

The illustration depicts a bustling village scene with stone buildings built on a hillside. In the foreground, a woman in a blue dress stands near a doorway, surrounded by large red pots. To her right, a man in a red tunic is pushing a wheelbarrow. A woman in a pink dress and white headscarf is walking across a courtyard. In the background, a man in an orange tunic is near a stone archway. The scene is filled with various details like laundry hanging on a line, a donkey, and a small structure with a thatched roof. The overall atmosphere is one of daily life in a rural setting.

The Coming

A Nativity Story

By David Gibbons

Introduction

What follows is a retelling of the birth of Jesus, the Anointed One. It came out of an intense study of the two gospel accounts of his birth.

Most people know the "story" of his birth. However, the story they know is too often that of the Christmas pageant, and not the gospels. Much has been added, some has been left out, and what is left is, too often, an unbelievable myth. I have nothing against the Christmas pageants themselves; they surely have a place in our culture and preserve at least something of a religious nature during the Christmas season. But they make it hard for thinking people to really understand what happened.

My question as I started was simply "is there a believable story in the actual gospel accounts?" And so I set about trying to accomplish the following four goals: 1) to read the accounts themselves with new eyes, trying to see what was actually there; 2) to strip away, as far as I could, the accretions; 3) to see if the two accounts (in Matthew and Luke) could be harmonised; and 4) to try to understand the human motivations behind what happened.

There are, for instance, a couple of obvious "omissions" in the resulting story. Most people will be surprised that the birth itself does not take place in a stable. However, there is no mention of a stable in either account, it had simply been inferred from the fact that he was laid in a manger. In first-century Palestine, mangers would have been common in peasant houses, as almost everyone kept animals and brought them inside at night. I don't know when the stable first appears in Christian writing, but my guess would be that it originated in a more urban setting sometime after the gospels were written.

The other omission, which may surprise people more, is that there is no inn. Surely there is an inn, as it is mentioned in the text. It is true the word "inn" appears in many English translations, but that is only one possible translation. The word used is not the usual one for inn, and only appears in one other place in

the New Testament, where it refers to the upper room where Jesus held the last supper. Another, and more probable, meaning is “guest room”, as is the case in this other usage. Modern research has shown that Bethlehem was a very small village at the time, and almost certainly didn't have an inn. Even if it did, the reason Joseph went to Bethlehem was that he had familial connections there and, in the culture of the time, to go somewhere where one had family and stay in an inn would have been considered a grave insult. As a result, I have chosen to interpret the word as an upper room/guest room.

Early writers ignored the " internal dialogue" that modern readers are familiar with. They dealt with actions and words, rarely ever with thoughts and feelings. As a result, such elements in the story that follows are entirely conjectural. Conjectural but, I would argue, reasonable. The story that emerged from my research is one I find understandable, the people involved real people, their motivations ones we all recognise.

I expect most people reading the story will find things in it that they disagree with. That's OK: I have in many places had to make decisions on things that I wasn't certain of. What I hope you come away with, however, is the ability to see beyond the pageantry and to get into the story itself—to question and research for yourself the actual gospel accounts.

And I hope you enjoy the story.

David Gibbons, Christmas, 2018

Chapter one: Jerusalem, 6 BC

It was the silence that struck him first. The crowd outside was not particularly loud for this was just an ordinary day for most people, but it was noisy. As he passed through the vestibule and into the great hall the voices were cut off by the massive stone walls and the silence came, an almost physical thing.

Coming in from the bright afternoon sunshine, it took time for his eyes to adjust, making the hall seem dark at first, though it was in fact quite bright. That seeming darkness emphasised the silence. He stopped for a moment partly to allow his vision to adjust but also to savour this moment.

"I'm here! Finally, after 40 years of service, I'm really here."

Zechariah, priest of the order of Abijah, now stood in the Holy Place of the Temple of God in Jerusalem for the first, and probably only, time in his life. He had almost given up hope that this day would come. With so many priests, all of whom hoped to have the chance to perform some special part in the service of the temple, the different orders took turns and even then, the priests were chosen by lot from within the order. Some were never called, for most it was a once in a lifetime opportunity, the high point of their ministry.

As his eyes became adjusted to the dimmer light of the sanctuary, Zechariah looked down the length of a hall. There, almost 60 feet away, stood the altar of incense, his goal. It was there he would offer the afternoon incense, its sweet smoke filling the holy place and even penetrating the great curtain that divided this place from the inner room, the holy of holies.

His gaze shifted to the curtain and for a minute he allowed himself to imagine

that space where God dwelt, that only the high priest ever saw, and then only on the Day of Atonement. In there, he thought, had once sat the Ark of the Covenant, the gold covered box made by Bezalel for Moses himself. Now, though, the room was empty except for the two giant Cherubim who had once stood guard over the Ark and now protected its place should it ever return. Their great bestial bodies faced the holy place where he stood, but each had four faces keeping watch all around. Their wings spread across the room like an awning, meeting in the middle and touching the outer walls.

Zechariah was about to approach as close to that sacred place and its awesome guardians as any man could, except the high priest, and he was very aware of both the honour and the responsibility. He was determined that nothing would go wrong; he would perform his appointed role exactly as it should be done. He took a deep breath and began to walk down the hall.

Ahead of him on either side of his path stood the mighty pillars that supported the roof almost three storeys above him. In the spaces defined by the pillars stood the 10 lampstands and the 10 tables of the shewbread. His brother priests had attended to these earlier, but wanting to be certain that everything was perfect, Zechariah glanced to left and right as he passed. The seven lamps on each of the first two lampstands shone with bright, steady flames, the large flat loaves of bread were stacked in neat piles. So far so good.

Continuing forward he cast his gaze back down the hall to the altar of incense - and saw he was not alone! His first thought was that the man standing there must be one of his brother priests, for no one else was allowed in this holy place. Perhaps he had been finishing up some detail of his ministry and was now waiting to join Zechariah as he performed his. He must have stepped out of the shadows as Zechariah had been looking to the sides.

But even as the thought formed, Zechariah knew it could not be so. This man was not dressed as a priest. Besides, he had talked to the priests who had

tended the lamps and checked the bread as he had prepared the incense he was carrying for the offering. He knew they were all still outside.

Zealot! The word leapt into his mind bringing with it a sharp stab of fear. Had the zealots started another of their uprisings? Feelings had been running high in Judaea for months now. There were rumours of a census that would surely mean more Roman taxes. There had already been a couple of disturbances, hardly riots but certainly not good omens. He still remembered the last uprising, only a couple of years past, when Theudas had gathered his "army"—what were 400 men against the might of Rome!—and tried to throw off the oppressor's yoke. How many had died, including Theudas, innocent as well as guilty?

If a new rebellion had started, Zechariah knew that the temple would be an early goal. Not only was it the heart of the people and hence an important strategic position to hold, but also the zealots hated the Sadducees who held the religious power, including the role of high priest. To the zealots, these men were more interested in maintaining their positions than in the good of Israel. They had sold out to the hated Romans.

Zechariah was not a Sadducee, just a simple village priest, but he was not a fool. He knew that once the violence started, any priest was likely to become a target. He stopped where he was, fearful for his life.

But then Zechariah, calm, almost timid Zechariah, felt a great anger rise within him. It was mostly a righteous anger: this man, this zealot, was committing sacrilege! His very presence here was a violation of the sacred space. How dare he defile it! But even as he started forward again, determined to face the intruder, to demand an explanation, he recognised that he was also angry on his own behalf. Why now? Why today, of all days? Everything had been going so well—and now this. Such a desecration was unheard of. Only the priests had stood here since the days of the great

Maccabees. Instead of being a humble, forgotten priest who had faithfully done his duty, he was destined to be remembered as the priest on duty when the sanctuary was contaminated.

The man waited quietly by the altar as Zechariah closed the distance with firm, purposeful steps. His attitude puzzled the priest, he seemed so calm and as Zechariah got closer he could see no sign of a weapon. It was almost as if he were waiting to talk with Zechariah, just a friendly chat. In another setting, Zechariah would have held out his hands in greeting in welcome to such a man, but this was the temple, this should not be happening. Nonetheless, as he reached the man all the angry words died unsaid and Zechariah came to a halt a few feet away.

Up close he was taller than he had looked. Simply dressed, he still radiated an aura of authority. There was something about his eyes that seemed to see more than was there and had been seeing it for a very long time. He wasn't old to look at, but one sensed history in his presence. In total confusion, Zechariah didn't know whether to be angry, to run away, or to fall down before this stranger.

"Don't be afraid, Zechariah," he said in a rich baritone that seemed oddly intimate in the vast formal space of the sanctuary.

