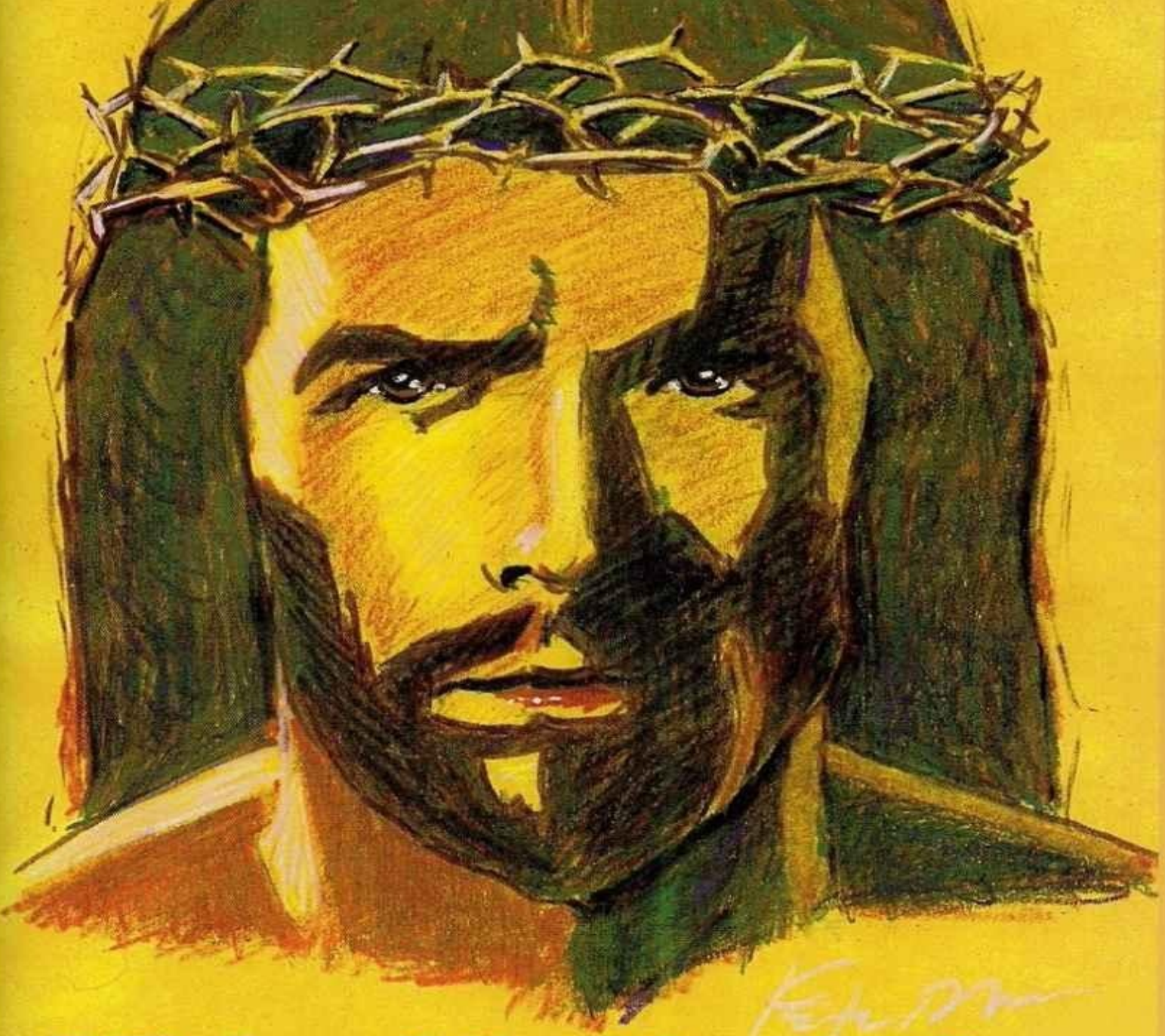


"God has landed on this enemy-occupied world in human form."

-C.S. Lewis

Divine Invasion



Michael L. Monhollon
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Reflection Publishing
Abilene, Texas

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LC 97-91836

ISBN 0-9657561-0-6 (hardcover)

Cover Illustration by Keith R. Davis

Cover Design by Imagination ii

For Seth and Joshua

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CHAPTER 1

Six corpses, entirely nude, hung rotting in the morning sun. They had been there three days, but the last of them, the strongest, had expired just hours ago, at daybreak. The grass about the low crosses had been trampled flat by Roman boots.

Why do they have to put them so close to the road?" Herodias asked querulously. The height of the crosses was little greater than the height of the men hanging from them. The feet of one were perhaps a cubit above the ground, eighteen inches. The feet of the others would have dragged the ground back for the iron spikes driven through the lapped feet and into the post. Despite her words and her tone of disgust, she leaned closer as the royal chariot passed by the crosses, the stench of decay, of voided bladders and emptied bowels, filling her nostrils. "All Jews," she said. "Of course they would be."

Crucifixion was a cruel death, never inflicted on citizens of Rome.

"It's needed as an object lesson to would-be revolutionaries," Herod Antipas said. He, unlike his wife, had no interest in the circumcisions of the dead. Using his teeth, he pulled the stopper from an amphora of wine. He drained half of it, gulping repeatedly without drawing breath. The flies were thick, and buzzards perched on the crossbeams of the crosses within easy reach of the vulnerable eyes. God, these Romans were brutes, Herod thought.

