

Tosca Lenci

JESUS' BELOVED DISCIPLE

In The Beginning was reason;
reason was toward godness
and Reason was god.



मोक्षो न संदर्शनप्रकाशो भवति

शान्तिर् नो मनः

शान्तिर् नो वाचश्च

शान्तिर् नः कर्म ज

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ

הָעוֹלָם, שְׁהַחַיֵּנוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהַגִּיעֵנוּ לְזִמְנוֹ

הַיּוֹם:

الحقيقة لساندة،

انما اللمى من الحقيقة هو السلوك الحى الصادق.

0030 a.d./c.e.

YEAR ONE

“Now there is a body made for walking....”

The woman who heard the male voice turned her head and gave the two men behind her a stern look. *Young enough to be sons of mine*, she thought. *If only they knew how this body aches!*

The woman, whose name was Magda, once prided herself on endurance. But it had been 10 years since she last made the three-day trip from Rabbah to Jerusalem. Ten years is a long time, when it spans the fifth decade of life.

The first day, Magda traveled by camel, and camped that night with the caravan near the pools at Heshbon. The second day was the longest. She secured a ride with a donkey train that covered half again the distance of the first day. It was late evening, when at last the train stopped at a pilgrim hostelry midway between Jericho and Jerusalem. That night she indulged herself with a good sleep on a cot.

Magda had a substitute for physical strength—money, of which she had very little before—and her courage had not been diminished by age. She knew when to draw on each. She left the hostelry at daybreak on foot, in demeanor just another widow amid the crowd. Certain qualities that catch male eyes, however, are not concealed easily. When the two young men finally overtook her, well past Bethany, she smiled beneath her veil.

It was uphill the last of the way, but the Holy City was in splendorous view. Temple mount gleamed above a stream of people and animals clustering at the Valley Gate. Approaching the city wall, she felt a rush of youth flushed by time, the feeling that, not the journey, but reaching its destination spells adventure’s true beginning.

Judging by the sun the time was just past the sixth hour when at last Magda stopped to rest, in the shade of the colonnades at the rock pool of Bethzatha. She expected seeing the aged and crippled persons who gathered there; but their number was much greater than in the past, and her sadness at the sight, harder to endure. She encouraged herself to press forward. *I made it this far*, she thought. *I can wait to bathe my feet in the pool at the Fountain of the Virgins....*

At the southeast corner of the temple grounds, however, a large assembly of people barred her way. At least half the crowd was female, unusual for that vicinity. Something of great interest seemed to be happening in the main court. She heard shouting—

“HOW FAR HAVE WE COME IN OUR EXCESSES?--**TOO FAR!**”

The people were so intent on the scene they could be jostled aside and not notice. Magda shouldered her way through and peered around a tall gentleman. Her attention was seized first by the bankers. They leaned over the tables, half-squatting above their benches, mouths agape. The shout also had drawn the merchants out of their stalls that lined the sides of the square. The signs behind them stood out starkly: PEACE OFFERINGS FOR SALE - GUARANTEED UNBLEMISHED. Loosed lambs nudged the front row of people. The birds inside cages were silent. Then—

Magda saw him.

Short and stocky, a barrel of a chest, he was without robe or mantle. His linen tunic, lifted by a heavy rope coiled around the waist, revealed calves that looked as if they had strode to Mount

Parnassus and back. The man shouted again. "YOU MAKE ME LAUGH!"

Slowly he moved toward the bankers' tables and began to unwind the rope, not lowering his gaze from the arrested faces. "If each and every offering was acceptable in kind, you might convince me that man's nature can live without feeding on its brothers. Tell me! What is the true value of God's grace? Who gives authority to fix its price?"

The money changers now were fully on their feet. He flipped the rope's tip smartly across the fronts of their tables. "But each of you *is* fair?" He twirled toward the crowd. "As fair as God, your Father, would have all of *us* be?"

He twirled again, and with the calculated twist of a lion tamer's wrist snapped the rope at the bankers' eye level. "OF COURSE YOU ARE," he bellowed.

He extended his left hand back toward the crowd. "These of God's people have come long distances, to the place in which our forefathers chose His Name to reside in perpetuity. Some left humble huts; others folded their tents. They journeyed here to consecrate a time of freedom, and what do they find?" He pointed once, twice, thrice. "You and *you* and YOU-- from draft-free houses, wearing rich stoles, making feast-day profits!"

A priest emerged from an inner court at the rear of the square. Gold threads in his sash sparkled in the noonday sun.

The boldly-speaking man raised both hands skyward, rope dangling. "Would that same One God not accept His own people's coin? Is it that One God who fixes the rates of exchange?"

He twirled a last time and let loose the rope. It circled above him, flew over the moneychangers' heads, and fell at the foot of the alcove to the inner court. He kept his eyes from following it and twirled himself again to face the people. His words reached to the poorest among them.

"Ask yourselves: is it God, who demands inflated prices for burnt offerings, so as to feed already fat bellies? Wouldn't *God* prefer that you feed your children? Isn't the sacrifice *God* requires fulfilled, simply with your presence, when they—" his voice exploded as he turned toward the tables, "When YOU would sacrifice *The Law*, to hold *these*?"

The crowd heaved a unified gasp and pressed tighter upon the hallowed square. Jumping toward the center table, he pitched daggered fingers into one of several pots. Instead of striking the gleaming surface his fingers curved and slid into it. Then, lifting high, they separated. A clanking coin staccato bounced off the stones of the square....

Magda saw the priest retreat into the recess of the inner court. But before refectation was cut off by shadow, she caught the look on High Priest Caiaphas' face. It was the visage of a frightening thought....

Ex-High Priest Annas stood at the top of wide semicircular stairs, by which one ascended from the women's courtyard to the men's. Behind him, beyond the priests' court and its sacrificial altar of unhewn stones, the east face of the temple was greeting the sunrise.

Older women came earliest for morning worship, and they still bowed their heads toward Annas as they crossed the court below. Over the 15 years since Rome removed him from active duty, however, the women had become more than accustomed to his still figure on the platform above. With time Annas saw automation attach to their act, as if he were a statue that would be noticed only if it were not in its place.

This morning, however, the women could have been puppets. All of Annas' attention was

detached from vision. He had been given much to think about, the preceding night, when he took supper in his chamber with two colleagues—Joseph, a longtime temple fellow, and the stalwart Nicodemus, some 10 years younger.

Annas' early morning walk once had been fully a spiritual ritual. Now it was his main daily exercise. The sixth decade of life was wearing heavily on his skeleton, especially hip and knee joints. He could not kneel for prayer or lift his body without intense pain. Just the previous evening he had remarked, *priesthood has its own occupational hazards*—although, when he said it, he had much more than skeletal discomfort on his mind.

He closed his eyes and took a large gulp of fresh morning air. When he reopened his eyes the full sun blazed through to their retinas. *Oh, my God!* He whispered, but not because the sun represented such to him. It was the automatic plea of one who, having had many a blow from life already, sees he is about to be delivered another. He closed his shawl across his breast and tucked his hands beneath it.

The prior evening replayed itself in Annas' mind as he walked slowly back to his room....

"Of one thing you can be certain," Nicodemus began. "Certainly Jesus' mother's family commands the respect of many, but it is his evenhandedness that wins people. He is not one way on one side of a line and another, on the other." Nicodemus knew he could speak freely there, but the silence following his comment was unnerving. He glanced at Joseph, who continued chewing calmly as if nothing had been said.

Joseph--the Great Sanhedrin's master of self-containment--just was back from a visit to his hometown of Ramathaim-zophim. He shared his birthplace with Samuel, the last great judge-commander before David forged the land into a nation under one king, a thousand years before. Ramathaim-zophim, or Arimathaea as it more modernly was named, was the seat of the area represented by Joseph at Temple, and a long-day's donkey ride northwest from the Holy City.

The friendship between Annas and Joseph, both history buffs, was a lifetime one of uniquely matched intellects. As a young scribe, Joseph had amazing power of memory. He could quote a passage verbatim after copying it only once, a talent Annas envied. But Annas had talent of equal magnitude, when it came to listening. His ability to recall witnesses' precise words spared much bickering, in the days when he presided over the temple's executive and judicial body.

The temple hearths usually did not come alive until winter, and the priests' rooms tended to be dank in the fall. Nicodemus crossed his arms and gathered his robe against his ribs.

Annas sat silently, rubbing the back of his neck.

"You know the history better than anyone," Nicodemus finally blurted.

Annas straightened in his chair. "Refresh my memory," he said, in a way a mere acquaintance would take as a cynical dare. Joseph recognized it as the standard Annas ploy for more time to think. Howsoever Nicodemus may have taken it, he instantly complied. "It's been a long time, since there were twelve Jacob grandsons of Abraham," he began. "No one questions that Abraham carried the One God belief forward in the world. But neither would any man of knowledge deny prior existence to that belief and its fundamental concepts, in lands west, north, east or south."

Nicodemus possessed an oratory style that could capture even the most conservative high council members. Warming to his task, he arose from the couch and leaned on the fire shelf, his outer robe now open and drooping from his shoulders. "Let us concentrate on the combined royal staff and priestly mantle as it was carried and worn by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—collected responsibilities of body and mind, heart and spirit."

He executed a graceful half-turn with uplifted palm. “Not until under Moses as judge-commander was a new wish of God ordained--that one priest be designated as chief of all priests. We know also of periods that followed when the people, divided, returned to the older way. Nevertheless, no elder needs to be reminded, that it was Moses who fixed the bloodline for chief priesthood in the Kohath-Amram-Aaron limb of Levi. Or that, after Samuel, the royal line was fixed in the bloodline of Jesse’s son, David. Believe me, as to all of that--Joseph, I think, will vouch it also—the man Jesus has no desire to force anything down anyone’s throat. Indeed, he eschews any stand on material substance.”

That roused Annas. “And you, personally, can guarantee that, at some consummate moment, he won’t yield to popular demand?” Annas raised a palm and turned to Joseph. “Tell Nicodemus how many times revolutionary ranks did close, based on maternal lineage alone. History shows us what happens next.” He pressed his fingertips together and closed his eyes. “First rocks, then arrows, loosed....whether or not he lifts his own arms for the command!”

“True...” The mild quality of Joseph’s voice was in keeping with his person. He looked up at Nicodemus. “Scripture does report more than one instance when lifted arms—even remaining on one’s feet!—was not a self-willed act.”

Annas was back at his room, settling into his armchair, when he recalled Joseph’s remark. Fondness for their mutual scriptural knowledge caused a smile on the ex-high priest’s careworn face--a smile tightened by cynicism, knowing they then shared the same thought. In the days when troop loyalty was owed only so long as men saw their leader still in command, the arms of more than one ancient prophet-commander had been held up by others. *Poor King Ahab!* He had been kept *standing* in his chariot, *in his own blood*, while his life drained out with it....

Nicodemus intuited that some tacit understanding had passed between the other two. He lifted his voice. “Jesus’ god—mine, Joseph’s and yours—can be nothing, if not the same: God of Abraham.”

Annas abruptly arose from his chair. “This time is no different from too many before it!—precious little to do with God!” He blew out so forceful a breath the words that followed it were guttural. “The same deadly funneling of individual forces.... How can a true man of God—if he knows as much history as this Jesus is touted to—ignore the danger?”

But, there, Annas stopped. He had taken to speaking less even with trusted friends. Since his forced ‘retirement’ he had seen colleagues die and his own grandchildren fail national history. Perhaps if he had not used all his vigor early in life?--perhaps if he were able now, to lend blood, so to speak, to the entire flock?--too many cut off in their own numbers....

Why belabor it? The current explosive mix had to do with the power of resources, and the fear men had of losing the little that God had allowed them to garner, each for himself. Any real semblance of equal representation had ended centuries ago, after David....

Annas tucked his hands into his sleeves. Man’s fundamental want might be to reside in the sense of his own continuity, he thought; but once again, at this also-later-to-be-lost moment of History, too many men stood ready to settle for everything less than immortality. Who could predict, from where and how many could be reassembled into one force? Annas was certain of one thing only: however big the force, Rome’s would be bigger.

He had done his best against constraints of foreign occupation. He had striven to enjoin the Temple to corral and preserve its people, the greater number of whom still could dredge family memories of the patriarchal father, who had been everything--spiritual leader responsible for the

family altar; maker of sacrifices before God; defender of his clan. Ostensibly the office was inherited by the firstborn son, *a custom that apparently did not sit well with everyone*, he thought a little vehemently, remembering history.

The nearer Annas got to the portal of the hallway that dims inexorably to death, the more farcical life became: forefathers invalidated through the reactive reasoning of their progeny, and once-logical laws reduced to involuntary rituals. Whereas Annas had abandoned utopianic fantasizing long ago, good Nicodemus had enough belief left in the impossible to speak for it....

“Today’s evils are sufficient,” Nicodemus paraphrased Jesus. “Let us renew our love for our brothers. Any child of Abraham can do the work of Abraham. We must recall the past, to forego in the present!” His fervor increased. “Many hearing Jesus’ words are saying, such a priest-king this man could be!—greater than Melchizedek—”

Greater than Melchizedek meant greater, even, than Abraham! Would the man rip the tapestry of spirit all the way back to when the word, ‘priest,’ had known its fullest meaning--*kohen*: father and judge, commander and priest, all in one. Such had been Jacob. Such, Jethro Reuel, kohen of Midian and Moses’ father-in-law—to whom, some apparently believed, Moses paid more homage than he should have. Surely Prophetess Miriam, Aaron’s and Moses’ older sister, believed so!

Although Annas might contemplate ancient possibilities of hubris versus tradition, there were no details. Not any, of the seemingly peaceable passage from God’s ordination of Noah all the way through Shem, Arphaxad, Shelah, Eber, Peleg, Reu, Serug, Nahor, and Terah to Abraham. Scripture did note one or two domestic troubles as staff and mantle went from Abraham via Isaac to Jacob. It was subsequently, from Reuben through the return from Egypt—the ‘exodus’--that matters betrayed real complexity; and Annas did not think it simply because more latter details were recorded. In the hammering out of the co-federation, far more than individual family birthright had been at stake.

There were only so many years to life, and Annas of the House of Levi already had seen one beloved son, Eleazar (called Lazarus, by some), become fodder for the grindstone of empires. Eleazar had been second of three high priests who, after Annas’ enforced retirement, preceded Caiaphas. The tenure of each had been brief. Annas’ conjecture as to the fates of his own remaining descendants was one of the few things left that made him tremble. What more should God expect of him?

He had not experienced the glory days of the Maccabiahs and Ashemons. He had witnessed some of their descendants fail to grow to father-wisdom, however, in the embrace of individual immortality. He had seen the flowering of the Pharisaic method for modernity’s access, an oral tradition toward more lenient interpretation of The Law, while the Sadducees, on the other end, professed to stand firmly on every written syllable. But Annas’ eyes were old and tired, always red around their edges now even after an afternoon’s sleep. They were finished with scanning old script, long past the days that they guided his hands to write the most beautiful of it....

Annas had bit his tongue at the end of Nicodemus’ monologue, but thought insisted running its course.... Too many of our youth have been educated totally by society! Have any studied what it really meant, to be the highest priest, most exalted of God’s sons and the army’s commander as well? How many of those being educated today understand what their history truly represents? Certainly not my reluctant daughter’s husband—Caiaphas!--raised to believe

that a man could consider himself a god! It's enough to be cursed as a son of God: to show expected courage at the front of His legion--one conscience, holding the line against its enemies. And still the masses never give up! Watching; waiting, for one particular son with all of Man's might as well as all of God's reason—

“Pure Reason—” Nicodemus regained Annas' attention. “That is what Jesus insists upon-- The Logos, the Greeks call it.”

Annas, who did not need the definition, thought sharply, it still remains to be proven whether it ever can lodge fully in the flesh!

Nicodemus, sensing there was little time left to his audience with Annas, pressed on. “Let me explain that claim of his about ‘destroying and rebuilding the Temple in three days.’ It was based on the very precept that sustained each exile and exodus, immigration and emigration, of the peoples of Abraham. The temple in material existence is but a symbol; the true temple, manifest in The Law, abides in its people.”

Only then was Joseph moved to speak. “It hasn't been two years since his emergence; and I for one do believe that, if he chose, he very well might be able to ‘re-erect “the Temple” in only three days.’ Twelve servants, giving the call in as many directions, still may be capable of bringing back that temple greater than any built by hands. Think how many are in a condition to relate to his words. Peasantry in Samaria are feeling hope again. Cleopatra's Philip, Tetrarch in the northeast regions, would stand solid. Meanwhile, the Galilaeans are more than harking to witnessed reports that no one--not Pharisee nor Sadducee--can cut to the quick like this Jesus can.”

Annas felt a surge of age's chronic wish to cut off unnecessary suffering in listening to what one already knows. Yes, yes, he thought. This Jesus has done his homework; he understands well how words and their meanings change with language and generations over time--take, for example, his reported rephrasing of David: how can one be both The Lord and The Lord's footstool at the same time?--

Again, however, Annas held his tongue against curt remarks that Nicodemus would take as unfeeling. At middle-age Nicodemus thought of himself at the end of learning, not the younger man as seen by Annas. True, Annas had not walked northern, eastern or southern tracks for many years; but he was well aware of odious border detainments....

Another escalation of Nicodemus' voice re-engaged the ex-chief priest's ears. “--his words are constantly misrepresented. Is Jesus not correct?--God created only one son's life, Man's. Every man who followed was and is a son of Man. God, alone, may be the final judge, whether a son of Man is also one with His, The Father's, spirit. But, if one is to be--using Jesus' words, ‘it is vital that the son of Man be elevated, in the same manner that Moses elevated the ‘serpent’, in the wilderness.’”

Annas remembered that he could listen and not listen at the same time; his shoulders loosened down as he reprised Jesus' point. Had he meant a son of Man could call himself a true son of God only when he elevated himself, to accept full responsibility for everything he had done that he claimed had been God's intention? Annas had no quarrel with that. Yet there also could be an accompanying interpretation, a cleverer one? Might Jesus have been referring to Moses' elevation in the wilderness of sons of Man that had worshipped gods who wore serpent headpieces? Annas brushed the conjecture aside and focused on the issue at hand....

Now, if Nicodemus was to be believed, Jesus did not aim to raise all the buried tributaries between Aaron and David, or especially between David and himself. But...spirit conceived apart from substance? Such an impersonal concept of creation was difficult for Annas to imagine at

best; and, how much more difficult given certain memories, one of which unbiddenly sprang before his mind's eye that very instant: a young maiden, in a patch of sunlight, spinning a new veil for the temple....

Annas pushed the vision away and looked at Joseph, who returned a sympathetic gaze and then lowered his eyelids sadly as if he, too, had seen the picture. Annas read this of his best friend's silences as correctly as he interpreted Nicodemus' recitations. Joseph understood hopelessness of will, as well as of want; nothing was to be gained, thinking about the scarlet thread....

Nicodemus, on the other hand, still could imagine that miracles of pure justice were possible. But something told him at that point it would be best not to quote any more of Jesus' words, especially those conveyed personally in the deep of an earlier night. "You are a teacher of Israel and ignorant of these things?" Jesus had exclaimed. "If you cannot comprehend what I have said of terrestrial matters--of the epigeia—how, if ever I should tell it to you, would you be able to believe in the epourania, the celestial? No body ascends into The Empyrean that doesn't redescend from it. That which is created out of flesh is flesh. That which is created out of spirit is spirit. The breath of Life, the spirit, the pneuma, moves where it wills. We hear its sound but do not know wherefrom it comes or where it goes. So is it with everything generated out of spirit."

"When the Council receives him, you will see," Nicodemus finished, instead. "Then you will have the opportunity to hear him speak as I have."

Ah, dear Nicodemus! Annas exhausted a silent response. Why argue and grieve you all the sooner? What would you feel, if I told you it cannot--history proves it will not--matter, even if this loosed filament did come woven through every king of Judah and queen of Israel. One example of Jesus' intellect would have sufficed for me--on point, how he handled that lame conspiracy by Pharisees wishing to force a seditious statement out of him in public....

"It's our understanding that you are truthful, and, no matter the man, you do not accept him at face value but by way of the truth of God you profess. Is it lawful, then, that we pay tribute to Caesar? Should we give it, or should we not?"

Had they really expected the man to deny Rome's authority? "Show me a denarius," he had asked, instead. "Tell me whose image and inscription is on it."

"Caesar's."

"Well, then. Repay Caesar-things to Caesar, God-things to God."

