

The Builder

1. Sepphoris

The day was barely dawning as Yosef Bar Yakov rose from his hard pallet. In the quiet he paused briefly to draw a sash around the waist of his coarse tunic, pick up his cloak and retrieve his turban. He donned his clothing with practiced ease, then picked up the sack containing his lunch and a water-skin. He stepped out into the early morning air and took a deep breath, pausing to recite the ancient words of Moses.

*“Shema, Yisrael, Adonai elohenu Adonai echad. Ve-ahabta et-Adonai Eloheka be-kol-lebabeka u-be-kol-nafsheka u-be-kol-meodeka...– Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is one. And you will love the LORD your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all or your mind...”*¹ He quickly continued on in his litany, eyes closed, reciting it in the pure old Hebrew language that few of the unschooled truly understood. How blessed Yosef was for having a father who not only could read and understand the ancient language, but who still spoke it fluently with his sons. Yosef savored his recitation of the *Shema* every morning and evening, feeling it brought him a step closer to his God, the One he truly loved, the One he longed to see.

At the end of his recounting the words of Moses, the sturdy builder quickly strode out of the courtyard of his father’s house. He turned left, down the main street of Nazareth to make the hour-long walk to near-by Sepphoris where he was currently working on expanding the house of one of the rich merchants of the city. As he walked he hummed a tune in the soft minor key of the eastern peoples, the one that his father often used when reciting the Psalms. This time Yosef was thinking of the mighty words of what would later be termed the second Psalm:

*The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
Then he rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
“I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.”
I will proclaim the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
You will rule them with an iron scepter;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”*²

He considered the words he sang as he walked in the slowly increasing light. He, a direct descendant of the kingly line of David, the beloved king of Israel, knew that these had special meaning for his house. His line should be the one to carry this promise: the “son of God,” the king who had the right to rule Palestine and crush the enemies of the LORD. Ah, that he would be able to see such a thing! But he knew from his studies of the Scriptures that much was yet to come. The Mashiah, the Anointed One, the peaceful King who was prophesied must arise, so he knew. And Yosef also knew that he was not the Messiah, though he could trace his lineage directly back to Jehoiachin, the next-to-last king of ancient Israel. If this king hadn’t failed, then perhaps it would have been Reb Yakov who would be ruling this country.

Perhaps the King would yet come in his lifetime. It was an odd feeling that had struck Yosef often as he had walked the four miles between his home and the most prosperous city of the area. He continued meditating on it as Sepphoris itself came into view, perched on the crown of a hill, much like a bird’s nest. After all, the old Hebrew name Zippori meant “bird,” an apt description of the city. The view was breath-taking no matter how often he looked at the clay and rock walls surrounding the peak of the hill. Living up there must give one the

¹ Deut. 6:4-5

² Ps. 2:4-9 (NIV)

feeling of living at the top of the world. He understood a little of the feeling, as the cliff above which his little home village of Nazareth was situated gave him a similar view of the Beyt Netofa Valley.

Yosef's final destination was on the western edge where old Eli Yoachim had his expansive home. The city gates were just opening as he arrived and he strode through with a friendly word to the men on duty. They greeted him in kind, while Yosef made his way up the path of the poorer quarter, pausing at a small house where Yehuda, his younger brother by a mere eleven months, lived along with his wife. Their brother Clopas stayed there that night, having been invited by a local scholar of the Law to dine with him and display the famed knowledge of the sons of Rabbi Yakov Bar Mattan. Clopas was the least scholarly of the four brothers, but he was also the one who was most persuasive, having inherited his father's way with words. Many thought that this young man might have gone on to be a lawyer if his father's trade as builder hadn't already given him an area of work that any man should be proud of.

"Shalom, Yosef!" Yehuda called, as his older brother stepped through the low doorway into the small courtyard.

"Shalom, brother," the builder replied with a smile. "I see you are well."

"You say that every time, Yosef. We only saw each other yesterday!" Yehuda chuckled and slapped one pudgy hand on his brother's shoulder. "Come and break bread with us so we can get going up to Eli's. I'll wager a new adz that he's got more carving for you to do." He glanced at the door behind Yosef, expecting to see Abiyah, their youngest brother. "Where is the runt off to?" he asked.

"Mother kept him at home," the older brother replied. "Besides, someone's got to take care of the furniture orders."

"And he would *never* venture away from Father and his books unless forced to, right?" Clopas remarked, coming down from the roof of the house. He smiled and said, "Shalom," embracing Yosef in the customary manner. They went up to the roof, where only a few minutes later Yehuda's wife, Bat-shua, brought them some bread, goat's cheese, and milk, as well as a few black olives. As the oldest, Yosef said a brief blessing before the three brothers breakfasted.

"So we're off to old Eli's again," Clopas chuckled around a morsel of the flat bread. "I tell you, Yosef, I saw a sight there yesterday that would make any man strong again."

"Looking at the girls again, Clopas?" Yehuda grunted. "You need to remember that Father already has someone in mind for you!"

"Right, isn't it the cross-eyed girl from Cana, whom no one wants?" Yosef jibed, an impish smile on his face.

"Ha, Father wouldn't do that if she were the only Israelite woman left in Palestine!" Clopas exploded. "He will let us select our *own* brides, and you know that!"

"What a responsibility for you, boy," the oldest laughed. "Your eyes wander after everything that happens to have long hair and a shawl! I bet you never even notice if they're mature or not!" Yehuda tried to hide a chuckle by sipping from his milk, only to have it choke him, so he sputtered and coughed and received a few well-meaning but useless slaps on the back from his brothers.

"I tell you, Yosef, this girl's different!" Clopas said sincerely when Yehuda's fit had passed. "She's the most beautiful I've ever seen and I don't say that lightly!" Yosef looked at Yehuda and gave him a knowing smile. Clopas Alphaeus the match-maker was hard at work again. It really, really galled him that his oldest brother was still single while Yehuda had already married. It was only six months ago, but still he felt a stigma being attached to Yosef, who at 23 was overripe for marriage by most standards. The older brothers looked at each other with a wry smile.

"So who's the lucky girl this time, Clopas?" Yosef asked. His little brother gave him an I-knew-I'd-hook-you look.

"I'm not exactly sure yet, but I tell you she's definitely of the family of David. The Word says he was ruddy and handsome. And this girl! All of the above!"

"A handsome girl," Yosef returned good-naturedly. "Now that's new. I thought I might be looking at a *beautiful* one instead."

"She's probably old Eli's daughter, Yosef," Yehuda put in. "Everybody knows the old man moved up here from Bethlehem years ago. He can trace his lineage all the way back to Natan, David's son, I'm told."

"My, my, my. You know a lot, dear brother, is this some kind of scheme you two put together to get me married into a rich family?" Clopas and Yehuda looked at each other, grinning like a couple youngsters caught in a prank. Yosef folded his arms and looked at them with a benign smile.

"I thought so," was all he said. Then he looked up at the sun. "We'd better get going, hadn't we?"

"Yes," came a voice from down in the courtyard. "Eli doesn't take kindly to slackers."

"Ah, Micah, right on time," Clopas laughed. "You always know when to show up." The three brothers looked down at the wiry form of the local stone-mason. It was hard to imagine that such a small man had learned such a hard trade. He was a good friend to all of Reb Yakov's sons, having grown up in Nazareth with them until he was about fourteen when his father had moved to Sepphoris because of better business opportunities.

"Yeah, let's get going," Yehuda sighed. "Bat-shua will clean up." And so they did. They followed the narrow streets up and around the crown of the city, then back down into the well-to-do district. The houses here were larger and more luxurious, even the outer walls white-washed to a pristine white. The four men laughed and talked as they paused at one large door set in the wall and knocked. A few minutes later a porter opened it and noticed the workmen for the expansion of the house. He welcomed them in and the four of them immediately hurried over to the unfinished east wing. They had spend three weeks tearing it down and then the past three months rebuilding it. Eli was paying a pretty sum to get it done, not being content with the regular clay bricks that most people used, but wanting it built out of stone.

No other workmen were there yet, it being early. Yosef, his brothers, and Micah all threw off their cloaks, drew up their long tunics into their belts and set to work on their various tasks. The builder carefully scrutinized the beams that they'd lifted into place the day before. They were ready for him to complete the carvings he'd begun. There were lilies and pomegranates, stylized cedars, a few birds, and in the center of each one was to be a beautifully stylized lion's head, the lion being the symbol of the house of Judah, which Eli proudly counted himself a part of. Half of the sixteen beams had been completed and the scaffolding had remained beneath for the carving of the eight. Yosef quickly scaled this and unpacked his mallet and chisel. He knew he'd be done with these by noon time, each one slightly different from the one before, beautiful hand-carvings in the sturdy cedar wood that Eli had paid a fortune to bring down from Lebanon.

The builder hummed to himself, thinking of the imagery of the lion and its bearing on the tribe of Judah. The ancient prophecy of Israel himself came to mind as his chisel formed the slanted eyes and the mouth open in a snarl:

*Judah, your brothers will praise you;
your hand will be on the neck of your enemies;
your father's sons will bow down to you.
You are a lion's cub, O Judah;
you return from the prey, my son.
Like a lion he crouches and lies down,
like a lioness – who dares to rouse him?
The scepter will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he comes to whom it belongs
and the obedience of the nations is his.³*

Strange that he would think of the Messiah again even as he was carving the symbol of his family house. How everything around him reminded him of those eternal promises! He longed for the freedom of Israel from the Roman oppression as much as anyone else, perhaps more so, because as a descendant of David he might even be allowed to be in the line of Messiah! To his mind that was an honor far above holding a throne or commanding people. He did not mind his work as builder or his reputation as the best wood-carver in the valley, as a matter of fact he enjoyed it. The manual work gave him time to recite the vast passages of the Torah that he'd memorized

³ Gen 49:8-10 (NIV)

under his father's tutelage. Even as he was working with his father as a boy before the accident he was committing verses to memory. It was at that time he'd memorized the 150 Psalms as well as most of the five books of Moses. He smiled to himself as he remembered how he had stumbled through the first parts of *Debarim*, the fare-well speeches of the Prophet. His father had put down his plane and glared at the boy.

"You must take your study of the Word seriously," Yakov said in perfect Hebrew, the language he always used when talking to his sons. "It is only in the knowledge and application of the Word that true immortality lies, my son. The Almighty gave us the Word to teach us how to please Him. You must learn it and learn to interpret it!" That was where the high regard for all things sacred began to be impressed upon Yosef Bar Yakov's heart. When he was Bar-Mitzvah he did not read from the scrolls, but recited them from memory, by then having assimilated all of the prophecies of Isaiah and some of Jeremiah. And still the learning went on. Only yesterday evening his father had allowed him to memorize a new part of what was to his mind the most intriguing of the books of the Scripture: the words of the prophet Zechariah. The visions had been laborious, but in the poetry of the latter parts of the book Yosef could lose himself joyfully. He recited the words to himself, burning them into his mind with the intensity that he had learned from the time he'd been able to talk.

*Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and having salvation,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the war-horses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.
As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.
Return to your fortress, O prisoners of hope;
even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.
I will bend Judah as I bend my bow
and fill it with Ephraim...⁴*

Suddenly he stopped, realizing that a soft voice was taking up the sing-song recitation below him:

*I will rouse your sons, O Zion,
against your sons, O Greece,
and make you like a warrior's sword.⁵*

He looked down and saw a girl of about sixteen setting down a water-jug with a ladle for the workers. In her quiet voice she continued singing the prophecy.

*Then the LORD will appear over them;
his arrow will flash like lightning.
The Sovereign LORD will sound the trumpet;
he will march in the storms of the south,*

⁴ Zech 9:9-13a (NIV)

⁵ Zech 9:13b (NIV)

*and the LORD of hosts will shield them.*⁶

At that instant she must have become aware of his penetrating gaze on her back. The song broke off and she turned and glanced up at him openly with wide eyes of brown flecked with gold and green. A small furtive smile swept across her rose-bud lips before she inclined her head and walked out of the unfinished room, self-consciously pulling her scarf closer around her face to hide the dark brown hair that peeked out from the edges of it.

Is that the girl Clopas was talking about? he wondered and with it came the thought. *That's Eli's daughter? Who would have taught her the Scriptures?* Certainly Yakov was less stringent about the women's knowledge of Scripture. Yosef's mother Yehosheba could not only read and write in Hebrew and Aramaic, but she also was able to recite vast portions of the history of the Kings straight from memory, being surpassed in her memorization only by her husband.

But Eli was a Pharisee and a strict one at that. Would he allow his daughter to study the Scriptures? Didn't most Pharisees disallow such a thing? It was true that Yosef's father held a loose affiliation to the popular party of Palestine, but he was much less tied to the oral law than his compatriots. He regarded the Scripture as the summation of all that was needed to know. For that reason he had no qualms about teaching women the ancient writings.

"Wasn't woman created as man's helper?" he'd say with a loving smile towards his wife. "She can only help in the depth that she understands the Law that was given and so she *must* be taught!"

