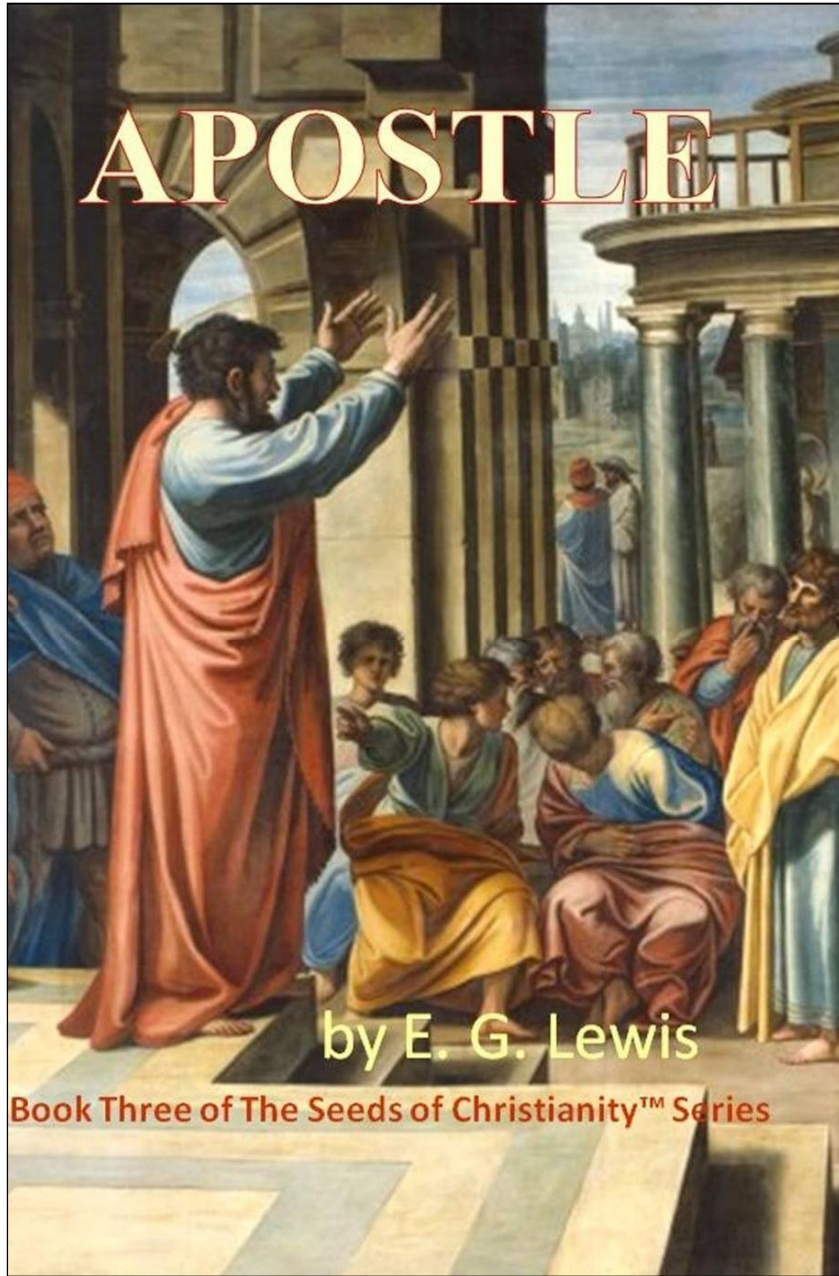


# APOSTLE

by E. G. Lewis

Book Three of The Seeds of Christianity™ Series



## **Historic Personages Mentioned in APOSTLE**

Name, Biblical Reference, Modern Equivalent

### **Yeshua's Family**

Yeshua: Iesus...Jesus

Mother: Miryam...Mary

Foster Father: Yosef...Joseph

### **Others**

Claudius: Roman Emperor AD 41 — AD 54

Gamali'el: Teacher and Head of the Sanhedrin

Ignatius: Third Bishop of Antioch after Peter & Evodius

Lazarus of Bethany: Brother of Mary and Martha

Loukas: The Evangelist Luke

Martha of Bethany: Sister of Mary and Lazarus

Mary of Bethany: Sister of Martha and Lazarus

Mattithayu bar Alpheus: Apostle and Evangelist, Matthew, Levi

Miriam of Magdala: Mary Magdalene

Nero: Roman Emperor AD 54 — AD 68

Shau'ol/Paulus: Saul...the Apostle Paul

Simeon the Cananaean: Apostle Simon Zelotes

Simon Petros: the Apostle Simon Peter

Stefanos: First Christian martyr, Stephen

Thomas: Apostle, Didymus, the twin, Doubting Thomas

Yaakov the Just: James, first Bishop of Jerusalem

Yohan bar Zebedee: the Beloved disciple and Apostle, John

Yohan Marcus: Evangelist and companion of Peter, John Mark

Yosef Barnabus: Apostle and companion of Paul, Barnabus

Yosef of Arimathea: Secret disciple of Jesus

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**Fictional Characters in APOSTLE**  
Name, Meaning, Modern Equivalent

**Rivkah's Family**

Rivkah: A snare...Rebecca  
Shemu'el: God has Heard...Samuel  
Their Oldest Son: Yo'el...Yahweh is God...Joel  
Yo'el's wife: Tzipporah...Bird...Zipporah  
Grandson: Shemu'el...God has Heard...Samuel  
Their Oldest Daughter: Hadassah...Myrtle Tree...Esther  
Hadassah's Husband: Hebel...Breath...Abel  
Granddaughter: Sarit...Lady...Sarah  
Grandson: David...Beloved...Israel's Greatest King  
Their Middle Son: Yaakov...Supplanter...Jacob/James  
Their Youngest Daughter: Channah...Grace...Hannah  
Channah's Husband: Darios...Good  
Grandson: Agapitos...Beloved  
Their Youngest Son...Yudah...Praise...Judah/Jude

**Others**

Atticus: Shemu'el's friend: ...of Athens...famous Roman name  
Marcelina: Atticus' Wife: ...dedicate to Mars...Marcella  
Lysandros: Tryphena's second son...Released...Lysander  
Moshe: Tryphena's first son...Deliverer...Moses  
Pavlos: The Autistic Giant...Small  
Phaidra: The Midwife...Bright  
Tryphena: Distraught Mother...Delicate

## ~ 1 ~

*“Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb”*  
—Isaiah 49:15

Cloaked in the anonymity of the commonplace, the young woman moved through the market stalls unnoticed. She might have been a housewife hurrying home to start the evening meal, a handmaiden running an errand, or a tortured soul seeking deliverance.

Her name was Tryphena, not that anyone cared. Even the youths who loitered in the forum ogling women as they passed paid her no attention.

She kept her veil tugged forward, shielding her face from passersby as she threaded her way in between the other shoppers. The coarse, homespun cloth not only covered her bruised cheek and swollen left eye, it provided a welcome refuge from the world at large, a place where she could be alone with her secret sorrows.

The market basket dangling over her left arm rocked back and forth in time with her quick steps. Woven of water reeds, these soft but sturdy baskets had high sides and big loop handles. They were designed for ease of carrying and made large enough to accommodate even the bulkiest of items whether fresh melons or bolts of cloth. Most women owned several and habitually looped one over their arm whenever they left the house.

She reached the entrance to the compound of the *Christianoi* and paused for the first time since leaving home. The reality of what she was about to do sent shivers dancing along her spine. She pawed the ground like a nervous mare, swiveling her head

and casting furtive glances over her shoulders.

Seeing no one, she stepped forward and grabbed the double-twisted balusters of the ornate wrought iron gate. She pressed her face between the uprights and stared up the curving drive like a prisoner peering through the bars of their cell.

*Don't linger.*

Each second's hesitation increased the likelihood of someone seeing her. They would surely recognize her as the stranger she was. And knowing she didn't belong there, they would ask questions...questions she did not wish to answer.

Despite her fear of discovery, she dallied. Her fingers played along the hammered iron, stopping here and there to examine minute imperfections in the metal's surface. An inner voice reminded her of why she'd come, yet her heart resisted.

She stared at the expansive white building at the end of the curving drive, wishing with all her heart she could turn and run away, pretend she had never seen this place. Instead, she gritted her teeth and flung open the gate. An instant later she made a frantic dash up the drive.

Curving rows of privet bounded the perimeter of the upper drive on both sides. Old and dense, the hedge had grown tall. A small grove of lilacs grew behind it on one side. Their overhanging branches created a cave-like den.

*A perfect hiding place.*

She dropped to her knees on the soft earth, heart pounding and gasping for breath. It took her several minutes to gather her wits. She took a deep breath, blotted her sweaty forehead, and separated the hedge for her first close-up look. The limestone facade on the front of the building glowed ruddy orange in the dying rays of the setting sun. As darkness came, she crouched in the shadows with the sweet fragrance of lilac swirling around her and listened to the laughter and good-byes of people exiting the building.

Though she couldn't know it at the time, the scent of lilacs would bring tears to her eyes ever after. For her their sweet smell

and the bitter pain of this evening would be forever intertwined.

A large light hung beside the door. She watched an older woman step out onto the patio with a taper in hand. Glancing back through the open door, she called, "I will get the light as I leave." She lifted the bulbous glass globe and touched her taper to the wick. The light flickered into brightness as she headed up a rising gravel path and out of sight. Meanwhile, inside the building someone bolted the door and drew a curtain.

Tryphena breathed a sigh of relief. Despite her worst fears, so far everything had gone according to plan. Moonlight filtered through the lilac branches casting a small circle of light beside her. Turing into the light, she pulled her cloak aside and smiled at the tiny newborn slumbering there.

The baby stirred when she caressed his cheek. As much as she longed to, she refused to speak the name she'd picked out for him. It hurt too much to say it aloud and besides, they would give him a new one anyway. She slipped the handles of the market basket off of her arm and sat it on the ground. Reaching in, she fluffed and adjusted the blanket in the bottom.

"It's time," she said to herself as much as to the baby. She slid a hand into the baby's sling and scooped his little body into her arms. His fingers instinctively closed around her finger. She studied his tiny pink fingertips in the moonlight and bit her lip.

*Why couldn't the rest of him have been as perfect?*

She stared down at his cherubic face, sniffed, and whispered, "Will you forgive me for this someday? I would not be doing this if your father had not insisted. Please do not hate him for making me do it. He is a good man in his own way. Perhaps you will understand when you are grown."