Easy for him to say, thought the priest, his world isn't in total disarray!

"God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a child, a son. You will name him John. The sadness and shame you have felt at your lack of children will be turned into great joy and gladness. Indeed, many will rejoice because of your son for he will be a great man of God. He shall not drink wine or any alcohol but the Spirit of the Lord will fill him from his mother's womb.

"He will turn the hearts of the children of Israel back to God. He will be like Elijah, moving in spirit and power before the Lord, turning the hearts of the

fathers to their children, of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. He will get the people ready for God."

"A son! Yes, how I prayed for that. But it has been years. I am an old man now, and Elizabeth is past the age. How is this possible?"

"Is this not good news? How can you doubt? I am Gabriel! I stand in the presence of God himself! God, with whom nothing is impossible, and who sent me to give you this message."

As Gabriel spoke, images blossomed in Zechariah's mind: Abraham and Sarah, twice his age, laughing at, then with, God at similar news; Hannah bringing the young Samuel to Eli after her long barrenness has ended. Rachel watching her sister give Jacob son after son until her own womb was finally opened. Perhaps God really could do this thing! But Gabriel was still speaking.

"Perhaps you need a sign, O doubting one. That you may know that God can do all things, even these I've told you of, you shall be mute until your son is born."

"No, I believe you!" Zechariah tried to say. But although his breath still came and went and his mouth moved, no sound came out. It was true, he and Elizabeth would have a son! His eyes filled with sudden, unexpected tears of joy. He blinked them away but when he could see again, Gabriel was gone.

Zechariah turned to go, still in a daze, and was startled to find the incense still in his hands. It took him a minute to realise he still had a job to do. In great joy and true worship he turned back to the altar and performed the duty that had brought him there. As the smoke rose he silently offered the required prayers, hoping that the God who had struck him dumb would understand and accept them anyway.

Meanwhile, the people in the courtyard, many of them priest themselves, were getting restless. It usually only took a couple of minutes for the priest to offer the incense and then he would come out to bless the crowd. It was why they were waiting there. And waiting. Had something gone wrong? Had Zechariah done something wrong and been struck down by the almighty one?

Some of the priests began to discuss whether someone should go in and check and if so, who. Everyone wanted to know what was happening, but if God was angry it could be very dangerous in there still. Perhaps someone should go fetch the high priest.

Then suddenly the crowd fell silent. The priests looked up and saw Zechariah standing there, obviously alive, just outside the great doors of the sanctuary. The silence stretched on. Why did Zechariah not offer the blessing? He just stood there, looking over the crowd. When he spied his fellow priests standing together on one side, he began to gesticulate, beckoning them to come to him.

"Give the blessing!", "What is wrong?", "Did something happen?" The questions flew as the priests approached but Zechariah just waited. When they were close, he began to pantomime that he was unable to speak. It wasn't long until they understood that, but when he tried to act out what had happened, he got mostly blank looks. He tried again, and again, and finally, someone guessed that he had seen a vision. He could see that that was as close as he could get, so he just nodded. The priest who had guessed that then turned and addressed the crowd.

"Zechariah has been blessed with a vision from the Lord, but it has taken his voice from him, so he cannot tell us what it was. But clearly God has blessed our brother and we, too, are blessed with him. Since Zechariah cannot do it, let me pronounce this evening's blessing, for surely God is pleased with his people today."

Zechariah hardly heard the blessing offered by the other priest. His mind was thinking back, reliving the strange encounter and making sure he remembered all of Gabriel's words. When the prayer was finished and the crowd began to disperse, each one eager to carry the tale to their family and friends, Zechariah broke away, needing to be alone. As he hurried to the room he was staying in during his time of service in Jerusalem his thoughts turned to Elisabeth. How surprised she would be! Would she believe him? And then the question that would keep him awake late into the night: how, exactly, was he going to be able to tell her?

Chapter two: a village in the Judean hills, six BC

The house was one of the largest in the village, two whole rooms, one above the other. Too large, she often thought. Almost all the families here lived in one room houses that they shared at night with their few animals. Here in this big house, there was just her husband and her.

Not that they wanted it that way. God knew how much they had prayed for children! Three times she had become pregnant, only to miscarry in the first few months. Somehow that was worse than if the womb had been totally shut, but now she knew it was her fault, her inability. Her shame had been great and the failure a cause of gossip, but at least the gossip had died, even as hope had died, as she had aged and moved beyond her fertile years.

As it became obvious that it would always be just the two of them, she had devoted herself more and more to doing what she could for the other women in the village. Most of them had called on her in times of need, and she had watched over most of the children of the village at one time or another as the mother attended a sick husband or older sibling. It was a bittersweet task. She loved being with the children but they often reminded her painfully of the hole in her own life.

Today, though, her thoughts were not of the children who had never come. Today all she could think of was her husband. He had been gone 10 days—their longest time apart that she could remember—and today he was coming home. Tonight she would sleep in his arms again, safe, his presence filling the house. And she would hear his voice! How she longed to hear every detail of his time away, to know if he had actually been chosen to participate in the ceremonies. She hoped he had for he wanted to so much, and if anyone deserved the honour he did, who had always been so faithful to his calling.

She stood now in the open doorway, looking down the road. But it was still

too early, he wouldn't be home for some hours yet. Laughing a little at her eagerness, she came inside and went around the room rearranging a few things. Not cleaning or tidying, for the house was as clean and neat as it could be after her work that morning, but she had to do something.

On her fourth—or was it fifth?—trip to the door, she finally spied the familiar figure coming up the road. Her hands checked her hair and brushed some imaginary dirt off her dress as she waited for him to get closer. She could see he was smiling, no, beaming would be more accurate; he must have been chosen to serve, what else would make him so happy?

When he reached her, she dropped her eyes and waited for his greeting, the dutiful wife. She noticed the dust on his feet from the long walk and thought of washing it off. Seconds passed, but no greeting came, then she felt his hand on her arm and she looked up. He was still smiling at her, but now there was something almost apologetic in it. He shook his head and shrugged.

“What is it, Zechariah’s?” She asked, puzzled.

He didn't answer, just opened his mouth as if he were going to answer again.

“Zechariah, please... What is wrong?”

This time he opened his mouth and acted like he was shouting, only no sound came out. Then he closed his mouth, but a finger to his lips and shrugged again, a wistful look in his eyes.

Slowly it began to dawn on Elisabeth that he couldn't speak. But why, then, did he seem so happy? Clearly, something unusual has happened, something she needed to understand, only how? For once she wished that she could read so that her husband could write what had happened, but she was only a woman. No, she would have to find out some other way.

“Something happened to you, and now you cannot speak?”

He nodded, his face lighting up in wonder and joy.

“Something good, I take it.”

He nodded again, almost dancing in front of her. Then he stopped and held up one finger to get her attention. As she watched he pointed up, then tried to say something, then pointed at himself. When she just looked puzzled, he went through the sequence again, emphasising each part.

“God... Spoke... To you?”

He almost bowed to her as she got it.

“God spoke to you! Zechariah! What did he say?”

Once more Zechariah held up his finger and paused. Then he reached out and placed his open hands on her stomach, smiling. She looked down at his hands. Had he healed someone or been healed? She looked back up, her confusion written on her face.

Zechariah had known this would be difficult, but he had had a couple of days to think it through. He directed her gaze back down to his hands and she watched as he pulled them off her, almost as if he were pulling something out of her. Then he crossed his arms a bit and began to rock them. It almost looked as if he was holding...

She looked up, shock and disbelief in her eyes, to find him nodding vigorously at her.

“No...No...Zechariah, you can't mean...A...baby...for us?”

Zechariah stopped for a moment then, holding his open hands out to the sides, shrugged in a gesture that said, “I don't understand either, but..”, as clearly as if he could talk.

“Oh, Zechariah! Can it be true? Will God remove my shame? A baby! Our own son... or daughter...”

As she said daughter, Zechariah shook his head.

“No? A son then! But how? Zechariah, we are far too old. And after all the other...” She stopped as the familiar pain rose in her. She felt tears come, but whether they were from hope or pain she could not have said. She hugged herself, unsure whether she would laugh or cry, dance or run away and hide.

Gently Zechariah lifted her chin and then looked up and raised his other hand. It is of God, trust Him, the gesture said. Then he put an arm around her and led her into the house.

Once inside, Elisabeth felt as if she were waking from a dream. For a while, she simply concentrated on being a wife welcoming her husband home. She sat him down and then fetched the food and wine she had waiting. As he ate and drank, she knelt and washed his feet of the dust she had noticed when he first arrived—how long ago that seemed now! And slowly, through a long series of yes or no questions, she began to piece together what had happened.