Another neat little piece of dialectic, mused Annas—avoidance answering in the negative but playing nicely on Caesar's self-titled godship. Caesar could believe he was a god because the coin he received had his face upon it. God knows what due is His, however; and so, better, should any son of His, quite apart from to whom he must pay head tax!

Nicodemus fidgeted, while Annas' mind returned to the main issue....

Pontius Pilate, Rome's prefect of Judaea, was a man of letters and would find Jesus intriguing. But Antipas Herod?—he who would have his face on the other side of Caesar's coin, if not on his own? Annas' saliva threatened to curdle in his throat. The greater the intelligence of a perceived contender, where the Tetrarch of Galilaea and Peraea was concerned, the greater the treachery would be.

Joseph ended the awkward silence. He stood up, hoisted his leather bag from beside his chair and said, "It's late. I'm in need of rest." He bent and gave Annas a soft kiss on the cheek. "Sleep well, friend," he said audibly, and then whispered, "New times; new reasonings."

Annas mustered a small smile for both men and wished enough benevolence into it to save Nicodemus from loss of all hope. It was easier that way.

0031 a.d./c.e.

YEAR TWO

South of the temple, Jesus fell into step with women hurrying through the city gate to collect water from the spring on the east side. The women, narrow jars balanced on their heads, were absorbed by their task against approaching darkness. In the late evening light, tawny patches on the hills across the narrow Kidron valley were awaiting fall's first thunderhead.

It was the season of thanksgiving and ingathering of the year's second harvest, when The Law enjoined the faithful to make their yearly offerings at Temple. Those who came to the festival for business reasons or pure pleasure generally could afford city lodging. In contrast, the dry Kidron bustled with family shelters created of poplar and olive branches, or perhaps a lucky find of myrtle. Men were accompanied by all of their households, and a flickering village had sprung up there overnight.

Magda had heard that Jesus was known to camp in the park across the vale, and her long wait by the Water Gate was rewarded. She hoped for more than a mere glimpse of him but lost nerve; when he did appear she turned her back toward him. Jesus was preoccupied, as he threaded his way through the activity near the gate. He took no notice of the woman rummaging through her carpetbag, nor did he see her turn and follow him.

Along the paths between thatched tabernacles, Magda heard the sounds and felt the energy generated by hearts happy in believing. She did her best to keep up with Jesus' youthful stride, until at the foot of one ravine she lost sight of him completely. Reluctantly, she dropped her bag and sank next to it. Using the bag as a pillow, she curled up beneath her cape.

She was on her feet again before light. In a cleft at a hillock, across from where she had slept, some of the pilgrim women had created their privy. In return for a coin an old woman gave Magda a bowl of water with which she washed her face and hands. She ate the last of her bread and then retraced the way back to the Water Gate.

Inside the city wall, on the public square near the gate, vendors were arranging their wares. She used another coin to buy almond cakes and several dried figs for her food pouch. She was intent on where now would be the best place to keep watch, when she realized that she, herself, was being watched. She averted her steps to avoid a cluster of men at the northwest corner of the square. All but one had their backs toward her--

"You! Woman!"

Magda already had recognized one of the men as Zuph, whom she had known when he was an arrogant leader of young Pharisees, and managed to avoid the preceding year. She ignored the call, but he broke from the group and hurried after her. He caught her arm and drew her veil down insolently. "I knew it!--if it isn't the *'the Magdalene'!*" His grayed hair surprised her; but she kept her eyes from shifting and drew back from his touch. "I thought you'd gone east for good," he exclaimed. "Never expected to see *you* in the city again. Alone, are you?"

"What concern is that of yours? Is there a new law against single women attending festivals?"

"No...," Zuph smiled churlishly and mimicked a royal bow. "*Especially* not one of your

esteem? Ahhh...*I* know. If *anyone* came to see him, it would be you.”

“See whom.”

“You know. The one who’s got all the women stirred up.”

Magda saw that the other men in the tight circle at the corner had turned to stare. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She drew up her veil. “Excuse me; I’ll be on my way.”

“But you won’t mind if I introduce you to someone?” Zuph took her elbow firmly and maneuvered her across the square. The circle of men broke open, and Magda saw that they had been attendant on yet another man, sitting on the ground with his back against a pillar. . . . Jesus!

Zuph tightened his grip on Magda’s elbow and gave a sharp thrust. “What say you about *this*, ‘prophet’?” Pebbles stung Magda’s hands as she hit the ground, but immediately she lifted herself up, supporting her torso defiantly on fattened palms.

“What was it you were saying to us before?” Zuph pressed hotly.

Jesus set steady eyes on Magda’s face. “I was saying,” he replied in a civilly soft voice, “that, yes, Moses said a man may give his wife a certificate of divorce. But a woman who is let go, if she remarries, has been forced toward adultery.”

Zuph pointed to Magda. “Of this woman, therefore, it can be said that she has been caught in the act twice. It is a known fact that she has had three husbands. So, on the penalty for adultery, isn’t The Law clear?—death by stoning. What, then, should it be for her?”

Jesus lowered his head and, seemingly absentmindedly, ran a line with his finger through the sand. “Let us be certain, first, of our definitions. Perhaps *you* understand the word, *adultery*, to mean *fornication*? Now, ‘fornication’ is a Roman word, the root of it being *forno*—oven.” He dragged out the *o* and *r* and gave the *n* just the right amount of hum. “‘*Adultery*,’ however, derives from *adulteration*—specifically, of bloodlines. Are you accusing this woman, then, of adulterating fornication?”

Magda, childless as she was, would have laughed had she not been feeling the sting of both pebbles and anger. She sat back on her haunches. Her harasser, slack-jawed by Jesus’ sophistry, had forgotten all about her; and Jesus wasn’t finished yet. “In such case, then,” he drew a line in the sand parallel with the first, and a line connecting them, “the act when between two persons married to each other also could be labeled ‘adulterous fornication’ if *either* the woman *or the man* had been married previously?” Magda saw some heads nod and some shake, but all, uncertainly.

“Wherefore, in the true sense of the word,” Jesus continued, “how, under The Law, could ‘adultery’ have been illegal and concubinage not? The Law did not proscribe adultery only on the part of females, did it? Seek the scripture and determine whether God’s law against adulteration might have become adulterated itself. We need look no farther than recent history, to appreciate dangers of watering down of bloodline, and the lengths to which some can be driven in resulting conflicts of inheritance.”

The men were no less awestruck than Magda. She could tell from their expressions—they, too, were put in mind of the Great Herod’s horrors, and the sufferings of Miriam of Ashemon, of her sons by the Great, and of their grandmother, Alexandra.

Jesus now drew descending zigzagged lines between the sand parallels, another parallel at a distance on each side, and more zigzags over all. “Tribes... dynasties... empires,” he murmured. He looked up, not at them but at the patch of blue between the tops of their heads and the ledge of the building’s portico. “So..,” he sighed. “As is written, Moses ‘in his soft-heartedness’--seeing Man could not fully control his nature according to certain commands--reformed The Law to permit divorce.”

His eyes shifted then; and, with the hint of a polite smile beneath, they pierced Zuph's coldly. "One question remains. Did a change in The Law make it right in God's eyes--that men be permitted to divorce wives on contrived grounds, and leave their discarded property to the hounds? Answer me that. Then, he among you who never has missed the mark, let him throw the first stone." He bowed his head and erased the diagram from the sand of the walkway, sending Magda covert glances from under lowered brow. *Hold tight*, was the message. *I think we've called their bluff*.

Magda heard muttering and feet behind her slide away...more muttering...more movement. Finally Zuph's departing voice came clearly, a mixture of bravado and hostility: "I've had enough of this."

Magda no longer needed to wait for either crunch of foot or scrape of stone; but her eyes were glued to Jesus', thought suspended in-between. Several seconds went by, until he stood up and extended a hand. "Looks like we're alone," he said. He lifted and turned her like a father would have, brushing the dust off her skirt and examining her palms and fingers. "Not hurt, are you?"

"No."

"Good! I'm Jesus, by the way. Friends call me Jeshu. And you are--?"

"Magda."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Magda. Going in my direction? I'm headed for the temple."

Magda hesitated.

"No?"

"Yes... except--"

"Except?"

"Are you certain that's where *you* want to go?"

"It's why I'm here," he replied quickly but with a little less lightness to his voice.

"Ophel's the quickest way. Feel up to it?"

She didn't bother answering but had to run a couple of steps to stay with him. It was about a quarter-hour walk, and she tried hard to hide her shortness of breath while matching his stride. He noticed, however. Once he had adjusted his pace she asked, "Have you broken fast yet this morning?"

"Not yet."

She took out the food pouch from her bag, loosened its lace and offered it toward him. "Here are figs and almond cakes if you care for some."

"I could use a little nourishment. Thanks." He reached in and took two of each. Magda was grateful because he walked still more slowly while he ate.

The nearer they got to the temple grounds, the more obvious it became that the man at her side, not festival activity was the morning's draw. People stopped milling about when they saw him; many in small groups pointed and whispered. It had been years since Magda had known herself an object of public attention, but she had not forgotten how to react. By the time Jesus stopped where the Royal and Solomon colonnades met, she was carrying herself like a queen.

At the southeast corner of the temple grounds, three men accosted them. They came quickly, unexpectedly out of nowhere. The tallest of them clasped Jesus' shoulder from behind and whirled him around. Magda, alarmed, backed behind Jesus. The stranger--of Jesus' age--had a haughty boyish look about him. His brown hair was long and tightly-curved. He had a blunt nose, and skin that Magda would peg as 'middle-colored.' "You weren't

supposed to be here yet,” he said.

“I took a short cut,” Jesus replied, scrutinizing the crowd.

Magda was relieved, seeing that the two of them were friends. Jesus reached around and drew her forward. “We have a new recruit.”

“Where’d you find her?” the other asked.

Magda, instantly hostile at the term of reference, gave answer before Jesus could.

“Gleaning in a field, of course—where else?”

The touch of sarcasm wasn’t lost on the man. “Oh. I see,” he said, and pressed his lips together as if to keep from saying more.

“Peter, it’s my pleasure to present Magda, who was kind enough to share her breakfast with me. Magda, meet Peter.”

“How do you do,” Peter said politely. His pupils against the sunlight were lost in irises of darkest brown. Magda put out her hand, but then seeing that Peter already was looking away, she withdrew it. *Not exactly the type who can give a woman long eye-to-eye looks*, she thought.

Compared to Peter, the other two men seemed shy. Jesus reached a hand to the shoulder of each and drew them nearer. “Magda, meet two more of my friends: Andrew--he’s Peter’s brother--and Judas Levi.”

“I’m very happy to meet you both,” Magda said, as each when named shook her hand. She sensed a greater deference in them toward Jesus than in Peter, which caused her suddenly to remember that he was a teacher of the highest order. How easily his naturalness could make one forget!

Andrew had an open face and a wide, ready smile. Magda tried to guess which brother was the older, Peter or Andrew. There was a strong resemblance between them, their coloring was the same, and they were equally well-developed physically. But in all respects Andrew’s appearance was less dramatic. He was shorter in stature, his nose not as blunt, and his eyes were a warmer brown.

Judas, who looked much younger than the others, was lighter-skinned and of a height between them. His frame was lanky; light-brown waves of hair tinged with gold swept from his temples like a lion’s mane. His irises were a mix of green and yellow-brown specks, and he had a sweet, thin-lipped smile and a sharply perfect nose.

“Let’s walk,” Jesus said, abruptly skirting around all of them. They followed him through a south gate that accessed the plaza, where Magda had watched him roust the bankers at Passover the year before. That main court at temple was not restricted like the inner ones. It was open to one and all, and used as a general thoroughfare. Past the gate Jesus took an immediate right between the lofty Greek-styled pillars of the Royal colonnade. Its three columns (thanks to the Great Herod, 162 pillars in all) intersected Solomon’s colonnade--three more columns of marble pillars that ran along Temple ground’s east side, overlooking the Kidron.

Jesus strolled amiably, nodding with a smile when people he passed looked to him for it. Peter was close on his heels, Andrew behind Peter. Lastly, Judas walked abreast with Magda, who had a slight but distinct feeling of acting as a maternal foil. Jesus turned left through Solomon’s columns. His retinue dutifully followed, and Magda noticed a small parade was forming behind them. Around they went, past the gate called “Beautiful,” along the north colonnades and then the west.

When their circuit returned them to the main court, however, all pretense of aimless strolling was gone. Jesus sat himself on the ground near the corner of the stone barrier that separated the outer plaza from the inner courts. Magda, who rarely lost composure, felt at that

point that she might. *He's one of those people who says, 'Come along!' and neglects to add, 'but, if you do, you're on your own.'* She felt better when several women from the parade remained grouped around her, even if--judging by the movement of eyes above their veils--they were no more certain of the situation than she was. She gravitated with them to the side pillar nearest to where Jesus sat.

A formidable group of stately-robed men--a contingent of nobles, politicians and scribes exuding confident attitudes--had congregated in the immediate area. Magda was beyond distinguishing from which districts they came.. Their modes of dress varied and, as always, the more interesting differences were in skin color and faces. Some of them leaned along the stone wall against which Jesus sat; others mingled in separate groups. It pleased Magda to note that Judas sat with Jesus and they were conversing naturally, as if not in the process of being surrounded. Peter and Andrew stood watchfully several feet away.

A singular man stood somewhat apart from all others, closer to Peter and Andrew. His robe spoke of noble position. "Look," the woman nearest Magda nodded toward him and whispered to her friend. "There's Joseph of Arimathaea." Magda thought she caught an exchange of acknowledgment the older man and Jesus, but so brief she might have imagined it

Three gates entered onto the west colonnade. People entering from the two farthest gates, not wanting to circle in opposite direction, began to press from behind. Magda, aided by the women around her, held her ground. They had been joined by more women entering by the front gates, who made a beeline toward the female group as soon as they spied it.

Two new, obviously also friends of Jesus arrived, and had quick consultation with him. Judas Levi moved and took a standing position a short distance away, while the new arrivals positioned themselves on a lengthening line from Jesus past Peter to Andrew. All seemed stationed to guarantee emergency exit via the third and nearest, the western, gate.

Settled in her niche Magda became more observant of the individuals collecting in the square. The marvel of faces and tongues gave her an odd surge of mass patriotism. Not only north, south and mid-country Israelites had been drawn in great numbers to the festival. In the square Aramaic dialects, including Syriac and Samaritan, interplayed with each other, with pure Greek a repeating lyric above staccato notes of scholarly Hebrew.

Magda's mind's eye saw History pressed into a cornucopia of Time. On its peripheries, the sons of Japheth, Cush and Canaan; spiraling through center, two distinctly separate cords fastened to the root of Abraham. *Canaan or Palaistine?* She wondered--*in Roman measure, roughly 1300 stadia north to south and 650 east to the sea.... Such a small but consistently drained artery of the world!*

Another two new men arrived who also made their presence known to Jesus and then spaced themselves between him and the gate. It struck Magda then, how Jesus' compatriots mirrored human components of the square. She looked at him and found his eyes on her. **You!** She thought fiercely. **You could do it!--Antipas Herod, himself, recognizes the power of blood right joined with reason, by the very act of arresting your cousin!**

An elder leaned out of his group and motioned peremptorily toward Joseph of Arimathaea. Joseph stepped forward and cleared his throat. Seeing that he had Jesus' full attention, Joseph's voice was the epitome of grace and civility. "Some of our colleagues," he said, "are most interested in having discourse with you"....

The noon sunlight fell just short of Annas' feet where he sat in the doorway of his chamber. He had been watching through half-closed eyes as Caiaphas paced the priest court, awaiting a report of activity in the public squares.

Caiaphas' penchant for secrecy wasn't what troubled Annas. It was the way secrecy nourished wrong minds, and he did not know--was Caiaphas in league with Antipas Herod and, if so, how deeply? It worried Annas' thought like thread grazing an eyeball. Antipas' ambition was far greater now than it had been 25 years ago, when his father, Herod the Great, died. The power struggle that followed then ultimately resulted in Rome taking direct control of Jerusalem *and* the Temple.

At first after the Great's death, Rome allowed "Palaestina," as the Romans pronounced it, to remain a client-monarchy. Client kingdoms retained internal rule and were managed only at a distance by Rome. Herod the Great's last will, which was administered by Caesar Augustus, directed that Herod's son, Archelaus, was to succeed as overall ruler. The two sons, Antipas and Philip, were to be sub-rulers under Archelaus, and the territory parceled among the three. Archelaus and Antipas were full-blooded brothers, sons of the Great by Malthace, a Samaritan. Philip was their half-brother, the Great's son by Cleopatra of Jerusalem.

Archelaus received the lion's share—the southern District of Idumaea, the central District of Judaea, and, north of it the District of Samaria. Antipas received the more northern District of Galilaea and, east of the Jordan River, the District of Peraea. Philip received the far northeast region that included the Districts of Batanaea and Trachonitis.

Archelaus, however, had not been able to keep order. Continuous strife and civil upset brought woe to many of the people, and deathly consequences for some. Three thousand died in one riot alone at Jerusalem. In the end, Archelaus received all blame and Rome banished him. But Rome did not replace Archelaus with another Herod. It annexed the territory instead, and his province fell under direct Roman rule—*where it remains this very moment, Annas thought...control of the Temple, its funds, and appointment of Chief High Priest—all, vested in a local Roman prefect....*

Annas was too astute to think that Antipas was the type of fox that would outfox himself. By imprisoning Johanan—he called 'the baptizer'—Antipas may have caused more support to be thrown to Jesus, his cousin; but that left only one potential contender at large, instead of two. Among other Antipas recent politically "expedient" acts was appropriation of Herodias from one of his half brothers, her first husband (who was the Great's son by Miriam, daughter of Simon of Alexandria, whom the Great had had as high priest after taking that Miriam to wife). Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus (the Great's son by Miriam of Ashemon, and an older half-brother whom the Great himself had eliminated, along with Aristobulus' brother, Alexander).

The upshot was that Herodias' young daughter, Salome--granddaughter of Miriam of Ashemon, flower of the family, *and* betrothed to Philip--also was in Antipas' hands.

Annas had not been able to restrain a small snort, when someone suggested pure love of Herodias was the reason Antipas divorced and banished his first wife, the daughter of King Aretas IV of Nabataea in the Arabian southeast. Aretas was of a mind to wage war over the broken alliance; but Antipas' Roman connections stood ready, if it became necessary, to save his hide.

Antipas' acquisition of the last aristocratic Alexandrian-Ashemon females provoked a mental image in Annas: women rising from desert dust and mountain gullies, mouths petrified in a silent scream for justice. What might they say, he wondered, when The Judge of All Time removed the chalk of ages?... *Look to us. US!—wives whom men took from their husbands to*

become fathers of their own sisters. Was that for your glory, oh Lord?--

Annas arose abruptly and padded down the hallway to his sitting room....

The ancestresses would not need voices on such a day of judgment! All is known to God, and would a just God deny them their purging? Annas pursued the imaginary drama. Who would speak first?--Miriam, prophetess of the exodus? Yes!--the very first Miriam; she who, 14 years older than Moses, rescued him from infant death and contrived his adoption by the then-Pharaoh's wife....

The record was clear. The first Miriam didn't just carry the mantle into the Sinai; for many she was the original mortar that held the exodus together. It was Miriam who insisted they bring animal stock for survival; knew where to find water; pressed for cultivation of land; encouraged hunting and trade. *She* who, as the people made their way north, believed war with descendants of Esau should be avoided, and so counseled Moses. "It now is upwards of 400 years since our fathers dwelt in their lands; these people know us not!"

Ah, the women.... What might God have to say to Keturah and Hagar, for instance, about their relegation as concubines?

If Annas were to imagine the Pharaasaical resurrection, it would be to see flesh restored to every single skeleton of God's female family. He would lounge on a cloud and hear the puzzle of History solved in the words of the matriarchs who lived it. Of two who bridged the exodus, little remained except their formidable names—Azubah, another shared wife of uncertainty, and Ephrathah, which translated, was *Bethlehem*.

A chief priest, even one *emeritus*, remains human. Reading between the words of God in His Own history, Annas had found the stuff of memoirs--everyday realities engraved privately in people's hearts. Three years separated Aaron and Moses, children of Levi daughter Jochebad and Levi grandson Amram. Amram was their cousin as well as their father, being Jochebad's nephew, son of her brother Kohath.

Annas never mused such delicate scripture in public. In his handsome youth, however, he and Joseph secretly delighted in wider deliberations, the private type enjoyed by the cream of society's young scholars since the beginning of time. In his and Joseph's mental commune of intellect, Annas had felt on ground no less holy than that which housed them.

