



WITNESS

By E. G. Lewis

Book One of The Seeds of Christianity™ Series

Historic Personages Mentioned in WITNESS
Name, Meaning, Biblical Reference, Modern Equivalent

Yeshua's Family

Yeshua: The Lord is Salvation...Jesus
Mother: Miryam...Wished for Child...Mother of Jesus...Mary
Foster Father: Yosef...He Will Add...Jacob's son w/Rachel...
Joseph

Others

Annas: Former High Priest and Caiaphas's Father-in-Law
Athrongeus: Judean Messianic Pretender
Avraham: Father of Many...Hebrew Patriarch...Abraham
Caiaphas: High Priest at the time of the crucifixion
Daniyyel: God is My Judge...Prophet...Daniel
Judas the Galilean: Messianic Pretender, founder of Zealot Party
Moshe: Deliverer...Led Jews out of Egypt...Moses
Pontius Pilate: Roman Prefect in Palestina
Quintillius Varus: Governor of Roman Syria

Fictional Characters in WITNESS

Name, Meaning, Modern Equivalent

Rivkah's Family

Rivkah: A snare...Rebecca
Her Father: Yaakov...Supplanter...Jacob/James
Her Mother: Hadassah...Myrtle Tree...Esther
Her Uncle: Chayim...Life...Hyam
Her Aunt: Tamar...Palm Tree...Tamar
Her Cousin: Ruth...Companion...Ruth
Her Cousin: Elisheva...God is Abundant...Elizabeth
Her Cousin: Yonah...God is Gracious...John
Her Oldest Son: Yo'el...Yahweh is God...Joel
Her Oldest Daughter: Hadassah...Myrtle Tree...Esther
Hadassah's Husband: Hebel...Breath...Abel
Her Middle Son: Yaakov...Supplanter...James
Her Youngest Daughter: Channah...Grace...Hannah

Fictional Characters Continued

Shemu'el's Family

Shemu'el: God has Heard...Samuel
Father: Yo'el...Yahweh is God...Joel
Mother: Sarit...Lady...Sarah
Brother: Yhonatan...Yahweh's Given...Jonathan
Yhonatan's wife: Miriam...Wished for Child...Mary
Brother: Caleb...Dog...Caleb
Caleb's Wife: Avigail...My Father is Joy...Abigail

Others

Friend Rachel: Ewe...Rachel
Rachel's Husband: Binyamin...Son of Right Hand...Benjamin
Rachel's Son: Nahum...Comforter...Nahum
Rachel's Sister: Nava...Beautiful...Nava
Nava's Betrothed: Uri'el...God is My Light...Uri
Friend Devorah: Bee...Deborah
Devorah's Husband: Shaoul...Asked For...Saul
Friend Gavriel: Strong Man of God...Gabriel
Friend Simeon: Hearing...Simon
Father's Friend Sidonius: Man of Sidon
Sidonius' Son Tyro: Man of Tyre

~ 1 ~

I would have seen the lion if those clods of dirt flying past my head had not distracted me.

There I was, relaxing on a hill, bothering no one. The sheep poked around the sparse pasture for the last clumps of edible forage while I sang Psalms and wove a basket. The summer sun had browned the grass and baked the Judean hills, turning them tan as barley bread.

My tongue swept around my mouth tasting the gritty dryness of the afternoon as another clod sailed overhead. It struck the ground in front of me and broke apart in a spray of dust.

All sorts of strange objects took flight whenever I tended the sheep. Overripe figs, half-eaten pomegranates, sticks, and now clods of dirt had sprouted wings and flew through the air.

The boys did it to upset me, to make me cry. Once upon a time it had worked, but no longer. If I cried, they won. And I would *never* let them win.

Jumping to my feet, I spun around to face them.

Two more clods headed toward me.

Ducking under them, I rested my hands on my hips and glared across the ravine at the boys throwing them. "Stop, or you will be sorry," I yelled, adjusting my headband.

Like the bigger shepherds, I carried my *shebet*, a small club, and my sling tucked in my sash. I tugged the sling out and stooped to gather stones. Imagining myself David, I threw my shoulders back and rolled the stones in my hand. Seeing their startled faces when one of these rocks bounced off their forehead would do my heart good.

But there would be no rocks to the head this day, I thought with a sigh. No matter how angry they made me, there was little I

could do. On Mt. Sinai, the Lord gave Moshe the stone tablets containing the Law which commanded, *Thou shalt not commit murder*. The boys had nothing to fear and they knew it. Gavriel and Simeon could throw things, call me names, and torment me without fear of retaliation.

“Go sweep floors, little maiden,” Simeon hollered. “Comb wool, weave cloth, bake loaves.”

“Perhaps you should go to Jerusalem and apprentice yourself to a fuller.”

Simeon’s head snapped back. His eyes popped open wide.

Beside him, Gavriel snickered at the idea of seeing his friend removing lanolin from wool cloth by plodding knee-deep in a vat of stale urine.

Simeon’s face reddened.

Gavriel’s snickers became laughs. They grew louder until he doubled over, holding his sides and choking.

“Go away! You do not belong here,” Simeon shouted. He stuck out his tongue and did a little dance, daring me to do something about it.

“Do too belong here. I am tending my flock.” The smooth stone slid between my thumb and fingers.

Where to hit him?

“Sheep are for shepherds.” He gestured toward his loins. “Shepherds. Understand little girl?” He spat on the ground, clearing his mouth of the despicable word *girl*.

“There are shepherds and there are shepherdesses, you evil little boy. Take a look. What do you see? A shepherdess with her flock. Now go away, you are making the sheep anxious.”

A rock to where he pointed would give him good reason to dance. I gritted my teeth in frustration. Not only did Yahweh’s law rule my life, but Abba’s did as well. My father would never approve of me hitting a boy in the loins with a stone.

Abba’s stern voice echoed in the back of my mind. “Rivkah, my little dove, will you never learn? A gentle answer turns away wrath, but harsh words stir up anger. Do not fight with the boys.

Exhibit the comely behavior and feminine demeanor befitting a daughter of Avraham.”