Zechariah had been in the temple, doing...something when he saw God...No, an angel of God...who told him about the baby then struck him dumb because... Zechariah had said something. It was a punishment...or rather a sign and would last until he saw the baby.

Elisabeth still didn't know what to make of it all. As she lit the lamp in the early evening her mind was filled with images: Zechariah meeting the angel, a baby in her arms, the looks on the other women's faces. But behind it all still lurked the pain and disappointment of those other times. As she sat back down with her husband, she took his hand and voiced her fear.

“Husband, I cannot tell you what joy your news brings me, and yet I remember too how our joy turned to ashes in the past. That God should take away my reproach even in my old age is more than I dared to hope for. I believe you, my love, but please, humour an old foolish woman: let us keep this to ourselves for now. Just until we are certain that God is, indeed, doing this marvellous work.”

It was some weeks later that Elizabeth arose one morning and felt a strange reluctance to begin making their morning meal. The whole idea of food seemed a bit nauseating. In fact, she had been feeling this way for a few days. And she remembered feeling this way before, several times!

She managed to keep the secret almost a whole week. By then she was certain: she was pregnant. With a mixture of awe, gratitude, and not a little fear, she told Zechariah. Together they offered prayers both of thanksgiving and for the safety of the baby. It felt strange for her to be speaking the prayers, not him, but he was still mute.

When Elizabeth said she would prefer to keep it their secret a while longer, difficult as it would be, Zechariah agreed. It turned out to be easier than they feared, for Elizabeth had been staying home anyway to “care for” Zechariah. If anyone did notice a change in her they simply thought she had put on some extra weight. The possibility that she might be pregnant was too ridiculous to be entertained.

And so, the next few months passed. After three months they began to relax a bit and allow their hopes to grow. But still, they kept the secret. The fourth month became the fifth month and, finally, they began to let people know. There were arrangements to be made before the birth after all.

The word spread quickly through the village. The godly couple were being blessed after all. God was doing a wonder in their midst. Slowly the news passed to the other villages in the Judean hills and even further afield where there were family ties.

Chapter three: Nazareth, six BC

“The animals are all fed, mother.”

“Good, Mary. Come and help me finish preparing this food. Your father and uncle will be here soon to eat before they go to Simon’s house to work on the arrangements for your wedding.”

“More arrangements! Why can’t we just get married? It’s been months. All they do is talk.”

“Now, Mary,” her mother said, smiling, “you know that this marriage involves more than just Joseph and you. Both families are affected and it takes time to work out all of the gifts and obligations. Everyone has to go through this, girl, they survived, and you will too.”

“I just wish they would hurry. At this rate, I’ll be too old to give Joseph any children! You don’t understand.”

It was a little later that day after her father and uncle had gone and her mother also had left to visit with some of her friends, that the stranger arrived. Mary had just finished cleaning up from the meal when his dark shape filled the doorway, plunging the room into gloom. Mary looked up, but because the light was behind him, she could not tell who it was. Just as she was about to tell him that her parents were both out, he spoke.

“Rejoice, favoured one, the Lord is with you. You are blessed among women.”

Mary didn’t recognise the voice, which was odd—and frightening—as she

knew everyone in the small village. His greeting was also strange, too personal, for all its formality. He had come inside as he spoke and now Mary could see him clearly and knew for certain that he was not from the village.

Her unease crystallised into fear. It was not only unseemly for an unmarried girl to be alone with a man and, especially, a stranger, but it was also very dangerous. As she tried to find the words to answer him, she glanced out the door, hoping someone would be there who could help her. But the street was empty.

“Don’t be afraid, Mary. You really have found favour with God.”

His use of her name puzzled and unsettled her. Yet somehow, she felt her fears subside. She was still trapped in the house, alone with a strange man, but his voice and his attitude seemed friendly and non-threatening. Until he spoke again.

“You’re going to become pregnant and have a son.”

Now her fear and confusion came back full force. She shrank back, trembling, and almost missed his next words.

“Name him Jesus. He will be a great man and called ‘the Son of the Highest’. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will rule Judah forever, without end.”

It would be months yet before she and Joseph would be married, yet this messenger from God seemed to be implying this was going to happen now. Worried what his answer would be, she asked the question.

“How can this be? I have never been with a man.”

The angel, Gabriel himself, saw her fear and smiled at her to reassure her.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Highest will overshadow you. The Holy One you bear will, therefore, be called the Son of God.”

Relieved at least that this powerful stranger was not to be the father, Mary sat down, her mind reeling. God was going to give her a baby? Without a man? But how could this be, and why her? Gabriel gave her a moment then continued.

“Elizabeth, your relative, even though she is too old, has also conceived. In fact, she is now six months pregnant. And they said she was barren! But with God, nothing will be impossible.”

Mary hadn't seen Elizabeth very often but knew her to be a kind, godly old woman. If God could work the miracle of giving Elizabeth a baby, then surely, he could work in her body. She looked down at her hands in her lap and spoke quietly, mostly to God.

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord. As you have said, so let it be to me.”

When she looked up a moment later, Gabriel was gone.

She sat there for a long time. At first, her thoughts were on the words she had heard. God was going to give her a baby! She tried to imagine being pregnant and holding her new-born, nursing him. And he had said the child would grow up to be a great man of God, a leader of their people.

But slowly her thoughts turned to Joseph and her parents. How could she tell them? Would they understand? No matter how she tried to imagine it, in her mind it never worked. There seemed to be no way that she could tell them without causing disbelief and heartbreak. Joseph was such a godly man; how could she expect him to accept this unless she could prove it was really God?

The angel had left no proof that you could show them.

In the end, she decided to wait. Perhaps it wouldn't happen after all, or maybe not until after she was married to Joseph. And if it did happen sooner, she would trust that God would also give her the right time and means to tell people so that they would believe her.

A couple of weeks later she knew that it was, in fact, going to happen sooner rather than later. She was late for her period and that hadn't happened since the early days a couple of years before. So far no one had noticed, but she knew her mother would soon realise and start asking questions. She was deep in thought as she headed home, but still, she could not see how she was going to break the news.

As she entered the house her mother saw her and called to her, excited.

"Mary, Mary! There is a wonderful news! You remember our kinswoman, Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife? Well, they say that, old is she is, she is going to have a baby!"

Mary's heart lifted at the news as she recalled Gabriel's words. One thing remained, and she ventured the question:

"When did this happen?"

"Oh, from what I heard she must be...six or seven months along by now."

"Yes! He was right!"

The words were out before she realised. Even as she tried to wish them away, she saw her mother's shrewd gaze focus on her.

"You knew? How? Who told you? Who is this 'he'?"

“Oh mother, it was...It was an angel of God...He came some two weeks ago and told me about Elizabeth.”

“And just why would Almighty God send an angel to tell a young girl that a relative she hardly knows is pregnant? What kind of a story is this?”

“He told me about Elizabeth as a sort of sign, so I would know he was telling the truth, I think. It was like ‘if God can do this, then he can also...’” She stumbled to a stop, afraid still to admit the rest. But her mother understood there was more.

“Mary, it’s not like you to hide things like this! Tell me, what else did this angel say, what else is God able to do? How does it involve you?”

“Elizabeth is not the only one will have a baby, mother. God is giving me one too, a son who will become a mighty man of God.”

“This is wonderful Mary! That God would promise to bless you and Joseph with a firstborn son at the start of your life together.”

“No, mother. The child will be God’s, not Joseph’s. And God didn’t wait for the wedding, I am already pregnant.”

There was a long silence as Mary’s mother absorbed this news. Mary, her lovely daughter Mary, who was always so obedient, was with child and claiming the father was not Joseph? It didn’t make any sense. Who else could be the father? And when and how? Mary loved Joseph, was always talking about him, wishing they were already wed. She had never had eyes for anyone else.

“Mary, the truth now. If you and Joseph have been intimate, well, people will be a bit surprised but not too shocked. We will deal with it.”

“No, Joseph has done nothing inappropriate. He is a godly man and has always treated me with respect. Joseph is not the father.”

“Then who, Mary? Did someone force you?”

“It was no man, mother, it was God himself.”

“Who has heard of such a thing? Who will believe it? Why would God bring such shame on our family? I love you, Mary, and I trust you, but even I find this beyond belief. How could you!”

“I didn’t do anything! I didn’t ask for this! The angel just showed up and announced it. If it was God’s will, what could I do but accept it? I’m not Jacob, to wrestle with God,”

Seeing her daughter so upset, she drew her in and hugged her, wanting to soothe her, wanting to believe her.