The exodus from Egypt had begun with mixed convictions on the part of its peoples. Miriam, apparent leader of a large segment of them, was critical as an ally. Late at night in the scribes' room, Annas and Joseph poured over every available account of the organizational upheavals at the foot of Mount Sinai, where Miriam was caught in a bitter dispute between Moses, son of Amram, and Korah, son of Kohath's son, Izhar....

Moses and Korah—Levi great-grandson first cousins! How different their relationship, Annas thought, than that of Jesus and Johanan....

Centuries before Moses, at a time of a severe drought, descendant families of Sarah and Abraham had been able to establish residence in northern Egypt, under auspices of Rachel and Jacob's son, Joseph, who had risen to power there. And from whom had come those descendants? Annas had not run *that* gamut for a long, long time....

Terah, Abraham's father (whose wives' names were not given in the scripture) had two other sons who had cities in Aram--Haran and Nahor--where Terah, Abraham, his half-sister Sarah, and his nephew Lot had sojourned enroute their emigration from Ur. Haran and an unreported wife had a daughter, Milcah, who married her uncle Nahor. Their son Bethuel and an unreported wife had a daughter, Rebekah. Later, Sarah's and Abraham's son Isaac, married Rebekah; and it was their son, Jacob, who was patriarch of the then 11 family clans who settled

in Egypt, in the area called Goshen.

Some four hundred years passed before Moses' personal rebellion flowered in Goshen; and Egypt's Pharaoh--because Moses had been "stirring up the people"--sent a detail after him. Moses got out, northeast to Midian. There he dwelt with descendants of the old union between families of Hagar's and Abraham's son, Ishmael, and Rebekah's and Isaac's other son, Esau....

Forty years between Moses self-exile and his return from Midian to lead the exodus. Could the first Miriam be blamed for questioning his decisions? In the interim, Moses had married Princess Zipporah, daughter of Midian Kohen, Reuel Jethro, and fathered two children. It was not surprising to Annas that, when Moses as commander took counsel from Jethro in summit, Miriam was moved to ask, "Who is Jethro, to instruct the children of Jacob how to govern themselves? Have we been ignorant all these years?"

It remained unclear whether Miriam was spared witnessing the ultimate ugly Moses/Korah standoff, although she was present during the earlier priesthood dispute that ended in annihilation of Aaron's two older sons, Nadab and Abihu—

There is that repeating pattern! Annas thought. *Were Nadab and Abihu perhaps not Aaron's natural sons and only his wife's--the priestly Elisheba, daughter of Amminadab?--Annas' heresy was halted by a sound--footsteps? Or had he only imagined them, anxiously anticipating at what next moment Caiaphas would light upon him?*

When a person did materialize at Annas' right, he exclaimed an involuntary, "Oh, no!" But the person that appeared only was delivering the ex-chief priest's midday meal. Startled, the servant took even more care than usual righting the objects on Annas' side table, to receive a steaming soup cup and a plate of strips of unleavened barley bread.

Most definitely, Annas was in no hurry to hear the next abridged summary of current Caiaphas maneuverings. He lifted the cup to his lips and blew gently. *The High Priest's robe still sports scarlet pomegranates around its hem, he thought, but too bad they got rid of the bells...*

Meanwhile, the gnawing at Caiaphas' solar plexus was intensifying with each moment; the afternoon report was as overdue as his first meal. He assigned a trusted subordinate to watch for messengers, and forced his short legs to their widest stride toward the priests' dining room. A humorless loner by nature, he liked little about the practical duties of his office. He hoped both to find something left of the day's fare and no one there.

He especially was bad catering to different personalities. With the council in a state of foment, his limited charm forced him to rely on cohorts to lay necessary groundwork. He was trusting Summas and Datam to deal with the ultraconservative elders—several of whom, near the edge, insisted, "We *must* correct the situation *ourselves*, and as soon as possible, before Pilate gets involved!" The highest-minded, like Gamaliel, cautioned appositely. "Direct action too-quick on our part and matters could get out of hand. Then prefect Pilate would be certain to intercede." Self-absorbed types preferred to ignore all of it, muttering, "We are mad, if we bother even *listening* to that Jesus."

Caiaphas worried the most, however, about those council members he termed "country cousins," highly respected men of irrefutable lineage in the people's eyes--men like Joseph and Isaac, who had been overheard to say, "The words Jesus speaks don't sound like words of a mad-man to us." Meanwhile, Caiaphas' search for three willing eyewitnesses, as required under Temple law for an indictment of any kind, had been frustrated in the extreme. Potential witnesses

infuriated him by falling victim themselves, to the man's silver tongue.

When Jesus was observed one sabbath day collecting grain for himself and his men, he had stymied a consortium of potential accusers in one fell stroke. "What about *David*?" he had tossed at them. "Did *he* break The Law, when he pilfered and ate *priestly shewbread*, and gave of it to his faithful servants to stave off hunger?" And so it had been going too long! Plotting, badgering, and failure, as Jesus answered every thrust with tales that, for reasons not consciously clear to the hearers, rendered them mute...

At the temple square, Jesus' strong voice across it was carried back to where Magda was standing

"I already have said, the teachings are not mine but the god's from whom I come. One disposed to do godly will knows when a teaching is from God, not *mine* spoken out of my Self. A person who speaks out of his own self seeks his own glory, but there can be no unrighteousness in one who seeks the glory of The One who dispatched him. Yet some seek to kill me?"

"That's crazy," an exasperated elder interjected. "What makes you think anyone's looking to harm you?"

"*One* deed and I am questioned. Moses--not of his own initiative but of The Father's--codified the number of days after birth when circumcision is to be performed. If circumcision be allowed on a sabbath so that God's law, as received by Moses, not be broken, would God deny on the Sabbath making a sick man whole? Judge justly, not from outward appearances, and remember!: 'in the Sanctuary there is no Sabbath.'"

Another voice called out; Magda could not see its owner--a tremulous voice: "If you believe you are anointed by God why not say as much?"

"It is *works* that witness whether a son is one with his Father," Jesus replied.

Magda noticed a change in the crowd. An unfriendly element had advanced to the fore, and she saw Jesus' men assuring each other that they were on the alert, while Peter tried unsuccessfully to get Jesus' attention. A stone few past Jesus' ear, but Magda knew it would take more than that to move him.

"For what reason was that act done toward me?" He called out.

"For your blasphemy!--you, but a man, would make yourself God!"

Jesus jumped and straddled the space between two of the short posts that formed a barrier between the square and inner temple courts. He gave his voice full force. "Isn't it written *in* The Law? Doesn't *It* say, 'I said, 'YOU are gods'?" He turned and pointed in the direction of the shout. "Yet that man would nullify Scripture. *He* is unable to believe in thought equal with the Father's purpose, because, if he did, he would have to answer fully for his own iniquities."

The number of common people was dwindling steadily, in fear of an episode that would bring soldiers down on their necks. All of the women near Magda had left by the back gate.

Jesus' voice passed over his opponents to reach the ears of retreating men. "Some say I blaspheme in my claim to be a son of God. *I* say, if you are unable to believe that I am in union with The Father, *believe then the workings of His word*, so that you may come to know the truth." He addressed the accuser again. "You hate me for that? Yet if you believed truly that the same god about whom you inquire *is* the Only God, One Father of all, you would love me. Different standards yield different measure. Judgment, however, belongs to a power greater than you or I possess. Believe me when I say, the glory I look for is not for me--"

"But haven't you said a man does not need to die? Yet Abraham died! *All* the prophets

died—”

“You to whom God gave ears for hearing—*listen!* Before Abraham and all the prophets came into existence, The ‘I’ of the One God was. He who is one with that Word does not die so long as *It* is alive. Be true to that, not upon names--”

Another stone; Jesus ducked....

“He who believes my words is not believing *me*, but the words of that One who caused me and has caused all; thus one who sees me sees that One, who says, ‘**I**, Light, am in the world so that none believing in **Me** suffer darkness—”

Another stone! It hit Jesus squarely on his left shoulder. He jumped from the posts and strode toward the threatening group now encircling him. “You think I come to unite??” He hissed the words through clenched teeth, elbows tight against his sides but hands raised benevolently toward them. “Doesn’t The Law say,” abruptly he closed a fist near a bearded chin, “*the testimony of two men is true?* Well I am one man testifying about The Father in the same way that more than one forefather, a son of Man, testified about Him before me.”

For the first time since arriving at the temple grounds Magda came aware of a wider landscape. Above the sun was past its zenith. Birds flittered under the colonnades, and children obliviously at play could be heard beyond the temple grounds.

Then, “Just *who* are you?--say it!” one man spit. “*Where is your father?*”

In his spirit! Magda thought, while Jesus turned away, his back toward the harassers like a bull daring them to lower the yoke.

“No! Who was your *real* father?”--a taunt calculated to bring out the worst!

Jesus again faced the hostile human cordon near him and dropped his voice to a menacing whisper. “You are from a lower sphere of existence; I, a realm above. *You,*” he actually poked his finger against one ugly man’s chest, “are fully *in* and *of* the *world.*” Then he strode through them toward the gate.

Paired bodies separated cleanly, like hematite from its crystal, yet as unresisting as water is divided by a reed. But the whirling whiteness of Jesus’ linen head cover shattered Magda’s metaphor, as he turned and boomed his last words against the unfriendly faces. “WHEN YOU HAVE ELEVATED THE SON OF **MAN**, AND BELIEVE THAT WHAT A MAN DOES FROM HIS OWN INITIATIVE TRULY CAN BE ACCORDING TO WHAT THE FATHER TEACHES, *THEN YOU WILL KNOW WHOSE SON I AM.*”

Peter and the others now were surrounding him as he reached the edge of the square. There he turned a last time, and spoke in a softer tone to the defiant ones that followed him. “You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. However, if ever I should, the judgment would be true because, it is not I, alone, who judges, but that in me of That which dispatched me. Like the fine shepherd knows which sheep are his and they know him, may The Father know me and I, him. There are other sheep that are not from this fold. Those I will lead and, hearing my voice, it shall become one flock.”

0032 a.d./c.e.

YEAR THREE

Jesus reached across the table and drew the bowl of lentil stew nearer, to dip in a chunk of bread. “Only seven days left until the first of 13 bulls is sacrificed. If I was one of those 70 tithed beasts, I’d be more than a little worried.” He lifted his chin toward Mark. “What would my odds be—13 out of 70?”

“Ehhh.... Let me see.” Mark tossed his long black curls away from his cheeks. “Seventy less 13 is 57. 13 into 57 is... ummm...,” Mark tried to give his answer a positive spin, “a little less than one in five.”

“Is that so?” Jesus said with polite amazement, while Marie, Mark’s mom, lifted her eyebrows above a “That’s my boy!” smile. It hadn’t sounded to Magda like the right formula for calculating odds, but no one at table would spoil Mark’s pleasure just to prove an unimportant point.

“They can kill and eat *all 70 bulls*--and every last one of the 119 lambs, rams and goats--for all I care!” Andrew’s outburst broke the mood. “The real sacrifice this year is missing *here*,” he slapped the table with force uncommon to him. Next to him his sister-in-law, Hannah, Peter’s wife, bowed her head. Eugenia, his mother, just had come from the kitchen with a replenished bowl of stew. She lowered the bowl beside Andrew and pressed her hands on his shoulders. “It still doesn’t seem possible,” she said softly.

Andrew rubbed his fingers around his cheeks and eyes, as if a face could be erased of pathos from without. “Not more than two years, since Peter and I last stood with Johanan on the east side of the river....”

Jesus reached out, clasped Andrew’s shoulder and chided away grief. “Remember the *dunking*?” The recollection did the trick--Andrew couldn’t believe Jesus actually used the word. “Oh ho ho--” Andrew’s laughter stopped tears, “small difference of opinion there!”

“Jahn--” Jesus, who always used the familiar name of his beloved cousin, had to stop a moment himself. “... Well, it’s true Jahn and I may not have seen eye to eye on ritual, but that didn’t affect our union. We were brothers in spirit from birth, born before Judah the Galilaean led his uprising. Jahn was a baby when the Great Herod had high priest Zachariah murdered, for not telling where his wife and child were hidden. In Jahn’s mind, that act always was as alive as yesterday. Zachariah may have been my uncle, but he was Jahn’s *father*.”

Jesus did not want, however, to fuel sad personal reflections. Jahn, himself, would not have Death’s presence at table, ever. Jesus chose instead to pursue the subject of ritual. “For the poor, who lack means to atone sins at the place or in manners specified by The Law, Jahn’s symbolic purification was a major gift. What anyone personally thinks about it shouldn’t matter. Why deny harmless consolations that succor the spirit?”

“So, as far as orthodoxy *was* concerned,” Jesus continued, “Jahn’s and my relationship was like father and son, bound by a shared faith learned through family, the premise being that nothing be irreconcilable between godly civilized men of the intelligence that God, Himself, insists His children can achieve. We likewise were raised by two intelligently loving mothers.” *Such wonderful boyhood days!* he refrained from adding, *memories through which one would feel for all future....*

Instead he took another dip of stew but held the bread dripping above the bowl. “To

think,” he scoffed, “that some might have considered us *contending* sons. When I came back from my eastern sojourn and we saw each other again, it was like two daughters of the same doting father.” He shook his head, dropped the bread, and pushed the bowl away. “How I loved that man.”

Magda had low tolerance for grief. She reached for her cup and raised it: “To the second most-beautiful-man.” She spoke the toast in a softly descending voice, confident that Jesus would understand her good intent—he was master, after all, at renouncing adulation before Self even contemplated considering it. She *had* worried briefly how the women might receive her words; but when Peter twisted on his seat as if coarse fabric had creased his buttocks, her reaction was too close to glee. However, seeing Jesus notice Peter’s discomfiture pricked her conscience, and regret rushed in behind.

The lamp light, before dappling Jesus’ cheekbones, now shined on the prominence of his brow. He turned his cup slowly, seeming to concentrate on reflections thrown from it back toward the lamp. Magda felt like she was inside his head, hearing corroboration of her own afterthought--*a well-intended gesture, perhaps, and forgivable. But it did fall short of a proper diversion.* She was relieved when, finally, he resumed conversation toward her. “Not surprising, is it?—that Jahn dredged more than political animosity in Antipas Herod’s household.”

Magda straightened her back and leaned forward. She felt like a special isolation was enveloping the two of them, the others receding into shadow, as if her and his joined sight made all the light theirs alone. “So you think as I do,” she answered.

He didn’t respond; he would let her say it.

“How could Herodias—” Magda looked at Marie. “Could any woman?—*not* respond to Johanan’s nature, so devastatingly superior to Antipas’ ‘pragmatism’?” Magda gave the last word just the right cynical emphasis. “What could there be *to* compare, between one of total purity and one who finessed a brother’s wife, toward fastening both Rome and the mantle? God can strike me dead right here and now for saying it—”

Jesus shaded his eyes with a palm. *But say it you shall!*—

“Personal envy! That extra push that Antipas’ opprobrious sense of urgency needed to seal the unthinkable.” For the first time Magda consciously remembered to restrain emotion’s baser words, in deference to all ears presiding; and she fought the pride she felt, when Jesus’ face came up wearing appreciation.

He took it from there. “’T’wasn’t for the *people*, the end of a marriage with Nabataea. There was method, all right, in Antipas’ detainment of Jahn at Machaerus. It was predictable--once in Antipas’ presence, Jahn would not fail to rebuke him soundly for turning his back on the southeast.”

“Yahhh—” Andrew broke in with a grunt, “the sons of Petra didn’t start hating Rome just lately. If Aretas has his way, he’ll even get Damascus back one day. Where Antipas is concerned, his Roman connection is all that’s holding Aretas in check. And that was clear before Jahn’s arrest—”

“*That’s* why Johanan’s murder was doubly unspeakable.” Beyond the lamplight, from the darkness at the kitchen door, Hannah spoke out fiercely in the security of her home. “It didn’t make any difference anymore on the southern front. And that evil explanation Antipas circulated, as to why he did it!”

“Have you forgotten what went on in that family when Antipas was growing up?” Peter asked, leaning to his side as Hannah fit herself between him and Mark on the bench. “And now he has Agrippa, Herodias’ brother, lurking in the shadows. Antipas or Agrippa? Care to

wager which of *those* two, in the end, will win rule of Caesarea Philippi's beauty?"

"Young as she is, Salome must know the full score," Magda said under her breath.

Peter heard and looked ready to reply but Jesus held up a hand. "We all know the situation, and every one of us knows where he or she stands." Magda liked to think his use of both pronouns was for her benefit. "We are concerned for everyone. But in *our* battle—" he gave an intense look around the table, "no participant bears arms."

She knew precisely his meaning!—*go so far as to imagine your very body armless.*

"This thing you do—" Peter whispered almost, to restrain the vehemence in his voice. "Setting the stage for martyrdom? Remember, legend—not God—accords reason to that. First you do what you, yourself, warn others not to. Casting your pearls before swine, giving arguments they haven't brains to understand. *Daring* them to—"

"Quiet, Peter!" Magda couldn't keep from cutting off his words. She forced thought through her eyes to his. *What good will saying it do? Besides! You're scaring Mark.*

Jesus gave Peter a look that mirrored Magda's, and Peter remained silent. Then Jesus began to speak softly to the room at large, as if he had heard neither of them. "The Baptizer..." he smiled wistfully and closed his eyes. "Jahn may be dead to Antipas' world; but there always will come to me a particular combination of morning—not merely birds singing, but one particular song from one particular bush—and I will think, Jahn never will be dead so long as love lives."

He then opened his eyes directly into Peter's, and the tone of his voice changed. "It's true; we are between foes." He drew scores on the tablecloth with his fingernail. "Between princes and peasants; rich and poor; The Law and Love." It was like the diagram in the sand, except only Magda knew that this one omitted the zigzags of mother blood channels that crisscrossed all. "If you think to go with me to Jerusalem because it is *I*, going," Jesus concluded, leaning back, "then you go for the wrong reason."

"You're asking a lot." Peter forced a reciprocal quiet to his voice. "Is it possible—I mean, *humanly* possible?—for a man to make himself all spirit, identifiably uncountable?"

"You mean, for such perfected spirit to exist in the flesh, ever ready to renounce all material existence?" Magda was surprised both by her own words and Peter's reaction. His voice lifted with his body as, palms hard on the tabletop, he leaned fully into the light. "Look at history! Look at all the good people who did die submitting. Did human nature get any better for it?"

"I confess sympathy with what you say, Peter," Magda interjected, for at least one part of her spirit fully was allied with his. She turned to Jesus. "Who *are* 'we,' as a people, this time? It no longer is just north and south, potentially unitable if constricted by the same tightening ring. Now it's faction upon faction upon faction."

Jesus poured wine into his cup. "Yes, old Canaan lands have suffered many boundaries, whereas mind calls to it a common nation, composed of only two territories--"

"Land and Spirit," Magda finished.

"Precisely." He looked up at Peter. "A mother's skin may not be the same color as her son's, but her Spirit and his--"

"And mine!" Magda grabbed his forearm—

"Are colorless, formless, transparent..."

Rare is the notion that mind can transcend influence of body; certain, love between any two who proceed from that point. But if Jesus' look toward Magda this time was that of one who loves beyond the perceivable world, there was no more than that in it. Such love may contain but cannot entertain the lesser, that which exists in and of substance alone. Peter saw and

understood; Magda felt it. *How odd it was!* she thought, *that spiritual love also can engender jealousy.*

Jesus lowered his lids. Magda saw weariness descend, and an effort to will it off. He leaned back and spoke dreamily, as if from a private vision behind the closed eyes. “Ordinarily man thinks only in terms of a world that ‘was’ and a world that ‘is.’ The first was then, the second is now. All else was then; *he* is now. Yet against what can one measure God’s time? For mortals there only is a succession of events and changing scenes. In that constant flux of form, epochs and ages become but retrospective groupings of similarities. If one day all the earth upon which we walk, along with its system of things, was flooded away again, where, then, would Time begin for new historians?”

When he opened his eyes they were focused again on Peter. “Our job is to dig a trench against war. If the watershed fell full force on life’s sustaining channels they would disappear. Our job is to open new irrigation canals, so that the Spirit may float gently again over the land.” He let go Peter’s gaze and glanced around the table. “Understand me. I am not discounting the dilemma of our good father Annas, Chief Priest Emeritus.”

“He’s not my father and certainly he’s not *yours?*” Peter said unrestrainedly.