So Eli allows the women of his household to study Scripture, Yosef mused wryly. He also allowed images of beasts to be carved into the rafters of his new banquet room. Old hypocrite!

Yosef returned to his work and tried to concentrate on the carving, but that brief glimpse of the girl would not leave his mind. He tried to chase the image away with recitation of Scripture, repeating the prophecies of Zechariah first, but when he found it only enhanced his memory of her voice he tried switching to the Psalms. Here he found himself reciting the wedding psalm:

*My heart is stirred by a noble theme
as I recite my verses for the king;
my tongue is the pen of a skillful writer.
You are the most excellent of men
and your lips have been anointed with grace,
since God has blessed you forever ...
Listen, O daughter, consider and give ear:
Forget your people and your father's house.
The king is enthralled by your beauty;
honor him, for he is your lord.
The Daughter of Tyre will come with a gift,
men of wealth will seek your favor.
All glorious is the princess within her chamber;
her gown is interwoven with gold...⁷*

As soon as he noticed where he was going, he forced his mind to slide to a halt and paused to examine the head of the lion he'd just finished. It was perfect. He smiled to himself. The lion of the tribe of Judah.

Just before lunch time came around Eli strolled into the banquet hall where Yosef was putting the finishing touches on the last of the sixteen lion heads, this one with its mouth shut, a royal light in the wooden eyes.

⁶ Zech 9:14-15a (NIV altered)

⁷ Ps 45:1-2,10-13 (NIV)

"Magnificent!" the old merchant exclaimed, stroking his beard with one broad hand. "Magnificent work, Yosef Bar Yakov! You were not recommended in vain!" The builder smiled and bowed slightly, coming down from the scaffolding while Eli walked back and forth in the hall, loudly praising the carvings. As Yosef descended from where he was working he noticed a slight figure standing in the doorway and recognized the girl who had brought the water earlier that morning. He forced his eyes away from her and on to the man who now had traversed the entire length of the hall and came back to where Yosef had come to stand at the base of the scaffolding.

"You are truly a master of your art, Yosef Bar Yakov," the merchant laughed, clapping a hand on the young man's shoulder. The builder didn't quite know how to respond, as old Eli was not known to dispense praise much.

"Thank you, my lord," he said with deference.

"Come now, don't be so modest, Yosef. After all, I'd never hire any but the best and you must know that!" Another hearty laugh came from deep within the old man's broad chest. He turned back towards the door and nodded at the girl who turned and quickly walked away across the courtyard, into the house. *Is she his servant girl?* the builder wondered.

"Today I am providing the fare for you, my friend," the old Pharisee announced, "for you, your brothers, and your friends." Up until now the old miser hadn't cared to do so and the workers had brought their own meals. What had prompted such a change?

"The expansion is ahead of plan," Eli explained as if sensing the young man's question. "You and your friends have done a magnificent job and we need to reward that. From this day forth you'll be eating from my table."

It seems that the old man has made some unexpected profits in his cloth business, Yosef mused. Hadn't Micah said something about possibly supplying Herod and the High Priest's families with cloth and clothing? Yosef followed Eli out into the courtyard where some of the old man's slaves had set up an awning. The workers were just beginning to put down their tools and head over to the shade. There were ten in all, the finest in the area. If Abiyah had been there Eli certainly *would* have the best wood-carver in all the Beyt Netofa Valley working on his house, but the youngest son of Reb Yakov tended to be bookish and not interested in manual labor, much to his father and mother's chagrin.

The men sat down on the ground around a low table that was laid out with fresh bread, grapes, dates, roasted corn and a small portion of meat for each of the men.

"Eat well, my friends," Eli laughed. "After all strong bodies need strong nourishment to work hard."

Bribery to get us to finish even faster so it will save him more money, Yosef thought cynically. The head of the household asked the blessing on the meal and then allowed the men to eat. They were attended by male servants, all except the old man. As soon as he was finished a girl came to replenish his empty bowl. Yosef recognized her as she leaned past the merchant's shoulder, her shawl slipping forward to veil the side of her face that was toward the man she was serving. Yosef noticed that her hair had fallen forward a bit as well. It was a dark brown, but shimmered reddish, the trademark of the house of David.

A loose woman, he thought for a moment, but as she glanced at him and gave him that same small smile from the banquet room, he decided otherwise. Here was purity incarnate. Suddenly he winced at a jab in his side and glared at a broadly grinning Clopas.

"Didn't I tell you?" he mouthed silently. Yosef nodded demurely and went back to his food as the girl straightened and left the table. *Who is she?* he wondered. *Has she been spoken for?* It was interesting that she only served the old man. Might she be a concubine? That thought chilled him for a moment and he focused on his meal. It was not uncommon for the richer men to keep a concubine or two beside the wife, but he'd never thought a staunch a Pharisee as old Eli Yoachim to be such a hypocrite.

"What's the matter with you, Yosef?" Yehuda asked from across the circle. "You're awfully quiet today."

"Oh, sorry," the builder answered. "I was just thinking..."

"Ah, yes..." his younger brother returned with a knowing smile. "In case you were wondering, that girl's Eli's second daughter. That's all I was able to wring out of one of the servants who brought us water. That, and the fact she's not yet spoken for."

What does that have to do with me? Yosef asked himself. *I'm not interested, am I?* And yet he found himself counting the moments until the girl reappeared. He sighed to himself as the men finished their meal and she did not reemerge from the house. Perhaps he was just being foolish, but a girl who could quote the Hebrew so well was a prize! Why would Eli allow something like that? He later voiced that question to his friend Micah who just happened to be chipping a stone block next to where Yosef was readying a cross-beam.

"They say that old Eli dotes on his children, especially the girls," the mason explained. "One of the servants once told me that when his daughters requested a chance to learn the Torah, it had only taken one question from the second one to get him to agree. They say that two of his daughters can recite as well as the rabbi in the synagogue."

Like the girl this morning, Yosef thought. *She must be his daughter!* And within him rose the desire to know this girl. Even before he'd noticed it, he sent a silent prayer to his God asking for a chance. Finally registering what he'd done he sighed to himself.

"Don't listen to a fool, o LORD," he muttered, scraping his plane along the beam. "I'm not even sure what I want here."

As evening came and the men prepared to return home Yosef entered the unfinished banquet hall to retrieve some tools. They'd already begun laying the roof over the beams and the whole hall's exterior should be done before the rains would begin within another six weeks. He climbed the scaffolding with ease and looked around to find the tools he'd laid down, wishing he'd had a lamp to aid him. He found the mallet and the three chisels, picked them up and began walking to the edge where a basket sat to lower them down. The sun falling into the room at just the right angle made it difficult for him to see where he was going.

"Be careful or you'll fall!" came a girl's voice and Yosef stopped, mere inches from the edge of the board. He glanced down and only was able to see a silhouette against the sun.

"Thank you," he replied and knelt to feel for the basket. After a few moments he found it, placed his tools in it, and lowered it to the floor, quickly climbing down after it. He stood on the ground and glanced around. The girl had gone to pick up the jug she'd set down in the morning. It was nearly empty now, most having been drunk by the men while they worked in the sun. Yosef tried to ignore her, not wanting to fall from Eli's good graces, but she came towards him purposefully. She extended the jar to him.

"Would you like the rest of the water?" she asked innocently. "It would be a pity to waste it."

"Thank you," he replied with a smile and accepted it from her hand, being careful not to touch her. He threw his head back as he emptied it, unaware that the girl was admiring his strong build, broad shoulders and raven hair that often shimmered reddish. By the time he was finished, she had composed herself and dropped her gaze again.

"Thank you, Bat Eli," he said in Aramaic, handing her the jug. She smiled and he noticed that she had a small dimple on the right side of her face.

"And you are?" she asked directly.

"Yosef Bar Yakov," he answered.

"I saw you looking at me, Yosef Bar Yakov," she told him. Shame washed over him.

"Forgive me, Bat Eli," he said quietly. "I meant no offense." She smiled again.

"You should consult Eli before you look at Miriam's face," the girl laughed. "He gets very jealous of me."

So her name is Miriam, Yosef thought to himself. *Miriam – bitterness.* An apt name in times such as these, but so unfitting to this young woman.

"Forgive me, Miriam Bat Eli," he repeated, this time in Hebrew. The girl couldn't keep her eyes down this time, amazed at the perfect diction from this rough builder's mouth. She gave a little laugh.

"You speak the language of our fathers!" she exclaimed in the same tongue. "Few do."

"From my father," Yosef replied. "A gift of God."

"Hm, yes," she returned, uncertain what to say, then shouldered the jug and began to walk off. At that moment it seemed the Yosef's mouth disconnected from his brain.

"Will we meet again, Bat Eli?" he asked. She turned back and gave him a curious look, but did not answer, stepping out into the setting sun, the red rays obliterating her form. To Yosef it was as if an angel had vanished into the light of heaven. Would he ever be the same?

"Your work has been far beyond what I could have repaid," Eli said as he reclined at the table with Yosef Bar Yakov, his three brothers, and several other guests following the completion of the new wing. "Certainly I would like to retain your services in some way, Yosef."

"I already have new assignments, my lord," the builder replied evenly. "There are others in Sepphoris who are building. And then there is the furniture you ordered."

"Quite, quite," the old man sighed, waving one hand impatiently. A servant rushed up to refill the host's goblet with some of the Mt. Carmel wine that Eli loved so much. At that moment Yosef noticed that he was being attended by a male servant and not by Miriam.

Me and my big mouth, the builder thought ruefully, recalling his telling Micah, Clopas, and Yehuda of the brief conversation he'd had with Miriam Bat Eli. His brothers had laughed knowingly. Certainly he'd seen more of the girl during the rest of his time finishing the new wing, but the closest he'd ever gotten was a shy, admiring look and a small smile. He felt disappointed, longing to talk to this young woman who clearly was much deeper than she seemed at first.

"I do feel that I have not remunerated you enough, though, Yosef," Eli cut into his thoughts. "Ask of me what you will, and I'll grant it." That offer caught the young man off guard.

"I do not dare ask, my lord!" The words popped out of his mouth automatically. There was a sly light in the old man's eyes.

"You don't dare ask because you would ask for something that I prize very highly, is that not right, young man?"

"Forgive me, my lord," Yosef replied, averting his eyes. Eli chuckled.

"Well, my boy, I have eyes in my head and more than a little common sense." The occupants of the table laughed a bit at that remark. "I know you have seen my daughter, my Miriam, and I've seen the way you have looked at her." Yosef lowered his head to hide flush of shame rising to his cheeks.

So he's had me sit at his right hand so that he can humiliate me better, is that it? he asked himself.

"There's nothing wrong in a man noticing a woman's beauty," Eli continued benignly. "Especially my Miriam's beauty! Ah, now there's a girl for you – few with her countenance and her quietness. She is so gentle that she would not hurt any living thing and yet she has a soul of iron that will not bend to the wrong. She is untouched, unblemished. She has a servant's heart and," here he winked at Yosef conspiratorially, "she would make the perfect mother for Messiah, but don't tell anyone I said that." Yosef forced himself to smile, but thinking of what he'd seen of Miriam, he knew that Eli's words were true. The old man sighed loudly.

"My boy, you do not know what you are asking this old man to give up!"

"I am not asking, my lord," the builder replied humbly, almost trying to defend himself. But something within was telling him that this was merely a game that Eli was playing and that no matter what Yosef said the outcome was planned far in advance.

"You aren't asking, Yosef Bar Yakov, and you are wise not to do so," the merchant replied, eyes once more becoming very sly. "You are a humble man in more ways than one." He smiled. "I have asked about you, Yosef Bar Yakov. I know you are the oldest son of the much loved and revered Rabbi Yakov Bar Mattan of Nazareth where my daughter Hephzibah lives. I know that you work hard to keep your father and his family supported. I know that you recite Scripture better than the rabbis of Sepphoris – and in our fathers' tongue none-the-less! I know that you are honorable and hard-working, a man who has no faults and who obeys his God without question!" He leaned in close. "There are few of your kind, Yosef Bar Yakov, very few. That's because you carry something other men don't: you are a direct descendant of Yehoiachin, the last king of Judah, and were Israel a true nation today with one of David's sons on the throne, you would be the next in line." This had been said in a low voice so only Yosef and Eli's son Abiram who sat on the merchant's left could hear it. Yosef knew that the old man's words were true and they chilled him, because to utter such words in public might arouse the ire of certain

rulers of the country who didn't care to have a Davidic dynasty on the throne. Eli leaned back, cleared his throat, and took another sip of his wine.

"So, Yosef Bar Yakov, what is your request?" The builder's head started to spin and he found himself having to breathe heavily to contain his pounding heart. Dare he ask?

"I am poor, my lord," he pushed out instead.

"A humble man, as I said, Abiram," Eli remarked to his son. "What does that matter, Yosef? Your expertise can easily provide you with the means to support a family twice the size of the one you already have." At that point the young man decided.

"Sir, I would like to ask for your daughter Miriam's hand in marriage," he said, eyes averted.