Her racking sobs caused her to shake so badly she feared he'd wake. She swallowed hard struggling to regain control of her runaway emotions. "He...he told me he would wring your neck with his bare hands. I promised him I would take you to the riverbank and pitch you into the water." She brushed back a few stray hairs from his forehead. "But I lied. I could never do that to you."

She dried her eyes on her veil and sniffed. "So I brought you here instead. I have heard these people take in...in" she intended to say *unwanted*, but her trembling lips refused to say the word. "They, they take in babies," she stammered.

"They are good people...caring people. Everyone says so. They will find someone who will love you just the way you are."

She re-fluffed the blanket, delaying their parting a few more precious seconds. There was nothing left now except to place the baby into the basket. And so she did.

The door of the compound seemed a thousand miles away. Throwing her shoulders back, she forced herself to grip the handles and make the slow, agonizing walk to the door. Sitting the basket beside the door, she knelt on the flagstones and peered in at her infant son a final time.

She kissed her fingertips and touched them to his lips. "The only way I can save you is to relinquish you. I will never forget you. Forgive me; please forgive me."

She rose into a crouch, made a fist and pounded on the door with all her might. Then, sobbing uncontrollably, she raced back across the patio and into the bushes from which she'd come.

Rivkah was staying at the compound that night to safeguard the foundlings as they slept. Her head jerked up at the sound of knocking. She rose and glanced down the hall, waiting to see if whoever it was would rap again. When a few moments passed in silence, she picked up a lamp and headed out to investigate.

The young woman huddled in the bushes, chewing her finger as she watched the glow of Rivkah's lamp move along the row of windows. One-by-one it passed them, getting ever closer.

Rivkah unlatched the door and opened it a crack. Not seeing anyone, she opened it wider and stepped out. She noticed the market basket and knelt beside it. She separated the handles and peeked in.

The infant stirred and began to whimper.

Her son's cries pierced Tryphena's heart like a knife. She hugged herself and quaked in the darkness, mentally willing

Rivkah to reach in and pick him up.

“Hello, little one. Have you come looking for a home?” Rivkah lifted the boy out of the basket. Grabbing the blanket, she wrapped it around the fussing baby and nestled him to her bosom.

Tryphena waited in the bushes until Rivkah went back inside. Then she rose to her feet and blindly ran down the drive without ever looking back.

## ~ 2 ~

*“...she took for him a basket made of bulrushes...and she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds at the river's brink. And his sister stood at a distance, to know what would be done to him...When she opened it she saw the child; and lo, the babe was crying. She took pity on him...”*  
Exodus 2:3-6

**P**riskilla watched out her window until she saw Shemu’el leave. As soon as he disappeared under the aqueduct, she scuttled across the narrow yard separating the two homes and rapped at the door.

“Come in,” Rivkah called from inside the house.

Priskilla found her with her back to the door. Bent forward at the waist, she was busy working with something on the bed.

“How are you this fine morning, Priskilla?”

The old woman hunched her shoulders and lowered her brow. “How could you know it was me?” Her lips pursed as her eyes darted about the room.

Rivkah chuckled. “When my children were young they sometimes imagined I had eyes in the back of my head. In truth, I recognized you from the limp in your footfalls. Have you come seeking more of Shemu’el’s pain medication?”

Priskilla frowned and rubbed her eyes. “Does he also make a sleeping potion? I hardly slept a wink last night. Making my bones creak and ache no longer satisfies that daemon Geras. Now he has summoned a hoard of Algos to torment me. They know my inner weaknesses. Through all my years of marriage I was never able to conceive and the beasts tormented me all night long with the sound of a child wailing in the darkness.”

Rivkah scoffed. “The Algos cannot torment you any more than Geras afflicts you with aches and pains. The only place these daemons exist is in your imagination.” She smiled and swung a blanket-wrapped bundle into her arms. “There, all done.”

Priskilla recoiled in shock when she saw the baby in Rivkah's arms. "Ah-ha!" She wagged a boney finger at the child. "You are right. There is the one who disturbed my rest."

"Moshe's little tummy bothered him last night." Rivkah held the child out to her. "Would you like to hold him?"

Priskilla approached, arms extended and a smile on her face. She came to a sudden halt when Moshe kicked the blanket aside. Gasping in fear, she raised her arms protectively and retreated. "How did you come by this...this thing?"

"He is *not* a thing. Moshe is creature of God, a beautiful baby boy. He is a foundling and does not have a home yet. We are keeping him with us temporarily."

"Moshe...Moshe?" Priskilla moved her tongue around as if the name left a bad taste in her mouth. "What kind of a name is *Moshe*?"

"A very nice one. Moshe was a great leader who freed the Jews from slavery in Egypt." She grinned. "But that is not why I named him that. You see, when the original Moshe was an infant his mother placed him in a reed basket and set him afloat in the Nile River."

"Did he have infirmities as well?"

"No, he was very healthy."

"Some mother she was. The child could have drowned."

"But he didn't. Instead he was adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter and became a prince of Egypt." She glanced down at the infant in her arm. "And this little Moshe came to us the same way. A few evenings ago I spent the night at the compound of the *Christianoi*. I answered a knock at the door and there he was in a reed market basket."

"Whoever left him visited a curse upon you." She gave the child a caustic sidelong glance. "Who could blame them for wishing to be rid of such a thing?"

Rivkah caught the boy's crippled foot in her hand and took a step closer. "A twisted foot is no big matter. See for yourself."

Priskilla retreated, flapping her hands to shoo her away. "I will not touch it. Children like that are bad omens, he is a *gryllos*. Such mixlings should be exposed to the elements and left to die."

"Perhaps his mother loved him too much to do that."

A shiver rippled through Priskilla. "Or...or he has some special power which makes him immune to mortal threats," she whispered.

"Your superstitions will be the death of you. He is no different than you or I."

"I am telling you he should have been exposed. Then, rather than being in this room with us today, he would have become food for the dogs and other wild creatures."

Rivkah grimaced. "What a horrid thought. We work hard to prevent that from happening. Members of our *ekklesia* visit the necropolis searching for babies left there to die. Pavlos walks the banks of the Orentes nearly every day, straining for the cries of abandoned infants."

Priskilla clamped her hands over her ears. "Do not even mention the name of that giant in my presence. He was sent here by Hades, the abductor of Persephone. The daemons of the underworld stole his tongue before unleashing him to walk among us."

Despite her best efforts, Rivkah couldn't stifle her chuckles. "Pavlos has a tongue just like anyone else."

Priskilla's hand quaked when she pointed at the bundle in Rivkah's arms. "This is not right. You will call a curse down upon us all."

"Nonsense. One of Moshe's feet is deformed, that is all.

"He can never run and play and the other boys will shun him."

"Moshe is a child made in the image of God. Whether he can run is not the question. For reasons beyond our knowing, this is the way God made him and we will love him just the way he is."

Priskilla continued shaking her head. "I do not like this

right next door to me. I do not like it at all. A civilized society does not tolerate such imperfections. He will be a burden no matter where he goes.”

Moshe began to whimper and Rivkah snuggled him closer, hugging him to her bosom. “Why must you project only failure for his future?”

“He is lame and will always require assistance. Who will care for him?”

“A family will adopt him and he will become their child.” She brushed aside downy hairs and kissed Moshe’s forehead. “If they need help, other *Christianoi* will come to their aid.”

“So what they say of the *Christianoi* is true. You are fools who share all you have with others.”

“If we are fools, we are fools for God. As for sharing, we share everything that everyone else keeps separate and keep separate the one thing that everyone else shares.”

Priskilla arched an eyebrow. “I do not understand.”

“Ask a Roman for his cloak or a pair of sandals and he will spurn you. Yet this same man cares not at all that his wife indulges in countless affairs and he happily seeks pleasure in the arms of another man’s wife. They value the things of the body, but care little for the things of the soul.”

The old crone sniffed the air. “Do I smell bread and...and herbal tea?”

Rivkah slipped Moshe into a carrying sack and slid the strap over her head and across her back. “It is left over from Shemu’el’s breakfast.”

She pulled back a chair back at the table for Priskilla and placed a basket of bread and cup of steaming tea before her. “Be careful, it is hot.”

The old woman wrapped both hands around the mug. Lowering her head, she breathed in the tea’s ginger-minty aroma.

Rivkah walked her fingers across the woman’s shoulder as she passed behind her. “Does the warmth of the cup ease the pain

in your fingers?”

Priskilla nodded and continued sniffing the tea.

“It is made with ginger, rose hips and mint. I can give you some to take home if you like.” Rivkah leaned over her shoulder and whispered, “I stirred in some *turcumin* for your joints, but do not let Shemu’el know.” She giggled. “He gets upset when I borrow from his *pharmacia*. Oh, and *turcumin* can be bitter, so I sweetened your tea with carob syrup.”

Rivkah sat opposite her. She took Moshe’s twisted foot in her hand and began to massage his lower leg and flex his ankle.

“Do you fondle him like that to taunt me?” Priskilla asked through a mouthful of bread. “It must surely hurt, why does he not cry in pain?”

“It does not hurt. Look at him grin; it feels good. The tragedy is that his parents abandoned him because of his foot and the problem will go away.”

“Will the rubbing work one of those miraculous healings you always talk about?”

Rivkah smiled. “In a way.” She put her fingers on each side of Moshe’s lower leg, sliding them along as she spoke. “Shemu’el said we have tendons running down both sides of our leg. In Moshe’s case, the one here on the inside is shorter than the one on the outside.”

She dangled her hand in the air then folded her wrist at a right angle. “See, this is the way Moshe’s ankle is.” Her hand returned to boy’s foot. “If I stretch and flex it, the shorter tendon will gradually lengthen to match the other. In a few days, once my massaging has made his ankle flexible, Shemu’el will place a special binding on his foot to draw it back into place. Moshe will wear it for a month or two. Then a cobbler will make a little boot for him to wear. By the time he’s ready to walk, his ankle will be straight and strong.”

Moshe dozed while Priskilla ate.

Rivkah began putting away dishes. “I find it strange that you condemn Pavlos because he does not speak, yet think

nothing of the Emperor Claudius' problems," she said over her shoulder.

"How dare you even imply the Emperor has something akin to the giant's curse." Priskilla refused to utter Pavlos' name even in anger. "There can be nothing wrong with the divine Claudius. His words are like gold."

