

# **The Mystery of the Empty Tomb**

**By James A. Bacon Jr.**

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From the preface to the epilogue, this novel is a work of fiction. Nicolaus of Caesarea is a fictional character. His manuscript is fictional. The author has stuck as closely as possible to the historical sources but the inevitable gaps in the record are filled with informed conjecture.

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*I dedicate this book to Morton Smith  
whose scholarship inspired my inquiries into  
the historical Jesus.*

## Preface

The long-lost manuscript of Nicolaus of Caesarea, “A True and Accurate Account of the Entombment of Jesus of Nazareth and the Persecution of Pontius Pilate,” has been widely hailed as solving “the greatest mystery in history.” After a wave of publicity following discovery of the text last year, almost every literate person on the planet knows that Nicolaus, a counselor to Pontius Pilate, claims to have investigated the empty burial tomb of Jesus of Nazareth, identified the malefactors who removed his body, and disproved the Christian narrative that Jesus had arisen from the dead.

Other than translations of brief passages appearing in *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, Nicolaus’ words have been accessible only to those conversant in ancient Greek. It is high time for Nicolaus to speak to a broader audience. I am honored to present the first English-language translation of his work.

The Nicolaus manuscript was one of many discovered last year when the Turkish National Petroleum Corporation was drilling for gas in the mountains near the town of Duragan and happened upon a cave that had been sealed for centuries. The chamber revealed the largest archive of ancient texts since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The manuscripts appear to have been assembled by Marcion, bishop of Sinope, or his followers in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century of the Christian era. Marcion has been called the first Christian heretic, and much of early church theology cohered in opposition to his teachings. The bishop’s doctrine led him to deny Jesus’ birth, death and physical resurrection. Although his obscure heresy has been long forgotten, Marcion was the first to develop a canon of sacred scriptures based upon the life and teachings of Jesus. His collection inspired proponents of what would become the orthodox Christian tradition to assemble its own canon, now known as the New Testament. Only with the discovery of the Duragan cache, however, was the full extent of Marcion’s corpus

revealed: six treatises by Marcion himself, the works of Luke and Paul, including two Pauline epistles previously unknown, and the Nicolaus text.

Nicolaus' stated purpose was mundane: to rectify the reputation of his patron, Pontius Pilate, and to squelch the belief that Jesus of Nazareth had arisen from the dead. Presumably, the Marcionites preserved the Nicolaus text because it vividly contradicted the narrative of Jesus' bodily resurrection.

The Duragan manuscript is the only known copy of the tome. Not surprisingly, with so much at stake, some scholars have expressed skepticism of the manuscript's authenticity. Writing in the *Journal of New Testament Literature*, Timothy Stroth notes that the text is mentioned by no other ancient source. He concludes that the "work is a clever forgery penned by a member of the Marcionite community, perhaps by Marcion himself." Internal evidence in the text – allusions to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and to Titus as the "son of the Emperor Vespasian" – point to a composition between 76 C.E. when Vesuvius buried Pompeii and 79 C.E. when Titus succeeded his father as emperor. But radio-carbon testing dates the parchment to 140 C.E., give or take 20 years, making it of the same vintage as the other texts in the Duragan archive. Stroth argues that the dating of the manuscript to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century C.E. is consistent with a forgery, although he concedes that there is nothing to disprove the conjecture that the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Duragan text is a scribal copy of a 1<sup>st</sup>-century original.

Nicolaus of Caesarea claimed to be the grandson of Nicolaus of Damascus, who is well attested to in the historical literature as chief adviser to King Herod and a wise man esteemed by Emperor Caesar Augustus. Other than an oblique reference in a manuscript fragment dating to the 7<sup>th</sup>-century C.E., the author himself is unknown to history. But that reference is telling. A certain Sophronius of Damascus referred to "a family that had always been illustrious, starting at its root from the philosopher Nicolaus, the instructor of Herod and the teacher of the children of Antonius and Cleopatra. He was followed by twelve generations of Nicolauses, each flourishing in turn." This independent testimony, though not proof of the authenticity of the manuscript, does constitute circumstantial evidence that Nicolaus of Caesarea, grandson of Nicolaus of Damascus, was a real person.

One way or the other, the Duragan document makes compelling reading. In presenting this translation, the title of which I have taken the liberty of shortening to “The Mystery of the Empty Tomb,” I make no judgment as to the work’s authenticity, other than to say that if the text is a forgery, it is an exceedingly sophisticated one in which the author anticipated 21<sup>st</sup> century scholarly sensibilities.

For the convenience of the reader, I have detailed in footnotes where Nicolaus’ account is consistent with or departs from the New Testament, Flavius Josephus, and other historical sources. I invite readers to draw their own conclusions regarding the authenticity of the work and, more intriguingly, the credibility of the conclusion Nicolaus reaches regarding the disappearance of Jesus’ body from the burial tomb.