Jesus ignored it. “More pitiful for Annas than for us, he must be taken as one with Caiaphas. Remember, too. In Caiaphas, Prefect Pilate is dealing with a High Priest he inherited from the last prefect, not one he appointed himself. Pilate’s good in his position with Rome only so long as he makes sure the Temple makes sure that the people behave. Look *back*, Peter. Has there been a time, ever, when insurrection was unleashed under similar circumstances that people didn’t die undeservedly by the thousands?”

“Never should it *be* time for warring--that’s what you mean,” replied Peter, with a sideward glance.

Jesus tried a change of subject. He patted his stomach. “Another year’s harvest is in and another great meal. Rain’s imminent—”

“Yes; yes. The new year--” Peter fought to retain the lower voice. “And The Law enjoins man to pitch his tabernacles once again, ‘so as to preserve himself from the cold,’” he quoted from childhood. “I know...time to rest from tilling hard dirt or shoving shoulder under the hoist. But what about all the ones who’ve never had a tent to pitch, much less a hut--while *they*,” he spat the words, “*certain ‘fathers’*, sleep fat and warm, and scheme to get rid of you as much as their women dream to spread their hair over a gladiator’s—”

At that point Peter remembered where he was. He leaned around and touched Mark’s shoulder from the back. “See how excited one can get over history?” Mark laughed, but it was more out of politeness than feeling.

“Well, if we go to Jerusalem, I hope everyone has his toll tax ready,” Peter resumed light-heartedly enough, thinking to jest a little more; but it didn’t last. “Making us pay, to pass through our own land,” he murmured. “Greeks may complain about Rome’s setting the denarius above the drachma a point or two--” his voice rising, as he picked up a pocket of bread and pointed it around the table, “but for the hungry it means less of *this*. How I’d love to see the Romans made to put their asses where their mouths are!”

Although crude, Magda found Peter’s use of the short name for Rome’s assarion coin acceptably clever. Eugenia, however, fixed her daughter-in-law in the eye. Hannah pushed up from the bench, nudging Peter purposely with her moving bulk. “By the way, Jeshu,” she said, “Mark and I had an interesting talk today about how to describe God.”

Jesus looked down table as the youth leaned forward. “Well, Mark, man has imagined

many gods. But when Terah, Sarah and Abraham left Ur, to follow other family members' tracks north and west, they believed in One God for all humanity."

"Ur?" Mark echoed.

"A very old city of Mesopotamia, near Babylon--one of the most beautiful regions of the entire world."

Young Mark jumped up, circled the table and unselfconsciously bumped Peter over from the end of the bench near Jesus. "Tell us more."

Jesus ruffled Mark's head. "What, again?"

John Zebadiah shook the arm of his brother dozing at the other end of the table.

"James... Wake up!--we still need to tend the pack animals." James caught on immediately. "Of course; of course," he replied stoutly, fumbling for the ties of his cloak. The brothers had delicate carriages for men of their size; not one item on table shifted as they extricated themselves from the benches.

All that Magda knew about the Zebadiah brothers was that their mother (who, it appeared, was related in some way to Jesus' mother) was named Salome. Besides Herodias' daughter and the great Salome Alexandra of Ashemon, who reigned a hundred years before, Magda knew of two more Salomes. One, a sister to the great Herod, was dead. The other was a daughter of his, the only child borne to him by a woman named Elpis...

What happened to Elpis after the Great's death? Magda wondered. *Last I heard of her daughter Salome was that she wound up with one of her cousins. Now she would be about the right age to have sons the ages of the Zebadiahs--roughly as old as Jesus, Peter and Andrew...*

But Magda quickly left off trying to intuit connections of magnitude, simply noting the Zebadiah brothers as phenomenally striking men--statuesque in frame, fair of skin, and eyes the green the sea holds under grey skies. Their father, Magda had learned, was involved with the fishing industry at Tiberias, the city a short distance south of Capernaum, built by Antipas some 12 years previous on the west shore of the Galilee.

Matthew Levi, having stood to let the brothers slide out from table, intercepted Magda's stare and smiled. She cocked her head and smiled back. He and his brother, another James, were for the most part taciturn gentlemen. Slight of stature, and although only in their forties, they conveyed a manner more than one generation removed from Jesus. Magda felt a natural compatibility with them, and both had taken an obvious liking to her.

Magda had learned also, from Marie, that Matthew and James Levi had been leading Pharisees at Capernaum. Moreover, Matthew formerly had been Antipas' local tax collector! He had resigned the post to throw full support behind Jesus. Their father, Alphaeus, was dead; Magda had yet to meet their mother, Mary, and younger brother, Joses.

Then there was a third "James" whom Magda had not seen yet... *possibly a step-brother of Jesus?* There was a second "Judas" too, who took care of and distributed the company's common resources, but hadn't been present this evening. That Judas gave Magda an uneasy feeling. She began to speculate why; however, the seating at table resettled, Jesus' voice cut in. "Now, Mark," he asked, "what would you like to hear tonight?"

Eugenia began to gather bowls quickly, as if kitchen work was a beckoning recreation. Meanwhile, the Zebadiahs hastened collecting their possessions and exiting, with hearty goodbye waves. Jesus clasped his hand over his mouth and waited until they were clear of the doorway before he chuckled and whispered, "Our audience falls away, Mark!"

"Who cares!" Mark whispered back.

Jesus tilted back, gave his arms a wide stretch, and then started in the middle of

something, a habit Mark didn't mind in the least. "Wealthy city-folk can be terribly condescending toward their country cousins." He slid the last utensils over to the edge of the table for Eugenia and Hannah. "Take, for example, the term, *am ha-arets*. Like many words over time, it acquired a whole new meaning. In the beginning it was a term of respect--'peoples of the land', citizens with full rights regardless their station."

Mark, schooled at home as well as in Rome, was familiar with the term and nodded.

"After the return out of exile, the reference changed," Jesus continued. "Ezra, that is, Azariah--ultimate high priest of the post-Babylon reorganization--cautioned his flock against mixing with *peoples of the lands*, meaning those who had different practices. Now the term implies 'backward' and 'unlearned,' particularly as to The Law in all its finer points. However, God's nation wasn't created through merely formal education, southern or northern, as any teacher worth his salt would admit--

"BUT," Jesus interrupted himself, "you and I weary of politics, no? It's *history* we are concerned with; although certainly you don't want me to begin at the beginning, again?"

"Of course not," Marie answered for her son. "Mark's begun a scroll."

"Scroll?"

Mark, already retrieving it from his possessions in the corner, came back to the table.

"Scroll?" Jesus repeated.

Mark lay down his scribe kit and unrolled a large scroll on the now cleared table. Jesus clapped the boy's shoulder. "I'm impressed. Read!"

Mark ran his fingertips along lines while he read aloud....

"For 400 years, descendants of Abraham lived all along Canaan land. Then drought and famine in many areas drove people either north or south. The Jacob families entered Egypt and settled there in a region called Goshen, because Jacob's son, Joseph--Abraham's great-grandson--was an important person in Egypt's government.

"The people worked and lived in Egypt for about another 400 years, over which time Egypt's fortunes changed. More and more, the Goshenites were forced to pay heavy taxes and used like slaves by the pharaohs. Finally they decided to leave Egypt and go back to the land that they had been told about by their forefathers, most of which by then was held by powerful city-kings.

"The Chief of the immigration from Egypt was Moses. For 40 years the large number of people who left Egypt with him lived in the desert. During that time laws were written, the men were numbered, and an army was built. Not all of Jacob's relatives originally had gone south into Egypt; families of distant relatives still lived on the land. Sometimes they accepted and assisted the immigrants. Sometimes, they did not; and the people had to fight their way.

"When Moses died Joshua was chosen to lead. The army gathered on the plains of Moab, east of the Salt Sea, and Joshua led the way up and across Jordan River where they made camp at Gilgal. The kings of south Canaan, under the then-king of Jerusalem, banded together to fight; but Joshua and his men captured Jericho. They fought southward on the west side of the river, too, all the way to Hebron; then, northward. In six years, 31 kings of Canaan territory were unseated.

"Joshua erected a tabernacle at Shiloh. Different parts of the land, both conquered and as-yet-unconquered areas, were assigned to the tribe families. It took a lot more years for some clans than others to gain control of their portions; some never did. Then, for another 400 years--"

"Wait," Jesus interrupted. "You haven't named the tribal clans."

Mark blinked.

Jesus pointed to the scroll. "Write."

"There isn't any room on this part."

Jesus turned the scroll. "Here, in this space on the side." Mark opened the scribe box and commenced to grind ink powder into a small cup.

"Don't worry about missing anything I say while you're getting ready; I can repeat it," Jesus said, and continued speaking. "Jacob had 12 sons who in turn fathered the 12 sub-tribes or clans, but that number isn't precise. Jacob fathered 13 children who produced clans. Nine are considered Leah's, daughter of Abraham's grand-nephew Laban and an unknown wife. Four are considered Rachel's, Leah's sister. One of Leah's nine, Dinah, was female but in status a 'son'. She was lost early on, after some trouble at Shechem--Magda will be happy to fill you in on that later, I'm sure," Jesus interjected, not looking at her when he said it. She liked thinking he hadn't dared to!

"However, the original 13 count ended up 12 for more than that one reason, but when it comes to mothers one hears much about only a few," Jesus took a tack. "One forgets how many are missing, on the record, of their far-flung generations--"

"Isn't it said better, *far-torn*?"

Magda, utterly startled at Jesus' mother's voice out of nowhere, loved what she heard.

After supper, Mother Mary had retreated immediately to the cushions beneath the room's window that faced Peter's and Hannah's front yard. Both Magda and Mark turned and peered into the darkness, the lamp's rays reaching between them to highlight Mother Mary's face.

Anyone would agree that Mother Mary was an extraordinarily beautiful woman. Yet her very essence forestalled dwelling on any one physical quality that comprised it. Very likely no older than 45 years, her countenance combined ineffable agelessness with the sad wisdom of old age. Despite any uncertainty of circumstance Mother Mary might be feeling, one always experienced great serenity in her company. She complained about nothing, and negative remarks seemed alien to her constitution. Of Magda's hours with the family, more had been spent with Mary than with any of the other women, all of it out of preference.

Jesus gave his mother an adoring smile then shifted his eyes to Magda. "I dare *anyone* to fill in the Judah-Ashemon line! But--where was I? Mark?"

"Leah sons and Rachel sons--"

"Oh. Well now, before the time of the big drought, Leah sons reached a point where they thought Jacob was favoring Rachel sons. Some of the Leah brothers sold Rachel's young Joseph as a slave to a merchant caravan on its way to Egypt. For a long time Jacob believed that Joseph was killed by an animal. Meanwhile, down there, Joseph worked himself high into Egyptian government, and had two sons himself. Their mother was a lady named Asenath, the daughter of Egypt's high priest and priestess.

"After the exodus, Joseph's and Asenath's boys--Ephraim and Manasseh--were given equal standing with their uncles in place of Joseph's legacy. Lastly, when Moses established the overall priest house in the Levi line of Amram, all Levites were placed in service to the priesthood. They were given cities scattered amid all the other tribal divisions.

"So, to recap. We began with 13; less Dinah, 12; less Joseph who died in Egypt, 11; plus Ephraim and Manasseh, 13; then, less Levi, for the final 12-count. Ready, now, to write all 15 names?"

Mark nodded.

Jesus paused between each, spelling those with which Mark needed help: "Leah and Jacob sons: Reuben...Simeon...Levi...Judah...Issachar...Zebulun...Dinah...Gad...Asher." (Magda was

dying to add, *but the mother of the last two really was Leah's handmaiden, Zilpah, referred to as concubine!*)

"Next," Jesus resumed, "Rachel sons: Joseph...Benjamin...Dan...Naphthali. (Again Magda had to clamp her lips together. *But the mother of the last two really was Bilhah, Rachel's Egyptian slavegirl!*)

"Lastly, Jacob's and Rachel's grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh." Jesus, tired as he was, waited patiently until Mark finished printing. "Now, continue reading."

Mark turned the scroll upright. "Each tribe chose a judge. Each judge was commander-in-chief and ruler of The Law for his tribe. The next 350 or so years were mixed times of war and peace. The tribes fought off other peoples—desert Cushites, Moabites in the southeast, Ammonites to the east, and Philistines on the coast. Some of the peoples got back together with distant relatives who had not gone to Egypt."

Jesus raised a hand. "Stop there, Mark. I think that should be underscored. It's one of those things that can get forgotten every time humankind is scattered by bigger forces. Here, let me do it." He dipped the stylus in the ink and reread the words while carefully placing a heavy line under them. "*Some of the peoples got back together with distant relatives who had not gone to Egypt.* I know..." he gave the stylus back to Mark, "I've said I hate talking politics--" he glanced up to see Magda stifle a smile, "but this is a telling point.

"The laws of Abraham largely had remained unchanged for those kin who joined the confederation's fight for land; and most of the power struggles between tribes were more because the land of their allotments was less easy to win. Judah and Benjamin went at it in the south, and Ephraim and Manasseh versus the other eight in the north. But that's enough of that. Continue, Mark."

Mark took a deep breath and looked as if he actually might be getting sleepy himself. "All of the territory wasn't won until King David came into power, more than 300 years later. He won even more. After David died and Solomon took over, Solomon came to be seen in the north as an overtaxing tyrant. When he died, the 10 northern tribes banded together. They refused to accept, as king, the son Solomon designated his successor; and the country had a civil war. Neither side won and the great nation David had forged was divided for good into two states, Judah and Israel.

"Over another 350 years, both states dealt with aggression from encroaching empires. Eventually, Assyria captured the north. The south was spared until Babylonia overtook Assyria. The south stood up against Babylonia for a while, but finally Jerusalem fell." There, Mark's finger reached the end of his text.

"How many generations ago was *that*, Jeshu?" Marie asked, masking a yawn.

"Depends on how many years you call a 'generation.' In years, about 618," he replied. He gave Mark a sound clap on the back. "Good job, son. Want me to continue?"

Mark revived himself and exclaimed "Yes!" as if he really was ready to hear the remaining 600-plus years then and there. Marie, striving to keep up her eyelids, only could hanker after that detached wakefulness of youth. At the opposite end of the table a little snore from Andrew confirmed he had lost the fight altogether. Meanwhile, Jesus' presence was holding Magda there, the sound of his voice lulling her dreamy mind toward fantasy. She knew that at the next polite opportunity she should take herself away. *The sooner I'm curled up in my bedroll, the better*, she thought; but she wondered whether any prayer existed that could lower sleep's curtain on such a powerful night....

Late the next afternoon, Magda found Jesus sitting on a log at the quay, his robe rolled up to the knees, legs stretched toward the water. He neither spoke nor glanced at her as she slipped her feet from her sandals, skirted the log, and sat beside him. The sand was damp and cool.

The hills were dividing the sun's arcs into white-gold at their feet and black depths of land shadow across the bay. Magda held her tongue for what seemed an eternity--elbows on knees, chin propped glumly on palms, concentrating on the shallowly lapping waves. Then, at disappearance of the sun's rim, she arched her back, turned, and looked at him. "Peter doesn't like me tagging along, you know. Sometimes I think he hates me."

"Don't waste time brooding about it. Like everyone, Peter is innocent after his own fashion."

"I'm working on it, but that kind of 'innocence' he still shows I lost a long time ago. Except it really wasn't a loss of anything. It was the acquisition of an inexorable awareness one never again is without."

He drew up his legs and planted both feet flat on the sand, letting the rolled robe drop down to them. "Don't let his passion dredge your emotions." His fingers creased a fold of his robe. "Death hasn't come alive, yet, in Peter's head. Part of him believes, for instance, that righteousness can paralyze a war machine. For Peter there is still a future against which he feels he can exercise free will. As for your problem with him," he stole a side look at her, "--or, rather, his, with you--partly it's because your body happens to distract him."

Magda jumped up but kept her voice even. "And of course it's beyond his comprehension, how many times I gladly would have abandoned this body could its own hands have been willed to free me! Instead, spirit became as far detached from female form as it can be." She wanted not to, but was forced to say it all. "*You* understand--not just me; the multitude like me who needed one man true. A wise father for their children should they have them. One man to sleep beside, with whom passion could be loosed in trustful sanctity. There came a time when the very thought of a touch made me sick."

He didn't respond; she hadn't expected he would. Hands on hips, the gauze of her skirt molded to her as she faced the breeze, "I used to wonder what it was men saw in me that I did not," she said to the sea. "For, wasn't conscious love what each man sought?" She stamped the sand. "No! Some seek immersion of their dark selves in innocence, the unwitting child in the form of woman. For others, false purity; an eternal mother--not of their children but of themselves; one who will touch them in an unconsciously remembered, yearned-for-fashion...the guileless touches that say, 'For you I shall make all good, all right.' But woman longs for a different union, one of body, *mind and spirit*, free from any spur of immorality.

"So—" She turned and faced him. "One gives kindness to receive love. But the hunger in common man for kind sollicitation far exceeds that of the suckling child. A woman can arrive at a point when, deceived enough, she desires no more. No more! Men are servants of gods and women are servants of men—that's the way Peter thinks. If Hannah is obedient, takes good care of his household, runs with food when he calls, then falls—"

"*Enough!*" He said it quietly. "Don't forget there are instances where a man could complain the same way about a woman."

"Oh," Magda scuffed the sand, "I did wish to speak it calmly. All I meant to say was, Peter has no right to try to convince you to leave *any* willing compatriot behind. Anger fuels his spirit. Is my anger any less? In one frame of Man's reference...well, you know how I have been

labeled...when, forced against all that my own heart and soul desired, men themselves placed me in such definition!” She twisted her upper torso back to the breeze but kept her head cocked rigidly down at him. “Is *form* any reason to keep spirit from the ranks?”

She dropped back onto the log, crossed her legs and, gathering her skirt, embraced her knees.

“It’s you who take on the label,” Jesus said, softly targeting the core of her emotion.

“Strictly speaking, isn’t that what so many women’s lives historically have been forced to do?” she responded. “The Law at least provided some support for woman widowed. You yourself acknowledged that a woman divorced is no different from a widow. My first husband knew but one life, that of the body. His mind was a pragmatic vise, into which no blood-warming sentimentalities gained entry.

“I was a child when sold to him, for a sale is what it was--a bride piece for a virgin daughter. I know my father loved me and had no choice. What good for him to conjecture the basenesses to which a girl’s nature might be subjected? I had learned that a civilized woman was to honor and glorify her husband. Should I have denied my husband’s command that I dance exotically in silks and veils? How was I to know it was what he imagined—not I!—that gave pleasure, along with the frenzied music that pleased his ears?

“Yet, in my innocence, I enjoyed the dance!—until, naive spirit, I learned that woman at her peak of loving could be viewed with total spiritual dispassion. Had my motions been rewarded with total love they never would have lost their joy. However, another young innocent soon needed to be substituted for me. I was married a second time and again, divorced. I won’t bore you with the details. Then, some years later, my dead father’s oldest friend, terminally ill, took me as a wife to assist his last days. If it was a business arrangement, it was a saintly one. From him, I finally received an independent livelihood.”

Her body relaxed then, and she turned toward him. “Do you know how astounded I was by you? To encounter a man that considerately viewed a single woman such as I had been? Who understood her true *aloneness* in existence? Moses didn’t exactly specify, did he?--how a woman divorced would support herself, if she had no relatives faithful to The Law to take her in. Under the ‘levirate’ provision, if a man died without a son his brother was bound to create one in his name with the widow. But where was it considered what it means to be woman, alone, without issue?”

The voice of the would-be mother broke out in a cry. “All of my life, man looked at me and saw something other than what I was *and am!*--all my life!” She nearly yelled it the second time, causing Jesus to straighten up on the log. “I died to man. *Died*. How could Peter ever understand?” Then she began to cry. Not sweet sniffing of demure woman but gigantic childlike sobs. And as she cried she hit him. Once; twice; thrice; again and again and again! For he was to bear all the hatred, all the humility, all the crimes against the heart by those, his brothers in the flesh. If not upon the beloved, on whom can the final fury be wrought? “You told them,” she said, turning again to face the sea as the sobs subsided, remembering the day two years before, at the square near the Water Gate. “You told them...”

The sky had changed to mauve. Magda stayed with her back toward Jesus through a long silence, until he reached to her hand and without speaking bid her sit. Then his muscular arm pulled her tightly to his side. “You’ve got to become more like a man!” he said, squeezing her reassuringly as one does a child. It reminded her of times her grandmother had held her close--a few moments blinking eyes of their last tears, mind and body safe, the soul in an envelope of love. The fragrance even was the same....

