances, with no provable answers on the earthly scale! Was it so hard to comprehend, as Max pointed out, why a young person cast among similarly disadvantaged peers--absent logic to his or her own loved ones' miserable existence--can choose a self-annihilation which he or she has been given to believe will gain at least an honorable immortality?

A last thought drifted into mind along with sleep

I must find out.... Is it Qu'ran or Koran or Ou'ran??

Certain thoughts arise suddenly, without perceivable cause; and for the second time after awakening next morning the Bishop appeared in Delilah's mind. First was recall of how he had fathered her dejected psyche; next, there was a longing wish for that company of a like, loving mind. *I can't deny*, she thought, brushing her teeth, *I, too, can wish for human consciousness alive beyond death--a champion somewhere, silently rooting for me; a time when I can be reunited with the people I loved.*

Talmai had proposed that the coming day be devoted to a loop around Jordan's eastern desert, to sites dating back to Roman and later Ummayyid periods. Delilah chose a long gauze skirt and soft cotton sleeveless top, slung a bag from one shoulder across her chest, tied back her

hair under a colored bandeau, and wrapped her shoulders with a silk shawl. The bag was just big enough for tissues, some cash, a small bottle of lotion, and a small comb.

Talmai already was seated at the same patio table as the previous night. He stood to greet her, fresh in slim cut levis and a crew-necked, light blue t-shirt. Delilah was relieved to see no hint of awkwardness from how he had left her door. Perhaps she had misread him.

A light breakfast of poached eggs and toast and they were back on the road, a picnic basket arranged by Khaled and a supply of bottled water on the seat between them. Off the Desert Highway just south of Amman Talmai picked up two-lane highway 40 eastward. Within some 50 miles, the rock castle “al-Kharaneh” rose seemingly out of nowhere, on a vast stony plain that reached to far faint hills of shadowed pink ochre.

“Who exactly were Ummayyids?” Delilah asked as they walked toward it.

“A dynasty that ruled the Islamic Empire in the seventh century a.d. It conquered Syria around 640, and ran from Spain and Morocco to India and parts of Central Asia. Damascus was its capital. It was an era that tolerated Christianity.”

They stood beneath the high-ceilinged arch of one of the structure’s 61 rooms. “The real purpose of these desert ‘castles’ or compounds isn’t certain, but evidently they then were watered oases,” Talmai explained. “Theories vary, like maybe it was Bedouin love of nature; or maybe they were hunting and pleasure retreats. They may have offered nature and pleasure, but it’s possible they became territorial outposts as well.”

Ten miles from al-Kharaneh, the desert loop turned north to the next site. “This is ‘Qsar ‘Amra,’” Talmai said, switching off the engine. “It seems pretty clear that this one *was* a rest pavilion, for hunting parties.” He led her through a large reception hall and baths, all richly decorated with intricate murals reflecting secular art of the Ummayyid period. Outside, an old

water wheel had pumped water to the baths from a 40-foot well. Of most interest to Delilah was the ‘clock’ in the main room, where a spot of sunlight through a circular roof opening marked the day’s hours around the floor.

Traveling east again, the desert continued to stretch flat toward Iraq, colorless dun terrain touched with pink, broken now and then by little sand cyclones. As the car passed the desert loop’s junction of roads 30 and 40, the near-noon sun began to strike Delilah’s arm and shoulder. She drew the shawl over yesterday’s slight sunburn.

Talmai took route 5 off the junction and, a short distance along it, they came to “al-Azraq”--the “Blue Fortress” Talmai translated; a Roman military outpost town situate on the west edge of a large watered oasis, where carved stones bore records of Roman emperors. Azraq’s castle had been built some 200 years before Christ. A small mosque at the compound’s center had been built centuries later by the Ummayyids; and later, Talmai told her, Ottoman armies occupied the site.

The castle’s entry doors, stone rectangles each weighing a ton, had hewn stone ‘hinges’ that fit into the sides of the stone threshold. Part of the three-story structure had been destroyed by an earthquake, but a large second-floor room was intact. Delilah stood a long while silently under its imposing arched ceiling; T. E. Lawrence had rested there, during his 1916-1918 historical unification of regional tribes that assisted England during World War I.

An old guide approached and showed them tattered newspaper clippings, one a photograph of Lawrence with a pleasant-faced elderly man. “My great-grandfather,” the guide informed them proudly

“El Orrance”...Lawrence of Arabia... Delilah felt a bit of melancholy, but not near as great as must have Lawrence, in the aftermath of war promises made.

“What happened to the Umayyid Empire,” she asked as she and Talmai exited the castle.

“The same thing that causes every empire to decline,” Talmai replied, the tone of his voice suggesting the question was moot. “How did one Umayyid chieftain put it? Can’t give it to you verbatim; but when asked what happened he said, to the effect, ‘Instead of visiting what was needed, more interested in our enjoyment of the pleasures of living, we oppressed our people until they gave up. We trusted ministers who favored their own interests, and kept secrets from us.’” Talmai tipped his head toward her with a sidewise look. “Sound familiar?”

Delilah just slowly nodded her head.

“Then came the Crusades and Frankish overlords, then the Mongols, then the Mukluks. Then, around 1400 a.d., good ol’ Tamerlane—omitting here all the massacres. Finally, the Ottoman Empire....” He stopped with his hand on the car door handle. “Why don’t we break out our lunch here.”

“Good idea.”

He took an old blanket from the car’s back seat and slung it over his shoulders, before lifting the picnic basket. Delilah, carrying two bottles of water, followed him back to shade near the castle entry. They filled pocket bread with dried fruits, nuts and bits of lamb. The sun was hard against the wall opposite; the glare blanked peripheries so that the rocks seemed to exist outside of time....

Rocks can reveal their travel through time, like the dating of Troy; only if they but were they able to speak! How much more of real lives rocks and bricks might have told, of the people whose backs moved and hands fashioned, stacked, and mortared them--weeding the embroidered legends to expose the political and personal truths, like those surrounding Helen. As if it was

her face alone, that launched a thousand ships!—and all the god and goddess myths about her incarnation, whether from an egg of Leda or Nemesis, fertilized by Zeus disguised as a swan or goose; or, from an egg found by and brought to Leda by a shepherd or dropped into her lap by Hermes!...

Impossible to imagine, the pantheonic beliefs of antiquity: the posed warrings of gods and goddesses, like Hesiod's claim that Zeus caused elopement of Helene and Paris to start the Trojan War, as part of a plan to obliterate the race of men. In truth, Helene was sole surviving heir of Spartan king, Tyndareus (whose wife was Leda, daughter of Aetolian king Thestius). Tyndareus chose Menelaus to be Helene's husband from the many princes who sought alliance—*Menelaus*, who then became Sparta's king—

Had Helen really first been promised to Prince Alexander "Paris," son of King Priam of Troy, as one story claims? Several legendary precedents existed for such derivation: "Io" taken from Mycenae; "Europa," from Phoenicia; "Medea" from Colchis; "Hesione," by Heracles. Oh but that the rocks could tell truly what gave cause for that 3000-years-past war of Achaea versus Ilium, in which almost all of Greece took part in either Menelaus' siege or defending against it--that period of the ending of the Mycenaean palatial civilization. Yet, who was left to stand in man's literature as 'responsible' party?—the seductive female of course!--from Eve to Bath-Sheba, and all the others in between and after....

Talmai's hand, suddenly running smoothly down Delilah's back, startled her from her musings. "So, Miss Delilah, how come you by such a notorious name?"

She leaned away. "Now that's a coincidence."

"How so?"

She turned as if to better face him but moved her a bit away. “I just was thinking about history’s labeled bad girls.”

“And your namesake *wasn’t* a bad girl, after all?”

“Who knows; maybe she was. But maybe she started out as a spy, then found out Samson was a better guy than any for whom she worked.”

“Are you going to answer my question?” Talmai persisted as he packed up the lunch remainders.

“How I got the name?—my father’s choice. He thought it went well with our last name, because ‘Sorek’ sometimes with a *q* instead of *k* is the biblical name of the valley that Samson’s Delilah came from. It’s the only use for a place, ‘though *Genesis* and other books use it for a particular grapevine.”

“Ah, I see....” The way his eyes traveled her body as they walked back to the car was discomfoting. *That which old-school mothers here expect of sons is quite different from western culture*, Delilah was thinking. *He could use a mother still—one of changed enlightenment; and I feel old enough to be her....*

She was able to relax only when Talmai returned to highway 30, headed slightly northwestward. The road shimmered in desert colorlessness, so totally opposite the Bishop’s last homeland. There, one understood why its ancients had piled stones: to see above the trees!—finding only horizon-to-horizon jungle. Here, the hot desert air swishing through the car’s open windows dried sweat on Talmai’s biceps, but not where Delilah’s breasts glued to her ribs. She imagined herself a caliph’s wife, swaying hot under the canopy of a decorated *hou’ah*, hearing the herd’s leaders shout sight of their desert “r-and-r”--

“Look—” Talmai pointed.

Delilah turned from the breeze and through the windshield saw a small edifice rising with the horizon. “Another castle?”

“No, an Ummayyid oasis bath house, where regional patriarchs and their families refreshed from nomadic wanderings.”

The small structure, ‘Haman as-Sarakh,’ was charming, with two bath sides—one for males and the other for females. Blackened posts beneath the now-missing bath floors testified to water-heating fires once stoked beneath.

The last stop Talmai had planned was a short distance ahead, before the loop turned south back toward Amman. Self-annoyance taunted Delilah; seeing sights only was incidental to gaining character *insights*. Thus, after some consideration, she asked, rhetorically, “Jordan’s luckily been free from the kind of vicious terror attacks that have happened in other countries, hasn’t it,” and followed that with, “Ever wonder what goes on in the mind of, say, a ‘suicide bomber?’”

“Don’t expect me to...” Talmai glanced at her, then back to the road. “I can’t tell what’s in another’s mind.”

“I know. It *is* impossible, isn’t it—really to comprehend what would drive someone to murder a lot of innocent people.”

He didn’t respond right away. He reached for the package of cigarettes on the dashboard, extracted one and put it between his lips. Delilah flicked her lighter and held it toward him. He bent to bring the cigarette tip to the flame.

“I’m not going to say this because I believe it is expiation,” he finally spoke. “But think!--the more one loves, the more the opposite emotion can take hold. A child is born ready *to* love—life and everyone in it. *If*, instead, it lives to learn not just that thousands of those he or

she would be first *to* love--one's own people-- have been sacrificed repeatedly to *mammon* (an Aramaic word, by the way!), and must live also to know no hope of justice—"

"Payback? Evening the debt?"

"Not even that; just pure release of hatred. Even bigger a fantasy than God, is that there can arise in the midst of all controlling, self-interested politics, *one* person noble enough.... *Ah*, haven't we enough history to know when it's time to reign in a nation?"

"Are you talking U.S.A.? *Iolationism*? Turn our backs on fellow man?"

He crushed out the barely smoked cigarette in the ashtray without taking his eyes from the road. "Much too late for that anyway. Global financing, overpopulation, demand for resources—everyone's got to be out for himself."

Delilah had her head down, eyes closed, listening.

"Those in power couldn't survive," Talmai continued, "if they empathized with all their subjects as living, breathing brethren. No one stays in power with a bleeding heart; and *that*, as history *showeth*, makes for the other type of martyr—not one who blows himself up; the one who attempts pure reason with peers, and is crucified for it."

Delilah heard the engine quieted and looked up to see they had arrived. "This is *al-Hallabat*--" Talmai turned guide again--"a Roman fort during the second century after Christ; but there's some evidence that originally it was Nabataean—peoples to the south."

Talmai stayed in the car while Delilah wandered amid the fallen rubble walls. Only one tension arch remained, the sun cutting its first lowered beam beneath. She lingered there, wondering at the arch's lasting height, and what it must have taken to erect its stones.

Talmai switched on the engine as soon as he saw her walking back toward the car. In less than an hour they would be back in Amman. “One more thing on that earlier subject,” he said, head turned as he watched backing up the car.

“Which?”

“You know history. *You* know all which well could happen before the world’s imperial dust settles this time--” he gunned the engine as the car reached the roadway—“a billion death-rattles rising to the clouds, all part of the necessary attrition.”

That word again; Delilah thought of Maxwell and for a moment wished she was with him.

She and Talmai rode the rest of the way in silence, re-arriving at the hotel earlier than she had anticipated when they set off. There was little she needed to do to ready herself for the morrow’s trip to Petra; she would be able to start a record of her assignment so far. She asked that a carafe of coffee be sent to her room, and that a supper be sent up at about eight.

It felt good to be alone. Once the coffee arrived Delilah took another shower, put on soft knit tights and tee, and brushed out her hair. Propped with pillows--cup of coffee, cigarettes, lighter, and ashtray at bedside—she took journal and pen to hand.

It took a couple of hours to compose a succinct account of Talmai’s family history and culture, his politics, and whether she thought him subject to subversive acts. A conclusion to the last item seemed obvious: *product of a safe and resourced rearing; stable in his work and income; and, although not altogether content in his reclusive nature, of the intellectual sort that witnesses from a superior distance, seeing events as taking an inescapable historical course.*

In general regionally, she noted on a separate sheet, *it's too soon to make substantive statements; but the intertwines of 'race' with 'ancestry' and 'politics' with 'religion' appear far more complicated*--at which point she was interrupted by a timid knock at her door.

Delilah looked at her watch. It couldn't be supper; it was only seven o'clock. "Just a minute," she called. She finished her note (*...than the surface indicates*); put journal and pen aside, and opened the door a crack.

Talmai...

"I hope you weren't resting?"

"Well...no. Is something wrong?"

She was familiar with his habit of looking away with a lowered voice when he was tentative about what he was about to say. He did that then. "I thought maybe...before your dinner came...you might like more conversation."

His sheepish look cornered her--*blast maternal sympathy!* "I am kind of tired, but maybe...just a little while," she said after a moment, and opened the door wider. He walked in behind her. "But I don't have another coffee cup,"

When she turned toward him again she saw his eyes quickly shift away from her form. He looked around the room. "Oh, I don't need any."

"Please, sit down," Delilah indicated the room's easy chair and propped herself back up on the bed.

It was obvious Talmai had done some conversation planning ahead of time. He sat very straight in the chair and with a nervous catch to his voice launched right in. "I don't remember if I mentioned that my grandmother said Terah may have had good cause for leaving Ur when he did, with Abraham, Sarah, and Lot."

Delilah, who had smoked enough already that day, knew also that she couldn't get by this visit without more. "How so?" she asked, lighting up.

"Seems a lot was happening in the Sumer region about the time they left—sometime around 1935 b.c., or so my grandmother said. Apparently there are some ancient monuments evidencing revolts—power conflicts and hostile takeovers between city states, probably responsible for the rise of a third dynasty of Ur."

"Hmm...interesting." Perhaps it was that Delilah smiled as if she meant it; Talmai's mood temporarily lightened and he relaxed back in the chair. He had dressed for the occasion, too. Black slacks and a smooth short-sleeved, white over-shirt with wing collar, gold chain showing beneath. She believed she knew what to expect.

Time and the Cosmic Constant, Delilah thought, Talmai looking to her for words—one and the same, a microsecond equal to the infinitive quantum, the few thousand years of recorded human history a drop in the bucket to the whole, over which time more than enough attempts have been made to capture the brevity of one existence. Now here is this young man, looking for love—

"Think of all the *women* who lived and died even before Abraham," Talmai strove to break the silence with a topic he knew was a favorite of hers. "Women never get their just due, do they?"

Delilah sneaked a look at her wristwatch—7:15; she would give him a half-hour. "I know I've shown some obsession about what women have endured, in the progression of, of... I'm not sure what to call it—"

"Civilization?"

“No...,” she crushed out her cigarette and swung her legs off the bed. “Collective humankind’s far from ‘civilized’ in my opinion. Perhaps I meant in the progress toward civilized *governance*.”

“Even could we feed all combined historical sources into one program we wouldn’t know all the real individual *friendships* there were,” Talmai offered. “Like Tamin; that’s another story you’ll like!” *He’s so innocently sweet*, Delilah thought, as he proceeded to tell it.

“Tamin originally was Christian, whatever that *meant* 1400 years ago; yet he was one of Muhammad’s closest companions and chief advisors. Toward the end of Muhammad’s life Tamin ruled Hebron. He had one child only, a daughter, but when he died the fiefdom went to his brother.”

“Typical, huh,” Delilah smiled, simultaneously remembering the Zelophehad daughters and thinking, *this boy would like to stay all night. He’s such a bright boy; but, then, isn’t it often the brightest who find themselves at sea in the world of love and sex?* “Look, Talmai,” she stood up and gave what she felt was a realistic yawn. “We’ve had a long day. I really need to get myself together and be well rested for tomorrow.” She took a few steps in the direction of the door and waited.

He looked at her a long while. She kept silent.

He stood finally and moved toward her. She put out her hand. He took and held it, then quite suddenly clasped her to him. His body quivered against hers, hard against the thinness of her clothing...

How easy it would be, to take him, Delilah thought, the mother in her knowing how swift, how merciful, the release would be to him. But the mother body did not need release. The

mother body could hold him until he quieted, move out of his embrace when he did, give a strong hug and big smile, and close the door softly behind him.

Part Four

THE EGYPTIAN

Khaled telephoned Delilah at her room early next morning.

It wasn't a surprise exactly. Talmai wouldn't be able to make the Petra drive. Some unexpected obligation Khaled said, but Delilah was not to worry. It so happened one Caleb *from* Petra had brought a tourist from there to Amman just yesterday, and Caleb would be glad to accommodate Delilah. He was another trusted friend of the hotel and also spoke perfect English.

Delilah brought her light luggage down from her room, settled the hotel account with Khaled, and had a cup of coffee in the patio. When she returned to the lobby, Caleb was sitting in one of its chairs. He rose and extended a hand as Khaled made introductions.

Caleb carried extra weight for his average height and had a fatherly look about him. The complexion was more on the brown side than Talmai's but eyes much lighter, and he sported a fine bushy moustache stranded with gray. His once dark brown hair was liberally streaked with gray also, and sparse above the forehead. Delilah took him to be in his 50's, although tiredness about the eyes made him seem older.

Delilah took fond leave of Khaled and promised to stay in touch. Caleb led her to a green 2003 Honda Civic sedan parked two doors down from the hotel and expectantly opened the street-side back door for her. He wasn't able totally to conceal surprise, when she said she would prefer riding up front; but he obediently tucked her bag off to the side away from her feet.

Delilah settled herself comfortably; south from Amman to Petra was to be another all-day

affair. She noticed that Caleb rested his haunches gingerly as he took the driver's seat, but there was not a familiarity between them yet for her to solicitously inquire why. Instead she chose to initiate small talk with a comment on the particular neatness of the car's gray interior.

"I take good care of this car," Caleb said with some pride, switching on the ignition. "It was a used car but had only 70,000 miles on it. Those 7,000 JD's turned out to be a good investment." Seven thousand JD's, Delilah calculated--around eleven thousand U.S.

"Do you have special places you wish to see on our way to Petra?" Caleb asked as they pulled from the curb.

"Khaled said I should not miss Madaba and Kerak Castle."

"Yes, both are worth seeing. First we go to Madaba, some 118 kilometers through the mountains of 'Moab'"--*about 73 miles*, Delilah's mind did the conversion; "then, a very short way west from there is the Moses memorial shrine. I think you will like seeing that also."

"Do you live at Petra?" Delilah asked.

"I live at Wadi Musa. You know?--the town at Petra."

"Does your family live there too?"

"Just my wife and myself; our two sons live at Hebron with my wife's mother and other relatives." His expression turned sad. "My sons have trouble finding work, but I am able to send some money for them."

"Your father no longer is alive?"

"Yes; I mean, no; he is not; neither my mother."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"They had some good years together," Caleb smiled then. "My father was born in Egypt. He first worked in date palm groves on the sea coast of the Sinai, around a town called Al-Arish.

The town started long ago as a Bedouin settlement, but later it became an old border town between Egypt and Palestine.

“Now,” Caleb gave a little wry laugh, “Al-Arish is a sea resort. My father was 20 years old at Al-Arish in 1956, when Egypt’s Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, took it away from Britain and France, and kept Israel from using it. When the three powers fought to recapture it and the Sinai, my father left and went to Wadi Musa and found work there. He met my mother through an old branch of the family in Hebron. They were married and she joined him in Wadi Musa. I was born the next year; he was 22 and she was 19.”

“Are any of your grandparents still living?”

“Only my mother’s mother, Grandma Huldu. She is in her 80’s now but always has been a very strong woman.”

After a brief silence, Delilah offered, “Hebron has had many difficulties, hasn’t it.”

Caleb turned a quick look, and his answer too was rhetorical. “You are familiar with the situation there.”

Indeed she was....

Hebron, the last city to fall to the 7th century a.d. Islamic invasion; never without strife for both Palestinians and Hebrews, each considering it their legitimate home--through caliphates, crusades, Ottoman pashas, British Mandate, and recent tribulent years....

“One hears news reports--it sounds sometimes as if there are two Hebrons,” Delilah let herself reply.

Caleb nodded. “It has had a difficult history--on one side of the troubles, the holiest city second only to Jerusalem; on the other, one of the four holiest. My family lives in the Palestinian sector. I worry always about them.” Creases around his eyes deepened. “One never

can be sure of their safety. But Hebrews who have relatives in Hebron's old city enclave have all the same worries...." His voice trailed off and he rubbed his eyes; Delilah wasn't sure whether wiping away tiredness or tears.

"Do you mind that I smoke cigarettes?" she asked, staying her hand as it reached toward her bag.

"Please, go ahead." He flipped open the ash tray.

"You must have an interesting personal history," she breathed out with smoke. And as she had hoped, Caleb took to reminiscing.

"I was a boy who liked to stay at table after a meal and listen to the grown-ups talk." He paused to make a safe pass on the two-lane road. "Sometimes they talked about the past, and one day I asked what it all was about." He gave a hearty laugh. "All four of my grandparents were alive then, and I didn't know what I was asking for."

"Why?"

"So you want to know family history!" my father's father said. "Well, first you must be certain to respect the fact that different peoples have different stories--understood?" I nodded; but, as I said, I didn't know what I was in for. All I could tell was that the adults were very *serious* about this 'history' matter. They had much discussion about who should tell what, and they finally agreed to let my mother's father—his name was Jalam--begin."

Delilah turned toward him, tucking her legs beneath her on the seat. The eagerness in her voice was sincere. "Tell me their stories."

Caleb shook his head and smoothed his moustaches, each one out to its tip. "It was very complicated. Does Madame really want me to?"

“Absolutely!” Delilah already had noted Caleb’s strict English usage, how he never used contractions; and she loved the way he called her ‘Madame.’

He laughed again. “All right. I shall tell you as I remember how all was told to me; but *you* must remember that you asked for it!”

Caleb adjusted his back more firmly against his the back of his seat. “To begin, Grandpa Jalam pointed around the everyone at table and said, ‘All our family histories began with a man named Ibrahim, who came to this part of the world a long, long time ago. During his life Ibrahim had three wives: one named Hagar was from Egypt, and they had a son named Ishmael, who also had many sons and sons of sons. History does not tell where another of Ibrahim’s wives, named Keturah, was born; but she and Ibrahim had a son named Midian, who also had sons who had sons who had sons. Between Hagar and Keturah was a third wife named Sarah, and her son by Ibrahim was named Isaac. Isaac took a wife named Rebekah from Aram—‘

“Aram? I interrupted Grandpa Jalam.

“‘Yes. A moment, please,’ he asked, went for and brought a map that he laid on the table. ‘Up here--Aram,’ he pointed to roughly Syria land. ‘To continue, Rebekah had two sons of Isaac, Jacob and Esau; and both of them had sons and their sons had sons and so on. By some seven hundred years after Ibrahim, sons of sons of sons were scattered all around the place.’ Grandpa showed me on the map the parts of land anciently called Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Canaan. You know those?” Caleb turned to Delilah.

She nodded, extinguishing her cigarette.... *East of the Jordan River, beginning at the north, Ammon; south from Ammon through Moab past the Dead Sea to and through Edom, ending at north Arabia; and, to the west, Canaan....*

“‘So all our history began with Ibrahim,’ I said to Grandpa. ‘Yes, Ibrahim,’ he repeated; ‘Ibrahim called the Father of Many Nations--’

“‘*Just a minute!*’ his wife, that’s my Grandma Huldu, held up her hand. She certainly was heated up!” The recollection caused Caleb to chuckle some long moments. “‘Ibrahim did not become father of many nations all by *himself!*’ she almost shouted. ‘Nor did *all the sons of sons of sons* have sons *all by themselves!*’ The other women at the table jumped in, and they *did* shout: ‘Yes, yes, yes!’

“‘*Alright*, ladies,’ Grandpa Jalam caved in. ‘I yield the floor to my wife.’

“‘Well now,’ Grandma Huldu turned to me. ‘On Grandpa Jalam’s and my side together, we could say that you are part “Nabataean,” part “Midianite,” and part “Hebrewite.”’

“‘I will explain,’ she assured me after seeing the look on my face. ‘Many groups of people--some call them “tribes”--were created from among all the different sons and sons of sons of sons.’

“‘All the ladies had made a face, shaking their heads, because of the word *tribe*. ‘You are correct,’ she acknowledged them before resuming. ‘All the *groups* who came down from Hagar and Keturah, usually all called *Ishmaelites*, were up and down the east side of the Jordan River and Salt Sea, with the Keturah groups farther south. Show him on the map, dear.’

“‘Grandpa Jalam first showed me those parts of land once called Ammon, Moab, and Edom, then moved his hand across to the south of old Canaan land and said, ‘Some of the sons of sons, *etcetera*, also were over here in ancient days.’

“‘So!--’ Grandma Huldu took it up again: “‘Nabataean people came down from Hagar’s and Abraham’s son named *Nebaioth*. They mostly made their home on Edom land as far as Petra. But as Grandpa Jalam showed, some of them also occupied south Canaan land. Now, my

mother's family was from a group of them that settled at and around old Hebron, and they joined with Grandpa Jalam's family, which began with Keturah.'

"At that point Grandma Huldu said, 'This gets very complicated!' and looked around with a pleading raise of eyebrows. When the other ladies just put on little smiles, she dived back in. 'Sarah's grandson Esau married the daughter of a man from the mountains between the Dead Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. See...here on the map. Her name was Oholibama. Oholibama and Sarah's grandson Esau had a son named—guess what?—*Jalam*.' Grandma Huldu then turned with obvious great relief to Grandma Photini, my father's mother. 'Your turn!'

"Wait!' Grandpa Jalam interjected. 'You forgot to tell Caleb that both Oholibamah and my ancestor, *Jalam*, were chiefs!'

"I bow to you, *Chief* Jalam,' Grandma Huldu said, lowering her head, 'if you will allow me to emphasize that *Chief* Oholibama was a *woman*.' Naturally the other women applauded.

"Grandma Photini then leaned toward me, sitting across from her." There, Caleb had to laugh again. "I remember how she heaved her ample bosom onto the table top. '*This* grandfather's side'--she put her arm around her husband, my father's father, Jethro, who was sitting near her--'also goes back to Sarah's grandson Esau and *another* wife of his, named Basemath, who was in the line of Hagar's Ishmael. *They* had a son named Reuel—"

"Don't forget!' her husband held up his hand. 'Reuel also was called Jethro!'

"Yes, dear,' she said sweetly, 'Reuel *Jethro*. Somewhere before, in the line of sons of sons, Reuel Jethro's family had joined with a group that came from the son of Keturah and Ibrahim named Midian, living in south Edom. As a matter of fact, Reuel Jethro was the name of a High Priest, a *Kohen*, of Midian. Later in time, some of your papa's relatives went to Egypt,

where Grandpa Jethro was born. So there you are.’ Grandma Photini preened a bit and straightened her formidable torso on her chair.

“‘*Uffff*--’ Grandpa Jethro leaned back on his. ‘I’m surprised we also didn’t need to hear about Adah and Judith.’

“‘Oh don’t pay attention to him,’ Grandma Photini nudged me with a smile. ‘Those were other Esau wives. You’ll *note*,’ she gave a sharp tilt of head toward him, ‘I *also* didn’t go into how Moses married Kohen Reuel Jethro’s daughter, Zipporah; how they had two sons, and how Moses lived 40 years in Midian before going back to Egypt to lead the big emigration back to Canaan land.’”

Caleb paused in his tale. With a small grimace he pulled in his paunch a bit to re-straighten his back. Delilah, having noticed no road signs, realized she had no idea how far along the road they had traveled; they had to have gone 50 miles at least.