Neither Herod nor Herodias said anything for perhaps a mile. The silence was broken only by the jingling harness of the horses, the creak of the chariot, and the tramping feet of King Herod's military escort.

"Did you know about it beforehand?" Herodias asked him.

"Know about what?" He had finished the jar, and droplets of wine hung in his reddish, square-cut beard and stained his tunic. "Oh, the crucifixions. No." Though nominally a king, he was more accurately a tetrarch, a satellite prince without the same royal dignity. Perea was his province, as was Galilee, but the two provinces constituted only a fragment of his father's kingdom. Just as his father had held his kingdom at the pleasure of the emperor, so Herod Antipas held his tetrarchy. The emperor's legionnaires would rarely consult him before inflicting the penalty for insurrection.

"They should always consult you," Herodias said. "You should insist on it." Her hair was dark and straight, jewels glinting from the hanging tresses.

"Maybe I will."

"And maybe you won't." Her anger showed in her eyes, so dark as to appear utterly black.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means don't merely talk about it this time. Do it."

He regarded her sourly. It was hard for him to believe, sometimes, that he had ever been in love with her, but he had been. There was a time, especially in Rome, where he had come to know her little more than a year ago, when he could hardly get enough of her.

"You shouldn't drink in the mornings," she told him as he tucked the empty ceramic jar beneath the seat on which he sat.

He belched and grinned with satisfaction at her expression of distaste.

"You're not nearly as civilized as your brother," she said.

"So you should have married my brother."

She had, of course. It was his brother Philip she had left for him, and, though Philip (also tetrarch) had made an early show of mild hostility, Herod had come to believe that Philip was very much content to have inflicted her on him. He reached again under his seat for the last of the jars he had stashed for the journey.

He, for his part, had given up a Nabataean princess, and it was doubtful he had heard the last from her father, Aretas.

“Do you intend to swill wine all the way to Jericho?” Herodias asked him.

“All the way to Jerusalem. I’ll have to restock in Jericho.”

She made a sound of disgust.

“After the spectacle we just witnessed, I intend to become as drunk as possible.” He bent toward her to bestow a sloppy kiss, and she pushed him away.

“I’d suggest you do the same,” he said. “Wanton.”

Her eyes narrowed, but her lips curved in a smile. “Beast,” she said. The sun shone in her black hair, emphasizing its luster.

“Strumpet.”

“Lecher.”

Peace restored, he held out the wine jar to her, but she shook her head.

He shrugged. “Perhaps it’s just as well.”

“What’s as well? Why?”

“This is my last amphora,” Herod said, taking a short pull on it. “I’d hate to have to split it with you.” He wiped his mouth with his forearm.

†

The preacher — the wild man, some would say, being skeptical even of his sanity — stood in the Jordan River at the Hiljah Ford. Though the day was warm, and the air, beneath the overcast sky, was humid, the water itself was cold. The ford was several miles upstream from the Dead Sea, but the water, nonetheless, was brackish. John’s camel-hair robe was bound at his waist with a leather belt, and the swift current rose high enough to keep it wet.

A boy splashed out toward him, struggling against the current, the water rising as high as his chest. Good, the preacher thought. He’d been watching that one.

He gripped the boy’s arm. “What is your name, son?”

It was Seth.

“Ah,” said the preacher. “The child of promise. ‘God has appointed for me another child.’ So said Eve.” One hand on the boy’s chest, the other behind his head, the preacher pushed him down beneath the surface of the water and drew him up again, his hair streaming with water.

“Go,” the preacher said. “Go and live a life that is pleasing to God.”

“What shall I do?”

“Eh? What’s that! What shall you do?” One hand gripping the boy’s shoulder with the strength of a pincer, the preacher looked up at the crowd. “Do you need me to tell you how to live a life that is pleasing to God? Are you completely numb in spirit?” Sometimes he thought they were; it was enough to make him despair.

“If you have food,” he said, “then share it with someone who has none. If you have two coats, give one of them to someone without any coat at all. Is Judea devoid of those who are poor and afflicted? What good can you do?”

Still their faces were blank, uncomprehending. The preacher looked again at Seth. “Ask God, son. Ask him, and he will tell you what you should do.”

The boy nodded.

“Go on now.”

There was the rumble of distant thunder, and, casting a nervous glance up at the dark clouds, the boy floundered toward the bank.

A man reached out a hand to help him to shore, lifting him easily onto the bank. “It’s all right,” he murmured. “The Baptizer was preaching to all of us, not just to you.”

The man had a dark beard, a straight nose, and warm brown eyes, almost golden in color. The boy smiled up at him, and the man squeezed the boy's shoulder. Then he entered the river himself, wading out to the Baptizer.

"Would you too be baptized!" John said to him, taking his arm. "You are conscious of the sin in your life?"

"All have sinned, have they not?"

"A strange answer." There was something odd about the man, something familiar and yet unsettling—unsettling even to John, who was rarely unsettled.

"You have not been to hear me before," he said. "How is it that I know you?"

"Do you?"

John drew him close, staring into his face with an almost maniacal intensity. He did everything with an almost maniacal intensity; it was one of the reasons he attracted crowds.

"Don't I?" he said.

The man smiled, his teeth straight and white against his dark beard. "We met as children."

"Children!"

"We played together on the streets of Jerusalem when the two of us were only twelve years old."

John searched his eyes.

"Try to imagine me without the beard."

"Jesus. Mary and Joseph's boy."

The man nodded. "Your cousin Jesus."

"Yes."