Rivkah spun to face her. "Let me tell you a few things about your great Claudius. Our friend, Atticus, has traveled to Rome and interacted with the Emperor on more than one occasion. Claudius was sickly as a child and shunned by his playmates. He has an illness which causes his limbs to shake and quiver. He was also born with a foot like Moshe's and still walks with a limp. He speaks with great difficulty, stuttering and sometimes garbling his words. Claudius is ridiculed behind his back and called an *imbecilius*."

Priskilla appeared stunned. She sank into the chair, muttering, "Claudius a babbling cripple? This cannot be."

"I would not lie to you. Despite these handicaps, even his severest critics acknowledge Claudius' keen mind and superior intelligence. And he directs the Empire despite these handicaps."

Priskilla shook her head. "The Senate and the Legions would never follow such a person."

"It was the Praetorian Guard who chose Claudius to be Emperor. His predecessor, Gaius, who was called Caligula, suffered from *morbis caducus*."

Priskilla gasped. "Gaius had the falling sickness?"

"Yes. His arms and legs shook uncontrollably. His eyes rolled back and he lapsed into unconsciousness. The great General, Julius Caesar, suffered from it as well."

Rivkah rested her hands on the table and leaned forward. "We must not judge a package by its wrappings. Man sees only the external, while what really matters lies hidden within. God alone sees into the heart and mind and judges each person accordingly."

"I know nothing of this god you so often refer to."

Rivkah picked up a knife from the counter. “If I lopped off one of your fingers, would you still be Priskilla?”

The old woman reared back, wrapping one hand protectively over the other. “Of course, I would. Finger or no finger, I would remain who I am.”

“Suppose instead of a finger, I took an entire arm? Soldiers sometimes suffer horrible injuries in battle. Does that mean they should be denied treatment? Though maimed for life, many survive.”

Priskilla had no comeback.

“You have often lamented that your womb was never opened.” Rivkah pointed to the sleeping infant bundled across her chest. “You wish to have had a child. Well, here is a child who needs a mother. When you were younger, a child such as this could have given you what you so desperately wanted and you could have offered him the one thing he lacked.”

Rivkah turned so Priskilla could view Moshe as he dozed.

Instead of looking away, she studied the child’s features and smiled.

“How can this irony escape you?” Rivkah asked. “Every night women weep in the dark because they cannot have a child. Yet every day children are thrown aside in broad daylight and left to die. Does this make sense? If people ache with hunger, they are given food. How is this any different?”

## ~ 3 ~

*“Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns...”* — Matthew 6:26

A rooster crowed in the back yard, welcoming the first light of the new day. Shemu’el rolled in the bed. He stretched out his arm and patted the cool sheets searching for Rivkah. The realization that she’d already risen brought a bitter sigh of disappointment.

He dug an elbow into the bed and leveraged himself up. His feet thumped onto the floor and he sat on the edge of the bed staring at the floor as he prayed.

The sound of movement in the bedroom drew Rivkah from the kitchen. She glanced around the corner at Shemu’el on the side of bed.

She removed a flowered robe from a hook on the wall and pulled it over her gown. “You tossed and turned all night. What can I do?”

He answered with indeterminate muttering.

Sitting beside him, she laid an arm across his shoulder. “He hasn’t even arrived yet. Why take such a defensive posture when you have no idea why he is coming?”

Shemu’el lifted a crumpled scroll from a small bedside table and waved it in the air. “The tone of this letter tells me all I need to know. Whatever his mission, he is not coming to congratulate me.”

“Things will look better when you have had something to eat.”

He slammed the scroll back down and raked his fingers through his hair.

“Enough of this pity.” She snatched one of Shemu’el’s hands off of his knee. Turning her back, she swung her arm around and caught his other wrist. She leaned forward like a draft animal pulling against a heavy load and, with an

exaggerated grunt, heaved him up off the bed and onto his feet.

Once she had him on his feet, she picked up the pace, leading him across the bedroom, down the hall, and into the kitchen. She released his hands as they passed the table and continued on to the small cook top.

Fresh loaves waited in a basket on the counter and water bubbled in a pot on the stove. She tossed a handful of dried apple peels into a kettle and filled it with boiling water. While the tea steeped, she put out plates, mugs, honey and yoghurt.

She moved around the table singing, "This is the day which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." When she had the food on, Rivkah brought the kettle and sat it in the center of the table. "Rejoice, even when you do not feel like rejoicing," she said with a wink as she sat down.



**P**avlos jogged along the gravel path casting worrisome glances over his shoulder. He was going to be late and nothing he could do would change it. He hoped his friends waited for him.

He'd lolled in bed daydreaming until he heard the shrill tones of *buccina* at the Citadel playing the familiar strains of *Dia Anna's Hymn*. The morning rouse for the Legions snapped him back to reality and he bolted upright the instant he heard the bugling. He scrambled out of bed, but no amount of rushing would regain lost time.

An arc of the rising sun sparkled through the gap in Mt. Silpius by the time Pavlos dressed and gathered his bread. He'd left the small cottage he shared with his mother, Zeeta, on a run and hadn't slowed since.

Pavlos' long shadow skimmed over the dew-dampened lawn as he sprinted up the gravel path. But a man Pavlos' size cast a sizeable shadow even at high noon. The mute giant measured a full seven Roman feet and weighed in at 366 *libras*.

The path steepened. Neat rows of grapevines climbed the hill beside him. Trellised on wires anchored to posts set in the

round, the vines were heavy with bunches of ripening fruit. His breath came in labored gasps and, despite the morning's coolness, drops of sweat beaded on his forehead.

The orchard came into view as Pavlos crested the hill. Set on a plateau, it provided a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. Flocks of sheep, at this distance hardly more than moving puffs of wool, grazed the green hillsides across the valley.

In his rush to get out of the house, Pavlos had neglected to put on a cloak. The wind rippled his sweat-dampened tunic sending shivers up his spine. He ignored the discomfort and raced along the familiar path with loaves snatched from the kitchen table clutched to his chest.

*Must hurry*, he thought between breaths. *Must hurry*.

His friends would be expecting him and he didn't want to disappoint them.

When he reached the old fig tree, Pavlos allowed himself a single deep, cleansing breath. Then he folded his enormous frame and squirmed in under its canopy of branches. Effectively hidden, he leaned back against its twin trunks and pulled his knees up close to his body. He took one of the loaves, crumbled it into his hand, and rested his flattened palm atop his knee. He sat perfectly still, scarcely breathing as he waited.

He could have selected other trees from the orchard. Any of them would have served his purpose, but this was the one he preferred. Sometime in the distant past, a bolt of lightning cleaved his tree in two. Rather than succumb to its fate, against all odds the tree healed itself and survived. A new creation, a joined pair of gnarled trunks, now stretched into the sky where a single one had once been.

*Thanksgiving*.

A feeling of holy gratitude welled up inside him and filled his being. Pavlos studied the helter-skelter branches surrounding and sheltering him. He and the tree had much in common. Both of them, he and the tree, had been scarred by tragedy yet, against overwhelming odds, they'd survived. He'd been turned out on the

river bank to starve, but hadn't. Instead he clung to life, growing to maturity, eating what he could find, taking handouts when they were offered, stealing when they weren't.

A rustling in the branches alerted him to his friends' arrival. As usual, the wrens were there first. They landed on his forearm and walked across his big palm to feast on the breadcrumbs he held. In no time the wrens were joined by chickadees, nuthatches and yellow buntings. The tiny birds came in groups, ate their fill, and left. New arrivals replaced them and, as the crumbs were depleted, Pavlos reached for another loaf and then another.

He continued converting loaves into crumbs until only a single one remained. By then the small birds had all departed. Pavlos turned his eyes to a place where light came in. This break in the foliage created a natural opening...a small doorway of sorts. A few moments later a single waxwing crawled through.

Pavlos flattened the back of his hand against the soil in front of the bird and it laboriously made its way into his palm. Though it could fly as well as any of its cousins, the waxwing's crippled food made walking difficult.

Pavlos scooped the bird into his hand. It nestled between his big fingers and feasted on the crumbs he'd prepared for it. Large and grey, it had bright yellow tips on its tail feathers, a white stripe on its wings, and a deep rust colored topknot above its brown eyes. When his crippled friend finished, Pavlos fanned aside the curtain of branches and extended his arm. The bird spread its wings, rose into the air, and gracefully swooped across the meadow.

*Approaching footsteps.*

"Pavlos, your morning meal is ready," Zeeta said.

The big man under the fig tree froze.

Zeeta's arrival brought an unnatural stillness to the orchard. The birds quit chirping, even the wind seemed to stop blowing. She put her hands on hips. "You cannot fool your mother. I know you are under that tree, Pavlos." She waited. "Do not pretend you cannot hear me."

There was a stirring under the fig tree. Several of its low hanging branches quivered. An instant later the branches parted and Pavlos looked up at his mother with a sheepish grin.

Zeeta did her best to pretend she was angry, but her ruse fell flat. She could never be angry with him and both of them knew it.

Pavlos crawled out. Rising to his full height, he stretched and yawned.

“How were your feathered friends this morning? They must feel better now that they have eaten.” She reached up and took his hand. “What about you, my son? Are you also hungry?”

A guilty look washed over Pavlos’ face.

She gave his arm a playful tug. “Yes, I noticed the loaves you took.” She cocked her head and grinned up at him. “It took a few days, but I have figured out why my bread disappears while I am sleeping.”

Pavlos appeared not to hear.

She pressed his big hand to her lips. “It is all right. I know you take it for your friends. The good news is I baked fresh loaves for you. If we hurry, they will still be warm when we get home,” she whispered as they walked down the hill together.



After bowing her head in prayer, Rivkah filled Shemu’el’s cup with the fragrant brew. “The things mentioned in the letter took place while Simon Petros was *Episkopos*.”

Shemu’el grabbed a freshly baked loaf from the basket and tore it in two. Curling the thin bread between his thumb and forefinger, he used it to scoop up a glob of yoghurt. He folded the bread over on itself, spreading the yoghurt, and took a bite. “I have been here in Antioch since the beginning,” he said as he chewed. “Simon and I sweated side by side digging out the floor of that cave to make it our first sanctuary. It makes little difference to those in Jerusalem whether I acted on my own, or in

Simon Petros' stead."

Rivkah's fingers slid across Shemu'el's neck and shoulders massaging his tense muscles with long, soothing strokes. "If you ask me, they have no right. You were properly elected and ordained by Simon Petros. No one can question your authority as Bishop."

"Truly spoken, but you will not be the one sitting on the judgment seat."