“Let me say,” Caleb picked up, “I did not comprehend why it seemed to me they found the history amusing; but then I did not understand irony and already had been told *far* more than interested me then.”

“Yet you remember so much of it so well.”

“That is because of my later studies, when I was able to relate to what I had been told.”

“But you were schooled in Muslimism,” Delilah posited a rhetorical lead again.

“I was taught it, yes; but it was left to me as to how I wished to practice. My wish had been to be a scholar and I did well in my studies, until it became necessary for me to earn income for the family. My father, his name was Akhom, had a copy of the Hebrew testament; and I think he knew as much from it as he did know from the *Qu’ran*; and all the family were very

civil. They always stressed that institutional practices were second to behaving by the fundamental beliefs of every good religion.”

“Finish your story.”

“Oh. Well, finally my father jumped up and said, ‘My turn.’

“‘Oh, now let us hear words from my son, the Eagle!’ Grandma Photini exclaimed with a wink and smile to the others. *Eagle*, you see, was the meaning of his name. Well, the ‘Eagle,’ gave no attention to the laughter that went around the table and just spoke over it. ‘My family counts a High Priest’s daughter in *its* history,’ he proclaimed. ‘This, Caleb, is how *that* happened.

“‘While Sarah and Ibrahim’s other grandson, Jacob, was occupying old Canaan land with all of his clans, one of his sons named Joseph was sold as a slave to Egypt by a couple of jealous brothers. Joseph was the son of a Jacob wife named Rachel, from Aram. She was the great-granddaughter of Ibrahim’s brother Nahor and Milcah, who was the daughter of Ibrahim’s other brother, Haran.

“‘Now Joseph was very smart. He rose to be a very important person in the government of Egypt’s pharaoh, and he married Asenath, daughter of a High Priest. They had two sons, named Ephraim and Manasseh. Later, when a bad drought came to Canaan lands, Joseph helped all of Sarah’s great-grandson families move down to the north part of Egypt, where they lived and grew in size for many, many years. But a time came when a new pharaoh, having war and money troubles, needed more soldiers and taxes, and made the people’s lives very hard. So their relative, Moses, who had rebelled and left Egypt to escape the old pharaoh, organized a big move back to Canaan lands—‘

“Grandma Photini interrupted. ‘Now don’t *you* go off on all those details about Korah or Hezron and Azubah and Chelubai--’

“My father rolled his eyes. ‘*May* I tell Caleb how, when they all were back on Canaan lands, the great-grandson tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh settled on this part here.’ He took the map and showed me roughly Samaria, west of the River and a part on the east of it too. ‘That is where my people lived as far back as they could remember, the family story being that we go back to the group of Manasseh.’

“So there you are,” Caleb turned to Delilah with a moustache-lifted smile—“my family history.”

“Wait a minute.” Delilah frowned in thought. “What about your mother? Wasn’t she there?”

“Yes...she was there but...well...she was a very quiet person. She kept busy tending to the clearing table, which the other ladies were happy to let her do. But she was bright, perhaps brightest of them all. The next day, fixing my lunch, she said to me, ‘History is all very interesting, Caleb. But it serves humankind no purpose unless, in reviewing it, we come to understand that all common people *in* the Past suffered in their own way to the same degree; and what we need to concentrate on now is to work hard to end suffering in the Present’.... *What a woman she was.*”

Then the loving expression on Caleb’s face surprisingly changed to one of sadness, which Delilah could not help responding to. “What is it, Caleb?”

He shook his head. “I just thought of how sad she would be, if she knew about her grandson.”

“One of your sons?”

“Yes.”

“What is the problem?”

“*Yo Allah,*” Caleb heaved a sigh. “He had very good friend, a Hebrew. They played ball together; they were like brothers themselves. Then, in one of the stupid outbreaks of violence, his friend was shot and killed. He has not been the same since. My worse worry is that he afterward made acquaintance with a group of ‘activists.’ He feels hatred, but it is very confused.” Caleb stopped; he was uncertain whether to go on. It was difficult for him. “There is a man in Jerusalem with whom I believe my son’s group has contact. His reputation is not good.”

The car came to a stop at the same time as Caleb’s words. Delilah had been so absorbed she failed to note that they had reached Madaba....

“Madaba, the ‘City of Mosaics’!” Caleb swept his hand around him as they approached the Greek Orthodox Basilica of Saint George. “Madaba, once a Moab border city, has a history reaching back before the Bronze Age. Under the Romans it was part of their ‘Provincia Arabia’ that replaced the Nabataean kingdom. Later it fell to an Islamic caliphate; but for centuries—as far back as 451 a.d.--it has had a Christian community.”

Delilah now was certain that Caleb was not a well man. His eagerness to fulfill her interests, such as now as they walked, put him somewhat out of breath; but he continued, nonetheless. “Serious archaeological research began in the late 1800’s. Matter of fact,” he huffed a smile at her,” it was by two Italian priests from Jerusalem. They led a group of Arab Christian families from Kerak, who settled at the ruins.”

“Why is this named Saint George?” Delilah asked as they started up the basilica steps.

“You have not heard of Saint George?—‘Saint George and the Dragon?’” Caleb paused on a step, ostensibly to answer, although Delilah believed to ease his breathing.

“No.”

“A saint both for Christians and Muslimists; traditionally he is said to have been a Roman conscript from ‘Syria Palaestina’ who became a martyr. On the Islamic side, it is said that he had believing contact with Jesus’ last disciples. The dragon legend got attached in late Middle Ages. Supposedly Saint George harnessed a dragon that lived in a pond--at a place, I think, in Libya—where the people regularly fed daughters to it as brides. When the people agreed to convert to his faith, he killed the dragon.”

Oh, yes, I’m remembering some of this, Delilah thought. ‘Ascalon,’ the name of Saint George’s sword; the name Churchill used for his personal plane during World War II.

Caleb stood aside for Delilah to enter. “Another version puts Saint George in Palestine, where a dragon supposedly was controlled by the Devil, blocked the water supply, and was given a number of virgin sacrifices [*always, virgins!*]. Saint George arrived just in time to save the last daughter, driving his spear between the dragon’s eyes.”

They hush the church seemed dictated by its’ icons, paintings, crystal chandeliers, and gold-haloed Jesus in the vaunting nave. A mosaic map, parts of its missing, was cordoned on the church floor. Unearthed in 1884, it was claimed to be the most detailed and oldest preserved map of the lands east and west of the River Jordan, from the desert to the Mediterranean and from Lebanon to Egypt.

Afterward, Caleb gave Delilah a short tour of the town and its’ Archaeological Park. By 10 a.m.—it already was *hot!*--they were again side by side in the car, seven or so miles northwest to Mount Nebo. Despite the heated air, Delilah lit a cigarette. “I would have liked knowing your

mother.”

Caleb turned on the air conditioner and rolled his window up, nodding to Delilah to do the same. “I admit she was my favorite. She brought the subject up again in her gentle way the next day, saying, ‘You were very good to listen to all those stories the other night.’” That caused me to ask who was mother of *her* nation.

“‘Well that depends on what is meant by the word, *nation*,’” she replied, opening a napkin across my lap. “It can mean land that’s inside certain borders and under certain rulers or governments—like here, now, we live in the “nation” of Jordan. But borders around lands are not the same anywhere as before, changed often over time by different conquerors. Many times, groups who were part of what was to them their land or “nation” were, and still are divided by borders made by rulers; but they still did and do feel part of their older “nation” and its’ villages, often with relatives on the other side. Then,’ she pulled a chair next to me, ‘there can be a “nation of *spirit*”—people who live inside different borders, but connected by families of the same beliefs about God and life.’”

Caleb hunched over the wheel to ease his spine. “Of course it was some time later that I came truly to understand what she said. I should say, how complicated it *is*, just in labels alone-- how anyone that speaks an Arabian language *dialect* is *called* ‘Arabian.’ Egypt, for example, where the dialect *Masri* is spoken, has been trying to distinguish its’ people as *Egyptians*, not ‘Arabs.’

“I didn’t want to ask directly but I did ask, ‘Is that why some people are called ‘Palestinian?’ Mother pressed her lips together a moment and then nicely changed the subject. ‘Do you know who you are named after?’

“I was surprised and shook my head. I had no idea I had been named after someone. ‘Remember the part when your papa talked about Moses leading the people out of Egypt to Canaan land?’ I nodded. ‘Well, there was a very important man joined with Moses. That man was a leader in Moses’ army as the people made their way. Moses promised that, because of the man’s help, Hebron would belong to him and his family for all time.’

“‘And did he get it?’ I asked.

“‘Yes, after the emigrants had reached Shiloh. A man named Joshua was leading the people after Moses was dead, and he kept the promise.’

“‘And the man was named Caleb?’

“‘Yes!--except back then the word was *Chelubai*. Chelubai or Caleb, he must have been quite a man. It’s said that he taught the people who followed Moses how to use the bow and arrow. He married the wife of another important leader, Hezron, after Hezon died. Her name was *Azubah*. He also married other women; many of their sons became important leaders.’

“My next question obviously gave mother a problem: ‘Was Chelubai an Egyptian?’

“‘For *Allah’s* sake’—she used the term sacredly; ‘no one knows, really, because we don’t know who his *mother* was.’”

Caleb readjusted his back against the driver’s seat. “I learned later that an old scripture not accepted suggests that Caleb was from Canaan. Lastly I asked her, ‘Does Caleb’s family still rule in Hebron?’

“‘No, dear,’ she answered, but did not explain further. She only smiled that kind of a smile with a little movement of the head, that says, there is too much more we do not need to talk about.”

Had it been that, Delilah wondered, *at the core of Arafat's obstinence?*—but Caleb stopped the speculation. “You know about Abraham’s wife, Hagar?” He lifted himself up off the seat to extract a large white handkerchief from his trouser pocket, and wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead.

“Yes, I know about Hagar.”

“She is believed mentioned obliquely in the Qu’ran but is directly in the *hadiths*. You know about the *hadiths*?”

The mention caused Delilah a twinge of guilt, remembering Talmai. “Only that they are scholarly writings, and that not every Islamist accepts them all.”

Caleb nodded. “Well, Islam’s scriptures tell that Hagar meant to return to Egypt after she and Ishmael were dismissed by Ibrahim; but she lost her way, wandered around a while, and then settled in a part of the desert called *Faran*—in the Hebrew tongue, *Paran*. It ran roughly from the center of the Sinai up to the northeast part.”

‘Hagar’...meaning “stranger”--Sarah’s Egyptian ‘handmaiden,’ Delilah thought, then said, “The Hebrew bible says that Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham so he could have a child, because Sarah hadn’t been able to, up to that point. It also tells that Hagar gave birth to Abraham’s Ishmael 14 years before Sarah had Isaac.”

Caleb gripped the top of the steering wheel with both hands and once again adjusted his back. “Does it say how old Sarah was, when she left Ur with Abraham?”

“No..,” Delilah was startled to be given *that* conjecture!—“No, it doesn’t.”

“Islam has two Hagar stories. One is that an Egyptian pharaoh named Dhu l-‘arsh took her after he killed her father, the King of Maghrib—“

“Maghrib?”

“The west part of North Africa. *Maghrib* is Arabic for ‘west,’ it originally was Berber country—“

“Berber?”

“Roughly today’s Morocco, Western Sahara, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania. Before the Islamic conquest the Berber kingdom was somewhat independent; Saint Augustine of Hippo was a Berber. A lot of Berber-speaking people call themselves a word that means ‘noble’ or ‘free men.’ Most now live in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Mali, and Niger. A ‘Maghrib Union’ was formed back in 1989, which al-Gaddafi—ignoring the many North Africans of Berber identity--looked to becoming an Arabian superstate. Since then, border tensions between Algeria and Morocco over the Western Sahara put a halt on that.

“But back to the first version of Hagar’s story. It says that pharaoh made her mistress over his female slaves; then he converted to Ibrahimism and gave Hagar to Sarah.”

“And the second story?”

Caleb squinted watery eyes against the road glare. Delilah wondered again why he didn’t wear sunglasses. “The second tradition says Hagar was the *daughter* of the Egyptian king, and that he gave her to Abraham as a wife because he thought Sarah was Abraham’s sister.”

No point bringing up the Old Testament parallel there, Delilah thought--especially not, the part about Sarah being Abraham’s half-sister. Nor did she mention Paul’s allegorical use of Hagar in the New Testament, distinguishing the bloodline of the “bondmaid”--“the slave”-- from the Sarah’s, the “free” woman’s legitimacy. Curious, there, Delilah mused, the contrast of Jesus, who eschewed the stand that he could have made, as to his God-sanctioned, maternally-bestowed high priesthood and royal legitimacy—

Nor did Augustine help matters!-- along with Aquinas and Wycliff, and all the later Christian 'new law' hermeneutics--Augustine's symbolizing Hagar as humankind's earthly, sinful condition (the flesh, you know!); and per Aquinas, the carnal, the exiled unredeemed....

“Muslims honor Hagar for her motherhood,” Caleb continued after a short quiet. “When they perform their *hajj*, the pilgrimage at Mecca, they pass seven times between two hills known as *al-Safa* and *al-Marwah* in memory of Hagar’s search for water, when she and Ishmael were thirsting to death. Hajj Pilgrims drink from a well which, it is claimed, God created specifically to save Hagar and Ishmael. Water from *Zamram*--the well in the Wadi Ibrahim, near the Ka’aba at Mecca--has a distinct taste and is believed to benefit body and spirit.

“The well has sat under a marble dome for many centuries, but so many pilgrims would go to it that the water has been pumped instead to an east part of the mosque. Saudi law prevents commercial exports. However,” Caleb laughed ruefully, “I hear there are counterfeit markets in other countries.”

The Moses memorial perched on the precipice of a spectacular plateau. On a clear day such as they had, one could see as far as the Dead Sea in one direction and Jerusalem’s spires in the other. Ruins of an ancient church and monastery were excavated in the 1930’s by Franciscans, who bought the site, and a new edifice eventually was built. “But the ancient church and monastery here,” Caleb continued to inform Delilah, “was mentioned by a Roman nun named Etheria more than 600 years ago.”

Sixth century Byzantine mosaics inside the present church were splendidly patterned intricacies. Near the altar, beyond the original stone and mosaic slab flooring, a catholic mass was in progress for a tourist group. Delilah was startled to hear *New Testament* liturgy....

Their stay at the memorial, the church and the view, was short. Back through Madaba, headed south, the two-lane road was lined with pines like those seen on the Jerash trip--trees that in Delilah's home region would be considered sparse and dry; here, revered as lush growth. Indeed, Caleb pointed to them with a happy sigh and said, "*Forest!--nice!*"

Oh, Caleb, Delilah thought, how I would love to take you to see a real forest....

The Petra trip's timing made it necessary that Delilah accept another sacrifice. She agreed that it would be best to not take the side road that led to the fortress *Qalat al-Mishnaqa*, better known as Mekawer or Machaerus. She recalled Josephus' description--*at a great height on a very rocky hill; valley ditches on all sides so deep the eye could not reach their bottoms....* It had been at Machaerus that Herod Antipas had imprisoned and murdered John the Baptist. Perhaps that, and remembering young Salome, explained Delilah's only mild reluctance not to visit the site.

Soon after, coming down a hill she had her first glimpse of the Dead Sea. In some places its 'oriental turquoise' stretched along the roadway not more than 10 or 12 feet below. She recalled another Josephus description, how Romans enjoyed throwing a man into the sea with hands and feet bound, to see the spectacle of the salt sea's extreme buoyancy.

Caleb turned left toward bordering bare mountains, passing Bedouin tents; donkeys padded along the roadway. The mountains were fierce in their barrenness; Delilah knew no way to describe the landscape. *What determination there had to have been, she thought, to build a fortress on any of it.*

Another turn, down another hill, and they reached the motionless expanse of the sea. Across it, yellow-white "sand rain" hazed desolate cliffs. Caleb pulled off the road. "Come," he admonished. "You can put in your feet." At a deserted beach Delilah did just that, taking a

photo of her feet cooling in the lapping water at the sea's edge.

Back in the car, as Caleb had done at regular intervals, he began to “sing,” Delilah concluding it was his form of prayer. This time, in the middle of it, he stifled a big yawn. “Look!” he pointed afterward, “Banana plantation.”

Not having had breakfast, Delilah murmured, “Wouldn’t I love having a banana right now.” But she was confident Allah would will her to eat when it was time, although the very necessary bottled water supply was getting low.

Their next stop along the “King’s Highway” would be *al-Karak*—commonly, *Kerak*; but found in the Bible as *Kir, Kir Moab, or Kir Heres*; in biblical times, a town on the trade caravan route between Egypt and Syria. Kerak gained prominence in the first half of the 12th century a.d., when Crusader King Baldwin I of Jerusalem had the castle fortress built, one of a long line of Crusader forts at strategic sites from Turkey down to the Gulf of Aqaba. In 1188 a.d. Fort al-Kerak fell to *Salah ad-Din*, a strict Sunni Muslim; founder of the Ayyubid dynasty; and leader of regional opposition to the Christian Franks and other Crusaders. His Sultanate ultimately included Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, the Hejza, and Yemen.

Delilah distracted her hunger with recall of the tale of Renauld de Chatillon, governor of Fort al-Kerak before it fell and later killed by Saladin. Reportedly, de Chatillon had the swell habit of throwing his enemies over the battlements of the castle, first putting a wooden box over their heads so they didn’t lose consciousness before hitting the valley below. On the other hand, de Chatillon had reaped enduring neutral respect from his foes, including Richard the Lionheart, for chivalry and generosity.

The car’s 1000-meter climb up to Kerak castle was immediate. Despite the good condition of Caleb’s Honda civic, its engine begged once or twice for mercy. “It’s okay,” Caleb

didn't reassure Delilah, exactly: "It is coming *down* that's dangerous...*yo Allah!*"

Kerak...ancient capital of the Moabite kingdom; later seat of a Byzantine bishopric but mainly known for its Crusader fort. Caleb chose to wait in the car--hoping, Delilah believed, for a short nap—while she explored.

She avoided the smartly-dressed young English-speaking guide at the gate but was a sucker for the Bedouin haunting the place inside. An old man with watery, glassy green-grey eyes, he said nothing, merely pointed and mimicked. He showed her a torso in the rock, an obscure staircase to the fortress top, and hand-hewn stone balls still resting beside the ramparts, over which defenders threw them on their enemies. Delilah, doubting her photographs would do *al-Kerak's* incredible construction justice, gave the Bedouin five dinars.

Lunch, bought off a street stand in town and savored in the car, never was more welcomed--bananas and fresh flat bread that tasted like pizza crust. Caleb gave Delilah its Arabic name, of which she then gave him a fair guttural echo but would not remember it. "How far have we come toward Petra?" she asked when Caleb again switched on the engine.

"About two-thirds of our way."

Red dirt, some agriculture on small parcels, the ubiquitous stone houses, then bare land again; a herd of sheep; wind tearing through the car's open windows--Delilah felt a new ease in herself, as if she were being psychologically reincarnated, a smothering of self-defeating constellations in her Private Unconscious. She had been granted this chance, riding alongside Caleb, his arms riveting sweat and her breasts again gluing to her ribs, as the open car windows swished hot air from a 360-degree shimmering colorlessness.

Village of Tafila coming up--more like a small city; olive and fruit tree groves now, but no English signs. Coming out of stark mountains and desert into a bustling city was a novel

experience for Delilah, which perhaps would not be, for an Arizonan or New Mexican. “Is this a Palestinian village?” She asked.

“No,” Caleb replied, “Jordanian Bedouin.”

“I don’t think I *ever* will get Middle East ethnicities straight!” Delilah blurted.

“Do not feel bad, Madame. The entire ‘race’ issue is skewed--that business about avoiding the word, even. With the constant watering-down of races over time, all we are left with is *ethnicity*; and where does the line—or, should I say, where do the *shades* between them fall?”

Caleb stopped the car and went somewhere without explanation. He came back with things wrapped in paper.

“Oh, Caleb--*not* more food!” Delilah exclaimed.

“Not *food*--sweets!” he replied--*halubh/hallub?*—and placed the wrapped items between them on the console: deep-fried rings, crispy on the outside and soft insides that looked like a slightly lumpy flower mixture dripping sugary oil. “Have another!” Caleb commanded, using one of Delilah’s wipes on his bushy moustache. “I buy two for Madame and three for me.”

At this rate, Delilah thought, I won’t need dinner....

Such a mix along the road: an old man walking with his loaded donkey; the houses, a great number of them large and ornate in the Arabic tradition; wide in-between spaces and no fences; grazing goats; and, amidst the scrub brush, Bedouin-garbed people; stone walls and rocks, rocks, rocks. Beyond gorges, the landscape receded in a pastel-tinted sun-haze that made one think one’s eyeglasses needed cleaning.

Caleb began ‘singing’ again, and Delilah was aware of thoughts of a nice cool room, no clothing, and a good cup of coffee. It was time for a ‘clean-up.’ She rolled up the window so as

to give a combing to her hair, taking it down from its pins, barrette, and bandeau. Catching a glimpse of her hair in the right-hand rear-view mirror, it appeared the sun in streaks was bleaching it whiter once and for all. It took but a couple of minutes to comb; but as she retied the bandeau at the nape of her neck, she almost prayed to some god to make her fingers do it quicker, so she could get the window back down before she expired. *Any middle-aged lady who thinks she's getting incontinent ought to come to the mid-east, she thought. Almost a quart of water today, and I've peed only once....*

For the second time that day the car was stopped by soldiers, followed by a lot of loud talking and worrisome gesturing. Nearby vendors, knowing Caleb from frequent tourist trips, came over in support. Soon everyone joined in hand-shakings and smiles. When the car came back around to the road, one of the officers gave Delilah a big wave and with a wide white-toothed smile called out, "Welcome!"

"They need to make their quota of stops; that's all," Caleb supplied as he drove away.

It was getting late. Another but less difficult decision was to skip the 12th century castle at *Qasr al-Shawbak*; Delilah wanted to conserve some energy for getting settled at Petra. Near Shobak they passed the largest amount of green seen yet, a little lowland otherwise surrounded by the familiar dun-colored rocky landscape and low hills to the west. "Apple trees," Caleb said, pointing to small groves climbing a terraced hill. The four p.m. sun was creating a sharp shadow-orchard on grassless ground between the rows of slender trees, and Delilah thought of the luxurious green growth amid her sister's Oregon apple orchard.

Caleb stopped for gasoline in Wadi Musa and then drove Delilah to a small, family-owned hotel, a short climb from near the gate of the ancient Nabataean city of Petra. She was grateful to retire to her room a spell, get settled, and have a short rest.

Caleb, who had suggested a drive afterward for a view from the low ridge above Wadi Musa, returned before sundown. Beyond the small town below, desert mountains that ran to the horizon looked incapable of access. “See that narrow shadow, way down there,” Caleb pointed. “That’s the ‘siq’, the entrance to ancient Petra.” Delilah nodded, but there were so many shadows among deep cliff ridges she wasn’t certain she saw the right one. “Across there,” Caleb pointed again--this time to the topmost mount in the distance--“is Jabal Harun, or as you would say, Mount of Aaron. There is a mosque there.” This time Delilah did see the setting sun’s shine off the mosque’s dome. *Was that also not Mount Hor: as the Old Testament says, “on the edge of Edom”?* *Are Aaron’s bones really there?* She wondered.

When they returned to the hotel, its owner’s nephews were gathered on the front patio, using heated coals to light an *aghillah*, a tall ornate water pipe used to smoke flavored tobaccos. Delilah was treated to a couple of mild strawberry puffs, the tobacco’s fragrance softening the sharp crystal air.

Next morning Delilah and Caleb were at the Petra site when it opened, sunlight not yet reaching its gate. A short walk later they entered the *siq*, the dark passageway leading between cliffs into the Nabataean stronghold of long ago. Only a narrow shaft of blue sky showed high above. Along one side of the passage, cut into the rock, was a trough that once carried water to the site. Then, as they emerged from the *siq*, there *it* was: the *Khaznah*, the ancient “treasury” temple carved into pink cliff rock. “*Raiders of the Lost Ark*” *didn’t do it justice!* Delilah reacted.

Six columns flanked the *Khaznah*’s high portico, beside which were ornate niches from which statues long had gone. It was beyond imagining, the hand-hewing into cliff rock that

created the structure's façade and the large, high-ceilinged interior room which they entered. Delilah envisioned noble leaders in colorful long garb sitting along the benches carved at the room's sides.

When they emerged and descended the few steps to broken flagstones of what once had been the Khaznah's front plaza, it took Delilah's eyes a moment to adjust to the sunlight that now reached tufts of grass amid the stones. Caleb turned her to the right around the edifice, where he had spied an elderly guide with two tethered donkeys.

After what definitely appeared to Delilah as negotiations, Caleb took her hand and led her to one of the donkeys. "You have an even greater treat in store, Madame," he assured her, when she saw he meant to help her onto one of the animals. "We are going up to Petra's 'high place,' also known as 'the monastery.'" The guide, in his red and white checkered headdress, took the lead in sandaled feet, as Delilah's and Caleb's donkeys began an upward climb along narrow rock 'stairs' circling the Khaznah's rising cliff.

"Eight hundred of these stairs," Caleb, his donkey following the guide, called back-- "more than two thousand years old!" The donkeys, so often had they done the climb, clopped along casually, the guide equally heedless of the straight drop into gorges below.

The flat cliff top, when finally they turned onto it, could have been the top of the world. The carved edifice there more than rivaled the Khasnah--taller than the treasury and, unlike it, the monastery's pink-hued spires were carved free from the cliff to touch the sky. Its doorway stood several stories tall, columns flanking large urns on the façade top. Inside its' large interior room, a double staircase led to an upper niche resembling a pulpit.

"This building may have been a temple dedicated to Obodas I," Caleb informed Delilah. "He was a Nabataean king of the first century b.c."

They sat afterward at the edge of the monastery's front plaza. Other visitors had arrived, having made the climb on foot--red-faced and borne down by backpacks. Delilah was fiercely happy that she had not needed to prove her stamina; the 15 *dinar* donkey ride—about \$22.50 U.S.—had been triply worth the price.

Their guide—an affable, dark-skinned, English-speaking Bedouin named Siel--sat with them as they observed the newcomers. “One tourist who climbed by foot last month had a heart attack and died here,” he told them. Delilah knew that many tourists took one-day trips to Petra out of Amman...*the hot drive down, the impossible breadth of the site*—it was a wonder there weren't more cardiacs; *but not a bad place to say farewell to life*, she thought, although she doubted the man ever considered his cortege would be on a donkey.

“Now you be nice to ‘Jack’,” Siel teased Delilah, Caleb interpreting as he helped her back onto her donkey for the descent. As ‘Jack’ clopped downward she couldn't keep from looking to her left, down deep to the gorge and then up and out to the mountainous vista beyond. Pushing her feet hard on the stirrups to keep from sliding sideways on the rough camel-hair saddle, she thought of how donkey travel had been a way of life in Jesus' time. *No wonder his mother went into labor!*

Back at the main tourist area a barbecue pit in the restaurant patio just was heating up for lunch. Caleb suggested a tour of the adjacent museum while they waited.

Delilah found no brochures about the museum contents, while there was much to see. Some items caused her to pause long before them: a small bronze bust of curly-haired, long-bearded Nabataean deity Dhu-Shara, “Lord of the Mountain,” from Petra's Temple of Winged Lions; ancient coins, one a silver of Trajan, 98-117 a.d.; and a first century a.d., 12-foot-square slab of mosaic floor from a Nabataean villa in Wadi Musa, uniquely incorporating four colors of

stones.

A tiny cuneiform tablet, inscribed “Contract between two Aramaeans and an Edomite, first year of Darius,” recalled political intrigue that followed Cyrus the Great’s death.

Unquentaria, small slender jug-shaped vials for scented oils, put her in mind of The Magdalene, while clay figurines of mother-goddess Astarte seemed so innocuous, compared to the big deal made in Scripture about Ashtoreth worship. What were the words the exiles spoke to Jeremiah, when he led a contingent into Egypt for refuge after Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem?—

“But certainly we will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and pour out to her drink offerings, as we have done--we and our fathers, our kings, and our princes; and we had plenty of bread, and were well, and evil did not see. And from then that we stopped burning incense to the queen of heaven, we have lacked all, and by the sword, and by the famine, have been devoured”

Delilah paused longest before a 6th-century b.c. female statuette, identified as possibly al-‘Uzza-Aphrodite. Nearby was an *ostraca*--a small clay tablet, from an unknown Temple of Uzza--indicating a tax-exempt structure in the ancient Hebron region. The name, “Uzza,” stayed with Delilah, as she and Caleb exited the museum. She recalled that the name appeared after the Babylonian conquest, in confusingly irresolvable *Old Testament* Benjamin-Manasseh genealogies—

And weren’t kings Manasseh and Amon buried in a garden of Uzza? And then there were “Ahihud”--called “brother of mystery,” brother of Benjamin Uzza--and Uzza, son of Abinadab, with whom the Ark had rested two decades, and who died at an unknown threshing floor during the Ark’s retrieval by King David....