Jesus' woolen robe and tunic floated on the water, swirling about his hips. The current about them was swift, carrying the mud and sand from beneath their feet, and several times each had to shift their feet to find purchase.

"Why do you hesitate?" Jesus said. "You are known as the Baptizer, are you not?"

"So I am." John scooped water from the river with his hands, but as he raised them, the sun broke through the lowering clouds, forming a halo about his cousin's head. John blinked, temporarily blinded. From close by came the flapping of wings, but, though John jerked his head, he could see nothing. It seemed to his sun-dazed eyes that the people and the shrubbery along the bank were all in shadow, and he felt disoriented, dizzy.

Jesus' hand, which years of carpentry had hardened into oak, was at his elbow, supporting him. His face seemed unnaturally bright.

"It's you," John said. "You're the one who is to come."

Jesus smiled, a little quizzically. "I hardly see how I can be, as I'm here already."

John ignored the play on words. He scooped up water and held out his cupped hands to Jesus. "Take it," he said. "I need for you to baptize me. Please."

Jesus pressed John's hands back against his chest. "No, John. You are the Baptizer. It is I who have come to you."

"It would be a sacrilege. You have no need of the baptism I offer."

Jesus extended his hand to the crowd on the bank, still little more than a forest of shadows to John. "Do you see them? They have need of the baptism you offer."

"But —"

"And today I accept baptism on their behalf."

"My . . . my work is over, then."

"Very nearly," Jesus told him. "Very nearly."

†

Herod and his party heard voices as they approached the Jordan River, long before the river itself was

visible. More accurately, they heard a voice. When the chariot topped the rise that overlooked the Jordan, a crowd of people was visible on the far bank — peasants, most of them, though here and there was the gleam of gold or the flash of a brilliant hue that marked the clothing of a rich man. The speaker was a wild man, hair to his shoulders, beard full and unkempt on the breast of his camel's hair robe.

Herod held up a hand. "Halt," he cried softly, and his captain echoed the command.

The tramp of feet and the jingle of armor and harness ceased, and, in the relative quiet, the words of the preacher could be distinguished: "Today I have seen the one spoken of by the prophet: he who was watched in the night visions, and behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like unto the son of man. He came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. . ."

"What's he saying?" Herodias asked.

"Hush! It's from the Book of Daniel."

Though the day had been dry, the hair of roughly half the crowd was plastered to their scalps with dripping water, and their cloaks were spotted. All eyes were intent on the speaker.

". . . all people, all nations, all languages should serve him. . ."

None of the crowd had yet noticed Herod's party. "It's a Messianic passage," Herod said, softly enough to be audible only to Herodias and to the guards closest to them. "He's preaching the overthrow of earthly kingdoms and the foundation..."

"He's a revolutionary then."

"Perhaps, but not necessarily. It's a matter of theological interpretation."

Herodias shot her husband a look of withering contempt.

One of the men nearest to the preacher, one of the better dressed among them, said abruptly, "Who are you to say such things?" His voice was loud enough to carry easily across the river valley. "Who are you that we should listen?"

Herodias said, "You mean a man accused of treason can save himself by means of a fine theological distinction?"

"Hush," Herod whispered, gesturing vigorously.

"You say the day of the Lord is upon us," said the well-dressed man. "Are you then the Messiah?"

The shape of the crowd shifted subtly, though it was not clear to Herod whether in support of the preacher or his questioner. The well-dressed man stood in a crowd of six, all with phylacteries strapped to their left arms, three with another of the black leather boxes strapped to their foreheads as well. Herod was familiar with the phylacteries: each contained four passages of scripture. Moses had commanded the people of Israel to keep God's law always before them; there were some who took the injunction literally.

"Are you the Messiah?" the well-dressed man said again.

"I am not the Messiah," the preacher said.

"Who are you then? Are you Elijah?" Elijah, generally acknowledged as the greatest of the prophets, had never tasted death — at least, not according to scripture. At the conclusion of his ministry, he had been taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire. Many Jews — and Herod as well, though he was of Idumaeen extraction — half expected Elijah to descend again from heaven one day to announce the end of time.

"I am not Elijah."

"Are you the prophet the Lord promised Moses?"

"I am not."

Another of the scribes said, "Who then? How dare you presume to baptize God's own chosen people?"

"I preach a baptism of repentance, in preparation for one who is already among you. The hearts

God's people must be cleansed of all unrighteousness."

"Who?" said a member of the crowd. "Who is among us?"

"We are sons of Abraham," said the scribe. It was the Gentiles who needed cleansing, the Gentiles who had to undergo ritual purification in order to become one of God's people. The Jews were Hebrews already.

"I will tell you the worth of being a son of Abraham." The preacher hawked and spat the phlegm against a rock outcropping. "Out of that stone God can raise up sons of Abraham."

The graphic insult to their race — to Abraham — left them momentarily speechless. The preacher said, "You have asked me who I am; let me tell you who you are. You pretend to be righteous and holy, wearing your religion on your sleeves as you do, but you are merely politicians. Pharisees and Sadducees and... You there — do I recognize in you a member of the ruling Sanhedrin? What a nest of snakes!"

"You can't—"

"But I can. And one is here among you who is more powerful than I, one whose sandals I am not fit to carry. I warn you to flee the coming wrath, for the one who is to come is here. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering up the wheat into his barn and burning the chaff in an unquenchable fire."

"Who? Who are you talking about?"

Herod leaned forward to prod his driver. "Advance," he said. "Advance."