*Why now, Lord?* Rivkah wondered. *Is this your way of testing him?*

"I am pledged to maintain the *orthodoxia* of our teaching and practices." He cupped his hands. "The fate of the church of Antioch rests in my hands."

Rivkah leaned around and kissed his cheek. "Do not worry."

"How can I not? Being *Episkopos* is no small weight to carry. I am a shepherd called to protect this flock. Like any steward, I shall someday have to account to my Master."

Rivkah smoothed the hair on the back of his head. "And when you do, He will say, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.'"

He motioned Rivkah onto a stool. Taking his wife's hand, he stared into her eyes. "You and I both know what happens if the shepherd does not remain alert. The flock scatters and predators carry away the weak. The Prince of Lies and his minions tempt all believers, but he saves his greatest torments for those of us who are in positions of leadership."

She started to respond, but Shemu'el's finger on her lip stopped her.

"I must be ever vigilant. As the Church continues to grow, Satan will sift its leadership like wheat, gathering the weak and sinful unto himself like so much chaff. Any who succumb to his blandishments will become paving stones to be trod into the mire that fills the streets of Hell."

## ~ 4 ~

Shemu'el stepped into the house and, not seeing Rivkah, called out, "I'm home."

Her reply came from the bedroom "Hello. I will be there in a moment."

He stretched and rolled his shoulders, easing out the kinks and tensions of the day while he waited.

Rivkah approached with a smile and kissed him. "How was your day?"

He ignored her question, and concentrated on her instead. She'd oiled her hair and carefully braided it. Her linen tunic appeared new. A light shade of pink, it had subtle stripes of a slightly darker shade interwoven with the pale. A chain of leaves and violets accented the neckline and she wore contrasting red cloth girdle knotted about her waist.

He held her at arm's length and smiled appreciatively. "I do not think I have ever seen this before. Is it new?"

She acknowledged his compliment with a happy grin. "Isn't it nice? The girls made it for me. They wove and stitched it," her fingers went to the neckline, "and then Hadassah did the embroidery. Channah made the matching belt."

She stepped away from him and slowly spun in a circle. "Do you like it?"

"Very much." He pulled her close and kissed her. "Very, very much," he whispered as he nuzzled her neck. "But why the new dress? What is the occasion?"

Rivkah winked. "It's going to be a special night."

Shemu'el's voice grew ripe with interest. "Hmm...I like special nights. Tell me more."

"Oh, you'll see soon enough." She took his hand. "Come sit with me and tell me about your day."

"Nothing unusual. Routine, busy, tiring."

She rested her head on his shoulder. “Is it possible for you to remain at home this evening?”

“That was my plan, but should they summon me, I will have to go.” He read the disappointment in her eyes and gave a helpless shrug. “What can I do? A shepherd must tend his flock.”

“Then we shall both pray that none of your sheep requires the aid of their shepherd this evening.”

He grinned and slipped an arm around her waist. “Why is it so vital that I not be away on this particular evening?” He traced the curve of her cheek with the back of a finger. “Does this have something to do with that *special night*?”

“Yes.” She slipped his increasingly amorous embrace, and when he reached for her, planted the flat of her hand in the center of his chest. “But not in the way you are imagining. On his way out this morning Yudah told me he wished to speak to the two of us on a matter of great importance.”

Shemu’el’s anticipatory grin faded. “Ah yes, Yudah. And did he say what this *matter of great importance* might be?”

She gave him a playful poke in the ribs. “I cannot believe how you men can remain so oblivious to what is happening right in front of your eyes. He did not have to say, I already know. There can be only one reason. He wishes to take a young woman’s hand in marriage.”

“Yudah contemplating marriage?” He gave a questioning look. “Are you certain?”

“Let’s look at the facts.” She raised her left hand and began ticking off the clues on her fingers. “Yudah is at an age when a young man begins to contemplate marriage. He has been working with Hebel for some time now and has learned the pottery trade. Now that he has an occupation, he can support a wife.” She grabbed her baby finger and wiggled it. “And last, but not least, I have seen the way he watches the young women when he thinks no one is looking.”

Shemu’el remained unconvinced. “But Yudah is so shy. Anytime one of the young women of the *ekklesia* speaks to him,

he stares at the floor and makes an excuse to dash away.”

“Most young men grow shy in the presence of a maiden, especially if their parents are nearby.”

Shemu’el chuckled. “I sometimes worry that Yudah will end up being like Hebel, the most humble of husbands.”

“Do not worry about Hebel. He performs his uh...husbandly duties to your daughter’s satisfaction.”

“Dare I ask how you know this?”

“How else? Hadassah told me.”

He sank back. “You women discuss your husband’s... *performance?*”

Rivkah gave his hand a motherly pat. “Perhaps it is best that you not contemplate such things. Trust me, Yudah will do fine when he marries.”

“You sound very confident.”

“Why should I not be? Yudah is his father’s son. Your blood flows in his veins.” She gave him a sly wink. “My mother’s intuition tells me Yudah has found someone.”

Pushing the curtain aside, Rivkah glanced out at the setting sun. Leaping up from the couch, she headed for the kitchen. “I must begin preparing our evening meal. Yudah is surely on his way home by now.”

Settling back, Shemu’el crossed his arms and chewed his lip as he thought. Something about this scenario did not feel right. Yudah should have spoken to him first. These were the type of things on which a boy sought his father’s advice. Both of the older boys approached him privately so they could discuss things man-to-man. Instead, Yudah had gone to his mother first. As usual, his youngest son’s behavior remained a bit of a puzzle.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Rivkah threw on an apron and hummed a happy tune as she banged and clanked, chopped and kneaded. Shemu’el gave a start when her smiling face suddenly popped around the corner. “Who do think he has chosen?” Her cheery expression clouded momentarily. “I do hope she comes

from a good family.”

Shemu’el opened his mouth to reply, but she disappeared before he had the chance.

“Do you think he could have chosen someone who is not part of our *ekklesia*?” she asked from around the corner.

“He will tell us when he’s ready.”

“Surely not a pagan.” Worry caused her voice to rise. “Yudah would never choose to marry a pagan girl, would he?”

Tiring of speaking to someone he couldn’t see, Shemu’el joined her in the kitchen. He crossed his arms and leaned against a counter, watching as she poked cubes of lamb onto skewers.

She alternated the meat with chunks of onion and cucumber. When she finished, she arranged them on a plate and spooned pomegranate syrup over them. She glanced up at him. “I am running behind, can you help?”

He barely had time to nod before she shoved a marble bowl of chickpeas into his arms.

“The pestle is there beside you.” She bustled back and forth, firing directions at him as she worked. “Smash them thoroughly and make sure they are nice and smooth. I made flaxseed crackers to go with it.”

As Shemu’el set about mashing the chickpeas he found himself wondering why Yudah’s announcement warranted such elaborate preparations. Was there more Rivkah hadn’t told him? Yudah surely would not bring the prospective bride’s parents home with him...would he?

Rivkah emerged from the pantry carrying a melon in each hand. She quartered the Persian melon, using the green stripes on its netted skin as a cutting guide. As she worked, juice puddled on the wooden countertop and the melon’s tantalizing aroma wafted in the air.

She scooped out the seeds, tossed them aside, and trimmed away the skin and rind with smooth strokes. She arranged crescents of the melon’s soft flesh on a bright red platter that Hebel made for her.

Shemu'el stopped his mashing and stared. "A Persian melon? Do you know how much those cost in the marketplace?"

"Of course I do. I just bought it there this morning." Rivkah concentrated on the platter, adjusting the slices until they were evenly distributed.

"What is wrong with melons from our garden?"

"Not a thing. I have one of them too."

Shemu'el reached for a slice of melon. "I cannot remember the last time I had Persian melon."

Rivkah smacked his fingers. "Stay away! Those are for dinner."

"Why not save the feast for his wedding?"

"We will have one then too, but tonight is special."

The second melon, grown from seeds she saved when they lived in the little shepherd's settlement outside Bethlehem, had a smooth yellow skin. It took her only moments to remove the skin and seeds. She alternated its cream-colored slices with the yellow-orange ones already on the platter.

Rivkah's head snapped up when the front door creaked open. She paused for a moment, listening to Yudah's footsteps echo in the outer hall then whispered, "What did I tell you? Yudah is home already."

Stepping out of the kitchen, she smoothed her apron and gave her son a broad smile. "How was your day?"

Yudah smoothed the soft hairs of his wispy beard and grunted. "Hot and tiring. The drudgery of stoking Hebel's kiln never ends."

"Would you like a cloth and some cool water?"

"I stopped at the baths," Yudah mumbled as he continued down the hall.

Rivkah tiptoed back into the kitchen and touched Shemu'el's hand. When he glanced up she caught his eye. "Do not let him know about our talk." She grabbed the mortar and pestle out of his hands and replaced it with the platter of kabobs. "I will finish these chickpeas while you put the skewers on the brazier. I started the fire before you came home, the coals should be ready."

Platter in hand, Shemu'el dutifully headed for the back door.

“And keep turning them,” she called after him. “You know how quickly the sauce blackens if you leave them on one side too long.”

He acknowledged her warning by shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

Rivkah tucked a flyaway strand of dark hair back under her headband and concentrated on blending crushed garlic into the lumpy mass of chickpeas. When she heard Yudah exit his bedroom, she put the bowl aside.

He'd changed out of his work clothes.

She stretched up on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Feeling better?”

He shrugged. “Hebel is expecting a trading caravan any day now and he has worked himself into a frenzy. He wants to have enough of everything ready when they arrive. I hate working with him. He drives me like I am his slave.”

“He means well.” She gave him a motherly pat on the cheek. “Take some time and rest. I am fixing a nice meal for us.”

He slunk away without a word.

“Yudah?”

He glanced back at her over his shoulder.

“Your father is in the back yard roasting the meat.” She gave him a knowing nod. “We can talk over supper.”

## ~ 5 ~

Rivkah hummed as she refilled Shemu'el and Yudah's glasses. She gave her youngest son a benevolent pat on the shoulder and began clearing the table. She returned from her last trip dusting her hands and smoothing her tunic. She took a seat beside her husband and rested a hand on Shemu'el's knee. She had to fight to control the grin that threatened to spread across her face.

"Well, here we are ready to talk." Rivkah intended to pause and let Yudah take the lead, but she couldn't contain her curiosity a moment longer. "Well, do not just sit there like a bump on a log; at least tell us her name."

Yudah's brow crinkled in confusion. "Her name? What do you mean *her name*?"

"Tell us the lucky young woman's name."