Caleb’s stomach rumbled as they finally took seats at a white-clothed dining table in the

patio restaurant adjacent to the museum. Meanwhile, a tour group of 150 chattering Italians was settling at tables nearby. A waiter appeared to take their drink orders. “You know,” he whispered, with a smile and a gesture indicating ‘motor-mouthed’, “Italians are like Arabs, and both of them are like Spaniards.” Amused, Delilah wondered what *she* looked like—an ‘American?’ *How convoluted, the meaning of ‘race’, she thought, inexorably obfuscated by labels and religions.*

“Three different *monotheisms*--Islamism, Hebrewism, Christianity—seems to me an oxymoron of the highest degree,” she voiced the last of her thought’s sequence. “Since each insists there’s but *one* God, He would need to be the same! And look at how similar their prophets are--descendants of Abraham, members of tribal societies, philosophers and reformers—all *subjective* differences coming *after*—“

“And all of it modified interpretedly via minds, words, and hands of *later* men?” Caleb shook his head at the incongruities.

“And *I* will add,” Delilah couldn’t resist, “*each* originally of a culture where *mother blood* was held the absolute determinant of legitimate lineage; yet, how *few* ensuing mothers are known. ”

“Many similarities, yes; but a couple of major *dif-fer-en-ces*,” Caleb half-sang.

“You mean patriarchally: Jesus being descended Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, and Muhammad, Abraham through Ishmael--”

“No!” Caleb exclaimed, “you are missing your own point, Madame: Jesus from *Elisheba* and *Sarah*; Muhammad from *Hagar* and *Keturah*. Poor Abraham!” he muttered softly off to the side,--“such a hard time of it he must have had,” to which Delilah gave a small giggle. Never, in

all her private speculating, had she imagined *domestic* scenes where Abraham and his harem were concerned. But she *had* been intrigued by the puzzle around Moses' mother....

Moses was held a son of Levi's daughter Jochebad, who had been born in Egypt (her mother unnamed); but *Exodus* didn't state *literally* the name of Moses' mother--only that Jochebad was taken to wife by Amram (referred to variously as Jochebad's nephew, cousin, or kin and could have been all three, given ancient intergenerational marriages); and that Jochebad "bore to" Amram, Aaron and Moses. Scriptural use of the words, *bore to* ("brought to?"), often could be unclear, however.

"I am sorry you are staying so short a time," Caleb interrupted Delilah's stream of consciousness. "If you had more time we could visit a Bedouin family I know, living in a cave. It is only 25 minutes from here."

"Living in a cave?"

"Like Bedouin did for centuries, in and all around Petra--descendents of desert-dwelling nomadic Bedouin over most of the desert belt, Sinai and Negev to the Arabian desert. There are dozens of clans; I think no one knows the actual number. Bedouins began transition under British rule in the late 1800's; but not until the 1950's and '60's did a large number begin settling in cities. Not very long ago, cave dwelling here was restricted by the government to a farther radius from Petra. The government has built houses for Bedouin, except many still prefer tents."

"Yes!--I noticed that on the trip down; residents keeping their small herds around a house *and* tent."

"The word for a family tent unit is *bayt*, usually a handful of grown-ups; one or two married couples with their children, their siblings and their parents. Several tents traveling together is called a *goum*."

“I’m reminded...,” Delilah sighed toward the chattering Italians and raised her voice a bit. “I’m reminded of how England’s military officer, T. E. Lawrence, recruited and melded a Bedouin force that was critical to the British campaign during World War I—tribe names like *Beni Sakher* and *al-Howaitat*—“

“You still can find them in the Jordan region. *Ah, Orrance!*” Caleb looked upward, his expression almost beatific. “How his love for his ‘adopted’ region won over the Bedouin irregulars, to British operations against the Ottoman alliance with Germany. But how sad,” he looked back at Delilah, “the disillusion...Feisel’s ultimate loss--”

“Just another instance of how differently things might have gone?” Delilah strained for an adequate reply--“but for the inevitable dross, at the end of a forge between established powers and the trust of newly-lifted?” Caleb made no response. *Best to leave the subject*, she thought, and said instead, “I am sorry I won’t be able to visit your friends; but tell me more about Nabataea, and your relation to it.”

Caleb hesitated. Some doubt about this woman wanted to surface but it was smothered by self-esteem. He assumed a lifted position on his chair, feeling like the teacher that as a boy he had wished to become. “History gave the name, ‘Nabataean,’ to a Semitic dynasty that began with a king Aretas the First, in the century before Christ.” Delilah was impressed by Caleb’s use of Semite in its strict sense; not, as often used specifically for descendants of Noah’s son, Shem: groups of peoples of southwest Asia, chiefly Hebrews and Arabians but, in ancient history terms, also Babylonians, Assyrians, Aramaeans, Canaanites, and Phoenicians....

The waiter arrived with their drinks, coffee for Delilah and tea for Caleb, who then resumed talking. “The pastoral Bedouin of the Negev and Sinai—Semitic tribes of south Canaan, south Jordan and into north Arabia—go far back in time. It was not until the first

century a.d., that the name, *Nabatene*, came to be used for the land bordered by Syria and Arabia, east of the Jordan River from the Euphrates to the Red Sea.”

And it was Josephus known as first using the term, Nabatene, Delilah thought, as Caleb sipped his tea.

“Scholars probably would have more to say on all of that,” Caleb added. “I was taught that the region originally was called *Reqem*—“

“How’s that spelled?”

“Reqem?”

“Yes.”

“R-e-q-e-m.”

Delilah raised unfocused eyes to the distance and said softly, “Now *that’s* interesting.”

“Why?” Caleb picked up on her words.

“Oh,” she turned toward him. “Well..,” she paused; was it explaining too much? “In the *Old Testament* there’s a word transliterated ‘r-e-k-e-m.’” *As a matter of fact, all the way back to Moses*, Delilah refrained from adding. Instead she took a long drink of coffee, grateful Caleb didn’t ask her to elaborate. ‘Cover’ as a candidate in Mid-East studies might justify substantive regional knowledge, but prudence dictated silence on suggesting possible interrelationships odious to one side or the other. She toyed with her teaspoon....*Rekem, one of the Midianite kings...*

Moses, who, as a commander of Egyptian forces (they undoubtedly being enslaved Hebrews) had led pharaonic battles in Ethiopia, before he later fled Egypt after causing a ruckus in Goshen. Pharaoh looked to grab Moses’ hide but he made it old Edom’s Midian, which was in Petra’s proximity. The Good Book allows those 40 years later when his exodus people reached

Jericho, they encountered an alliance of Midianites and Moabite descendants of Abraham's nephew, Lot. *Then there's that report--in Numbers? But like so much ancient record, the chronology's impossible!* Delilah moved her teaspoon aside, aware that Caleb patiently was waiting for her to speak....

At some point, exodus men formed undesirable relationships with encountered women--one man in particular with a daughter of Midianite king-chief Zur. Hard to believe, that Moses' men warred against Midian, killing all males, including five king-chiefs, one being called, yes, Rekem. And wasn't Rekem the name also of a son of Hebron--possibly by a daughter of Mareshah, the founder of Hebron? And didn't Josephus write that king-chief Rekem's name was the name, as well, of a city that was capital of 'all Arabia'?--

"Something?" Caleb finally inquired.

"No...no." Delilah shook back her hair. "Just daydreaming. Might I have more coffee?" Nor would she mention, as Caleb signaled the waiter, any relation between *Nabataea* and *Nebaioth/Nebajoth*, the name of Ishmael's firstborn of 12 sons, who scholarship suggests founded the ancient regional Petra capital of prominent Arabian tribes--

Curious, that too...12 clans of Jacob, 12 of Ishmael; but there was an earlier divide even before that: Noah's son Shem down to Eber; Eber's Peleg down to Isaac (Abraham sending to Aram for Isaac's Rebekah); and Eber's Joktan down to Almodad--no mothers named there! Then Isaac's and Rebekah's Jacob and his 12 clans--via Aramaeans, Leah and Rachel; Bilhah (an Egyptian;) and Zilpah (heritage unstated); and the union of Isaac's and Rebekah's son Esau with the other Semitic clans. Almodad was reported as father of at least one Ishmael wife, only two being named, and more confusion there--

*Of course!--*Delilah's ire on behalf of the silent majority of ancient mothers and their

unknown ethnicities never failing to surface.... *The mother of Ishmael's daughter Basemath may have been lost to history, if her father wasn't Elon the Hittite. But it would be hard to refute that Basemath, with Esau, was Reuel Jethro's mother--Reuel Jethro, 'Kohen' of Midian, Moses' father-in-law—Midianites and Ishmaelites often biblically equated, as Edomites later morphed into Idumaeans....*

Saying none of that to Caleb, coffee refilled, Delilah instead resumed with, “Can it be said how far back Nabataeans go as a specific group?”

“I do not know, really,” Caleb was honest. “According to my family, they were successful camel caravan drivers, eventually controlling trade routes from Damascus in the north to present-day Saudi Arabia—“

“As far south as ‘the *Hejaz*’--the ‘barrier’?”

“With some evidence even beyond, to parts of Rome's Arabia Petraea province. I would not go so far as to say, as some do, that Petra was ancient Sela. But Petra was the Nabataean full-fledged capital, and their kings profited much from trade that crossed all the way from India to Rome, via Mediterranean ports—“

“Frankincense and myrrh?” Delilah teased smilingly.

“Believe it or not,” Caleb smiled back, “yes--including frankincense and myrrh! And they held their own a long time. Even Alexander the Great did not best them, nor the King at Jerusalem some 300 years later against Nabataean king Aretas. However, not long after that—“ Caleb paused, then finished with a sour look--“another century and Rome owned it all.”

And oh, the politics that preceded that! Delilah thought, most of it related to the struggle between the last of the Ashemon Hasmonaeans-- the “Maccabees” at Jerusalem--when avaricious Roman generals dropped their heavy boots into the region--

“What hour does Madame wish to leave tomorrow morning?”

The question brought Delilah back to the present with a start. The day had lulled her into pleasant forgetfulness, time without sense of duty. “Ummm,” she hesitated--*tomorrow...*

Jerusalem! “What would be a good time, do you think?”

“Shall we say seven o’clock?”

“Yes, seven will be fine.”

Tomorrow....

Tomorrow she would enter that small territory, the heart of the far-flung corpus of Alexander the Great’s empire, over and across which his generals fought each other and their own dynastic half-relations. Over the 150 years ensuing his death in 323 b.c., Macedonian contenders Cassander to Perseus numbered 11; Ptolemies, beset less by internal competitions, five; Seleucids, eight or more—

“*Ahh,*” Caleb happily breathed, “lunch is served.”

Delilah realized the morning trek had fueled appetite in her equal to his. The 12-dinar lunch was surprisingly good, lamb with yellow rice and a fine salad. Conversation took a back seat, unbroken until the waiter placed a dessert plate of sectioned oranges on the table. “What language did Nabataeans speak?” it occurred to Delilah to ask after a first savor of fruit sweetness.

“Inscriptions found at Petra and elsewhere, together with some texts from the Dead Sea caves—you know those? Yes? They are in a western form of Aramaic, which it is believed educated Nabataeans originally spoke. Then, according to scholars, when Aramaic declined as the regional *lingua franca* over the last of the first millennium b.c., there was a gradual shift to a

northern Arabic dialect. It appears that the Nabataean alphabet, which developed out of Aramaic, was precursor of the Arabic alphabet.”

Caleb lifted a dripping orange segment and dropped it whole into his mouth. His perfect teeth, whiter despite his age than starched altar linens of Delilah’s childhood, reminded her of “Orrance’s” comment: it had grated him, the way his tribal cohorts always were scraping their teeth.

“Modern Arabic is called *Fusha*,” Caleb continued after a thorough wipe of his moustache, “with some classic literary differences in the Qur’an and old Islamic writings.”

“Like there were, in the ‘mid-language’ between Latin and Standard Italian,” Delilah said, thinking of Dante. She excused herself then, for a trip to the lady’s room.

Caleb’s eyes followed the smooth shifting of Delilah’s hips as she wove through the tables, the way the soft cotton of her skirt followed the curve of her hips. In the light, the loose length of swinging hair showed none of its grey streaks. When he lost sight of her his lids closed briefly over the char-black pupils, whether to relish or stop thoughts behind them not knowable.

Delilah relished, meanwhile, the rest room’s modernity (even *if* a ‘toilet’ flush with the floor, like encountered in Amman, strengthened thigh muscles!) While washing her hands she appraised her face in the mirror. The strength of desert sun had given its light olive skin a coppery glow; it married well with the larkspur blue irises of the eyes.

She took a cigarette and lighter from her bag and watched herself take a first welcomed inhale. Her image ordinarily would have paused in acknowledgement of Nature’s kindness. All she could think at that moment, however, was how much still there was to learn on this assignment. And she had thought she knew so much!

Returning to Caleb, and exiting the Petra site, Delilah delighted in watching the enduring white-robed, older Bedouin guides—some like Siel on foot; some with pure white headdresses patiently listening to the same chatter from their hirers; and the young ones, galloping on horses, headdresses flying in the wind.

A short distance from the site entrance was Wadi Musa's large Movenpick luxury hotel. As they left the Petra site, Delilah--feeling the combined exercise and heat of the day--knew a fervent wish then to be lodging at the Movenpick. The two uphill blocks to the small family hotel felt like 20. She was grateful that Caleb also was disinclined to use breath for talking. He had given her much to think about....

The sacrifice denial story that resulted in saving Islam's progenitor, so much like Abraham's aborting sacrifice of Isaac.... The similarities of patriarchal tribal and clan organization; the similarities of factioning!—on the Old Testament side, the end of the originally dual High Priest representative divisions of Eleazar and Ithamar under Moses and Aaron, which David had maintained with Abiathar and Zadok...the prophet army commanders like Elijah and Samuel (what, exactly, was going down, politically, when Elijah got 'taken up' and Elisha took over?) And underneath all, lineage, lineage, lineage--and that contrast of Jesus, who eschewed his maternally-bestowed legitimacy, refusing to call his followers to arms despite Peter's urgings--after all, Jesus could attract an assembly of 5,000! But he knew his history: the common people always had suffered the greatest in dynastic contentions for power; and it wasn't by then just a matter of Jesus against Herod the Great's son, Tetrarch Antipas in the Galilee. Ultimately it would be the people against Rome...

If one took out the entire issue of who owned the one God, and traced ancient relationships from their beginning, what quarrel remained other than diverging paths and

practices dictated by Time and its conquerors? Perhaps it was Delilah's fatigue, but of a sudden a strangely new voice exploded in her head—

I don't want to give a damn anymore!--tribes, clans, religions, or sects; all competing for autonomy of their beliefs; and all of it—all!-- reduced to matters of personal power and security versus impotence and mortality. There should be an island somewhere, where pacifists could abide without being slaughtered....

Delilah summoned just enough strength to climb with grace to her second-floor room—homelike and simply furnished; soft curtains, that admitted lots of light in daytime, and lent the room a sweet peacefulness as evening approached. Inside, she leaned back gratefully a few moments against the closed door.

Later, when she awoke from a long, much needed nap, the light on Petra's cliffs had gone to dusky mauve. After a shower and fresh clothes, at eight p.m. she found herself the only patron in the restaurant that occupied the hotel's entire top floor. Carved, highly polished high-backed chairs were inset with embroidered velvet-cotton and cushioned in deep red and pale green. Pastel paintings of Arab street scenes adorned the walls, and French-hung brocade curtains framed tall windows.

Caleb appeared and opened wide the window next to her table. The lights of the town ran brightly up the hill beyond, the night prayer song vibrant on the cool night air. The chant, each time she heard it, caused a peaceful feeling in her solar plexus. "Five times a day, the call comes to prayer," Caleb said, and proceeded to sing its words, encouraging her to recite the sounds.

Delilah was served her dinner then. A traditional *hummus* appetizer (ground chickpeas mixed with tahini, garlic, and lemon, decorated with leaves and tomatoes), quickly was followed by a finely chopped tomato and cucumber salad (a variation, Caleb said, of *tabbouleh*), along

with flattened, crusty-breaded chicken breast, French fries of the thick variety, and pocket bread to eat with the hummus or to make one's own little 'sandwich' with other items.

Caleb wished Delilah a good appetite, said he'd see her in the morning, and left her to her dinner.

Departure time next morning had been moved to 8:30, mid-east being a lot like Mexico that way, Delilah thought. Nervous, she had contemplated the upcoming journey while having her breakfast of assorted hummus and something that looked like thick baloney. The former southern crossing to Israel from Jordan was closed. To reach the Allenby Bridge to the north, Caleb needed to drive the same route he had to Petra until, practically parallel with Amman, he could turn west to the border.

The car radio's repetitive beat of Arabian popular music heightened the tautness in Delilah's solar plexus, as Caleb drove like a desert wind over the two-lane road, once unpaved and traveled by kings and conquerors on horses and camels. The posted speed limit on straight-aways said 80 kilometers; Caleb clocked 130. "Do not worry," he said, reaching to pat her prayerful hands. "I am driving 25 years." However, coming to a rise and seeing *two* cars passing in the opposite direction, Delilah couldn't help exclaiming *Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!*

"Perhaps Madame would like to have a cigarette," Caleb said softly.

Yessiree!...Madame needs_a cigarette!

Bare rocky terrain stretched east, just an occasional patch of green, never the verdant hue of regularly rain-fed land. Bedouin and their flocks were small shadows in the dun-color between widely spaced tents. Finally turning west, the road toward the border descended to hills, trees spindly sentinels on their crowns. Then down through Addassieh, lower into the valley

from which Jordan got most of its fruits and vegetables, the barrenness broken by small spots of villages, terraced agriculture, and orchards.

Tall trees now lined the road, yellowed Eucalypti; buses seen for the first time; banana groves and denser trees--one full-leaved variety covered with bright red clusters of blossoms. Swinging through Deir Allah—*where Jacob is said to have wrestled with an angel and named it Succoth*--more deep red-flowered trees clashed with orange bougainvillea. Only then did Delilah cognate fully how colorless had been so much landscape previously traveled. Past the Shounah turnoff she asked how far a person could travel in a day on a donkey. “About 15 to 20 kilometers,” Caleb estimated—*some 12 miles....*

They reached the border at high noon.

The Allenby Bridge that crossed the Jordan River and connected Jordan with Jericho had a history all its own. Rebuilt in 1918 by British general Edmund Allenby over remnants from the Ottoman colonial era, the bridge later twice was destroyed—in a 1946 operation by a Hebrew underground strike force (*Palmach*), during the British Mandate; again in the 1967 “Six-Day War.” A 1968 temporary bridge had been replaced by the modern crossing after the late ‘90’s Israel-Jordan peace treaty.

At a stone’s throw south of the bridge, on the river’s east side, would have been “Beth-Abara,” part of the puzzle about “Bethany on the east bank of the Jordan,” presented by the *Gospel of John* as where John the Baptist was baptizing. The “Bethany” where Jesus lodged, before his notable entry into Jerusalem, commonly was taken as less than two miles east of Jerusalem on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives, opposite Jericho. The King James version of the *New Testament* was the only English version giving the baptismal site as “Beth-Abara,” a view strengthened by the existence of a ford called “Abarah” some 12 miles south of

the Sea of Galilee. *Regardless “Bethany’s” location,”* mused Delilah, *it’s involved in that other [to her, greater] puzzle, of ‘Mary,’ the ‘Anointer’....*

All four Gospels reported Jesus’ anointment by a woman. *Luke’s* report appeared earlier in time, did not specify where or the woman’s name but referred to her as sinful. All three others, *Matthew*, *Mark* and *John*, placed the event at the house of one Simon at “Bethany” (in Aramaic, *Beth anya*, “house of the suffering”), before the Passover of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Matthew and *Mark* said that the woman poured the costly ointment (*nard*) over Jesus’ head. *Luke* and *John* said that Jesus’ feet were greased (a common treatment for sandaled, walk-worn feet). Only *John* gave the woman a name at the time of the anointing—“Mary.”

Mary of “Bethany,” sister of Martha, commonly was held as the anointer. However, the statement in *John* that identified “Mary of Bethany” as the anointer appeared to be, was believed by some scholars *to* be a later interpolation--that phrase in the *past* tense occurred in the text *before* the event.

At entry to the parking area on the Jordan side of the crossing, Caleb was stalled behind another vehicle. As they waited, Delilah reflected on how much of her early studies were being brought back, simply by being in the region. One subject, however, she consciously had carried with her. Given time, once settled on the Jordan River’s west side, she intended to explore it: beyond all other puzzles of the ancient texts was the bad rap that Man had leveled on the head (*and body!*) of Mary Magdalene--

“Ah, finally!” Caleb exclaimed, able to move the car forward and park.

Depending on the political situation, border crossings were dicey; and the Jordanian and Israeli terminals on their respective sides had differing requirements. It was clear now to Delilah why Manny had set her itinerary to begin at Amman.

Manny--with his half-spectacles, green visor, and old-fashioned desk lamp (also green)--could have been taken straight out of a Dickens novel . Obviously he had known, as was his job, that at the time of Delilah's crossing Jordan accepted Allenby as an international border entry point; but, conversely, had she begun in the west, an Israeli-stamped passport would have prohibited granting of a Jordanian entry visa. Palestinian international travelers from Palestinian-controlled territories, however, had to exit into Jordan and use Amman's airport, in that permission to use Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv was difficult for them to obtain.

There was a long holding of hands while Delilah waited to board a bus that took travelers only some 100 feet through the Hashemite gate into the 'West Bank.' "I am wondering," Caleb began, and then pressed his lips together uncertainly.

"Yes?"

"You know I am worrying about my young son. I am told he makes trips to Jerusalem to visit a 'friend.'" He paused again uncomfortably.

"Please, Caleb. Feel free to tell me whatever you wish to say."

He took his wallet from his pocket. "Here is a picture of my son that Huldu sent to me. Perhaps you will see him while you are there."

Delilah took the picture from Caleb's hand, and a small tremor went through her--not upon seeing Caleb's son, a slender boy with aquiline features who, she thought, must take after his mother. It was the *other* face in the photograph--the face on an older, a tall and handsome individual, whose arm rested around the young man's shoulders—

The third man!

Delilah took a deep breath, looked up at Caleb and trusted her smile betrayed nothing. "If I do run into your son, I will be happy to speak with him, see how he is faring. I'll let you

know at the hotel.”

The bus was boarding. “I am your brother now,” he said, not letting go her hand until she stood on the second step. “It is good to have a sister somewhere else in the world, even if I did not see her again for 10 years.” *Dear Caleb!* Delilah bent, gave him a quick kiss on his cheek and waved to him from the bus window once she was seated.

It was merciful that she could not know then. Within a few months Khaled would advise Manny by e-mail: regretfully, Caleb no longer would be available as a driver for Division visitors; he had died, of heart failure....

The air on board the bus was all-serious. In the few minutes needed for the bus to cross over, Delilah was joined by only a handful of others. Three were women in long black *jilbaab* and white *hijabs*, who tearily had left family members at the Jordan station.

Disembarking on the Israel side, Delilah learned there was no bus from there to Jerusalem. *Had Manny mentioned that?* No matter; a taxi driver lounged laconically against his vehicle; and, from his surreptitious glances, Delilah decided that perhaps it had been unnecessary for her to know.

The taxi driver was stocky of build with muscular arms and, judging from the way his trousers fit, legs, too; dark hair and eyes; not bad looking. *Where we are*, Delilah thought, *one would conclude he was Arabian in descent. Elsewhere, he could just as well be Greek or Italian.*

Whether he was a Manny contactor or not, he was all business: cost of the 125 miles to Jerusalem, \$90 U.S.! Luckily the station’s cashier window was open, where Delilah was able to cash a traveler’s check.

She felt luckier still, in that the taxi was well air-conditioned. She grabbed the arm rest as it took a wide swerve southeast along a bleak roadway, past Jericho toward Jerusalem. *Huh!* She thought, *always thought Jericho was southwest of Jerusalem.* She might have enjoyed visiting Jericho, situate just 10 miles north of the Dead Sea. But she had said nothing; and her driver, Issa (whose name, he mentioned, was Arabic for *Jesus*), bypassed it without offering to stop.

Delilah knew a great deal about Jericho--its name, *Fragrant*, derived from a Canaanite word; known as the *City of the Palms*, where settlements dated to 9000 b.c. Skulls archaeologically discovered there--plastered and painted to look like their deceased owners--were believed art history's first example of portraiture. It was where Jesus healed a blind beggar, and somewhere along the road from there to Jerusalem had his encounter with the 'good Samaritan' (*a good Samaritan, south of the line?*)

After Jerusalem fell to Vespasian's Roman armies in 70 a.d., Jericho became but a small garrison town. In the Byzantine era, the time of the "Eastern Roman Empire," Christianity did take hold; but over the ensuing millennia Jericho knew possession by Arabian dynastic caliphates, invasions of Seljuk Turks, Crusader upheavals, Ottoman possession, and the British Mandate. Since then it had seen itself through Jordan annexation, Israeli capture, and the 1994 handover to the Palestinian Authority.

Hundreds of years before, Jericho had housed a private estate of Alexander the Great. Less than a hundred years before Jesus, it had suffered during the Hasmonaean struggles. Then, when Octavian Augustus defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra VII, it was given to Herod the Great, who named a fortress there after his mother. And it was at Jericho that afterward he had Miriam's brother, Aristobulus III, drowned.

Alexandra II had been beside herself, when the triumphant Great did not make the handsome 17 or 18-year-old Aristobulus III High Priest. Cleopatra VII--whether out of true sympathy or for political reasons--compassioned the Hasmonaean survivors, even lobbying Mark Antony to kill the Great. Antony did ask Herod to send Aristobulus III down; but Herod politely refused. Then Herod, on intelligence that Cleopatra VII was willing to aid Alexandra II in ousting him from government, did make the popular Aristobulus III High Priest, followed shortly by the drowning and the numbering of the days of Miriam, her two sons, and her mother....

It was just as well they hadn't stopped at Jericho. Delilah may have made much progress on the "social" aspects of middle eastern ethnicities, but Caleb's photograph had shook her back to the that belated 'second part' to her assignment. She kept expecting to see Jerusalem at every turn of the tediously circuitous road; meanwhile, her top left molar was hurting a bit.

When the road straightened Delilah searched her carriage bag, found the little plastic pick, and carefully worked its point around her gums. It had caused a chuckle when the dentist handed it her--*the old wooden toothpick, reborn*. Finished with the task, she opted not to dwell on the incongruity of gum deterioration versus her next thought: a cigarette was going to taste good.

"You have a stressful job," she spoke clearly to the back of the Issa's head, blowing out the first drag.

"It's not bad. I earn enough for the family."

"A large one?"

"I myself have two young children." He pointed to a photograph pasted to the dashboard, and Delilah leaned forward to look. "But the family's getting bigger. My sister's pregnant and the father has abandoned her."

“Oh. “ *I guess I do look like a mother-confessor* Delilah thought but knew nothing adequate to say. Automatically she gripped the car door as Issa took another fast tight turn—

Unsecured birth? Good lord, some two-thirds of the globe’s population was the result of it. Unbelievable after all the millennia, that there existed *still* persons that wielded power over individual consciousnesses—‘authority’ figures who didn’t merely *accept* accidental births, *encouraged* them? *Such a selfish thing, despite all History showed—Humankind held subject to intractable instincts.* And what was Science doing? Spending millions—*no, billions!—no, trillions!*—trying to *split apart* that which holds everything together; thinking to find some little ‘god’ particle, while Humankind kept producing more of Itself, most of whom had not enough food to get through a day. *What a piece of shit it was to a reasonable mind!*—her tired mind at that point employing language usually foreign to it.

Intentional forgetfulness had become a mental challenge for Delilah--to disallow evocation of Love’s sad conjectures. But the dusty road called to mind the one along which the Bishop’s last letter surely had traveled....

Nothing one person can do will change the fact that it will take a century for my people here to progress beyond ancient ways, he had written. Yet he had continued his singular work, dogma having hammered a brightest of minds into certain martyrdom.