Several members of Herod's guard trotted ahead of the chariot and several behind. The bulk of Herod's fifty men flanked him, and Herod's captain rode a charger on the far right. By the time they reached the river, they had the attention of everyone on the far bank. The silence was total, the faces sullen. Herod Antipas was no favorite of the Jews.

His men formed a column to cross the ford. There was no bridge. The road led down into the water at the Hiljah Ford and up again beyond it. The chariot rocked precariously across the paving stones laid across the river bottom in the middle of the ford, the royal couple holding their feet up to keep their slippers dry. The water had a salty smell to it, a stale, unpleasant odor.

With a jolt the wheels of the chariot regained the road on the other side of the Jordan River.

"Herod Antipas." It was the preacher, the wild-looking one in the camel's hair coat. "We've been expecting you."

"Are you John?" Herod said, sounding a little breathless. "The one they call the Baptizer?"

"I am John." His face was gaunt and deeply lined. He was an ascetic who had subsisted for years in the desert on a diet of locusts and wild honey.

"And how is it you have been expecting me? Are you a prophet then?"

John laughed, the sound mocking. His dark eyes seemed to burn in his head like smoldering coals. "Oh, yes. A prophet indeed! Yesterday I saw the king's men laying these paving stones on the river bottom so that your chariot could more easily navigate the ford, and I prophesied to all here, 'The king is coming.'"

"So you are not a prophet?"

"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the paths of the Lord."

"The words of Isaiah," Herod said. "What do you mean by them?"

"I mean that the day of the Lord is at hand. Even now the ax is at the root of the tree. Every tree that does not bear fruit pleasing to God will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

There was something about his eyes; Herod felt the hair rise at the nape of his neck.

"Do not think that you yourself will escape unscathed," John said. "Already a fox has been in your brother's henhouse."

"What do you mean?" Herod said. "Do you speak of treason? Treachery?" Treachery had always

been a constant worry, both for him and for his father before him. Of all his father's sons, only he and Philip now ruled any part of their father's kingdom.

"Treachery indeed. Philip's own brother has lain with his wife and rides with her now in the royal chariot."

There was some general laughter in the crowd, though Herod's darting eyes failed to detect a specific culprit. He flushed.

"You will find impudence most imprudent, Baptizer," he said.

John bowed elaborately. "My apologies to your wife, the queen. Or should I say your niece?"

Herod's face had become the color of clay. "You should not," Herod said.

"Have I been misinformed then? She is not the daughter of your deceased brother as well as the wife of your living one?"

"Aristobulus was my half-brother."

"I see it now. Your sister-in-law is half a niece and wholly a wife. A talented woman indeed with so many roles to play!"

"This is intolerable," Herodias said sharply. Her narrow face was pinched in anger. "Why do you banter words with this wild man? Guards! Arrest him."

The captain wheeled his horse toward John, a half-dozen of his men falling in behind him. A stone rang off the captain's helmet, and he wobbled in his saddle.

Herod stood upright in his chariot, his expression disbelieving, his heart hammering in his chest. The boy responsible stood just a little way from John. It was Seth, his hair still damp from his baptism. Already he had fitted another stone to his sling, and he twirled it casually at shoulder-height. His eyes watchful, his narrow face unsmiling.

John held out a hand palm-downward to the boy. "No," he said. "I will go peacefully."

It was too late. One of Herod's soldiers launched his javelin in an over-the-shoulder throw, and hit the boy just under the breastbone and hurled him backwards.

Cries of anger and astonishment sounded here and there among the crowd. One Jew drew a sword from a scabbard beneath his cloak, and a stone, thrown from somewhere, caught Herod in the shoulder, sending him sprawling backwards onto Herodias.

"Dolt!" she shouted, pushing at him and kicking at the driver. "Move." The soldier at the reins ducking his head, spurred the horses.

"Protect the king," the captain shouted, turning his horse after him, and the soldiers retreated into a tight formation.

When the soldiers had passed over the rise to the west, the crowd, which had scattered, huddled tightly around the fallen boy. John the Baptizer stood looking at the man who had drawn his sword.

"They won't be arresting you today, Baptizer," the man said grimly. His complexion was dark and smooth, his black beard trimmed close to his face.

"Who are you?"

The man didn't answer immediately, and John turned aside. He had the boy Seth to attend to.

†

The boy was lying on his back, the javelin running through his body, pinning him to the ground. He felt no pain, only a mild dismay that he didn't seem to be breathing. He felt as if he were drowning in a warm bath. When the face of the Baptizer appeared above him, the lines of his features wavered disconcertingly.

Seth opened his mouth to speak, but his words, which had a garbled, underwater quality to them, were unintelligible.

The Baptizer's words likewise were unintelligible. Seth found himself looking through John's wavering image at a river valley greener and richer than he remembered it. John faded, and Seth found

himself alone in the far country.

†

Several miles up in the sere hills northeast of Jericho, Jesus stood with his face turned in the direction of the Jordan River. He had heard no sound — he was too far away for that — but he had sensed something, and it troubled him. “Dear God,” he said, softly. “Dear God.”

He stood for some time, watching and listening. A crow cawed in the distance, a harbinger of death. Jesus sighed, deeply. “How long, Father, how long?” he murmured.

If an answer came, no one but Jesus heard it. He turned to climb higher into the barren hills.

†

John closed the boy’s eyes and eased him onto his side. The crowd pressed closely about them. He stood and looked at them, his eyes settling on the dark-skinned man, who by now had sheathed his sword.