Easy enough for him to say.

“There is no such thing as a shepherdess,” Gavriel hollered.

I shook my fist at him. “Did an unclean spirit turn you into a *goy*?” He glared at me for calling him a gentile, not that I cared. “What about Laban’s daughters, Leah and Rachel? Have you never heard of Jethro’s seven daughters, of Zipporah the shepherdess and wife of Moshe?”

Behind me the sheep bleated nervously. I ignored them. The boys and their dirt balls not only upset me, they bothered my sheep as well. Sometimes they threw things into the midst of the flock scattering them. It took a lot of effort to chase after those sheep and bring them back together.

We stared daggers at each other across the narrow gully.

I fit a stone into the pouch of my sling and let it dangle at the end of its straps. Shepherds used their slings to drive off small beasts and vermin. Gavriel and Simeon qualified.

Swinging it up in a practiced arc, I whipped it around in a tight circle. The whirling blur above my head buzzed like a hoard of locusts.

The boy’s mouths dropped. They glanced at each other nervously, at me, and then at each other again.

My warning shot smacked the ground in front of their feet, boring into the dry soil and scattering dust over their bare toes.

Gavriel laughed. “Ha! You shoot like a girl, little shepherdess. You would miss the side of a camel if it were standing right in front of you.” He stuck his fingers in the corners of his mouth and made a face.

“May the Lord will your face to remain like that for the rest of your life,” I said.

There were several more stones in my left hand. If they wanted war, war they would get. The boys jumped when they saw me reloading my sling.

But I never threw that second stone.

Shemu'el appeared behind them while they scoured the ground for ammunition. He is three years older than we are, almost twelve and soon to become a man. Shemu'el is tall, and stronger than Gavriel and Simeon put together. And, most importantly, he is my friend. It upsets him when the boys bother me.

They were so busy hunting for rocks, his footsteps went unnoticed.

Taking long strides, he marched up behind them and grabbed each of them by a shoulder.

I grinned when the boys winced and howled as he shook them.

"Go take care of your sheep, you little fools. They are beginning to stray." He spun them around and gave them a shove.

Today's battle may have ended, but our war had not. The boys shot me a look that promised revenge, then slunk away.

Shemu'el swung out his staff and gave them a spank as they left. Turning, he glanced up at the ridge behind me and gave a start.

The expression on Shemu'el's face made my stomach quiver.

He studied the hillside a moment longer, then, quick as a gazelle, leaped the ravine and ran to where I stood.

"Look, Rivkah," he whispered. "A lion."

~ 2 ~

Shemu'el dropped to one knee and rested his hand on my shoulder. He pointed across the dry meadow to an outcropping where a large, yellowish animal crept along the ridge.

Tales went around the campfire of lions carrying off sheep, but I had never seen a real one before. The hair prickled on the back of my neck. He was much larger than those in my imagination.

“What are we going to do?”

“We can drive him off. When a lion stalked our flocks, my older brothers defended the sheep.”

“But we do not have Caleb and Yhonatan here to help us.” I swallowed hard, struggling to control my rising panic.

Even though the lion's tawny coat blended into the dry soil, the ewes noticed him. They bumped against each other, softly bleating. So it was not the boys who made the sheep nervous after all.

“Where did this lion come from?”

“He came out of the mountains. My father says they range from the Negev north all the way to Galilee and east into Syria.”

“From the tales they tell around the campfire, I expected more fur around his neck.”

“His mane is not yet full because he is still young and small.”

Small?

“Why is he here?”

“Most likely he was driven by hunger. Game becomes scarce in the hills during the dry season.”

“What if he plans on eating us?”

Shemu'el chuckled and shook his head. “They seldom attack people. He came to raid your flock.” He gave me a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Our job is to stop him before he can.”

I wished for his confidence.

The lion inched along the slope, using the scrub and dried

brush for cover.

“The lion is concentrating on the sheep,” Shemu’el whispered. “If we stand still, he may not notice us.”

My eyes scanned the parched meadow, determining the lion’s target. Shemu’el and I saw the young lamb at the same moment. A look of understanding passed between us. The lamb with one brown leg had found a treasure, a patch of green growing in the shade of a boulder. She continued eating, oblivious to the predator stalking her.

My hands moved one around the other as tears welled in my eyes. Why, oh why, had I let those boys distract me? A single moment of carelessness might cost Abba one of his lambs. Maybe Simeon and Gavriel were right. Perhaps I was not cut out to be a shepherdess after all.

“You stay with the flock. I will go and retrieve your lamb.”

Shemu’el adjusted the heavy *shebet* tucked into the band of rope wound around his waist. About two cubits of hard, old grapewood, his shepherd’s rod had a large knob at one end.

Mine, much smaller, was mostly for show. When there was nothing else to do I used it to smash bugs.

Eyes on the ridge, Shemu’el set out on a curving path to the lamb.

I scurried down the hill toward the flock, walking on the sides of my feet to avoid slipping. Bits of soil and dislodged pebbles tumbled ahead of me. Like Shemu’el, my eyes remained on the predator creeping along the ridge.

The lion had the advantage. A few quick steps and a long leap would put him on top of the lamb. It dropped into a low crouch and inched forward, muscles taut and tail twitching.

Shemu’el broke into a run.

Whispering a prayer, I loaded a stone into my sling. Shemu’el counted on me for help and I could not let him down.

Crashing over the last cubits of hillside, Shemu’el flared his cloak and gave a throaty snarl.

The surprised lion snapped out of its crouch.

Shemu’el beat his staff through the brush with a defiant shout, sending branches and dry leaves flying into the air.

The lion showed its teeth and growled.

Swinging with all my might, I loosed my first rock. It slammed against the top of the big cat's shoulder.

The lion flinched and retreated a step, grumbling and snarling. His head swiveled, searching for the stone's source. An instant later its yellow eyes honed in on me standing in the midst of my sheep.

A shiver of fear rippled through me. I imagined the lion deciding which made the better meal, me or the lamb. A voice inside my head screamed, "*Run!*" My legs twitched, begging to go, but I held my ground. If Shemu'el had the courage to face a lion, so did I.