– *James A. Bacon Jr*  
*Richmond, Va.*  
*February 25, 2025*

## Chapter 1

After a lifetime witnessing the follies of the human race, I, Nicolaus, have concluded that most men have scant regard for the truth. They believe what they wish to believe, and they heed any charlatan who tells them what they want to hear. Unless the tellers of truth speak forcefully, falsehood goes uncorrected and spreads from one man to another like a plague.

Nowhere in the world have lies traveled faster and to more pernicious effect than among the Jews of Judea and Galilee, whose love of self-deception plunged them into a succession of miseries and horrors. Dreaming that their nation might prevail against the greatest empire the world has ever known, the Jews revolted against Rome. In punishment for their hubris, they suffered the sack of their great city, Jerusalem, and the destruction of their holy temple.<sup>1</sup> Learning nothing from these misfortunes, a faction among the Jews today indulges a mania as deluded as the first: what force of arms could not accomplish, their messiah will. Adherents of this sect believe that one Jesus of Nazareth, having died and ascended bodily to heaven, will return to establish the rule of their god on earth. This dementia has leaped from the Jews to the Greeks, leaving untold numbers as bereft of reason as oxen in the field.

I am but one man, and I cannot correct every fraud and perjury that animates such nonsense, but I can expose the error of the most audacious claims. I write now to proclaim the truth of these matters before age and infirmity overtake me.

Let me plainly state my intentions. First and foremost, I seek to end the madness of the followers of Jesus who suppose that their messiah arose from the dead. Second, I aim to clear the name of Pontius Pilate, the most honorable of all the Roman governors

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolaus is alluding here to the first Jewish-Roman war, which took place between 66 of the Christian Era (C.E.) and 70 C.E.



of Judea and indeed the most enlightened ruler of the Jews since King Herod. Had Pilate not been chased from his office, he might well have saved the Jews from their descent into madness, their revolt against Rome and their destruction at the hands of Titus, son of the Emperor Vespasian.

I know the truth: I served Pontius Pilate, and he was my patron. I shall attest that he administered the provinces of Judea and Samaria with justice and restraint, and I shall refute the calumnies that the Jews fling at him to this very day. I observed the trial of Jesus of Nazareth and witnessed his execution on the cross. I examined the empty tomb where he was buried and interviewed dozens who loved him or reviled him. I shall demonstrate that he did not rise from the dead. Indeed, I shall explain the disappearance of his body and tell how his followers came to believe in his resurrection.

Who is this truth teller, you ask. I hail from Caesarea Maritima. I am the son of Nicolaus, manager of the royal warehouses, who was the son of Nicolaus the Damascene, adviser to King Herod. My grandfather was the most learned man of his era, a lover of knowledge and truth, a chronicler of great works, an intimate of kings and emperors, and a philosopher in the tradition of Epicurus. Walking in his footsteps, I traveled to Alexandria to take up the study of philosophy, the noblest of all branches of knowledge. I mastered three languages: Greek, my native tongue and the language of philosophy and commerce; Latin, the language of war, law and administration; and Aramaic, the dialect of the common people. I have served as interpreter, scribe, advisor, and diplomat for two prefects, Valerius Gratus and Pontius Pilate, and a king, Herod Agrippa. Drawing upon a keen memory undented by age and a storehouse of notes and reports compiled during the conduct of my official duties, I am as certain of my recollections as if they occurred yesterday.

Study the evidence, O reader. Reason and a decent respect for the truth will guide you to the same conclusions that I place before you.

## Chapter 2

In the 19<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius Julius Caesar<sup>2</sup>, Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea and Samaria, governed with a steady hand. The land was well-ordered. Discord between Jews, Greeks, and Samaritans was at a low tide. Banditry, a perennial scourge, had been nearly extinguished. Trade flowed freely, the population grew in numbers, and cities expanded beyond their walls. However, the Jews had never fully reconciled themselves to Roman rule. They remained an excitable people prone to tumults, especially during the feast of the Passover when every malcontent from Judea, Galilee, Idumea, and beyond the Jordan flocked to the holy city of Jerusalem in search of a mob to lead.

As the festival approached, Pilate did as his predecessors had done: He transferred his judgment seat from the prefect's palace in Caesarea to King Herod's palace in Jerusalem where, with a cohort of soldiers stationed in the fortress of Antonia, he kept a stern watch over the Jews. For matters pertaining to the military, engineering, or the treasury, he had advisers of considerable accomplishment. For guidance in his dealings with the Jews and other peoples under his administration, he depended upon me. As Pilate's advisor who assisted him in all his dealings with Greeks, Jews, Samaritans, Arabs, Syrians and other denizens of his territory, I kept current with popular sentiment by maintaining a network of sources at all levels of society, from the offal pits of the tanners' district to the sacred precincts of the temple.