“Judas,” the man said. “Of Kerioth.” He looked down at the boy, and, as if moved by sudden feeling, gripped his cloak by the collar and tore it down the front.

It was a gesture of mourning, and it reflected how all of them felt. Another man tore his cloak, then another.

“He was a brave young man,” said someone. All around, men scratched dirt from the earth and ground it into their hair. More cloaks were torn. Some removed their shoes, and some sat upon the ground. A tunic was removed, and a pallet prepared from it for the body.

“How long must we stand for this?” someone said.

John shook his head. “Not long,” he said. His eyes focused on Judas. “The day of the Lord is upon us, a day when we will be delivered, not by human hands, but by the hand of God.” He looked around at all of them. “On that day,” he said in a growing voice, “the Lord with his cruel and strong sword will punish the fleeing serpent. On that day a song will be heard in the land of Judah.”

A wailing went up from the crowd, beginning with a single voice and growing.

“On that day Israel’s dead shall live; their corpses shall rise. The earth will disclose the blood she has hidden upon it and will no longer cover its slain.”

The boy was lifted up on his pallet. John started through the crowd, moving toward the river, and those he passed turned to follow him.

“On that day,” John said, holding up his hands. “On that day the trumpet will sound. The earth will give birth to those long dead.”

The crowd waded into the river en masse. John cupped water in his hands and let it drain through his fingers onto the hair and dripping beards of those around him. He pushed some down totally into the water and with his hand drew them up again.

“The trumpet shall sound. The dead will be raised.”

A hysteria had gripped the crowd. Each one plunged down into the river and came up again, his hair and his clothes streaming water.

CHAPTER 2

As the afternoon turned to dusk, Centurion Marcus Antoninus marched from the garrison at Jericho to the Hiljah Ford with half his company. Herod had arrived in Jericho bellowing complaints about the lack of security at the ford, and Antoninus was under orders to take possession of the ford, by force if necessary, and to seek out and capture a long-haired, unshaven barbarian known as John the Baptizer.

“Not publicly, not publicly,” Herod had insisted. “The people will riot. He’s a great favorite of the people.”

“So what? So what if we upset a few Jews?” Antoninus’s tribune said.

“It may not be just a few Jews. If we fan this into a full-fledged insurrection, Rome won’t look too kindly on either of us.”

“Where else but in public can I find him? You think his Jewish friends will point me freely to his door?”

“You secure the ford,” Herod said. “If you find John, arrest him. If you don’t, let it go. I’ll find him eventually. He’s well known in my territory beyond the Jordan.”

The tribune turned to Antoninus. “Take fifty men. See to it.”

The first travelers Antoninus came upon were Nabataean merchants, two of them, small and dark, each sitting side-saddle on his donkey. Four camels plodded behind them carrying huge sacks of grain, two to a camel, each sack large enough to have held one of the Nabataeans and his donkey as well.

“Stop,” Antoninus called out in Aramaic, the common language of Palestine.

The merchants stopped their donkeys, and their camels came to a halt behind them.

“You have come from Hiljah Ford,” Antoninus said. “What were the conditions there?”

The first man said something in a language incomprehensible to Antoninus.

“What?” he said, this time in Latin. To his troops he called, “Does anybody speak this monkey tongue?”

None of his men volunteered.

Turning back to the merchants, Antoninus said something vulgar about the sexual practices of the Nabataeans’ mothers, and the two bobbed their small, dark heads. He let them go.

The Romans were two miles from the Jordan River when they came upon their first group of Jews.

“Stop,” Antoninus called again.

The Jews stopped. There were five of them, too few to be any kind of threat, to be anything but terrified.

They pressed close to the side of the road, eyes on their own sandaled feet.

“I seek John the Baptizer,” Antoninus said in broken Aramaic.

None of the travelers answered him or even raised his eyes.

Antoninus pointed to one of them. “Seize him,” he said, and two of his men stepped forward to grab his arms and jerk him forward.

“What is your name, Jew?” Antoninus said.

The man looked up at him. One of Antoninus’s men jerked his hood from his head, revealing a dark face and a short black beard. It was Judas of Kerioth.

“What is your name?” Antoninus repeated.

Judas told him.

One of Antoninus’s men pulled the scabbard from beneath Judas’s cloak, jerking it loose from the fabric that held it. “He’s armed, centurion.”

“He is. How very interesting. Are you one of the *sicarii*, Judas of Kerioth?”

Judas shook his head, denying comprehension of the Roman's Latin. "I'm not sick," he said.

~~Antoninus wasn't fooled. "I wasn't inquiring into the state of your health," he said. "I was suggesting you were one of those outlaws who prey even on their own people in the name of misguided patriotism.~~

Judas lifted his shoulders, turning his hands palm-upward in a helpless gesture.

"Speak up, Jew."

"No, centurion," Judas said plaintively. "These are violent times. I am concerned for my safety and for that of my friends."

"Were you at the river earlier today? Did you see the man they call John the Baptizer?"

"The wild man? Yes, I saw him."

"Where is he now?"

Judas shook his head. "Beyond the Jordan? I can't say where."

"You can't, or you won't? In what village does this Baptizer reside?"

Again Judas shook his head. "I don't know."

Antoninus stared at him. Judas kept his eyes on the Roman's feet.

"Let him go," Antoninus said abruptly, and his soldiers flung Judas backwards to the ground.

"March."

They passed other travelers on their way to the river and stopped twice more to question them. No one could tell them anything about the Baptizer, and, when they got to the ford, it was deserted.