The lion's gaze moved to Shemu'el, then to the lamb.

It might be confused, but we knew what to do. Two slings whistled in the air. Two rocks flew toward the lion. Shemu'el's larger stone smacked its head.

The lion jerked its head and staggered back. Rearing up, it clawed the air. Its angry roar echoed around the narrow canyon.

We both hit him again.

Confused, and tired of being pelted by rocks, it vented its frustration on the leafless branches of a nearby bush.

Shemu'el sensed the tide of battle turning in our favor and hurled his staff at the lion like a spear. He jerked the rod out of his sash. One well-placed blow could shatter the lion's skull. Shemu'el held the rod high, ready to strike, and inched his way closer to the cowering lamb. He scooped up a fist-sized rock, hurled it at the lion, and broke into a run.

The rock made a hollow thud when it struck the animal's side. The lion growled over its shoulder and slunk away.

In one swift motion, Shemu'el snatched the lamb and tossed it over his shoulder.

I continued lobbing stones at the lion to speed him on his way. The lion had disappeared by the time Shemu'el returned with the lamb. Now that the danger passed, my body shook like a leaf in the wind.

"You were brave," Shemu'el said, placing the lamb in my shaky arms. "Your father will be proud of you."

He smiled. "You are a good shepherdess, Rivkah. Do not let the boys convince you otherwise."

He turned to leave, then stopped. "In the excitement of the lion, I almost forgot why I came."

He dug in his leather pouch and handed me a short piece of carved and polished wood.

I turned it in my hand, enthralled by his artistry and the swirling grain of the wood. Shemu'el had trimmed away a portion of the branch, allowing him to create a wreath of delicate flowers curling around its entire length. I studied it closer, noting the angled cut at one end and row of neat, evenly-spaced holes set between the blossoms.

Seeing my confusion, Shemu'el took it out of my hand. "It is a *shrika*. I chose olive wood because of its fine tone. Here, let me show you."

He put the whistle to his lips and blew. It made a pleasant, melodic sound. He lifted his finger, uncovering a hole. The tone changed. He vibrated his finger above the hole.

I looked on in amazement. It was not only beautiful to look at, the *shrika* made beautiful music, too. The trilling sound he made reminded me of the small yellow and gray-feathered serins that flitted from bush to bush.

When he handed it back I drew a big breath and blew into one end. Instead of music it made an embarrassing squeal. My cheeks warmed when he laughed.

"Takes a little practice," he said, with a wink. "You will learn."

The strong muscles in Shemu'el's shoulders moved under his tunic as he trudged back up the hill. At the top he turned to grin and wave good-bye.

My heart swelled until I feared it would burst. Clutching my precious *shrika*, I raised my hand high above my head and returned his wave.

As I watched Shemu'el leave, it became clear to me why he came, why he always stopped the boys from pestering me and why he brought me gifts. He planned to take me for his wife.

As a young maiden, not even a woman yet, some would say

it was too soon for me to be thinking about these things. But what other explanation could there be?



Most days I enjoyed being alone with the sheep. Today it unnerved me. The slightest sound worried me. What if the lion returned and Shemu'el was not there to help? Better to take them home to the sheepfold.

I watched the shadows, jumping at the slightest movement as we walked home. The sheep sensed my uneasiness and reacted to it. They clustered around me, jostling for position as we walked.

Together we drove off a lion, I thought, smiling. It felt like a dream. Shemu'el said we could and we did. He said I had been brave. We both knew better. He was the courageous one.

Someday Shemu'el would be my husband and the father of my children. It gave me a secure feeling knowing this most important matter had been decided.

~ 3 ~

Abba was up on a stool picking plums when I returned. He gave me a surprised look and hopped down.

“You are home early, is anything wrong?”

“A lion...” All the way home I promised myself I would not cry when I told Abba what happened. Yet as soon as the word *lion* came out of my mouth, I broke down and bawled like a lost lamb.

He pulled me into his arms and kissed the top of my head to make me feel better. “You have no injuries, which is more important than any lamb. Tell me about it.”

“If Shemu’el had not been there to help me, the lion would surely have eaten one of our lambs.”

“Shemu’el is a fine young man. I will tell his father about this good thing he did.”

His words warmed my heart. Abba thought Shemu’el was a fine young man. He would be proud to have him for a son-in-law when Shemu’el asked to take me for his bride.

“Which lamb was it?” Abba asked.

“This one,” I said, walking over to the flock and picking out the ewe lamb with one brown leg.

“Very good. Now come sit beside me, my brave little shepherdess.”

He had something on his mind. Was he upset with me for neglecting the sheep? I snuggled against Abba’s strong chest, hoping he was not.

“Hungry?” He offered me my choice of plums from the pot he picked into.

Choosing a nice one, I cleaned it on my cloak and took a big bite. Sweet juice dripped out of the side of my mouth.

He caught the drip with his finger up and smiled.

When Abba smiles like that it makes me feel good all over.

He studied his sticky finger for a moment, then popped it into his mouth and licked it off. “I think the time has come for you to have a sheep of your own.”

I jumped up and down and clapped my hands for joy. “Which one...which one?”

“The one you saved. She owes her life to you, so we will make her yours.”

“Do you mean it?”

I frowned into Abba’s soft brown eyes. He sometimes made jokes and played tricks on me. Do not let this be one of those times, I prayed. Please do not let this be a joke. It must not be.

“Of course I do. You are ready to start your own flock.”

Throwing my arms around his neck, I hugged him with all my might and kissed his scratchy cheek. “Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“My father gave me my first lamb when I was about your age. It is a way for a boy to build a flock for the day when he must provide for himself and his family. Since I have no sons, I will do it for you instead. This will furnish you with a dowry.” He stopped and glanced down at me. “Are you listening to me?”

“Of course.” My mind sometimes wandered, but not this time.