"I, I don't understand what you are talking about." Yudah swallowed hard, forcing down his rising panic. "What young woman are you referring to, Imma?"

"The young woman you plan to marry, of course. That must be what you wanted to talk to us about."

Fear crept into the boy's wide eyes. He swallowed again. "The young woman I hope to marry?" He gave his father an imploring look, begging his assistance. "Where did you get the idea I had selected a wife?"

"Why are you acting so coy? Do you think I have not noticed how distracted you have been these last few days? I have seen the way you smile to yourself when you think no one is looking. Something is afoot." Rivkah gave a happy little giggle. "And I know what it is."

"You noticed I have been distracted and I smile from time to time? And just from that you deduced I have decided to take a wife?"

Rivkah ran a fingertip around the lip of her glass gathering the last remnants of her wine. She licked her finger and gave her

son a condescending smirk. "Come now, Yudah. Your father and I were not born yesterday. If a young man says he wishes to speak to his parents, he must be anticipating marriage." She tossed her hands in the air with a happy grin. "What else could it possibly be?"

"What else, indeed." Yudah's chin dropped to his chest. He stared into his lap and kneaded his throbbing temples.

Rivkah started to rise, but Shemu'el's arm on hers stopped her. "Wait. Let the boy have his say." He glanced in Yudah's direction. "If your mother is somehow mistaken and you are not planning to marry, what did you wish to speak with us about?"

Yudah pounded his fist on the table and glared across at his mother. "Why do you always try to run my life? Not once have I ever mentioned women or marriage...or, or anything." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Yet here you are marrying me off and no doubt already starting to count your grandchildren. Why must you always be like this?"

Rivkah's shoulders sagged under his verbal assault. Tears welled in her eyes. She opened her mouth to stutter a defense, but no words came out.

Shemu'el scowled at his son. Eyes hard and flinty, he rose and loomed over him. "You will not speak to your mother that way as long as you live under my roof. I will not have it. Do you hear? I will not have it! She fixed a special meal to celebrate the news you brought us. Now, for the final time, what did you wish to speak to us about?"

"Nothing." Yudah shook his head. "Nothing at all. If it once seemed important, it no longer is. I just wanted to tell you that I have been offered an apprenticeship."

Rivkah shook her head in disbelief. Resting her elbows on the table, she leaned toward her son. "An apprenticeship? What are you talking about? You are already Hebel's apprentice." She smiled encouragingly. "You have a trade. You are learning to be a potter."

"Suppose I do not wish to be a potter and spend my days

mucking in the clay and sweating over the ovens? It is filthy, dreary work. How can you imagine me doing such a thing for the rest of my life?”

“But, but you have gone to work with him every day for almost a year now. Being a potter is an honest trade.” Her voice trailed away in disappointment. “A trade that would enable you to support a wife and family. You do want a wife and family, don’t you?”

“Of course I want a wife and family...someday. But for now, Sextus Lucretius Piso, the Water Master of all of Syria, has offered me an apprenticeship with the *Statio Aquarium*.”

“What will you do?” Shemu’el asked.

Excitement danced in Yudah’s eyes for the first time and his chest swelled with pride. “I will train to be a hydraulic engineer.”

Shemu’el patted Rivkah’s shoulder. “There, you see, Mother. You should be smiling. Your youngest son is going to become a hydraulic engineer.” Shemu’el’s tone reflected his pride in Yudah’s achievement.

“Thank goodness someone can see things as they are.” Yudah’s voice softened as he turned to his mother. “This is the chance of a lifetime, Imma. Usually these positions are given to the sons of rich and powerful families.” He lifted his eyes and swept his arm above his head. “Just imagine, someday I will design the great aqueducts that march across the empire.”

“And after you have achieved your fame and fortune, will you then choose a nice girl and settle down and marry her?”

Yudah placed his hand over hers and smiled. “Yes, I promise.”

“Perhaps not the news you anticipated, but still good news. Very good news,” Shemu’el said. “What will Piso have you doing?”

“I really do not know. He said that during my training I must learn all aspects of the water system. I will be working on the *insula* with my own office in the administration building.”

Shemu’el grinned and clapped his son on the back. “How

about that? Your son will have an office all to himself. Pour us some more wine so we can toast Yudah's achievement."

"Tell me about this Sextus Lucretius Piso," Rivkah said as she filled their glasses with ruby wine and water. "Is he a good man?"

"He is not a believer, if that is what you mean. But then, very few Romans are," Yudah hastily added.

"I can hardly wait to hear about all the new things you see and do," Rivkah said as she lifted her glass in a toast. "I look forward to you entertaining us each evening with stories of your work day as we eat our supper."

Yudah lowered his glass with a sigh. Cupping his chin, he sucked in his lower lip and studied the damp circle the glass left on the tabletop.

No one spoke. A pall settled over the room. The rustling sound of the caged pigeons they kept in the yard drifted in through the open window.

"I, I...uh, will not be taking my meals with you and Abba any longer. You see, the apprenticeship requires that I move out. I will be residing on the *insula*." Seeing the expression on his mother's face, he quickly added, "Though I will come to visit you from time to time...quite often, actually."

"Move out?" Rivkah shrieked. "Who said anything about you moving out of our house? I expected you to tell me you were taking a wife and instead you tell me you are leaving us?"

Shemu'el tried to calm Rivkah as she continued peppering Yudah with questions about how often he planned to visit, how far away he would be, and where exactly his office would be located.

"Part of my training involves working with the water systems and part of it requires that I make drawings and do calculations. Lucretius Piso said he prefers to have his apprentices stay in his home. That way he can tutor me...us, in the evenings."

"How long must you reside with him?"

Yudah shrugged. “He did not say. Quite some time, I imagine. He has a large estate and a number of his assistants reside there in various guest houses. They sometimes meet as a group to discuss problems or review plans.”

“When will you go?”

“Next week. I plan to notify Hebel tomorrow.”

Rivkah hung her head and turned her hands over and over in her lap. “I do not like this moving out. You must tell this man, this Lucretius Piso, that you cannot do it. Tell him your mother will not allow it.”

Yudah’s expression hardened. He wiped his fingers on his napkin and threw it onto the table as he rose. “I have already agreed to his terms. I do not need, not did I come to ask, your permission. I had hoped you would be happy for me. Apparently, that is not the case.”

Rivkah raised her eyes and stretched out a quivering hand.

Yudah ignored the gesture. He spun on his heel and headed for the door. “Do not wait up for me; I will be back late. I promised friends I would meet them for a round of *lantrunculi*,” he said as he left.

Rivkah watched in silence as the door slammed shut behind Yudah. She heard him stomp down the walk and strained to hear his footsteps as they faded in the distance.

When she could no longer hear Yudah’s footsteps, she slumped against Shemu’el. “What will become of him?”

## ~ 6 ~

The call came in the middle of the night...a frantic pounding on their door.

Shemu'el lurched when Rivkah rocked his shoulder. "Someone's at the door. You are needed."

He responded with a sleepy grunt. Rolling out of the bed, he heaved himself to his feet with a sigh. Shemu'el scratched his head with one hand while searching for a taper on the bedside table with the other. Finding it, he touched the taper to the night light's flickering flame and lit a lamp.

The incessant rapping on their door resumed.

Shemu'el followed the lamp's yellow-orange circle of light out of the dim bedroom and down the narrow hallway. "Go back to sleep. I am sure it's for me," he whispered as he passed the children's room.

Rivkah threw a robe over her gown and padded barefoot into the dark hall to wait.

"I am coming." Lifting the bar, Shemu'el threw open the door and stretched his lamp into the darkness.

A Roman soldier waited on their stoop.

Shemu'el immediately recognized the Centurion's uniform as belonging to the palace contingent who guarded Legatus Gaius Quadratus, the Governor of Roman Syria.

The soldier snapped to attention and saluted. "Sorry to bother you at this hour, Sir. I seek the one called Evodius."

"I am he. What is it you require?"

"Atticus, the *Primus Medicus*, requests your presence."

"Is there a medical emergency?"

"I am not privy to such information. I know that Atticus is at the Governor's palace on the *insula*. He was summoned to the chambers of Lady Sextilia Velina. He also requested that you bring oil for anointing." The man pointed to a horse-drawn coach

waiting at the curb. “Time is of the essence; I have a carriage waiting.”

“Give me a moment to dress. I will join you momentarily.”

Shemu’el eased the door shut and returned to the bedroom.

“What did he want?” Rivkah asked.

“Atticus sent him to summon me to the suite of Lady Sextilia Velina.” He tugged on his lip as he thought. “I was not aware she was ill.”

“She is not.” Rivkah sighed deeply. “You are not being called for Sextilia Velina. It is her handmaiden, Amara, who needs you. With Atticus’ assistance, Phaidra has been treating her for a *carcinoma* of the womb. The last time I visited, the *oncologist* had become so great that she looked as if she was with child.” She brushed aside a tear. “I remember how happy she was the day she was accepted as a catechumen and began instruction for Baptism.” She shook her head. “But with the onset of this illness she has grown too weak to complete them.”

Shemu’el took her in his arms. Hugging her tightly, he kissed the top of her head. While he finished dressing, Rivkah prepared his small traveling case. She took out a vial of chrism, blessed oil for anointing the sick and dying, and put it in the case.

“Do we have any of the reserved sacrament?” Shemu’el asked as he bent to lace his sandals.

Rivkah checked a cupboard. “This is our last packet. I will bring more from the compound when I go in for the daily distribution tomorrow.” She eased back the cloth wrapping and turned the packet’s contents to the light. “It is still in good condition.”

The regular loaves they consecrated at their Eucharist molded if stored for more than a few days. Shemu’el routinely consecrated small portions of traveling bread, an unleavened, matzo-style loaf similar to those used by the Legions when they were on the march and by Jews during their annual celebration of the *Pesach*. This thin, dry bread kept well in storage and, since it’d been blessed during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, it

carried the prayers of the entire congregation to its recipient whether Shemu'el or one of the *diakonoi* took it to the sick.



Atticus waited at the palace entrance for their arrival. He dismissed the Centurion with an appreciative nod and grasped Shemu'el's elbow. "This way."

The two men whispered as they walked the palace's labyrinth of marbled hallways. Atticus led him past the night guard and into the Governor's private quarters. They crossed a large anteroom with tapestries hanging on the walls and continued down a corridor lit by hanging lamps. "Sorry to have roused you from your bed, but I do not believe she will last the night."