One week before the high holy day of Passover, the name on every person's lips was Jesus of Nazareth. My little chameleons, as I called my informants, were either besotted with him or appalled by him, depending upon their station. We had heard of

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<sup>2</sup> 33 C.E.

the man previously but paid him little mind for he was active mainly in Galilee, Herod Antipas' realm to the north;<sup>3</sup> he visited Jerusalem only during the major religious festivals. As best we knew, Jesus had spoken against neither Antipas nor the Romans, nor did he consort with bandits or rebels. To the contrary, he was known as a healer of the sick, a benign personage like our own Asclepius.<sup>4</sup>

"Let him cure all the people he wants," Pilate once declared. "That leaves all the more subjects to pay tribute to Caesar."

Jesus did bedevil the temple priests with his teachings, however, and he had caused a furor by overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple of the Jews – an act that affronted the priests upon whose sufferance the merchants plied their trade.<sup>5</sup> But those were problems for the scribes and priests, not Pilate, to sort out. The Jews had their own court, called the Sanhedrin, which passed judgment on violations of their law. If the holy books of the Jews are to be believed, the only man who could settle a controversy to the satisfaction of all had been King Solomon, and he had died centuries before. Adjudicating disputes among this fractious people only antagonized one party without earning the gratitude of the other. As long as the Jews obeyed the laws of Rome, paid their portion to Caesar, and kept the peace, Pilate was content to leave them to their own devices.

One of my informants was a young priest, Ephron by name, a partisan of House Kantharos, rival to the House Annas in the grubbing for a share of the honors, offices, and spoils spilling from

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<sup>3</sup> Herod Antipas was a peer of Pontius Pilate. Pilate governed Judea and Samaria; Herod governed Galilee to the north and Perea west of the Jordan River.

<sup>4</sup> The Greeks venerated Asclepius as a son of Apollo given the gift of healing. In the eastern Mediterranean, they built many temples to him where people inscribed stone monuments attesting to his healing powers.

<sup>5</sup> John 2:14-15. Nicolaus appears to agree with the Gospel of John, which placed this act chronologically soon after the beginning of Jesus' ministry, in contrast to Mark, who placed it during his final trip to Jerusalem.

the Temple. Ephron readily shared the gossip about the intrigues of the High Priest Caiaphas, son-in-law of the aforesaid Annas. Dating from the incident with the money changers, Caiaphas had conceived a great animus toward Jesus. The Galilean had denounced the high priests as illegitimate, corrupt, impious, and indifferent to the hardships of the people. The temple, he said, would come to ruin under the stewardship of the High Priest.<sup>6</sup> Normally, Caiaphas would dismiss such prophecies as the ravings of the demon-possessed, but Jesus was no ordinary man. Besides performing a great many miracles in healing the sick, or so it was supposed, it was said that he had summoned a certain Lazarus from his grave. In the mind of the people, Jesus seemed capable of any miracle, and Caiaphas worried greatly about his intentions. Moreover, in a departure from previous practice, in which Jesus traveled to Jerusalem discretely amid the throng of Galilean pilgrims,<sup>7</sup> this Passover season he had gathered a large retinue and let it be known that he would make a grand entrance into the city on the first day of the Passover celebration.

After dismissing Ephron, Pilate confided that he was of two minds regarding Jesus. The prefect bore a long-standing grudge against Caiaphas, as I shall explain in due course, and he also was charged with maintaining public order. Any failure to do so would be reported to the Syrian legate in Antioch, Lucius Pomponius Flaccus, or perhaps even to the emperor himself.

“Insofar as Jesus discomfits Caiaphas and diminishes his standing among the Jews, he may prove useful to us,” Pilate told me. “Yet his boldness grows, as does his command of the crowd. By staging a public entrance into the city, he challenges established authority.”

“It is difficult to know which course to take,” said I. “What we truly know of this man would not fill a beggar’s cup.”

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<sup>6</sup> While the Gospels recount Jesus denouncing Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and high priests, they contain no record of him singling out Caiaphas for criticism.

<sup>7</sup> This is reminiscent of John 7:10. “When his brethren were gone up, then went he also up unto the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret.”

“Then you shall get to know him,” said Pilate. “Observe his entrance into the city. Follow him through the streets. Listen to him. Talk to his followers. Take note with whom he consorts. Then report back to me tonight.”

Although he bore a stern countenance toward others, Pilate always treated me with kindness and generosity. More than once he said that I reminded him of his own son who marched with the emperor’s legions in Germany. “I shall have no harm befall you,” said he, placing a hand on my shoulder. “I would assign a detachment to protect you, should you feel need of it.”