“We will add an extra notch to her ear meaning *this sheep belongs to Rivkah*. When your ewe is bred, all her offspring will become yours.” He raised a cautionary finger. “Now understand, you will be responsible for the offering of the first fruits. After that, if she drops ewe lambs, you may keep them to increase your flock. If she brings forth rams, we will take them to the Temple along with mine.”

He offered me an important privilege. The sheep vendors in Annas’ market at the Temple in Jerusalem paid the best price for lambs. Only approved shepherds could sell to them and, even then, they inspected each animal for blemishes. Abba’s father and his father’s father had provided sacrificial lambs to the Temple. He and his brother, Chayim, inherited this right when they came of age. Now my lambs would also be eligible.

What about my husband? Could he sell to the Temple too? You worry too much, a little voice inside my head told me. Shemu’el’s father, Yo’el, sold his lambs to the Temple just as we did. I imagined being grown up and married to Shemu’el and walking beside him when we led our lambs to Jerusalem.

Abba’s voice jerked me back to reality. “Are you paying

attention to everything I've been telling you?"

"Yes. Oh, yes." Well, I had been thinking about lambs...sort of.

"When we take your lambs to Jerusalem, I will pay the road tolls and the livestock tax at the Sheep Gate. We will deduct it from the sales price when I give you your money."

Money? Did he say, "*Money?*" Having a sheep of my own was such an exciting prospect that the thought of money never entered my mind.

"When we are paid for our lambs at the Temple Treasury, you can place your tithe into the offering bowl. It will be up to you to set aside an equal part for second tithes. After that, the rest will be yours to keep."

I leaned against Abba and tugged his big arm around me. Soon there would be a new flock in our little settlement. Not a shepherdess, heh? What would Gavriel and Simeon say about me now?



After supper Abba said our evening prayers and put a single lamp in the niche for our nightlight. Abba always said the sleep of a laborer is sweet. He fell asleep right away. Shafts of moonlight shone through our window while he snored.

Even though it had been a tiring day, my mind refused to let me rest. When not remembering the lion or thinking about my new sheep, my thoughts returned to Shemu'el.

A few weeks before, in the shade of the orchard, my friend Rachel and I took turns braiding each other's hair. We found a scrap of blue ribbon and tied the ends with it, pretending we were getting ready for our wedding day. While we worked we speculated on what it would be like to have husbands.

I piled my braids atop my head and spun around for Rachel to admire. "Do you think Shemu'el would like my hair pulled up like this?"

"Do you really believe Shemu'el will take you for his wife?"

"I am certain of it."

“What if he chooses someone else.”

Just the thought of Shemu’el choosing someone else made me sad enough to weep. “Do not ever say that, Rachel. Shemu’el will take me for his wife. He will...he must.”

“And will you kiss him?”

“Well, of course,” I stammered, trying to sound very confident.

Rachel giggled. “When you are betrothed you must let Shemu’el kiss you right on the mouth the way lovers do.”

“How do you know so much about lovers?” She always seemed to know more about these things than me.

“My older sister, Nava, is to be married soon. One evening I followed her and Uri’el, her betrothed, while they walked in the vineyard.”

“They let you do that?”

A devilish gleam twinkled in Rachel’s eyes. “I hid between the rows. They spent all of their time staring at one another.” She clasped her hands and pretended to swoon.

I scooted over so as not to miss a word.

“They never noticed me. I watched them put their arms around each other. Uri’el stroked Nava’s cheek and sniffed her hair. They lay down on the grass side-by-side and kissed each other on the mouth over and over. They were so close I couldn’t tell where Uri’el stopped and Nava began.”

Rachel leaned over and whispered, “The following day I overheard Nava tell a friend she had incited Uri’el’s lust in the vineyard. She said his wonderful kisses made her weak.”

We thought we understood the part about inciting his lust, though neither of us knew for sure. As for kisses making you weak, Abba often kissed me. Always on the cheek or the top of my head. It made me feel happy inside and secure when he kissed me. Is that how Uri’el made Nava feel, happy inside?

The only person who ever kissed me on the mouth was my little cousin, Yonah. He was still learning to walk and called me Rivvy. Whenever I picked him up, he grinned and gave me a wet, sloppy kiss right on the mouth. Would a lover’s kisses be messy like that?

How would it feel to kiss Shemu'el?

Abba snorted in his sleep making me jerk.
Could he somehow know my thoughts?

He coughed and moved in the bed. After a deep sigh, he resumed snoring.

Easing my arm out from under the covers, I brought my hand to my mouth. I closed my eyes and kissed the back of my hand pretending I was kissing Shemu'el.

That was not how kisses would feel. There should be some lips pressed against mine. The next time I put my first two fingers against my lips.

Too bony.

How could I ever know what it felt like? I would die rather than ask Shemu'el to kiss me.

But if it was his idea...

~ 4 ~

Aunt Tamar was not pleased when she heard about me starting my own flock. It seemed like she complained to Abba about me every chance she got. Said I spent too much time with the sheep and not enough time learning household tasks. The household tasks were just an excuse. She needed me to care for my young cousins, Yonah and Elisheva, so she had more time to gossip at the well.

Not that I minded caring for my cousins. Women's work was fine too, but I liked being with the sheep as well. She and Abba reached an agreement allowing me to split my time between the sheep and the house. After we prayed, I spent the rest of each *Shabbat* with the sheep since the Law forbade housework.

More importantly, I got to stay in the fields all night with Abba during lambing season. It was my favorite time of the year because I loved babies, all kinds of babies. Baby lambs, baby goats, baby birds...even baby people. My cousins were young, but not babies anymore. I loved them just the same.

Some birds nested in one of the olive trees beside my uncle's house. Every few days I checked the eggs to see if they hatched. Once they did, I looked in on my baby birds every afternoon to see how they were getting along.

Gavriel and Simeon noticed and asked about the birds. It surprised me that they would be interested in baby birds. I offered to let them climb up and take a look, but they said, "No, thanks. We are happy just letting you tell us about them."

Aunt Tamar saw me up in the tree and talked to Abba about it.

"You must stay out of the tree, my little dove," Abba said. "It is not proper for a young maiden to be climbing."

"Why?"