"There's the spirit, my boy," the merchant remarked slapping the young man on the shoulder. He then turned and called, "Miriam!" Yosef's heart leaped into his throat. The betrothal now? His family was not here!

"Sir, my family..." he interjected.

"Don't worry, my boy," Eli returned. "They've been properly informed. Your father declined the invitation, though, as his health is poor." Yosef glanced over at Yehuda who was nonchalantly nipping at his glass of wine. *Were they in on it?* he wondered. Clopas lay there, grinning broadly. Yes, they were *definitely* in on it. *I bet the old man had this all set up from the first day I walked on the job,* he thought to himself.

At that moment Miriam came into the room, wearing a maroon-colored dress with a desert-blue sash and a white head-scarf. Her hair peeked out at just the right amount to be modest. Yosef rose. The girl glanced up at him, unable to hide the excitement in her eyes and in her flushed face.

This is all so fast! Yosef thought to himself, but was composed as he reached into his belt and retrieved a full silver shekel that Clopas had given him on their way to Eli's. When asked what it was for, his brother had only mentioned that it would be needed when the time came. The custom was that the betrothal be sealed before representatives of each family by the couple exchanging a small amount of money. The larger the coin, the higher the esteem and a full shekel was the highest that Yosef could afford at this point. His savings were meager, but they were there and would have to wait to support a wife. He paused and looked at the girl.

"What do you have to say to all this?" he asked suddenly. She lifted her head and looked him square in the eye for a moment, smiling broadly. She lowered it again.

"I would never reject a son of David," she whispered. "I would never reject a man who loves God as does Yosef Bar Yakov." The simplicity of her statement thrust him off balance, but he composed himself quickly and held out his hand with the shekel in it. She raised her right and he put the coin in it, closing her fingers over top. She quickly drew the piece of silver to her lips before presenting him with a like coin, displaying her affection for him. Then she bowed slightly, turned and ran from the room.

"And now let us celebrate, Yosef Bar Yakov – my son," Eli said with a smile. "For fortunate is he who can have a daughter of the house of David!"

11. Nazareth

It was a worried Yosef who strode down the street of Nazareth to the home of Kalev Bar Shmuel, the brother-in-law of his betrothed. Miriam had just returned from three months in Judea visiting an elderly cousin who had just delivered her first-born. The story of Yochanan Bar Zachariah had been passed on to Yosef's family by Abiyah who had also just returned from down south where he'd been negotiating to study at the feet of a well-known rabbi. Yosef had been itching to see his bride ever since she'd returned the day before, but his business didn't allow it. Then today came one of Hephzibah's messengers.

"Come and speak with your wife," was all that he'd told the builder, but he had ill disguised a very negative tone in his voice.

What has happened to Miriam? Yosef wondered. In the past nine months of their betrothal he had taken ample time to get to know the girl and had come away surprised at her depth. She was a normal girl in many ways, but unusual in just as many. What woman did he know besides his mother who could argue the fine points of the Law with the fervor and logic of a seasoned Rabbi? What woman did he know who would submit to him as Miriam did, unquestioningly? What woman had he ever met who would look at him with such adoration in her

eyes? And now there was some trouble. What trouble? Yosef sighed as he came up to Kalev's enclosure. He paused before knocking on the side gate.

To his surprise it was opened by Hephzibah herself, a small, rotund woman with dark eyes that scarce hid cunning and wisdom.

"It's good you came, Yosef," she said evenly. "My father was here this morning. Miriam is very shaken."

"What's happening?" he demanded, stepping through the gate.

"Perhaps you'd better see for yourself," was the reply and, though he prodded, his bride's sister would say no more. So he followed her silently onto the roof of the house where Miriam was spinning wool. She looked up as he came and gave him a small, melancholy smile. Her face was paler than usual and there were shadows under her eyes. However, she held herself erect, trying to be sure. Hephzibah nodded to Miriam and then turned and disappeared. Yosef sat down on the parapet next to her.

"I'm so glad you came, Yosef," she greeted him in her quiet voice. "I've had such trouble." It surprised him that she refused to look at him, something that they'd perfected in the months past.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded, slowly becoming agitated. Who had *dared* lay hand on his wife, the woman he loved? She put down the wool she was working on and glanced at him furtively. There was a strange light in her eyes.

"Has Hephzibah not told you?" she asked.

"No." The girl looked away and bit her lip, as if afraid. He wanted to reach out and grasp her hand.

"Miriam, what happened? Was it on the journey?"

"No, before." She looked back at him. "Yosef, I'm pregnant." His jaw dropped open, unable to grasp what he'd just heard.

"What?" was all he could croak.

"I'm pregnant – but it's not the way you think!" He began shaking his head.

"Please, *ba'ali*, hear me out!" The pleading in her voice, the use of that epithet – *ba'ali*, my lord, my *owner* – was something he'd not experienced before and he could not do anything but comply. Miriam smoothed her dress with both hands and then launched into her narrative.

"It was two days before I left to visit Elisabeth, my cousin in Judea. I had just returned from getting the water for the morning. I was alone in the courtyard when suddenly I saw this man. He was tall and shining like the sun. There was something about him that immediately made it clear to me that this was a messenger of God!" Yosef raised an eyebrow skeptically, but Miriam didn't seem to notice.

"He said to me, 'Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!'⁸ I was very surprised at this, I mean, who am I to be favored, I'm just a girl who is betrothed to a son of David, the deposed line of Israel. Why would I be favored?" She flicked a glance at him. "To be honest, Yosef, it scared me very much and I wondered what he might mean. But he went on.

"'Don't be frightened, Miriam,' he said, 'for God has decided to bless you! You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Yehoshua. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!'"⁹

"But how? I've never touched you, and neither has any other man!" Yosef demanded.

"I asked him the same thing and he told me, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elisabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's already in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.'"¹⁰

"And you declined, right?" Yosef asked, unbelieving.

"How could I, *ba'ali*? It was God who was speaking. How can I reject what God has asked? After all, I am His servant." She looked at him with pleading eyes. "Yosef, please say you believe me!" He struggled with what she'd told him. This was the most ludicrous story he'd ever heard to cover up a pregnancy. It couldn't have been

⁸ Lk 1:28 (NLT)

⁹ Lk 1:30-33 (NLT)

¹⁰ Lk 1:35-37 (NLT)

him. He'd touched her hand once, maybe twice, but he'd not even kissed her yet. How could she be pregnant? Had she been raped? Had she consented to something worse?

"Yosef?" the girl's fearful voice cut through his roiling thoughts. He knew she would read the disbelief in his eyes.

"I – I need to think, Miriam," was all he said and rose. This certainly was too much. Might it have been one of those Romans who had traveled through Nazareth on their way to Sepphoris? He did not even bid her farewell as he turned angrily and walked down the stairs, only to bump into Hephzibah.

"She told you?" the woman asked. The builder nodded.

"Who was it really, Hephzibah?" he queried in turn.

"That I can't say, Yosef. It certainly wasn't here at the house if it were a natural conception." She paused and looked away. "My father asked the same question of Miriam. He even struck her for lying to him." The eyes flicked back to the builder. "I don't know if I should tell you this, but we had the midwife come by and look at Miriam. She swore that my sister is still a virgin." Those words stopped Yosef cold.

"What did you say?" he demanded.

"From what we can tell Miriam is still a virgin." The sister's voice was most defensive. "My father did not want to believe it, but it seems what she said is true." She grabbed the builder's arm. "Yosef, if what she says is true, might it not be..."

"I'm not about to speculate in that direction, woman," he said coldly, turned, and stalked off.

It was a very troubled Yosef Bar Yakov who returned to his father's house. His mother greeted him, but he avoided her and went to the roof, where his father was sitting, meditating on some portion of Scripture. The old man looked up as his son came and sat down across from him.

"Ah, my son," he greeted the builder with a wan smile, "I see you have returned from your wife." Yosef lowered his head.

"You know?" he asked.

"I know. Eli was here while you were away in Sepphoris. He told me." The old man sighed and shifted his stiff leg where a large beam had taken him out of the business of building and catapulted him into the task of learning and teaching the Word. "It pains me."

"Hephzibah told me she's still a virgin," Yosef pushed out. Yakov looked at him sharply.

"You would believe her? Women as witnesses are unreliable!"

Here we go again, Yosef thought. This blasted double-logic!

"Father, you yourself have told me that if a woman swears before God, her witness is valid. The midwife swore." That made the old rabbi thoughtful.

"Perhaps you're right, my son." And he was quiet for a long time.

"What shall I do, father?" the builder asked.

"You know the Law, son," came the answer. Yes, Yosef knew the Law, better than most. Adultery was punishable by death – death by stoning. He could not see his beloved Miriam in this situation. Certainly she'd betrayed him. She'd given herself to another, but he still couldn't bring himself to do such a thing.

"What if I divorce her quietly?" he suggested.

"That would be your decision, son," Yakov returned evenly. "You must clear this between yourself and God."

The evening meal was somber as Yosef, the one who usually led the conversations with his wit and laughter, was silent. He'd spoken with Clopas about it after talking to his father and, to his surprise, his brother had defended the girl.

"After all, you know that she would *never* lie to you. She could have kept it secret from even you, brother."

True, why would she tell me? he wondered. *I'm the one who can cause her death. Why did she tell Hephzibah for that matter?* The answer to the second question was obvious: a woman could notice if another woman was pregnant before a man could. But what must Yosef do? He had prayed for guidance, but in wrestling this one through,

whether with his father and his brother's advice or alone, he was unable to come to a solution. It was as if he were Jacob, wrestling the Angel of Yahweh at Penuel. There would be no winning.

With such melancholy thoughts he threw himself on his mat, uncertain what to do. He struggled through restless dreams, many of them having to do with Miriam, all ethereal. There were hints from friends, chastising him for entering into such a marriage without thinking about it deeply first. There were those who accused Miriam of being loose. He even saw himself casting the first stone at her as she cowered against the wall to the synagogue. It was then that he woke up, staring at the midnight sky.

No, he told himself, I will never do that to her. And then he made up his mind: I will divorce her quietly. That way she and the baby will live. That is more important. The certainty of his decision gave him rest and he fell asleep again.

A new dream assailed him and later he could only describe it as a night-vision, similar to what Zechariah might have had hundreds of years earlier. He found himself in the synagogue. They were accusing a very pregnant Miriam of adultery. She looked at him, pleading, before two rough men grabbed her and forced her out of the building. Yosef followed. They cast her to the ground and men began to pick up stones. Someone shoved him and he found himself standing in front of the trembling girl. She looked up at him, eyes doleful, asking for help. He stood between her and the throng ready to stone her. He was her shield.

A hand laid itself on his shoulder and a quiet voice began to whisper in his ear.

"Yosef Ben David, do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Miriam. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Yehoshua, for he will save his people from their sins."¹¹ He did not know how, but he knew it was the voice of an angel in his night-vision. He knew what he must do. And as he stepped forward to raise his young wife to her feet the vision faded and he came awake on his pallet. Dawn was just breaking and he rose, certain of what he would do.

Eli was not surprised to see Yosef at this early hour. He looked at the young man who stood there, certainty in his eyes and stance.

He'll divorce her, the merchant thought. Not that I blame him. After all, she betrayed him.

"Welcome, Yosef Bar Yakov," he said gravely. "I know why you have come. It is because of Miriam"

"Yes, my father," the young man replied evenly. "But it is not as you think." Yosef paused for a moment, summoning the strength that had rested on him since the dream had come.

"I have come to ask you to bring the wedding forward. I wish to take Miriam to my home as soon as possible."

Eli's mouth dropped open and it took the old Pharisee a long moment to compose himself.

"What did you say?" he demanded incredulously. The dark eyes of the son of David met his.

"I wish to take Miriam home as my wife."

"But she has betrayed you, Yosef!"

"I had a night-vision, my father," the builder explained and suddenly the old man realized that this was what gave Yosef the strength he displayed.

"An angel appeared to me in a dream last night. He told me to marry your daughter, because her child is conceived of the Holy Spirit of the Blessed One." The Pharisee forced a chuckle.

"Come now, Yosef, you've fallen for my daughter's lies!"

"No, my father. She told the truth, as has the midwife. I know because of what God has told me in that night-vision. I will marry your daughter and raise her son as were he my own."

Eli shook his head, unbelieving. What had gotten into this young man? First he didn't dare ask for the girl's hand and now he wanted to marry her though she'd been unfaithful to him. But at the same time the Pharisee could not help but admire the young man's devotion to the girl he'd been betrothed to. It certainly spoke of a much deeper righteousness on Yosef's part than Eli had even suspected. How many men did he know that claimed such a righteousness who would even *consider* marrying such a woman? No, the most any other man he knew would do was to divorce the girl quietly. The rest would have her accused of adultery and stoned publicly. Perhaps he should be happy for Yosef, the man who would keep his most beloved daughter alive. But could Eli

¹¹ Mt 1:20-21 (NLT altered)

live with the stigma of his daughter's illegitimate child? Yosef had promised to make the child legitimate through his marriage to the girl and agreement of raising it as his own.