She pushed back the thought. *Not me!*

She had tried “asking nothing” against Svatmarama’s ‘three fires’--pain caused by self, others, and nature. She wished for a sweepingly pragmatic scythe to lay open the biblical core and separate chaff from wheat. She believed she understood “the number of years” of David--not the number of journeys or worldly years’ desolations, but wastelands of conscious spirit in the society of the flesh. She longed for psychological reincarnation, a purposed material self that

could circle and smother self-defeating constellations in the collective psychological orbit of Humankind. *Hadn't Jesus said, "YOU are gods?"*

It would have shocked Delilah, had someone pointed out that she didn't have a "messiahnastic" complex but a downright *messiah* one. Feminist she never had been; but what she lusted after--if truth be told--*was* Man's power. Now, however, would not have been the time to address the subject with her.

At about four p.m. the car entered the Old City and a few minutes afterward pulled up at an Armenian Catholic guest house in the Islamic quarter. She paid Issa the fare. Would he be available not tomorrow but the next day, for a journey north?

He would be happy to serve her, he replied, and agreed to retrieve her at nine.

Delilah's reserved second-floor room, with a small window overlooking the Via Dolorosa, was small but convent-pristine. Her first need was to find food, not having had any since breakfast. After a modest washing-up, she walked to the corner. There at a stand she bought kabobs—one U.S. dollar each; meat with slices of tomato and cucumber pushed from a stick into pocket bread.

While eating, she stood against a stone wall in the midst of a bedlam of stalls, vendors, and mixed peoples. The first gain of focus was a company of an older man, a boy, and two customarily-attired Muslim women. One of the latter shared a smile with Delilah and, before Delilah knew it the woman was over to her, embracing her like a long lost relative. Although the woman spoke no English, she made herself understood. She was from *Uzza*, the woman said, ecstatic when Delilah recognized the name--an exchange that restored Delilah's spirits.

A right turn at the corner, down from the hospice and up El Wad, was a restaurant recommended by the guest house clerk. Delilah paid four shekels (another dollar) for coffee, 50

cents for *baklava/baklawaw*, and \$1.20 for orange juice. It surprised her a bit, that the owner's eyes didn't light up when she said she just had come from Jordan. After all, there was dead King Hussein's picture large on the wall.

A group of American travelers entered, Arizonans and Californians of 'Arabian' descent. When Delilah's eyes dropped to the oldest one's grey-haired chest, she saw a huge gold cross buried there. Then, glancing up to another wall, there was a photograph of the Pope on a recent visit. *Ah...Christian Palestinians*, she finally discerned.

One of the women in the party struck up conversation. Did Delilah like it here?

"I'm not altogether sure, yet," Delilah replied guardedly.

The woman agreed. She had visited some years previously, "when it was very nice. But now it is so congested—terrible for the Holy City." Then she leaned toward Delilah and whispered something, hand angled across her mouth. In what she said was the word, *Muslims*...

Enlightenment comes slowly, thought Delilah, but clarity was beginning in her. There was a difference, between being summoned in existence, and being invited. The Old City maze she would explore on the morrow; for now, a shower and blessed sleep....

Part Five

THE ALIEN

Delilah was beginning her morning ablutions when sounds of prayerful pilgrims along the Via Dolorosa wafted up through her room's open window. She wondered what she would be thinking if, some 2000 years before, she was one of the spectators of Jesus' execution retinue along the cobbled street below, when the *muezzin*'s call to prayer simultaneously rang out over the old city and mingled with the passing prayers.

Delilah smiled wryly and next moment was crying--full drops; as if to wash away the centuries of miseries known in the old city's crowded warrens. Mind set in motion a prayer of its own.... *Oh Lord I am not worthy that Thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak the words of comfort so my spirit healed can be*—not, perhaps, the precise words sung, pacing slowly toward the altar of the church of her childhood, colored lights coming and organ music going through its high stained-glass windows....

So many words, she thought, taught then to her by perceived authority, to the child-mind too naive to question. But oh *to be able* to believe--believe that when this life was done, she again could be with all she had loved who predeceased her, and wait for those still living; to sit on Mount Olympus, or whatever went for it, and talk about all we went through in human existence—*the daemons of our personas and how we dealt with them; how we strove to give purpose to our lives. 'Life'!*

She brushed away both the tears and that inextinguishable human wish for a universally sympathetic Supreme Consciousness, within whose realm one might rely on eternal *conscious*

rest, and turned on the water at the bathroom sink. When it ran hot she held the warmed washcloth against her face, forced as always since her time with the Bishop to think of all the people with nothing but cold water. Never either since was she able to sink into a hot bathtub and luxuriate body, without thought of children who didn't even have water to drink....

Jerusalem's Old City is not even a mile across and less than three miles in full circumference, embraced by walls built in the 1500's by Ottoman Suleymann, "The Magnificent." Stone walkways are a twisted maze of alleys and roofed *suqs/souks*, or markets.

The Old City quarters, built over uneven terrain, require more energy to walk than one would expect. Delilah ambled slowly to the Jaffa Gate, on the west side where "Christian" and "Armenian" quarters met. She wandered through the Tower of David Museum but quickly was drawn out, and instead paid 14 shekels for admittance to stone stairs that took her up to the wall's ramparts. To the north were Jerusalem's far-flung, modern urban areas, a dramatic contrast to the ancient city's crowded complex behind and below her.

A stairway at the north end led down to the Damascus Gate. El Wad 'street'--*Ha-Gay*, as it was known in Arabic--began there in open air, a busy hustle of produce stands and bread vendors. Delilah cashed another traveler's check at a money-changer at the foot of the Gate, noting a neat little café that sat slightly above the path. A nice setting for a future breakfast, she thought.

El Wad descended gradually via shallow, wide-spaced steps, and gave way to shops of tinned staples, cheeses, dry goods, and souvenirs, an ever-moving array of colors and sounds. Elder Palestinian women sat on the ground along the way, selling fresh fig leaves, herbs, and used clothing.

Delilah bought two pocket breads, tomatoes, and fruit from the outdoor tables and a small tin of tuna from a shop, for a supper in her room. She needed to catch up on finances--the next day's trip with Issa would cost a 'pretty penny' (*but strike while the iron's hot!*). She would make more journal notes, perhaps would write a few postcards, but especially wanted to review the next day's route north.

Counting on Issa's willingness, there was an obscure site she wanted to seek, near the Sea of Galilee in territory the Greeks called "Dalmanutha, where Jesus retired after addressing an assembly of 4,000 or 5,000 people. *Matthew* referred to it as "Magadan," while some ancient *Mark* transcripts rendered *Magdala*....

Delilah continued south on El Wad toward vicinity of the holy 'Mount.' Traditionally, for Islamism, the enormous rock housed in the temple there was the site from which Muhammad ascended to Heaven. For Hebrewism, it was the traditional site where Abraham aborted sacrifice of Sarah's son Isaac.

She first took a slight detour west and strolled the Christian quarter. In that *souk's* commercial hubbub she spied an innocuous entry into a quiet, dim room. *Strange...a little bistro in this vicinity?* She thought, before reading a small sign beside its door: Station of the Cross #7! *Apparently, pilgrims along the Via Dolorosa these days must make some necessary adjustments,* she thought, as she walked on. *And* (as the sign also had noted), *if it isn't "Good Friday," to boot!* It sparked recall of the three Good Friday hours she spent as a girl, circling the 'station' depictions around Saint Vincent's interior--trying so hard, as the nuns had instructed, to identify with the suffering each painting entailed. .

A short way east Delilah finally reached Temple Mount, believed site also of the first Hebrew temple built by Solomon according to King David's directions. The site offered yet

another biblical puzzle. Certain versions suggested it more anciently had been Mount *Moriah*, the threshing floor of Araunah/Ornan, the Jebusite. Jebuseuses, descendants of Noah's son, Canaan and originally occupied "the heights," were evicted by Joab, King David's nephew and commander of his army. Regardless, since seventh century a.d. *Masjid Qubbat As-Sakrah*, as it is known in Arabic, was home of the mosque known occidentally as the "Dome of the Rock," built after Islamic conquest of the region.

At a stall nearby Delilah bought a *ka'ak*, a soft Arabian 'bagel' with sesame seed topping, and a fat *falafel*, a robust, deep-fried patty of a ground chick peas blended with herbs and spices. While eating she sat on steps in the shade of the street arcade, watching tourists enter the area of the "Wailing Wall." Located at the west foot of Temple Mount and a revered Hebrew holy site of pilgrimage and prayer, the wall is believed a remnant of a second Temple constructed by Herod the Great in the late first century b.c.

Appetite satisfied, Delilah proceeded to a wood walkway that ascended to the Mount. First in line in the waiting queue, "Allah" decided to bring next to her a man labelable 'schizophrenic,' who unbrokenly parroted an un-mimicable monologue, at once 'sense-sounding' but indecipherable, about sons of Ishmael and Esau and a father and relatives of his in New York.

Then--"You see," the man did say intelligibly, gesturing from his mouth to Delilah's-- "I'm not able to speak 'straight-out' speech because I have no 'mother' tongue. I really don't know what my heritage is." It caused her to *think* about tongues, and their effect on speech, recalling again how in certain biblical times potential crossers of the Jordan from east to west were tested by pronunciation of the word, *Shibboleth*.

All the while the man's arms shook and his small thin fingers quivered; yet he was tall

and of good looks. Delilah strove to be polite until finally the guard at the gate shouted. “No talk! Your talk is making me crazy!” Yet the man persisted, despite Delilah’s finger to her lips and a warning shake of head while shifting her eyes toward the guard. She yearned to make herself invisible, like Eastern mystics say an adept can. Mercifully, when she failed to respond further, the man gave her a blessing and left.

Delilah sat on an adjacent rock and did work at being invisible, in that it seemed the guard was about to move the tightly waiting line out into midday sunshine. Four young women were grouped next to her. Three of them, visitors from South Africa and Finland, were being shown Jerusalem sites. The fourth, their guide from a kibbutz, was amused to discover Delilah had thought that she was a tourist too.

Unsolicited by Delilah, talk turned political. “I understand how Palestinians feel, really I do,” the young woman said. “But even if only 100 Jewish descendants remain from antiquity, it’s our god-given land. And I’m afraid there’s going to be a war before it’s over.” The words echoed Delilah’s own fears, and she disliked the unbidden thought: she knew no other peoples to whom a god had guaranteed land. She was glad to be distracted by admittance to the mount....

The domed mosque, which commands a central fountain area—the “Noble Sanctuary” of the mount plateau--arrests all speculation: 16 circling piers and columns within an octagonal arcade of 24 more piers and columns; bright blue porcelain mosaic tiles adorn the exterior and its golden dome rivals the sun. The interior equally affects all who enter, temporarily rendered thoughtless by the grandeur of size and design--mesmerized, with tilted heads, by a complex feast of patterns, colors, and textures that keep the eyes in motion and the spirit in awe: marble inlays, intricately carved balustrades, stained glass of artful compositions, and blended hues--all

melded in perfect symmetry.

Delilah was unable to read any of the Qur'anic inscriptions around the upper ornamentation, but later would learn that one read, "In the name of the One God pray for your prophet and servant Jesus, son of Mary." Once she had corralled her wonder, she walked to the lustrous, carved railing surrounding the exposed top of the enormous rock, a stark contrast of raw nature in the embrace of grandeur.

Opposite the domed shrine, across the exterior esplanade, were an Islamic museum and a second, smaller mosque, *Al Aqsa*, also resplendent with interior designs and glittering chandeliers. Like inside the Dome, elegant carpets covered Al Aqsa's floors, some sections cordoned for worshipping. Delilah watched women in delicate silk caftans and draped scarves do their prostrations and risings, flawlessly performed no matter the person's age.

During the Crusades, the Al Aqsa had been headquarters of crusading Knights Templar, while subsequent Augustinians converted the Dome into a church. When Saladin recaptured Jerusalem in the 12th century a.d., the cross on the Dome was replaced by a gold crescent.

The most memorable item for Delilah in the museum was a four-foot, curved sword and its heavily embroidered, hand-woven, brass-fitted sheath, attributed to Asad Allah, a famous Iranian sword maker. Although photographs ordinarily were not allowed, the museum's custodian permitted her to photograph a lovely stained glass window at back.

Descending from the mount, Delilah proceeded toward the Old City's eastern entrance-- St. Stephen's Gate, named per a tradition that Stephen, the first Christian martyr, had been stoned outside of it. Another name for it was *Lions' Gate*, after animals that adorned its façade. On the way Delilah passed the purported site of the ancient fortress and tower of Antonia, once

the residence of Procurator Pontius Pilate, now the site of “Station of the Cross #2, Sanctuary of the Flagellation and Condemnation.”

Original Via Dolorosa stones were preserved in the sanctuary courtyard, and as Delilah walked them she conjectured. If the site *had* been Antonia, there were many ghosts there from the 76 to 67 b.c. government of Hasmonaean Queen Alexandra I--brief golden years during which she advanced education while keeping neighboring tyrants at bay. Yet, it had been *in* “the tower of Antonia” that Alexandra in her decline confined her son Aristobulus II’s wife and children under guard, during the contest for power between him and his natural brother, John Hyrcanus II. Some 112 years after that, it was in Antonia’s tower that Roman Procurator Fadus forced Temple priests to lay up their holy vestments under Roman control.

Finally reaching Saint Stephen’s portal, Delilah rested a while outside it. Below in the cleft of the old Kidron Valley, traffic moved swiftly along the Jericho highway. Across, the Mount of Olives now was a maze of residential areas and glittering spires of various shrines. Somewhere over there was the Garden of Gethsemane and the Church of St. Mary Magdalene, neither of which Delilah would have time to visit. Watching the mountain slowly relinquish the lowering sunlight, she imagined talking with the man who breathed his last in its shadow....

Imagine how much agony on both sides might have been avoided, she would say to him, had all parties been able really to work on the 2002 initiative, where Palestinians promised to recognize the State of Israel if it withdrew to 1967’s borders—

Mind supplied his interjection: “You’ve got to be fair across the board! What if Palestinian leaders in 2000 or 2001 hadn’t rejected Israel’s offers?”

To which *she* brazenly would reply, '*Leaders' the governing word there?—like in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, Tobiah and Sanballat? When the surface issues recognize nothing of the history—*'

“And saying nothing about the ‘infra-groups?’ Like what happened shortly after that initiative was nixed--that Israel withdraw from 12 or so percent of Israeli-occupied territories. Hamas’ purported chief bomb maker was killed in disputed circumstances; so, no surprise the very next day Hamas made the deadliest threat yet. Who knows who does what for what reasons? The fact that individuals act from what they perceive *in their ‘milieu’* is (if you will allow *my* pun) the *crux* of it all.”

And what good did your pacifism do? Maybe you should have sided with Peter, and lifted your hand!

“So that even *more* guiltless people could die?”

Delilah turned abruptly from both view and inner dialogue and counted her steps, instead, back through the Gate. Just inside the portal was a small café, and she decided to stop for a coffee.

The café was dim inside. There was only one other customer, a man sitting at back near the door to the kitchen. Delilah didn’t notice when he left his table and stood waiting in the care’s narrow aisle while the owner placed her coffee on her table. When the owner did move, light from the open door reached the stranger’s face as Delilah looked up, and saw in the flesh the man in Caleb’s photograph.

Was it the expression that crossed her face?—for instead of continuing on his way, the man stopped at her chair. “Do I know you?” he asked.

“No...no...,” Delilah smiled. “For a moment I thought you resembled someone I do know.”

As if he had all the time in the world, he crossed one foot over the other ankle, reached inside his jeans jacket breast pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and lighted it with a Bic . “So you’re a tourist,” he said on the first exhale.

“Yes...,” *of a kind....*

“The Unconscious does that sometimes when we’re traveling and feeling a little lonely—makes us think we see a friend.”

He would sit if I asked, Delilah thought, waiting for mind to make a decision. *I promised Caleb I’d watch out for his son!* “I wasn’t truthful altogether, about being a tourist. I’m a free lance journalist,” she heard herself lie again, “researching a piece on terrorism in young people—you know, fundamental causes.”

“That shouldn’t be too difficult.” He took another drag off his cigarette and then rested that hand on the back of the free chair opposite her. “Every spirit born wants to make a difference in the world. Most are destined to do it in small ways; a few get to create immortal works of art and literature. The damaged denied ones, at the opposite end of the spectrum?--well, they do it with bombs.”

“That’s what a good friend of mine in Petra worries that his son is gravitating toward. I promised I would watch for the son, but”--she gave her face what she hoped was a convincingly uncertain expression—“I have no idea where to begin.”

“His father believes some plot’s in the making?”

Does loyalty on one side demand lying on the other? She found herself a combination and answered, “One too incorrigible to give voice to.”

His look at her was serenely steady. “An important edifice, perhaps.”

No inflection there of a question? Yet, when his nod toward the vacant chair did pose one, it was his smile--softly drawn lips sweetened with a touch of humility—to which Delilah returned an accepting nod.

“Everyone needs at least one purpose for living, beyond scrabbling for the day’s needs and lucky if finding them. Why *be* alive for no reason?” He took off his cap and smoothed back his hair, thick and gray; but short waves around his ears were tipped still with light brown. “Then, one gets to that age when devoted energies of the past dissipate into perceived wastes of time, unless one manages to keep an eye upon the sparrow.”

Without having been asked, the owner brought each of them a fresh coffee.

The stranger cocked his head. “Do you believe in extra-terrestrial beings?”

Delilah’s had to smile at the abrupt change in subject. “There may be such beings, but I can’t understand why they would want to come here...for amusement?--like visiting a zoo? Or, to put their technology to its highest use, like if you build a racing car you need to race it--”

“Or, as suggested by persons who like to play with the subject, seeking emigration because some drastic condition threatens their civilization?—“

“*Except*, in that instance--with many more planets out there, as astronomers now assure us there are--if ‘aliens’ could fly here they could fly elsewhere. Why, with a choice, would they choose to relocate *here*.”

“Perhaps out of altruism?--to share their advanced civilized wisdom?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “We haven’t exchanged names.”

Altruism—that word again. Delilah unselfconsciously grasped her hair from the sides, wound it behind her head and then let it drop. “You can call me Dee.”

“‘D’ the letter?”

“Good enough. And you?”

“‘A’ for alien.”

“Okay,” she grinned; “the name is Delilah.”

“Call me John.”

John? She didn’t believe him but it was alright. His intellect seemed esoteric enough to resemble the anonymous scribe of the fourth Book. For all she knew, that “John”--or part of him--this stranger might be.

His hand crossed the table and rested on hers. “I suspect we are alike, you and I.”

She let his hand stay where it was. It was as if something unfelt by body, which she didn’t want to admit, was lurking at the edge of her mind.

“Come, my lady,” he stood up, reaching for and lifting her hand. “Let us go out to the villages; let us see if the vine flowers.” He put a bill and some change on the table, went round to the back of her chair, and drew it back as she arose from it. “Let us see what specials are being offered along the suq.”

He stood very near her; Delilah had to tilt her head to look into his eyes. “Thanks, but I have a full day tomorrow and work to do tonight.”

“I’ll walk you a way, then.”

There only were two directions to take from the cafe, the one to the Gate or the path up into the old city. The fact he automatically took the path northward without asking could have been only logical. Anyway, why should he know where she was staying?...

Delilah had the silly thought that he had the kind of body it was a pleasure to walk beside. “We don’t get it yet, you see. Humankind’s at the end of an *epoch*, woman.” He

reached around, lightly grabbed her far shoulder, and gave it a brotherly shake. “And there you are--struggling with your writing, I assume, toward some goal.” He let go her shoulder. “What *is* that goal?”

Her first thought, *world peace*, was too trite to give voice. After a brief silence, with no idea from where the next thought came, Delilah heard herself unpremeditatedly start to say, “My grandmother....”

“Yes? Your grandmother?—”

“An incredible role model; imagine: presiding over a Tuscan estate, designing corsets for the local gentry; a successful merchant husband, and wet mothers for each of her dozen children. She was a college graduate, you know—possibly the only female one in her whole region at the time.” Delilah--bewildered by, critical of the easiness she felt with the man!—was impelled to continue nonetheless. “And where did she of *that* civilized dynasty die?--in an upstairs flat in San Francisco, in the shadow of its famous tower; so much for the story of the emigration of Wisdom.”

“Don’t be so negative. Think of it as would an Eastern, quote, ‘mystic,’ unquote, would: perforce, in evolution, wisdom too comes and goes in waves.”

“Oh--so that one need not feel hopeless altogether during a time of ‘devolution’?”

“I would rather say, ‘loss of ground.’ I don’t expect other persons--” he carefully avoided saying ‘you’—“those who’ve had much that free society can give, to know what it’s like for people still caught in their ancient history. In your case, what a long course went those genes across the world, to become lost in a nation of a nameless race. *Here...now*,” he lifted a hand to indicate their environs, “inconceivable.”

So much a story that little bit told, Delilah thought--everything dictated simply by circumstances of birth, nothing by will? She was reminded of how the Bishop had been with his “children,” how he strove make their existence happy in their circumstances, and how he had nursed the wounded child in her. Until then, she might have returned publically to the world of academe, able in-between to retreat to the solitary peace of her home--*its’ windows’ clear admittances of the garden; the lemon tree tall beyond the hinged, white wood gate--family matriarch aging to a secure retirement.*

But she would not try to convince this stranger how much she really did understand. “It has been hard for me here, mind bearing the misery and the impossibilities at the same time.” She gave him a side glance. “And you are right, in what I believe you’ve been thinking. *I have not one g.d. thing to complain about.*” She looked away. *But don’t lord-it-over me, Man,* she thought; then, *‘Lord it over?’ How did that phrase initiate?*

“But please don’t suggest,” she was moved to speak again, “that I don’t feel the circumstances here because of my comparatively wondrous lot. That sets my teeth on edge.” She took a deep breath. “Universal laws govern human cognition too. Each segment of *collective* consciousness reflects its’ personal history. Some, *forced by* theirs—as you pointed out--lag behind and lose substantively. Others lose ground in the welter of their affluence, oblivious to what Democritus said before Socrates--that Truth is difficult, since perception through the senses is subjective.”

“John” remained silent. If he was exhibiting unusual reticence, it was because he was beginning to fancy Delilah as Woman in all her forms, all the way back to Venus. “Back to this immediate region,” he finally said, “is there any religion that claims God didn’t understand self-defense?”

It reminded Delilah of the Bishop's (*was it 'teleological?'*) example: "'God can do anything and everything, right?'

"Right," Delilah had replied.

"Well, then, can God make a rock so big he wouldn't be able to lift it??"

But, *oh dear*...how she loved talking with this *stranger*; loved being with him!-- threatened by feelings that had been buried a long, long time....

"You'd think that computer geeks could create a program marrying all the stats that have preceded every Humankind devolution, together with movements of ideas and money," he changed tack, unaware that the 'marriage' then occurring was the very sound of his voice to her ears. "Once that pattern was established, we might through analysis see clearly where the state of the world is at *this* point, and, maybe, avert a 'darkened' age."

Was Delilah going to say the next thing because *consciousness* chose to, or body? It wasn't enough to have everyone one has loved just there for that time. *Not enough!* And was the immediate next thought, of Maxwell, synchronistic? *I owe Max. He put up a fight for the Division to hire me.* And there remained Caleb's son! It wasn't a matter of now or never; it was a question of *ever or never*. She slowed her steps and bowed her head. "I lied."

"About what?"

"The journalist part." She strove not to look the sheepishness she felt. "That's my 'cover.'"

"'Cover?' For what?"

She stopped, turned him toward her, glanced once in each direction and then lied yet again, right up to his face--not quite a whisper: "I'm looking for 'the Bomb Maker,' she whispered, as if she knew such a personage existed.

He didn't bat an eyelash, only lifted an eyebrow. "Talk about a direct approach. I wouldn't have taken you for being such a trusting human being."

"One has to take some risk. That's what one gets paid for."

"Ah. One of the unnameable sides."

"Not exactly."

"Then what, 'exactly?'"

"This isn't the time. And maybe I *can't* trust you."

"Well, I neither will say I could be useful in your quest or that I cannot. But I *would* like to see you again. Would tomorrow evening be too soon?"

"Yes. The next day."

"Good! Know that café at the Damascus Gate?"

"Yes." Why did it feel that he *knew* she knew? What's more, having reached the corner of El Wad and her hostel's part of the Via Dolorosa, it was *he* who stopped, not she—

"Meet me there, then, day after tomorrow—for breakfast?"

Delilah began backing her way toward the hospice a half-block up the via. "Alright, the café near the Damascus Gate, day after tomorrow—about nine."

He nodded, waved, then turned right, to walk back the way they had come.

Part Six
THE ISRAELI

Down at the street waiting for Issa, Delilah knew separateness, a longing to be home, aware of the curiosity she evoked in workmen on an adjacent building. Seen straight on, her hips were perhaps a bit wide (the best child-bearing girth); but in profile her body was svelte-like. One worker had taken particular interest in the lone woman since her arrival at the hospice. This morning he again paused for a long look before turning back to his chisel, fantasy perhaps strengthening its strike.

What a psychological challenge, existing here as a lone, 'free' woman, Delilah thought. She pressed deeper inside the hospice's shallow entry, so that all that was visible was an occasional breezed wave of her long gauze skirt. It wasn't that she felt a self-conscious need to hide her body. Early and impatient, she simply wanted to light up a cigarette....

What an old and boring story it is: Man, who comes to exist through the being of Woman, more often than not (at least until the present younger generation?) so often remains a child in the chasm between sex and a woman's love.

Had she been born *genetically* to be genderlessly cerebral? Or, had it been a matter of 'Nature versus Nurture'--her father, a rare man old enough to be her grandfather, imparting to a daughter his own mortal reasoning consciousness. Armed by that realism she had broken though the prison of Christendom, traversed foreign valleys, and found all to be but a circle to the same nameless gate, beyond which nothing was knowable while alive.

Dig down far enough--she was adamant with herself on it-- and one hits the trenched mazes beneath all Psyche on the globe. Many wait for a new 'Messenger' with an answering message. The Messenger they might get; but they would not like the message--no reward, unless be it in living.

Issa arrived on the minute. They left the Old City through Stephen's Gate and into the modern city, where Delilah asked to stop first at an ATM for cash. Mildly frustrated (wording all in Hebrew, and the machine spitting out only a maximum of 600 shekels a time), it took three extractions for the 1200 promised to Issa, plus enough (*hopefully*) for the remainder of her 'mission.'

With Delilah finally ensconced comfortably in the roomy front seat, Issa headed north on route 60. Within a few miles the van went past where once had been Bethel, where excavations dated to the 21st century b.c. Between it and Ai, a couple of miles east, Abraham once pitched his tents.

Approaching Ramallah, a surprisingly short distance north of Jerusalem, Delilah contemplated how little the average westerner knew about the "West Bank." Comprising old Judaea and Samaria, it had been described as such in the 1920 United Nations Resolution 181 (II), representing post-World War I's allied powers' aim at a 'two-state solution.

In 1948 Jordan conquered and annexed West Bank territory, which also included a swath west of the Dead Sea embracing Bethlehem and Hebron. The West Bank was distinguished from land east of the Jordan River by the term "Transjordan." Jordan ceased rule after defeat in war with Israel in 1967; and, in 1988, Jordan formally ceded all rights of sovereignty to the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

Issa's van entered Ramallah, and Delilah recalled that in 2000 Madame Albright and Mr.

Arafat had met there about ‘the peace process.’ Her interest during this day’s precious hours, however, was elsewhere. She was intent on reliving *ancient* times, from Jerusalem in ‘Judah’ through ‘Samaria’ to the ‘Galilee,’ and one particular destination in mind.

Ramallah or *Ramah*?—another biblical ‘puzzle.’ What ancient record there was tantalized. “Ramah” had been birthplace of Samuel, the Commander-Prophet protégé of High Priest Eli, and under whom power would shift from the first king, Saul, to David. Judge/Commander/Prophetess Deborah, of the Zebulun clan of Leah by Jacob, had lived in the hills of Ephraim between Bethel and “Ramah.”

Deborah had been joined by one Barak, a descendant of the clan of Bilhah-by-Jacob Naphtali, against a Canaanite King Jabin from the vicinity of Lake Huleh, some 10 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Their battle took place near Mount Tabor, in the Kishon torrent valley of Jezreel’s low plain. Jabin’s force fled before a Deborah-Barak alliance of 10,000; Deborah sang her “Song of Victory;” and there followed 40 years of “rest over the land”....

A blockbuster movie could be made of Deborah’s story, Delilah thought--back in that “Period of the Judges” after Joshua, beginning around 1399 b.c. and ending with Saul becoming first King...