When Magda's consciousness re-engaged, she and Jesus were sitting separately again. She felt much better, like when grandmother would say, "I know you can't see it now, but you will; don't worry." Then she laughed aloud a little, because her next thought was a child's merry echo to a platitude. *Make myself like a man? What do you think I did?*

"What I meant, Magda, is that for all your intelligent worldliness you still are too sensitive for your own good. Men, on the other hand, are born with an inner armor it takes a long time to chink through."

"Oh." She gave him a sidewise look. "Speaking of which—armor, I mean—I for one would feel much better if you had a permanent outer coat of it, the way you insist on making yourself a wide-open target."

"I'm not 'making' myself into anything."

"All right; *letting* yourself *be* a target."

He turned to face her, crossing one leg over the other. "We go along with what is."

"Uh-huh. And I'm to believe, with not one step planned or reaction calculated." She unwrapped a honey cake from her pocket and offered to break it in half, but he shook his head. "Peter merely expresses his frustration," she said, "but another of the men, who does not, feels far greater disappointment."

"'Far greater disappointment' puts it mildly. That one is downright angry."

Magda turned her head sharply. "Dangerously?"

Jesus continued as if he hadn't heard. "You haven't had enough opportunity to notice, but the son of Iscariot has been unusually silent of late. Each time he *is* moved to speak now, his voice betrays a little more hostility. But said Judas never hid the fact that he is motivated by an uncommon cause." He sat up and smoothed his robe. "Some believe I should be their full-fledged deliverer, whereas I think he's just about convinced that I'm a lost cause."

"And is that, perhaps, another necessary element to—not yours!—'God's plan' as you see it?" Summoning boldness to say that, Magda neglected to be careful with the cake; her fingers were sticky.

Jesus leaned on his knees and squinted out over the water. "I'm no more in control of what happens than yon gull." He lifted his chin toward it. "Worrying about being finished off is a waste of time. Existence is to be and to act. If one's mind fully is concerned with rightly doing both, every instant, there's no time left to think about feeling. Don't you know? I'm a perennial boy whose spirit wants to live without hate and forget there's such a thing as death; let the body deal with that when it comes."

Then he shifted on the log. "Shall I confess, however? At the same time...." He looked off toward the north, away from Magda. "No mind bears easily the thought of the loss of itself." After that, he fell silent.

Magda thought she should, too; but the uncertain edge to the quietness goaded her. "I remember my Grandmother telling me about the disciplines of sages in the Orient. They said 'attachment' was the greatest hindrance to full realization of the spirit—that pure motivation demands complete non-attachment."

Jesus smiled winsomely. "So...? When we are separated from those persons we are given to love the greatest—even should it happen just when it feels we need them the most—we ought to believe that God had the greater need, for their being taken from us?"

Magda felt a sudden chill of isolated alarm. "Perhaps..," she responded after a pensive delay.

The stars had appeared. He tilted his head back and said no more until, "It's going to feel

great to bed down” he said decisively, rising from the log. “Morning will be here before we know it...”

And Capernaum’s temple will be overflowing, we can bet on that, Magda’s mind finished the thought for him....

All Jesus’ band was present at the Capernaum assembly, where Magda met Philip for the first time. Word had spread quickly that Jesus was to be there, and a crowd had been on the road before sunrise. After the temple sermon he and some of the men took a back path and put out across Galilee’s sea in one of the Zebadiah’s smaller boats, but the people were not deceived. One full boat after another pushed off after them, some with as many as 20 men, women and children aboard. Jesus--literally surrounded--had had no choice but to hold an assembly there. He was well into his oration by the time Magda and Mother Mary arrived, having crossed on a second boat. A far-flung silence enveloped the huge grassy slope--a multitude of held breaths, so as to not miss one word.

News of that day’s speech also spread, and another crowd crossed over the next morning hoping to find Jesus still there. But the extended family sailed back to Capernaum after dusk the same evening.

“Have you ever witnessed such total sharing?” James Zebadiah exuberantly asked.

“Food, as well as spirit!” brother John remarked. “Did you see what the woman did—the first person to be handed the communal baskets? She took a small bit and then from her own basket placed in 20 times more. By the time *this* report gets back to Jerusalem, they’ll be saying Jeshu fed 4,000 people with just two fishes and a nine loaves of bread!”

Andrew poked his face into John’s with a laugh. “I heard a dozen!”

He could have begun it with a morsel, Magda thought. The people, especially families with children, had not gone unprepared for a long wait, on the possibility of seeing and hearing Jesus. He *knew precisely what would happen when he started those two baskets around....*

Once Magda saw that Mother Mary was comfortable she went to stand at the prow, ignoring a Peter look that to her seemed to say, “Woman, you just don’t know your place, do you?” *Peter probably thinks I do things like this simply because I’m paying ample way,* she thought. It was true that she, like the other women, was contributing financial support to the cause.

Nothing, however, could interfere with her sheer delight upon the sea...flanked by Jesus and John; the breeze caressing their faces and the canvasses fluttering before the north star. For the time being, free....

“Free of all but thee and the sea,” she had murmured to the silence deep in the water, before turning her eyes toward the sky, now fully black behind the stars....

0033 a.d./c.e.

YEAR FOUR

She may have worked bare land with bare hands; brought vegetables out of the brick of it. Carried water and, while her fingernails dug parched earth away from stems so they could suck up every drop, worried about the pots left over the cooking fire yet steeling herself, not leaving off the counterweight of the trickling water jug. The husband coming in for the noonday meal; but the seedlings thirst had to be satisfied first, or there might not be any meals next year!

She was had not in slavery, however; deep thankfulness. That small patch of land was her home, until God's predetermined day she would not have a body that needed land for sustenance. She need not fear a day's donkey ride and dismissal at some wayside, to fend for herself among distant kinsmen (if lucky), or glean fields until she fell flat for the last time.

Oh, yes, Abraham's brother Nahor once may have sung his song to their niece, Milcah; but could Reumah, his concubine, have believed her's and Nahor's Maacah ever less bloodworthy than Bethuel? No more than David had lesser love for Absalom....

Magda's mind was daydreaming again along byways of womanhood....

Ironic, how veiled was the oh-so-necessary mother blood, the true confirmer of legitimacy. A repeating cycle--through the kings had gone sovereignty; through the queens, the priesthood. Should such queens, though, be envied? Hamutal? Or Nehushta?—900 years after Jochebad; one grown son after another murdered before she surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, who carried away her and her smallest to Babylon's court, the ultimate tender to new gold temples of Man. Too many the women from who such sacrifice had been extracted, at each new 'beginning'!
Yet—

*She remembered her own naive girlhood thoughts that thrust the chest away from the fragile armor of women's ideals, imagining herself dressing for a king--**The King**, who could not resist all that I appeared to be in flesh and blood, all of which I gladly already would have given to him as Prince and, never, anyone else--*

"MAGDA!"

Sweet Father--Martha's call...again....

Doesn't that woman ever take a break? Magda set down the two water jugs she was carrying and entered the house through the rear storage room, but the kitchen was empty. She glanced out the front window. The shadow of Simon's fig tree was contained fully beneath its drooping branches, and Martha and others were standing in the shade--

Peter and Andrew had arrived!

Magda reached the group in time to hear Andrew say that he and Peter had left the outskirts of Jericho before sunrise, and it wasn't known when Jeshu and John had taken to the road. Peter headed for the house. "I'm going to wash and take a nap," he said over his shoulder. "Wake me when they get here."

Despite having helped Simon out of doors all morning, Mark still was pure energy. Mounted on excitement he went back and forth between kitchen and front door to peer down the village path to its junction with the Jerusalem road. "I think I see Mother!" he called on the third trip, and ran off with a high wave.

Mark preceded his mother into the kitchen and dumped a sack of oranges onto the table. "You should see the people! The main road's filled."

Marie, several paces behind her son, breathless from the two-mile walk from the city, chimed in. “Everywhere one hears the same questions. *‘When do you think he might arrive? What do you think will happen?’*”

Magda was relieved by the arrival of Marie, a widow of obvious material substance who now resided at Jerusalem. A lively woman, Marie wasn’t nearly as entrenched as Martha in female subservience--probably due to time she had lived at Rome. Her friendship with Mother Mary and the extended family appeared to be an old one.

Marie emptied a bag of special treats. “Sorry I wasn’t here sooner. It was against traffic all the way. *Mothers in the heavens*, what crowds!” She piled a large plate with bananas and honeyed dates and circled them with unleavened cakes of fine flour. “Look at you!” she batted son Mark’s hand away. “Not until you’ve washed.” Lastly she laid out a heavy loaf of sweet sprouted-barley bread, a small round of cheese, and a small wood pallet. “We women need to keep up our strength,” she said indubitably, nodding Magda toward the board.

Magda took an orange and a small clean cloth from the endless supply Martha kept stacked on the open shelf above the breadboard. She went to the water jug in the storage area, moistened the cloth, and slowly polished the orange while monitoring the kitchen conversation.

“Now...what remains to be done?” Marie asked.

“Goodness, what *doesn’t*--” Martha began.

Her sister, young Mary, broke in tentatively. “The lamb must be half-roasted already, wouldn’t you say? Father’s tending to that,” she explained needlessly to Marie.

“Well, the table needs to be set,” Martha continued in a weary note. “Other than that, I guess we’re about ready.” Magda chuckled inwardly. *Said with a wan smile, I’m sure!*

Domesticity was useless toward alleviating Magda’s anticipation. She decided it would be better to try to contain Mark’s. Back in the kitchen she gave the other three women a wide benign smile, broke off a chunk of bread and covered it with a slab of cheese. Bread and cheese in one hand, orange in the other, she joined Mark in the front yard.

Magda knew Martha would not be able to keep from giving the sisters a questioning look. Young Mary, reticent as she was sensitive, would pretend not to notice. It was Martha, who whispered, “Pity *that* one’s foolish heart,” but kept her next natural thought to herself: *all she thinks she needs to do is stay clean and beautiful...*

Magda, who guessed rightly about Martha’s feelings, didn’t mind. She could imagine even less charitable thoughts that she, herself, might have, were she the other of them. She smiled.... *Martha sometimes may resent Mary’s youthful position, but she’s got to view me as downright lazy, and more than just a little pampered on the side of freedom. Age has saved me somewhat there....*

Martha, meanwhile, was patting out one last strip of dough. Certain that Magda was out of earshot completely, Marie’s tone of voice was light and indulgent. “Alas! My mind still has memories of falling in love.” Martha’s hands stopped. She looked sidewise at Marie. *Was that an insinuation hers didn’t?*

“Everyone falls in love with Jeshu,” young Mary intervened, “because he loves everybody the same way.” Martha’s hands resumed their work, but with the added force one gives to a task when the self is threatened by strong emotion.

In the front yard, oblivious to Magda’s pensiveness, Mark popped the last of a sweet cake into his mouth, still marveling at what he had seen at the fork of the road. “So many different costumes!--like Jeshu described once: ‘divided glory returning.’”

Magda, swallowing a big bite of bread and cheese, nodded, but thought, *except for a*

couple of types, meeting privately head-on, without worry about facial skeleton or dialect giving them away. A moment later she said, instead, “Legend has it that Moses could barely speak the old language, and had to communicate through his brother, Aaron.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh. It makes sense I guess, if it’s true Moses was raised up Egyptian.”

“Well, *I* understand the language,” Mark replied, “and still there’s an awful lot Jeshu says that’s beyond me.”

“It’s no wonder,” Magda replied, digging a fingernail into the skin of the orange.

“Sometimes I think his wish to be understood, and the average person’s capacity to misunderstand, overwhelms even him.”

“Like his swings between trying to say it all, and saying nothing?”

“Yes. Like that.” Magda was reminded again of Mark’s intelligence. There was something to be said, for sending one’s children abroad for additional studies. She dropped the pieces of peel into her apron’s pocket, split the orange in two and gave a half to Mark. “Did anyone tell you what happened at the big Galilean assembly when Mother Mary’s group got there?”

“I don’t think so,” Mark replied.

“Jesus was just reaching the peak of his speech. Someone told him in a loud whisper, ‘Your mother and other brothers are here!’ And he did this:” Magda’s legs stiffened to the ground; her hand swept a great circle around her body. “And he *roared*—” She raised her arm and shook a mightily clenched fist. ‘*WHOEVER DOES THE WILL OF THE FATHER, THAT PERSON IS MY MOTHER, BROTHER AND SISTER.*’ Lord, how the people loved it.”

Then Magda spoke totally softly, as if to someone visible only to her. “No changing Nature’s will, I guess, any more than God’s. Both make, place, and keep us here. What’s the best one can hope for, given the most impervious spirit imaginable, combined with a nature in which there’s no room for worldly relationship?”

Mark felt the self-consciousness certain ‘women-type conversation’ was wont to evoke in him. “Speaking of sisters,” he rebounded, “You haven’t told me yet what happened to Dinah.”

“Oh. Well, as you know, while Rebekah and Isaac were living in Canaan land, their son Jacob went north to his maternal grandfather Bethuel’s family, to get away from a problem with brother Esau. Jacob stayed a long time, and--as your scroll tells--he married Leah and Rachel, both daughters of his uncle Laban, Rebekah’s brother. When Jacob and his household finally emigrated from Paddam-Aram, brother Esau accosted him; but they made a peaceful pact, and Esau went back down south. It was when Jacob and his people had their tents pitched near Shechem....”

There, Magda refused to tell it the way her grandmother had: that “Prince Shechem and Princess Dinah fell in love,” although, perhaps, they had. Who knew?...

“Well,” she continued, “Hamor, King of Shechem, offered a lasting peace to Jacob with a union between his prince son and Dinah. Dinah apparently was willing; but her brothers, Simeon and Levi, were against alliance with the Hamorites.”

“And people got killed.”

Magda always at that point in Dinah’s story felt a stifling sensation. “Jacob, himself, said his name was made to ‘stink for all generations,’” was all she would say.

“And that was it for Dinah?”

Oh, dear, Magda thought, here I go again. How should I answer? Dismissively will be perceived as rude; hold fast? Tell it as I see it?--say, ‘That wasn’t the first time Man’s self-

interest changed the course of God's direction!

NO! That merely would be 'I,' 'Magda,' wanting to lay waste to the last question. "How might it have gone otherwise, if the beloved Shechem, a perfect son of Ham, fathered children for the love of Dinah?"

She peered down the road instead. She needed a deep breath but the very sweetness of the air was intolerable. *Was Jesus never going to come?* Surely she would suffocate if he did not arrive soon....

She hoisted herself up on the fence rail next to Mark. She worried about this boy she had come to love like a son of her own. Despite Jesus' tight-lipped attitude, Mark had heard a lot of late, about the political situation. He was bright, but as a boy had no real idea. Youth always believed that past atrocities were just that--*of The Past*. Yet overnight Mark's safety could become threatened in ways no 14-year-old deserved.

"You know, an awful lot gets left out in the way we learn history," Magda was given to speak again. "Sometimes, like Peter, it does upset me. Mostly because I think we wouldn't keep making the same mistakes, and see *ourselves* better, if we knew how everything in the past really happened."

"And you don't think that the writings tell everything?"

"No! Well...I mean...how can they? History accumulates from a lot of sources--like your scroll. Some of it you've written from what you've been told. Some of that was quoted from ancient written sources. But some of the people who recounted *those* events, and some of the writers who described *them*, actually weren't present any more than we were."

"Except some writings *were* done by people who were."

"I suppose. Yet any that did exist have been translated and copied and retranslated and recopied. Think of the various and sundry places all the collected, reconstructed scrolls came from and traveled to; and we certainly don't have access to all that were written."

Magda paused, thinking she should stop there. Then, wondering where was Jesus rushed immediately into the void; and she gave in to the mercy of losing herself just a little while longer. "Finally, there's all that stuff that supposedly was 'simply omitted.' I've wondered, sometimes, if a lot of it wasn't left out on purpose along the way."

"Like what became of Dinah?"

"Yes!"

Mark lifted his feet and swung around on the fence, hopping off inside of the yard. "And not telling who King David's mother was?"

Magda gave Mark a quick look. "Well, he *was* a pretty important king."

"What were his mother's and father's names?"

"Uh...as to his mother, only a rumor that she was a Moab priestess. Prophet Samuel did report, 'though, that Moab gave refuge to David's first family during David's early struggle for power. One of my favorite scripture stories is the one about Zelophehad and his daughters.'"

"Zeh-lo-feh-had?" Mark repeated carefully.

"A great father of a large descendant family of Manasseh--you remember, Manasseh was a grandson of Rachel and Jacob, one of the sons of Joseph's and Asenath. Zelophehad died around the time of the exodus and left five female children, no males. At first, Moses told the women that surely they would inherit their father's legacy; but later, on the plains of Moab, their uncles petitioned against it, claiming a lot of Manasseh property eventually would pass to others when Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah married. Moses overruled himself then, and decreed that they had to marry in their own clan."

“And did they?”

“Apparently. It’s reported they married cousins, but the names get lost.”

Mark leaned out the gate to look up the road. He wasn’t that interested really. Magda bit her lower lip. *He would be, was he old enough to talk with about intimate details*, she thought; and then her mental cork popped....

*DAVID’s perfidity may have been acknowledged, but even **there** Bath-Sheba’s sexual irresistibility became the scapegoat. And what about poor Michal?—retrieved from one husband by her father; ripped from her father by David.... And her sister, Merab! Whose **were** those poor four (or was it five?) children, the murder of whom purportedly paid for an act of men who’d lived generations before them? It couldn’t have been (could it?) to make sure that the Saul line was gone for good?*

Despite Magda’s mere desire to point out factual irregularities, implications of male power over fleshly chattel always sparked much, much more! Many a fawning friend had changed to foe, in the days when she had confronted the most muscular of brains with intelligence camouflaged by youthly beauty. Indeed, she’d been known to take off on thousand-year retrogrades through patrimonies and matrimonies all the way back to Abraham--

“Assaron” or “Hezron?” she would fire; and Reuben... ah, Reuben! That his immortality was relegated to defiler of his father’s bed, losing not just a doubled inheritance but all first-born rights. Reuben!—who had saved Joseph for Jacob. Was Reuben not martyred too, in the processing of Amramites and Izharites, Jacobites and Jethroites, Josephites and Judahites; Leahites and Rachelites? He forfeited all his sons--some, immediately in the flesh; others, later, in numbers. Who could answer? Were the original sons of Reuben four or five? And how many were left of the clan of Carmi, who entered Egypt with Jacob, exited with Moses, but survived only to see the four last daughters annihilated after Joshua finished off Ai?--

No, no, no, no! Magda’s tooth let go the lip. She would say none of it, not ever, again. *Muted?--by what? Certainly not by—self-recognition flinched at the word—shyness. Because of a shy recollection—*

All right, Jesus is right. Where is the logic for fueling hostility with words, where Love’s wish should be that this boy’s ears belong to a peaceful generation. What purpose could be served by forcing Mark to consider, rhetorically, what Abraham would think about the machinations required now of the innumerable sons of matrilineal traverses? Did any of it need revival?....

David’s 21 sons of just the named wives, for instance? That, of 15 born at Jerusalem, five being Bath-Sheba’s, the mothers of 10 are unknown? Who was born first--Solomon or Nathan? And how came there to be nothing said, about Bath-Sheba’s Nathan, while at the same time someone older than Solomon named Nathan was second only to the king and queen?—the same Nathan who chastised David for his “strategy” with respect to Bath-Sheba. And no written words about King David’s mother while, on the other hand, a lot to explain how the poor little baby, who had to die for his prior generation’s sinning, couldn’t have been Uriah’s, Bath-Sheba’s first husband’s?

Now Magda never had been sure even *she* believed King David capable of a connivance as bad as the bare story could give one to imagine. Yet there she would find herself at the end of a downright vicious monologue, when the only point she had started out to make was, “See how differently deductions can be drawn, depending on one’s point of view?” It hadn’t been funny, when certain of the men would shake a finger right near her nose and utter a guttural “Blasphemy!” But she finally was able to laugh at that younger self and she did, then, hopping

off the fence. Mark grinned back questioningly.

“Nothing,” Magda chuckled. It felt as if a demon had been expelled from her mind. She could keep on wondering, forever if need be, about historical mothers lost to record except for a name—like the one of that triplet in doom, Adonijah. But, miracle of miracles, nevermore would rancor overtake reason! No more need she make it a matter requiring capitulation, that some written history simply was too indigestible for *her* intellect’s comfort.