“There there, Mary. What do I know about such things? Calm down. We will tell your father and see what he says. And surely he and Joseph will be able to figure out what to do.”

“Will Joseph understand? Will he still want me? What will I do if he doesn’t?”

“I don’t know, my dear. But if this is God’s doing then you must trust him. Joseph loves you, but he is also a righteous man. It will be very hard on him; I cannot say what he will do. But for now, let’s think how we are going to tell your father.”

The meeting with her Father was every bit as bad as she had feared it would be. There were disbelief, anger, and raised voices. There were also pain, tears, and sorrow. Around and around it went. Again and again, her father demanded to know who the father was, but Mary, despite her tears and fright, was adamant that it was God’s doing. Eventually, without a concrete target to

focus on, her father's anger subsided into a pained confusion.

Mary watched him as he returned from telling Joseph and his family the news. Her heart was in her throat as she waited to hear what Joseph had said. Would God, in giving her this child, take away her beloved and the future they had been planning? Would Joseph understand and accept? Part of her wished she had been allowed to go with her father, but another part of her was glad he had refused to take her. It was going to be hard enough to hear of Joseph's reaction from her father, she didn't think she'd have been able to survive watching his reaction if he hadn't believed the news.

Her father looked so much older as he came in and gathered them together again. There was sadness in his look that made Mary fear the worst, but she bit her tongue and waited for him to speak.

"Well, Joseph now knows as much as we do. Obviously, it was a shock to him. If I had any question about his being the father, his reaction convinced me otherwise."

Her mother poured him a cup of wine, then asked, "what does he intend to do?"

"I don't know, and neither does he. At least not yet. He needs time to think and pray, but what can he do? I don't see how the wedding can go ahead now."

"Do not be too hasty, husband. If this truly is God's doing, he may have a way. What we need is some time so we can discover it."

"Yes, but that is time we don't have. How long will it be before someone notices Mary's condition? Everyone here knows her—and Joseph—so well. It won't be long and if we haven't things out by that time, we will be unable to avoid the shame."

“That is true. But what if we had, say, a few months?”

“We could use them. I just don’t see how we can get them. The pregnancy will progress no matter what we do.”

“We cannot change that, but what if Mary were not here, not among the people who know?”

“You have an idea?”

“Yes. We were planning on going to Jerusalem for the feast soon. It would not be too surprising if we took a day or two and went to offer our congratulations to Elizabeth and Zechariah. I know Elizabeth has no close family there, so what will be more natural than for Mary to stay to help her for a few months?”

“An interesting idea.” He looked at Mary, “what do you think?”

“I would very much like to visit Elizabeth, to confirm with my own eyes the words of the angel. And if I can be of service to her, I will stay there.”

“Then it is settled. I will tell Joseph in the morning.”

Chapter four: the Judean hills, six BC

It was a good day's journey from Jerusalem south-east to the small village nestled in the rugged hills, and the family were tired as they finally arrived in the waning afternoon light. They asked directions from one of the men who were heading home from the fields and, having had the house pointed out to them, started gratefully up the last short street to the door.

Elizabeth had just started work on the evening meal when she heard the tentative "hello?" at the open door. Looking up, she saw the three travellers standing there.

"Zechariah is out at the moment," she said, thinking they must have business with her husband, "but please come in and wait. He should not be long."

"Elizabeth, you are the one we came to see." The woman of the group came in as she spoke and Elizabeth recognised her kinswoman Anne.

"Anne! You are a long way from home. Come in, come in, all of you." She greeted Anne with a kiss, then, more formally welcomed Joachim. Following him in came a young woman who must, she thought, be their daughter. As the young woman greeted her, she had to search her memory for the name, then it came to her, Mary. But as she put her hand on Mary's arm to draw her inside and Mary said "Hello", she suddenly doubled up in pain.

It was certainly not the first time she had felt the baby move inside her, but this was by far the most dramatic—and painful. It felt as if her son was trying to leap out of her. Still holding Mary's arm, she lifted herself back up and as she did so, her eyes met Mary's. In that instant she knew, though how she knew she could never say, that Mary was also going to have a child and that her child was inextricably linked to the one in her own womb. Indeed, from the way her baby was bouncing around, Mary's child could only be the one he was to announce.

“You are blessed among women and blessed also your child! But I do not deserve this honour, that my Lords mother should come to me. I should have come to you, for as soon as I heard your voice the baby leapt in my womb in recognition.”

As Mary heard Elizabeth a great peace came over her. Her future, especially her future with Joseph, was still uncertain, but Gabriel’s word had been confirmed and she knew that God would work it all out.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour. He has seen the lowly status of his handmaid and now all generations will call me blessed! The Almighty one has done great things for me, holy is his name.

“He has mercy on all who fear him in every generation. He has shown the strength of his arm for he has scattered the proud in their vain imaginings and has pulled the mighty from their thrones. Yet he has exalted the lonely and filled the hungry with good things even as he sent the rich away empty.

“He has remembered his mercy and helped his servant Israel just as he promised our fathers, Abraham and his seed, forever.”

It was only a short while later that Zechariah came home and the five of them sat down to eat. Over the food, Elizabeth told them everything she had managed to discover of Zechariah’s vision and her own pregnancy, of her fears and joy. Then Mary, encouraged by the fact that Zechariah had also seen an angel, told her story.

Mary’s parents were also encouraged to hear Elizabeth’s tale, and as Mary finished up by telling how she had finally told about her condition when the news of Elizabeth’s and reach them, Anne took up the story.

“You can imagine how shocked we were. And poor Joseph! He really

loves Mary, but he also is very scrupulous in keeping the law. He needs time to work out what to do. To give him that time, and to avoid the gossip, we thought that maybe Mary could stay here for a while. She could help you through the end of your pregnancy and for a while after the baby is born.”

“But of course! I would be delighted to have her with me. I have had some help, and offers of more, from some of the local women, but to have family helping is much better.”

And so, it was settled. Mary’s parents spent the night then set out early the next morning to go back to Jerusalem, there to rejoin the other pilgrims from Nazareth for the four-day journey home. Mary missed Joseph, but there was a lot to do as Elizabeth’s time drew near and so she was kept busy enough not to fret too much.

The weeks went by until there came a night that was disturbed first by the cries of Elizabeth as she laboured and then by the short, piercing cry of the baby as it entered the world, a cry quickly cut off when he found Elizabeth’s breast. In the early hours of the morning Zechariah was finally allowed in to see his son, then the midwife went home, and Mary and the family slept for a while.

That first week the family kept much to itself, though there were the inevitable visitors who wanted to see this miraculous child. Mary, now three months pregnant, was kept very busy filling Elizabeth’s role in preparing food and keeping house. It was a time of peace and wonder, of new routines, sleepless nights, and great thankfulness. Sometimes, gazing at the child as he nursed, Elisabeth found it hard to believe: after all the disappointments, after she had given up all hope, God had blessed her! Yet there he was, solid, real, hers. There is always something miraculous, something deeply spiritual, in the birth of a child, but how much more in the birth of a first-born so late in life. None of the mundane details—the sore nipples from his nursing, the soiled clothes, the crying—could detract from the wonder.

On the eighth day, the leaders of the synagogue and many of the neighbours came to the home for the child's circumcision and naming ceremony. As they were preparing, the ruler of the synagogue sought a quick confirmation from Elizabeth:

"His name will be Zechariah, I assume?"

"No. His name is to be John."

"John? How so? There is no John in your family for him to be named after. What honour can there be in such a thing?"

"No matter, he is John."

The ruler was at a loss, both at the choice of the name and also at Elizabeth's—a woman's!—insistence. He called Zechariah forward and asked him to confirm this strange request. Zechariah nodded, but the ruler wanted more definite assurance before he would proceed, so Zechariah had Mary fetch a writing tablet and carefully wrote out "his name is John."

As he finished writing, he read it over to make sure it was correct. Suddenly the room was silent and a shocked Zechariah realised he had read the words aloud. His voice was back!

"His name is John! Praise God! The Lord gave him to us, he also said to call him John. The Lord be blessed!"

Clearly, marvel upon marvel attended this child. Who, now, could question this name? John became a true member of the people of Israel, receiving the sign of the covenant in his flesh and the God-given name. After the ceremony and prayers were done, the ruler presented the baby to his father. Taking John in his arms, Zechariah lifted his eyes and prayed.

"Blessed by the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited his people with

redemption and raised a horn of salvation for us in the house of David, his servant, as he has promised through the prophets since the world began. He will save us from our enemies and the hand of those who hate us. He will fulfil his promise to our fathers and remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our Father Abraham: that we, being delivered, might serve him fearlessly, in holiness and righteousness all the days of our lives.”