Jabin’s field commander, one Sisera, took refuge in the tent of a male sympathizer. Once Sisera was drunkenly asleep, the tenting man’s wife, Jael, hammered a tent peg through his temple. How Delilah would have loved details about the Deborah-Jael relationship--*hadn’t Deborah told Barak that Sisera would fall “at the hands of a woman?”*

It had been at Ramah too, some seven centuries afterward, that Nebuchadnezzar assembled captives for exile, descendants of whom a half-century later would return in repatriations initiated by Persia’s Cyrus the Great. Ramah continued to figure all the way down

to the *New Testament*, its' name a short version of Ramathaim-zophim--hometown of Joseph, the sympathetic Sanhedrin member who obtained Procurator Pontius Pilate's permission to remove Jesus from the stave and provide a tomb. The *New Testament* supplied *Arimathaea*, a Greek rendition of Ramah....

Delilah smiled to herself, thinking how Caleb would appreciate Ramah "in the hill country of Ephraim"--that post-Moses, generous swath of land allotted to a clan of *Asenath*!

Maxwell, across half the globe in D.C., having arrived his office before light, was having a 'Morse moment.' *Why care so damn much about one puny region of the whole blasted globe?* A good deal of his preoccupation, however, was because part of his heart was there.

There was a "Max" as well as a "Maxwell." "Maxwell" was the staunch family man who daily fought the thought that it was all well and easy to be nothing but good, were one a chanting monk in a cloistered monastery; quite another to be god for your family and give it civilized life amid your private everyday life-and-death decisions. No wonder the poor looked for savior-commanders to lead to victory over oppression.

Maxwell was slumped in his chair facing the big window, his gaze traveling the wide complexity of its view, when "Max" cut in again--

Why care? Why bother, when 99.999 percent of the secure population of Earth remains asleep? 'That's a sidewalk,' they think. 'That's a building; that's an automobile'—as if words for things existed since a Before-Time; instead of every single syllable taking eons to develop via minds and sufferings of an exponential number of bodies the process devoured in the process!

Max and Maxwell weren't far apart on fundamental beliefs; but Maxwell, Chief of the United States Department of State's Division of Global Socialization, had found himself

functioning in a government strapped by a plutocracy. He turned to his desk and pulled the latest pile of folders from its corner.

Work, however, failed to staunch the dually dour mood. “Max” kept popping up between papers, Delilah cause of it all—*particularly* that “second” part to her assignment. He wished he could have fought that. He worried; she had a penchant for ignoring that it can be dangerous to be too clever....

Ramallah was alive with activity, a Palestinian policeman (*boy*, Delilah thought) directing traffic. He wore a dark blue cotton uniform devoid of police ‘gear’ except for a badge on his hat, an eagle crest in Palestinian colors. “The policemen wear no arms, you see,” Issa explained, guiding the van back carefully through the congestion. “Under existing agreements the Palestine Authority’s not allowed an arsenal.”

Past Ramallah the van met a checkpoint. “At times,” Issa told Delilah as they waited behind another car, “there’ve been 100 Israeli checkpoints through the West Bank--a third at entries from outside the ‘Green Line’ and double that internally. At some, private Palestinian vehicles only can cross by permits, usually only for public transportation or commercial vehicles.”

For the most part, however, Issa was kindly accepting, admitting there was good cause for caution. “One never knows when someone on either side may go off their head,” he acknowledged. “What has come about has come about. Destiny’s placed all of us in circumstances that drive people back into their faith, but neither side *really* cares how the other may pay homage to God....

“No!” he resumed emphatically, pulling forward as the preceding car left the checkpoint. “The problem is not religion. It may not be well known, but a lot of Palestinians in and from many places besides here—Syria, Iraq, Iran for example—practice Judaism and Christianity as well. *Everything* has to do with eking out life, home, and a job to support the family.”

It was not the showing of it; it was the form of the identity card Issa needed to show that wrangled him, the way it could reveal ethnicity. “So sad--” he lamented, when action around the van ended with plunge of clutch into the engine’s neutral hum--“you might think it a small thing. It’s just that Hebrew identity cards can show *two* birthdates—the standard calendar one and the second per the ancient Hebrew calendar. The fact mine doesn’t show a second date, *plus* what I look like, tells a deceiving story.”

Delilah braced herself as the van shot away. It was obvious that Issa had to work to /control his voice: “I *am*, after all, a *native* Israeli!--a *bona fide* citizen, born in ‘Israel Palestine—after the last war that we had hope born again, the last.... I *did* three years’ military service!—thanks to ‘Allah’, without experiencing any deaths or injuries....” Apologetically, instantly sorry to have allowed repressed anger revealed, “Jesus” reached over and gave Delilah’s forearm a friendly squeeze. “It’s okay now,” he assured her, returned to his true self....

“I think I get the picture,” she assured him back.

Another short distance and they were passing modern Shiloh--a modest Hebrew village now there, begun by a group of reverent Hebrews in 1978 and recognized by the government in ’79...

*Shiloh in Ephraim...where Joshua established the **first** ‘tabernacle’ and decided last tribal land apportionments; first long-time home of the **Ark**, with its first readable written code of a specific ‘race’-- kept at Shiloh almost all the more than three centuries of the Period of the*

Judges—could anyone dispute that an easier resolution may have made things easier? Delilah would include that in her report—a regional temple between Tiberias and Jerusalem—shades of Gerizzim! She would not anything about that, because it means overcoming hurts of history, and avoiding repeating hurts in the future, for what else is love of life about? She had to remember, to keep dreaming out of reality....

It had been after Chief Priest Commander Eli's sons fell before the Philistines that the people exhorted Samuel to consolidate defenses by appointing a Commander-King (*much like the Roman Senate, an 'emperor,' when the going got tough*); thus entered poor Saul, followed by David..

Delilah almost missed seeing a sign for a turn-off to “Izhar!”—

*Izhar!—the name of Moses' and Aaron's uncle. Might there still be long-time descendants there, of people who crossed the “Sea of Reeds” with Moses? Hadn't it been seen that if there is only **one** God--*

Delilah's stream of consciousness was interrupted, as Issa called her attention to a walled Israel community come into view. “See?--all on hills above Palestinian villages. Just like *that*,” he snapped fingers, “*chic-chac....*”

Thankful that he hadn't finished the statement, Delilah's reactive thought was vehement: No, no, *no!*--*I am not here to judge sides....* Traveling the same short distance as between Jerusalem and Shiloh (*a day's donkey ride?*), the van entered Nablus, tucked at the base of hills in West Bank central highlands, its houses climbing from city's center—

Ancient Shechem, in the narrow valley between Mounts Ebal and Gerizzim; originally Canaanite, then part of the northern kingdom of Israel, 'Nablus' being derived from 'Neapolis,' the name Rome gave it when rebuilt in honor of Vespasian....

Shechem, where Abraham built an altar at the trees of Moreh, and where Jacob tented his household as they emigrated south from Haran. *Shechem*, where one heard the last of Dinah, Leah's daughter by Jacob, and of her tribe--the only one led by a female. After what certain of Jacob's sons did to the Shechemites, because they were against sealing of a proposed alliance through union of Dinah and the Prince of Shechem, Joseph himself said they "made his name stink forever."

Shechem, where Solomon's son Rehoboam was denied 'Samaritan' confirmation of his succession to David. Then the exiled Jeroboam, whom Solomon had sought to kill, returned from Egypt, brought about the north's secession, and established rule of the north kingdom, "Israel"- at Shechem -

"The Palestine Authority incorporated Nablus with old *Sebaste*—Samaria City," Issa's voice interjected—

Samaria City, seat of north King Omri--circa 875 b.c.? And here I am, Delilah thought-- agricultural hills rolling by, traveling old Canaan land, the various names bestowed on it over time ranging from Hebrew "Pelesheth" and "Philistine" as Herodotus wrote, down to Greco-Roman "Palaestina."

Delilah was gleaned that Issa privately assessed when he should say what, like waiting until they were past Nablus before announcing that his father's family were 'Shechemites.'

"Initially they were Sunni Muslims," he said; "but my father, left without living family when he was young, converted to Christianity and became a *Nasrani*, the common Arabic word for persons of Christian culture."

"Your mother's family, the same?"

“Not at all!--her family is Hebrew.” Issa noted Delilah’s surprised raise of eyebrows and grinned. “Yes, Islamism allows intermarriage of Muslim men with Hebrew women; except by the time my parents joined up it wasn’t an issue. They were included when persons in the West Bank could receive Israeli citizenship, and they moved to Jerusalem before I was born.”

Issa laughed. “My father refused to talk about the *Nabka*. He called himself a ‘monopan’—a believer in one god being the same of all subjective religions. My mother’s family was from Scythopolis.”

Scythopolis, ancient Beth-shean, some 75 miles north of Jerusalem and 12 south of the Sea of Galilee, where excavation dated 15 centuries before Jesus--a strategic junction of four main roads; fortified by Egypt pharaohs before the arrival of Abraham; subsequently held by King David; held briefly some three centuries before Jesus by Scyths out of the northernmost parts of the continent (and from whom the city received its’ name). Eventually Scythopolis became a principal trade center of the Hellenistic Decapoli, the only city west of the Jordan River of that 10-city league.

Cleopatra IV, in the last century b.c , made league at Sythopolis with Jerusalem’s Alexander I, then in possession, it finally falling to Roman general Pompey’s administration as the Decapoli became a Roman protectorate, and Jerusalem a tributary of Rome. And wasn’t “abel (meadow)-Meholah” just southeast across the Jordan from Scythopolis?—

Where, really, had been Elisha’s home, where Elijah found him plowing?...

This time Issa retrieved Delilah’s attention with a wave of a hand. “For me, *this* is Heaven; but the *Qu’ran* says, Heaven is so very wonderful it’s beyond human concept.”

“What does the *Qu’ran* say about ‘Hell?’”

“That it is a place of fiery torments.”

“Both of those descriptions are Christian too. What name does the *Qu’ran* give to ‘Hell’?”

Issa answered a word Delilah neither could speak nor spell but sounded a lot like ‘Jehannan’, which now put her in mind of the *New Testament*—

Get thee to Gehenna!—that must have been an ancient blasphemy (never let me hear you say, ‘go to Gehenna,’ young man!). But expositions enough had conjectured Jesus’ use of the word, apparently Greek for a narrow valley called “Hinnom,” south/ southwest of Jerusalem, the site for disposal and burning of wastes.

Eleven a.m. the van passed Jenin, through land returned to the Palestinians some several years ago; *but not*, Issa claimed, “because of any political process; the people fought with stones.”

Was that following the first ‘Intifada?’—

“Crazy.” Issa--reverting to disbelief, pointed left of the road--“Israel land;” then, to the right, “Palestine village.”

“*I have* read that the *Qu’ran* speaks of Jesus as a Prophet of The One God,” Delilah sidestepped, “and that he is recognized as a primary martyr in civilization of Faith. From what little I know, it doesn’t seem the sons of Isaac and Ishmael, or Jacob and Esau, fundamentally had a quarrel about *God*.”

“I haven’t read the *Qu’ran*,” Issa responded without embarrassment. With his short but muscularly compact body, combined with a smile that suggested the word, “angelic,” he alternately could resemble cheerful cherub or devilish imp. “There are reasons why I haven’t--a different story. But I’ve been told Islam’s holy scriptures don’t just say Jesus was a prophet, but

that he never died! --that God made an *artificial* being that *looked* like Jesus and *that* was crucified.”

And it took a while for that form of execution to be replaced...the ‘Haunting of Giordano’ ...good title for a movie....

Wheat fields now and another sweep of Issa’s hand. “All this...from Tiberius down...Israel occupied in ‘48;” but Delilah had spotted a sign for Nain—

Where Jesus went from Capernaum during one of his ‘mission’ tours. A few more miles and we will approach the place of his mother’s birth....

Past Afula, a large city; language on signs changing from place to place--Hebrew to Arabic, Arabic to Hebrew. Delilah spied a left turn-off sign: ‘Yezreel’—

Jezreel?--where Jehu, Elisha’s anointee, ambushed both Ahaziah of the South and Jehoram of the North, and had Jezebel thrown from the balcony....

It was high noon when the van glided into the beautiful mountain town of Nazareth, Talmai’s *an-Nasira*. Barely five miles north was Sepphoris, once largest city in the Galilee; initially destroyed by Romans subduing revolts after Herod the Great’s death; grandly rebuilt by the Great’s Roman-appointed son, Tetrarch Herod Antipas, as his capital.

Nazareth, some 16 miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee in the once-burgeoning, cosmopolitan Greco-Roman region, was now a city divided literally in two: an Israeli section and a Palestinian section—

If the biblical Apocrypha were believed, an-Nasira had been home of Jesus’ mother’s seemingly affluent parents: father Joachim and mother Anna, who chose to dedicate their precious daughter, heir seed of Aaron and David, to Temple preservation when she was only three. How different that version from the common, poor villagers’ family version....

Judging by Issa's happy anticipation of lunch, he knew Nazareth well. He easily chose a street vendor and then searched out a small patch of ground under a tree. Delilah was not disappointed by the *shwarma*, an Arabic-style pita bread wrap of shaved meat--this one lamb with hummus, tomato, and cucumber topped with a luscious sauce. While she ate, she became absorbed in people-watching, especially women, imagining how she would accustom herself to the events and lives into which they had been born.

Issa seemed to catch the drift of Delilah's thought. "It's especially hard for Palestinians in this 'digital age,' still strangled in history, to be made so aware of the western world. But *believe me*," he put his hand over his heart, "many like me recognize that Israel has established its' existence;" and crumpled up the last of tinge of vengeance in the paper that had held his schwarma.

"What total confusion there is even on what's *meant* by 'Palestine'. Nineteen twenty-two to 1948, during the British Mandate, it meant everything known now as West Bank, Israel, and Gaza 'Strip;' and a person living on any of it then had 'Palestinian' citizenship no matter ethnic origin or religious affiliation."

Delilah took a cigarette from her pack, which she didn't extend toward Issa. When she had offered it to him early in the trip, it met an emphatic (*perhaps a bit too emphatic?*) decline. *Poor dear*, Delilah had thought. *Quitting, are you?* She said nothing then or now, despite perceiving a hungry little look.

Issa turned away at the flick of Delilah's lighter. Then, apparently having mastered temptation, he began where he had left off. "*Palestine*...fast-forward to the late '90's and 'Oslo Accords,' the name's limited to the West Bank and Gaza population centers under a quasi-'s National Council adopted a 'Palestinian Declaration of Independence.' Still *de facto*, of course,

it unilaterally established a ‘State of Palestine,’ referencing the U. N.’s 1947 partition plan that had embraced the same region as the British Mandate--“

“Which included the now Jewish state.”

“Uh huh. As entrenched Palestinians say, *from the river to the sea*--”

Delilah held up her hand. “I misspoke when I said ‘Jewish’. I should have said ‘Hebrew.’

Issa drew back his head. “How so?”

“Both the word ‘Jewish’ and the word ‘Arabian’ make for confusion, I think. When after Solomon died the kingdom split in two, the northern one, roughly north central to south, was named *Israel*, with the *Judah* kingdom south of that. The word ‘Jewish’ came from ‘Judah’--*Old Testament* ‘Yehudith’, the south kingdom, which lasted a while after Assyrian conquered the north’s capital of Samaria around 700 b.c. The south held on in various ways—oh, maybe some 150 years—before Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar, although it was given much grief in the interim by then-Egypt.”

Delilah stopped to field-strip the end of her cigarette and dropped the butt in her pocket. “The confusion itself is confusing. A person of Hebrew blood need not be ‘Jewish’ by religion, while a person who is an ‘Islamist’ is expected to be of ‘Arabian’ blood, Arabian employed also for a multiplicity of ethnicities.”

Issa put a period on it. “You get that picture very well I think.” By then, his will power evaporated, he nodded a question toward Delilah’s cigarette pack lying between them and, after a return nod, he hastened to take one. Delilah handed him her lighter,

“You might still want to ask, who exactly *is* a ‘Palestinian?’ Issa blew out a long, contented smoke-filled breath. “Take your pick: someone born in ‘Palestine’ pre-1918; *or*,

someone of any ethnicity who was a citizen before and/or under the British Mandate--the meaning then being regional, not ethnical.” He took another deep inhale. “Then, there’s philosopher Immanuel Kant’s 1700’s definition of European Hebrews, as ‘the *Palestinians* living among us.’ Finally,” he got to his feet and stretched, “the Palestine National Charter was amended by the PLO National Council in 1968 to define Palestinians as ‘those Arab nationals’ who until 1947 normally resided in Palestine; and anyone born of a Palestinian father after ’47 *also* was Palestinian, regardless where persons in either category were residing.”

Delilah put the cigarettes away and also got to her feet. “Talk about a round-robin--’Palestinian’ there meaning as stated in the Palestinian Declaration of Independence.”

“Correct--the Charter also considering Palestine an indivisible territorial unit with the boundaries of the British Mandate.”

“But there’s that term, ‘Arab,’ in the Charter.”

“That means *Arabic-speaking* Palestinians, regardless religious affiliation. Hebrews of Palestine also were included as ‘nationals,’ but limited to those ‘who had normally resided in Palestine until the beginning of occupations.’ Since creation of the Israel state, its non-Hebrew citizens identify themselves in various ways--‘Israeli,’ ‘Palestinian,’ and, yes, ‘Arab.’ Except, what’s in a name?” Delilah heard for a third time in recent days.

Issa turned aside. Delilah couldn’t decide whether the look on his face was chagrin or disgust; but when his face turned back to her, the expression had been replaced by sadness. “Yet, you see...how I continue to be *perceived*?” He gave a childish scuff at the ground. “Ehh, it’s ludicrous to dwell on, that time-worn clinging to the concept of a one-religion territorial nation.” *Shades of Caleb’s mother*, Delilah thought.

“Ironical and sad,” she said as they walked to the parked van. “Israel was created when displaced Hebrews were territorially bereft and now ancient brothers are in the same boat--“

“Three-and-three-quarter-million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, alone; Jordan, an estimated two-and-three-quarter million; Chile, near twice that; Syria, close to half-a-million; and Lebanon, approaching that—“

“And my country?”

“Comparatively, not many--some seventy thousand; the same for Egypt; but an additional fifty thousand in Kuwait, Brazil, and Honduras; about half that in Yemen and Canada and maybe half again that, in Colombia and Australia. That’s between ten and eleven million persons, more than half of them state-and-citizenship-less.”

He unlocked and opened the van’s front passenger door. “But come. Before another 20 miles have gone by, we’ll be sailing on the sea!”

It had pleased Issa that Delilah liked his lunch selection, but it perplexed him that she showed no great interest in Nazareth tourist sites. Before lunch, however, she had walked with him through the Church of the Annunciation--brilliant stained glass windows interspersed with branching stone arches under a marble dome. Steps at left inside the church led down to a grotto shrine, appointed simply with a table altar where pilgrims knelt in prayer.

Walls around the church’s lovely interior garden were filled from all around the world with paintings and mosaic depictions of Jesus’ mother. Realistic to abstract, each accorded to its’ artist’s heritage and imagination.

Delilah had restrained her eagerness to attack her private Galilee quest. However, as Tiberias, a placid city with a cosmopolitan look, rose regally over “Lake Chinneroth,” the Sea of

Galilee, she graciously allowed Issa to take her for a lake ferry ride. When the boat pulled from the quay she realized just how arid so much of the past days had been. Reveling in a stiff breeze over blue-jade water silvered by the sun, she retraced where the path in so short a time had taken her: from far-flung east desert to the south of cave-dwelling Nabataeans, where ancestral mothers had swaddled their infants tightly against scorpion and snake bites; past where Jericho's *Tel-el-Sultin* ruins dated to 1750 b.c., 400 years before the Exodus--to here, *Jesus' home region--*

Toward the Syrian coast north were the ruins of Ugarit, home of the Goddess *Anat*, Jeremiah's "Lady of Heaven, Mistress of All Gods," immortalized in tablets found at the site. And just northeast of there was found "The Galilee Man," most ancient of all human skulls found in the Levant, and the only one from the Lower Paleolithic period some 300,000 years in the past.

Despite the pleasures of being at sea, however, Delilah was far from forgetting her private mission. Looking toward the opposite shore she let herself be seized by the persona of Mary Magdalene, Peter leaning on the tiller of his boat, a bothered look to his face as he watched the aura cast by the setting sun around two figures at the prow....

Back in the van Delilah immediately proposed what Issa considered a fruitless expedition. To him she presented a unique contradiction as women went; she certainly could be determined! *Like a male in female disguise*, he thought, without contemplating it a possible oxymoron--*capable of behaving and speaking like both woman and man--*

Delilah pulled out her map. "Here," she pointed. "I want to go here."

"There?" Issa, mystified, was querulous. "*Migdal?* There's nothing there but a Hebrew settlement," he said a bit peremptorily.

“There’s something I want to check out near there--I think an ancient site that isn’t well known. I want to give it a try.”

At a small Hebrew settlement near the Galilee? Nonetheless, Issa with his customary courtesy took to the road. Delilah turned her head toward the window and smiled. Issa unwittingly neatly had been roped into being a biblical private detective’s amiable scout....

John had awakened at 4 a.m. that morning to the body’s pain...*too much walking yesterday...damn lumbar nerves!--caught between vertebrae....*

He arose from the bed, opened the window, and pushed out the paint-worn shutters to a sky hint of dawn. Earth still had some 14 degrees to turn before light, he figured, noting how Mind could inject objective thought into the subjective mood. Normally he would have smiled at the mental interjection, but a lean on the sill caused pain at base of the spine that tightened his lips and reminded him of his age.

The street below was vacant of life. Parked cars lining it looked coldly strange, as if knowing that, although submissive to, they were not condescending fully to the human animal. *This is going to be the last deal I make*, John told himself again. Abruptly he flicked the curtain and turned from the window. He hadn’t counted on *her--*

How she refuses the negative!--a feature, judging by his accompanying indulgent smile, that he found warming.

“*It’s got to happen!*” That was what she said. “*Imagine the volumes on library shelves one day--chronological compilations of Collective Consciousness from its origins through all the*

god-concepts Humankind needed in struggling with Nature--warrings for supremacy over resources, misunderstandings of language, the creep toward control of instincts.....”

It was the visage her face assumed when she spoke thus, looking off but not seeing the scene before her; as if, instead, on some vision that reflected light of divine truth to her eyes.

Issa’s taxi had carried moneyed-enough tourists many times north to the Galilee Sea--‘lake’ the more accurate term for that seven-and-a-half by 13-square-mile body of inland fresh water. Once known as “Gennesareth,” ancient fishing boats had crossed it heavy with bounty; now both its water and industry were as reduced as was Man’s recall of its history.

Yes, Issa had done the Galilee tour countless times; he knew every place of tourist interest there was. Now here was today’s patron, a singular woman of middle age whose years dissipated when one looked into her eyes, who wished him to take her *where?*

“See?” he put his finger on the map. “There’s Migdol, some four miles north of Tiberias. *Migdol, Migdal*—however it’s pronounced; it means *tower* in Hebrew--just a little community.”

But it’s in the area of “Magdala!” Delilah fought against, did not utter the exclamation.

“You’re not confusing this Migdal with the old Arabian district of Ashkelon, on the south coast?”--Issa was feeling a bit testy—“where a lot of Russian immigrants went after the ‘48 war, most of them later living in Gaza?”

“No, I’m not.” Her voice, adamant, reminded Issa she was the paying customer.

“Okay--Migdal it is!”

However, “See?—nothing more,” Issa insisted again when they arrived at the small, neatly-ordered community of Migdal some four miles north of Tiberias. The only soul in sight

was an old man at a corner shop near the gated entrance. “Go,” Delilah urged. “Ask him where is *Magdala*.”

“If you can’t fight ‘em, join ‘em,” Issa thought as he made a quick u-turn, hopping out almost before the car stopped moving. Delilah saw the man apparently give directions back toward the lake.

“He said we’ll come to a fork in the road,” Issa said, foot again on the gas pedal, “and to be sure to keep to the left.” The man had neglected saying, however, that they would meet two forks. Issa first took the wrong one, only to come upon a fruit-packing shed.

“It’s got to be around here somewhere,” Delilah said.

“What must be?”

“I’m not sure, a place...some kind of place.”

Again at Delilah’s urging Issa stopped and queried two men within the shed. She saw much deliberation, and when Issa slid back into the driver’s seat he was displaying a little excitement.

Back on the rutted dirt road, at the second fork they spied they spied a small, weather-worn and nearly hidden sign in the brush--*Magdala Beach!* A left turn there took them to what looked like a prison compound: a large piece of ground surrounded completely by a chest-high stone wall topped by steel fencing. In the compound’s center were stone ruins that looked to be foundations of ancient structure.

Delilah would recall later that the dashboard clock said exactly 4 p.m. when she jumped from the car to the only visible entry--two heavy iron, green-painted padlocked doors, each bearing a large gold-painted cross of Eastern Orthodox type.

A dog inside that ran menacingly barking toward the doors swiftly was halted by the site's caretaker, a gorgeous young man with crystal-blue eyes swept by languorous lashes. Issa interpreted the Arabic for Delilah as she asked, and the caretaker responded to her question. "Yes, it is true. This was the house of Mary Magdalene."

Issa was enthralled. How was it in all his tourism he never learned of this site? Now he had more to offer patrons! Delilah bit her tongue while he pursued more details from the caretaker. "What's he saying?" she asked finally.

"Well..., according to this gentleman, this place did not...uh...did not have a good reputation," Issa replied. *The same legend*, Delilah thought; *but had truth or maleness laid its' cornerstone?* "He said Mary Magdalene was so taken by Jesus' message," Issa continued, "that she went off with his troop and never returned."

There was no question that in ancient days this out-of-the-way site, above a little cove of the Galilee, would have been well known to local fisherman of the lake waters. *So, which was it?—Mary of Magdala, an independent wealthy liberal owner of a hostelry with a view of the lake, a place where fishermen could find a meal, drink, and restful camaraderie? Or, Mary Magdalene, the "Madam?"*

"May I enter?" Delilah asked.

More quiet conversation passed between the caretaker and Issa until the latter turned to her with an answer. "No, we can't go in. The site's kept closed because it's dangerous."

Dangerous? Delilah peered again through the fencing--weeds among stones; *dangerous?* Why just walking the pathways of the Old City was an hundredfold more dangerous than *this*.

"He's very sorry," Issa concluded his report. "One only can enter by making arrangements with this gentleman *after* approval of the Bishop of Tiberias."

Wow. *No time for that!*

There was nothing for it but to head back to Jerusalem...

Issa skirted the lake to take Route 90 south, along the west side of the Jordan. Delilah had been permitted to take photos through the compound's fence, but disappointment festered some 12 miles until the van reached Scythopolis again, and mind piped Maxwell's correct pronunciation of its original name...

Beit She'an, strategic site commanding entrance to the Jezreel Valley, and on the ancient trade route from the Mediterranean coast across and on to Damascus. Ten miles east of it had been *Jabesh-Gilead* of King Saul's time, when victorious Philistines hung Saul's and his sons' bodies on Beit She'an's wall. Then there was that relief at Karnak, celebrating a once capture of Beit She'an by Pharaoh Shishak; and during David and Solomon times it was one of the 12 royal supply districts....

Issa stopped in town to replenish their water supply and Delilah was able to use a public restroom. When she returned to the van, the sun at her back, he took pleasure in watching the age-belying silhouette and graying tresses saturated gold by the light. However, as Delilah unselfconsciously re-sat herself and rode next to him, sunlight had not layered away all iciness from her blue eyes. When Issa pointed and called out, "Look—Mount Gilboa!" she, sunk in thought, barely turned her head....

Too many legends surrounding this region well-walked by that historical man_of many names: Yehohshua, Yeshua, Yeshu, Jehohshua, Joshua, Jeshu, Issa, Iesus, Jesus! One claims that before his prominence in Palaestina he had been to India. And the stories about the Magdalene!--that before she died she climbed Mount Ararat hoping to see Noah's Ark!

According to that myth, a fierce storm came; but all was stilled where she stood, a window opened in the heavens, and a shaft of light enveloped her; another, that a writing buried in the sands of the Nile detailed how, as she was lifted from Earth, the hands that reached out to receive her were those of “brothers—Jesus and Mohammed!”

Some 40 miles south of Scythopolis Delilah spied a sign for Gilgal—

Which Gilgal?

Through another checkpoint, a sign for Ma Mixmas—

Might that be toward the “ravine of Michmas,” where Saul encamped against the Philistines? And why is this called ‘Middle East?’ If there’s a ‘Far East’ and a ‘Middle East,” wouldn’t that make Europe the ‘Near East?’

At *that* point, Delilah accepted that Mind had reached *max*.

Twelve hours from Jerusalem in old Judah through old Samaria to Galilee and back....