"Because you must lift your clothing when you climb. A young maiden should not expose herself in such a manner. Tamar noticed the boys staring up your tunic while you were in the tree." He paused to let me think about this then asked, "Were

you wearing a loincloth?”

My stomach quivered and my cheeks burned. “Yes, Abba,” I said, lowering my head. “Always.”

He hugged me. “Then you have nothing to be ashamed of.”
And that was that.

Not having a mother meant my father and I sometimes had to discuss embarrassing topics. My mother, Hadassah, died a few days after I was born.

The same thing sometimes happens with our ewes. They have a lamb and then turn right around and get sick and die. You can never tell. It happens the other way, too. The mother survives and the lamb dies. But it all evens out in the end. We put the motherless lambs with another ewe and she raises them.

My father’s brother, Chayim, is also a shepherd. He and his family live in the house next to ours. They took me in as a newborn, making me and their oldest daughter, Ruth, milk-sisters. His wife, my Aunt Tamar, nursed me until my father took me back at three years of age.

Aunt Tamar opposed the idea, saying it was not a good thing for him to do. Better I should stay with her and learn the womanly work of keeping a house. After all, who wanted a wife who herded sheep and could not cook and sew?

But he insisted, and so back I went. It has worked out all right. I learned how to cook and keep house. Everything in our little home gets taken care of and Abba never complains. We have each other and that is all we need. The Lord looks after us and we look after the sheep.



If I was such a disgusting person, why did Gavriel and Simeon want to look up my tunic? They told me they were interested in knowing how my baby birds were doing. Ha! They had no interest in birds at all. No more climbing for Rivkah.

I spent a lot of time thinking about it and the same thought kept running through my mind. Gavriel and Simeon were the ones who misbehaved, not me. So why did it feel like I was the

one being punished? Who committed the transgression, Bathsheba taking her bath and bothering no one, or King David sneaking around his palace and peeking out the window at her nakedness?

Aunt Tamar said I should not waste my afternoons watching birds when there were useful chores to be done. She taught me to spin wool into thread. Making clothes is more than just sewing cloth. First we sheared the sheep, and then I carded, or combed, the wool to remove any dirt in it.

In the evenings, while Abba said our prayers, I took handfuls of carded wool and rolled them on my thigh, twisting them into coarse yarn. Since I started doing this, my hands were no longer rough and scratchy like a shepherd's. The lanolin in the wool made them nice and soft. Very womanly.

Aunt Tamar wanted to teach me how to spin my coarse yarn into finished thread. We placed the balls of yarn in a special bowl with guides to keep it from becoming tangled. I attached one end to a spindle, turned my back to the bowl and raised my arm. Then, holding the thread between my first finger and thumb, I dropped the spindle.

The spindle twirled as it fell, spinning the coarse yarn into finished thread. You controlled the thread's thickness by how fast you let the spindle drop. When it hit the floor, I wrapped the new thread around the spindle and repeated the process.

My aunt did two at once, one strand in each hand. Each time I tried to keep track of two of them, I got confused and made a mess of them both. My thread never came out as fine as hers either. I tried to explain, because I am short, her spindle had farther to fall than mine.

Aunt Tamar said it was because I am hopeless.

I worked extra hard spinning several skeins of very nice thread to impress her. I planned to dye it red and use it to weave stripes into a bolt of cloth for Abba's cloak. One day, while she shopped, I decided to dye it myself and surprise her.

Everything went just the way it should. I ground dried madder roots, put them in a pot of water, and heated it. Then I strained the roots out and soaked my thread for a long time over

a low fire before letting it cool.

No one told me to use a stick to lift the yarn out of the dye. When the time came to remove it, I reached into the pot, squeezed out the excess dye and put the thread into a cool rinse. My arms turned bright red all the way up to my elbows.

Aunt Tamar screamed so loud when she saw me that everyone in our little settlement came running.

"I thought you were bleeding to death," she said, patting her heart and fanning the air in front of her face.

Abba heard the noise and hurried over to check. He patted my head and chuckled. "This is how we all learn," he said. "The next time you will know."

"There may not be a next time," Aunt Tamar said and made a nasty face.

For two weeks every time Gavriel or Simeon saw me they jumped back and waved their hands in the air shouting, "Unclean! Unclean!"

It made me wish I had some terrible disease just so they would catch it.

~ 5 ~

Shemu'el and I sat side-by-side on the hillside scarcely breathing. A few feet away, a chickadee hopped from branch to branch in search of berries.

We stared into the bush without making a sound and communicated with our eyes. A hush settled around us and I listened to the faraway hum of a beehive. A fly landed on my arm. I gritted my teeth and stifled the urge to bat it away. To do so would startle the tiny feathered creature we were watching.

Shemu'el sighed with pleasure when the bird flew away.

An impromptu merging of his flock and mine, grazed in the meadow below us. Shemu'el often led his flock to fields adjacent to where mine grazed. It gave us time to spend together talking about whatever crossed our minds. We enjoyed each other's company and spent many days this way. Because I was young, and he not yet a man, no one paid much attention.

When it came time for the midday meal, we shared what was in our sacks. I usually slipped little treats and tidbits into mine to give to Shemu'el.

After we ate, we lay on our backs and stared up at the sky. Raptors soared high above us, nearly as high as the clouds it seemed. I saw a scattering of storks sweep past. The return of the storks signaled the beginning of their annual migration. Soon our skies would be filled with flocks of migrating birds.



Shemu'el unwrapped the cloth. "I love the wood's beauty," he said and handed me the bowl.

Beauty? What beauty? All I saw was a crude bowl, rough and splintery. I slid my tongue along my lips trying to decide what to say. Would his feelings be hurt if I spoke the truth?

Shemu'el read my face and grinned. "You do not see it, do you?"

Lowering my eyes, I shook my head. "I am sorry, but I do not."

Rather than taking offense, he surprised me by laughing. “No wonder. There is little, if any, beauty there yet. I look at it with my imagination, not my eyes.” He touched the side of his head. “I sometimes forget you cannot see what is in here. Hopefully, I will transfer what I hold in my mind to the bowl you hold in your hand.”