†

"Are you hurt?" Judas's four companions were gathered around him, looking down.

"No. I'm not hurt."

Judas held up his hand, and a man named Simon helped him to his feet. "Roman dogs," Judas said. "They'll pay for that one day."

"Judas Sicarii," Simon said.

Judas looked at him irritably. "What?"

"It's what the Roman called you. *Sicarii*."

"*Sicarii* is plural," said one of the others, who knew a little Latin. "It should be Judas Sicarius, Judas the Daggerman. It has a ring to it."

Judas half-smiled. "For a revolutionary," he said.

Simon said, "We can't stand here jabbering; we have to go back. If they arrest the Baptizer, we will lose the rallying point we've placed so much hope on."

"Maybe the arrest would be the trigger needed to rouse the people," Judas said, disagreeing. "John is a popular figure."

"You heard him, though. He is not the Messiah; he is not Elijah; he is not the Prophet. None of them is going to raise his stature any."

"People are wondering about him, though. People are asking. And you saw the reaction to Herod's attempt to arrest him."

"True, true. And consider the questions: Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah, returned from heaven?"

"Yes, we can't ignore this John. If the Romans arrest him, we need to act. We'll make camp outside Jericho tonight. Tomorrow, we'll go back to the Jordan to see if we can find out what happened."

†

Neither Herod Antipas nor Judea's procurator — a position to which a man named Pontius Pilate had recently been appointed, though no one in Judea had yet seen him — lived in Jerusalem. The procurator lived in Caesarea-by-the-Sea, a city built by Herod the Great on the site of a settlement

known previously as the Tower of Straton. It was a Greek city in every respect, complete with agoras, theater, amphitheater, stadium, palace, temple of Caesar, and colossal statues of Augustus Caesar and of Romulus, the mythological founder of Rome. When the procurator visited Jerusalem, which he was compelled to do from time to time, he occupied the Palace of Herod, which had been the primary residence of Herod the Great, the father of Herod Antipas.

Herod Antipas, whose capital city was Tiberias, a city he himself had built on the Sea of Galilee and named for the emperor, visited Jerusalem with roughly the same frequency as Pilate, though Tiberias was not located in either of his territories. On the occasions of his visits, he was limited — unhappily — to the smaller, less elaborate Hasmonaean Palace, which had been the home of the dynasty that had ruled Judea during its brief period of independence some generations ago. The palace was located in the upper city, close to the Xystus Gate of the temple.

Herod arrived there two days after the incident at the Hiljah Ford. Once he had time to rest from his journey, to sleep and to bathe and to dress himself in the royal purple, he sent for the high priest of Jerusalem.

Within the half-hour, the high priest was announced, and Josephus Caiaphas entered the throne room.

“What are you doing here?” Herod asked him snappishly. “I sent for Annas.”

“My apologies, majesty,” Caiaphas said ponderously, giving Herod a slight bow. “I had heard that you sent for the high priest, a title which has been mine now for some years.” He was dressed in the Greek style, with a long, seamless tunic and a cloak with tassels on the four corners of the hem. On his head was the embroidered cap of the high priest.

“I was thinking of Annas.”

Caiaphas was a big man with a thick black beard and a booming voice. He had physical presence, but to many it was a hollow presence. He was dominated by his father-in-law, who had been high priest many years before him. His mind lacked Annas’s subtlety. His will lacked Annas’s resolve.

“Is there a message I could give him for you?” Caiaphas asked.

“Yes. I was attacked by the Baptizer and his followers on the road to Jericho only two days ago.”

“John the Baptizer?”

“Are there others? He incited the crowd against me, and I was lucky to escape with my life.”

“Has he been arrested?”

“Not that I know of. We haven’t been able to find him.”

Caiaphas raised his eyebrows. “He has ceased to preach publicly?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know, and I don’t care. I want him arrested quietly, out of sight of the crowd.”

“Ah,” said Caiaphas. “Very politic of you.”

“Rome replaced my brother Archelaus because he continually riled the people. I won’t make that mistake.”

Caiaphas bent at the waist slightly in acknowledgement of Herod’s wisdom.

“But the point is, I was attacked. Tell Annas that. Tell him I hold him personally responsible.”

“Responsible!” Caiaphas echoed. “How —”

“The Baptizer’s a priest, isn’t he? One of yours.”

“He’s a Levite. He serves no formal role in the priesthood.”

“Perhaps you should give him one. Why has an unsupervised Levite been permitted to develop such a following among the people? It isn’t good, I tell you. It isn’t safe. I alerted the tribune at the garrison in Jericho as to his revolutionary activities, but I expect you to look into it as well.”

“We’ve been looking into it. A delegation returned from questioning him only yesterday.”

“What did they ask him? What did he say?”

“It was inconclusive, your majesty.”

~~“Inconclusive! Tell your people to stay on him until they reach some conclusions. This John preaching apocalypse: I want to know why, what his motives are. When you find out, I expect you report to me.”~~

“Certainly, your majesty. Certainly.”

“It may be that we’ll have to do something to stop him.”

†

When Herod had left the throne room, he found Herodias standing in the hall. Her arms were folded across her chest, and her slippered foot tapped impatiently.

“Why do you appoint that baboon to do your work for you?”

“It would be better if John were dealt with by one of his own.”

“The man is a revolutionary. He precipitated an attack on your own person.”

“No, you precipitated the attack by thoughtlessly ordering his arrest with all those people around him.”