“Nay,” said I. “The Jews will not speak freely in the presence of soldiers. I shall clothe myself as a commoner and mix with the crowd.”

“If the mob discovers your deception, it will tear you to pieces.”

That was true enough. Gentiles were forbidden to enter the inner precincts of the temple, but I was brash as a young man and had little fear. I believed I could pass as a Jew, posing as a native of Alexandria where I had studied with the masters of philosophy. Other than the ritual mutilation of the male member, a barbarous practice they call circumcision, many Jews living under Roman dominion outside their homeland were indistinguishable from the Greeks in speech and comportment. Many did not speak the tongue of the Jews’ native land. If I spoke Aramaic with a Greek accent, no one in Jerusalem would think a thing of it.

According to our talkative friend Ephron, Jesus had quartered himself in the home of Lazarus, who abode in the village of Bethany less than an hour’s walk to the east of Jerusalem. Of the two gates on the eastern side of the city, the Golden Gate was the more magnificent. To make the greatest impression, I surmised, Jesus would enter the city through that portal.

Dressed in the manner of the Jews, with a short jacket over a light wool robe belted at the waist, I set off for the Golden Gate. I easily blended into the teeming streets of Jerusalem. During the festival the city swelled with two or three times its normal number. House owners took in friends and family members from far away. Innkeepers filled every room, sleeping two families to a chamber

and charging double the fee. Beyond the city walls, tents dyed blue and yellow bedecked the ground like fields of lupine and mustard. As I fought through the crowd, it became apparent that many people were heading the same way as I and with the same object in mind. Coming into view of the massive Golden Gate with its double-arched passageways set in a massive block of masonry, I found the crush of humanity almost too dense to navigate. Only through the greatest of exertions did I squeeze through the gate and find a front-row position along the road to Bethany.

As we waited, several men approached the city, proclaiming the miraculous nature of Lazarus' resurrection. "I bear witness to the power of Jesus of Nazareth," one called to the bystanders. "I saw with my own eyes how he called Lazarus from the tomb."<sup>8</sup>

I have little patience with people who speak of miracles. Adherents of the Epicurean philosophy, such as I, deny the action of invisible forces upon the world of men. We believe only what our senses tell us. Tales of miracles are born either of lies or delusion.

As the man passed, I grabbed him by the arm. "Who are you? How did you come to see this miracle?"

"Matthias is my name," said he. He claimed to dwell in Bethany and to be married to a cousin of Lazarus. He had mourned the man's death and helped lay him in the tomb. He saw Jesus weep for the loss of his friend, and then heard him tell Lazarus' sister, Martha, to take away the stone. "No, Lord, by this time he has begun to stink. Let him rest in peace," said she. But Jesus commanded that the stone be rolled away. And when it was, he called out, "Lazarus, come forth!" And out of the cave he stumbled, bound hand and foot with grave clothes and his head wrapped with a bandage.<sup>9</sup>

"Was he putrefied?" asked I.

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<sup>8</sup> John 12:17. "The people therefore that was with him when he called Lazarus out of his grave, and raised him from the dead, bear record."

<sup>9</sup> John 11:38-43. "And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin."

“No, it was as if he had been sleeping,” said the man.

“How do you know, then, that he died? If his body was not decaying, perhaps he *had* been sleeping.”

The question stunned Matthias for a moment but he recovered and answered gamely. “Be gone, Sadducee.<sup>10</sup> Such is the power of Jesus that he brought Lazarus back to life and cured him of his stink as well.” And, with that, he proceeded down the road, proclaiming the same message to those willing to hear it.

Just as a cool gust foretells a summer squall, the crowd signaled the approach of Jesus long before he came into sight. First, the sightseers let out a murmur. Then they cut down branches from the trees and spread palms along the road. Others unwrapped their cloaks and headdresses and strewed them in Jesus’ path. At last came a procession of people leaping, dancing and waving joyously, making up with enthusiasm what they lacked in decorum. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” they cried. “Blessed be the kingdom of David!” Finally, Jesus came into view, and the Jews swarmed about him as excitedly as ants around a bread crumb.

But Jesus was not a conqueror, nor a king, nor even a warrior. He rode astride a young donkey, legs dangling halfway to the ground.<sup>11</sup> He garbed himself in a robe of plain wool. He kept his hair long and his beard unshorn. The calluses on his bare feet were as thick as lemon rinds. His frame was lean from fasting, his skin weathered from the sun, and his cheeks hollow from self-denial. Yet there was an intensity about him: His eyes burned like glowing coals.<sup>12</sup> I had heard of such men: ascetics, hermits who

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<sup>10</sup> Presumably, Matthias called Nicolaus a Sadducee because the Sadducees denied the resurrection of the dead or any afterlife at all.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 11:7-10. “And they brought the colt to Jesus, and cast their garments on him; and he sat upon him. And many spread their garments in the way: and others cut down branches off the trees, and strewed them in the way.”