Then Zechariah looked down at the face of his son and continued in a softer voice.

“And you, my son, will be called a prophet of the Highest. You will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to teach the people about salvation and the remission of their sins through the tender mercy of our God. The dawn has broken from on high giving light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death and guiding our feet in the way of peace.”

The next few days were again busy as people came by to confirm for themselves that Zechariah could, indeed, speak again, and to see John. But the interest quickly faded. John was, after all, just a baby and they had all seen plenty of those. And a man who can talk is, well, not much of a marvel. While no one would forget these remarkable events and they would often be discussed, there was nothing to see any longer. So, by the time Mary’s parents returned a few weeks later to take her home, life had returned to normal in the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth. As normal, that is, as life can be in any household with a new-born.

Chapter five: Nazareth, 6 BC

Of course, the first thing Mary wanted to know from her parents when they arrived to take her home after Elizabeth had told John what Joseph had decided to do. On this point, they had good news...

Joseph was never sure, afterwards, if it had been real or just a dream, but he knew he would never forget the encounter. He had been working in his workshop on a project for a neighbour, but it hadn't been going well. When two pieces of wood refused to fit together, he was barely able to stop himself from throwing them across the room.

"Aargh! Why won't this work! This is supposed to be a simple project. What is wrong with this wood? Calm down. It's not the wood's fault. I've got to calm down, get focus. Respect the wood, that's what father always said. This project is simple, it's my life that has become complex.

Why Lord? I am just a simple man and I've always tried to obey the Law, to honour you. I've never wanted wealth or power, I only want my shop, a family, and to have a quiet life. What is so wrong with that?

Everything was so perfect: Mary and I in love, our families in agreement, all the arrangements proceeding. How could she?! And not just to betray me, but to make such claims! How does she expect us to believe her? It is so unlike her, she's always been someone you could count on, I've never known her to lie before. But this? No, it is impossible. Yet, who could have done such a thing? There isn't anyone, but there must be.

And despite all this, I'd still marry her if I could. It just goes against all tradition. The shame and dishonour it would bring to my family if I claim the

child is mine, or to hers if I disavow it.”

The arguments kept going back and forth in his mind as they had for weeks now. Every time he thought he had made a decision, he’d find himself doubting it the next day—or even hour. Every decision hurt people, people who didn’t deserve to be hurt. Realising that he was pacing back and forth, back and forth, he forced himself to sit down. Perhaps if he stilled his body, his mind would also find peace. He lowered his head onto his folded arms. Perhaps he slept.

The next thing he was aware of was the sound of feet. Looking up he saw a stranger in the door of his workshop. While it was not unknown for a stranger to come there—usually travellers who had broken or lost something—it was rare; most of his business came from the other villagers, people he had grown up with and known all his life. He jumped up quickly.

“I’m sorry,” the stranger said, “shall I come back later?”

“No, no, come in... What can I do for you?”

“It’s just... You looked so deep in thought... Or distress.”

“A family problem, a tough decision to be made, that’s all. Please, come on in.”

“Family problems, yes they can be so hard,” The man said as he came inside all the way. “How to decide who gets hurt when you love them all.”

“Oh yes.”

“And so often there are conflicts between what seems right and what tradition says, between what one feels and what one thinks should be done.”

“That’s exactly to it! If only...” Joseph stopped suddenly, his natural reticence reasserting itself. It was almost as if he knew about... but that was

ridiculous.

“Perhaps God will give you the answer to your problem.”

“I want to do what is right, to live according to the law. But I’m just a village carpenter. I honour God but why should he noticed me?”

The stranger had been walking around the workshop as they talked, now he picked up a wooden bowl.

“I like this bowl. How much is it?”

“It’s not for sale. The wood had a flaw in it, I cannot sell it.”

“But I like it, flawed or not.”

“It is worthless.”

“Did it ever strike you,” the stranger asked, examining the bowl carefully, “that God often uses flawed vessels?”

“God is perfect.”

“Yes indeed, but his vessels? Take, oh, David for instance.”

“David was a man after God’s own heart!”

“True, but flawed. There was that little thing with having Uriah killed because he had had an affair with Uriah’s wife and had got her pregnant.”

“Pregnant... Just like...”

“And David started out as a shepherd, remember. God used a poor, flawed shepherd. Why not a village carpenter?”

“Do you really think he would?”

“Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid! Marry Mary, her child really is from the Holy Spirit. What is more, she will have a son. Call him Jesus because he is going to save his people from their sins.”

“it’s true? But how did you know? How could... I can marry her!”

The stranger smiled as Joseph sat down, lost in a welter of conflicting emotions and questions. When Joseph finally shook his head and looked up, the stranger was gone. There was no sign of him in the street outside either. But even as he found himself wondering if he had really had a visitor, he discovered that the confusion had gone. There was a great peace in his heart and a strange conviction in his mind. He would, indeed, marry Mary.

“That at least is the story he told us,” Joachim finished.

“It’s as if Joseph had his own angel! So, we’re going to be married?”

“Yes,” answered Anna. “Your father and Joseph’s have finished all the arrangements. Everything is set. Two weeks after we get home, we will have the ceremony.” She cast a discerning eye over her daughter before continuing. “You are starting to show, but not too badly. I think most people would just assume that those rich Judean relatives have been feeding you too well. Of course, that will not last for long, but we will deal with that when we have to.”

“I can’t believe it! Come on, let’s get going! I want to see Joseph again.”

Chapter six: Bethlehem, five BC

Then noonday sun was hot but not unbearable as it bore down on the man walking beside the donkey. Behind him on the small cart sat his wife and their few possessions—mostly his tools. She let out a small sigh as a cool breeze blew for a few seconds. Almost seven months into her pregnancy, she knew Joseph had taken things easy on this trip; That what had taken over a week would normally have taken only three or four days. She was grateful for his care, but even more for the sight of Bethlehem shimmering in the heat in front of them.

Joseph too was grateful that they were almost to their destination, though at that moment his thoughts were back in Nazareth and on the events that had brought them here. He smiled as he remembered Mary's homecoming from Elizabeth's; what a joyous reunion that had been! Then a frantic couple of weeks to finish the wedding preparations. And then, almost before he realised it, they were married. It had been quite a party, or so he had been told. In his memory, it was all a bit of a blur except that Mary had been beside him and was now his wife.

But, of course, being married had not solved all their problems. While only their own immediate families still knew of the baby growing inside Mary, it was only a matter of time until someone noticed. And even if they could keep it a secret until the birth, it would then be known, and everyone would be aware that the wedding had only been some three months earlier. Clearly, they needed to get away, to be somewhere where they were just a young married couple who had been blessed in the union.

Nazareth's small size, part of the problem because everybody knew them, was also part of the solution. As long as he was part of his father's household, Joseph could work with his father. But now he had his own family to look after and there simply wasn't enough work for two carpenters in the little village.

Normally a son in Joseph's position would look for work at the nearby villages, but while that would have solved the work problem, it wouldn't have helped with the baby issue. They needed to move further afield, but where? And how to explain such an odd decision?

That's when the news of the census reached them. Most people regarded the census with suspicion, if not outright hostility, for why else would Caesar want to know how many people there were except to impose a new tax, or increase those already in place? But for two—now three—families, the news came as an answer to prayer. Joseph, it was true, could have stayed in Nazareth for he had been born there, as had his parents. But their family had its roots down south in Judaea and they still had quite close kin in Bethlehem. It was the excuse they needed, and so within a month of the wedding, they had found themselves on the road south.

Bethlehem itself was not much bigger than Nazareth, but it was close to Jerusalem and so the prospects for work for a good carpenter were quite good. Joseph is a little concerned that he might not be as established as he would like before the baby came, less than two months from now, but he could not deny that so far God seems to have worked everything out amazingly well. He would just have to trust.

It was almost two hours later that the donkey finally got to rest. The house he stood in front of was typical of the village: two storeys of one room each with a small enclosed yard behind. It was home to Eliezar and Joanna, their three young children, and Eliezar's mother who had come to live with them some months earlier when her husband had died. Eliezar was a cousin of sorts of Joseph's father and he and his wife welcomed the young couple warmly.

Over the evening meal, Joseph and Eliezar discuss the situation.

"Of course, you must stay here!" Eliezar declared.

"But we had no idea you had three children now, or that your mother had

come to live with you. We should find other relatives to stay with.”

“So, we’re a little crowded. We are your closest relatives here and besides Joanna would kill me if I let you take Mary away before the baby comes. Be reasonable, Joseph. You’re going to be very busy looking to get your shop going, finding work, and Mary is going to need care. We would be honoured to help.”