Oh that it would at least be a son, the old man found himself thinking. With that stray thought he finally decided to give in.

"So you want to marry her as soon as possible," he mused. "When might that be?" The builder was pensive.

"Considering what we have to prepare at my home, perhaps two or three weeks from now," he said after a few minutes of thinking.

"Very well, we can do that," Eli agreed.

"Sir, there is something else..."

"Oh?" The old man raised an eyebrow.

"It has to do with the wedding night." Yosef drew a deep breath. "Miriam must remain a virgin until her son is born." That statement caught Eli off guard.

"What did you say?"

"I will not know Miriam until she has had her baby. I hope you can understand that." The old man thought for a moment. Well, there *was* part of him that understood it, as to how it pertained to the law, but what it might mean for Yosef to wait so long until the child was born before knowing his wife intimately, he couldn't fathom.

"Very well," was all he answered. "My wife will speak with your mother on some of the details. We'll have the wedding in two weeks."

The two weeks until the wedding had been a mingling of crawling and flying for both Yosef and Miriam as each of them prepared for the ceremonies. When the afternoon finally came and the groom would come for his bride, Kalev and Hephzibah's house was breathless in expectation. The four elders of the town were there, as well as an honored guest: one of the sons of the High Priest in Jerusalem, who had business dealings with Eli. Eli and Hannah were decked out in their finest, as well as Hephzibah, her husband Kalev and her siblings Abiram, Salome, Naomi, Yehuda, and Tamar.

It was just the time for the evening sacrifice when there was a loud knock at the gate. Quickly Yehuda rushed to open it, letting in Yosef and his immediate family: Yakov, Yehuda, Clopas, and Abiyah. The groom was resplendent in white garments that had been prepared for just this occasion. Ah, the money that had gone into this wedding! It would make even the richest man poor, thought Eli proudly. Yes, Yosef was an excellent match for his beautiful daughter. He strode forward under the canopy where the father, the mother, and the elders waited. The ceremony was short, a brief exchange of vows, a gold necklace and bracelets that were token of love from Yosef to his bride, a drink from a cup of wine and then the declaration that they were married. Instantly the builder picked up his young wife and strode towards the gate, carrying her in a joyful procession to his own house where the feasting would begin.

The families followed, as did the elders. All of Nazereth had turned out for the festival. There were singers and dancers there, as well as some guests from other towns who were passing through or visiting relatives. As Yosef and Miriam walked into the courtyard of Yakov's house, there were cheers of "God Bless" from all sides. The couple took their place under the royal canopy and the celebration began. The best wine was brought out and served to the many guests. There were dances by the men, with Yosef at the center, and by the women, surrounding Miriam.

About halfway through the feasting that evening, Salome got a moment to sit down beside her sister, face flushed, and out of breath.

"Oh, this is wonderful!" the younger girl breathed, pulling her shawl up onto her head again. "Just look at all the people!"

"And who is that handsome young man that I've seen making eyes at you, Salome?" Miriam asked with a conspiratorial smile.

"His name's Zebedee. He's from Capernaum," the girl replied.

"He's a fisherman," Hephzibah whispered from behind. "They say his father is very rich – supplies the High Priest's family with fish directly from the Lake."

"Well, you might make a good catch yet, little sister," Miriam laughed.

"Never better than you did," Salome said with a little pout.

"Don't tell me you're in love with my husband, too!" the bride exclaimed.

"Who wouldn't be? He's such a wonderful man! Marrying you even after – all that." The girl quickly bit off the end of the sentence, noticing the slight shade of red that fell across Miriam's face.

"Sorry," she whispered, got up and hurried over to where her father and mother were reclining with some of the other guests.

"What was that all about?" Yosef wanted to know, returning to his wife's side after another dance.

"It's – never mind," Miriam answered, eyes downcast. Then she glanced up at her new husband. Noticing the warm, possessive look in his eyes, she remembered the words from the Song of Songs: *If only you were to me like a brother who nursed at my mother's breasts! Then, if I found you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me.*¹²

"It is time," he whispered to her and held out his hand. She grasped it and arose from her couch.

"It is time!" he declared to the assembly and they all laughed out loud. With that the bride and groom departed for their bridal chamber, carefully made up in the inner room of Yosef's house by his mother and Miriam's sisters.

The door closed behind them and for the first time ever they were completely alone. The sounds of the festivities wafted in through the small, high window. There they stood hand-in-hand and a sudden chill shook Miriam. At first she couldn't believe that this was *her* wedding night – hers and the man's she loved. But now she was afraid. What would happen? What about her child? Yosef had never said anything to her about this moment.

Slowly she drew back, taking her hand out of her husband's. She walked towards the bed and then turned around, noticing that he hadn't moved from the doorway.

"Miriam," he said quietly. "Don't be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid," she replied in a quavering voice, trying to put up a bold front. A gentle smile alighted on his face, one that made her smile, too.

"No, don't be afraid." He looked away for a moment. "I wanted this to be the night, just you and me together. But it can't be." He looked back. "Miriam, I will not touch you until the boy-child – Yehoshua – is born."

"But, Yosef ..." she objected.

"No buts, wife." He held up his hand. "I want there to be no doubt in our mind *whose* son it is you are carrying."

"You're right, husband," she replied, looking away. There was a long silence.

"Oh, Miriam, I love you so," he suddenly burst out. She looked up, suddenly realizing what he was giving up for her – something that she equally wanted, but knew that they couldn't share yet. And he would do it for *her* and for her child! Her love for him welled up in her suddenly and she could not contain herself, but took the three steps across the room and flung her arms around him. His arms closed around her in a strong embrace as she settled her head on his shoulder.

It's like it was made to go there, he thought to himself, relishing the feeling. Then he gently pushed her away.

"It's time for us to sleep, beloved," he told her.

"But what about the bridal bed?" she asked, suddenly remembering the custom.

"It's already arranged," he replied. "Your mother and father know..." His voice trailed off, as he thought of the oath he'd taken before Eli, Yakov, Abiram, and Clopas just two days earlier when the subject had been brought up again. Yes, it was all taken care of.

Miriam walked over to the bed and sat down. Yosef hesitated.

"Are you not coming, husband?" she asked gently, smiling.

"No, beloved, I'm not," he told her, reaching for the bedroll that leaned next to the door. "Until Yehoshua is born I will sleep here." And with that he unrolled his bed in front of the door, took his blanket and laid down.

This is a strange bridal night, Miriam thought to herself as she rolled into the wide bridal bed. Her husband's honor felt strange to her. Here he was protecting her by not even sleeping in the same bed, but she longed to feel

¹² SS 8:1

his arms around her and his warmth protecting her. She closed her eyes to stifle the tears. How much longer before the child came – and she and her husband would be one? Oh, that it would come soon!

III. Bethlehem

It was getting on towards winter. For some time now the evenings had been cool enough that families no longer slept out on the roof, but huddled around the central fire pit in the house. Animals were brought into the stables beneath the house to create more warmth. People could be seen walking quickly, cloaks pulled tightly around them to ward off the late-fall chills. It would get worse soon, Yosef thought to himself as he made his way to his small home, especially with this new, disturbing news that his brother Abiyah had brought back from Jerusalem. And then Shallum had read the new edict in the synagogue...

He reached the side gate and let himself in. The house adjoined his father's on the back and was rather smaller than his family's, but it was cozy. Miriam had taken pains to turn it into a comfortable home. Yosef reflected on the past months of their marriage. It had been difficult dealing with the whims of a pregnant woman, but the joy that he'd had from her constant presence much outweighed the annoyance of her sudden cravings for strange foods at strange hours. How would she take to the new edict?

A beautiful smell came to his nostrils as he pushed open the door to the large living room. Miriam was kneeling by a large metal plate that rested over the fire, watching a batch of honey cakes that she was preparing for their evening repast. She looked up at him and smiled in greeting. She was very pregnant now, her belly large and round from her son. His mother had commented that the baby should come within a few weeks at the very latest. The pregnancy had been fairly easy on Miriam and she showed herself as vigorous as usual, though lately she'd often remarked about the weight and the soreness of her feet in an off-hand manner, not complaining about it at all, as he remembered his mother doing with his youngest brother.

"Hello, my dove," he said as he slipped off his sandals and sat down to splash water on his feet from the large urn they kept on the floor. He then quickly dried them.

"Welcome home, husband," she replied. He crossed the rough, hand-knotted carpets that were spread out. Her smile faded as she noticed the look in his eye.

"Is something the matter, Yosef?" she asked. He hesitated. He did not want to bring this up yet, but the sooner it was said, the better.

"Abiyah just returned from Jerusalem today," he began.

"Yes, I saw him," his wife affirmed, gingerly flipping one of the honey cakes on the griddle, "but I don't think that's what's bothering you." Yosef smiled despite himself.

"Did he tell you that the delegation to the Emperor in the west has failed?" he asked.

"No. Abiyah doesn't talk to women about such things." She made a face and reached for a wooden plate to put the pastries on.

"Abiyah doesn't talk to women, period," Yosef sighed. "Anyway, he told us that there was talk that the Emperor rejected our plea to not have to be subjected to a census."

"But it's just talk," Miriam interjected. Here her husband shook his head sadly.

"They read out the edict in the synagogue today. Each man must go to his home town to be counted." He paused. "Which means I must go to Bethlehem." She passed him a laver to wash his hands in.

"Fine." She was smiling broadly. "When are we leaving?"

"I was leaving within two days," he began. "I was thinking that you would stay here, what with Yehoshua coming soon..." He put the laver aside and she passed him the plate with the honey cakes.

"No." She shook her head emphatically, settling herself back. "I will go with you. I'm your wife, after all." He saw the iron will in her dark eyes and smiled to himself.

"Very well, Miriam, we will leave the day after tomorrow, then. It will be a long journey, though." And then he asked a brief blessing on the meal.

"I've been there several times," she told him, now producing a small bit of salted fish and some herbs. There were also some fresh apples, dried figs, and raisin cakes.

"We'll be staying with my cousin Adoniram," Yosef explained. "Abiyah said that he's already told them we're coming."

"Is your father going, too?"

"The whole family is, my dove, the whole family." He bit into the honey cake, savoring the sweetness on his tongue, before chasing it down with a small sip of water.

"When do you think we'll return?" She asked around her own mouthful of fish.

"When we see fit to do so. I think I will look to see if there are any building jobs there," he explained. "They say Herod is still working on parts of the Temple and there is always skilled labor needed in Jerusalem."

"True." There was something in her tone that made him look up, surprised.

"What is it, Miriam?" he wanted to know. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, it's just that I was hoping we wouldn't have to leave this home," she began. "We've been so happy here."

"And we can be happy there, too, my dove. We both have family down there. You'll be near your cousin, Elisabeth. And we'll be close enough to worship at the Temple as much as we want!" She looked up and noticed the delight dancing in his eyes. Yes, he would want to be nearer his God. And she would, too. That was something she hadn't thought about. It would not take long to pack her things. They would take their blankets and the sleeping mats. What little jewelry she had she could easily wear and they did not have too much in the way of clothing either, two cloaks and an extra tunic each. They were not rich, but they were well off.

The next day was spent packing. What Yosef had as ready capital was carefully gathered up and put into a heavy leather bag that he wore under his cloak. Their bed rolls and extra clothes were gathered into a bundle that was tied to the back of a donkey that her father sent them for the journey, along with Yosef's satchel of tools. Eli was going down as well, but only long enough to register. Business in Sepphoris was too good to leave behind.

They left at dawn the following morning, walking in a caravan with Yosef's family. Only old Reb Yakov rode on a donkey, due to his stiff leg. The journey progressed rather quickly, taking eight days to travel the roughly 85 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It would have taken seven, but Reb Yakov refused to travel more than a Sabbath's walk on the Sabbath, which fell on the third day out of Nazareth.

Miriam was in good spirits, though Yosef thought she waddled a bit more than walked. She kept with the steady pace set by the patriarch's old donkey, at times wandering with her mother-in-law and Bat-shua, at times with Yosef, and even at times reciting Scripture with Reb Yakov. The old man fairly glowed with delight at her command of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings and highly praised her to his son using words from the Proverbs of Solomon. It warmed the builder's heart that his father would so approve her to him.

As they drew nearer to their destination, more and more people joined them. Abiyah spent much time with the other scholarly young men, some of whom he knew from studying in Jerusalem, and some he'd just met on the road. At one point he was even able to rope Yosef and Clopas into a long argument with two young men whose fathers were extremely strict Pharisees and who were gladly treading in their fathers' footsteps.

And so they arrived in Bethlehem on the afternoon of the eighth day, just as the shadows began to lengthen and the darkling hour was approaching. Abiyah navigated them through the front gate and into the tiny village. Yosef clung to his donkey's halter with one hand and his wife's hand with the other, afraid that both would get swept away in the swirl of humanity pressing in around them.

"It looks like all Judah has returned home," Reb Yakov muttered to his son.

"Do you think Uncle Attai will be there?" Yosef asked.