<sup>12</sup> There is no way to verify the physical description of Jesus. There is not one word in the Gospels attesting to his stature or appearance.

lived in the wilderness, starving themselves in the hope of bringing on visions from the gods. But never had I seen their like in person.

The crowd followed Jesus as he proceeded along the Bethany Road upon his plodding donkey. I wondered at the meaning of the cry, “blessed be the kingdom of David.” The kingdom of David was the ancient land of the Israelites at the height of their power. The Jews deemed David, the greatest of all their kings, to be the most beloved of their god. But centuries had passed. The ancient Israelite kingdom had been extinguished by the Babylonians, and then a succession of conquerors had ruled the land: the Persians; Alexander the Great; Alexander’s successors, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids; a dynasty of Jewish priest-kings, the Hasmonaeans; then King Herod, whom many call the Great; and finally the Romans.

I turned to a man beside me. By the look of his sinewy arms, I took him to be a stone cutter or a carpenter. “Why do you speak of the kingdom of David? What has that to do with Jesus?”

“Jesus shall restore the kingdom of David. He is the messiah, the anointed one.”

“And *how* shall he restore the king of David?”

“As a conquering king,” said he. “He shall raise an army and vanquish the Romans.”

At this I took great alarm. Before the time of Herod, the Hasmonean priest-kings had sorely abused my people, the Greek inhabitants of the free cities of Decapolis. I far preferred the rule of the Romans to that of the Jews. If the Jews set up another king, there would be nothing to stop them from compelling neighboring peoples to worship their austere god as they had done before. If Jesus saw himself as a conquering king, he would cause nothing but trouble for the Romans. I needed to inform Pilate at once.

But a man nearby broke into our conversation. He was well attired, with handsome, embroidered robes like those of a wealthy merchant. “That is foolish talk,” said he. “Does Jesus, seated upon an ass, look like a conquering warrior to you? The messiah is like a priest. He shall call upon the spirit of the Lord, who shall come in his glory and smite the gentiles with plagues and calamities like those which afflicted Pharaoh.”



Yet another bystander chimed in. He was a holy man, judging by the long hair falling from his temples. “Jesus fulfills the scripture. ‘Rejoice, Zion, your king is coming, humble, and mounted on the foal of a donkey. He will speak *peace* to the nations.’”<sup>13</sup>

None of these men bore any love for the rule of Judea by gentiles. But only the first did I fear, the one who dreamed of cleansing the land by the sword. The other two imagined their messiah working his will through divine agency. As long as they waited for their god, Yahweh,<sup>14</sup> to perform the dirty work of expelling the Romans, I was confident that they would be waiting a very long time. Whatever Jesus meant to convey by entering the city upon an ass, his fellow Jews saw in the act what they wished to see – and each man saw something different.

Jesus passed into Jerusalem through the Golden Gate and made his way through clogged, narrow streets. I tried to get near him, but the crowd prevented me. With no more power to resist than a swimmer caught in a current, I followed the human tide into the temple as best I could.

Set upon the highest point of the city, the great temple of the Jews dominated Jerusalem like the spirit of its demanding god. Only the fortress towers of Antonia, from which Roman soldiers looked down into the courtyard, rose higher. The temple foundation stones were massive; the four walls were so strong that no battering ram could touch them. Builders had filled between the walls with rubble, creating a sprawling plateau as flat as a table, and atop it they had laid a vast plaza of white stone. This plaza, encircled by ornate colonnades, was known as the Court of the Gentiles, for here it was permissible for non-Jews – proselytes, curiosity seekers, even soldiers – to enter. In stalls under the

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<sup>13</sup> Zechariah, 9:9.

<sup>14</sup> Yahweh was the name the ancient Israelites gave their god, although it became blasphemous to utter it. In Nicolaus’ time, the Jews commonly referred to Yahweh as “Adonai,” or lord; “Elohim,” a generic word for god; or “El Shaddai,” or God Almighty. As a Greek, Nicolaus used the name of the Jewish god as he would the name of any god.

colonnades, merchants conducted a raucous business selling bullocks, sheep, goats and fowl for sacrifice. To pay for the animals, they exchanged coins bearing the faces of Roman emperors, which they considered impure, for coinage with no graven image.

At the center of the plaza stood a complex of walled enclosures that formed the heart of the temple. Only Jews could enter the interior courts; gentiles were forbidden under pain of death. Women were allowed as far as the Court of the Women, but only if they were clean.<sup>15</sup> Only men could ascend the staircase leading through the Nicanor Gate into the Court of the Israelites. Only priests could mount the steps into the Court of the Priests, which contained the altar where sacrificial animals were slaughtered and burned. The innermost sanctuary at the uppermost point of the temple was called the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest, a man with the purest of bloodlines and free from physical blemish, was permitted within, and even then only on a single day of the year. This holiest of places was demarcated by a heavy veil, or tapestry, of lustrous colors. Inside this holy chamber, the Jews believe, the high priest stood in the presence of their god, Yahweh. The outer walls of the sanctuary were plated with silver and gold. Seen from afar, the sunlight's reflection dazzled the eye from miles away -- truly a marvel to behold.