Issa was a feeder on the wind, loving it best when it came from the west, off the sparkling Mediterranean, beyond the confines of his being. It came now through the van’s open windows. He took a deep breath; the air’s caress wiped away all irritation from a last identity checkpoint, reminding him of the soft touch of his little daughter’s fingers across the day’s stubble, when night brought him home--

Home! Home after another long day; up the narrow stairs to the tiny back porch, under the laundry fluttering over neat clutter that their small apartment could not hold; the beckoning smell of cooking food, conscious on reaching the open door of muscles under bristle moving flesh into a smile. *Home; safe; granted, one more blessed night!*

Delilah's stream of consciousness, meanwhile still was sputtering. *Migration, emigration, resettlement...centuries of demographic mixings under one or another hegemonic empire...never a record of commonweal peasants left on the land....*

Her hair was sticky on her shoulders. She wound and pinned it up with the barrette ever-present in her pocket. Pertinent now to her thoughts would have been the quotation Maxwell had read to her from Bernard Lewis: "*Clearly in Palestine as elsewhere in the Middle East, modern inhabitants include among their ancestors those who lived in the country in antiquity. Equally obviously the demographic mix was greatly modified over the centuries by migration, deportation, immigration, and settlement. This was particularly true in Palestine.*"

What Delilah did recall was Max's remark, "The people survive in their customs and manners." Lifelong ties to the land of her own 'roots,' and any persisting effects of *her* ancient tribal origins, were inconceivable to Delilah, "first-generation" American; the difference being, an immigrant descendent satisfactorily resourced and opportuned, opposed to a refugee having nothing, going nowhere. But descendant also of self-exiles who, having seen the writing on the wall, had enough resources to get out early? Hadn't her father and his siblings been and done just that, before World War I?

Maxwell had read another quotation to Delilah: "*Early ancestors of some of today's Palestinians no doubt are Canaanites, Philistines, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Idumaeans, Nabataeans, and Samaritans. In later periods, intermarriage with conquering peoples such as Greeks, Romans, Arabians and Turks merely added to the genetic mix.*" She wasn't sure she remembered the writer--Kermit Zarley?--only how well it had married with Peter's description in the *Book of Acts*, about the multitude of men in Jerusalem from all the then-known extremities of the world—"Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judaeans, Cappadocians, Pontians,

Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylinians, Egyptians, Libyans, Cyrenians, Romans, Cretans, and Arabians”....

Delilah shook it off; it was time to revive her assignment. She shifted herself straighter and turned a bit toward Issa. “So your dad’s a *Nasrani* and your mom’s Hebrew? That’s an unusual combination.”

“If we rest on words of both my paternal and maternal great-grandmothers, as quoted by surviving family elders, my father’s bloodline reaches up to Lebanon and the Phoenicians, and my mother’s, to the Greco-Roman Hebrews.” Delilah’s mind began to ponder Philip’s request to bring to Jesus certain Greeks asking to meet with him; but Issa interrupted with a laugh. “My father’s father liked to snort that, genetically, *all* humans are *mongrels*.”

Route 90, all the way down through Jericho to route 1 and past the last checkpoint, Issa’s gladness as the van began the moderate climb to Jerusalem was uncontained. “Ah,” he exclaimed, as the van took the first hilly street, “*so* happy to be back in Jerusalem! I *love* Jerusalem!”

Delilah patted his shoulder. “You feel about it the way I do, about San Francisco, where I was born.”

Part Seven

THE ARCHETYPES

The sun angling across temple mount already was sharp enough to eat Polaroid. The alien man was oblivious to it, mind full of the coming ‘meeting.’

Until now, “John” had pigeonholed human beings in two groups, ‘moral’ and ‘immoral,’ whether naively or sophisticatedly. This woman, however, definitely defies categorization, he thought, as he took a table at the open-air café. Never considering himself a stereotypical male, he nonetheless had found conversation with her unexpected....

Delilah meanwhile was ascending the stepped stones toward the Damascus Gate. The market pavement was being swept new-morning clean, a hubbub of merchants and families setting out wares anew, an old city’s ‘Farmers’ Market.’ *Change it to an iconic park in a burgeoning small town of educated values and I could feel back home*, Delilah thought, and then saw John’s wave.

He stood to greet her. “Yesterday went well, I hope, and a good night for you?”

“Yes, thanks.” Delilah shifted her eyes from the comfort of his gaze. “Sleep was great and breakfast will be wonderful.”

He waited silent until she was brought coffee, his body and countenance placidly assured, as if nothing of any note was the cause of their *tete-a-tete*. She lifted her cup to her lips; she, too, needed to be patient and was, until “John” finally shifted position and looked at her directly.

“I’ve thought a lot about our conversations day-before-yesterday. I rarely have a chance to talk about the situation here. Besides, whenever at a point of exploding and thinking I *will*, I realize no one here needs more misery added to what the day already holds.”

Delilah replaced her cup on its saucer. “Defenseless human beings, thrust before Norman Rush’s ‘hellmouth?’” she supplied.

Was this a test? If so, John thought, *one I can pass*. “The mouth of Hell opening right in front of them without warning and thought no fault of their own’...yes. But in this case, it could be said that History gave ample warnings?”

“Totally useless; asinine, even--“ Delilah couldn’t believe she was saying this to a veritable stranger, *especially* this one--“to waste breath trying to remind leaders of how much world misery would cease, if Humankind took full responsibility for its existence.”

“Which doesn’t require the need to *deny* a God.” He ventured another quotation. “Just foregoing credence to a stripped screw of theological scholastics’.”

Delilah, her stomach grumbling for the upcoming omelet, both was impressed and distressed, interested but anxious. At the same time she saw a different appetite in John’s eyes. Unknown to her, he was basking in a little *déjà vu*--youthfully stone-headed times with nothing to do; all ‘living’ still ahead; free to ponder an all-encompassing All, wherein he would be judged by Its question, *how have you sculpted Me?*

He reached across the table and covered her hand with his. “I want you to answer a question.” He then lifted his hand command-like. “How do you think of me; simply someone who can further your aim...nothing more?”

Jung said that the Anima produces moods and the Animus, opinions; but conditioning determines types, Delilah thought. The saying that one oughtn’t tell a child something ‘before its

time' could be extended to an adolescent; and, in the opinion of her Animus, that was what Man was, still, when it came to—

“Everything I need for myself now only I can give to myself,” she hemmed away. He let it go at that, remained silent.

Delilah poured a bit of milk into her saucer, bent and placed it beneath her chair for the resident kitten lurking there. Then, enjoying breakfast in a continuing silence, she watched the current day's life at and beyond the café: serious-faced boys hard at work lugging a wagon of bottled water up the stone steps; the passing somber-faced young mothers weighed down by their all-covering garb, newborn in arms and one or two toddlers in hand. Now and then a spy of high-heels shoes beneath a robe, or a colored scarf or peek of blouse, that made her wince in empathetic reminder of her own young womanhood...*when there was so much one wished to have, and to do....*

“Terrible.” He halted her reverie with a culmination of his own. “Look--” he turned on his chair and pulled Delilah's focus above the street scene to the tangled maze of antennae on clustered roofs beyond, “Cable television all over—22 channels.” He slouched back around and laconically rested an elbow on the table. “Children see so much more than parents can give.”

He realized he almost had said, “*owners can give.*” *Well*, he thought—*horror to conceive!-- wasn't that what some procreators in distant parts still were forced to become?*

Delilah had observed that television in the mid-east fundamentally was no different from home, perfect families in chic garb pristinely enjoying (or humorously long-suffering) up-beat depictions of life; but she refrained from commiserating television glut. She was feeling oddly cynical. “You think too much,” her sister fondly said more than once--*as if one can stop Mind's fixed nature*. Delilah never before had asked hers, as she did now, to conjecture “cynicism”

either a universal character *potential* or choicelessly congenital. She decided the first, and that she should avoid it in the need to feel this “John” out.

“I like believing that crass television eventually will disappear, along with the baser of human traits.”

He toyed with his teaspoon and tilted his head slightly. “Nice thought to live with.”

“Not so rosy...knowing all that would-be-blessed souls will need to endure while history repeats itself!” Intensity of voice was unintended, but she did not stop; “and all the while, a ‘god’ waiting to mete out punishments.”

“So it takes another six thousand years. Under the ‘evolution of collective consciousness theory,’ look at the progress!”

She knew he was being facetious but took the bait. “True, the highest west society may not properly value workers in all the tasks necessary to a reasoned, civilized society; but, the *concept*, slavery, has been expunged at that level.” She was inclined to go back farther, to that major step over human sacrifice, but only ended with, “And birth control is making headway.”

He contained a snort. “I’ll grant you, our ancestors were prolific--thousands for massive armies; but what else to do with burgeoning populations--”

“Nicely captured in that biblical line, ‘in the Spring—’”

“‘When Kings went forth with all their armies’,” he finished the quotation. “So, per your theory of an eventual evolutionarily enlightened human collective, the need for bodies for war is to be....” He stopped, and Delilah saw his eyes follow the snaking past of his chair of a young tourist’s bun-riding skirt.

Damn. Isn’t it also still that way?--they get you talking and then—

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Is to be wiped out--” he continued--“that is, given...” He stopped again, eyes still moving, “a lot of time.” When he looked back and saw Delilah’s expression he chuckled. He moved his waist against the table and pulled his shoulders over it, his face tilted close to hers. “As Bret Harte wrote,” he whispered--and she found herself thinking how sweet could be kisses—“Inattention can be the highest form of civility.”

Skepticism or Stoicism? Delilah gave her head a small shake; then remembered she had to be nice, and smiled. “You said it perfectly.”

Expanding daylight had begun to play shadows where they sat. Whether actual or imagined, of a sudden instead of a simple visage of “John” Delilah saw an image of pathos that automatically pierced maternity. She looked up past him, and found herself telling a story, like a mother wishing to distract her distressed child. The ‘story’ she told was her own....

Briefly she told him some truth of her life--her ‘fling’ with Academe; more particularly, her flinging *from*. “Folks believing in free will would say I might have *chosen* better.”

“Alas, still we pine that nature-spurred self who now would be able to play life to greater joy?”

Delilah lighted a cigarette, smiling around it, eyes telling him he had hit a mark. She lifted the cigarette away. “Anyhow,” she blew the smoke off to the side, “two years ago I opened my closet door to a dead persona. The individual standing before it wondered that she had existed at all.” The remainder she did not say...*teetering on the far edge of the ‘American Dream,’ at the end of another ‘System of Things’--the valley of the Future as dim as the view from Lot’s unnamed daughters’ cave; then, Bishop; and, now, history slapping me full face?*

Delilah's patience, however, was running out. "Can I at least get you to admit, so far as History *has* gone, that as Time re-affects more individual consciousnesses, there can be another 'Enlightenment?'"

John lifted and dropped, then shrugged his shoulders, "All right. I will agree. We'll save breath not talking about children bearing bombs in this time of fragmented collective consciousness--those who wouldn't be, was their last potential reason for existing at all not becoming a servant of 'God,' thinking to save the forest by burning new growth; and," he sniffed hard, "*only coincidentally* becoming psychological and material fodder for self-interested powers."

He pushed his plate aside and drew his coffee nearer. "An end to Cyrus; an end to Darius, Alexander, Julius Caesar, and all 'imperial' names regardless title before, between, and since—all the changing borders of peoples; and then 'empires' expanding beyond capacity to contain *themselves and* care for those that flocked to them...and, *then*"--his voice lifted, but stopped.

He took a cigarette from her pack. "And now, onward?--" he flicked the Bic, "to what end." Delilah could imagine an Aurelius—

"Here I am," he continued, "--drinking coffee, smoking, knowing where my next meal is coming from, knowing my bed is waiting for me; while all around the world are people trudging roads with their last possessions on their backs, children with lice in their hair and eyelashes and empty bellies, eating mud cakes; thirsting--*what a pile of--*" he hesitated; decided not to use the word for defecation in vain. "While over and above them is a plenitude of egos that have it all and think they know what Life's about.

“The way I see it is,” he took out his wallet, “what good is it to let oneself be, as one ancient ‘messenger’ is pictured, a bleeding heart. Radicality to terrorism rides on convoluted logic. The *order* Marx envisioned may have been untenable, but substantially he was right--a society is doomed if it never proceeds to classlessness in valuing its’ whole, institutionalized religion contributing too much to the morass.” He turned his head sharply with a smirk. “But don’t go label me a ‘Marxist.’ The label’s too much misunderstood.”

True, Marx may not have been fully understood, Delilah considered--like Freud’s terms and concepts of states of Mind got distorted in translation from east to west through language alone.

At that point, however, Delilah felt a little chill; how being with this man could make her forget Caleb’s photograph, and the reason she had given for her presence in Jerusalem. Wasn’t her ‘social’ data-gathering done? Copious notes had been finished the preceding evening, together with a first proposal to the Division: float a grant program to subsidize a global group of university women to recompile world history from the female perspective, including *scriptural* texts.

Other Division members would find it fanciful, but she knew Max would be on her side; and (although she tried never to consider why) she always had believed he would be. But here, now, bottom line (*that ‘added’ assignment! The promise to Caleb!*), what would *Maxwell* think?

Well, a *man* in the same position shouldn’t hesitate!

Delilah took a deep breath. “This conversation’s gotten a bit out of the league I intended, I think.”

“It’s okay,” John shrugged. (*That knowing smirk again?*) “So we both know that politics isn’t a science. It’s a theatrical sports ring where team meets team” (*a beguiling smile!*), “and gladiator, gladiator.” He stood. “We walk a while now.”

He took her arm at the two stairs to the street. “An answerable conscience, on the other hand,” he paused to consider both directions, “is not a statistical thing.” Sadness crossed his face again. This time Delilah unexpectedly thought of Galileo when “Inquisitors” smothered the cosmology contrary to the then-leading Franciscan and Dominican orders--the “West World’s then major owners of Divine creation,” Englishman John Milton referred to them, after a visit to Galileo.

The head covering of Delilah’s present companion, however, was far from the seventeenth century and needed more than one word to describe--close-rib-knitted yarn resembling thick dark hair. A few gray-tipped strands curled behind the ears....*crystalline lenses that could be fully-faceted diamonds, the irises around them seeming to change hue with his thoughts....*

With two halves of Delilah’s mind struggling over her conduct, she wasn’t aware of the youth who climbed to the café until John stopped to greet him. She turned..., and saw Caleb’s son!

John, smiling, immediately said something in the youth’s language, of which Delilah caught sound of just one word--‘*tontin?*’ Yet she had the feeling that the something said was like, “You’ll enjoy this woman; she’s something of a joker.” Was it meant as inviting, or to convey some other meaning?

Caleb had not mentioned either his son's name or age. The boy (or rather, young man) looked to be at least 20. His lanky slightness, narrow face, and long thin nose were the same as in the photograph but his deep-set dark eyes, older; more penetrating.

John, one hand on the young man's shoulder, the other palm-up toward Delilah, said with a wink at her, "This is Miz Dee. She is an American." He pulled the young man closer and a bit toward her. "This is Jalam" (*--like his grandfather!*)—"but he prefers 'Little John.'"

"Happy to meet you, Little John," Delilah said, extending her hand. He took but held it only briefly, with a perfunctory nod and what barely passed for a smile.

Delilah chose an opener. "'Big' John" (*--a wink at him--*) "has been very good to forgive my knowing so little about the problems in your country. But I am learning a great deal and much about its long history--"

"Just more than five thousand years, on record." This expression just missed a sneer. "Well, okay, maybe only *three* thousand, before the blue grave of Arun."

'Aaron', Arun'--'Harun'? Do I breathe in or out, when I say it? Delilah tried. "Aaron—(*breath in--*) *Ah-roon*, (*breath out--*) *Ha-roon*—how many ways is it pronounced? But you mean, some still prefer going back before Ibrahim, back to Noah? "

Deep inside, the boy was impressed. "Now you're beginning to sound like my grandmother." He relaxed, pulled a chair near to the café's steps, and slouched back. "So when do *you* think the 'Great' divide happened?" He crossed a leg.

Ah, 'Little' John is aptly named; the test starts immediately. "'Great' divide?" Delilah inquired as if not knowing.

“You want to know, on the record? A couple of generations at least after Noah, the weather settled enough for survivors to revive on this globe’s highest heaps. Here, around the time of Ibrahim, there were plenty of family clans, but just two regionally dominant *tribes*.”

Delilah knew he meant the “*and the land was divided*” thing--the Noah-Shem-*Joktan* and Noah-Shem-*Peleg* thing. Hopefully he would not take it *etcetera ad nauseum* down and through all subsequent ‘divisions.’ She felt sure, on the other hand, that he wouldn’t say anything about all the daughter-mothers in-between and decided to pursue it.

“We might talk about tribal *mothers*.” She didn’t add, *or of what historian Josephus termed* ‘genuine’ *offspring*. She asked, “What tribes does the record say *they* were from—the mothers of the many sons of sons of sons, some of whom are recorded by the names of their *maternal* grandfathers?”

“Laughable, all of it.” “Little John” haughtiness reappeared. “Hagar and Sarah,” he scaled the words in bored sing-song. “Ridiculous!” It was apparent they were the most that at the moment he could name, which was no gauge, however, of his general intelligence as he tipped the chair to its back legs and pontificated. “Those who believe themselves in the know fail to account for all of Ibrahim’s ‘many nations’ in-between. They are ignorant that prophesy is something corroborated after the fact, and one dynasty after another ascends and then descends into ignominy, each merely ending another epic.”

It being obvious that a Delilah-Jalam match could be a long one, “Big” John decided it wise to break in and stepped down to the pavement. “I’m glad you ran into us, Jalam,” he said, stepping to the pavement. At the same time Delilah had gained a grip and reverted to the appropriate façade. “And I really have enjoyed talking with you!”

“You’ll need to excuse us now,” John took a few steps away; Delilah followed. “Miss Soreck and I have an appointment.”

“Sure, sure,” Little John got up from the chair. Delilah sensed he thought of a grandma-approved leave taking of an older woman but only gave her a hard nod. “I’ll see you later, then,” he addressed John, “maybe tonight.”

Delilah’s sandals threatened skidding on the still damp cobbles, as John crossed her to the dry shade. The wet shine reminded her of Dorothy Sayers’ line, “slick as a wet mackintosh.” He steadied her with a hand under her elbow. Meanwhile doubt was assailing... *“Big” John?—how silly am I going to let myself be? Who am I supposed to be?—some flower child gone to seed, mono-oogenetically transformed into a new breed?* But they had not gone far, before she asked her enigmatic companion, “Your son?”

“No.” His look was noncommittal. “He only temporarily lives with me.”

She waited a few moments. “We have an ‘appointment’?”

“Little John’s a good boy and useful [*useful?*], but I didn’t want to waste any of our day [*our_day?*],” he said in an off-the-cuff way. “But...truthfully? Whether to be an excuse or reality, there *is* an appointment we can choose to keep, depending on you. I would prefer, however, if,” he gave a noting look all round, “as we walk, you refrain from the term you first employed.”

“It’s no wonder people need to believe in a god,” she mused, putting off answer. “Literature gets repeated to try to take us further into reality, when all that can be said already has been thought and written.”

“People want things to be different, to establish sensible purpose beyond just eating, sleeping, and...” he paused, almost having used that word again. “Well, live like fellow animals.

It's inevitable if one does live long enough, past all efforts to nail Reason, one's life can dissipate into perceived waste, probably the second righteous cause for needing a 'justifying' god. If one is lucky and manages to keep his *own* eye on the sparrow, one learns the four elements necessary for desire to be effected: time, intent, decision, and volition. Now we, today, have the first," he took her hand, "have the first, and I'll supply all that's needed of the other three."

Delilah, toes gripping her sandals, realized she had been led along an alley or two, only vaguely aware of from what direction. *Right this moment, I'd settle just knowing where I am*, she thought. It did not escape her attention, however, that she was *letting* him lead her and all the while managing to enjoy the walk and scenes passed. The Delilah of recent years was distanced, in a child-like place where melodies enter ears before one has heard anything about the music of the spheres; before every atom of conscious thought feared Hesse's described devolution into pure instinct.

Even if human animals are only half-rational, they also are half-reasoning; and that includes me, she thought; but 'Conscience' wasn't able to admit yet that this man was becoming a living magnet, seemingly not so *dangerous*. (Maxwell would admit to himself later, *I knew it!* And be painfully envious were he now to see John, walking with body curled a bit protectively at Delilah's left as if courting a sexy angel .

John, meanwhile, was making his own assessment....

The way she walks...as if oblivious of her appearance, a quality that draws male interest materially. Psychically, a bit neurotic in the intellectual sense (something easy for him to recognize). He knew it pleased her, his having said that he liked the way that she dressed—today, grey and white striped dress of long cotton, and a wide white bandeau smoothing waves back from the forehead.

It was more crowded where they were now: narrower street, different types of buildings. All Delilah could do was to keep talking. "I guess it isn't much different along here as it was in old days."

"Here it never has been anything *but* 'old days,'" replied John, who had noticed her backward glances. "In case my scintillating monologues distracted you from watching where we've come, we're in the northeast corner of the 'Muslim' quarter, not far from the Herod Gate. And this," he stopped before a three-story building, "is my place. I have one of the studio apartments on the second floor." He knew she was reacting, not showing it. "Not to worry," he shook his head, smiling. "Just better if we talk in private."

Compulsion is equal to the line of least resistance," Wilhelm Reich said; *but had he said, 'least resistance' is equal to impulse?* That which truly distinguished human from animal, Delilah often privately had pontificated, was neither less propensity toward instinct nor greater propensity toward goodness, but capacity to hold on in-between. In her present state she was oblivious to how perceived Anima reflection of the Animus' projection bound Personae to an Archetype....

It was not a bad little studio--one large room and bath, a full window in the bed-sitting room, and a cozy Pullman kitchen-dining area. John opened the shutters and Delilah leaned next to him at the window sill, surveying the neighborhood street below.

"Here we have new generations suffered by old," he remarked, then turned and dropped into one of two easy chairs that faced the window.

Delilah took the other chair and a proffered cigarette. John also took one and dug for his trusty Bic. A tin ash tray, empty and wiped, was on a small table between them. Everything was very neat.

“*En fin*, what more can the bottom of the historical barrel tell us?” He resumed after both cigarettes were lighted. “Rare are peaceful times reported. If you care about my opinion, institutional government won’t reflect Reason against Instinct until all--or at least the majority of its constituents--individually do.”

Delilah, not wanting consciously to admit it, loved the way he could reach her true persona. “You just spoke words I might have, myself--what appears to be Humankind’s willful self-inflicted misery being an unavoidable part of Its’ progress. As I recall Kant, he wrote—“

“He got into a bit of trouble, didn’t he--suggesting among other things that the inability of human conscience to consider itself *judge*, as well as self-accuser, is at the foundation of the concept of God.”

Why should Delilah be surprised that he knew philosophy, perhaps better than she? “I know little of Kant’s writings,” she admitted; “but didn’t he reason that, if and when it should come to warring, a law-prescribed citizens’ majority must consent, through representatives?”

“Interesting,” he remarked, “how teleology--imagination at the behest of human subjectivity—perforce leads theology to causation by divine design. So,” he lifted the ash tray under her ignored length of ash so she could tap her cigarette, “here we are, wishing to believe a collectively rational day will come when each person, beyond assumption of existence of a god, will see him or herself bound in a Humankind of enlightened ethics and morality.” He replaced the ash tray on the table. “In a way, you and I are a bit with the ancient Cathars there--

redemption coming from within as opposed to external dictates.” He fell quiet, smoking, openly observing her.

For a moment Delilah felt naked. “Yes, I do believe....” She extinguished her cigarette, got up, went back to the window, turned, and faced him. “But *here*, despite all my self-credited erudition, only by *being* here have I begun to gain real comprehension--Syrian-Palestinian, Jordanian-Palestinian, Egyptian-Palestinian, Arabic-(Iraq- and Saudi-) Palestinian, Persian-Palestinian--all in quotation marks, all lumped together, be they Sunni or Shi’a muslim, Western or Eastern christian, orthodox or unorthodox judaist; some territorial borders material, some ethereal--”

“With all lesser factions caught within, overrun by either guns or insults.” It seemed to Delilah that she was hearing Maxwell.

John grew more pensive. “As things stand, can any human being really expect another voluntarily to give up *home*, no matter when or how established? On another side, can any human being imagine adequate compensation for having lost the life in theirs?”

Delilah was put in mind of another thing Caleb had heard from his mother. Second only to family, *village* could be ‘nation,’ along with ‘nation’ of blood and ‘nation’ of spirit, within all of which existed ‘nations of language’--*shibboleth* versus *sippoleth*...*Yahweh* versus *Jahveh*, and--it seemed just yesterday--*baklawa* versus *baklava*. Issa, too, was right: neither *Bible* nor *Koran* could serve answer in this trampled land, eight million displaced and/or replaced souls, all yearning for one thing.

“It’s fine, I believe--” the gaze of John’s eyes direct and darker now into hers--
“determining the nature of a person with whom one may do business.”

Afternoon was drawing evening. Delilah reassumed 'herself.' "What about our appointment?"

"Oh...I haven't told you?"

No, you haven't—

'It's tomorrow.'

Tomorrow?

Never much of a drinker, the double scotch John handed Delilah then was just the tranquilizer she needed.

He *apologized*; he had enjoyed the conversation so *much* he had neglected to let her know. He laughed it off. "So I did give Jalam a true excuse after all!"

Delilah's father, true patrician soul, would speak of various ancient customs that evolved westward from Mesopotamia and India and east from the Mediterranean, and of the mingled millennia which the kingdoms of matter and minds of men and women bore equally in a quadrilineal pyramid toward One God composite—of Aton, of Yahweh, of Zoroaster, of Allah. Perhaps words pass through child-consciousness onto a vocabulary of unconscious skeletons, for she was convinced there was something original there--not that *with which*; that *within which* were words and thought united.

It wasn't just the alcohol. She looked across at John, aware of consciously projecting a yearning to be free of miasma, not caring that subconscious thought can make eyes issue invitations. He came to where she then was sitting, on the couch-cum-single-bed, took the glass from her hand, and set it on the nearby table. He drew her blouse from her shoulders, a slow and deliberate act, and the feeling traveled to her lips. It had been a long time since they had known

eagerness for a kiss, that first long kiss and...when it happened...it was like shadows running from a rising sun. Her body, denuded of its armor, lay back hungry with anticipation....

Being old was being scared, a frequent recent thought of the person named John.

Delilah was sleeping nestled in his armpit. He didn't move, not wanting to disturb her. He lay with eyes wide open, thinking....

Anxiety takes a lot out of a man--and he had known danger; but scared of non-existence? Why? Why fear not-being?

Time, he discovered, weakened psychical borders--aging's form of Jungian "enantiodromia," psyche's unconscious contents flooding susceptible Ego's tight bond with Superego and Persona; one self at the precipice, where all one could do was hang on.

I'm going to quit this 'business'! So he had been telling himself at least a year; now body had joined in. But one thing lost in the process was not to be grieved!—*the caring*....

It no longer could plague him--supposed 'civilized' societies by and large reading life from the outside, clueless as to what really went down, either in the streets (where there were some) or seats of government. Had John been in a better mood he would have had a chuckle over the word, 'seats'....

Just another time of witting Greed (at its base, unwitting over-indulgence) outwitting Reason to circumvent Ethics— GOD DAMMIT! There I GO again, sounding worse than any good-hearted man whose misfortune it be to become a politico....

Somewhere along the line, this John had ceased to feel totally alone, but he still couldn't live just one day at a time. He lived each one simultaneously thrice—It, the Fixed-Past, and the

Future–Possible, identifying with the exiled and their keepers, like the professor-turned-waiter who with a forced smile brought food to him, the secure ‘asshole’ at a restaurant table.

Posterity too, not only Empathy, was being pushed to the very back of Mind. Once he had seen himself as a fearless gladiator for Truth, believing Justice part of Truth. Instead, lives lived, he learned, were literary dissertations after the fact; no amount of posthumous laurel wreaths ever capturing the unknown soul.

He bent his neck, saw the tangled-hair top of Delilah’s head and smiled, albeit a short-lived one. *Good lord*, he thought. *How am I going to handle it?* One thing he thought had been definite, that both his mind and body were beyond complicated enticements. Now, brushes of Fate had painted her in his world. *She* could keep him from seeing life as some macabre jest in a no man’s land between joy’s skies and seas of steely morbidity

Delilah meanwhile was coming slowly back to consciousness. Morning was at its height; only an occasional breeze moved the edges of the window’s thin curtains. She adjusted her head, saw that John saw that she was awake, and instantly was back in the “dilemma.” She gave him a tender smile, but he sensed some slight withdrawal.