“Where did you get it?”

“When we take lambs to the Temple, Abba lets me visit Leandros the woodworker,” he said. “He attaches the block of wood to a device called a lathe that turns it like a wheel. As it spins, he gouges out the center and shapes the sides.” Shemu’el smiled. “And then he gives it to me.”

“After all that work, he *gives* it to you?”

“To finish, carve and polish. Then I return it to him and he pays me three *denarii* for my work.”

“He is very generous.”

Shemu’el gave a self-conscious chuckle. “Do not grieve for Leandros. Rich men pay him well for my bowls. But not this one. When this bowl is finished, I plan to give it to Imma.”

I envied his mother receiving such a beautiful gift. Shemu’el covered his lap with a piece of hide. Placing the bowl in the center of it, he began working on it with a curved scraper. Sweat beaded on his brow as he scraped. Every so often he stopped, brushed an arm over his forehead and dumped out the thin curls of wood that accumulated inside the bowl.

A week later Shemu’el removed his materials from his bag and arranged them in a straight line. The last item out was the bowl.

He offered it to me for inspection. “Well, what do you think now?”

I hardly recognized it. His scraping had shaved away all the gouges, splinters and chips.

“It is lovely,” I said, turning it in my hands. I ran my fingers over the wood, feeling its grainy texture.

“It still must be smoothed,” Shemu’el said, reading my mind. He filled the bottom of a clay dish with light gray powder.

“What is that?”

“The Romans call it *pumicis*. It is mined near the town of Herculaneum, at the base of Mt. Vesuvius, and crushed into fine powder. I get it from Leandros.”

“Is it hard work to smooth the wood?”

“It is one of the easier steps. Would you like to try?”

I looked everywhere but at Shemu’el. “Oh, no. I might ruin your bowl.”

He caught my hand and gave a playful tug. “Nonsense. Come, sit here. I trust you.”

I sat cross-legged as I had seen him do and smoothed my tunic. He spread the hide across my lap and placed the bowl on it. I folded my hands in my lap and squeezed them together to keep them from shaking.

“We always start with oil and finish with water.” Shemu’el removed the stopper from a small bottle of olive oil, added it to the gray powder in a dish, and stirred them into a paste. He handed me the dish and a pad.

I stared up at him, not knowing what to do.

“Would you like me to show you how?”

I nodded.

Shemu’el stood beside me for a moment chewing his lip, then said, “Uh...Rivkah, I do not want you to think I am taking liberties. Would you be offended if I reached around you? Just to show you how it is done, you understand.”

“No,” I said in a tiny voice. I swallowed hard. “You may do that.”

He dropped to the ground and slid close. “First, dip the pad into the paste.”

I did as he instructed.

“Now set the dish aside and place your pad into the bowl.”

Shemu’el eased his arm around me, taking care not to brush me. He placed his hand atop mine. “Like this,” he said, directing my hand. “Without too much pressure, swirl it in circles.”

Together, our hands glided around the bowl in a slush of oily grit. Feeling his breath on my cheek made my heart pound. I forced myself to concentrate on the swirling pattern inside the bowl, though other thoughts kept intruding.

“Now begin to run the pad up the side each time we go around.”

Shemu’el inched forward. When his chest brushed my back, I leaned back against him ever so lightly.



“Can I see it yet?” I would never look until Shemu’el allowed me to.

He unwrapped it with care and handed it to me. After our oil sanding, he sanded the bowl again with *pumicis* and water, then carved and stained the wood. The bowl was nearly done.

I squealed with surprise and delight. Graceful stalks of wheat circled the outside of the bowl. I ran my finger over them, marveling at their realistic beauty. “The wheat is unbelievable,” I said, handing it back to him. “You should be a woodcarver, not a shepherd.”

He shook his head. “I enjoy carving, but I was born to be a shepherd. All that remains is the polishing,” he said and stretched for the pot he’d left warming in the sun.

“What do you use to polish the bowl?”

He tilted it for me to see. “My own recipe, sweet almond oil and beeswax. Taste it,” he said, offering me the pot.

“Will it make me sick?”

He stared into my eyes, his expression serious. “I would never do anything that would bring you harm. Go ahead.” With a happy chuckle, Shemu’el caught a dab on his fingertip and licked it off. “See. There is nothing in it to hurt you.”

I took some and rubbed it between my thumb and forefinger, feeling its slipperiness. I sniffed, then put it to my tongue. It tasted sweet and nutty...surprisingly pleasant.

Shemu’el grinned when my finger returned to the pot a second time.

More than anything, I wanted to fix the taste in my memory...and with it this day. Even then, I somehow sensed how much this memory would someday mean to me.

~ 6 ~

“And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.”

—Luke 2:8

I named my sheep Liat, which means *You are mine*. Having a sheep all my own made going to the fields much more exciting. I still did womanly chores with Aunt Tamar, but as soon as Abba returned with the flock, my feet flew out the door as I ran to check on Liat. Now I had two things to think about while sweeping, grinding meal and kneading dough, Liat and Shemu’el. Well, mostly Shemu’el.

But for a time there would be no more weaving and dyeing, sweeping and stitching for Rivkah. Lambing season had come and, as a shepherdess, my duty was to be with my flock. Abba and I would spend our nights in the field along with Shemu’el, his brothers and father and the other shepherds of our settlement. I danced with excitement as I scurried around the house preparing to leave.

Abba moved the sheep to the birthing pasture about the ninth hour, leaving me behind to gather the things we needed. My bag waited, stuffed with food. Knowing the fields grew cold at night, I threw in our fleece-lined cloaks. After tucking my rod into my sash, I glanced around the room making a final check. Ready to go. I tossed the bag over my shoulder, grabbed my staff and bid my cousins in the next house farewell.

My heart pounded with anticipation as I skipped down the path. The coolness of the coming evening settled around me on my way to the pasture. A surprisingly large number of people traveled the main road heading for Bethlehem. I threaded my way between them watching the setting sun paint pink and purple bands across the western sky.