The Jews had been building and adorning their temple for hundreds of years, but it was King Herod who raised it to its greatest state of magnificence. Many Jews despise Herod as a creature of the Romans and a friend to Greeks and Samaritans. It is true that, as the king of a diverse domain, he treated Greeks and Samaritans as equals to the Jews. For that sin many Jews condemned him as a traitor to his people. It is also true that he built many theaters and gymnasias used by Greeks only and that through his patronage he restored the Olympic festivals to their former glory. But the wealth he lavished upon the Jews' temple in Jerusalem was beyond compare. The structure, people say, was more impressive than the temple of Artemis in Ephesus, greater even than the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. While the

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<sup>15</sup> By "clean," Nicolaus means not menstruating.

Jews loved not the memory of Herod, they loved dearly the temple he built for them.

Of course, the temple stands no longer. Titus, conqueror of Jerusalem, plundered the temple, tore down its stones, and forbade the Jews from rebuilding it. He stripped all the riches – the golden menorah, the golden table, the gold and silver plate, the wealth of the treasury, all of it – as the spoils of war.<sup>16</sup> So has fate punished the Jews for their stubbornness, pride, and ingratitude toward Rome.

Knowing full well the danger to which I exposed myself, I mixed with the throng following Jesus into the inner court forbidden to gentiles. I read the inscription by the gate: "No foreigner is permitted within. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which follows."<sup>17</sup> Nervously, I passed within. To my relief, Jesus went no further than the Court of the Women, for many of his followers were women. As he began to hold forth, I pushed my way through the crowd until I got close enough to hear him above the din.

On this day, Jesus answered questions shouted from the crowd. Learned Pharisees and Sadducees, philosophers who disputed as much among themselves as do our own Stoics, Cynics, and Epicureans, endeavored to trap him in his words. But he was as agile a sophist as they – he would have done no better had he trained at the foot of Gorgias himself.<sup>18</sup>

The Jews devote great energy to wrangling over obscure aspects of their law. I will provide two instances of their deliberations with Jesus.

A scribe hewing to the doctrine of the Sadducees, who deny life after death and the bodily resurrection of the dead, posed a riddle. Moses, the lawgiver of the Jews, had proclaimed that if a

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<sup>16</sup> Nicolaus refers to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. during the Jews' revolt against Rome only six or seven years before the apparent writing of this book.

<sup>17</sup> Nicolaus' memory, though not perfect, was very good. An inscription of almost those words was uncovered in 20<sup>th</sup>-century archaeological excavation of the temple.

<sup>18</sup> Gorgias, a master of rhetoric, famously debated Socrates.

man died and left a wife behind but no children, his brother should take the wife. And if the second brother died, leaving no issue, a third brother should take her, and so on through seven brothers. If all men rise in the resurrection, asked the Sadducee, whose wife shall she be? It was a clever question, yet Jesus was cleverer still, appealing to the Jews' belief in heaven as a place in the sky, beyond human perception, where Yahweh sits upon a chariot throne surrounded by winged seraphim, four-faced cherubim, and all manner of fabulous beings. "When people rise from the dead," Jesus said, "neither shall they marry, nor be given in marriage. They shall be like the angels in heaven."<sup>19</sup>

As no man has visited heaven and returned to tell of it, no man dared contradict him.

Then his enemies tried to ensnare him with another question. "Master," asked one scribe, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?"

At this question, my ears perked up like those of a hunting dog. The tribute imposed by Rome was no more severe than the exactions the Jews' own rulers had levied to fund their endless wars in the past, but the Jews complained endlessly of the burden. Pilate most certainly would want to hear of anything Jesus had to say on the subject.

"Show me a coin," said the Galilean.

The scribe handed him a copper penny.

"Whose image and inscription does it bear?"

"That of Emperor Tiberius," said the scribe.

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."<sup>20</sup>

The people marveled at this saying and whispered much among themselves. Listening closely to their reactions, I then understood the brilliance of this man. Jesus spoke in such a way that people could impart their own meaning to his words. To those content to live under Roman dominion, his statement seemed straightforward: Render unto Caesar his coin and his tribute. To a Jew zealous about keeping the laws of his nation, the words meant

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<sup>19</sup> Mark 12: 19-25

<sup>20</sup> This same incident was recorded in Mark 12-14-17

to render nothing to Caesar and honor not the profane power of the gentiles.