Then she experienced a sudden emptiness of head, as if she had left it at the end of a line of footsteps in the sand. *Voices...down the path... Oh God!* She saw feet coming around the bend and they were feet she knew. At the very instant that she had forgotten she was waiting, he had arrived. “Look Mark!” she pointed. “Jesus is here!” Mark tore away like a catapult.

Run, Mark. Run into his arms. Who cares about family scandals and lost history at this moment, when one’s spirit feels it is being approached by itself. She watched Mark’s silhouette against direct light from the sinking sun, as he broke into a run out the gate toward the approaching men. Her eyesight sailed past him to the central figure in the path, and she felt that funny twinge. *So improbable a form, to have grandeur always at its disposal.... Why did it have to be him? Why him, to feed the impossible, be forced to force men to adhere to what they claimed God had spoken? Who perpetrated that silly romantic notion, that a sprout would save everyone—king and priest in one predestinated man?*

And there he was, almost at the gate, one pure bud from old stock that obstinately refused to flower on an ancient trunk. Magda did not need her eyes to be first to greet his. She turned toward the house where, on the east slope of Bethany, those who loved him had spent some of their best hours. The warmth of Simon’s home had been their reward at the end of each journey.

Seeing the house’s face shadowing before the setting sun, Magda had to harden her eyes against tears. *How different the thought of again leaving it would be, were we setting off to assail the great Himalayas--to die, if we must; but all together, somewhere in the Valley of Kashmir....*

It was one thing for the establishment to contain the rabble and blindly-striking Barabbases. It was quite another, to have had arise in its midst a fully sentient being who, as surely as a son of a recognized queen, that placed both the mantle on his shoulders and the sceptre into his hand, could, if he chose, seize upon that double blood right and turn fervor into fury.....

It was two days after Jesus’s arrival at Bethany that Passover week. Magda and young Mary were in the Simeons’ front yard in the company of Philip, Jesus’ most eminent ambassador. Martha had spread a blanket for them under the fig tree. Philip and Magda sat on opposite corners while young Mary laid herself down between them, carefully smoothing out her good skirt so as not to get it wrinkled.

“Am I right?” Mary spoke unexpectedly, tilting her chin to look up at Philip. “We had one whole kingdom only twice. The first under David, which Solomon then reigned until he died, after which it split south and north, when the north’s Jeroboam returned from exile to confront Rehoboam, Solomon’s successor son. Then the second full kingdom, 800 years or so later, under the Ashemons or Maccabiahs?”

It surprised Magda no end to hear Mary’s question. *This quiet girl may have been more attentive to table lessons than Mark!* she thought.

“Strictly speaking, yes,” Philip answered. “But there were long periods, after the civil war that followed, when the seemingly separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah coexisted pretty

well. They had close state ties between both the priesthood and royal families, and they often allied to fight foreign powers.”

Mary rolled over onto her stomach, forgetting her skirt, and propped her chin on her palms. “What’s the main reason this land’s had so much trouble?”

Philip smiled, his middle-aged handsomeness perfected by silver streaks in the dark hair at temples. “You want that in a nutshell, do you?” He looked at Magda for help. She smiled and gave a small, slow shake of her head; she wouldn’t dare tackle that one.

“Well,” Philip began with a deep breath, “all the way back, to when it was called ‘Canaan’, the region has been a hub of trade routes. Every time the big guys got to fighting over world control their armies trampled through—”

“—not failing to take some treasure here and there as they went!” Magda was moved to add; and, although she certainly had not planned to, more. “The land’s been torn up so many times, people barely could get it together before the next horde. Caught in-between; then forced to submit to occupiers and profiteers. No populace can stay unified absent individual strength, the kind that comes from decent living through honest work under united leadership. Inevitably, individual deprivations eventually start people fighting among themselves. More needy they become, the worse it is. Not until all classes get pushed to their limit does change come, and then it must be through chaos.”

“Nicely put!” The words from behind the fig tree’s enormous trunk were followed immediately by their speaker.

“Bartholomew!” Philip jumped to his feet and the two embraced.

“So--we are enjoying a lesson in regional politics, ay?” The newcomer mussed Mary’s hair. Bartholomew’s large, thick-fingered hand suggested fatherliness. Mary giggled but didn’t pull away. *I wouldn’t pull away, either*, Magda thought, as Bartholomew turned toward her. “And who is this gracious teacher?”

Philip made introductions; very nicely. He introduced Magda as a dedicated friend of the cause. “Tolmai’s from Cana,” Philip added. “Do you know it?”

“Yes,” Magda replied, not bothering to mention its proximity to the town where she had been born, raised and lived until her first marriage. “Southwest of Capernaum, near Nazareth?”

Bartholomew nodded and dropped to his knees. “Fortunately I didn’t have to do it on foot. I am, however, ready to rest one part of me.” Mary giggled again and he swatted her playfully on the backside.

Bartholomew lay back on the grass next to the blanket, hands behind his head. “Tell me, Philip,” he said upward to the leaves, “do you believe it really ever could happen?--all of the upper classes seeing the light, and political progress happen civilly?” He turned his head toward Philip. “You’re a rare man, my friend. Who better than you to comment on the matter of principles versus security of position? Few have sacrificed more in that arena,” he ended soberly.

A call interrupted before Philip had time to answer. “MARY!” It was Martha, of course, from the front door.

“Yes!” Young Mary jumped up, hoisting her skirt. “*Coming!*” Bartholomew reached out and made a pretend grab for her ankle as she rushed off; but his facial expression quickly changed as soon as she was gone. “What’s the latest?” he asked. “Where is he, Philip?”

“Here, since Monday; but it wasn’t known in the city until yesterday. A big crowd lined the road thinking I guess that he might go into town right away. A sizeable group of Judean conservatives confronted him when he rode by on Simon’s prize mule.”

“He doesn’t miss a trick!” Bartholomew sat up and slapped his knee.

“What does that mean?” Magda asked. “I don’t understand.”

“Back in the old days,” Philip explained, “opposed to the common ass, mules were hard to come by. One had to be a king to own one. Solomon used David’s personal mule when he rode to his anointing ceremony.

“Anyhow, Tolmai,” Philip resumed, “he just keeps it up--speaking simply to the people, but including those little reminders of discrepancies on record which stab at the more knowledgeable. Raising ghosts of Eleazars was the last straw. The people may not know books, but they know enough of the real history. Oh! And a large contingent of Greek brethren contacted me for an audience with him--scholars, eager for a philosophical discussion. That meeting’s scheduled for tomorrow.”

Magda picked up a twig and scratched at a tuft of dried grass. “There are so many sides to the thing.”

Bartholomew sensed Magda’s conflicting desire to talk more but not offend Philip. “Philip will forgive my saying it,” he offered, “but the worse side right now is Antipas Herod’s grand delusion of one day being king over all.”

“No question,” Philip affirmed. “My good half brother, devoid of true patriotism as a leader can be, has his heart set on a regional Herodian dynasty--his own, of course. Unfortunately for Antipas, he may be titled ‘tetrarch’, but he’s not a quarter of what the old man was.”

Magda had not been as far north as Philip’s capital city near the headwaters of the Jordan. Once called Paneas, Caesarea Philippi was known as a place of great beauty, cradled at the base of mountains beyond which rose Mount Hermon’s snowcapped peak. It had been some 50 years, since Rome made Paneas part of the former Herodian kingdom. Afterwards the Great had caused a white marble temple to be built there, dedicated to Caesar Augustus.

Philip’s innate nobility was a far cry from the type of nature that could pursue his half-brother’s games. Ordinarily, a man in Philip’s circumstances would have been spitting venom. Antipas’ long efforts to undermine him in Rome’s eyes had been successful: Caesar Tiberius had ordered a Roman official, Carus, by name, to confiscate and oversee Philip’s province.

Magda liked Philip immensely. He possessed good humor, as well as grace and wit. There had been so much somberness of late. It felt good to laugh a moment at his play on the title, “one-quarter ruler,” from *tetra*, Greek for the number four. She hated feeling her face turn sad again; she blew a sigh and shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” Philip empathized. “He’s not your ordinary type of fellow.”

Magda knew Philip meant Jesus, not Antipas. She nodded first then shook her head again. “He behaves as if he doesn’t comprehend the effect of anything.”

“Oh, he *knows*,” Bartholomew assured her.

“Care about, then.”

“There we are at the truth.” Bartholomew slid himself closer to the tree and rested his back against its trunk. “Ever hear it said? ‘Tomorrow’s hope dies today.’”

“No..,” nor did Magda like the worseness it made her feel. “To be so totally capable of being believed in, and then—”

“Not use it.” Philip finished for her.

“I’m afraid. He’s been under constant surveillance; almost arrested twice. No matter what side, who in power would believe an opponent with so much potential backing *isn’t* courting sedition?” She shook her head again. “I’m so afraid,” she repeated.

Philip extended his long legs, leaning his weight back on flattened palms. “Ever since

certain Pharisee leaders in Peraea gave warning, of a rumor that Antipas was out to get him, there's little doubt that Caiaphas will get locked into it. Neither Galilaea's tetrarch, nor the current 'high priest' want their individual boats rocked."

The three were silent what felt too long. Philip tried for a change of subject. "Magda, were you across the river with him winter past, at the Festival of Lights?"

"No. I spent it with my sister's family; I hadn't seen them for a long while. But I did hear that it was obvious there at the time, that almost everyone from beyond the Jordan to as near as Jericho was ready to take up arms would he but give the sign. Then, when I returned, I learned support on this side had fallen away, because of increased intimidation in both Judaea and the Galilee. Others closer to him seemed to be wavering too. I understand he went so far as personally ask every man if he wanted out."

Bartholomew stood up and massaged the small of his aching back. "We can take some consolation from the fact Prefect Pilate is one Roman that Antipas *can't* cater to. Antipas uses everything he can to discredit Pilate back home, but it hasn't worked yet. Still, who knows what other plottings took place in Rome, when Antipas was last there, and with whom? Herodias isn't Agrippa's sister for nothing."

Magda saw iciness flash for an instant in Philip's eyes, but he didn't give vent to the thought that caused it. "Oh, what Antipas would give," he said instead, "if he could have Jeshu in his camp."

"Not 70 years..." Bartholomew began to muse, "since the country forged by Mattathiah Maccabiah reached its last peak, in Alexandra Salome's truly golden, albeit brief, reign. She managed impressive social and educational reforms. The Pharisees all were for her, but Roman general Pompey capitalized quickly on the fight between *her* sons. And, when Pompey's competitors got the best of him, that was it for the independent monarchy--Ashemon territories and more became subject to Rome. Alexandra's son, Hyrcanus, was left as High Priest, but under Antipater Herod II as Rome's Procurator."

"Careful!" Philip said cynically. "That's my grandfather you're talking about. But you're right. One doesn't need to go very far back to show how the imperial rivers sidled up to the Fathers', and Rome's funneled into the power of Alexander of Macedon; however, please! Let's not get into all the related intermarriages." He omitted saying, *especially the matricides, fratricides, and parricides...*

For Bartholomew, dropping the intractable past left only the equally-so present. "With today's Pharisaic party, routine differences between it and the Sadducees come second to their mutually comfortable status, economic and otherwise, as client-subjects of Rome. As for Jeshu's temple support, I heard the council got word that anyone who continues showing any will be booted off--"

"You didn't hear?" Philip interjected. "That policy has been augmented. Sympathy on *anyone's* part now means expulsion from synagogue. I truly feel for the sensitive members on the council, bound to keep order at any cost. The intent of the good ones doesn't concern me. It's knowing how self-fear can erode goodness. And the partisans, the Zealots--so angry things haven't been brought to a head, they're ready to see Jeshu go down for that disappointment alone."

Bartholomew brushed dried grass off his robe. "I suppose Nicodemus still is trying? He'd better watch himself. And what of Simon? I've never seen him as subdued as when I got here today."

"Ahh, there's not much to say," Philip answered. "He's not been in to the city, much less

the temple, for weeks. Caiaphas has called him a leper.”

Of a sudden, permanent laugh lines around Bartholomew’s mouth almost disappeared. “So it comes to a halt once more, on all spokes of the Kings’ highways—dead-ended in front of the same God-awful thicket.”

God-aweful, Magda’s mind echoed....

“And those of the masses who do manage to survive will be the essential losers--nothing left to live on but religious hopes,” Philip added, standing up. “Waiting for that flawless prophet-party commander who, with only one might, will re-carve David’s empire with all of God’s justice.”

“We might as well be the same people born over and over and over.” Magda, who had managed mostly only to listen, now felt anger kindling her. “Different coins; same poverty. Different weapons, same forced conscriptions. Different projects, same slave labor—”

“Different rulers, same reasons!” Bartholomew ended it.

She stood up, shook the blanket, and then folded it with Bartholomew’s help. “If only I could believe it all will count, somehow, at the finish,” she said, as the three of them left the shade of the tree. “If only history gave even *one* example, *one* time when complete pacifism—” she was unable to call it, *God’s*--“just *one* example!--when perfect pacifism in a man like Jesus was rewarded with *anything* other than--” But then she heard the pitiful catch in her own voice and left the last word unsaid.

“Life is full of consolations--” Jesus said, “sights and smells, sounds and touches—”

“And tastes!”

“And tastes.” He tousled Mark’s hair. “Take any bigger a bite, though, and you’re likely to choke.”

Mark excused himself for speaking with his mouth full. “Martha!” he exclaimed, as soon as it was empty, “These raisin cakes are great. You’re the world’s best baker.”

More than once Magda had thought, *Martha’s lovely when she smiles; she must have been a very pretty girl. Wonder why she never married?* Martha had settled, it seemed, for a solid love she already had--that for her widowed father, over whom she fussed now more than ever. *With good reason*, Magda thought; for Simon, a heavy man, already was labored in breath when Magda first came to know him, and of late his complexion had taken on a worrisome bright flush.

“Let us give thanks for the lamb,” Simon said at that moment, and tipped his cup toward his breast. “Forgetting not who roasted it!”

“Aye, aye,” the guests agreed in varying unisons, lifting their cups toward him.

Simon worked unsuccessfully to brush back wisps of white hair from his perspiring temples. Martha reached across and wiped them away carefully with her napkin. He ignored the attention and announced cheerfully, “We’re in luck, Mark. Clear skies, tonight.”

Mark and Mary already had carried bedrolls to the top of the house’s flat roof. Simon insisted he would sleep up there too, on a cot; Mother Mary was to have his room. Martha welcomed Marie in with her. So, when young Mary said she would be honored if Magda took her vacated small room, Magda happily had accepted.

“We’ll have some good stargazing, ay, son?” Mark, his mouth full again, nodded an emphatic *Yes!* back at Simon. It sparked nostalgia in Magda: a memory of standing on

grandmother's roof the eve of a long-ago Passover, in the last minutes of dusk, as stars of different magnitudes became visible....

"It's difficult in our day and age to imagine Man's fear of the Driver of the Stars in ancient times," Grandmother had said, drawing the adolescent Magda tightly to her side. *"A father often sacrificed his most beloved possession, in belief God demanded that from him, until Abraham put a stop to it"--*

"Good Pharisee!" Jesus, sucking a morsel of meat, exclaimed to Simon. "Truly you outdid yourself."

"Oh!" Mark was reminded suddenly of something. "What are the real differences between a Pharisee and a Sadducee?"

No laughter went around the table, as ordinarily it would have at one of Mark's impetuous questions. Jesus, noting the difference, paused less than usual before replying. "Ummm, let's try it this way," he said. "Sadducees will tell you that God is on the side of right even when He appears to dictate a sad state of affairs. If The Law results in some questionable injustices, either they really are deserved or God has His good--if private!--reason for them.

"Pharisees would say God can appear to be unreasonable, yes. But it can be righted when, with study and a lot of talk, it is discovered that God really wouldn't expect such-and-such of His subjects at the same time making them human--a contradiction which certainly would not escape God's notice with the passage of time."

Magda, looking at Mark's face, could not--she absolutely could *not* stifle herself.

"All right. See, Mark? It's just too much for some folks," Jesus said, with the same sound of fun in his voice that Mark usually heard. Except this time the crinkling didn't happen at the edges of his eyes.

Magda looked around the crowded table. The "brothers" all were there: the ones she had come to know well--Peter, Andrew, Philip and Bartholomew; John and James; Matthew, Judas Levi and his father, James. Two, Thomas and another Simon, were new acquaintances. Clearly all the adults recognized each other's efforts to keep worry private, while honoring the fine meal before them. To Magda, the relief when supper was over was palpable. She helped pass items along the table to clear it but remained seated. "Careful there!" Martha admonished once, when Magda hooked a four-handled bowl--Martha's best--in what appeared to be a cavalier manner.

Magda knew Martha had all good reason not to expect her to join in the kitchen duties. Yet this time Magda was conscious of weak envy--to be, perhaps, more like Marie, able at the moment to interact with the women.

Martha picked up the two heaviest jugs and unceremoniously addressed young Mary. "Come. Get up and help."

"Oh! Later... please? I want to listen."

"Leave the girl be," Jesus interceded, giving Mary a wink. "Mary chooses the better part, knowledge, which no one can take from her." Martha rolled her eyes but said no more.

"Come here, Mary," Jesus instructed, "on my other side." Magda moved along Marie's vacated part of the bench until her and young Mary's shoulders touched.

"Business matters will call early tomorrow morning," Jeshu said to Mark and Mary. "I plan to say goodnight soon; but for now what shall we talk about?"

"Rabboni..." Mark began most tentatively, "I have been thinking about your sermon at the Capernaum temple--remember? When Mother and I came up to visit Peter and Hannah." Jesus nodded.

Magda recalled some of her own thoughts about that last of the Capernaum sermons, one

of Jesus' most intricate. She never pretended an ability to penetrate the deep connections of mind and tongue necessary to pronounce different languages. In the same vein, she had felt that many of the people listening at Capernaum could not completely connect words heard with the thoughts expressed. Often it had seemed the people thought Jesus was talking about himself when, in fact, he was giving example of the "I-Am" voice through Its children.

"You see, Mary and Mark," Jesus began, "all the people you love at this table believe that there's a difference between wisdom and knowledge. You could say that's a tenet of the family's faith." He took Mark's hand. "There is knowledge man has." Then he took Mary's hand. "And there is knowledge that woman has. Wisdom is born of that double knowledge. Neither is sole possessor of it all. Just because man primarily has known how to stretch a bow, and woman, how to make one—" he paused to allow Mary and Magda to exchange grins, "such matters are of the World of Genus. But man and woman have identical access to the wisdom of the Spirit. Its knowledge affixes to mind without a bridge of external words.

"As I said at Capernaum, in the wilderness God gave our forefathers manna so that their bodies could live. The bread of which I spoke, which God also desires to give to us, is the bread of wisdom, the living bread of the spirit. Whoever partakes of *it* can have life unto the ages, because *that* nourishment is above the life of the world.

"One last word. When I speak about 'The Father,' I refer to the 'I-Am' alive in the spirit, which can manifest differently in the minds of Its subjects. But Its essence, the farthest indweller of Spirit, expresses by virtue of Itself. All words thus far reported as received from God have come by the minds, mouths and hands of Man. Remember this as a new law: 'I only shall claim that The Father's Spirit has been seen when I, myself, believe I have seen It.'"

Mark sat pensively. Indeed the entire room was quiet until Mary stood up, more sensitive than Mark to the fact that Jesus had given to them all that for the moment they should expect. She kissed him on the cheek. "Coming, Mark?" she asked.

Mark gave Jesus a kiss then, too, and followed Mary toward the front door. But Jesus called after them. They paused against the blackness outside. "Here's a puzzle to ponder together with the stars: God can do anything. Correct?" Mark and Mary nodded. "Well, then, could God make a rock *so* big that He, Himself, could not lift it in accordance with His own will?"

Judas Iscariot, arriving late, almost ran into Mark and Mary outside of the door. As Jesus had asked, Judah initially had bypassed Bethany and continued on to reconnoiter the city. He was irritable; Martha quickly brought him a healthy serving of leftovers.

"What news?" Peter prompted.

Judah paused in his eating, wiped his fingers carefully with the napkin Martha provided, and answered matter-of-factly. "The city's filled past overflowing." Then he looked directly at Jesus for the first time since entering. "There's a lot of excitement about how and when you'll show up. A crowd hangs around the temple grounds all day just waiting. Only a few men were willing to speak privately with me. Everyone *wants* to talk about the situation, but most are afraid to, in public." With that, he went back to his dinner.