"If he is, we will be very snug indeed," the old man replied. "I do hope we will have some privacy for your wife when her time comes." Yosef nodded at that. Attai, one of his father's two younger brothers, was also a builder, but he had been spending his last years working on the Temple Mount. He felt that, because he was doing such a great work for God, he was entitled to the best of everything.

"Here we are!" Abiyah called out, and pounded on a narrow wooden door much like the rest on the wall-lined streets. It was opened a few moments later by a man just a bit older than Yosef. He was stocky and dressed in his customary tunic, curled hair and beard glistening with fragrant oil. Clearly, here was a host, ready to receive his guests!

"Abiyah!" he exclaimed, throwing his arms around his cousin's shoulders. "How good of you to come. And Uncle Yakov!" Here he strode forward and bowed to the old man, kissing his hand in respect. The rabbi raised him up and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Adoniram! How good to see you again," he laughed.

"Welcome, welcome all!" Adoniram thundered good-naturedly. "Enter with the blessing of God." He turned to lead them into the house, gently touching the small box set into the doorpost. The others followed, doing the same.

"Now, I must warn you that Uncle Attai and his family are here," Adoniram told the others when they had trooped into the crowded courtyard. "It is good that my father still has his own home. He has taken the rest of the family." He shrugged. "Of course, everyone's house is full in Bethlehem, what with the edict and all." He cast an eye toward Miriam. "But I do hope you will be comfortable, all of you."

As he was speaking, a tall, slender woman came down from the house. She stood almost a head taller than her husband, but her deference to him was clear. She quickly greeted the women and led them up and into the house, fussing over Miriam as they went. Yosef looked after her apprehensively.

"Don't you worry, cousin," Adoniram said with a broad smile. "She'll be well taken care of. My Sarah is one of the midwives in Bethlehem. She will know what to do."

"Will she have some privacy?" the builder asked.

"I'm afraid not," the host sighed, himself leading the men up the mud-brick staircase and into the living room. "Uncle Attai claimed the guest room for himself, his wife, and his children as soon as they arrived. It is a blessing that he only brought his three youngest daughters." He laughed at that. Attai had started earlier than his older brother and had nine children, six sons by his first wife, all married, and three daughters by his second wife.

That evening Yosef found himself in the position of sleeping next to his wife for the first time since they were married.

"Are you uncomfortable?" she whispered as he rolled out his mat next to hers. With fourteen people in the living-room, not to mention the five in the guest room, the only semblance of privacy they would have for some days were the quiet whispers.

"Some." He glanced at her.

"Come, we will have to begin some time, my lord," she told him with a smile. "My day is nearly here."

"I would have waited until then," he replied. "I pray for strength."

"Back-to-back, husband," she admonished, slowly getting down and rolling on her side. "That will help us."

"If two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?"¹³ Yosef quoted. Miriam smiled as he lay down next to her.

"I love you so," she whispered over her shoulder then shoved herself squarely against Yosef's back. He thought he could hear her heave a sigh of contentment. She had been waiting for this as much as he. *Dear wife*, he thought, settling himself, bedding his head on his arm, *how long have we waited? It will be soon – soon!*

The following day he went to the gate where the people were being registered, waiting all day for his turn. Just as he had finally moved to the front of the crowd, darkness fell and the Roman recorder and his hellenized Jewish assistants closed up their wax tablets, rolled up their scrolls and went home for the night. Yosef returned to his cousin's house, tired and forlorn. Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the next day?

Miriam was waiting for him with dinner, once more his favorite honey cakes. They sat in the circle with the family, listening to his father and Uncle Attai discuss the census.

"I will not go until the very end," Reb Yakov's brother announced. "I am old enough that I will demand some respect and have people give me way. If we are going to have to pay taxes to these *goyim*¹⁴" – he spat dryly onto the floor beside him – "and their pagan king over the sea, then I will have some respect."

¹³ Ecc 4:11 (NIV)

¹⁴ Hebrew: Gentiles

"Respect is not likely to come from our conquerors," Reb Yakov intoned soberly.

"Conquerors!" Attai howled. "Just wait until Messiah comes! Yakov, he will rule! He will cast out the *goyim*. And *we* will rule with him. We will be kings, brother, you and I!" Yosef's father sighed and shook his head. That was his younger brother, all full of selfish ambition and seeking power and money. He would not even accord a pregnant woman privacy, much less his older brother a room.

Yosef caught his father's sad glance. *Tomorrow is the day*, he thought, though he did not know where the thought came from. The day for what? For Yehoshua's arrival or for his turn at the gates? He would see.

And so he rose before dawn the next morning. He gently reached down and caressed his wife's cheek before tying his belt around his tunic and throwing on his cloak. He slipped out of the house with Yehuda and Clopas. The three of them hurried down the street, only to find that a throng had already gathered.

"More waiting!" Clopas moaned.

"We have time," Yosef replied. "Much time." And they stood calmly among the people.

Yosef soon found himself talking with a young man named Gibbor. The name was apt, as he was tall and broad and looked as if he could crush a bull's neck with his bare hands. He was also from Galilee, but from Gamala.

"What I would not give to have this ended," Gibbor muttered. "I would that Messiah would come. Here he would have two strong arms for his cause." Yosef nodded absently, thinking of Miriam.

"And you, brother?" the big man asked the builder. "Will Messiah find you ready?"

"Huh?" Yosef felt himself pulled back to the present.

"You are not listening, Nazarene!" Gibbor exclaimed testily. "I asked you if you would be ready to fight for Messiah when he comes." The question took the builder aback. He could not answer without either incriminating himself to the Romans or to his new-found companion. He paused for a long moment.

"I will be ready to *serve* Messiah when he comes, brother, in any way he sees fit." He smiled. "I am a builder, Gibbor, a creator. I do not relish the use of weapons."

"I farm the land, brother," the big man replied. "But that does not mean that I cannot draw a sword. Nor does the use of the adz and the saw keep you from doing so." He continued on with his monologue of how Messiah would come and cast out all foreigners, his voice rising as he continued, unaware at the glances that he was receiving from those around him.

"That's enough, brother," Yosef, finally said, laying a hand on his arm. "I know you are zealous for God and for our people, but if you continue to speak like this, you won't be registering in the gate, you'll be hanging there." That very quickly shut the big man up. After a few minutes he muttered to himself a bit.

The builder let his thoughts wander back to his wife. Would she be all right? He remembered the feeling from the evening before: *Today is the day*. Would Yehoshua be born today or would he be allowed to register? Already he was almost at the front of the crowd. He glanced up at the sun, noting that it was almost noon. Miriam and the other women would be coming with their lunches soon. He would be glad to see her, and not just because of the food.

And then Yosef and his two brothers finally were at the front of the crowd. The Roman was questioning another man and Yosef decided to go next when he called. Just as the man registering was dismissed and the official looked up at the circle of faces before him, the builder felt someone pulling on his sleeve. He looked over, expecting to see Miriam, but found Adoniram's eight-year-old son Benyamin, face flushed and panting.

"Hello, boy," he said amiably. "What is it?"

"Mother sends me to tell you that her time is here," the boy nearly shouted, eyes glowing with excitement.

"Whose time is here?" Yosef demanded, dread and excitement creeping into his heart. He was *so* close!

"Miriam's!" the boy cried, fidgeting, wanting to be off. "She's going to have her baby!" The other men around took notice of the child's voice.

"What did you say, boy?" Gibbor asked, placing a big hand on Benyamin's shoulder.

"Yosef's wife is having her baby," the boy exclaimed. "He's going to be a father!"

"Well, we'd best get you through as fast as we can," the big man told the builder, "so that you can get back to your wife and not have to worry about coming here again." He raised his arms and shouted for silence. "Yosef

Bar Yakov is to be the next one to register!" he roared out over the crowd, only some of whom were listening. "He is to be a father! Let us honor him!" The men around laughed and cheered.

"God bless!" shouted some. And one or two exclaimed, "May it be a son!"

The builder was nearly thrust forward by the excitement of the crowd and suddenly he found himself in front of the Roman official. He looked up and down Yosef, as if appraising a stallion he might consider buying.

"Name?" he asked in Greek.

"Yosef Bar Yakov," the builder replied in the same language. The official grunted and scratched something on his tablet.

"Occupation?"

"I am a builder."

"I take it you're married?" Here the Roman looked up and there was a slight softening in the cold, gray eyes.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well." He looked back at his ledger. "Yosef Bar Yakov. Married, one child." He looked up and cracked a slight grin. "May your god and all the rest that roam the universe bless you. You will be told what taxes you owe when we are finished." He waved his hand and called out, "Next!"

Yosef remembered very little of the journey back to Adoniram's house. The men, minus Attai who still refused to vacate the guest room, had congregated on the roof to afford the young woman some privacy in this, her most difficult time.

"How long has it been?" he asked his cousin as he came up on the roof. He heard Miriam cry out.

"It began just as the women were to bring you your meal," the host replied. "Quite suddenly, actually. It's a good thing Sarah was ready."

"So it is," old Reb Yakov said. "Now we can only wait." Another moan from below clenched at Yosef's heart. He made for the stairs, only to be stopped by his younger brother.

"Wait, older brother," Abiyah coaxed. "This is her ordeal, not yours." Yosef shook his head.

"How little you know, *little* brother," he snapped. His wife was hurting and he wanted to stop it as soon as possible, to protect her. But in a way Abiyah was right. This was *her* ordeal. The time would come.

It was late afternoon when Miriam uttered a last, loud cry and the lusty scream of a baby filtered up through the floor.

"He's here," Yosef breathed. And within minutes young Atarah, Adoniram's twelve-year-old daughter, rushed up the stairs.

"Uncle Yosef," she announced, face beaming, "you have a son!"

"I want to see them," he said, turned and walked down the stairs, ignoring the protestations of it being abnormal. This child was too important. He must see him, his wife's son. He stepped through the doorway. Miriam was sitting back against one of the walls, a blanket over her lap, shawl around her shoulders, dark hair bedraggled and sweat still glistening on her forehead. She was cradling a small bundle of white in her arms, gazing into its face. As the light from the open door was cut by her husband's shadow, she looked up and smiled. The builder hurried over to her and knelt down.

"Here is your son, my husband," she said, raising the child with both hands, presenting it to him. He gently took the bundle in his arms. His son? He looked into the scrunched, pink face. The eyes were closed, and the helplessness was apparent. And yet there was also contentment there. This was Messiah? For an instant the infant blinked his eyes open and favored his mother's husband with a brief, blue-gray gaze. And in that instant Yosef felt he'd touched eternity. They were a new-born's eyes, nothing unusual in and of themselves, but the fact that the child had looked at him, and that he was holding such fresh new life made the builder for the first time realize the wonder that birth really was. He looked at his wife again. *His* son, she'd said. Was this truly *his* son? *I took him as my own the moment I married her*, he reasoned. Yes, this was his son. And he would be the best father he could.

Gently, he picked the child up and placed a kiss on its forehead.

"Welcome to the world, Yehoshua," he whispered in Hebrew, then quietly recited the Shema, the age-old creed of Israel, to this her newest son.

"I've had Adoniram clean a stall in the stable below," Sarah told Yosef after he had returned the child to his wife. It was now contently nursing from its mother. "We think that you will need some privacy and I don't want anyone stepping on the baby." That was a real danger at the time, especially because of the many people bustling in and out. Besides, a new mother would want some precious time alone with her baby, something that the constant presence of others in the living room precluded. Atarah eagerly knelt beside Miriam, watching baby Yehoshua.

"I'll help carry the bed-rolls down," the builder announced and picked up one of the bundles. He stopped by Miriam and smiled down at her. She returned it, eyes shining. He gently touched her head and then headed down to the place that they would stay for a night or two. The smells were not offensive to Yosef, having lived around them for his whole life. As a matter of fact, the smell of fresh straw had always been invigorating. Adoniram and Benyamin had just finished spreading out a thick layer on the floor as Yosef arrived. He quickly spread out the bed-roll and went back for the other one. When he returned the second time, he noticed that Benyamin was carefully smoothing a bundle of straw in a large stone feeding trough that stood in the corner.

"What's that for?" the builder asked.

"Mother said to make it up for the baby," the boy explained as Atarah came in. She hurried over and spread some fresh pieces of linen over the hay and tucked them down. A baby in a manger. *How strange*, Yosef thought to himself. The child was born in Bethlehem, the city of his forefather, but he wasn't even accorded a real cradle. Still, Adoniram and Sarah were doing their best to make this newest addition to their extended family as comfortable as the circumstances would allow.

Miriam moved down to the stable in the course of the afternoon, having carefully washed herself and changed her clothes once she'd regained some of her strength. Baby Yehoshua slept peacefully in his new manger-cradle, unaware that his bed was unusual. The man and woman sat on their bed rolls, she leaning against him, watching the side of the manger.

"He has come at last," she whispered after a long moment, then turned her head slightly. "And now I am truly yours, my husband," she sighed.

"Not for a little while yet," he replied. "You must finish your days." She nodded sadly. Forty more days would pass before she would be pure and able to please her husband. Still, the time would pass quickly, she believed. They had waited this long, they could wait a bit longer.