It would not be a smart move to question her; he was that astute where this specific female was concerned. He knew how to bring her back. He half-rolled and reached across her for his cigarette package. “So here we are,” he lay back and raised an arm around her shoulder, “mere microns in a period at the end of a sentence written more times than there have been days; both of us having had our fill of manmade institutions. The entire lot can’t produce enough salve to comfort wounds to come, much less could, already suffered.”

He struck a match and held it upright a moment. “There is not heaven and hell. There is hell and hell—the one out there,” he pointed toward the window, then put his hand on his breast,

“and the one in here.” It was not a novel but still moving line, and there was truth to it visible in him.

Delilah turned her face up to him consolingly. “I’ve had that feeling too; but you’ve been here I guess a long time, always with people devoured by circumstances.” Then the ‘agent’ part of her forced an addition. She tried a ploy, moving her head onto his chest. “I can understand why you’re involved with what you do. Truly I can.”

He gave a shake of head. “It’s the hypocrisy....” He leaned over to stub his cigarette. “Historically, *never* have it been--as I don’t need to tell *you*—faiths, themselves, in wars under the *banner of* religions--casuistry, suggesting any of it ‘holy’ on either side. So drop the word ‘muslim’,” he vented, “unless you’re going to identify other ‘occupiers,’ wherever they are, as ‘christian,’ ‘zoroastrian,’ or any other ‘religious’ label.”

Unselfconscious in his nudity he rose from the bed and lifted his trousers off the floor. Then he saw Dee watching him; and his thoughts, as if catching wind of hers, began to change....

Every human born--each incarnated consciousness--receives existence in a unique way, Delilah was thinking; *but for my path to have crossed that of this man who feels like my mental, emotional, and spiritual equal!* Nor was it insignificant, where her fundamental nature was concerned, a very being she could desire fathering children by her.

“And what of the Bedouin?”

Delilah realized John had continued speaking and she hadn’t been listening.

“*Hubris!*” He dropped the trousers and climbed back on the bed. “Thinking to drag them overnight into the western 20th century? Imagine strangers all of a sudden coming into your habitat and declaring you need to live life differently. By 1994 only a thousand Bedouin

lived still in their native Negev; possibly they're still struggling. I don't know; I gave up following reports of groups' worn-out hopes. Predictably, most of a rumbled 80,000 never got beyond destitution of sprawling desert slums around Beer Sheba."

He swirled over her, his face close to hers. "Here's something for that column you're not going to write: the first thing to be asked about a 'terrorist' is, 'what were the circumstances of his or her family?'"

Delilah's thought naturally centered on her own family by which, through generations of emigrations and resettlings, there had been conveyed a concept of laws of Humankind--some echoing 'God's' but through human reasoning alone. She spoke her thought's conclusion. "Two thousand years since Christ pitted reason against dogma, and I thought words could hasten evolution?"

"You dreamed big, Woman."

"Well..." She lifted her arms to spread her hair over the pillow, which raised her breasts above the sheet almost to their tips. "I confess my heart still remains with Kafka." She brought her arms back down to her sides, tightening the sheet across her, and quoted, "The 'Messiah' will come as soon as the most unbridled individualization of faith becomes possible."

"No more words needed than that, to say it," John acknowledged; but he was brushing a thoughtful hand across the stubble on his face.

Delilah turned her legs from under the sheet and over the side of the bed. "Isn't it 40 years almost, since Arafat at Geneva reminded the '*United*' Nations' General Assembly of *its* '*prior* affirmation of Palestinian rights'?" Her reach for her turtle-necked shirt off the chair uncovered more than just the slimness of her waist...

“And what good, his reminder,” John made a grab. She swiveled to her knees and held him at arms’ length. That is, he let her, for the moment; and she saw the way his muscles were rippling over his midsection. He knew she consciously was taunting him, and he loved it.

“*That--*” she continued, changing her hands from his arms to his chest--“since the United States-Soviet Union Resolution Number 181 endorsed in 1947, providing for Old Canaan Land to be divided into two states, only half has been honored and that, disparately. But you know all that,” she gave him a suggestive smile and clasped her hands around his neck.

He could play this form of ‘fore-play’ too! He fell back, pulled the sheet over his face and head, and lay quiet. He knew she would wait for him to make the next move. After a few moments he said, through the cloth, “*Here* there’s no Heracles to trick the hundred-headed dragon and gain the golden apples of freedom,” and then he pulled the sheet down, a quirky smile on his face.

Still kneeling, Delilah stretched up and pulled her shirt over head and bare breasts. “Subsumption of blooded races over time is overshadowed by the Present’s clinging to antiquity,” her voice muffled. “For all that’s touted as known,” her head emerged, “Jesus’ mother in her ancient lineage may have had a bit of Scythian-occupation blood—Nazareth practically a suburb of *Scythopolis*...Hey!--” She dropped down and back beside of him, her right index finger pointing up.

“Oh, oh.” John leaned over her. “When the lady displays the John the Baptist sign you know she just got a big idea.”

“Okay, I’ll withdraw it,” she conceded and drew the finger lightly down to his navel instead, with a small suggestive laugh.

He waited.

“What I was going to say was, you’re right, it *is* facetious. I’m a generated American who never has thought about returning to old Tuscan family land, where even once hung my grandmother’s family’s coat of arms, from aristocratic days of that triangular swatch of Italy when it was a papal state. But you know?— maybe somewhere there are old deeds..,” and she had a vision of the two of them in a courtyard....

She used fingers of both hands this time, running them, barely touching the lines of his breast bone and edges of his ribs. “You could be Jesus the Anointed One, yourself, the way you speak.”

He guffawed and grabbed her hands.

“Who knows?” She thrust against his. “On the Einsteinian model, parts that made up *that* flesh and blood, by some cosmological happenstance *could* recollect.” She freed his hands and placed one over each breast. “Maybe Psyche along with it? Look at how many ‘psychical’ lives we’ve lived in these bodies alone—“

At that point, Delilah hated being reminded! She *couldn’t* lose sight of that which, if not the cause was the *reason* why she was *where* she was. She scooted herself a bit further down his torso. “I understand a body wanting to make a mark in the world. Like you said, a few do with immortal works; most people, in little ways; the damaged ones, at the worse end of the spectrum, think to do it with bombs.”

He encircled her waist with his hands, raised himself over her to his knees, and lifted her toward him. “Everyone needs *some* work to justify existing.” His hands gripped her hips firmly. “Few can accept life, their very being as a one-time thing— just one life for *this* mind, *this* self,” his hands glided down and under her buttocks...“*this body....*”

“Times I’ve wished I could be like them,” she murmured.

He lowered his head and placed a soft kiss where it made her murmur again, all pleasure.

“Oh you Einsteinium heretic, you,” he whispered between soft kisses on the surrounding skin. “You implacable but –in-your- heart-uncertain object of pure Physics....” He raised forward upon her then and the kisses were around her neck and ears and down toward her breasts but not quite reaching them--yet....

“On that question, of man’s need to war—“ hands drew her nearer while he said it, “musn’t ignore the *testosterone* factor. And, as for that disintegration,” he continued between the first opening, the first testing movements, “bet you thought I didn’t know--” restraining himself with words; wanting to make it last as he was being drawn deeper--“you’re a humble Planckian subject of $h\nu$ --made within and contained by h against νsix-point-six-two-four times 10 -to-the-power-of-minus-27, which latter...(closer, deeper!) as undoubtedly you also know...is point-26 zeros to 27 times ν --the frequency of radiation in cycles per second--“

She pushed him over, astride without having lost him, and shut his mouth with a long force, f , which from point of application proceeded through him a distance a --the result, the classic Physic’s reaction but as far from ‘work’ in its classical meaning that anything can get.

He had gone out and brought back a veritable smorgasbord breakfast. “Here..,” he lifted a half-pocketbread on a napkin and placed it carefully in her hand. Just the smell, Delilah realized how famished she was. John sat cross-legged beside her and turned on the small television in the opposite corner...a ‘terrorist’ attack--this one in England--

Delilah dropped her bread on her napkin, took the remote and turned off the set. Distanced abruptly from a lingering rapture to which she had been taken--things she would have expected only a god *could* do--*alas*...forced to remember that day’s ‘appointment.’

John thought the ‘downer’ he saw simply was due to the news report. “A ‘terrorizer’ is beyond thinking of individuals,” he said. “The blow is against a world first and foremost from which the perpetrator--as the article you’re not going to write might emphasize—“ he flashed a knowing look--“wants out, first made to believe a *meaningful* existence will be his or hers after death.”

Delilah started gathering scattered objects, aimed at restoring the room’s order. John came round, put his arms around her, and nuzzled her neck—

Impossible!—

“C’m on,” he let her go, slipped feet into sandals, ripped the coverlet off the bed, and tossed it over-shoulder. “There’s a patch of ground out back. While we persist in constructing a framework to simultaneously support material and metaphysical, we may as well get some air.”

Delilah followed him downstairs, out and around to a tiny courtyard. She dropped to her knees on the coverlet John floated over cracked pavement. He noticed how the sun through the muslin of her dress gave a gossamer sheen to the lines of her form. She, however, had been jarred back fully to the farther point of their spectral conjunction. She leaned back on her hands, back arched. *Make it casual*, she thought.

“Going to fill me in now, about our ‘appointment?’”

“‘Palestinians,’ you see, *have* no specific scripture.”

There he goes again!

He sat himself beside her and slid his side up and down a couple of times against hers. “Theirs is an unwoven tapestry of tangled threads back to the beginning of their region’s history.” When Delilah noticeably pulled away, he cupped a hand gently under her chin, turned her face to his, and whispered conspiratorially. “We’ll talk the ‘appointment’, my love, when I

know all I need.” He gave her lips a touch of a kiss. “Want to tell me the *real* reason you need my contact?”

Here come lies again.... “Alright.” Delilah heaved a sigh, sat up straighter, and assumed a resigned expression. “I work for a consortium. They believe that there’s gold under ‘dat dar ‘hill [--this scene causing the novice actress to add--], if you get my drift.” John managed to withhold even hint of a smile.

“Not an original theory, I’ll grant you that.” Dee thought of Mae West, avoided saying *mah man*, but did readjust her bust and nonchalantly reached to his breast pocket for the cigarette pack.

“Before every climax [he had to work to keep from saying] “Before *this* climax”], one must get to the base of its desire.”

Dee thought of Sean Connery--*now that was coy!* But so could she be. “I believe the proposed arrangements are capable of being *most* satisfactory.” She even, for the last two words, first flicked her ash and then smiled at him.

“Next, then,” he held on to his authority, “only that one site has been selected, of the three potential groupings of roughly three-score places where valuables were hidden, according to script on a copper scroll found in a cave in the vicinity of Qumran--” He looked away, controlled an *and-you-thought-you-knew-it-all* smirk—“28 miles south of Hebron and about a mile west of the Dead Sea, wasn’t it?--in the challenged region once occupied by ‘Kenites’? ”

Caleb! Delilah thought, but more: *his son; I won’t let myself forget again. So “John” knows all about the scroll. Well, all that does is make my plot more plausible....*

When it came to the Copper Scroll, Delilah had ready ammunition from a long-time pet interest. But it wasn't easy, abandoning the thought (*wish?*, that those unfolded moments of a 'chance' encounter were more than a one-time happenstance.

John was running his fingers along her calves beneath the skirt, thinking, *with this woman I could give myself over again to beautiful music and the play of light upon water*. "All those tired old stories of peoples' struggling and suffering might be tolerable, if so many weren't, still. *Will you do it with me?*—he imagined saying to her--*say farewell, goodbye to our and all pasts, old hates, all other loves? Oh, we'll be missed, but not for long, and we won't have needed to die to be so, alive on some distant shore*. He ran his free hand through his hair. *Jesus! What kind of a marriage proposal would that be? And she would say what about the children I have? I wouldn't be able to be with them ever? Ostensibly I could reply [oh, sure!], It's a small world, you won't be losing them...."*

But he understood Maternal Woman. There was some of her in him too.

Delilah, steeling herself to ignore his touches, managed to stay cool and had readied her next lines. "My...uh... 'employer' proceeds, of course, on the premise that the list is genuine. As I'm sure you know, some believe the scroll's creation was a kind of ruse--inconceivable! Imagine the laborious *reverse* etching on the purest of coppers, and the entries by different hands—"

"Eminently logical, considering difficulties in selecting sites, covert extractions and conveyances of the items, etcetera--yes, yes; and your 'team' thinks it can be smarter than other scholars who have studied it."

"I didn't say there's one or any scholars on the, quote, 'team'. I personally do not believe myself smarter than anyone else on the subject. If you will deem to suspend your acuity—" she

caught herself and began again. “But it is believed that the importance of the word, ‘house’, may have been overlooked.”

“‘House’?”

“Yes, *house*, a word used variously in ancient Scriptures relating to Priesthood parishes. Under David, the word was used for ‘districts’ or ‘divisions,’ Chief Priests of which alternately rotated service as Temple High Priest--like John Baptist’s father Zechariah *who, by the way (la professora couldn’t resist explaining)*, just happened to be *serving* at Temple, during the ‘quandary’ over Jesus’ young future mother--when she refused to leave and find a husband as all its then young maids, contrary to usual custom, inexplicably of a sudden were discharged to find suitable husbands.”

“Where, exactly, is *that* said?”

“In the *Protevanglion*, not included in the Constantinian canon. If you’re interested, really...” (*here I go again, straying from the ‘plot’--*) “that book reports how Zechariah was murdered in the entrance to the temple and altar, by Herod the Great henchmen sent to get info as to whereabouts of the Law-blooded infants, that is, John and his cousin Jesus. *However* [she couldn’t resist!], far more arresting is how scholars take Jesus’ reference in the *New Testament* to a Zechariah murder some hundreds of years *earlier*, when his very own *uncle* had been murdered the same way just three decades before, in his own lifetime!”

Delilah, equally surprised at vehemence in her voice, noted John’s raised eyebrows. “I’m sorry; I do get carried away on certain subjects.... Back on point, ‘house’ at times is used for clan or dynasty, but head patriarchs that alternated as high priests had their own room-- ‘*house*’-- at Temple. It was common, you know, for exterior walls to have built-in rooms, like Rahab’s at Jericho.”

John rolled his eyes and flopped back. “Still, it isn’t known even *when* the hiding was done.”

“Right. The main estimate is only a rough range, 250 b.c. to the 70 a.d. fall to Rome, and embraces two favored times for the *stash* [she liked that word]. One, the time of, or following Queen Alexandra. When she relinquished 22 fortresses to the Pharisaic party, she kept three principal ones and their ‘treasuries;’ but she may have caused a good deal to be hidden. It’s possible Aristobulus’ partisans, when he made his play, unearthed outlying deposits to fund their cause. The other main favored time is, of course, during the Roman advance to conquest.

“But I’m sure you’re familiar [she said this as if she meant it] with the fact that the scroll’s script is in an unknown form of Hebrew; some have suggested possibly village dialects, or the work of non-native speakers.”

John reached up and tugged gently at Delilah’s shoulder. She thought she could resist *that way* he had about him but allowed herself to lie down beside him.

“How many years before Christ were Alexandra’s years?” he asked.

“Seventy-six to 67 b.c., some three decades. I’ll cut to the chase in a minute,” Delilah promised (*wasn’t it the perfect time to say that?*). “But I’ll mention a couple of last things, even if they aren’t new to you. Two or three Greek letters appear after seven items—“

“Yes.”

“With correct literary interpretation, those Greek letters convert to *drachmae*. Hasmonaeans were Greek-speaking down to their fall. Then, the writing might be taken as of lesser education and correspond with last-gasp ‘Zealot’ takeover but, again, nothing definite.” She turned toward him and searched for the cigarette package. “None of that matters, anyway. All that does matter is to know *one* place.”

“And your ‘consortium’ thinks it does?” He propped himself on an elbow to give Delilah’s cigarette a light.

She needed a few moments to think as she lay, smoking. Her next comments, pure invention, could end the charade; but there was nothing for it but to plunge right in

“As to *house*, the *New Testament* book of *Nehemiah* describes repairs made post-Cyrus on the temple walls. It names specific priests who worked ‘each *before* his *house*,’ where ‘before’ would mean the wall side of his ‘room’ facing out. Now, I *am* sure you know,” she kept tongue out of cheek, “about uncertainties about the list’s columns and syntax, plus the unfamiliar site names that redound in guesswork. But my employers....” Delilah stopped to take a deep drag on the cigarette, Guilt was beginning to ricochet in conscience.

John sat up abruptly. “Your ‘employers,’ what?”

“Consortium analysis has pinpointed two hiding places in Temple environs.” She then also sat up, in a Siddhasana posture, facing him. He took and extinguished her cigarette. “All I can tell you,” she managed to meet his stare unblinkingly, “are two words I overheard: *peristyle* and *colonnade*.”

“Coordinates would come later, not necessarily from me. My job was to find you, and to convey that the two sites together are estimated at 940 ‘talents’ of precious metal—gold and silver; a talent weight being anywhere from 25 to 75 pounds.”

Delilah extricated her legs and lay back down on the coverlet. “Now you know all that I know.” Hands clasped behind her head, she crossed her ankles, but not quick enough for John to not notice she hadn’t put on her underwear. She, meanwhile, had thought of a last thing to say. “All of this is being pursued through trusted contacts, you understand. I couldn’t give you the hiring source.”

“Given this dubious plan works, how does the hiring ‘source’ get away with the booty *if* such was uncovered, which could take quite a while in all the debris and rubble.”

Oh god, Delilah thought, *I had hoped to avoid this part*. She was prepared with an answer, but how long could she let herself carry on the deceit? “That question is one I have not been told the answer. Truthfully?—I would not like saying what I surmise.”

“I can guess,” John said, deprecatingly. “There’s going to be some unnamed armed unit to surround the place. You’re talking a *militant* operation, and no small scale a one. Oh, no one hurt—that’s always the *plan*; and with prior warning, who’d want to be in the Old City and its environs at that point anyway.

“Well...,” he rose to his feet. Delilah had to fight expelling a hard, relieved breath. “I think we can go to that appointment soon,” he said, and began to tug the coverlet from beneath her. “Let’s stop upstairs first.”

Delilah tidied her hands and hair, then sat on the edge of the bed and waited, forgetting to put on her briefs, lost to sight on the bed’s other side.

John, for whatever unknown reason, was rummaging in the closet.

Delilah was smoking another cigarette. The tin ashtray was overfull.

When one feels disconnected, everything magnifies. “War... war—*wars!*” Delilah’s words came out, appropriately, in smoke. “Insane;” she inhaled again--“words like—“ she was going to blow out *collateral damages* but John walked past, ruffled her hair, and said, “Maybe it’s all like the rainbow.”

“The *rainbow*?--that thing of beauty?”

“Maybe man’s penchant for war *is* unchangeable, like the physics that yields your rainbow.”

“I can’t believe you really believe that.” The ash tray overflowed as Delilah, choosing to be haughty, snuffed out her cigarette forcefully. “Like seawater slowly encircling Mont Saint Michel,” she intoned, “human behaviors *aren’t* subject to evolution? Like the consciously premeditated warring expeditions we talked about, before, by armies in antiquity?”

“Lots of that in *my* ancestral region’s history!--I’ll give that,” John responded, flopping down behind where she sat on the bed. “Xerxes went fighting from Persia to Athens all the way across Anatolia and Asia Minor, digging canals, building bridges--unbelievable, the enforced manpower involved.”

My god, Delilah thought, I know nothing about his heritage--Persian? What were those statistics Maxwell spouted....

Forty-seven thousand Iranian-born Hebrews; roughly 87,000 Israeli-born of fathers born in Iran; many Iranian Hebrews tracing lineage all the way back to Nebuchadnezzar’s exiles...*of course--Nehushta, and Daniel)*

John was back to mulling his own ‘predicament.’ “I can thank the cat for sealing my career,” he muttered offhandedly.

Cat? It was the first time Delilah heard a particular wistfulness in his voice. It caused her to swing up her feet and lie next to him. “Cat?”

“Too common a story,” he shut his eyes and rubbed closed fingers across his brow. “There was a mother, never in her son’s lifetime able to wear a joyous face, although in her last dysfunctional years he did feel patient love, even if it could not be from the core of him. Then there was his good friend...”

Delilah thought he might cry; but he made mind lift away; was able to say matter-of-factly, “The friend was caught in a a bomb blast and...[*torn flesh; internal bleeding--black blood coming out through tubes; days of unconsciousness!...*] she died.”

She?—

“She was a Christian missionary; mothered the young man more than his own could.”

Much as Delilah’s heart wanted to say something, or arms to envelop him, she did neither.

“Finally,” John laughed mirthlessly, another unusual display for him, “Eventually he found himself in a new country, and there was this cat--can you believe it?--a poor, starving skin-and-bones stray found its way to him. The man never felt safer than when with the cat, his last kin, on his lap. But then the cat, too, had to go and die; not because the cat was old from years--just too long lost wandering among the lost.”

Again Delilah didn’t interrupt. She was thinking of the vastness hidden from human perception. *It* cannot conceive the extent of galaxies, suns and planets. *It* cannot contemplate a next moment but brain could. At that moment a marriage of neurons in hers wanted to take his story as her own; say, *oh how I understand!* Like her, he was afraid to let himself fall in love again.

She closed her eyes a few moments and when they opened toward the ceiling, unfocused, she again *saw* the light--Brahmanism’s impersonal ‘*effulgent light beyond all sorrows*’--omnidirectionally conveying images within the very glue of existence; gravity’s invisible sustainer; its immutable presence more God to her than any so far conceived by mind.

Not a cat; it was that perception—the *facts literally lapping ‘round their feet!*—which had presaged the revolutionary change in Delilah’s life. She snuggled naturally against John, resting

a hand on his midriff, for a first time revisiting her seawater change in awareness with mild amusement....

Two thousand tons of divested plain water makes two measly ounces of 'heavy water'!
Sound, four times as fast through water.... John put his arm around her and drew her closer. *But of course 'they' had their explanation: every oxygen atom had to have its "neutron" as well as a "proton," and each electron, anti-electron?—that ever-descending family of proposed particles with silly names which, if permanently isolatable from each other, it would take an eye as big as the sun to see....*

As the Bishop had analyzed, recognition by 'peers' no longer mattered; she had *done* it; 'it' could be left at that. She *could* live totally each moment. All she asked was that the powers that were—whatever they were—hold her children safe, in a world replete with risk and catastrophes.

She turned her face to John's shoulder. "Have I told you about my father? He raised sisters and brothers, protected his naïve wife, and cared for his widowed mother until she died." Her voice was sensuous against the skin of his neck. "Then, when I was four or five, he fell ill. What seemed to me overnight, that ebullient spirit which had lifted me high with laughter stopped shining on me. It was then, I think," she found herself *saying* it, for the first time, "knowledge became the one thing that couldn't be taken from me."

And what fortunate 'synchronicity', she thought, changing position unconsciously to circle John's abdomen with small kisses, *that Maxwell had been there with the net.* Which would she prefer he had asked: working at the home office or abroad? It may have *appeared* there was a choice but, as the Bishop assessed and Delilah now accepted fully, she had been *geared* to 'choose' what she 'chose.'

She lifted her head and placed it on John's chest, one arm now under his body. There was a 'choice' relative to Delilah that he soon would need to make, but all he could think then was his wish to keep her as long as he could. "Why should it matter?"

The tone of his voice caused her to lift her head. "Why should what matter?"

He lifted himself, turned Delilah, raised her skirt, and cavalierly lifted her leg nearest him to his other side. After helping her position herself, he began to ask, "Do you think that a woman..." Delilah returned to adoration..."could take herself away..." Delilah rose higher on her knees without her mouth losing him..."from everything..., for..." a long, satisfied hum interrupted his words..."one man?"

He did not know whether Delilah had heard, because he had moved her downward by her flanks so that his lips met the corresponding place of her, and because of the way she cupped the parts of him beneath that to which she returned her mouth--where he most wanted. *Carpe diem...quam minimum credula postero*, her lips might have said, were they not otherwise expertly employed, causing him in turn to put her to rapture—

"Oh my 'vine woman..." he exclaimed; and she did not know that he was referencing her name with the mythic Greek *Oenone*, before his voice lowered to a timbered whisper, "*How you intoxicate me*," the last word a lingering accompaniment to Delilah's long drink of him until....

She lifted mouth and torso to concentrate on her own ecstasy. "And is the—*ooh*...fruit of the vine...*oooo*...sufficient--" she rotated her hips to perfect the contact point, "to betray...all former faith?...*THERE!*—"oh—oh...oh, oh, oh—Ohoohoooo!"

"Woe is me!" John laughed quietly after all had subsided, and he had moved her around and back up in his arms. "And when would I get my eleven hundred pieces of silver?"

Delilah lifted herself above him and smiled roguishly. “I think we’ll have to split it fifty-fifty.”

At that point Maxwell was pacing but his thoughts were not racing. Instead a same couple of thoughts crossed and re-crossed Mind at aggravating intervals. The first repeated, *there are two extremes of human nature, as some philosopher or other said--those never caused to conceive being any but their own selves, and those who can imagine being all others. The psyche at one end of that spectrum is as impervious to selfless conjecture as hippopotamus hide to water; the other, like a sponge, soaks up all the masses’ miseries.*

The second postulant was at the core of Maxwell-pragmatism *versus* Max-emotionalism. First, rationalizing away guilt: *yes, it was critical to the mission; she would see that.* But she was of that *trusting* type of nature, a personality quick to feel betrayal. *How would she receive the full truth?*

Delilah hadn’t expected to nap but she did briefly, with John, and dreamed the last of her angst away....

She was in a governing chamber of a people to whom she did not belong. She wanted to go away somewhere, someplace where she never had been, without any of the clothes worn before, and live inside her skin. Instead, she found herself removing dust and dead leaves from neglected plants...

Time and its Measurement, the dream remarked to Mind, playing words of Baruch Spinoza as if read off a page. Mind “heard” them, in the dream, but awake could not recite: “All our efforts and desires for sentient freedom follow from the necessity of Nature in such

ways that they are understandable only through Nature alone as their proximate cause, but the human Self being *part* of Nature cannot conceive adequately *of* Nature without all of its other individual parts”....

She stopped in the dream to tell someone the words she just had heard. Didn't they explain why human beings are unable, simultaneously with wonder and emotion, to receive the perfect spectrum off a spider's web and know that light, only, caused it?

John had turned toward Delilah and caressed her face, waking her. She moved warmly to him....

This woman..., he thought; this woman who lets me play her like a violin....

Oh, but that looming ‘appointment!’ Delilah, fully awake, fought to look at the matter in the absence of free will. Then, as John entwined himself around her, she had the slightly scandalous thought, *what better way than this--if not the best of ways!--for a woman to get ‘the skinny?’* The thought caused a short giggle.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just had a thought.”

What was this man's heritage? She wondered again, a bit belatedly ‘mission-wise.’ Eyes closed, she traced his facial bones with her fingers... *There must be a library on global physiognomy somewhere....* She did know of one attempt (*was it African or Egyptian?*) to establish racial facial features. Of those beneath her fingers, had she never seen them, she probably first would say, *Greek*; but that, perhaps could be because of the beautiful Alexander. Or, maybe partially *Roman*-- according to descriptions of a Hebraio-Roman nose?

She decided to ask.

“I’m not attached to my heritage; only was, for a brief time in childhood. I was born Persian and Hebrew—my father, the Persian, born in Iran; my mother, an Iraqi Hebrew. But I wasn’t born, nor did we live, in the lands of origin.”

Where were you born, then; and where did you live? Delilah wanted to know; but John continued talking and she hesitant to break his revelatory mood....

“We didn’t have much other family around, but I do have good memories of my parents’ mothers, who lived with us a while and took care of me after school, my parents both working. My grandmothers liked telling stories about their families in the ‘old country.’ I remember one saying, ‘We go all the way back to the *beginning*.’ The other sat me down and had me write geographical names, slowly spelling them out.” He laughed. “They never were spelled the way they sounded: Meh-so-po-tame-ee-a, A-kade-ee-a....”

John let Delilah go, then, abruptly; *coldly*, it felt to her. He went and sat in one of the chairs facing the window. She had an unexpected canny feeling that he didn’t want to be looking at her. She sat up and pulled the sheet to cover herself.

“All I know...,” he began, then stopped and lit a cigarette. He had to start somewhere....

“I’m not what you may think,” he said next, then stopped again for an inhale. “All I know, is I’ve been leading a strange life, not one practicably convertible to what you might call a ‘regular’ existence. Perhaps my family life was the cause, but I’m a pourous creature that needs to move with the strongest wind.”