“All good points, Eliezar, but to...”

“No ‘buts’! Look, Joseph, my family and I will take the upper room, you and Mary can have downstairs to yourselves. Well, apart from the animals at night, of course. That will give us plenty of room and you some privacy. After the baby comes and your work is going well, we will help you find your own place.”

Joseph looked over to where Mary and Joanna were deep in their own conversation, no doubt about babies and birth and motherhood. He could see that already a bond had formed between the women. Eliezar was right, Mary would need help, preferably from an older woman who had been through having children of her own.

“You may yet come to regret your generosity, Eliezar, but you win, we will stay.”

And so, the next two months passed swiftly. Joseph did, indeed, find work and, being a masterful carpenter, was soon in some demand. It certainly made him feel better about Eliezer and Joanna’s hospitality when he could contribute his share to the household economy. Joanna and Mary got along like sisters, the older woman coaching Mary through the final weeks and making sure everything was ready.

Then came a night that was disturbed by Mary’s cries. Joanna sent her eldest daughter to fetch the village midwife and sent the menfolk upstairs. Like

innumerable husbands before and since Joseph found the next few hours a torment. Every time he heard Mary cry out, he started for the stairs, to be stopped each time by Eliezar's kind but firm words. Then he would sit for a while until, fidgeting, he would rise and pace back and forth. Eliezar laughed quietly, remembering when his own children had been born and how he, too, had been just like Joseph.

"Be calm, Joseph. Women have been giving birth since Eve. Always it is with pain, as God said, but the midwife is good, and so is my Joanna. Mary will be fine and soon you will have a son or daughter to dote on."

"a son, Eliezar, she's having a son."

"Ah yes, I remember. But sit Joseph, he will come no sooner for all that you wear a hole in my floor!"

Sometime in the early hours of the morning of different cry came up to them; the high, but hearty, cry of a new being announcing its presence to the world. Joseph jumped up and started for the stairs again.

"He's here! Praise God it's over! My son is here."

"Joseph, sit down!" Eliezar said, gently but firmly. "Yes, he is here, but Mary's work is not done. The women will not let you in yet, nor be pleased with your interruption. Let them be about their business, they will send for you as soon as is proper."

Joseph sat again, reluctantly, and the next half hour seemed to pass even more slowly. The baby had not cried for long and after that, no other noises made it up to the upper room where the men waited and the children slept. But finally, Joanna appeared and beckoned Joseph to follow her.

As he entered, Joseph's eyes instinctively sought Mary's face. He saw her lying on their mat, pale and tired but happy and not in any obvious danger. She smiled up at him as he crossed to her then pulled down the blanket so that he could see the baby. He was sleeping on her breast, his little face peaceful, his mouth making small sucking motions. As was the custom, he was tightly wrapped in strips of cloth to prevent him flailing around—which was thought to be bad for babies. Tentatively Joseph reached down and barely brushed his fingers over the light fuzz of hair.

“He won't break, and Joseph, he's a fine strong baby.”

“He is, and Mary is going to be just fine too, Joseph,” Joanna added. “She needs to rest now, as does the baby, but there is nothing to be concerned about. The midwife will be back this afternoon to check on them both.”

“Yes, I suppose sleep will do us all good.” Joseph stood looking down at Mary and the baby in such confusion the Joanna burst out laughing.

“Look over there, Joseph, I've made you up a bed on the other side of the room. You may have forgotten that you cannot share her bed until after her purification, but I have not.”

Joseph arose early the next morning, moving quietly to let Mary sleep. He opened the door and led the animals outside for the day. By the time he had them settled, the sun had risen and was already replacing the cooler early morning air with its warmth. It was going to be a beautiful day. Joseph went back in to find Mary sitting up, she had obviously just finished nursing the baby and was checking his wrappings.

“Here, Joseph, he's asleep now for a while. Take him and put him in the manger.”

“I should have made him a cradle, it’s not right that he should lie in a manger!”

“If God had wanted him in a cradle, he could have let him be born in the palace. No, Joseph, he has been born as one of us, why should he not sleep as one of us? It was no dishonour for us to spend time in mangers, why should it be dishonourable for him?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Joseph as he changed the straw in the manger. Then he went and took the baby and gently laid him on the soft bed. “Let me just take this old straw outside and then I’ll see about getting us something to eat.”

“Joseph, I’m not an invalid! You go take out the straw, I will prepare the food.”

Joseph picked up the old straw and carried it outside, placing it where the donkey could get to it. As he turned to go back in, he saw three men coming up the street, two of them barely more than boys. It was still a little early for most people to be about but from the look of them—and the smell as they reached him—he guessed that they were shepherds returning from a night in the fields. Thinking they were heading for their homes, Joseph started for the door but was brought up short when the old shepherd spoke.

“Hello, sir. A moment of your time?”

Joseph turned, puzzled. “Yes?”

“is this the house with the baby was born last night?”

“Why, yes, it is. My son was indeed born last night.”

The shepherd seemed quite excited and yet also somewhat bashful. The younger two gestured to the older one to continue.

“Could we... I mean, it is not too great an imposition...we would... be grateful if...”

“We want to see the baby!” Broke in one of the young men, impatiently, adding a “please, sir” when he realised his rudeness.

“Well, I suppose it’ll be alright. But let me make sure that all is in order inside. Please, wait here a moment.”

Joseph went inside, shaking his head.

“What is it, husband? Is something wrong?”

“No. No, not wrong, just odd. There are three shepherds outside to want to see the baby.”

“But we don’t know any shepherds. How do they know?”

“I didn’t ask. But they seem very eager, even excited. What do you think?”

“Well, if they are quiet and do not wake him, I don’t see that it can do any harm. Invite them in.”

It was almost funny to watch the shepherds follow Joseph in, they were trying so hard to make no noise. But when he saw the baby one of the young men grabbed the older man’s arm and in a loud whisper said excitedly, “See! It is just as we were told! It is true!”

“Yes, yes, I see...swaddled...in the manger...This is indeed him.”

“I’m sorry,” Mary said, “but who told you about the baby? You seem to know so much but apart from the midwife no one else who knew about his birth has left this house.”

Now the shepherds looked embarrassed and for a minute just stood there shuffling their feet. Then the elder one took a deep breath and began hesitantly to explain.

“We were on the hillside watching over the flock when...Oh, you won’t believe it! We can hardly believe it ourselves—we spent all night and the whole walk here debating it!”

Mary smiled to herself, this sounded familiar to her. She well remembered how she had felt after Gabriel’s visit to her.

“Tell us, friends, for I think you’ll find us willing to believe you. You had a visitor, didn’t you.”

“Yes! We didn’t see him come—missed his going too, come to that—but suddenly there he was. Made us jump, I can tell you. Then as we were scrambling for our staffs (people showing up in the middle of the night are rarely friendly, after all) he says not to be afraid, that he came in peace with good news.”

“That stumped us,” added one of the younger ones, “I mean, who delivers good news in the middle of the night? Or to shepherds in the fields?”

“Indeed,” continued the elder, “but before we could ask such questions, he continued his message. He told us that a baby had just been born. A descendant of David. That he would be the Messiah. Then he said we would find the baby swaddled and in a manger.”

Then the other young man spoke up. “It was as though there was a huge choir somewhere nearby—a music that accompanied his speaking. It reminded me of the temple choir praising God.”

“We didn’t know what to do. After he was gone, we spent a lot of time discussing it. He hadn’t actually said that we should seek the child, but he had said we would ‘find him’. Finally, we decided we just had to try to find this

wonderful child, so as soon as we were relieved, we hurried into town and began asking everyone we met. Finally, someone told us that they knew there was a woman near to giving birth here, so we came.”

The shepherds spent a while longer admiring the sleeping baby but then their exhaustion began to catch up with them and they took their leave. As Joseph saw them out they asked him “You don’t think we’re crazy to you?”

“No, no more than we are. For both my wife and I have received such messengers. No, friends, God is moving, and the time of our deliverance is coming.”

Chapter seven: Jerusalem, five BC

It was late morning as Mary, Joseph, and the month-old Jesus reached Jerusalem. They had come from Bethlehem, passed by Bethany, and were now approaching the summit of the Mount of Olives. Almost three weeks had passed since the synagogue elders had come to their house, along with their friends, for the circumcision and naming of the baby. It had gone smoothly; the name Jesus was common enough that it didn't cause any sensation. Now they had one last birth-related duty to perform: to visit the temple and make the offering for Mary's cleansing and as a thanksgiving, and to present their firstborn son to God.