On this day and the days that followed Jesus did not speak of the Romans; it was as if they did not exist. His mission was to purify the Jews in the hope that Yahweh would reward them by reaching down from his heavenly throne and abolishing all wickedness on earth. Jesus fulminated against those who fell short of his lofty ideals. Upon the rich and the powerful would rain down fire and ash, a prophecy which some today say was fulfilled with the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.<sup>21</sup> “Beware the great men who think themselves more worthy than all others,” said he. “They wear handsome clothes and revel in salutations. They take the first seats in synagogues and make ostentatious prayers. They devour widows’ houses and they steal the gleanings from the weak. They are like whitewashed sepulchers, pleasing on the outside but all stinking corruption within.”

Jesus pointed across the plaza to the temple treasury. Along the wall were instruments in appearance like horns; coins placed into the mouths would slide into strong boxes inside the building. Jews seeking to honor Yahweh, or perhaps to secure his forgiveness, stood in line to cast their offerings. Said Jesus: “Behold how the great men cast in coins of gold and silver, while the poor offer only brass and copper.” He pointed to a poor woman in a threadbare robe. “The functionaries of the temple donate a pittance from their abundance; but she gives from her penury all that she has. In the kingdom of god, she shall find comfort while they find only damnation.”<sup>22</sup>

When the shadows grew long at the twelfth hour,<sup>23</sup> Jesus and his retinue proceeded back to Bethany. I returned to Herod’s palace to find Pilate still meeting with petitioners in the *praetorium*. When the Jews sought justice, they went to the Sanhedrin; when they wanted favors that cost money, they went

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<sup>21</sup> This reference to the eruption of Vesuvius, which destroyed the city of Pompeii, suggests that Nicolaus was writing after 79 C.E.

<sup>22</sup> Similar statements can be found in Mark 12: 39-43 and Luke 21:4.

<sup>23</sup> Sunset.

to Pilate. A city wall needed repair. A drainage ditch needed digging. Some worthy but impoverished patriarch needed a proper burial. Pilate seemed to possess a bottomless well of patience for hearing such requests. Unlike his successors, who drove the Jews to revolt with their greed and rapacity, he never dipped his own cup into the treasury, nor did he extort money from the people. He dispensed public funds as frugally as if they were his own but with a mind to accomplishing the most good. His philosophy I found estimable. He spurned those who sought something for nothing but was inclined to help those who were willing to help themselves. The truest test of need, he often said, was the willingness of a man to contribute of his own substance, either coin or labor.<sup>24</sup>

When Pilate laid eyes upon me, he dismissed the remaining petitioners. We sequestered ourselves in an antechamber, and he plied me with questions. I told him how the Jews pined for a redeemer, be it a conquering king or a prophet of god. Many hoped, I said, that Jesus might be the messiah. Although Jesus made no such claim himself, he made no effort to dissuade those who made the claim for him.

“Does he threaten the rule of Rome?” asked Pilate.

“I do not believe so,” said I. To be sure, Jesus bore the Romans no love – I could see no place for gentiles in his kingdom of god – but he paid them little heed. To his way of thinking, one might as well denounce a drought, a sandstorm, or some other affront of nature. Roman rule, like such disasters, was divine punishment for impiety. He channeled his anger against the great men of the Jews, especially Caiaphas and the House of Annas, whom he accused of twisting the law and profaning the temple.

The prefect bade me to return to the temple the next day and learn what else I could. “Keep a watch on him. He might prove useful.”

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<sup>24</sup> These views of Pilate are not found in any other source.

### Chapter 3

The next day I had no trouble finding Jesus in the temple. I just headed to the thickest clot of people in the Court of the Gentiles. Elbowing my way to the front ranks, I gained a close-up view of the performance. No play by Sophocles ever held an audience more transfixed. One moment Jesus told parables of the golden age to come, and the next he warned of the calamities that would befall the temple. Between soliloquies, he entertained a stream of supplicants. When haughty scribes wished to debate him over matters of the law, he obliged them. When humble Galilean farmers testified to his miracles, he listened respectfully. When the infirm begged him for a healing touch, he laid hands upon them. I saw him restore two people that day: one a deaf-mute and the other a paralytic whom his friends carried upon a litter. At Jesus' touch and soothing words, the mute did speak and the crippled man did walk. The people roared their approval of these feats, which Jesus proclaimed as proof of the imminence of Yahweh's kingdom.

I confess that I could see no sign of trickery or subterfuge in these wonders, but I did observe that the causes of the maladies were invisible to the eye. Never to my knowledge did Jesus heal fractures, restore missing eyeballs, shrink tumors, close weeping sores or perform physical transformations that could be seen and verified by all, such as those testified to and inscribed in stone at the shrine to Asclepius in Ascalon.<sup>25</sup> But the people would not abide anyone who would diminish Jesus' accomplishments. Hailing him as a miracle worker, they speculated out loud that he

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<sup>25</sup> Ascalon was a gentile city on the Mediterranean Coast west of Jerusalem.

might be the prophet Elijah come down from heaven<sup>26</sup> or even the long-awaited messiah.