Shemu'el shrugged away his apology. "Never hesitate to summon me. That is why I am here. Rivkah guessed your patient was Amara, the handmaiden."

"She guessed correctly. I have been giving Phaidra increasing amounts of pain killers, but they no longer have the desired effect."

An attractive woman in an embroidered silk gown waited by the entrance to the maid's quarters. She stepped forward when the men rounded the corner and grasped Shemu'el's hand between hers. "You must be the *Episkopos*, Shemu'el Evodius. Thank you for coming so quickly. I am Sextilia Velina. Your presence will surely bring my handmaiden much needed peace."

She led them through the open door. "Amara has often spoken of this Christos you worship while she helped me dress or combed my hair. Her tales are, to say the least, compelling. Tell me, does this Iesous of whom she spoke offer happiness in the life beyond only to the poor and downtrodden?"

"He died to save sinners, and, whether Caesar or slave, we are all sinners."

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Someday I may wish to learn more about this cult of yours."

“Perhaps we can talk again...under better circumstances.”

“Perhaps.” Her expression clouded. “Although you must understand Quadratus could never embrace such a radical idea as a crucified god. As a Roman politician he has pledged his faith and fidelity to the Emperor and the gods of Rome.”

“I understand.”

Amara lay in the bed shivering and writhing in pain. Her sweat-stained gown did little to mask her distended abdomen.

Sextilia Velina touched Shemu’el’s arm. In an urgent voice she whispered, “Do your very best. It pains me to see her suffer so. She has been with me for many years and I shall miss her greatly. I sincerely hope a better existence awaits her in the next life.”

She bit her lip and blinked back tears. Turning aside, she quickly tiptoed away. The hallway’s darkness swallowed her as her footfalls faded into the distance.

Shemu’el knelt beside the woman’s pallet. Picking up a cloth, he gently blotted her damp forehead.

Amara’s head snapped around at his touch. Her eyes opened wide.

Shemu’el leaned close and smiled. “Do you remember me? I am Shemu’el Evodius, Rivkah’s husband. How goes it for you, daughter?”

“I am sorry to have pulled you from your bed.” She glanced up at Atticus standing behind the kneeling Shemu’el. “I told him not to, but he insisted. Despite the cramping and increased pain, I refused more of the medicine made from the poppy plant. I wanted to be alert when I greeted you.”

He took her hand in his and bowed until his forehead touched her fingertips. “It is my privilege to serve you. Just as the Lady Velina never hesitated to call whenever she needed you, I too am always at your service.”

“Before my illness I began instructions. I planned to be baptized at the Feast of the Resurrection.” She covered her mouth with a quivering hand and turned aside. “But I, I never

completed—”

Shemu’el touched her shoulder. “Do you believe Iesous is the Christos, the only Son of God, who died on a cross for your sins and mine?”

“I do.”

“Then nothing more is required. He will teach you all you need to know when you meet him in his everlasting kingdom.” He pronounced a blessing over the bowl of water that Atticus provided. Placing a towel beside her head, he scooped some out with his hand and poured it over her forehead saying the words of baptism.

Afterwards, Shemu’el opened his case and the three of them shared the sacrament of the Lord’s body.

When they finished Atticus approached with cup in hand.

Amara’s eyes widened. “No!” She shook her head vigorously and waved him away. “No, I am not yet finished.”

“Go ahead, drink it,” Shemu’el said. “It will dull your pain and help you rest. I can anoint you with the chrism while you doze.”

A look of terror swept across the woman’s face. “You do not understand. There are many shameful things that I have done in my life. The memory of these past sins continues to haunt me and steal my peace.”

“There is no need for anything you have done to bother you now.” Shemu’el motioned with his eyes at his friend.

Atticus gave an imperceptible nod, sat the cup of wine blended with narcotics on the table, and slipped away.

Shemu’el leaned close and took Amara’s hand. “The waters of baptism wash away all stain of sin. All is complete. Rest in peace. As far as the east is from the west, so far has your heavenly Father removed your transgressions from you.”

Amara sighed and sank back against the pillow.

He slipped an arm under her shoulder and slowly raised her. Taking the cup that Atticus left, he swirled it to mix the

contents and put it to her lips. “Drink deeply, my daughter. Let sleep melt away your suffering. I will anoint you as you doze and keep a prayerful watch until the Lord comes to claim your soul. You shall awake in Paradise, far beyond this mortal vale of tears.”

Amara eagerly drained the cup.

Shemu’el eased her back onto the bed and blotted her face with a cool cloth. Wetting his thumb with chrism, he marked her forehead with the *signum crucis*. He continued, anointing her eyelids, ears and lips, her hands and her feet.”

Atticus joined him when he completed his anointing. Together they began to quietly intone the prayers for the dying.

Amara let the soothing cadence of their voices ease her into a deep and final slumber.

~ 7 ~

Rivkah's daughter, Channah, paid little attention to her surroundings as she hurried through the building. She'd traversed these familiar halls so often that, if necessary, she could have done it with her eyes closed.

The women of the *ekklesia* rotated the task of baking bread for the daily distribution and this day the task fell to her. The yellow tiles on the kitchen's floor glowed like molten gold in the light of the rising sun as she scurried around the kitchen, gathering bowls and utensils. An overnight chill permeated the room and Channah maintained a brisk pace hoping the activity would warm her.

Her older sister, Hadassah, who usually paired with her on the baking chores, was nowhere to be seen. The children must have slowed her down, Channah thought, as she lit the overhead lamps. Not much of a heat source, but they would have to do until she had a fire going.

Their daily distribution of foodstuffs to the poor, elderly and ill required a lot of bread. Rather than buy it, when the *ekklesia* set about modifying the basement area for their use, they installed a commercial oven. The large *furnos* dominated one corner of the kitchen. Constructed of brick and stone in the standard Roman fashion, it utilized technology similar to what they used at the baths to heat the *thermea*.

Its domed baking chamber rested atop a rectangular stone base with a fire box in front and a pair of air chambers behind. Large and square, these chambers circulated hot air beneath the oven's flat stone floor. Once the heated air passed under the floor it was drawn into the hollow bricks of the oven's walls. These multiple flues merged into a common plenum at the top and were exhausted into a chimney that carried the smoke out of the building.

Channah tossed her cloak onto a hook and set to work. The door on the black iron firebox screeched on its hinges as she

eased it back. Kneeling, she loosely stacked several armfuls of wood in the chamber. She reached around the corner and extracted a handful of thin kindling sticks from an upright basket. They called them *fat wood*. Split from the trunks of spruces, firs and cedars, these wooden sticks were packed with natural resins and caught fire at the touch of a flame.

Lighting a taper from one of the lamps, Channah held it beneath the sticks. She waited a moment until she saw rising tongues of fire and heard the reassuring crackling and popping sound of burning wood. Then she poked them under the smaller branches and swung the door shut. The fire could take care of itself from there.

She adjusted the oven's damper and rose dusting her hands. The sound of children's voices echoed in the outer hall, telling her that Hadassah had arrived. After greeting her niece and nephew, Channah tied on an apron and turned her attention to the long wooden work table.

Hadassah took a large crock out of the pantry and thumped it down on the table beside her.

Channah lifted the crock's round wooden lid and set it aside. A wonderfully homey smell...a little sour and lightly alcoholic, blended with the earthy scent of wheat ripening in the sun permeated the air. She peeked into the crock and smiled. The movement had re-awakened the starter and bubbles churned their way to the top where they quickly burst, leaving behind a pock-marked surface.

The two sisters worked in practiced harmony. Hadassah measured several cups of flour into bowl and added an equal amount of water.

Meanwhile, Channah stirred in the thin layer of alcohol that sat on top of the starter.

When Hadassah had all the lumps in her bowl beaten down, she carried it to the crock. She waited until Channah dipped out enough starter for the day's bread then mixed in the replenisher she'd made. Covering the crock, she returned it to the pantry to grow the next day's leaven.

They took turns mixing the dough, each of them pulling large hunks of dough out of the pan to knead. Hadassah began covering the finished dough with damp towels so it could rise.

Channah opened the oven and held out her palm, testing its temperature. "I think we need to add some more wood," she said and left to gather it from the woodpile.

Hadassah busied herself in the kitchen and the children continued playing on the floor.

A stranger appeared without warning.

His bulky frame filled the kitchen's narrow doorway, blocking the sunlight pouring in through a window on the opposite side of the hall. He stood half in and half out of the room, glancing from side to side as if searching for someone or something. His shadow fell over five-year-old Sarit, who was playing on the floor with her younger brother, David.

She glanced up, saw him in the doorway, and gasped.

The man read the terrified look on her face and shook his head to calm her. His square face crinkled into familiar smile lines when he winked.

Sarit would have none of it. She leaped to her feet and scooped David into her arms. Clutching him against her chest, the little girl scurried across the room. She reached her mother's side and quickly vanished into the folds of her skirts.

Hadassah, who'd been working with her back to the door, glanced back over her shoulder to see what had disturbed the girl. The sight of the stranger startled her and the fingers of her right hand closed around the rolling pin.

The man opened his mouth to speak just as Channah rounded the corner with an armload of wood.

"Yosef!" Channah shouted the instant she saw him. Smiling broadly, she dumped the wood onto the floor beside the stove's firebox. She paused just long enough to brush away bits of bark from the front of her tunic then headed toward him with open arms.

She kissed his cheek when they embraced. "Abba said you

were coming. When did you get in?”

“I arrived last night. I planned to confer with your father this morning, but your mother said he was resting when I stopped at your home. Apparently he’d been up most of the night tending one of his flock.”

Channah’s smile momentarily dimmed. “Yes. Amara, a handmaiden of Lady Sextilia Velina. She left us to join the angels and saints shortly before dawn.”

“So, having time on my hands, I decided to visit the compound and see you instead. Your mother—”

Channah frowned and tapped the side of her head. “Where is my mind? Seeing you standing there surprised me so that I never bothered to introduce you.” She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into the kitchen. “Hadassah, this is Yosef who is called Barnabus.”

Hadassah, whose hands were covered with floury dough, brushed a stray lock of hair aside with elbow and nodded in reply.

“Barnabus is an elder from the church at Jerusalem, the *ekklesia* that Yaakov shepherds.” She hesitated for a moment then added, “He and Stefanos were friends, very close friends.” She reached behind her sister, extracted the children, and proudly introduced her niece and nephew.

Barnabus dropped to one knee in front of them.

Sarit tightened her grip on little David’s hand and stared at her toes.