Jesus moved the two carved wood chairs that he and Simon had occupied from each end of the table over to the hearth. He saw to it that Simon was settled again on one, before seating himself on the other. Mother Mary, who had sat at Simon's right hand at dinner but been as silent in company as ever, went to her son and whispered a few words to him. She bent and with a distressed look caressed new cracks on his feet. He took her hands and kissed them. She then bid Simon a quiet thanks and good night, and gave Magda's arm a squeeze as she passed to her room.

Meanwhile, the benches were moved and the table pushed against the wall to open up the room. The other men distributed themselves in after-dinner comfort, mostly on the floor with Martha's oversized, embroidered pillows. Thomas and Matthew, who had traveled a long piece that day, fell asleep almost immediately; a few others were ready to follow suit. Philip, Andrew and Bartholomew pursued quiet conversation in one corner while Judas, alone on a bench, was finishing off a second plate of leftovers. All would camp together, that night and the next, in the park of the Kidron.

Martha and Marie still were in the kitchen. Magda would see them to say goodnight if she passed that way to the smaller bedroom. She was inclined, instead, to use the entrance from the yard. She retrieved her carpetbag from beside the hearth but was not able, yet, to take herself away. Except for Philip's mention of the next morning's meeting, nothing had been said about other plans for the coming two days.

Magda felt at a temporary loss. It was then that her eyes fell on Jesus's feet, and she suddenly remembered the nard. The perfumed oil had been a self-indulgence, bought at the Festival of Booths when she first met Jesus. It had been buried deep in her bag, forgotten ever since.

Customarily one would have requested household oil; Magda knew that. But it seemed natural she should use her treasure, as if it had been preserved purposely for the moment's purpose. She had no inkling, as she quickly located the vial, that her spontaneous recollection of it could cause a problem. She knelt before Jesus and cracked the vial's seal. Gingerly she removed his sandals. Pushing back his toes carefully, she poured some of the contents across the balls of his feet, caught the ointment with her palms, and gently massaged it into the skin with her fingertips.

At first no one paid attention; such healing ministrations on the part of women were common. No sooner Judas noticed, however, he snorted an objection. Why hadn't she contributed the expensive ointment to the common treasury, so that it could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor?

Magda's hands froze. It was true ... *three hundred denarii... twice as much in shekels!* Worriedly she looked up to Jesus; but he returned an unruffled look and shook his head ever so slightly, that she should ignore it. Magda resumed her ministering, the others turned back to their conversations, and Judas said nothing further.

Matters would have ended there if it hadn't been for Peter, cross-legged on the floor next to Jesus' chair. He leaned forward and said softly, with a little smile that to Magda bespoke neither reassurance nor jest, "After all, a prophet more than anyone appreciates the true character of a woman touching him."

At that, Jesus inhaled a breath that pinched his nostrils. Then he exhaled, measuring his words with air. "Peter, I've something to ask you.... If a man was owed money by two people, one ten times as much as the other and he equally freely forgave both, which of them, do you think, would love him the most?"

Magda poured the last of the nard into one hand, spread it heavily over both palms, and cupped them under Jesus' heels. Bending lower over her work, the thick braid of her hair fell over one shoulder. Quickly she smothered its long loose tail between greased palm and instep, thinking, *will a time ever come, that man will be able to forget, totally, 'whoredom'?—when he will be able to consider male and female life in equal light?* She had tried to love Peter as much as Jesus seemed able, yet no one could make her sadder. She had cried in front of Jesus, but she could not remember the last time she had cried in public. She must not let it show.

See, Judah? she thought fiercely. *Not one drop wasted!* When her task was done she stood up dry-eyed. She thanked Simon graciously. She smiled a parting nod to all. Then she went outside, looked up at the stars, and saw them as tiny glow fish in a small brimming sea.

In Mary's little bedroom, Magda knelt before a small stone firebox built into the back wall. She carefully emptied into it the basket of twigs collected the day of her arrival, when she and Simon had strolled the premises. He had pointed to where the path circled the house. "You'll find some cut-up tree limbs 'round there by the side entrance into Mary's room, and possibly a few chips of cedar." Firewood was a precious commodity, and it had been a long time since Magda had enjoyed warmth at bedtime. She was most grateful for this, of all the gifts of Simon's boundless hospitality.

"How I looked forward to this luxury, she thought, touching a tiny stick to the flame of the oil lamp and lighting the kindling. The pungent scent of cedar completed her illusory retreat from uncertainty, but she could not let go her anger at the way the evening had ended. She brushed away one big tear that made it to the edge of her mouth. Then she remembered Jesus' look and words to Peter, and unwary love touched her soul again like a child on all fours on grass, reaching its mother under a towering tree on a blue-sky day--a memory of joy unspeaking, awareness wordlessly creeping toward its own singular throne.

Magda might love herself never fully again. With Jesus, she recalled a self before its pummeling by life, and the original living being in her absolutely loved that son-brother. Such a spirit in man could do anything with woman's; make her a sinless Eve who, instead of as a witless spawner of flesh, with him would conceive children in The Father's name.

Her mind, full of anxiety over the coming days, fought the heart's fear. Once again memory led thought, like a wise elder distracts a child, to recreate the girlhood Passover with her grandmother, as if the coming one could be it...

"Imagine,, my darling--" Grandmother's voice could be commanding too. *"Once upon a time, before the Great Deluge, a person could walk almost all the way to the other side of what is now the Great Sea. It is said that Atlantis, daughter of the Greek god named Atlas, was seen standing where the waters met the sky."*

But the frustrated child in Magda refused to be cajoled. *Who cares if Atlantis truly existed? All that matters to me is....* All that mattered to Magda was--

"Memories of sights, as much as of sayings, never die--haven't I promised?" It was as if Grandmother was in the room. *"Individual perceptions capture different scenes, like listeners hear differently the same spoken words."* Magda even heard Grandmother's puffs of winded breath between words, as they climbed to survey Jerusalem dressed for holiday. *"Every tale of history has at least one other version. On top of that, think how many ways each version might be told!"*

"As many as people living?" Magda had offered tentatively. The woman's arm had come around Magda's shoulder then and drawn her near—

Like Jesus' had, at the quay!

Yes, Grandmother had known well how to nurture youth's developing mind--when to say a pointed word, when to hold one's tongue. But Jesus, who recognized and treated the child in everyone, saw the wounded young woman also. He had enlightened Magda carefully, as to her uncensored diatribes. At the same time, he allowed her to stand her ground until, of her own volition, she herself could brush away the scabs.

She laid another piece of wood on the snapping kindling and warmed her heart further

with memories of their dialogues. His friendship had taken her full circle--*The Logos* encountered; off of it, one's own reflection reached that which the self always felt it was meant to be. Nevermore would she chase filaments of Ephratah and Hezron, Azubah and Caleb, or any other intervening firstborns, man or woman of the old history. Why? Because *he* could chase himself past David all the way back to Nahshon of Judah as well as Aaron of Levi if he chose to. He couldn't be bothered; why should she?

Annas stared into the darkness over his bed. His mind refused to give him rest....
Nicodemus was dared in vain, to search scripture and see that no prophet could be raised in the north. The last vestige of a lineage registry is Azariah's heroic effort, half a millennium ago!

Annas gave up pretense that he would be able to sleep, pushed himself out from under the white wool coverlet and wrapped it around his shoulders....

Levi, third son of Jacob by Leah, grandson of Bethuel. Bethuel—sometimes called the Syrian; sometimes, the Aramaean. After Zerubbabel, who was left?--to finger the wandering ones in the complicated matrices of humbled Leviites, who became scattered, indeed, o'er the land? Could anyone distinguish the son that might be of both Amram and Aram? None; except, perhaps, a mother--

Annas stopped pacing at the high back of his fireplace chair and slapped his hands on it. *An actual potential mashiiah? Irony of ironies! Even among the masses had one ceased truly to be expected out of anywhere. And now, of all times! For there to appear a man capable of winning confirmation by his mouth, alone--a veritable weaver of words and reasoning which few other men had minds to follow. Not a shepherd who became a teacher. A teacher who as a lamb learned about his ancestors in their purest form, anointable not merely by clamor of the people but by virtue of his very seed....*

This Jesus was far from an obscure Galilaean. In his blood flowed abundant waters of the legendary *meshihim*, whose draw in spirit at the raising of a staff caused in flesh a multitude to follow. A man to whom the impoverished would mold their flesh in a rank farer-flung, 10 times the strength of the hammerer of Ashemon--

It would not be enough, against Rome! Annas sank into his chair. He hooked his right thumb under his chin and rubbed his lips hard with his index finger. No matter how hard he prayed against the next link on the familiar chain of memories, one old one would not be defied....

Isn't the only difference between denial of living rights and murder a matter of degrees? He had known one woman who would so assert, without question. A woman who--without studying scripture ancient or modern, condoned or rejected--comprehended it all in the padlocked cellar of her soul. She had taught her son well, about the mixed bags of ancestry.

Men are such fools, Annas thought as emphatically as a cliché can be. *Rather than assess our own failures we transfer them off our side of the account onto that of God, explaining--ah, without complaining!--that our heavenly Father, never without purpose in His design, needs sin for His desired results. Convenient, that....*

"Who, historically, has been the buffer between king and prince and who, the bridge between prince and king?" Annas once had asked Caiaphas.

"Queen!" Caiaphas gave but understood the answer as little as he understood womanhood itself. As much as he understood the role mother-substance had played in peopling

the territories, and the tragic complications when squeals in the harem grew into vying half-brothers. Only Abraham was quoted directly, with reference to Sarah. “Yet really she is my sister; daughter of my father, only not daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.”

Endless had to be the tales untold in the Journals of Journeys, about marriages between relations, near or far, if the mothers of all generations were taken into account! From Elisheba of Amminadab of the tribe of Judah with Aaron of Amram of the tribe of Levi, through David and Bath-Sheba to Nathan and Solomon—

And what about Nathan? Annas echoed Magda’s thought. Nathan! —in whom the bloods of Judah and Levi reunited before Solomon’s birth. Little exists about “Nathan, the prophet;” nothing, about “Nathan the son.” Why is it not considered, ever, that they may have been the same one?

Annas cringed at admission of such a thought. Yet, even should records miraculously be discovered proving that Jesus’ mother was descended directly from Nathan of the House of Judah, as well as Aaron of Levi, it wasn’t a case this time of Adonijah versus Solomon with Nathan as Bath-Sheba’s foil. This latter-day son of Woman, determined to shun any authority as to being a blood son of direct line, was daring them instead to disprove that he was one with the God before one word of His law came to be written....

Without one word about heritage, he is thrusting torches into areas long-unlit, sharpening ominous shadows of ill-fated Zachariah—of Iddo, of Elkanah, of Berechiah, of Levi. He alone of his generation understands what made it necessary for Pedaiah and Shealtiel to share fatherhood of Zerubbabel; can give name and descendancy of the mother of Shechaniah, whose daughter married Tobiah, whose son, Jehohanan, married a daughter—also unnamed!—of Meshullam of Berechiah. Many then in Judah had sworn allegiance to Tobiah....

Annas’ aging bones resented being pushed from the chair, the chill he felt intensified by sounds of an unseasonal rain shower. He closed his robe over his collarbone and took another turn around the chair. *I have not come to this for lack of piety!* he thought fiercely. That was a truth. He had devoted all mind and heart to seek and keep truth. He did not know when it was, that mankind had come to call on God by various names, only that it was long before Moses. But Annas did not want to stand on equal ground with Moses! He did not want to be God’s judge, between Him and the Good of the Commonweal, *especially* on the issue of His legitimate successors. *One becomes lost in the process long before the strata of Ephraim and Manasseh....*

It was necessary to believe that Zerah and Perez fought with each other in the womb, to reconcile that ancient division. But Zerah had been with Jacob too, in the posterity of Leah, from entry into Egypt to the time of Reuben’s losses. Of Reuben’s first-named, Hanoah, nothing; nor of Peleth, unless Annas’ youthful research was correct and Peleth *was* grandfather of Dathan and Abiram, who stood fast with Korah against cousin Moses--

One Hezron or two? The descendancy of Izhar and Amminadab was an impossible snarl! Who was the mother of Amminadab’s children? Might she have been Korah’s mother, as well as Elisheba’s?...

There Annas always felt a queer hurt; a mother’s torment: Elisheba after the summit meetings, watching her first sons, Nadab and Abihu, meet extinction when the camp was found uniting behind them and Hur. “Aaron stood aghast,” one scriptural version said. Nor was it refutable on the record, that the great Miriam had been Hur’s wife--

.Ephratah with Chelubai fathered Hur; didn’t Hur’s descendants also reach Bethlehem? And one Chelubai or two? Some said it must be two; the time in between too great--that one Chelubai who as a young man perfected the bow in Goshen, trained the men in its use, and was

Moses' artery in Egypt--from the first assembly of sons ("Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Gershon, Kohath, Merari, Izhar, Uzziel and Korah" to a one!)--could not be the same Chelubai who gave his daughter, Achsah, along with some prime territory, to his military leader, Othniel, who succeeded Joshua as chief judge. But how many years were being spoken of, there—four or 40? *Ah—such a slight error of hand any of the numbers might be....*

Annas had kept his mouth shut as a young scribe, listened politely to the sorties of Pharesites and Perezites in the bosom of academic gossip. At times he had wanted to shout. *If you had been Sheba rebelling against Amasa or Absalom facing Joab, or among the Amalekites raiding Ziklag to kidnap Abigail and Ahinoam--many a contingent rejoined David then, on the news of Saul's death--might you have seen a brother?*

Neither monarch's sceptre nor priestly mantle passed through just any woman. Jochebad made one a Leviite; and, at some point, Ephratah, a Judahite? But if the Leviites *in toto* lost out to Aaron singularly, the Kohathites did not, in perpetuity; for lo, centuries later, Bath-Sheba joined the fold!

Reuben, Carmi, Hur, Chelubai; Shobal and Salma and Bethlehem; Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David, Solomon...

Or?...

Levi, Ram, Amminadab; Nashon and Salma and Bethlehem; Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David, Nathan...

Or, both?

The tracks to Hebron, were they lost? No; they had become roads traveled too many times. Was the King's Highway lost? It existed in even grander entirety, yet entrenched by ever-greater impossibilities. *Meanwhile, Jesus is welcomed from the Dekapolis unto Heshbon, and between Jericho and the heights of Laban...*

Annas let himself down slowly onto his chair. *GOD HELP ME!*, he thought.

Magda whiled away the following day in silent desperation. She spent most of it with Mother Mary, whose grief for Jahn barely had been given time to abate before doubling of fear for her own son's safety. Ordinarily Magda compensated for Mary's quietness, but now equally preoccupied she had not been able to make any small talk—

All day, all day without sight of him. Where were they? What were they up to?

Restless that evening she laid another small fire although the night was balmy. The fire took quickly. Still she was unable to stay her hands. Soon she absentmindedly was digging to the depths of her bag, praying in her own way....

My Father who abides in the heavens, hallowed is your name—

Her hands felt something made of madras fabric and lifted it out. The empty nard vial tumbled out at the same time.

Let Your reign come Let Your will be done....

She had kept herself from wishing the possibility until now. But there was nothing wrong, was there, in making oneself comfortable?

Thank you for giving me this day my daily bread. Forgive me my transgressions, as I strive to forgive those who transgress against me....

She set the large bowl of water used to sponge-bathe beside the closed side door to the kitchen. A few drops were left of the sweet nard; once bathed, she touched them to her ear lobes and throat, and ran scented fingers through damp hair. Perhaps she imagined it. The very act of praying made her even less resistant to those hands, which now lifted the brazier behind the lamp's

flame. Time was blurred on the burnished surface; it did not reflect grayed hair and etched lines. A tiny thought escaped: might she be found, still—

And lead me not into temptation!...

She laid the brazier down and drew on the madras cotton pajamas lying on top of her bag. She guided one foot, then the other, through long, shirred bloomers. Hunching her shoulders, she slipped her arms through the draped cotton halter. Suddenly the room felt stifling, so she pulled the planked outside door slightly ajar. She separated her hair, wound each half around three fingers, and with large bone pins affixed the rolls at the base of the scalp behind her ears. . . .

So many conflicting worries...the not-knowing, her thoughts were jumping like drunken monkeys. “*When the steeds of Thought have been tamed,*” Grandmother had been full of wise eastern sayings, “*Self, in its chariot, is brought evenly in line with God’s and sees its own blinding refection--*

“How beautiful you look.”

Again! Just when she had forgot even to wish that he might appear he did--in the outer doorway, rough cloak over his tunic, headdress hanging from one hand. “Walk over there,” he pointed across the room, “so I can get the full effect. You know?--women wear such things on the *streets* in Cyprus. Grecian, is it?”

“No. Persian.”

He swung a friendly arm around her shoulder. “Don’t let any Romans see you in it!” Eyes closed, Magda savored the feeling that ran through her muscles as she hugged him back. For a few blissful moments--the playful voice, the crinkled smile--she had forgotten.... *Tomorrow--Jerusalem!*

No! She refused to think about it. Now she only would remember how long she had waited for this state of grace, always having suspected that, then, all would be clear; when all that she desired would equal all that God wanted of her.

“I stopped to see how Mother was doing,” Jesus said, “and saw your light. I wanted to thank you. Not just for consistently unselfish contribution to ‘the cause,’” he smiled at the words, “but for being so good to and for my mother. Peter and some of the others are waiting outside to walk with me over to the camp. Have a good night!”

Magda’s head jerked toward the door as the thought crossed her mind that she might run and bar his way. Her lips parted slightly; her teeth were clenched. *What can I say?— don’t go? Don’t go into the city tomorrow?* Instead, she trailed him to the door, wanting to reach and gather his hair into her palms. He drew the door to close it behind him. “I love you,” she blurted. He turned with a last look through the narrowing space. “And I, you. Stay out of trouble now!” he whispered cheerfully. It helped her smile long enough for him to slip away.

The energy in the room, empty of his presence, all was of him. Her willing mind engulfed every lingering trace. *No one.... I shall never—*

A soul is sealed when it knows a bond the mind cannot reveal, even if--was it seizable--threatened with being cut out and laid awake to dry on desert sand. Her head was tilted toward heaven, but she saw nothing.

Lamedh, lambda; gimel and gamma

The stone floor snagged Annas' soft slippers as he paced the length of his chamber. Could Pilate's action be predicted?

The mean may have justified methods, where Moses was concerned; but only God could say whether the future success of all the sons of man would have been less, had the Korahites and Reubenites prevailed. What was certain, men had been subjects of many sacrifices--whether in cold submission on mountain top, or heat of battle in lowlands--all of them choicelessly. In his wisdom Abraham decided when God was ready to put a stop to the most hideous type of sacrifice, and saved Isaac for posterity. The present situation, however, was not in one man's hand. Like with David—*Oh, my beloved son!*—future's man would remember just the cry.

He' and epsilon; yohdh and iota; the aleph and the omega....

Time cannot kill the Witness developed in the old tradition. Ultimately, Annas never was permitted to lie to his self. Painfully, most pitifully, he could not refuse any longer now the thought of Jesus' mother. *So enchanting was she!*—when her sturdy three-year-old legs first clambered up the Temple steps....

Annas wondered, what talk of her passed, these days, amongst other elders? *That exquisite girlhood beauty.... How different her life became, than that which her spirit originally had willed itself would be. Rest in peace old Joseph. Then High Priest Zachariah chose well, when he secured her in your care....*

Annas took to his chair and glanced at Caiaphas, who all the while had been hovering at the hearth. So clueless, that foisted son-in-law, as to the reverence maternal bloodline could command. Many men had taken their fathers'-in-law names to legitimize themselves; it had not taken young scholar Annas long, to realize that. When a woman *was* acknowledged on the record, it was either for one purpose or because of one reason—either she served perfection perfectly, or she was too well-known (for whatever cause!) to be omitted. *But few seized upon Ruth, to show Ephratah's contribution to Judah!*

Annas again forgave himself his little heresies. No law of God that he knew forbade intellectual curiosity. Surely it rested certain with God too, that old family memories lived still, sensibly and sensitive.

Caiaphas, running out of patience, cleared his throat.

Ah, my avaricious son-in-law, who would laugh at the proposition that a male could awake to his own feminine intelligence; who finds ridiculous the notion of an existence higher than that of the flesh. To Caiaphas, Jesus *was* a madman: a body ignoring risk and a mind willed toward prime jeopardy--to History, the way a true king acts.