“No one can be permitted to address you as he did. The man must be nailed up and left hanging on a cross in the very place we found him, by the Hiljah Ford.”

Herod’s lip curled. “You’re a blood-thirsty wench,” he said.

She stepped against him, looking up. “But an attractive one?”

His smile widened.

CHAPTER 3

The baptism of Jesus occurred in late summer of the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius. It was in the fall of the same year that he, along with his family and friends, attended a wedding in Cana of Galilee.

There weren't enough chairs at the feast that followed, and Jesus was seated on the limestone floor with his kinsmen and two of his new Judean friends. The Judeans seemed ill at ease. Neither knew the bride, the bridegroom, or, for that matter, anyone in Cana.

Everyone was dressed in his wedding-day finest. Eating and drinking, people were sitting in the windows as well as on the floor; people were standing; people were sitting on the outside steps leading up to the roof.

It was Judas of Kerioth who first noticed Jesus' mother standing by, waiting for an opportunity to interrupt. She was wearing a blue cloak, as if to go outside, though it was only the middle of the afternoon and too early to be leaving. Judas touched Jesus' arm and gestured toward her. "I think your mother wants a word with you," he said. His glance went briefly to Jesus' kinsmen—James and Joseph and Simon and Judas—before returning to Jesus.

Jesus looked up, and he smiled when he saw her. "Yes, mother?"

"Come outside with me a moment. There's something I need to talk to you about."

"Just me, or James and the others as well?"

"Just you."

Jesus got to his feet, dusting off his knees and the seat of his cloak. "I'll be back," he said to Judas of Kerioth and his friend Simon.

When he was gone, the Judeans sat looking at Jesus' brothers, no one saying anything. Finally Jesus' brother James broke the silence. "What did Simon call you?" he said to Judas of Kerioth. "Sicarius?"

Judas laughed. "A joke," he said. "A couple of months ago, some Roman soldiers stopped us on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem."

"And they accused you of being one of the sicarii?" James glanced at the others.

"Why does a Roman dog say anything?" Judas said it too loudly, and his words attracted the attention of several nearby. They looked at him, and, when he looked up, looked away.

It was Carmeli's wedding day, not a time for inflammatory discussions of the political situation.

†

It was late fall, and the air outside, though muggy, was rather cold. A gust of wind swept up a cloud of dust from the dirt street and swept it toward them. Ducking his head, Jesus pulled his cloak more tightly about his throat.

"Yes, mother, what is it?"

The crowd on the steps had thinned, everyone crowding back into the house as the day cooled.

"They've run out of wine," Mary said.

"Here at the feast?"

"I overheard the wedding steward telling Miriam."

Miriam was the mother of the bride. Jesus glanced toward the door, where three young men stood watching them, just out of earshot. "Who are they?" he said. "Are they with you?"

"The steward's helpers."

"Ah. And you'd like me to help carry more wine from Naphtali's house." Naphtali was the groom. "I'd be happy to."

“He doesn’t have any to carry,” said Mary. “All he had was brought last week.”

“How about his parents?”

“Miriam would die.”

Jesus smiled at her. “What then?” he said. “Should I go out to the vineyard and start picking grapes?”

“I don’t know what you should do. Something.”

Jesus looked at the sun, already low in the sky. “It’s been quite a celebration,” he said. “I could tell everyone we’ve imposed long enough on the hospitality of our host and hostess. I think everyone would leave cheerfully enough.”

“Miriam —”

“Would die,” Jesus said.

“I’m being serious.”

“I know you are.” Smiling fondly, he reached out to touch her cheek.

“You’ll help her?”

“I —”

One of the men who had been sitting in the window of Miriam’s mud-brick house fell backward into the dirt, and cloud of dust rose up around him.

Jesus looked from him — lying on his back with his legs sticking straight up, resting against the side of the house — to his mother. He looked back again. The man wasn’t moving.

“Just a moment,” Jesus said to his mother. He walked over to the man and saw that his eyes were open.

“Are you all right, Eloy?” Jesus asked, looking down.

Eloy blinked up at him. The beard around his mouth was stained dark with wine, and he still held his cup tightly in his hand.

He belched. “Hello, Jesus,” he said.

“Hello, Eloy.”

“Nice party.” He seemed peaceful enough, obviously unhurt, and Jesus turned back to his mother.

“It would be hard to argue that people hadn’t had more than enough to drink,” he said.

Her smile was wry. “I’m going to leave it in your hands,” she said.

“I appreciate your confidence in me, but —”

Mary beckoned to the servants, still hovering in the doorway. “I know you’ll think of something,” she said to Jesus as they approached. “Make it rain wine, if you have to.”

He smiled suddenly. A professed belief in his miraculous powers was something of a joke his family had begun to affect sometime after the death of his father Joseph.

“Would you prefer white or red?” he said.

She touched his arm by way of acknowledging the joke — and dismissing it — then stepped away. The servants had approached and stood looking at him. All three were young, their beards as yet consisting of no more than the wispy beginnings of a moustache and sideburns.

Jesus looked back at them, still smiling as he reflected.

“Well?” one of the boys said. “What shall we do?”

“I’m thinking. My name is Jesus, of Nazareth. Are all of you from around here?”

“Yes,” said the boy. “He’s Oren. He’s Joel. I’m James, the son of Alpheus. Do you know my father? He keeps the synagogue here.”

“I do know him. He’s a fine man.”

“So where are we going to get more wine, sir?” Joel asked.

“Would we have any containers for the wine if we had any?”

“Wouldn’t any wine we found already be in containers?” Joel asked.