Barnabus rested his hand on her head and blessed her. “You acted right away to protect your baby brother from harm. This tells me you are a very good big sister.”

Beaming at the compliment, the little girl raised her head and met his eyes for the first time.

Channah moved to the other side of the worktable and picked up her apron. “You have caught me at a bad time. Hadassah and I are finishing up the baking for today’s daily distribution.”

Hadassah gave an impatient snort. She snatched the apron out of Channah's hand and tossed it aside. "A bad time? Nonsense. All that remains are the loaves made with sprouted barley for the beer. You stoked the fire before I arrived; I can surely finish this much alone. Sarit will help stack the loaves in baskets after they cool." She made shooing motions with her hands. "Go...both of you...go. Visit. Give your friend who has traveled so far something to drink and take him on a tour of the compound."



Channah led Barnabus to a set of double doors that opened onto the gardens. She opened a door and stepped aside to let him exit first. "Let me show the grounds."

Barnabus stepped out onto the flagstone patio and drew a deep breath of the crisp morning air.

They crossed the wide patio and followed a path that cut across the lawn toward the gardens. The gravel crunched under foot and sunlight sparkled off the diamonds of dew beaded on each blade of grass.

"You have often been in my prayers. How has it been for you Channah?"

She sighed with resignation. "Time makes it easier. My memories of Stefanos have become like a precious scroll to me, one which I safeguard in the ark of my mind, and only take out when the occasion merits."

"He told me of his plans more than once. Stefanos was very close to coming to see your father and ask for your hand in marriage. He had a few loose ends he wanted to tie up first. But..." He let the thought drop, knowing they both knew its conclusion.

Channah looked away.

"You know he loved you deeply."

"And I loved him as well. Were my faith stronger, I would have rejoiced at the happiness he no doubt enjoyed. And now that time has passed I find I am able to do this...at least most of

the time. But in the beginning, when the wound was fresh and his death weighed heavily upon my soul, the emptiness drove me to the edge of despair. On such days my faith faltered. I would have gleefully summoned him back from paradise, if I could. Stolen his pleasure to assuage my grief.”

Barnabus slipped an arm around her shoulder.

Channah leaned into him. She sniffed and brushed aside a tear. They continued on in silence, each lost in memories of Stefanos and what might have been.

The path meandered between rows of fruit trees, rising to a plateau.

“This is the *ekklesia*’s vineyard,” Channah said, brightening. “It is one of my favorite spots. We crush the grapes to make our sacramental wine for the Lord’s Table.”

“It is a beautiful place.” Barnabus combed the grape leaves with his fingers as they passed. He stopped and lifted a bunch of grapes, examining them carefully. “The soil here must be rich. It looks like you will have an abundant harvest.”

“This place is blessed as well as beautiful.” Channah plucked a ripe grape and popped it into her mouth. “Did Stefanos ever tell you about his grapes?”

The memory brought a smile to Barnabus’ face. “Oh yes, he never stopped talking about the special vines he asked Aristopulus’ vinedresser to set aside for him. I told him love had turned a scholar into a farmer.”

Channah swept her hand over the rows of well-manicured vines. “These grapes thrive because Stefanos tends them.”

“But Stefanos is...”

“Dead? Oh, believe me, I know. How well I know.” She touched the grape leaves lovingly. “They are his legacy. Knowing I would never return, before we left Jerusalem I went into Aristopulus’ vineyard...to the end of the last row beside the wall, the row Stefanos chose. Taking my pruning knife, I moved down the row cutting off canes until I accumulated a thick handful. I discarded any that didn’t have tight pith in the center and dense,

light green outer wood. Then I wrapped those I wished to keep in a damp cloth, tied them up in a piece of goatskin, and carried them with me to Antioch.”

“And these are those canes?”

“The year we arrived I had them clear this area for a vineyard. Atticus, who donated the property, told me he had tried planting many things here, but nothing ever did well. He said the soil was too thin. Despite his warning, I planted those canes one warm spring day and let Stefanos do the rest. They have yielded bountiful crops even in years when the rains are sparse. We have more wine than we can use. I will give you several amphorae to take with you, if you like.”

Barnabus grinned. “I would like that very much.”

## ~ 8 ~

*“News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabus to Antioch.”*

– Acts of the Apostles 11:22

The sun was high in the sky by the time Channah had shown Barnabus all there was to see. Activity at the compound increased as others arrived.

“It is good we had this time together,” Channah said as they neared the main building. “All of the believers here know of Stefanos’ actions and revere his memory, but very few of them knew him. They speak of him in the abstract, never knowing who he truly was. They have never watched the sunlight in his hair or heard his laughter. To be able to talk about him with someone who knew and loved him as I did makes all the difference.”

She took Barnabus’ hand in hers and squeezed it. “It was kind of you to come see me, thank you.”

“Your mother said you are planning to be married.”

“Yes, I am. Darios is a metalworker, a goldsmith actually, and a member of our *ekklesia*. We will be married following the celebration of our Lord’s Resurrection. Miryam and Yohan have promised to come from Ephesus. Will you still be in Antioch then?”

Barnabus shook his head. “Probably not, I have other matters to attend to. But even if I am miles away, know that I will be with you in spirit.”

She gave him an indulgent smile. “Will your travels never cease?”

“We all do the Lord’s bidding. Some, like your father, are called to the office of *Episkopos* and remain in one place to shepherd their flock. Others, like me, become evangelists carrying the word to distant places. But this time I will be away only a short while.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“When my work here is completed I am going to Tarsus to bring Sha’oul back to Antioch.”

Channah’s body tensed at mention of Sha’oul’s name. Her smile disappeared and she stepped away from Barnabus, putting distance between them. The warmth in her voice turned to icy coldness.

“How can you have anything to do with that vile man?”

“Whatever he did to persecute the saints is in the past. He has changed. He has taken on a new persona.”

“A snake can shed its skin, but it never ceases being a snake.”

“It is the Lord’s way to forgive our transgressors.”

“Then let the Lord forgive him if he wishes to. I will not.” She pointed to the door they had exited earlier that morning. “I have brought you back to where we started. Abba should be here now. I am sure you are capable of finding him on your own.”

She turned and walked away without another word.



**B**arnabus and Channah were away walking the grounds when Shemu’el Evodius arrived at the compound. Still tired from the previous evening’s call, he went out to the porch and sat in the sun while he waited. A short time later Barnabus rounded the side of the building.

The two men clasped each other’s forearm in a greeting reminiscent of the Legions.

“Welcome to Antioch, my brother.” Shemu’el led Barnabus into the building. By the time they entered his workspace, a tray with wine and cakes awaited them.

The compound buzzed with the news of a visitor from Jerusalem. After Barnabus ate, Shemu’el introduced this official delegate from the mother church at Jerusalem to other members of the *ekklesia*.

After the crowd thinned out, Shemu'el refilled Barnabus' cup and poured one for himself. "Join me," he said, inviting him to follow, "there is something I wish to say."

He took his guest into an adjacent room reserved for his use.

Barnabus settled his ample frame into a chair and Shemu'el took a seat opposite him.

"How was your trip?"

"Good, very good." Barnabus rocked forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "If I cannot travel in the spring of the year, my second preference has always been *Elul*. The weather remains mild and the winter rains have yet to begin."

"Yes, our rains, too, do not usually begin until after October." Shemu'el said, deliberately choosing the Roman rather than the Hebrew designation for the month. "Did you come by way of Damascus?"

"No. I followed the *Via Maris*. The Way of the Sea afforded me a chance to visit the churches at Caesarea, Tyre and Sidon."

"It is a great distance from *Hierosalyma* to Antioch." Shemu'el again chose the Greco-Roman designation for the capitol city of Judea. "Only something of extreme importance would bring you so far." Shemu'el caught his eyes and held them. "To what do we owe this visit?"

Barnabus momentarily seemed at a loss for words. "I must apologize for neglecting to congratulate you on your elevation to *Episkopos*. I know you assisted Simon throughout his time here in Antioch. Your faith and fortitude are well remembered in Jerusalem."

"And your status as an encourager and supporter of all who follow the Lord is known as well. What brings you to Antioch?"

Barnabus took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Word of some of your practices has reached the ears of Yaakov and the elders in Jerusalem. The things they have heard, uh...well, let me just say these practices concern them."

The room grew very still.

Shemu'el knew then that whatever Barnabus had come to say would not be good. Tension lines formed around his eyes as he wondered what he could possibly have done to offend Yaakov. How could he make them understand the fundamental differences between Antioch and Jerusalem?

The church at Jerusalem bobbed like a cork in a sea of Judaism. True, they faced discrimination and persecution, but the nature of things there differed greatly from that in Antioch. In Jerusalem they had the Temple and with it a regular influx of pilgrims to proselytize. The elders there mostly interacted with Pharisees and Sadducees. Here in Antioch he and his people lived surrounded by Greeks and Romans.

Those in Jerusalem considered themselves to be the center of the movement. Yet in the Roman mind, Jerusalem was hardly more than an insignificant outpost. Antioch on the Orentes, meanwhile, was the third largest city in the Empire, home to four Roman Legions and the administrative center of the Eastern Empire.

He, Simon Petros, and the others had expended much effort adapting to this new environment. Shemu'el understood how difficult it must be for those immersed in the cozy cocoon of Judaism to comprehend these new realities.

"It has never been our desire to offend anyone," he said. "What could we possibly have done to cause such uneasiness among our brethren that they felt it necessary to send an emissary all this way?"

Rather than wait for a reply, Shemu'el rose from his chair and extended a hand to Barnabus. "Perhaps it would be better to table this discussion for now. Neither of us is at our best today. You have just completed a long journey and I was called from my bed last evening to minister to a dying woman. You are welcome to stay in my home. Or," he swept a hand in a wide arc, "if you prefer, there is room for you here at our compound."

Ever the diplomat, Barnabus agreed to lodge with Shemu'el and Rivkah.

"In the morning," Shemu'el promised, as they walked under

the colonnades of the *Via Caesarea* on their way home, “I will show you all we have accomplished here in Antioch.”

“We have heard many good things. I look forward to seeing the fruits of your labors.”

“Splendid. Only by observing the way the Spirit moves among us can you, and those in Jerusalem, properly evaluate our efforts. Once you have seen all there is to see, I will gather the elders of our *ekklisia*. You may relay the particulars to us as a group and we will discuss this message you have brought us then.”