Evening descended and Miriam and Yosef lay together, back-to-back, wrapped in their blankets. The builder drifted off quickly and it seemed only a moment later when a loud thudding at the gate brought him awake. *What is going on?* he wondered, blinking his eyes open. Was there something wrong? He listened, but no one else seemed to hear the noise. The pounding repeated again and Yosef thought he could hear rough voices. He quickly rose, grabbed his belt and wrapped it around himself.

"What is it, husband?" Miriam asked, sitting up. She looked lovely in the amber glow of the oil lamp that was set on a little rock shelf above them.

"There is someone at the gate," he told her. "I'm going to go tell them to be quiet." He took the lamp, hurried over and drew the bolt.

"They're here!" he heard a muffled voice say. He pulled the door open to see perhaps ten men and boys. They were all dressed in rough garments, most carried staffs and a few even had broad sheepskins thrown about their shoulders.

"What is it you want at this hour of the night?" the builder demanded.

"We beg your pardon, good sir," the eldest of the men replied, pushing his way forward. "We have come to see Messiah."

"What?" Yosef was taken aback.

"There is a new-born boy-child here?" the old man asked again, scarcely hiding his impatience.

"Well, yes, if you must know."

"And he is lying in a manger?"

"How did you know *that*?" the builder exclaimed.

"The messenger told us!" a boy piped up from behind the old man.

“What messenger?” Yosef demanded. “I sent no one to notify anyone.”

“A messenger from God!” the boy shouted. “And there were hundreds more! They shone bright like the sun and they spoke words to us?”

“What is this?” The boy’s words made no sense to the man with the lamp. He glanced at the old man.

“It is as he says, good sir,” the aged shepherd explained. “We were watching our sheep this evening when suddenly a man appeared. He glowed brighter than the sun and his clothing was white – whiter than my sheep after shearing.” The memory shone in his eyes as he recounted his tale. “We all fell down in fear.” There was affirmative muttering from the other men. “And then the messenger spoke to us.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, “I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior – yes, Messiah, the Lord – has been born in Bethlehem, the city of David! And this is how you will recognize him: You will find the baby lying in a manger, wrapped snugly in strips of cloth.¹⁵ And then there were many more of them – the shining ones. They filled the skies! A thousand, no, ten thousand! And they were calling to one another.” He looked at the men around him, before chanting in a singsong, similar to that used when reciting the Torah.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.¹⁶” Yosef could see moisture at the edges of the old man’s eyes. “I have never heard anything so beautiful in my life, good sir. And now, if you please, may we see Messiah?” Dumbfounded, the builder nodded, backing away from the doorway, lighting the way with the lamp. The men came in silently, reverently. By the time they’d reached the stall, Miriam had composed herself and wrapped her shawl around her head. Yosef glanced at her, wondering if she’d heard the exchange. Her eyes were shining and there was a look of rapt delight on her face.

The shepherds came to the manger, and gathered around it. The baby was lying on its back, sleeping soundly. And, as Yosef watched, the unbelievable happened. Ten rough shepherds, knelt around the manger and the boy-child. The old man raised his hands to heaven and spoke what was on all of their hearts.

“Be praised, O God of Israel,
 May your name be exalted.
 For you have brought us salvation,
 Redemption has been given us!
 Messiah is come.
 The king is born.
 And he will liberate his people
 And set the captives free.”

“Amen,” the rest of the shepherds echoed heartily. The eldest shepherd then rose, placed a hand on the child’s head and whispered in his ear. Then, in silent awe, they all took their leave. Yosef closed the gate behind them and returned to the manger. The words from his night-vision echoed in his ears.

“She will have a son, and you are to name him Yehoshua, for he will save his people from their sins.”¹⁷

How can this be my son? he asked himself, looking at the baby. He reached out and stroked one of the tiny hands. *He is Messiah. Who am I to raise him – a simple builder? I do not have the strength.*

“Guide me, O God,” he whispered into the night. “Strengthen my hands. May this child grow to be Messiah as you promised.”

IV. Jerusalem

Forty days had passed since the child was born. Miriam had cleansed herself physically and now she and her husband were to offer the prescribed offerings at the Temple. As they wound their way through the tightly-packed streets of Jerusalem, Yosef thought back to the circumcision and naming of the child in the Bethlehem synagogue. When asked by the rabbi what the child’s name should be, Yosef paused.

¹⁵ Lk 2:10-12 (NLT)

¹⁶ Lk 2:15 (NIV)

¹⁷ Mt 1:21 (NLT)

"*Q'ara shmo Yehoshua*," he intoned in Hebrew. "Call his name, Yehoshua." The rabbi looked at him, just a bit surprised at his clean diction, then affirmed the choice.

"*Shmo Yehoshua*." And he'd cut the foreskin. The baby cried at the unexpected pain, and Yosef gently took it into his hands after the rabbi had applied a clean linen rag to the wound. At that moment the builder whispered into the child's ear,

"Your name is Yehoshua, for you will save your people from their sins." Little Yehoshua didn't seem to hear, but just went on squalling, now supremely uncomfortable. Yosef passed him to his mother who did her best to quiet him.

That day they had finally been allowed to take the guest room in Adoniram's house, as Uncle Attai and his entourage had left. The old man had staunchly refused to give up the room, even after Adoniram had asked him politely.

"I will not be bothered for a newborn!" he thundered. "No matter *who* everybody thinks he might be. I will know Messiah when he comes and that baby isn't him." Yosef had winced at those words, but the memory of the shepherds came back to him. How different those poor, simple men from than this rich, educated builder! How much more easily they listened to God. *And may I ever remain so*, Yosef prayed silently.

"What about the offering, husband?" Miriam whispered as they came up on the western entrance to the Temple.

"We'll find what we need in the temple courts," the builder explained. She nodded. They climbed up the stairs beneath the royal porch and then emerged into the Court of the Gentiles. Yosef looked around, a bit disconcerted. He could see piles of stone lying around and there were builders here and there, shouting to each other as they carried pieces into place to finish parts of the royal porch. Besides that there were money changers and marketers all over the place. Yosef recognized a few priests at the various stalls where offerings were sold. And above it all towered the great Temple, serenely looking over the hubbub. This was the one place that Yosef wished above all to enter, to see his God face-to-face, to know him and to worship him. But that would never be. The veil was firmly in place and the priests were the only one who could go behind it. Oh, that he, like David, his forefather, could worship and sing before the Lord!

He tore his eyes away from the building and looked around.

"A young lamb," he muttered, "and a pigeon." That was what the Law required.

"Or two turtledoves," his wife reminded him gently. He nodded and headed for the nearest pigeon dealer. The man was short and extremely corpulent. Yosef didn't like the glint in his eye as he sized up his customer.

"Turtledoves?" he echoed when Yosef explained what he wanted. "I sell the best. You won't find purer ones anywhere in Judah. I am authorized by the High Priest himself!" And he puffed out his chest.

"And how much do you wish for them?"

"Remember, these are *the best* turtledoves. It is guaranteed that the priests will not reject them!"

"How much?" Yosef pressed. The man named a price that made the builder balk, wanting almost as much as for a yearling lamb. They haggled for some minutes, Miriam quietly watching what was going on and holding her son up to see all the people around them. Finally, Yosef was able to get the price down to a level that he could afford, though it was still grossly over-priced. It used up the small amount of Jewish money that he possessed and he had to go find a money changer to convert his drachmes into the five Sanctuary Shekels needed to redeem Yehoshua according to the law.

They made their way into the court of the women, where Miriam was left behind on the stairs while Yosef took the birds in to be sacrificed. He returned with the priest who gently sprinkled the mother and child with some of the blood as the ritual required. The five shekels were passed to him and they received the blessing.

Throughout the whole thing, Yosef found it difficult to concentrate on the ceremony, still being a bit upset from being cheated in the Temple court of all places.

"Let's go back," he said to Miriam.

"But we just got here, husband, aren't you going to take time to worship?" she asked.

"I honestly don't feel like it, wife," he sighed. "These people here are interested in *money*, not in worshipping God. And I'm not sure that I can worship in such a mood today." She laid a hand on his arm.

“Do as you must, husband. God knows your heart.” It was said gently and he found her eyes reassuring. She was right. He must worship.

“I won’t be long, my dove,” he whispered and went back up into the temple courtyard, where he recited a prayer, thanking God for his provision. As he returned, he noticed an old man standing besides his wife, talking to her. The builder was surprised as the old man was dressed in the garb of one who was extremely religious, with phylacteries tied to his forehead and forearm and long, blue tassels at the edge of his robe. He hurried over and reached them just as the old man took the child into his arms and held him up to heaven. He called out in a loud voice,

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
 you now dismiss your servant in peace.
 For my eyes have seen your salvation,
 which you have prepared in the sight of all people,
 a light for revelation to the Gentiles
 and for glory to your people Israel.”¹⁸

Yosef was too stunned to speak, not even noticing that a crowd had gathered as the old man spoke his prophecy. He looked at the prophet, who gently returned the child to his mother’s arms, and noticed the glint of tears in his eyes, belying the strength of the voice that had uttered those powerful words only moments ago. The old man then raised his hands and held them over Miriam and her son.

“May the Lord of Hosts bless and keep you ever,” he said in rich, full Hebrew. “May he protect your going out and your coming in and may he be the one to guide your paths. Amen.” And he dropped his hands.

“Who *are* you?” Yosef asked, mystified.

“I?” The old man chuckled into his beard. “I am simply an old man, a servant of God. I have been waiting for Messiah my whole life and now I have seen him.” He gave a little half-bow. “Simeon is my name.”

“We thank you for your blessing,” Miriam told him, beaming at the affirmation.

“You are welcome,” Simeon said quietly. “But know, that this child will be rejected by many in Israel and it will be their undoing. But he will be the greatest joy to many others. Thus, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.” And here his gaze turned pained and his voice cracked. “And a sword will pierce your very soul,¹⁹ my child.” Miriam’s brow furrowed, uncertain what to make of those words. The old man gazed at both Yosef and his wife with his rheumy eyes, before turning and hobbling off.

“What did he mean by that?” Yosef wanted to know. Miriam was silent, clutching her son to her breast. Nothing would get between them if she could help it!

“May I?” came another old voice, this one belonging to a bent woman dressed all in black – a widow. She was very thin, her face creased with years, and the hair peeking out from under her shawl was the color of spun silver, but her dark eyes were clear and bright, having lost none of their youth. Miriam was loath to pass her son to any at this point, but she released her hold on him enough so his now rapidly darkening eyes could meet those of the old woman. She smiled a craggy, toothless smile at him.

“Hello, Messiah, I welcome you,” she whispered, gently reaching out and touching one small hand. He quickly curled it around her finger and cooed in delight.

“May God bless you ever, my child,” she said to Miriam. “And may God bless your son. He *will* redeem us. God has promised it.” She bent and placed a kiss on the child’s forehead and then slipped into the crowd. Yosef thought he could hear her excitedly talking away. He could catch the word “Messiah,” but not much else.

“Yosef, let’s go home,” Miriam said in a small voice, clutching Yehoshua to her again. “I want to go home.” He put his arm around her and guided her out of the Temple courts. They had nearly reached the gates of the city before they could breathe more easily again. Miriam finally let Yosef take Yehoshua into his arms. The baby burbled a happy sigh, and closed his eyes.

¹⁸ Lk 2:29-32 (NIV)

¹⁹ Lk 2:34-35 (NLT)

"So our son is Messiah," Yosef said quietly. "Who would have thought?"

"Yes, husband," she affirmed, looking at the child. "And we *will* protect him."

"Until his time has come and then God will look after him." The moment he uttered it, the builder wondered where the thought had come from. Perhaps it was the spirit of prophecy burning in the air. Even so, he knew with all his heart that God would protect this child. It was his responsibility to provide for the little one until he could stand on his own.

V. Egypt

Yosef passed down the path to his family's homestead in the village of Bethlehem. He and Miriam had taken a brief trip back to Nazareth directly after the visit to the temple to gather up what few things they had left there and to pass the responsibility of the family business on to Yehuda. They had been living in Uncle Obed's compound for nearly a year now, the builder having been hired by his Uncle Attai to help out on the royal porch. The other workmen were pleased to have such a skilled wood carver join them, though some were openly jealous of him. Uncle Attai provided well for them, but Yosef had turned down the offer to live in Jerusalem proper. He had never liked his older uncle much. Obed was a much more agreeable person, being a farmer, and his family was a bit smaller. Also, Miriam wanted to stay in Bethlehem, where she had relatives. And the village was a better place for a boy to grow up.

Yehoshua was crawling all over the place, inspecting things. It seemed his favorite thing was to watch living creatures. Nothing delighted him more than to watch a bug crawl across the ground. He cracked a wide smile when a bird flew overhead and had made fast friends with the various livestock around the compound. He'd just recently taken a few steps, trying to get from his mother to Yosef, before landing on his amply padded bottom. The builder thought he caught a look of puzzlement in Yehoshua's dark eyes, puzzlement that was quickly replaced by determination. He pushed himself up again and toddled across to Yosef with two more falls, but then squealed with delight as his father caught him up and hugged him.