I had slipped my *shrika* into my leather purse in hopes of playing it when we sang around the fire. A quick pat verified it was still there. My feet could not get me there fast enough.

By the time I reached the fields, the sky had turned dusky blue-gray and a delicate rim of moon peaked over the mountains

behind me. Wispy ribbons of smoke rose from the valley; they had already lit the evening's fire. Abba noticed me walking along the crest of the hill and dashed up to meet me.

He was breathless from the climb. Good news. Our lambing season has begun, my little dove. Just before you arrived the first ewe dropped a pair of healthy rams."

"Perhaps those twins are the omen of a prosperous season."

"May the Lord make it so."

I took his hand as we walked. "Why are there so many pilgrims on the road? It is not a time for festivals, and *Pesach* is not until the month of Nisan."

"Those are not pilgrims, they are going to Bethlehem for the census." Sensing my confusion, he explained. "Some time ago Caesar Augustus ordered a count of the whole world. They do it by province, beginning in the west and moving to the east."

He shrugged. "Our turn has come. It is about taxation and gathering gold. Just another Roman scheme to squeeze the last drops out of a rag they have already wrung dry."

"Do they not have enough already?"

Abba rested his arm over my shoulder and lowered his voice. "Let me tell you something about gold, little one. It is best to have none at all. Once you begin to accumulate gold it makes your palm itch for more. Love of money is the root of all evil." He licked his lips. "So what have you brought for our supper?"

Other shepherds drifted in from the fields as I spread a cloth and sat out our meal. There was a large block of soft cheese with herbs kneaded in the way Abba preferred, barley loaves, parched grains in vinegar and oil with sliced cucumbers, dried fruits, and eggs cooked hard in water.

A man's voice from behind startled me. "Those apricots look tasty."

A large hand reached over my shoulder into my open package and stole an apricot. I jerked around in surprise and watched the thief, my Uncle Chayim, grin as he popped the fruit into his mouth.

Chayim was more than an uncle to me...almost a father. He called me his other daughter because I spent my earliest years in

his household. Many of those evenings I crawled into my uncle's strong arms and fell asleep.

Chayim clapped my father on the back and dropped onto the grass beside him. "Twins, eh Yaakov. An auspicious start to the lambing season." He grinned. "You may be ahead for now, brother, but this season is far from over. We shall see who wins out in the end."

"And how are you, little shepherdess?" He rummaged in his pack for supper as he spoke. "Tamar sent honey cakes. There may be enough to share, although I feel hungry as a lion tonight." He bared his teeth, gave a low growl, then chuckled deep in his belly.

Abba grabbed a stick from the pile of branches the younger boys gathered that afternoon and poked at the fire, sending sparks soaring into the sky. He continued prodding the embers until flames re-appeared, then tossed on several more logs. The circle around the fire filled as the other shepherds drifted in from the meadows. The men shared food and talked among themselves. I sat with my head down, listening as I ate.

Shemu'el sat opposite me, on the other side of the fire with his brothers and father. We stole glances at each other through the flames. He and his brothers talked and laughed, making me wonder what they said. Each time our eyes met he smiled. The fire painted a glow on his face and its light sparkled in his eyes.



The hungry lion shared Aunt Tamar's honey cakes like I knew he would. They left my fingers sticky so I walked down to a nearby creek to wash.

"May I come down?" Shemu'el asked from the top of the hill.

"Of course." The cold water made my hands tingle.

Shemu'el's footsteps drew closer, then he plopped down beside me. "You do not mind me being here, do you?"

He understood that as the only maiden it was sometimes necessary for me to go away by myself.

"Oh no. Uncle Chayim brought honey cakes to share. I came

to wash my sticky fingers.”

He rubbed his hands together and grinned. “This is your first season with your own flock. You must be excited.”

I beamed with pride. “Yes I am, thanks to you.”

Shemu’el and his brothers each had their own sheep. He had been building his herd for several years in anticipation of the day he would take a wife.

“You give me too much credit, Rivkah. I did not rescue Liat. We drove the lion off together.”

Shemu’el always said nice things that made me feel good inside. He never belittled me the way the other boys did. *Stay and talk some more*, my heart begged. Knowing the other boys would tease us if we were gone too long, I forced myself to say instead, “We should get back to the fire.”

Shemu’el rose and extended an arm. His strong hand grasped mine and he pulled me up. He continued holding my hand as we walked back to the campfire. I imagined walking this way everywhere we went after we wed.

“As your herd increases you may want to introduce new bloodlines,” Shemu’el said. “My brother Caleb has a fine new ram. He would let you use him if I asked for you. I watched the ram search out and mount some of our ewes; he is a very aggressive breeder.”

My fingers quivered in his hand. “How nice. I will keep that in mind.” Aggressive breeding was the last thing I wanted to discuss with Shemu’el.

Our eyes met in the moonlight. Shemu’el noticed my embarrassment and let my fingers slip through his.

We walked the rest of the way in silence. Oh, how I hated that ram of Caleb’s.



Abba and I rechecked the sheep before turning in. Like always, groups of shepherds kept watch in shifts while the others slept. If a predator appeared, or anything out of the ordinary occurred, they would rouse the others.

Those on the first watch left for the field and the rest of us took our places around the fire. The flames danced in the dark as the men began chanting *Ma'ariv*. I tugged my fleece cloak over me for a blanket and tucked it under my chin as they sang our evening prayers.

Using my arm as a pillow, I watched Shemu'el through the flames as he arranged his bedroll. I imagined us snuggled together and sleeping in each other's arms.

Myriad stars spread across the heavens above me. An unseen weight pushed my eyelids closed and I drifted into a deep slumber.

~ 7 ~

*“And an angel of the Lord appeared to them,
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were filled with fear.”*

– Luke 2:9

“Look out, a star is falling on us!” I awoke with a start and squinted into the bright light racing toward us.

Abba hunched beside me staring into the sky.

The terrified look on his face gave me a chill. What was happening? Nothing frightened Abba.