Caiaphas: outside, soft as a woman; inside, as stupid as she was fabled to be. And his adversary?--hammered iron and mental totality. Of all macabre human drama, one of the more intriguing plots: complete absence of sense of place in History versus unflagging self-determined certainty. *If Caiaphas comprehended any of it, Annas thought, he would know that all that really is saving him is the adversary's unswayable pacifism.*

Caiaphas, at that point, was thinking vehemently, *Get on with it, old man.* But he tightened rein on his emotions and only said, "I'm sure the council members that are available have assembled by now." He did not add, *what's more, the highly disgruntled administrator of Jesus' treasury has arrived, and is being kept waiting in my room.*

Soon it would be 20 years, since Procurator Valerius Gratus retired Annas after Rome's annexation of the province. It had not been easy but, until Caiaphas, Annas had been able to

hold on to the strings. Now, his son-in-law's consultation was but a thinly-veiled formality. Annas silently addressed the curled fringes at the end of his slippers, as if they were puppets. *Children, I am seeing the end of the days of my usefulness.*

Caiaphas, draining his wine cup, was smoldering; but Annas still was not able to initiate voice, in effect to see concluded at the end of one hour that for which The Law prescribed 24 times it. Tension in the city was so thick he imagined he felt it through the walls. A single outbreak in any quarter could touch off what for those on all sides would be the end of all 'civil' wars; take from one and all the last of any life livable, as one more overlord came down upon their necks with full force.

Annas released a pent-up sigh toward his now uncomfortably hot audience and drew his feet away from the fire. *God creates situations; His sons are left to control them.* He wiggled his 10 avid students to resurge their capillaries. *Count the generations! Levi was a grandfather by the time Jacob led the clans into Egypt. His son Kohath had four sons, Izhar, Amram, Hebron and Uzziel. Korah, Miriam, Aaron, and Moses were Levi's great-grandchildren....*

Annas had reservations, however, about supra-longevity. He would not be surprised by intervening unreported generations, in the large number of years between the influx and the exodus—bloodlines passing from son to son via the daughter-mother. That last thought provoked the greatest pain, instantly returning him to recall of Her--and of himself, youthful Temple emissary between it and its most regal of virgin daughters, seed of a nation.

Ah, priest Zachariah found himself in a quandary indeed, assigned to satisfy the people's wonder at a strangely sudden Temple dismissal of its nest recently come of age--all to find husbands; all, that is, except one, for whom a husband carefully was selected....

Annas turned his head sharply to erase memory. But each object of sight and smell—the stylus and ink at his right hand; the fragrant hint of evening incense—caused Past's drama to recreate itself in mind, to race backwards from now-contemplating, through then-knowing, to first-sensing--enough! *Sick am I! I cannot let this happen!* Annas' tasseled audience had fallen into overheated slumber...

Oh יהיה.... Oh יהיה...

That great dissembler, Irony, had its perfect vessel in the mind of Caiaphas into which vacuum, reasoning was sucked without creating a flow. What did Caiaphas know, of The Law? Sixteen hundred years, since the skeleton of the Sanhedrin first appeared under Aaron, when the number of cases became too great for Moses to judge by himself. Moses appointed chiefs of ten, fifties, hundreds and thousands over what some said grew to a population of three million soul. David had six thousand judges.

Annas of all people had no need to review rules for trial. As a young man he could be found industriously scribing codes up to the last minute. *"A tribe, false prophet or high priest are not judged save by a court of seventy-one. Capital cases, tryable in daytime. A verdict not to issue until the next day. Capital trials proscribed on the eve of a Sabbath"--and this Passover is a double, a Great Sabbath!*

What were the potential Temple charges here? *False prophesying?* Unlikely. Certain citations and case law existed in written facsimile on the pages of Annas' mind and, clearly, *Deuteronomy 13:1-5* called for the death penalty only if the transgressor performed signs enticing the people to other gods. *Blasphemy?--Leviticus 24:16, penalty, death.* But could the man's high-handedness be called *blasphemy?* Besides, *Numbers 15:30* said only that such person "shall be cut off." *Desecration of the Sabbath?* Now here there was no question! *Exodus 20:8*, sanctification of the sabbath; *Leviticus 19:3*, each man shall keep all sabbaths; and, finally,

Numbers 15:32--the case of the man stoned to death for gathering sticks--

Caiaphas anticipated night just was beginning. This time he coughed to remind Annas of his presence.

Annas shut his eyes. Life time, he concluded, is a period of oral contracts, unlike the silent ones of death time. He took a deep breath before looking up toward his son-in-law. "You'd best be on your way now."

Caiaphas' sleeve caught on the stone mantle's rough edge as he set his cup down on it, too hasty in his desire to be off to his task. Annas closed his eyes again and listened to the receding slide of sandals. Only when they reached the arched far entry hall did his taut jaw slacken. Two hours, perhaps three, before the next summons would come to him. Left to think, in front of that fire, which thinning blood now required burning all night even in springtime, Annas felt the nearest to dying he ever had felt. But it appeared he would not be freed soon enough, from his exclusive little anteroom of Death...

Magda barely slept that night. She dreamed about climbing a tower over which she somehow had responsibility. The tower was imperiled by a hidden weakness, a threat she, alone, could avert. *Higher...she had to climb higher....* People, so many people in her way; all but her oblivious to the danger. *I must reach the parapet; from there everything can be made safe—*

Too late! A great surge of water burst forth and swept her into a drain; around and around, down the tower. Women and children flailed, drowning as she passed, while her body skimmed the surface like a shell empty of all but curiosity. It was not her fault! The tower had been defective. But how could she have been so near, too late?—

*Fire!--*seen out of the corner of the eye; fierce as dry burning brush. Words hung over the scene but she did not need to turn her head to read them. She read their image reversed, instead, in a banner reflection of firelight-- "*a callow myth?*" Nebulous other words vied to be grasped as the banner waved away--*the murder of three Zachariahs? Someone should pay!*" A verdict, in writing, was handed to her; it said, simply, "*Sanballat*"....

When will I see the beauty I once possessed and where, you, yours, if not in each other's eyes? And, when the eyes begin to dim, how will there live in the memories behind them all the reality we once were, if not in our mutual feeling? I do not want to sit alone and watch the young people dance. I want to watch them with you on the bench next to me, remembering when we danced together as they are. I do not want to watch a child of ours leave the house with that particular glow of eye and twist of shoulder which belie the beloved waiting at the gate. Not without you there, opposite me over the remnants of supper, remembering when it was I, eager to see your face, and you, waiting in the garden—

It was her, speaking in her dreams....

The other man had been sitting in dead silence ever since being escorted into Annas' chamber. The composure was magnificent. He followed Annas with his eyes, into which the priest had looked twice for many moments without making them blink. Each time Annas read the same message. *You and I recall enough history of the sons of Man; neither of us wishes any part of the other.*

The second time Annas' eyes shot back. *God is sufficed when we do our best at playing Him, not merely advancing ourselves as Caesars do. Isn't each of us a man of God?*

Suddenly Annas' retreat into the past to avoid a future of self-hate seemed all for this purpose, to see himself once-removed. To change the will of God meant Annas would need to change the will of this one of His sons, which could not be done. Jesus himself had funneled Annas out of the eye of the storm. As he had put it, a true son of The Father always is with Him.

Annas saw how, from the beginning, he himself was meant to serve this day in the deepest crevice of the Leviite chasm. His assignment had been to reduce Prosecuting History's summation to one question: *Would God not prefer that just one of His children die, over many?* Annas was most grateful to God for one thing. He had not been forced to be there, in Caiaphas' chamber, to hear the words a second time.

But what, now? *Bound over! They will take him to Pilate for confirmation of the verdict. Will Pilate remand him to his own district—to Antipas? If so, Antipas will keep himself as clear as possible, and rely on Caiaphas to deal with the inevitable.*

Annas, facing the hearth, felt sick at his stomach. Then, when he turned and looked into Jesus' eyes a third time, an unanticipated comfort came to him. It only was History that failed to record thought shared and life known between son and father, as between Man and God. This was their time, Jesus' and Annas', in the full history of their unique God. More than lifeblood was involved: that second substance of equal value, the union in spirit which the young Annas once conceived could exist.

In that last lingering look Annas was baptized by an embodied concept of self-, therefore all-forgiveness, for all Time, without need of God to speak it. In his soul all was quieted, as one imagines it is beyond the stars, still as no sound, safe from the world. Annas' chin lifted, then, and recaptured the jaw line of mind forged past all illusion of free will. The other noticed. Annas had come full circle: a man reaching, recognizing, and accepting his mark.

Now their eyes met and held, and Jesus finally spoke. "Let this between us be but an exchange of homage, as between Melchizedek and Abraham, the King of Salem to the King of Haran. Until one righteous man meets another whom he has been led to believe is his enemy, he might fear that the other's reasoning is better than his." Jesus stood up and put his hand firmly on Annas' shoulder. "Father, we agree. Neither of *us* craves affirmation that none of our brothers worshipped a golden calf. Even if Korah lived again to prove himself a true son of Amminadab, Man might change what has been written, but cannot, what has been."

Here was a son a man both would wish for and despair having sired! *I was wrong*, Annas thought, with a watery feeling in his eyes, the sensation of which he long ago had forgotten. *I did need to have him in my presence, just once....*

It was wrenching half-sleep, half-wakefulness...

The brothers had been working on a recitation, and Magda had not dared inject herself into the composition as she very much wanted to. But now her ragged mind worked the lines like beads on a strand...

*I believe God is an all-mighty force that governs the Cosmos,
and that I myself, one of Its children, was conceived of virgin matter
in union with sacred spirit, to become born, live crucibly, die and be buried.
On the third day after death my spirit shall ascend into the heavens,
where it shall abide at the right hand of The Father, from whence
I also shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in
holiness of spirit, a communion of souls, and in Life, everlastingly....*

Then, in a brief deep sleep, Magda dreamed that she was with him, standing beside

him, holding tightly to his hand. He was her nourisher and protector. Soon, others appeared. All were listening to him except her, for of a sudden she realized everyone was hungry. All were hungering for the soup which he had made, a thick concoction of warmth and strength. She commenced to serve it to the people. Too late, she realized she had served it all to others. There was none left, for him....

A timid servant awakened Prefect Pilate. The commander of the military unit attached to the Temple was outside; the Prefect's presence was required on a matter of some urgency.

Pilate had been swathed in that rare deep sleep which happens only toward dawn. Irritated, he followed the servant's high-held candle down the dark hallway from his apartment in palace Antonia, near the northwest corner of the Temple. *At this ungodly hour? It had better be urgent*, he thought, hoping otherwise.

Any urge to take his officer to task fell away however, as soon Pilate reached the courtyard. He forced his sleepy eyes open wider in the early morning graylight. Instead of one commander waiting, he found a small group of men and several soldiers guarding a bound prisoner. Pilate saw, mainly by their attire, the others were Sanhedrin members and recognized at least two men at front as fanatic Caiaphas loyalists. The unit commander nervously handed over the document on which he had acted, a warrant of arrest bearing the High Priest's seal.

Without bothering to look at the document, Pilate swallowed an annoyed sigh. "What charges were brought against the man?" he asked. The representatives looked quickly side to side at each other. Their darting glances came to rest on Datam, who had kept his eyes centered on Pilate. Datam took a step forward and answered forcefully. "He incited sedition, threatening to destroy the Temple. He is a sorcerer, as well."

Pilate was dubious, where sorcery was concerned. Certain suspicious deaths attributed to it, in Rome's ruling families, coincidentally had served political purposes too neatly for his liking. "And what wicked methods does he use?" Pilate asked.

"If he wasn't a criminal, would we have brought him here? Among other things, he has broken our sacred law of the Sabbath day."

Pilate hunched his shoulders with lifted palms. "Then take and judge him according to your law."

"Judgment already has been entered. We are here in accordance with Roman jurisdiction, under which it is illegal for us to carry *out* the sentence. A death sentence brought by our court is subject to Roman confirmation and execution."

Pilate did not need to be so informed, but, "*death sentence?*" Pilate, who had his own intelligence network, glanced at the court document and noted the accused's name. Then for the first time he looked fully at the prisoner. *Ah*, he thought, *this is that man about whom I was informed—the teacher and physician of sorts, whose words and purported healing powers have garnered considerable public interest.*

Pilate had not assigned any immediate concern with regard to his own province, when he had reviewed the report. Now he recalled more details. It had been noted that many of Palaistina's peasantry might see this Jesus as a legitimately contending, full-blooded leader in accord with the law of their ancients. His preaching had evoked a large following in Galilaea and Peraea, where Antipas Herod was everything but loved by the commonweal. Instantly Pilate understood the reason for the High Priest's dead-of-night court activity--*Caiaphas and Antipas... of course!*

Was there any epoch, the history of which was not a contest between the exploiting and the exploited, the rulers and the oppressed? Pilate was an educated and experienced man, well-versed in his own country's struggle of plebeians versus patricians. But the body politic of this, his assigned region, with its mixtures of peoples and their particular code of law, was vastly different. He turned on his heel and directed the guards to bring Jesus to him in his chamber.

In the brighter light of the large room's candelabra, Pilate initially was arrested by the man's material presence, which seemed merely embraced by his bonds. One sensed a potential champion of both flesh and spirit. Pilate understood how such a man's foes would fear his command of popularity; the same unwavering certainty in Jesus' eyes seemed to emanate from his entire body.

"Might you be considered a king in this nation?" Pilate asked, primarily out of private curiosity.

"Is it you, personally, who wants to know?" Jesus asked back, "or have others asked you to find out whether I believe I am."

"I'm not a Judaeon, am I?" Pilate answered sharply.

"My realm is not a worldly one," Jesus assured the Prefect with a small shake of his head. "If I wanted it to be, you can be sure my subjects would have fought valiantly against my surrender to arrest."

"Then you're *not* a king."

"It's you who suggest I might be. I was born into the world—was *brought* into this--as a servant to Truth. Everyone living out of Truth hears the voice of Truth."

"What is 'Truth'?" Pilate asked facetiously. "The rule of your *court* causes you to be brought before me. You've heard the charges against you. What do you say?"

"Truth is an unchangeable quality. No quantity of denial can remove it from anything to which it is attached. As to your second question, under the statute of which my indicters spoke, subjects of The Law are enjoined to desist from all works of the hand every seventh day. That practice is in memory of their history of slavery, wherein there is not one moment over which an individual may exercise his own will."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Pilate responded, touching a finger to his temple. "That means, if someone on a 'sabbath' is threatened by death and one could forestall it, he should not?"

"Yes."

"That makes no sense to me," Pilate said.

Pilate called the guards from the doorway to wait with Jesus and went outside. "I, for one, am not finding any cause in him," he announced, and tried a different tack. "It is customary, at this time of your Passover celebration, for my office to honor a request from your nation for pardon of one prisoner," he addressed the group at large. "Now, I have one man, a thief--Barabbas by name— under condemnation in the prison, and this man you have brought to me, in whom I find no fault. Which of them do you will that I release to you?"

"Barabbas," they all replied. "Barabbas!"

Pilate then thought he might resolve his dilemma if he imposed a punishment. He had Jesus subjected to a scourging, after which the soldiers took pleasure in putting on him an humiliating king costume. Pilate himself then returned Jesus to the courtyard.

"Look," Pilate said. "I, personally, lead the man out to you, in order to assure you once more that I find no cause in him." His effort, however, was useless before the insistence of the conspirators and their agents.

"He has been tried and judged according to our law," Datam repeated. "He has been

delivered to you to be impaled.”

“You take him and *you* impale him,” Pilate almost shouted, daringly, “for **I find no cause!**”

Datam relinquished the floor to the deviously clever Summas. “You would be disloyal to Caesar, and let this man go?” Summas asked, feigning great disbelief. “When he permits himself to be called the son of God and a king? Would *you* have him for a king, therefore, in place of Caesar? Does *Caesar* know, yet, that he has a new son?”

The last words struck Pilate. Administrators can have private doubt about the divinity assumed by their emperor. But the servant who manages to remain healthily in office never forgets the nature that lies beneath such self-bestowal. Emperor Tiberius, himself, had extended the law of *laesa majestas* to include libelous words.

Pilate had a new thought, the thinnest of chances. The court’s proceedings were held in his district, but he did not know where the alleged capital offense had occurred. If the “crime” had occurred in Antipas Herod’s principality, and it should be that Jesus was Galilaean, Pilate might be able to remand him to Antipas for further inquiry.

Pilate again had the now bleeding, stone-faced man in the purple cape brought inside. Weighted by the threat inherent in Summas’s remarks, Pilate’s voice changed tenor. “Where, really, are you from?”

Jesus didn’t answer.

“You’re not speaking to me? Don’t you know I have the power either to release or impale you?”

“You would have no authority over me, did it not come from on-high; and it would be unnecessary for either power to be exercised were I not brought to stand before you. Therefore, the man who handed me over bears the greatest sin.”

Stymied, Pilate never before had felt himself at such loss. Meanwhile, loud voices from outside hammered at his private fears. “*Anyone who would make himself a king opposes Caesar. If Pilate releases that man, Pilate is not a friend of Caesar!*”

Pilate stood for several moments agonizing in silence. The only thing left was absolute contravention, but Rome followed a general hands-off policy in overseeing self-rule in its provinces. Any overrule demanded full substantiation. What justifiable cause for direct interference could Pilate argue in his own behalf, should Caiaphas appeal the issue? Caesar undoubtedly would view it as a nuisance matter that never should have been allowed to reach him. And what if the man was released, and did cause serious problems in the province of Judaea? Antipas’ powerful Roman lobby would have all it thirsted after, to prove Pilate’s inadequacy....

What was it Jesus had said? Pilate asked and answered himself. *It is only illusion that I have freedom of authority over his fate. Our presence here has been determined by a higher power.* That thought, new to Pilate, consoled him. It was a concept which Man ordinarily expressed, if at all, only after the fact, when history was viewable as a course apart from individual will.

Pilate looked long and hard into Jesus’ eyes. It seemed as if he was reading the man’s mind. “*Each of us has his own part to play here. I have chosen and accept mine.*” Only then was Pilate able to turn away.

Neither Chief Priest Annas nor Prefect Pilate ever would know it, but at that moment they became brothers under the skin. Pilate, clenched of jaw, led the way outside for the last time and continued walking, unceremoniously cutting through the waiting group of men. They scurried after, as he strode from his residence to the palace’s official seat of judgment. He stepped onto

the central platform and sat upon the stone seat. It was the sixth hour of the day of preparation of Passover.

“Look: *your* King,” Pilate said, infecting the words to convey perfectly his personal estimation of the accused relative to his accusers. To Pilate, Jesus *was* a king over the audience, petty subjects of the justice-effacing Caiaphas.

“WE have no king *other than Caesar*,” Datam responded coldly.

“Shall your court’s action be confirmed, then, and I cause this man to be sent to his impalement?”

“Yes. Arise. Have him taken away.”

“*Yes! Arise!*”

And, so, Pilate permitted himself finally to wash his hands of it all. Resignedly he rose to his feet. That was the Roman sign: the hearing before Pilate was finished and the soldiers could take the prisoner away.

She forgot she was standing on her feet; forgotten, that there were earth and air and fire and water; knowing only that there still could be made men on the face of the earth capable of hurting another beyond what they could sustain themselves.

“*Remember, remember, remember*,” Grandmother had told her, the pillow beneath the dying lady’s head strangely made whiter by the whitened face. “*When anything bad happens it will end and be over; all things pass away. Believe it!*”

Magda had to. Not for him—good God! It was herself who could not bear the thought; *never again, never again....*

The sun was touching the horizon. Just a little was all that was left of time, for belief to run its course—

I love you so! You, who understood how sad my life had been. Was I alive, before?—not knowing how much more loneliness there could be; not even your shadow leading me.... NO!—I will not forget to remember! For I have learned how life, alone, can be; your spirit set it free....

And she did not take her eyes from him. When his chin sagged to his breast she lifted herself upwards and willed her spirit to where his consciousness was suspended. She felt movement beside of her; heard Joseph of Arimathaea’s anxious voice. But she would not take her eyes from Jesus. If he had to lose she must take that loss and make it Victory.

As if he heard her thought he opened his eyes, directly on her. She saw them shift to his mother. “Mother...Mother, behold your *son*.” It was a forced shout collapsed to a whisper as his eyes shifted from his mother to Magda. “*Son, behold your Mother....*”

Tears couldn’t be stopped then, but as quickly as they sprang to her eyes Magda lifted her head higher. In a moment he would be beyond the pain; and he’d seen it done, by sundown....