Yosef felt he couldn't get enough of holding the child, now really feeling that this was *his* boy. Somewhere deep inside he knew that Yehoshua was more than simply his son and he was reminded now and again when he watched other children fight and bicker amongst themselves. It seemed to him that Yehoshua was the most unselfish of children he'd ever met. Oh, he would yell when he was uncomfortable and make his needs known, but he would readily *share* things, be it with adults or other children.

"And that at an age when they are usually fighting over everything," Sarah had remarked when she'd visited with Miriam for a day. "What a remarkable child!"

Yosef arrived at the compound to hear squeals of delight, definitely Yehoshua's voice. He opened the door to see Atarah there, swinging the boy around in the air by his hands. At the same moment Miriam appeared in the doorway of their room.

"Atarah!" she shouted at her niece. "Put him down!" The girl slowed down a bit to quickly, shaken, and bounced the boy's knees against the dirt. He yelped. Miriam was across the yard faster than Yosef had ever conceived she could travel and scooped little Yehoshua up.

"Are you all right, sweetie?" he heard her ask him. The boy sniffled and looked at his scraped, pudgy knees. Tears began to pour down his cheeks, but he didn't bawl and he didn't glare. Yosef came over as Miriam straightened up.

"How many times have I told you to be careful with him, girl?" she demanded of Atarah.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Miriam, we were just..."

"I don't *want* you doing that with him! Now he's hurt."

"But, Aunt Miriam, if you hadn't..." the girl pleaded.

"Don't talk back to me, girl," the woman snapped. "He got hurt and I don't want that to happen!"

"Miriam, it was an accident," Yosef intervened, coming up. She turned and glared at him.

"We must *protect* him," she shot back at him.

"Yes, from great danger, but not from little things like this!" He gently took the boy from her arms. His tears were still running and he moaned a bit at the pain. He stuck his finger in his mouth, puckering up his little face.

"There's a strong boy," the builder laughed. "You'll be all right. Let's put something on those cuts." And he walked back to their room. Miriam shot one warning glance at her niece and then followed him.

"So you think I'm overprotective," she demanded, closing the door behind her.

"Yes, I do." Yosef kicked off his sandals, stepped into the room and sat down on the floor, placing Yehoshua on his lap.

"But, if he hurts *I* hurt," she told him and went about finding the linen.

"I know, and so do I, but we must bear it, Miriam." He looked at her, taking in her lovely form. She was so precious to him and sometimes so *strange*. She quickly came over and wiped the little boy's knees and wrapped them with the linen.

"There, all better now?" she asked. He smiled a little, but the tears still ran a bit. They set him down on the floor and he pushed himself upright, toddling back and forth across the floor of their house.

"I don't think that we should let the other children play with him," Miriam began. "It's too dangerous."

"But that's a part of childhood," Yosef explained. "As are cuts and bruises."

"If she hadn't swung him around, this wouldn't have happened!" He had to smile at that.

"My dove, if you hadn't said anything, I don't think anything would have happened in the first place." She glared at him.

"Are you saying it's *my* fault?" she demanded.

"Some of it is." She gritted her teeth at his honest answer. He gently took her hand and she made to pull it out of his grasp, but he wouldn't let her.

"Wife," he began, "we have been entrusted with watching after Yehoshua. And right now he's our *only* child. What will happen when his brothers and sisters arrive? We need to watch him, yes, but we also need to give him space to grow and that includes cut knees." She glared at him, and he thought he could see the struggle in her eyes. She sighed after a moment.

"I guess you're right, husband." She gazed over to where Yehoshua was inspecting one of her empty pots, making gurgling sounds as he reached down into it.

"I love you so, my dove," he laughed.

"And I love you." She smiled. "You really think we'll have more children?" she asked.

"If God grants it." Yehoshua was now toddling back over to them, his tears forgotten. "I think that no child should grow up without brothers and sisters, be he Messiah or not."

The three of them took the evening meal together and then sat on the roof of their house, Yosef reciting parts of Isaiah in Hebrew to his wife's son, as his father had done to him many years before.

"The stars are awfully bright tonight," Miriam remarked, gazing up at the night sky. "Especially that one." She pointed up. Yosef and Yehoshua both followed her finger to see the bright light right above them. Yehoshua gave a little cry, pointing at it as well.

"Lovely, isn't it, son?" the builder laughed. "You know what your great-great-great-grandfather David wrote about that? *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands...*²⁰" He was cut short by a noise outside the compound wall. It sounded like the groan of a camel. There was the flicker of torches beyond the wall and Yosef thought he could distinguish the large lumpy shapes of camels and awnings in the street. The gates to Uncle Obed's house were open most of the time, as they were now. He saw a man bearing a torch enter, and then turn and call back through the gate. The camels started protesting and they disappeared from sight.

"What's going on?" Yosef asked. He passed Yehoshua to his wife and stood. She looked past the parapet to see several figures pass through the gate. Four of them were quite tall and distinguished looking, wearing large turbans. The flickering light of the torches glinted off their robes, making Yosef think that these were either very rich men indeed or else soldiers.

"What do you want?" he demanded in Aramaic from the roof-top.

"We have come from afar and are seeking the one who is born king of the Jews," one of the men below called up in perfect Aramaic. Yosef couldn't place the accent, though. "We saw his star in the east and it has led us

²⁰ Ps 19:1 (NIV)

here." The builder glanced at his wife, puzzled. She hugged Yehoshua closer. He tried to scramble out of her arms to see what was going on below.

"Wait here," Yosef told her and hurriedly descended the stairs. If the men had looked magnificent from a distance, being close to them made the builder positively want to fall on his knees before them. The four were tall, outlandish men, attired in rich robes embroidered with gold and silver. One seemed quite old, his beard white, but well-oiled. The others were younger, men of brown skin with bright, dark eyes and midnight hair, curled and oiled beards in an unusual style. They smelled richly of incense and perfume. Gold rings glittered on their hands and the old one bore a strange gold collar around his neck that held a single gem. The rest were servants, several of whom had the fair skin and dark hair of the Greeks and there was even a giant of a man with flaxen hair and beard. He bore a large chest in his arms, standing silently behind his masters.

"Who are you?" Yosef asked, breathlessly.

"We are Magi from the east," the old man replied in Aramaic. "I am Mehuman, advisor to the Parthian king." His bearing was regal, clearly underscoring that fact. "And these are my associates, Bigtha, Mersen, and Carshena." Each gave a little half-bow as their names were mentioned. "As we were saying, we are seeking the one who was born king of the Jews. We bring gifts."

"Born king of the Jews," the builder echoed, bewildered. Certainly Yehoshua was Messiah and that he was the king to be. Mehuman looked down at him, proud and yet humble.

"Have we come to the wrong place?" he asked.

"No, no! I – it's just that no one has ever *called* him that before," Yosef admitted. The tall man raised an eyebrow, trying to keep his face from breaking into a broad grin.

"Then he is here?" he pressed. One of the men behind him said something in a language that Yosef couldn't understand. The old man waved his hand and he was instantly silent. The thought of these men seeing Yehoshua both scared and thrilled him. Should he let them see him? Something in his heart told him it was for the best, but at the same time he was afraid that they might harm the child. He paused, prayed for guidance and looked deep into Mehuman's eyes.

"Come, man!" the old man exclaimed. "We have come to *worship* the child! He is king. We must pay homage!" He made to move, his façade crumbling for a brief moment, excitement pouring through, before he straightened again and resumed his regal bearing.

"I – I will get him," Yosef stammered suddenly making up his mind. Come to *worship* the child. These were *king-makers*. Why would they worship a child from a little-known land? A Messiah who was only for the Jews? The builder couldn't understand. He rushed to the stairs only to find Miriam already descending them.

"Miriam..." he began.

"I know, I heard." She smiled uncertainly. "Let them see him. I think God would want it that way." She looked at the child whose eyes sparkled in the torchlight. "I know *he* wants it that way."

She came down the stairs the rest of the way and into the light of the torches of the Magi. Yosef thought he could hear them draw a deep breath as they saw the mother and child. She smiled and then turned and entered the house, Yosef close on her heels. Mehuman made a sign and strode forward, followed by his three friends. The servants came after. Yosef quickly stoked up the fire and Miriam stood beside it.

And then the most amazing thing that Yosef had ever seen happened. These four powerful foreigners, king-makers, lords of their realm, those who directed the course of the king's reign in the east, fell down with their faces to the ground, prostrating themselves before the child. They spoke in a language that Yosef couldn't understand.

Yehoshua held out one hand towards them and for a brief instant it seemed that the child was more than a simple peasant boy, the son of a builder. He had for that moment *become* king and Yosef found himself sinking to his knees as well.

Mehuman was the first to rise, but only to his knees.

"O king of the Jews," he addressed the boy child in Aramaic, "we have come from afar to see you and we have not been disappointed. We saw your star rise in the east nearly one year ago and we immediately set out to find you. We praise your God that he has guided us this far by the star we first saw. The star brought us to Jerusalem where the wise men told us where we might find you. And now it brings us here, to this village. We

praise the God of heaven that he has shown us to you and we have brought gifts for you, O king." He clapped his hands and the big man came forward with the chest, placing it on the ground and releasing the large catch on the front. He folded back the lid to reveal two pouches and an ornate vase of some metal.

"We have brought you gifts from the very best of our treasures," the head of the Magi explained. Carshena got up and opened the first bag, a large, heavy leather sack. He reached inside and retrieved a hand-full of gold coins, large and round, heavier than any Yosef had ever seen.

"We have brought you gold, riches for a king," he exclaimed in Greek, letting the coins fall back into the sack as he spoke. Bigtha came forward and opened the second pouch, markedly smaller, but of much richer leather than that full of money. As he untied the string, a lush fragrance filled the room.

"And incense, for the worship of one who is worthy of it," he said, also in Greek. Lastly, Mersen lifted the small jar from the bottom of the chest.

"And myrrh, to bind the wounds and heal those who need it," he exclaimed.

"We pray the blessings of your God upon you, O king of the Jews," Mehuman closed, "upon you and your parents. We will pray for you to claim your throne soon and dispense justice and righteousness upon your people." Those words sent a thrill down Yosef's spine. Might he live to see Yehoshua take power? Might he after all be father of the King of Israel? The three men passed the priceless gifts into the builder's hands, paid deep homage to the child king again, and left as quickly as they had come. Miriam looked at Yosef and he at her. Only Yehoshua seemed unaffected. Dumbfounded, it took Yosef a long moment to realize he must see their guests off, have them stay the night, offer them food, or *something*. He hurried out of their house and to the gate only to find that the Magi had already mounted their camels and had begun their journey away from there.

He came back to the house, puzzled. Yehoshua was back on the ground, inspecting the gifts.

"What on earth?" Yosef asked of Miriam. She just shook her head and gazed at the child who for one moment had seemed so regal, so much more than he had ever been.

Yosef had thought that he might never get to sleep that night, but as he bedded down with his wife nestled in his arms, the dark of sleep overtook him with a speed that he'd rarely experienced. And with the sleep came another night vision. He dreamed he was awoken by someone calling his name. He got up from his bed and opened the door. There was their donkey, laden with a large bundle. A man stood beside it. His attire and bearing reminded Yosef of the Magi who had just departed, but there was a brightness around him that made it seem as if it was he who glowed.

"Get up," he commanded, "and flee to Egypt with the child and Miriam, his mother. Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to try to kill the child."²¹ And Yosef awoke, the thought still fresh in his mind. He immediately shook Miriam.

"Miriam!" he exclaimed.

"Let me sleep," she muttered. "I just dropped off."

"Miriam, we must leave!" he hissed. "Herod is going to try to kill Yehoshua!" She instantly came fully awake.

"What?" she demanded, rolling over to see his face.

"Herod is going to try to kill him. We must leave immediately!" The urgency was clear.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I've just had a night-vision." He leaped up and hurried over to where Yehoshua slept in a large basket.

"Come, dear, take only what we need."

"Yes, yes," she rolled herself out of her blanket and fumbled for her belt and shawl. "The bed rolls and our clothes." She collected them together as she spoke dropping them into one of the carpets on the floor. "What about your tools?"

"They're over there," he called, pointing to the satchel on the floor. "I'll have to leave the large saw. We can buy more when we get to Egypt."

"Egypt?" she gasped, ceasing her packing. "Why Egypt?"

²¹ Mt 2:13 (NLT altered)

"Because that's where I was told to go. We'll be safe there." He reached hurried to the corner where they'd stashed the gifts of the Magi. "Let's not forget these." Miriam nodded her head and gathered some provisions: fruit, bread, and a water skin. Meanwhile Yosef grabbed a wax tablet off one of the shelves and hastily scribbled a note to his uncle in Aramaic. He grabbed his satchel and slung it over his shoulder, picked up Miriam's bundle and hurried to get the donkey out. He was still tying the bundle to it when he heard a voice from the large house.

"Who is out there?"

"It's me!" he called up to his uncle. "Yosef!"