The light drew nearer, growing larger and larger, until it surrounded us. I scrunched between the other shepherds, making myself as small as possible. The other shepherds? What were the other shepherds doing clustered around me? When did they move to our side of the fire? What became of our watchmen? Why had no one sounded an alarm?

Too many questions. No answers.

Struck dumb with fright, we sat like statues, our faces turned to the sky. What at first appeared to be a falling star gradually took shape. The light came from the creature at the center of it. Placing a hand along my brow to shield my eyes, I squinted up at him. His light washed over us, pure and clear. Everything stilled as this powerful being hovered above us.

“Do not be afraid.”

I cannot recall what his voice sounded like, or if he even had a voice. His words became a part of my thoughts without me knowing how. An incredible sense of peace washed over me, better even than waking from a nightmare in my father’s arms.

The others felt it too. All around me people smiled and sighed in relief. We had nothing to fear.

No matter what happened, we knew it would be good. Just four simple words. This mighty creature had said, “Do not be afraid,” and we cast away our fears as easily as one tossed aside their cloak at the end of the day.

We came to understand he was one of God's angels sent to bring us a message. I snuggled under Abba's left arm and stared into the sky. With my fears gone, I could now look up at the angel without squinting.

"I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people," the angel said. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior. He is the Mashiach, the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

Then the night sky opened.

I gasped as more and more of these marvelous creatures poured out of the heavens as rapidly as barley kernels spill from a split sack. This heavenly host gathered about us, swirling above our heads, praising God and singing, *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."*

And then, as quickly as they appeared, they were gone. The sky closed around them and we were left in darkness, staring up at the stars in wonder. The night never seemed darker than it did after the angels left.

"What was that light?"

"We have seen the *Shekinah*, the Cloud of Glory," Abba said. "The manifestation of the Most High God."

"And those creatures of light were his angels, cherubim or seraphim perhaps," Shemu'el added.

Shemu'el? How could I not have noticed him beside me?

Everyone grew quiet, thinking on this. All at once the men looked at one another and cried in a single voice, "Bethlehem. We must go to Bethlehem. Let us go and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

The men scurried about gathering their things and preparing for the trip.

"What about our sheep?" someone shouted. "Shepherds do not abandon their sheep. Have we forgotten there are ewes in the meadow about to give birth?"

The men stopped in their tracks and cast questioning

glances at each other.

Yes, I thought, what of the sheep?

“We shall leave the sheep in the hands of the Lord,” Abba said. “He would not have sent his messengers to call us if He did not expect us to go.”

So off to Bethlehem we went.



When men are in a hurry they take long strides, making it difficult for people with short legs to keep up. The shepherds led the way and I ran alongside. Each time I stumbled in the dark Abba's strong arm caught me before I fell.

No one knew what to expect when we arrived in Bethlehem. The angel gave us no directions, yet somehow we knew right where to go.

We turned the corner of Bethlehem's back streets and found a man sitting on the ground blocking the entrance to a stable. He had his coarse traveling cloak wrapped around himself as a blanket and his back propped against the post which framed the opening. He reminded me of a shepherd keeping watch in front of a sheepfold. Seeing his head resting on folded arms laid across his bent knees, I assumed he dozed.

As we drew nearer, he heard the scuffling of our footsteps and stirred. Pushing aside the cloak gathered about his face, he lifted his head and studied our little band warily.

He rose, stretched and rolled his shoulders before untying the straps of his *tefillin*.

These small leather pouches contained verses from the Law. Jews tie them around their forehead and on their left arm near their heart in obedience to the Torah, which said, “bind the commands, decrees and laws of the Lord to your forehead and to your heart.”

He had been praying, not sleeping.

The man stood and combed his fingers through the tangles of his beard, watching us as we approached. Though clearly tired, his dark, intelligent eyes remained alert. I knew just about

everyone in Bethlehem, but not him. He must have come to be numbered in Caesar's census.

He held his large hands in front of him, not threatening, but prepared to defend if necessary. Defend what? What needed guarding in this little room attached to the back of a small house?

He moved to the center of the doorway. "*Shalom Aleichem*. Peace be unto you," he said. "What is it you seek?"

"*Aleichem Shalom*. Peace to you as well," Abba replied. "I am Yaakov bar Yonah, a shepherd." Planting his staff in the soft dirt, he grabbed it with both hands and gently rocked from side to side as he spoke. "These are my friends and neighbors, other shepherds. We seek the one of whom the angels spoke."

The man's eyes widened. "Angels? I do not understand. I know nothing of angels."

Abba and the other men all spoke at once, chattering in excited voices as they tried to explain what had happened in the fields. The bright light that surrounded us, the angelic being and the heavenly host singing, "Peace on earth and goodwill to men."

Then they told him about the message the angel gave us.

"We know only what we were told. The hand of the Most High urged us to leave our flocks and come to Bethlehem. We came without understanding why," the men confessed, spreading their arms in bewilderment. "Can you help us find this wondrous thing of which the angels spoke?"

"You have come to the right place," the man replied.

Recalling their fright when the heavens opened and the heavenly host poured out, the men shrank back. But their fears quickly gave way to excitement. Regaining their courage, they inched forward toward the doorway, stretching and craning to see. His raised hand stopped them.

"You must wait here," he said, courteous but resolute. "The midwife and the other women just left. My wife is feeding her infant for the first time. They must not be disturbed." He smiled and motioned the men away from the entrance. "Come," he said, "we shall talk while we wait."

He seemed most interested in hearing about what happened to us in the fields.

“Tell me again all you saw and heard,” he said, squatting. His eyes swept across the men circled around him. “Omit nothing.”

He listened, interrupting to ask questions from time to time. Sometimes he made reference to one or another of the prophets. As Jewish men will do, the shepherds all replied at once, each giving their own interpretation, telling what this rabbi or that rabbi once said.

When they finished with the angels he asked about their new lambs. Were they healthy? Was the lamb crop good this year? He was a carpenter, he explained, from the North Country, from Nazareth in Galilee.

Laughing and nodding, the men discussed the kind of things men always talked about, tools and work.

Then, from inside the stable, a baby’s cry pierced the quiet night.