**S**hemu’el invited Barnabus to relax with him in the back yard after the evening meal. The yard was a somber, barren place. The lush green vines and plants that were heavy with produce only weeks before had become brittle sticks. The fruit trees in their small orchard extended leafless branches into the sky like bony fingers raised in prayer. The grape leaves along the arbor, now limp and yellowed, gathered in sodden clumps around the base of the vines.

Shemu’el swept aside an accumulation of wind-driven leaves from a bench and invited him to sit. He pointed to the bedraggled surroundings and shrugged. “You should have seen this a month ago.”

Barnabus commented on how relentless the cycles of nature could be.

Tiring of small talk, Shemu’el spoke what was on his mind. “I understand from Channah that you will be going to Tarsus to find Sha’oul.”

Now it became Barnabus’ turn to adjust the terms of their conversation. “Yes, many in the church believe *Paulus* can assist us in our mission to the gentiles.”

“We have heard many things about Sha’oul. Some of the things you told us over dinner are, well, almost unbelievable.”

“I can understand your feeling the way you do. Paulus is both loved and hated. If you understand nothing else about him

know this, whatever you choose to call him, he is a man of fierce passion. He could not be satisfied learning the Torah at the feet of his local Rabbi; he went to Jerusalem and studied under the great teacher, Gamali'el. Not content to be merely an observant Jew, he chose to become a Pharisee. Given his history, is it surprising he displays this same intensity now that he has found the Christos?"

Barnabus touched Shemu'el Evodius' arm. "Trust me. I knew Sha'oul well. I studied beside him in the School of Hillel in Jerusalem."

Shemu'el Evodius nodded. "And you also studied beside Stefanos, whom Sha'oul had stoned."

Barnabus' countenance darkened at the mention of his friend Stefanos. "The ways of the Lord are indeed mysterious, my brother. I find it best not to dwell on questions I can never answer. I go where I am sent, do what I am told, and leave the questioning to those wiser than I."

## ~ 9 ~

*“Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?”*

—Romans 9:21

**E**arly morning darkness softened the edges and obscured details when Hebel exited the house in the direction of the small complex containing his workshop, kiln, storage shed and warehouse. Walking more by memory than sight, he traversed the narrow path beside the garden. Dry leaves and twigs from nearby trees crunched underfoot. As usual, he'd risen, prayed, ate and then tiptoed out leaving Hadassah and the children asleep in their beds.

He paused under the sloping overhang of the shed's roof long enough to light a lamp. Then he lifted the latch and threw back the door. A familiar heaviness in the air settled around him as he followed the lamp's circle of brightness into the building. Following a practiced routine, Hebel moved down the center walkway, pausing at regular intervals to lower and light the lamps which dangled on chains attached to the rafters.

When he'd lit the final lamp he turned and glanced around at the piles of sand in their bins, the rusty sieves, the other bins filled with mounds of freshly-dug clay, another full of the broken shards from pots that had cracked in the kiln, and yet another full of shells gathered on the beach. Beaming with pride and pleasure, Hebel took a deep breath and crossed his arms in satisfaction.

At moments like this he believed he understood how God must have felt when he gazed down upon his newly created world. Hebel scanned the room a second time and saw that it was good, very good.

Tiny though it may be, this was his place, his empire... where he felt most at home and at peace. Even the damp, musty

air that wet his hair and beard, felt like a dear friend. Without ever planning it, this daily pause for reflection and thanksgiving had become a ritual for him.

The moment faded as quickly as it came. He had much work to do if he was going to be ready for the merchants. Hebel removed his cloak, rolled up his sleeves, and set about it.

Making pottery was a complex process with even the simplest pot requiring a mixture of ingredients. But before any pot could take shape, Hebel had to find the raw materials and collect them, store them, process them, purify them and precisely blend them. Only then could he put it on his wheel and spin it into pots and bowls, vases and jugs.

He stopped first at one of the large terra cotta settling jars which stood side-by-side in a row down the middle of the room. He dug his clay at a secret spot he'd discovered along the upper reaches of the Orentes River. But before he could use this raw clay, he needed to screen and wash it. Each of these jars represented a step in the clarifying process. The day before he'd mixed clay and water into a thick slurry in the jars. Overnight the water rose to the top and the clay settled. He unplugged a spout halfway up of the side of the jar and an arc of grayish water spurted out.

While the water drained, Hebel lugged a heavy wooden frame over beside the jar. As the last drops dribbled out, he scooped the soupy clay into the frame. Over the ensuing days the last drops of residual water would gradually evaporate leaving a large, thick rectangle. Then Yudah would pulverize it to powder with a wooden mallet so it could undergo the washing process a second time.

Re-plugging the spout, he filled the jar with new clay, added water and stirred it with a paddle until it was thoroughly mixed. Leaving the jars, he began shoveling sand into the sieve. He had three bins each one with a tall cone-shaped mound of beach sand gathered the previous week from the seashore near *Pieria Seleucia*. While Hadassah rested on a blanket and the children giggled and romped in the surf, Hebel spent the afternoon

shoveling sand into the back of a donkey cart.

He positioned a large bucket on the floor to catch the trickle of fine sand emerging from the sieve. Shoveling and stirring, stirring and shoveling, he worked until the bucket was nearly full and only coarse grains, twigs and bits of shell and gravel remained in the sieve. He dumped them into an adjoining bin and crossed the room to a shadowy front corner of the barn. Here he kept his most precious possession, lumpy blocks of purified clay blended with sand, broken shards ground to powder and crushed sea shells. He wrapped each block of prepared clay in damp burlap and set it aside to age in darkness.

He reached under the wet cloth and caught a dab of clay between his fingers. Mashing it flat, he slid one finger over the other spreading the clay, gauging its readiness for the wheel. When he found a block that pleased him, he carried it out of the barn and plopped it down on the bench beside his potter's wheel.

Now the day's real work could begin in earnest.



**H**ebel looked up from his wheel when he noticed Yudah walking toward him. "You are late. I had begun to worry."

Yudah felt sweat rise on his brow. Was it the heat of the kiln, he wondered, or his nervousness? Probably both. Though he had only been in the three-sided rough board shack that Hebel elegantly called *his studio* for a few moments, the oppressive heat from the nearby kilns gathered around him like a suffocating rag.

"I must have overslept," Yudah mumbled. "I will come in early tomorrow to make it up."

An unexpected wave of pity swept over Yudah as he glanced down at Hebel's clay-stained fingers. How could Hebel remain so happy when this pathetic pottery shop was all he would ever have? What kind of a future was that? Nothing but an endless series of mundane tasks repeated over and over with mind-numbing regularity.

A humble potter would never know the success working for

someone like Sextus Lucretius Piso could bring. Power, influence, and wealth, a fine home with servants, a beautiful wife...poor Hebel would never know any of them.

Hebel leaped up from his wheel and bustled over to several rows of freshly thrown amphorae air-drying on long boards supported by stands. "I started before sunrise. These will be ready for firing this afternoon. Meanwhile, you can crush the block of clay in the shed." He shot Yudah a proud grin and tapped his chest. "I feel in my heart that we will meet our quota. Just you wait and see, we will make it yet."

I would sooner be dead than spend my life kneading clay and feeding wood into an oven, Yudah thought, as he stooped to gather branches for the kiln. He jammed them into the blazing maw of the firebox and ambled into the barn to begin pounding the block of dry clay to dust. Their discussion about him leaving for other work could wait until another time.



Though he promised to come in early, Yudah didn't arrive until mid morning the following day. The day after that he didn't show up for work at all. And somehow, he never got around to telling Hebel about his new job.

That evening, after he'd taken the last of the amphorae out of the kiln and cleaned up, Hebel walked to Shemu'el and Rivkah's home to check on Yudah.

Rivkah smiled when she opened the door. "Hebel, my son, come in, come in." She leaned to one side peeking around him. Her face fell when she saw he had come alone. "Hadassah and my grandbabies are not with you?"

"She sends her love. I cannot stay long. I came to inquire about Yudah." He handed her a small covered dish. "I brought him some of Hadassah's honey-coated dates stuffed with chopped nuts. I know how much he enjoys sweetmeats. Hopefully they will make him feel better."

Rivkah took the dish and motioned Hebel into the house.

“This is very kind of you, but it hardly justifies a trip all the way over here.”

“When Yudah came late yesterday, I thought perhaps he wasn’t feeling well. Then, when he did not come to work at all today, I knew he must have taken ill. If he is awake, I would like to visit with him for a moment before I leave.”

“Yudah left the house this morning at the usual time. Are you sure he did not show up for work?”

Hebel gave her an indulgent smile. “If he had been there, I am sure I would have noticed.”

“I said the first thing that popped into my mind,” Rivkah said with an awkward chuckle. “Forgive me, it made no sense at all.”

Taking him by the arm, she led Hebel to the back door. “Shemu’el is working in the yard. I want you to tell him what you just told me.”



**H**ebel was still conferring with Shemu’el when Yudah sauntered into the house with a wide grin.

His smile faded when he saw his mother’s crossed arms and lowered brow. “Where have you been and what did you do all day when you should have been helping Hebel make pots?”

“I was working...in a way. I went to the *insula* and spent my day visiting with some of Lucretius Piso’s assistants. At the end of the afternoon they invited me to stay, so I supped at Piso’s estate.”

“What about your commitment to Hebel? What about the orders he must have ready for the merchants who could arrive any day?”

Yudah gave a shrug. “Those merchants are none of my concern. I told you I was quitting.”

“Hebel is your brother. He has deadlines to meet and hired you to help him do it. Do you think it is fair of you to walk away

and leave him to shoulder this burden alone?”

Yudah rolled his eyes. “His troubles are not my concern.”

A look of understanding washed across Rivkah’s face. “You have not told him you plan to leave, have you?”

Yudah’s jaw tightened. “He will figure it out soon enough when I cease going to his pathetic little shop. I have had more than enough of his filthy, dreary work.”

Rivkah opened her mouth to reprimand him, but Hebel’s voice stopped her.

“Do not trouble yourself over this, Imma Rivkah. Abba Shemu’el told me all I need to know.”

Yudah stood between them rocking from one foot to the other. Head bowed, he stared at his feet.

Stepping around Rivkah, Hebel rested his hand on the boy’s head. “I call the Lord’s blessing down upon you, my brother. May he guide and bless you and bring you great success in this new endeavor.”

Yudah mumbled a weak, “Thank you.”

“You shall have your last wages by the end of the week.” Hebel sighed deeply and turned to face Rivkah. “Now if you will excuse me, I must return to my pathetic little shop. You see, I have much filthy, dreary work that needs to be done.”