"What in heaven's name are you doing in the dead of night?" the old man demanded, descending the few steps to the courtyard. "And with a donkey? Are you leaving?"

"Yes," the builder replied checking the ropes again. "Herod wants to kill Yehoshua."

"How do you know that?" Uncle Obed's face was skeptical.

"I had a night-vision, uncle."

"A night-vision." The old man snorted. "More likely fear brought about by those strange men visiting us!"

"It is true! I swear by Almighty God." Just then Miriam hurried out, the sleeping Yehoshua in her arms.

"Do you believe this, Miriam?" Obed demanded.

"I do," she said with conviction. "My husband does not lie. You should know that, uncle!" The old man glared at her.

"Very well, go with God. May you be kept safe."

"Peace be upon you, uncle," Yosef intoned.

"And upon you, my son."

And the three of them left the courtyard with their donkey.

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Yosef in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.²²

Epilogue

The builder bent low over the piece of wood he was working on. His skilled hands formed a large lily blossom, giving it the detail that years of practice had wrought. His hair had grayed quite a bit now, having recently reached fifty years of age, but his gait was still strong and his arms and back as sinewy as ever. Yosef and his five sons were well-known and well liked as builders in the area of Sepphoris, especially since the rebuilding had commenced some years earlier. He had been hired by Herod Antipas himself to do the rich carvings in his palace and now was working on a mansion for a Roman officer.

He gazed over at where his sons were working. Yakov was his first-born, a serious young man who was very much like his father, though his skill had turned more to stone-dressing than wood-carving. Here he was carefully working with the master mason to lay the walls. Yosef's second son, Yosef, was a fair wood-carver, but by no means as talented as his youngest brother Yehuda. Between them was Simeon, a happy, bright young man, who as a boy had been much like his mother. Then there were his two lovely daughters, both of whom were with their mother.

And always, there was Yehoshua, his pride and joy. He was a strong young man now, one to whom everything came easily. He carved as well as Yosef had ever done so and he studied the Scriptures with a depth and delight that Yosef had never seen anywhere. Sometimes he would recite the words as if he himself had

²² Mt 2:19:23 (NIV altered)

spoken them, a thought that puzzled the old builder. His father Yakov fortunately had lived long enough to witness Yehoshua's first steps in learning Scripture and he had delighted the old rabbi by plying him with questions about the Word of God that still amazed both his father and his grandfather.

And then there was the first time that Yehoshua had been to Jerusalem since his dedication. He was twelve and just Bar-Mitzvah. They had lost him as they left and it had taken them three days to find him again. That had been the time when he'd fought the most severely with Miriam. She'd berated him the whole time for having lost the boy.

"Look, woman," he'd finally said. "God will protect him when we can't. He's *twelve* years old and a man! Where would we find a man?" And that was what had brought them to the Temple courts. Yehoshua had been there, sitting among the rabbis, both young and old, listening, asking, trying to understand. The scene had instantly quenched any anger that Yosef might have had. It was clear that his son was doing what he had only ever dreamed of. And then came the rabbis' praise of the boy's quick mind and his deep insight into the Word. Yosef felt that he would nearly burst with pride. It was with delight that he put his arm around his son's shoulders and almost strutted from the Temple courtyard.

Miriam, on the other hand was not nearly as delighted.

"Son!" she exclaimed angrily. "Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere."

"But why did you need to search?" the boy asked, innocently, almost reproachfully. "You should have known that I was at my Father's house."²³ That deflated Yosef's ego just a bit, reminding him that though he was thought to be Yehoshua's father, the boy was not the son of his flesh. But still, his son was Messiah. And it remained at that.

The one thing that always came back to him as he remembered that incident was the pang that he had every time he went back to Jerusalem. It was the fact that he would never get the chance to see his God face-to-face. And that was the one thing he longed for.

He looked over to where Yehoshua was talking with one of the other young men, working on a beam himself. It was marvelous how their carving styles were so similar that he could share the work with this, his eldest son. Yosef laughed and stroked the wood with his chisel again.

At that moment a gust of wind rattled one of the large scaffolds nearby where men were hoisting a good-sized block to the top of the wall. The builder looked up and thought to himself that he ought to check the lashings on the beam farthest out. Perhaps they were coming loose. He sighed and pushed himself off of his block, putting his chisel and mallet down on the beam.

"Yosef, what is it?" his long-time friend Micah called.

"I think the lashings are loose on the scaffolding," Yosef replied over his shoulder. "I'm going to check them."

"Very well," Micah called back, glanced up at the stone and then yelled.

"Yosef, look out!" The builder looked up. The rope on the large stone they'd been hoisting up snapped and the rock was hurtling down at him. He had only a split second to move and threw himself to the side, but not far enough the rock came down on the middle of his back. The air was knocked from him and he found he could hardly get any back.

"Yosef!" Micah screamed, rushing over. The five sons of Yosef heard the word and hurried over. Yehoshua, as always, was there first.

"Father," he whispered, his dark eyes warm, compassionate, full of pain. With supreme effort the builder drew a breath.

"My back," he gasped. He looked into his eldest son's eyes and drew another breath.

"Am I dying?" The young man nodded solemnly, all his features making clear he was bearing Yosef's pain as well. The world was fading fast, but there were two things the builder wanted to say yet.

"Yehoshua, have I been a good father to you?" he asked. A tear slid down his cheek.

"The best human father a man could have," the young man answered and Yosef knew that he *always* spoke the truth. Yosef forced a smile and patted his son's knee.

²³ Lk 3:48-49 (NLT)

“The one thing – one thing – I’ve always wanted, Yehoshua –” He struggled for another breath. “I’ve wanted – wanted to see God – face-to-face, Yehoshua.” His eyes were teary as he looked up at the young man. And Yehoshua bent down and took Yosef Ben Yakov’s head in both his hands. He gazed silently into the dying man’s eyes and in that moment Yosef knew. He broke into a smile as he breathed his last, looking into the eyes of Eternity.

Author’s Note

As I wrote this I was supremely conscious of the fact that what I was typing into my computer was quite different from what much of western tradition has dictated about the person of Joseph, the birth of Jesus Christ, and Joseph and Mary’s relationship after the Child’s birth. I have endeavored to make this as close to what we know to be true about Judean culture around the turn of the Age. I tried to keep the names as close to their Hebrew/Aramaic pronunciation and spelling as I could. Hence Joseph would have been called Yosef, Mary would have been called Miriam, and Jesus would have been known as Yehoshua or Yeshua (depending on the preference of a person).

There are many things that western traditions have added into the story of Christ’s birth, such as the search for a place to stay in many inns, that Jesus was born the *night* they arrived, that Joseph and Mary never had sexual relations, that there were three wise men. Most of these are *tradition*. Tradition is not bad, but it is often flawed, and therefore should be scrutinized carefully.

Being well-acquainted with middle eastern culture myself, I know that Mary and Joseph would never in their wildest dreams have stayed in an inn when they had relatives nearby. The relatives would have *made room*. It was their sacred duty. Being a relative in the Middle East does not only mean you share the same grandfather or grandmother. It goes so far as to being the cousin of your wife’s sister’s husband’s uncle and sometimes farther still.

Also, it must be pointed out that inns were not exactly common in the times of Christ and used almost only by foreigners. Mary and Joseph wouldn’t be caught dead in an inn. Inns were only found on major routes. Bethlehem was way off of the major routes, a little po-dunk village six miles from civilization – and six miles back then is what thirty miles is today.

So what do we make if the word “inn” in our Bibles? Tradition states it should be translated this way. But let’s do a quick word study to see if tradition is warranted.

This word – *kataluma* – is used only three times in Scripture (Mk. 14:4; Lk 2:7; 22:11). Of those three times it is translated *twice* as “guest room” (Mk 14:4 and Lk 22:11), and only once as “inn” (Lk 2:7). It would be strange that Luke would imbibe the same word with two separate meanings, especially when he uses a *different* word in 10:34 (*pandocheion*) to describe an inn in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. I do not think that the argument that we should look at the Hebrew cognates²⁴ here bears any weight (and I’m an Old Testament scholar), because Luke is the one writer in the New Testament who is of purely Gentile background. He does have many Hebraisms in his writings, but these are mainly theological in nature.²⁵

We, as westerners, tend to disavow Jesus’ “middle-easternness.” We believe that he was western – albeit a westerner from the middle ages. Jesus was a Jew and he lived in a society very much like the middle eastern societies today. Family was immensely important, as was hospitality. Families would live together in large compounds and take care of each other. It was normal for three or more generations to live under one roof, in one compound. This also applied to cousins and more distant relations.

Some may question why I opted for the word “builder” rather than the more traditional “carpenter.” Joseph may have been a carpenter, as I do suggest, but the Greek word used for him is *tekton*, which designates a builder

²⁴ See here Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973). Footnote 1 on p185 of Book I.

²⁵ Terry Hulbert, *Gospels / Life of Christ Course Notes*. (Columbia, SC: Columbia International University, 1999.) pp. F-1 - F-2.

or a craftsman, regardless of whether he worked in wood, metal or stone.²⁶ We don't have any *direct* indication that Joseph was a builder, but the fact that Jesus is designated so in Mark 6:3 strongly suggests that his human father was one, too, owing to the fact that the son almost always took up the same vocation as the father.

I also don't give too much credence to the idea that Joseph was dirt-poor. Being a builder back then was a well-respected job, something like being a manager today. And there was *plenty* of building to do. Herod the Great was notorious for commissioning buildings, as was his son Herod Antipas. A man would have enough to do *all year* as a builder and he would enjoy a settled, steady income. Joseph would easily be able to support a growing family with his trade. I believe that the reason they brought the *less expensive* offering at Christ's birth was the lack of *liquid* means at the time and also the fact that prices in the Jerusalem Temple Market are known to have been way out of proportion. I daresay that a lower-middle-class family that could normally afford a lamb would be lucky to get away with a pair of turtledoves from the Court of Gentiles Market for the same price. No wonder Jesus would want to clear out the Temple!

One other idea that many people hold was that Joseph was an old man and that he never had relations with Mary, making her a perpetual virgin, hence Christ's "brothers" and "sisters" were never related to him or else they were his cousins. The text of Scripture suggests nothing of this. Matthew states that, "But he [Joseph] had no union with her [Mary] until she gave birth to a son."²⁷ This does not suggest that he *never* "had union" with her. To my mind it even suggests that he did – *after* Jesus was born.

Joseph was most probably older than his wife, but only by a few years, perhaps six or seven. It was normal practice then for a man in his twenties to wed a girl in her teens. We westerners may gag at that thought, but that is still the way it is done in *many* middle eastern countries.

One question I have often mulled over in my mind was, did Joseph and Mary know that Jesus was the Christ? My answer to that – from Scripture – is an unquestionable "yes." What they thought was meant by Messiah was probably different than what it turned out to be. Mary's heart was pierced by a proverbial sword when her first-born was crucified for the sins of the world and it is quite certain that Joseph never lived to see his wife's son's death.

Some people might balk at the suggestion that Joseph would have been crown prince if the Davidic dynasty had remained on the throne. That *must* be a given, as Matthew goes to great lengths to establish a *direct* lineage from David to Joseph Bar Jacob. There may be some missing generations in there, but there is little doubt in my mind that he would have been heir to the throne if there had been a throne. Otherwise Christ's *legal* claim would have been rather difficult to substantiate.

Now, many of these things are my personal views. I do not like to knock tradition too much, but we should do it every once in a while, if only to make sure that it isn't rotting away from the inside out. It is important to be on the side of Truth and sometimes tradition and Truth will butt heads, as they did in the Reformation. I will not go to my death for many of the things suggested in this piece, but I do believe that understanding the culture at the time of the Gospels will bring greater clarity to our understanding and application of Scripture *today*. Many thanks to Dr. Terry Hulbert of Columbia International University for these insights.

J.M. Diener
January 3, 2003

²⁶ Packer, J.I., "τέκτων," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. (CD-ROM. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999.)

²⁷ Mt 1:25 (NIV)

Sources

1. Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973.
2. Hulbert, Terry. *Gospels / Life of Christ Course Notes*. Columbia, SC: Columbia International University, 1999.
3. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. CD-ROM. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999.
4. Thomas, Robert L. and Stanley N. Gundry. *A Harmony of the Gospels*. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1991.
5. Scripture quotations marked (NIV) taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by Permission of the International Bible Society.

“NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark office by International Bible Society.
6. Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2003 by J.M. Diener. All Rights Reserved.

This is a free distribution made available through Wolfhawke.com <http://www.wolfhawke.com/>

This version is for the personal use of the person who has downloaded it. That person has the right to print one (1) hard copy at a time, provided the story is printed in its entirety, cited correctly, and not given to resale. It is not to be redistributed in any way shape or form, whether in print, or as electronic media without written permission from the author. Any editing or alteration of the story are direct infringements of copyright. For more information write to writings@wolfhawke.com.

Internet: <http://www.wolfhawke.com/stories/builder.php>

PDF: <http://www.wolfhawke.com/pdf/builder.pdf>