The die was cast now; how he wished he could tell her it all! He turned, took a quick look at Delilah, and turned away. “You should know that about me.”

She tried to burn her next thought the split-second it came, but such will is impossible. How could she have forgotten completely that *prior* time, some while after the divorce, that she

believed she had ‘fallen in love’? And, oh, how *sure* she had been afterward, that *never again* could she fall to *projection*! *I should have seen my own warning signs...all the symbols--his buying me the dangling earrings I paused and looked at so briefly while we strolled the suq--*

“I’m not the keeper of the world,” he said. “I’m not to blame for it, and I can’t fix it.”

All that letting go...letting go.... Tell me I’m not hearing this, Dad.... Jesus!—those seductive fingerings of thought....

She slid to the side of the bed; she was speechless.

Not *him*! *What a nerve!*

“You want to know about Middle East family histories?” (*Wait a minute; did I tell him I did?*) “Here’s one from the Bible: There were five male brothers of one couple and a lone female of another couple. An ‘intra-family’ law of their mutual theocracy was, if the spouse of the oldest brother in the family died without having fathered a child, the next age-wise brother in line was to do it on behalf of the dead brother.

“Well, what happened was, the oldest brother married the other family’s only daughter and then died prematurely. So the next brother in line stood in, so to speak; but he also died prematurely. The poor woman still was childless, so the next brother took over, and—yep—unfortunately he died; and so it went with the fourth. It’s not said whether the last brother was successful; however”—he stopped. “Bored yet?”

Delilah stood up. She knew all about ancient “levirate” marriage and didn’t give a damn. Still she found herself answering. “I *know* that story; it’s from the *New Testament*.”

“Well, the *denouement* in my family’s story was different. The woman had at least one child with each surviving brother and my mother herself, it was claimed, was descended from one of four daughters who all came from the brothers of one man.”

“Okay. All right. That’s enough.” She wasn’t going to let him do it again, pull mind away from emotions. And she had got the drift. She couldn’t recall whether it had been Pharisees or Sadducees—the establishment party or the aristocratical—that had posed the tale to Jesus and asked, *whose wife would the woman be, then, in Heaven?* And his answer she knew well: *in Heaven there is no such thing as marriage; one is free like the angels!*

Delilah felt like one of Zelophehad’s five daughters, cut off from all choice in love, female DNA scattered in time. She had taken seriously Vivekananda’s differentiation of *celibacy* and *chastity*; before Body could be chaste Mind had to be. But when the force of Nature decreed that Body follow *It*, there was no space in-between for Thought.

Suddenly she was self-conscious in her nakedness. Silent, gathering her clothing, her mind recalled something Durrell had written, in which she changed the statement’s gender: *There are three things to be done with a man! You can suffer for him, turn him into literature, or love him.* She already had felt one and three. Two, what she was living, was a time-worn plot.

He left the chair and came to stand in front of her....

Something—something about his face had changed, almost as if he was *assuming* the face of a stranger while he saw someone else seeing him; the exact point where a drama’s protagonist is supposed to (and John had no choice but to) say, “Sometimes it’s lose-lose, Scorp.”

I didn’t tell him my birthday--

“Later, after you think on it, you’ll know that when you didn’t find a rainbow *other forces* were at work there.”

Why--at the moment when she most should hate him—she avoided the bait and simply said, “Yes.”

He went to a box he had taken from the closet and pulled out something black. “Here. Put this on.”

What?--

“Where we’re going and why, it’s important to fit in.”

Obediently, Delilah enveloped herself in the long black garment. John handed her a head scarf. “Keep this close about your face....”

Did even one more word *need* to be written about poverty? Were not Hamsum’s *Hunger* words enough for all time? Did even two more need to be written of anger toward ‘God’?—*that ‘God’ who forsakes three-quarters of ‘his’ progeny still, in the world?....*

Delilah was sweaty under the jilaab, which was clean but not new; she wondered who wore it before. *How simple, to put on a persona with clothes*, she thought, pacing the rough stones. *Did all females of the “Central East” of antiquity need to hide all that Man found distracting?* But that line of thought no longer interested Delilah Soreck. No, sir! She then knew the same loss of caring that had to have happened to at least *one* female Amorite, Hyksosite, Caananite, Egyptianite, Philistinite, Assyrianite, Phoenicianite, Israelite, Babylonianite, Persianite, Bedouinite, Ishmaelite, Macedonianite, Aaronite or Aramaiaite, Mosaiite, Midianite, Jethorite or Jacobite, Judahite or Samariaite, Hasmonaeante, Herodianite Grecianite, Romanite, and all the Josephites in-between. Just like *her*, the ploys of Love no more of Time was needed to reveal...

Part Eight

UNIFICATION?

Delilah and John entered through an exterior hallway into what could have been one room of an apartment. Delilah barely took in the room, for its domination by *the* man.

He was sitting at a table by the room's one window, a few wooden chairs stationed about.

John introduced Delilah by name, but not vice versa.

The man didn't speak until they were seated opposite the table, and what he said caught her off-guard. "Would you want a child of yours sent to give his or her life in a war to satisfy cloaked private interests, instead of looking to his or her own family and its future generations?" His look was steady but not offensive. "It's a different thing, if barbarians are at the gate."

Delilah needed time, feel out what the persona she meant to convey would say. She took a tangent. "I think even bigger a fantasy than 'God' is that major world powers ever will know enough history to reign themselves in, in time."

He drew thumb and forefinger from cheeks to lips several times.... "You favor isolationism?"

"'Empires,' irrespective type, are becoming, I think, things of World-past."

The man tilted his head back and lifted his eyelids. "My son was killed in ill-conceived crossfire..," he lowered his head and with index fingernail traced a rut in the table's soft wood. "*Yitsah*," he whispered, then gave his head a sharp twist to the side. "But it is not pity for *myself* I feel; for my grandchildren, who have known not one day in all of their lives so far, without

seeing fear in their mother's eyes, and not only when they leave the house." He slapped the table. "*No* one is safe!--not on any side."

Yitzar...Yitsar?? Delilah recalled that something had happened there, what now seemed to her a long while ago. He was a handsome man once, she thought, as the anguished look receded, but not totally—never would it ever--from his face.

He relaxed back in his chair and held Delilah's eyes for the first time. "I used to believe in human nature, but I've seen enough," he scoffed, "of drummings-up from ancient scripture *and* of 'democratic' litany." Delilah heard the quotation marks. "Doesn't matter whose, to justify atrocities."

Delilah waited.

"The line's been blurred in me, you see." He turned and away and stared impassively into space. "Politically, all is a nothing but a stringing of inconclusive words around material and psychological chaos. What I do is of little consequence. Everyone's to blame for missing the mark."

'Missing the mark'?--the actual words used by Jesus; not the later translated, *sin*.

Delilah felt herself siding with Peter again....

What good had pacifism accomplished?—Jesus crucified, and since used no better than did the more ancients their mythological gods. Delilah had no problem conceiving explosions as the last of Last Resort's acts; denial and confusion reaching maximum suppression; a psychical supernova's external twin.

"One gets to the point..," she hesitated. What should she say now? All she could think to offer was H. Rider Haggard, and it surprised her how cold she could make her voice sound. "One gets to where thinking only serves to measure out the hopelessness of thought." She

extracted her cigarette package from her bag; then, lifting a cigarette to her lips, “You haven’t said whether you are interested in the proposal.”

He lifted himself across to light her cigarette, looking straight into her eyes. “You have no belief in God?”

Delilah paused; the ‘grilling’ wasn’t over yet. With her free hand she lifted her hair to behind her shoulders. “Not in any of the ways so far portrayed.”

This time his pupils absorbed her. “And that’s your *reason*, for wanting to shatter a material core of two—“

“Three--”

“—faiths,” he finished with a faint acknowledging smile.

“A place where the poor go with their last miserable hope, that--maybe, *maybe, maybe*--“

“Allah, God, or the Devil willing?” His smile this time was stronger.

Delilah gave what she hoped was a convincing shrug and toss of head. “Never have I not had a good meal or warm bed; I’ve seen my children grow up, and no end to glorious sunsets. It’s true,” she gave an acquiescent nod. “I believe that, were all the ‘blessed’ to see through eyes that did not have a religious edifice before them, human misery might change course an iota. *Perhaps* also--no?--it could be that ‘God’ wishes such from me.”

“Do you realize what you just said?—you just made ‘our’ point--”again, the quotation marks. His face might have been of any if not all ancient heritages, and this time his smile was almost benevolent. “No such thing as free will, ay? Each of us forced to live the life we are given, and all we are *fated* to do.”

Now is the time, Delilah thought; she felt she had reached him. She flicked ash from her cigarette and was able to lean back in relaxed fashion. “You are a very literary man. I’m thinking you may be misunderstanding *me* for ‘them.’”

“Am I? Isn’t it *you*, suggesting vaporizing a certain hill into a crater, an act the social enormity of which would equate with none yet known. Oh, I know.” He held up a hand. “You want no one hurt; you would see to that. Advance notice, right?—and a bomb of *containment*: no great destruction beyond ground zero; just remove the symbol.” He gave a soundless *hrumphh* that moved his shoulders. “And you want to know if such an IED can be supplied.”

IED--improvised explosive device....

Delilah held his eyes with hers, steadily, consciously delaying between blinks. “Yes,” coldness again in her voice--“the same that enables explosion of a ‘MOAB.’ You would be the one to decide all that, of course.”

“‘A Massive Ordnance Air Blast, the Mother of all *bombos*.’” His sigh was audible. “‘Bomb’ is from the Greek *bombos*, you know.”

“A good indication of how long Man’s played with them,” Delilah responded.

“Don’t discount their positive uses—mining, for example; and construction. Amusing, isn’t it?—how the word resembles BOOM.” He lifted the last word by decibels.

Delilah refused being detoured. “Not a word big enough for the weapons *business*—mass production of military bombs; custom-made, clandestine IEDs —“

“You’re unusually well informed.” It was an observation, not a compliment.

It was time to ply a bit farther; besides, he had goaded Delilah enough for her to take the stage. She shrugged her shoulders. “I know a little. That the first air-dropped bombs were used

by Austria in an 1849 siege of Venice, carried by 200 unmanned balloons. Few landed on a target, but was Man to be discouraged?

“The first bombs from airplanes were dropped by hand around 1911--Italians against, quote, ‘Arabs’, unquote, in what now is Libya....”

She exchanged crossed legs and rotated her shoulders as if to loosen her neck muscles. “Besides bomb bays on large airplanes, fighter bombers carry bombs on outside ejection racks, usually guided by remote control.” She changed position again, both feet on the floor. She needed to keep pace with the script and took an imperceptible deep breath.

Eyes directly to his, Delilah’s voice was even. “That last is most interesting, don’t you think? One realizes it is possible to concealedly position a bomb in advance *anywhere*.” Certain that he got her drift, she pressed on. “Whether my employers intend to share with your cause what may be uncovered, I cannot say definitely; but I do know such possibility exists...depending, of course, on the extent of their material gain.”

John, sitting to the side a few feet away, as yet had said nothing. The man now looked to him with a questioning raise of brow. “Material gain?”

“The scroll,” John said.

“Ahhhh...the *scroll*....” The man backed his chair from the table. “Okay, let’s fantasize.” He stood up and paced around to the back of Delilah’s chair. “First, there’s the little problem of underground positioning.”

There Delilah was stumped. Should she mention Hezekiah’s tunnel? No; she had no knowledge of its actual route or access. She had to hedge. “Work’s been done on that, I understand; but I have no related particulars.”

He circled back to his chair and sat down. “Money’s nice; but something tells me you’re not in it for that? I wonder...,” he crinkled his eyes, “what big mad you have against our maker, to be part of such a plot. What did He do to *your* family?”

“Hardly worth mentioning.”

“Lucky for you.” He eyes followed his fingers as they worked along the crease of his trouser leg. “I wish I could say the same,” he continued under his breath. When he looked up again his face reflected the visage of an aged man, devoid of self-posturing. “Should--” he looked over to John—“*should* we help—

He stopped, tipped his chair, and placed a foot on the table edge. “‘Material’ gain aside, only an *Allah* would know,” there was irony in his laugh, “the ultimate effects on human nature of such a big wakeup call.” He removed his foot and let his chair fall forward. “Allah granting?—a tornado to purge the stiltified—“

He caught himself then, all serious. “What would you say of a man in the quandary of *my* life, sitting on the tip of the shaft of war of two...no!—that’s enough. While there is the side of me who would wish well for psychological enlightenment by, let us say, the proposed ‘God’-given quest, our assistance—“

“Has a substantial price-tag,” John supplied.

“Of course.” Delilah refrained from looking at John. “That is expected.”

“John,” the man nodded his head to that side, “will be our contact then.” He dropped his hands flat on his thighs, a slap that said *this meeting is over*.

Delilah stood up. The small room’s bright overhead bulb cast her curved shadow against the opposite wall, but she was oblivious as to how the decades had not changed it. John rose also from his chair, pulled a cigarette, and rolled it between fingers.

The man came around the table, did not stop for a shaking of hands, and headed for the door. “Should you by any chance ride by a refugee camp,” the words trailed him, “think of how much human fodder has been processed, and not just there and not only recently; throughout all of the One God’s history.” Then, hand on the doorknob, he turned. “Yes, I know how to make bombs. Am I different from any and all other weapons makers in the business?”

It wasn’t only that he refused to allow the matter to concern him, Delilah was certain. His preference, like his ‘legal’ counterparts, would be to never know the whatever, or whenever of his products’ uses.

The firm shutting of door returned Delilah to the shock of her personal dilemma-- ‘*John!*’ John, cajoled *by* her into believing she could be party to a heinous crime! *He*, privy to a ‘business’ of which she now had direct knowledge, with no choice but convey it to superiors. Maxwell wasn’t part of Intelligence, but she could hear him say, *distributors are as guilty of abetting manufacturing as are the makers*. And, in the end, not a helpful thing where Caleb’s son was concerned!

The copper scroll treasure had been a ruse, but now in a private fury of splintered love Delilah almost *wanted* to see it--not the treasure; Temple Mount!--going up in one vast inverted pyramid, its base so high one would not be able to see where flying debris went into orbit, all the way to that empyrean height which for six millennia too many had died believing could be reached from there...

Oh, yes--not just the surface; opened to its most ancient depths, past the stone that had sloughed off waters of the great deluge and its surrounding threshing floor where, before Moses and Caleb, Abraham and Melchizedek had met in peace....

Delilah could tolerate occasional transgressions within the multi-faceted envelope of unconscious Ideal Love. Open and close it gently, it could last forever even with some weakened spots in its intricate warp. This “john” had torn it to bits; a bull’s eye in the solar plexus; a fission of the heart that literally was (she would *not* find the pun amusing) “blowing” her mind.

She would need to control herself.

I’ll take my time, she thought as they emerged onto the street. *First I must pay attention here so I can tell Max what he needs to know to tell whoever he’s supposed to tell how to get to this place even it is used only this once.* “I need to stop back at your place,” she lied, needing to memorize the way. “I left some toiletries in the bathroom.” She swallowed hard but kept her voice detached, casual. “We can arrange how we are to make our contacts. You know I’m catching a plane tomorrow.”

She may have thought matters couldn’t be worse, then saw Jalam approach. “Is the big guy in?” he asked John, ignoring Delilah; and, at John’s nod, insinuated his way between them.

Maxwell was having a cigar, which almost was at the precise point to be lain down to rest. He savored a last puff and carefully placed it on the ceramic tray on the table next to his easy chair. The tray had been a present from Delilah, but he needed no externalities to be reminded of her.

He went to stand at the window. In the last moments before the sun sank below the horizon, edifices of the bastion of western democracy rose regally between light and shadows. Were he in the mood to pick up the binoculars he kept on the sill, he could have seen the frieze

on the Supreme Court's south wall: Hammurapi receiving his Law Code from the Babylonian sun god. At that moment, however, Max was questioning laws that he and his Division were about, trying to make sense out of chaos; and all of it a practical repeat—

Granted, different contenders than Rome's 'Roman' Empire and Byzantine's 'Roman' Empire, in the days when "Byzantine" wasn't a word yet, and citizens of the East considered themselves Romaioi. Could anyone grasp the skeins of families, cultures, and languages? Who could say when or why a 'ph' became an 'f', as in the name of fifth-century Peter Filarghi, once Pietro Philarghi, known 'historically' as papal contendee, "Alexander the Fifth."

He gave a dissatisfied, sucking sound. ...

John was so tired. He lay there watching her through the bathroom's open door, like Ravic letting mind describe her as he watched: touseled long hair being brushed back over the shoulders; the supple back to curve of waist. He was feeling, all and only *feeling*.... That he had been able to be *with her*, after all the miles walked, hopes sought, cigarettes bought.

When Delilah emerged, she saw that he had fallen asleep. She thought of what, as a child in church, she had been given to believe: that one could expect eventually (*nay*, rely *upon*) a real, eternal 'sleep of peace.' She was conscious of wanting to touch lips to his forehead; was so much inclined to! Instead, she slung her bag over her shoulder and gave a last look around. There was not one sign she could see (except, perhaps the rumpled second pillow) that she ever had been there.

Her hand was on the door knob, when suddenly he spoke up. "That's just it--you're so damned *contained*. On the surface, that is." He sat up and looked around. "Everything in its proper place; even your words, so carefully chosen."

“Like you?”

He stood up and came around the bed. “Come here.”

“No.”

He came to her and said, “Let it go.”

“Stop it.”

“No!” He put a hand against her midriff. “You’ve got that killing-kind of anger in you and it needs to come all the way up.” He lowered his hand and pushed palm just above her pubic bone. “It’s like a grenade the pin of which is being held right here. I think you don’t care if it killed you off...” He put his other arm around her body, and it let itself be moved firmly against his.

Delilah had one brief thought, of Confucius’ three virtues to be united in practice. But neither sage nor saint did she at the next instant aspire to be, as both of John’s hands progressed down her back and cupped her totally to him. “Be with me in thoughtlessness one more time,” he whispered....

“Don’t you know how much I’ll be missing you?” John said not very long later. “See this?” He lifted his left hand so she could see the ring of string he had knitted on its third finger.

Delilah, dressed once again, ready to go out the door, deigned to turn her head.

“You are the only one who can take it off. It *means* you, woman—as if made to order for me just when I was needing love the most and didn’t know it.” He pushed himself off the bed but kept his distance. “I’m ready to *believe* in a God. Else why were you made for me?”

“Oh, spare me.” Delilah was beginning to *want* end to it and it seemed--with his trite phrasings from the age-old plot of lovers embroiled in espionage--he was intent on making her

want to; to flee love's vise; stop holding her body as if to make it invisible. Any longer in his presence, and--

"Oscar Wilde said that a person who knows no history can't know his or her own age. He probably would agree that, the more of known history in the Collective Consciousness, the better one *would* understand one's own age," John babbled; then saw Delilah's nostrils contract.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Oh yes, something's the matter."

"No, really...*not!*"

"You're still one angry woman--"

"I've done *nothing* to make you think that!"

"Come on," he said it pleadingly and grabbed her arm.

"Leave me alone." She pulled away, nearer to the door.

"No." He moved between it and her. "I'm not going to. I'm not going to let you go until you tell me what it is."

"O.K.!" She jumped to him and gripped his biceps. "So I let myself be bamboozled by you. So jail me." (*Jail me*? How could there still be a part of her--)

He gripped his hands over hers; he did look despondent. "Life here does that. Hard not to respond to someone who isn't living it--"

"And has the money? Oh, but I forgot; you're working to *help* matters."

He let go and dropped his arms to his side. "Arjuna's lesson," he said offhandedly, "wouldn't be possible without a bow and arrow."

So he knows Hindu mythology as well?--shades of JC! She returned a piercing look.

His response was to close his eyes and smooth his brow with taut fingers.

“I’m so sick of this!” she skirted him.

He went and sat on the edge of the bed with his back toward her. “Don’t you think I am? *Me!*” He began to give a laugh but it came out a bit tortured, which *might* have been intentional but didn’t sound so to Delilah. “**I**, the pacifist-kid-turned-tool-of-lunacy. *Here’s* what the human condition so-called is,” he said, his lips tightening across his teeth. It shocked her, how handsomeness of face could change to snarling dog.

He stood up and turned toward her. “If there *is* a god he would need to be weeping; and if any treasure *was* still buried and *did* turn up, it just would be something new to be fought over.”

He sat again on the bed, jaw set. “I’ve promised already that I’ll get in touch with you *when I can.*” He turned and placed a palm hard on the mattress. “Have some faith, for crying out loud,” the expression on his face one would think only true love could cause.

She felt as if they were playing Jesus and Judas, faith’s defense against offense; but here—right here, right now—there was no wider nation at stake. *Here*, between *them*, there had been what she had believed to be a ‘nation’ of *two*. She turned again to the door. “I should have seen the signs from the beginning.”

He leapt up and blocked her way. “*Wait, sweetheart, please—*“

His voice, his expression, all of him reflected the *friendliness* which, when received, can open sealed doors. It did not feel to Delilah that she was projecting it on him, but she remained unmoved.

He stepped around to her other side, freeing her way. “Just answer me this.”

And now that oh-so-apologetic smile! Here it comes—

“If you and I were only two young human beings left on Earth..,” she turned aside, eyes closed, from his try for a kiss, “and we had to *decide*....” He took gentle hold of her chin and turned her face to his. “You and I had to agree..,” he managed then to bring her nearer and brush his lips across hers. “Would we ever be able--” the touch of his manhood made itself known; Delilah closed her eyes--“to keep ourselves from....”

The first successful kiss was so soft it barely was felt.

Delilah opened her eyes, unable to withhold a smile--“not ruling out a god *entirely*, but our children free to assign it if and as they chose?” John kissed her softly again.

Only a god existing *could* know what passed then between their eyes, she not expecting answer; he reading correctly her tumblings of desire with thought. They kissed truly then, the hard-then soft-once-more-hard-again long, longed-for kiss one imagines as the joy of lovers’ first tryst....

He strung his belt through the trouser loops.

She drew a wide-toothed comb through tangled lengths of hair.

He pulled the belt taut and grabbed shirt off chair.

She stepped through the waistband of her skirt and drew it *slowly* over the hips, pride in the bare breasts in front of her and said, “Toss me my bag, will you.”

He walked it over instead.

She finished dressing; so did, he.

She didn’t stop to put on makeup or glance around. She hoisted her bag and walked toward the door. She turned the doorknob and said this act’s familiar last line. “If I don’t leave now I never will.”

He didn't respond.

She knew he wouldn't.

One hundred eight billion people are estimated to have lived on Earth so far, and I had to meet that one....

The nuns of DePaul had taught Delilah never to let her Self be fooled. God demanded that one *always*, conscientiously delve deep in mind for the truth about one's motivations. *Easy for you!*—she would say to them now, or at least thought she would!--*because you never have lived love with Man!*

So many times Delilah had lamented the vulnerability, and literary damning of women of antiquity—*Mahalath, Tamar, Jephunnah, Nimshi, Athaliah*--on and on she would go. Something new now was added to her thought of them--*love*. Yes--*loved, they must have*. But how she hated the feeling of having been *stupid*; and not believing in free will didn't help—

How could he!

But hardness and softness had been at war in his eyes; she *had* seen that....

At the airport next afternoon, not having known she could have changed to a morning flight, Delilah sought the outdoor smoking yard. She needed a calming breather. Mind, which so often had parroted how History repeated itself, was seeing itself such miniscule a part.

The air was muggy; the sleeves of her black cotton shirt felt tight; her right eye was runny from foundation that had swished into it. She took a medicated wipe from her bag, tore open its envelope, and worked the damp cloth carefully, first around the eye and then under each fingernail.

Perception fastened to a couple of marvelously taut-skinned girl tourists, especially to their long, lithe legs like tapered flames, the kind she once would have loved to own. She turned away to concentrate while she smoked, re-assessing her situation....

Assignment completed; notes for the full report, ample. A couple of days' debriefings, then free of the whole g-d thing--

Free for what?

Some time off, anyway....

Except there was no pleasure in the thought—

Back for a while in my latte-cum-whipped-cream, peaceful, affluent small town nestled within manicured wine country hills...

She stabbed the cigarette into the urn's sand, thought about throwing coins in a fountain, and pushed through the swinging glass door in answer to the boarding call. She had refused to listen when Mind added, *all by yourself*; but by the time she cleared identity and body check she had to flick a few tears away.

Foolish!—thinking she could take him away; dreaming of them together endlessly, the 'perfect union.' Oh, she knew that between them contrary moments would come and go, but under arches or skies they would be alive *together*....

I'll take you home, she even had imagined saying; even prepared, if necessary, without Maxwell knowing. Manny could arrange it!

In flight, Delilah was waiting, not too patiently, for the refreshment cart. She craned her neck to watch another plane traveling at right angles to hers, some hundreds of feet below. It

looked no bigger than a Missouri log bug. Relative motion being what it is, the perception was like a smooth Einsteinian ballet.

Above her plane's level, lavender-gray clouds were creating shapes reminiscent of Bradbury's floating Venusian clippers. The plane banked, and a beam of sunlight broke through. It hit the wing then fell onto a tin roof far down on the ground, a rounded disk that slid and moved along the countryside, creating patches of green into blue, blue into black....

Delilah had refused to carry a laptop—*absolutely not*, she had informed Maxwell; she was *not* an Intelligence agent. He had expected more emails, however. Weren't net cafes everywhere? There had been only one email, via the Hospice's Internet the night she arrived Jerusalem. "I'm well and hope the same there; much progress here," she had written. "I think the Division will feel satisfied."

Not a word since. Had she used the pre-arranged return ticket? He didn't want to use his position to have an in-flight inquiry made. Manny had gone ahead and arranged, anyway, for the car to be waiting.

The papers piling on Maxwell's desk had been reduced to one stack, the city behind him had turned on all its lights to night, and he finally recognized how hungry he was. How long would he have to wait? He worked time forward from the ticket's scheduled arrival time....

Time for making way through clearance to ground transportation; then the drive here, allowing for traffic. Maybe a couple of hours more, and I'll know if I will have cause to be sorry.

He would go for some supper.

Meanwhile John, where he was, was thinking, *I know what I could do with the chance to see her again....*

As soon as she saw him, he imagined, he would glance around first ‘conspiratorially’, and then whisper against her ear, ‘Lady, I think you have something there, that Hasmonaeon/Alexandra copper scroll theory.’ Then, after she pulled away (*of course she would!*) he would say with urgent sincerity, “Wait! It’s *gotta* be Alexandra, right?—that most well-reasoning, dedicated legislatrix in all the history of that theocracy, or at least equal to David; the one most *possible* of protecting, hiding the people’s wealth, in the dated time frame.”

He was quite confident, *were* he able to so accost Delilah, she would be hard-pressed not to add her two cents. *Yes, I know,*” he imagined her responding--*Alexandra, who to non-Greeks was known as Salome. Wouldn’t it be great if we knew her lineage.* And he would know that she then would think, “Why am I letting this...this...*person* even *talk* to me; much less, me to him!” Except she probably would use a choicer word than ‘person.’

Delilah peered out the window as the plane approached the runway at Dulles International Airport at Chantilly, Virginia; so different, this descent into the proliferation of lights below, than that which landed her at Rabbah...*had that been only nine days ago?* The 26 miles from Dulles to the capitol of the United States of America would be about the same as from Queen Alia Airport to Jordan’s.

Delilah did her usual waiting in her seat while the mob moved. She stood up finally, reluctantly, and took her place in the aisle. She was feeling a bit guilty. She’d been in no mood to send Maxwell a confirmation of her arrival, confident he would have a car sent anyway. If for any reason he had not had, there always was the coach service.

Muggy here, she thought some 20 minutes later, but relieved to exit to Ground Transportation. She looked up to where government-authorized vehicles were allowed to wait, and there it was--black and shiny, of course. The same driver who had taken her to Dulles those scant days before was standing curbside. He waved and opened the car's rear door as Delilah approached....

John was amazed at how a man his age could feel like a teenager...

Then I'll tell her: Both of us worried, me and Max--your being sent on a first dual mission of its kind, especially in an operation where my cover had to be total. Without you, we never would have got to the core cell and put it out of existence, besides getting a line on supply—

She would be mollified, hearing that; especially when he told her he was bringing Jalam to the states.....

"Hi, good to see you again," Delilah greeted the driver. Then, through the car's open back door she saw trouser-clad legs—*Maxwell?*...

No way. Max wouldn't be caught dead in *cords*...

And those long legs?

She lowered her head to enter and a hand reached out to hers. She didn't need to see the owner's face. She knew whose it would be, and would know always by that feeling alone.