As they rounded the crest of the hill, they saw Jerusalem laid out before them across the valley. Compared to the small villages they were used to it appeared huge. Indeed, the temple itself, its golden roofs beaming in the sun right in front of them, seemed as large as a village. It was an awe-inspiring sight that brought home forcefully so many passages in the psalms that praised Zion, the city of God. They stopped for a short rest, then began the descent into the Kedron valley that would bring them to the huge gate known as 'Beautiful' which led through the massive walls into the temple. It was the path that Jesus would walk many times during the later years of his life.

Passing through the gates, they found themselves in the relatively cool shade of Solomon's porch. The large Court of the Gentiles spread out to left and right of them while directly ahead stood the inner courts, dominated by the tall, gold-roofed Temple itself. Although their main destination lay in that direction, they first turned left and follow the shade toward the south end of the outer court. This was the area where you could exchange pagan coins for the temple ones to use in paying your temple tax or could buy approved animals for sacrifices—animals that the priests had already declared to be "without spot or blemish" according to the law.

Finding the stall of a bird seller, Joseph began the expected bartering and eventually bought a small cage with two doves in it. The law preferred a lamb for this offering but allowed pigeons or doves for those who could not afford a lamb. Then they set off towards the central area, Joseph taking the birds and Mary carrying Jesus.

The central courtyards were ringed with buildings pierced by arches and stood higher than the outer court. As they climbed the broad steps leading up, they passed through a series of poles which formed a ring around the inner part. Each of these posts carried a sign in both Aramaic and Greek that said: “Gentiles keep out!”

The buildings they passed under to reach the first of the inner courtyards contain the meeting hall of the great council, the Sanhedrin, as well as storerooms, libraries, rooms for copying books, and other tasks that would have seemed strange to the simple young couple. By their minds were on their task and they gave little thought to such things.

Thus, they entered the court of the women, at the east end of this inner sanctum. Going west from here one would come to the Court of Israel—at least one would if one were a man, women were allowed no further. From there, if one were a priest, one could enter the court of the priests which stood in front of the temple proper. Into the temple itself, even the priests only went to perform the necessary duties and then only into the first hall. The final hall—the “Holy of Holies” —was only ever entered twice a year, on the Day of Atonement, and then only by the high priest.

Since Mary could go no further, they found a priest there in the women’s court and delivered the offering to be sacrificed, receiving the blessing and pronouncement of Mary’s cleanness. It didn’t take long but once the priests had gone with the doves, they stayed there a while praying.

As they walked back out and down the steps to the Court of the Gentiles, they were discussing what to do next; head back to Bethlehem or stop in

Jerusalem to find something to eat first. They almost ran into the old man before they saw him.

“Our apologies, father, for our carelessness.” Joseph apologised, but the old man hardly seemed to hear. He was looking intently at the baby in Mary’s arms.

“This baby is your son?” He asked.

“Yes, father. His name is Jesus.” Joseph replied.

“May I hold him?”

Mary, with an inbred respect for the elderly, held out the small, tightly wrapped child. The old man, Simeon, took him reverently, then slowly lifted him up in the air, facing the temple, and pronounced a blessing on him. Then lowering his arms, he gazed down at the infant and said in a low voice:

“Lord, now I can die in peace. As you promise me, I have seen the Messiah whom you have given to all people. A light to the gentiles and the glory of Israel, your people.”

Then he gently passed Jesus back to his mother. It seemed to take an effort for him to lift his eyes from the baby but when he did, he laid a hand on Mary and took Joseph by the arm with his other hand. Louder now, he called the blessing on them both.

As he released them, he gazed intently at Mary and said to her “this child is destined for great things, he will cause the fall of many and the rise of others. He will be a sign from God, but many will speak out against him.” He paused, then with a sigh added, “yes, you too will be pierced by a sword and the thoughts of many will be revealed.”

Mary felt a shiver run down her spine and wondered if it would always be like this, strangers recognising her son even though she and Joseph kept the truth

mostly to themselves. But now Simeon was beckoning an old woman over.

“Anna, Anna, he is here!”

She came slowly and gazed at the child. “Yes, I see it too. Blessed be the Lord! Oh, there are many here that will be excited about this news. Finally, the Messiah. This is a great day!”

Joseph could see that if they didn’t leave Jerusalem soon, they might not get away at all. As graciously as he could he disentangled them from the small crowd and they slipped out of the temple, retracing their steps and heading back to Bethlehem.

Chapter eight: Jerusalem, five BC

The sudden appearance of the party of Magi threw the whole of the palace into turmoil. Visits from foreign dignitaries were complex enough when they were preceded by months of preparation, for people to just drop in unannounced was intolerable! Well, they would just have to understand if some of the protocols were a bit off—if the deference shown them was not exactly the appropriate amount; if they were sometimes kept waiting a little too long. It was by such small niceties that the complex game of relative honour was played and without the time to decide before the visit exactly who outranked whom and by how much, the courtesies themselves became a kind of give-and-take match designed to solve the issue.

The four Magi—Zoroastrian priests from Persia—took it all calmly. It had been nine months since their astrological calculations had first shown the birth of a major actor upon earth's stage. First, there were the checks, then the further study to discover where this prince had been born. And then more checks and double checks when the answer seemed to be the insignificant little territory of Judaea. Arrangements were made and, finally, they had set off on the journey west that had led them here to Jerusalem and the palace of the local ruler, hardly a king, who styled himself Herod the Great.

The palace staff was grateful for one thing, at least Herod was actually in Jerusalem at the moment and not in one of his fortresses or country retreats, or even on a tour to inspect some of the many building projects he had going on throughout the land. So it was that the magi finally found themselves in a small private reception hall face-to-face with Herod himself.

“I’m told you come looking for a newly born prince,” said Herod after the formal pleasantries were done. “I’m afraid you have wasted your time. All of my children have grown and none of them has had a child recently either.”

“Your pardon, majesty, but the signs are quite certain. Indeed, we checked them very carefully before setting off on such a long journey. A man of great destiny has been born here.”

“And yet, as I tell you, no prince has been born to me or mine.”

The magi looked at each other as the import of this remark sank home. Finally, one of them ventured, “Perhaps not of your family?”

“What! Never! No, my friends, I’m afraid you have made some mistake. Unless, of course, you think of the so-called ‘Anointed One’ has finally come!”

The ears of the magi perked up at the term, even though it was obvious Herod found it ridiculous. Their former eagerness returning, they pressed for more details.

“It is the belief of some of the religious people here that God has promised to send a descendant of the great King David who will restore Israel to its former glory. He is called the Anointed One—the Messiah or Christ. Every so often someone shows up claiming to be him and getting everyone worked up, but their rebellions are usually quickly put down. Such prophecies are more trouble than they’re worth.”

“Ah, but if the prophecy is true! It would most certainly explain the signs we have seen. What else can you tell us about these prophecies? Do they say where he will be born, for instance?”

“Well, you can hardly expect me to be up on all of these superstitions. But I will consult with those who should know. Return tomorrow and I will tell you all we know.”

As soon as the magi were gone, Herod let out the anger that had been

building up in him. Despite his pretensions to greatness, he knew that his position was really quite precarious. The Romans tolerated his role because his ruthless policies kept the province relatively peaceful. And the Judeans tolerated him—barely—because, while not Judean himself, he was closer than the hated Romans. But if trouble should break out, if the people should rally to a powerful leader! Even if he put down such an uprising the Romans would almost certainly remove him. And if the uprising should succeed, then not only his own life but those of his whole family would be forfeit. No! He could not tolerate any rival, least of all one claiming the authority of prophecy.

Herod's anger easily communicated itself to his palace staff, who fled into the city to bring the chief priests and scribes, Pharisee or Sadducee, to the palace. They came quickly, for Herod's rages were well known, but by the time they were all there most of Jerusalem was in a wary and upset condition. Surely this did not bode well.

Once they were gathered Herod swept in and, dispensing with all courtesy, fired at them, "This Messiah of yours—what do the prophecies say?"

After a brief consultation, one of the chief priests answered, "There are many prophecies, but they all agree that the Messiah will be a descendant of David who will free Israel from the oppressor's yoke and re-establish the Davidic dynasty."

"I know that! Every child in the city knows that, you fools! Details! When will he come? Where will he be born?"

The priests and scribes consulted together again, longer and more heatedly. Finally, one of the scribes came forward. "As to when, nothing is said. But the place is known: Bethlehem of Judaea. For so it is written in one of the prophets "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judaea, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

"Bethlehem? What, that dirty little village near my fortress of Herodium?"

“That would be it, your majesty.”