Jesus thought of rain falling from the sky. "I don't know. Do you know where we can find containers full of wine?"

"No, sir."

Jesus looked at the others. "Either of you know where there's wine to be had in Cana?"

Both of them shook their heads.

"Then I guess we ought to start with containers," Jesus said.

James took his arm, drawing him to where he could see through the doorway into the house. "Should we move the stone jars along that wall?" the boy said.

"That's the wine that's left?" Jesus asked him. The jars were of a type generally used for water. Jews who observed the law strictly, as the parents of the bride did, used a lot of water for ceremonial washing, and the jars for the water were huge.

"No. That's the wine that's been drunk."

"Ah."

"All those jars are empty now."

Jesus looked thoughtful. "Why don't the three of you go in and get them?" he said. "Bring them out here, all six of them."

"Okay."

It took them two trips apiece to get them all. The jars were heavy, even when empty, and the three boys were breathing hard after their effort.

"I think we could use some help with this." Jesus went to the door and beckoned for Simon and Judas to join them. Simon got to his feet. He was tall, with hollow cheeks, a dark, jutting beard and a prominent Adam's apple. Judas was shorter and unusually dark, his hair and closely trimmed beard almost blue-black in hue.

"We need to get these six jars down to the well there," Jesus said to them, pointing toward the center of town. Because the water table level was low in Cana, few individual households could afford to dig a well to the required depth. They relied instead on the town well for their water. "Can each of you carry a jar?"

"Why?" Judas said.

"They're empty and need refilling." Jesus lifted one of the jars himself, hoisting it onto a shoulder. Judas looked at Simon, who shrugged and shouldered one of the others. Judas picked up one, as did each of the boys. The six of them carried the jars down the dirt road to the well in the center of town.

"We're going to fill all these?" Judas asked as they were setting them down. "It's going to take a while."

"Then it will take a while. We can take turns with the bucket."

"I don't get it," said James, the son of Alpheus. "Are we going to serve water to the wedding guests when they're expecting wine?"

Simon said, "They are out of wine then. I thought they were running low."

Judas peered into one of the jars. When he tilted it, a little wine puddled at one side. "I can understand the urge to water the wine, but I think you've waited a little late for it."

"They'll know, sir," James said. "They'll know."

Jesus had already pulled the bucket from the well three times, each time dumping its contents into the jar nearest him.

"It doesn't even look like wine," Judas said, rocking the stone jar to swirl its contents.

"It might work," Simon said. "The wedding guests have emptied all six of these jars. It has to have dulled their palates."

"Nobody can be so drunk as to mistake water for wine."

"This is taking too long," Jesus said. He was working at the knot that held the rope to the bucket.

"We'll lower the jars themselves down. There're six of us. We'll be able to get them back up."

He removed the bar that secured the jar's lid and ran the rope through the holes. "See?" he said, tying the knot. "A great big bucket."

"I'll say," Simon said.

"Help me lower it. We don't want to chip it against the sides of the well."

Simon helped him play out the rope.

"Okay, heave," Jesus said. His clenched teeth showed white through his beard, and the cords stood out in his neck. Simon reached down to grip the rope for the next pull. As he took the weight of the jar, his face turned red and his neck puffed out like a blowfish. Jesus reached down to grip the rope.

When they had the jar up, Jesus and Simon stood panting, their hands braced on their knees.

"You're stronger than you look," Simon said.

"So are you." Jesus looked at James. "Put the lid back on," he said between breaths. "The three of you waddle it back down the street to Miriam's house, if you can."

"Sure. But do what with it, sir?"

"Present it to the steward."

"We can't do that."

Jesus smiled. "Just don't tell him where it came from."

The three boys looked at him.

"Go on, now. If they're already out of wine, they can't stall much longer."

James's face was unhappy. He shook his head, then squatted beside the jar. Joel and Oren helped him lift it. When they got back, Jesus and Judas and Simon had two more jars filled. The boys took one. Judas and Simon took the other. When they got back, Jesus was standing at the edge of the well, holding onto the rope.

"You don't think maybe three jars are enough?"

"Ah, Judas. When I do a job, I like to do it right."

Simon stepped up next to Jesus and looked down into the well, sighting along the rope.

"I thought maybe I could pull it out by myself," Jesus said. "I was wrong."

Simon and then Judas both grabbed hold.

When they were done, and all six of the jars were again sitting along the wall inside the front room of Miriam's house, Jesus filled his cup with the new wine and drained it. "Ah, that's good. Want some?"

Judas looked at him sourly. "I don't think so," he said.

"Simon?"

Simon started to shake his head, the gesture quick and birdlike, then he shrugged and held out his cup. Jesus filled it with the ladle.

Simon looked down into his cup for a moment, his mouth pursed doubtfully. "This doesn't look like what we put in it."

"Taste it."

Simon took a sip obediently. He looked up at Jesus, his eyebrows climbing his forehead and his black beard bristling. He took another sip, then another, then tilted his head back and drained his cup, his knotty Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

"It's wonderful," he said, holding out his cup again. "Wonderful. Judas, try it."

But Judas rolled his eyes in evident exasperation and turned away. "If I'd wanted water, I'd have gotten my fill of it while we were out at the well."

Simon's eyes were fixed on Jesus, his expression a mixture of wonder and incredulity. "How do you do it?" he said. His cup was in his hand, half-extended in front of him.

"Still thirsty?" Jesus dipped the ladle in the stone jar and filled Simon's cup for the second time.

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