“This whole thing just keeps getting more and more ridiculous! Very well, if that is all, we are done.”

And Herod swept out of the hall.

Late the following afternoon the magi found themselves in the same small reception hall. The Herod who entered and greeted them seemed to be nothing like the one who had interrogated the religious leaders the day before. Now he was all smiles and courtesy. But it was all a front—one which he had spent a long time preparing. He was absolutely determined that no peasant pretender from the middle of nowhere was going to unseat him and his family, but he also knew that his best course of action was to use these magi to get more information. In a way, he was pleased they had come, for in their innocence they had revealed a possible threat. Now he would use them to gather enough information to destroy it.

“I have good news for you, gentlemen! Good news for all of us, I dare say. My experts tell me that the prophecies are quite clear, if not on the when, then at least on the where of the Messiah's birth. It is the city in which David himself was born—though city is a misnomer for it is a mere village. It is called Bethlehem and, what is more, it's only some five miles south of the city.”

“Five miles? Yes, yes, our calculations could have been off by so little. We were looking for the birthplace of a king, so naturally, we assume the capital but...”

“We thank you, King Herod, for your assistance in this matter. If we can do anything to repay your kindness, ask.”

“Well, there is one thing. Obviously, the coming of the Messiah is great

news for us all. When you find him, please come back and inform us so that we can go and pay him homage to.”

“But of course. It is late today, we will set out in the morning and see what we can find out. We will be back in two, three days at most I would expect.”

“Good, and may God prosper your search.”

That night the four magi all found their sleep disturbed by bad dreams. They discuss them as they broke their fast before setting out for Bethlehem.

“It is significant, I think, my brothers that we’ve all had such ill-omened dreams!”

“Yes indeed. I fear we were too hasty in giving our word to Herod yesterday. I do not think this Messiah is good news for him at all, and surely he intends to destroy such a threat to his own rule.”

“But we did give our word. I, too, fear it is a bad thing that we should deliver news of this king to Herod, only our word cannot be lightly set aside.”

“No, nor should it. But consider brothers, just what was asked and what we promised. We agree to tell Herod what we find so that he could go and pay homage to the child. However, as our dreams make clear to us, he has no intention of paying homage. Therefore, I suggest, we are no longer bound.”

“In that case, we had better not return here to Jerusalem. But where else can we go? There is nothing much to the south, and if we go east, we will hit the Dead Sea which will force us north again towards Jerusalem.”

“Then we go west. To the coast. Then north, up the coast to Tyre before turning east and home by way of Damascus.”

“A long way! But then again, there will be many opportunities to pursue our studies. And should Herod try to find us he’d hardly expect us to go west.”

“Then we are agreed?”

“Agreed.”

Chapter nine: Bethlehem, five BC

It was rare for a small village like Bethlehem to receive such distinguished looking visitors, and it was only slightly less rare for the magi to visit such a place. Hence both groups eyed each other warily. For the villagers, wealthy, powerful visitors usually meant trouble, although there was always the chance that they were harmless, and a few coins might be made off them. For the magi, these were just poor peasants and would barely have received any attention at all except for their quest.

As the magi and their servants, a small party of a dozen or so, made their way into the village, the magi look for a likely source of information. They ignored the young children running around them and finally found what they were looking for in a small group of old men sitting in the shade.

“Fathers, we seek information on a child. Is there in this village a child born nine months ago, a male”

The men looked at each other, but whether out of hostility, puzzlement or some other motive was hard to tell. The magus who had spoken quietly took out a purse and opened it.

“We mean him no harm, I assure you. We’re here to celebrate his birth. Is there no such child here?”

Whether it was the sight of the money or the reassurance, the men seemed suddenly friendlier. They discuss quickly in their own language and then one of them answered in poor Greek “sounds like the carpenter’s son is the one you want, he’d be about the age.”

“Is he still here? Where can we find him?”

“Carpenters house is down that street there, ‘bout halfway, on your right.”

The magus thanked them and gave them each a coin. Then they set off on the final leg of their quest. A small crowd of children with some women and older men followed them until they neared the house. Stopping a little before the house, the magi left their servants in charge of the animals and went the final short distance on foot.

The house they approached was clearly little more than a clay box, a one-roomed dwelling like most in this village. The door stood open in the morning sun and the inside looked black to eyes accustomed to the harsh glare outside. They stopped at the door, about to announce their presence, when a girl, or very young woman, appeared from inside. She kept her gaze respectfully lowered as she began to apologise.

“I’m sorry, masters, but my husband is not here. He is away working. But he will be back this evening if you wish to return.”

“It is not your husband we wish to see, but your son. You do have a son, about nine months old, do you not?”

“Yes, sir.” That now almost-familiar feeling came over Mary again: more strangers appearing from nowhere to see her son. “Please, come in out of the sun.”

She stood back and allowed them to enter. The crowd of onlookers gathered around the door to watch, so Mary felt sufficiently chaperoned. The magi entered and found the house to be as they had expected, one room sparsely furnished. And there, crawling about the raised rear part of the room, was the object of their search, the child.

Mary went quickly and picked Jesus up, bringing him down to the magi. As she approached, she watched in awe, but without much surprise, as these great men bowed deeply. As they rose, one of them spoke to her.

“Do you know what, who, your son is?”

“Oh yes,” Mary answered softly, remembering Gabriel’s visit. “He will be God’s Anointed One.”

“Yes, your ‘Christ’. In the east, we had not heard of him and yet as we studied the stars, we saw the sign of his birth. We knew a great one had been born and the signs brought us here.”

“We brought gifts,” another added. “Gold.” He held out a purse.

“Myrrh,” said the next, proffering an alabaster jar.

“And incense,” the last added.

Mary accepted the gifts and took them to a shelf formed by a recess in the wall. She deposited the gifts there then came back to find the magi still looking at the child.

But he was just a child and Persian magi had little to do with children, so the situation quickly got a little awkward. Finding there was little left for them to say or do, they took their leave. Following their earlier decision, they left Bethlehem and headed west, not north, and so began the long journey home.

The next morning a very troubled Joseph spoke earnestly with Mary.

“We have to leave here, now.”

“But why Joseph? We’re doing well here.”

“I had bad dreams all night. Mary, Jesus is becoming too well known here. These magi who came had been in Jerusalem. If Herod hears, then who knows what he will do.”

“But surely God can protect him.”

“Yes, of course. But God put him in our care and now my best judgment says to go, now. I think God is warning us.”

“Where can we go? Back to Nazareth?”

“No. We must get beyond Herod’s reach as soon as possible. In my dreams, I saw us going south, to Egypt.”

“Then we go to Egypt. I will start packing the house if you’ll pack your tools and prepare the donkey.”

Two days later, when Herod realised that the magi were not coming back, the little family was already long gone. And the next day when the soldiers arrived to vent Herod’s anger and to allay his fears, they found only four young boys in the area. While it was no comfort to the bereaved parents they left behind, it was so small an item in the tally of Herod’s atrocities it went unnoticed in the larger world. None of the villagers had any love of Herod, and none even thought to inform the soldiers about the child who got away. It was, they thought, one small blow to “them”, the powerful and rich.

Chapter 10: Nazareth, three BC

Herod was dead, had been dead now almost nine months. It had taken five months for the news to reach the small Egyptian village where they had hidden, and, even then, they had not felt safe enough to return. Not, that is, until Joseph's dream and his ensuing conviction that it was safe again. It had been almost three years since either of them had seen these familiar hills or the great lake, and it felt wonderful. Soon they would be back among the family and friends they had known all their lives and could settle down and raise their own family—growing now as they had discovered that Mary was pregnant again, normally this time, just before they had set out to return.

This trip, since there had been no urgency, they had taken the time to prepare, and for Joseph to finish all the work he had in hand. Then, taking the coastal trade route, they'd slowly come north. The only bad moment had come when they reach Gaza. They had been planning on returning to Bethlehem and were about to turn east on the road to Jerusalem when they heard that Herod had been succeeded by his son Archelaus. While Archelaus was an unknown, he was Herod's son and they were concerned. They spent an anxious night, Joseph tossing and turning, then in the early hours he had a dream of being home in Galilee and slept better after that. The following morning, they continued north, avoiding Judaea.

At Caesarea, they had finally turned inland across the northern part of Samaria, then north again into Galilee. And finally, there was Nazareth, looking just as it had when they left it. Tonight, they would stay with Joseph's parents and tomorrow would begin to look for their own house and for work for Joseph. It would be easier this time, for they were already known, and Joseph skills had been well respected before they had left. It might take a few weeks, but life would return to normal. For a while, anyway...