At day's end, I returned to Herod's palace, eager to share my observations with Pilate. But Jesus was the last thing on the prefect's mind. He had received a letter from Rome, he said, and he needed my counsel. After finishing his affairs in the *praetorium*, he summoned me to his private quarters.

Never before had I been granted admittance to these rooms, which had once served as the seraglio of King Herod. Censers emitted tendrils of smoky fragrance. Fluted columns rose to a vaulted ceiling and colored tiles formed geometric patterns of exquisite beauty. Woven carpets dazzled the eye with bursts of cochineal, gold and indigo blue, while down-fluffed pillows were heaped in piles like fall leaves. One room even had a heated pool where the king, corpulent and weak in his dotage, had spent many of his last days. Hardened by battles and campaigns, Pilate needed no more than a wooden cot, but it pleased his wife Procula<sup>27</sup> to stay here – she was due to arrive from Caesarea the following day – so he made the chambers his personal quarters.

Pilate bade me to take a seat at a low-set table redolent with meats, breads, cheeses and fruits. There were no chairs or recliners here, so I sat cross-legged upon a pillow amidst the Persian splendor. A servant stood by, holding a long-necked amphora of wine.

“Dominus, I am honored to sup with you,” said I.

“It is an honor long overdue,” said Pilate.

“It has been my honor to serve you.”

“I am a soldier, not a courtier, so I am unpracticed in the art of giving gifts and spinning honeyed words,” said he. “But I wanted you to have this token of my regard.”

Opening a wooden box packed with straw, Pilate presented me with four glass goblets of rare craftsmanship. As translucently

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<sup>26</sup> In popular belief, Elijah performed many astounding miracles and ascended in a whirlwind to heaven.

<sup>27</sup> The Gospels never mention Pilate's wife by name, but it has been preserved in Christian tradition as Procula, as confirmed by Nicolaus here.



azure as the sea, they were embossed with figures of Olympic heroes. I had attended many banquets before, and I had sipped from cups of silver and pewter, but never had I tasted wine from the likes of these. I thought how delighted my sweet Hestia would be to look upon such treasures and how she would busy herself finding a worthy way to display them in our house.

“I am speechless, Dominus,” said I. “They are magnificent. I am not worthy of such generosity.”

“Their value pales beside the gift of your counsel,” he said. “Let us drink.”

The servant filled two glasses, and Pilate handed one to me. He raised his in a toast and sipped.<sup>28</sup> “To friendship and loyalty.”

My bosom swelled with the thought of the high regard in which Pilate held me. I had served him well, and, at the risk of immodesty, I believed I had earned his confidence. But it was one thing to believe so, and another to have Pilate, a man whom I respected above all others, affirm it. At that moment, I felt the burning of ambition as I never had before. Great things awaited me. Perhaps one day, I was so bold as to think, I might achieve a status as exalted as my grandfather’s.

I raised my glass. “To friendship and loyalty.”

We drained our cups, but Pilate had not invited me to his quarters to celebrate. His mood turned grim. “I have received evil tidings from Rome. Caesar has executed Quintus Venantius Minucius. My situation is as precarious as ever.”

Both Pilate and Minucius had served in Armenia under Lucius Aelius Sejanus, master of the Praetorian Guard and intimate of Tiberius, whom the aging emperor had put to death two years before. Minucius, who had remained in Rome when Pilate departed for Judea, had survived the first purges of Sejanus’ associates by pulling, tortoise-like, into his shell until the bloodletting ceased. Thinking that the emperor’s wrath had abated, he made the mistake of taking as a lover the wife of an elderly senator, who, upon discovering her infidelity, reported the outrage to Tiberius along with the reminder that Minucius had

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<sup>28</sup> The toaster sipped first to demonstrate that he had not poisoned the drink.

been one of Sejanus' loyal retainers. That was the last we had heard from previous communiques.

Pilate handed me a missive affixed with the seal of Septimus Minucius, Quintus' younger brother, which I unscrolled and read. Septimus' words filled me with dread. After a perfunctory hearing Tiberius had ordered Minucius executed. Only when Minucius tearfully stripped off his tunic and laid bare the war wounds he had received in the emperor's service did Tiberius grant him the honor of dying by his own hand.<sup>29</sup> "My brother's dying wish was to let his death be a warning to you, his old friend," concluded the letter. "The ghost of Sejanus still torments the emperor. Do nothing to bring down his wrath upon you, or your life is forfeit."

"I fear for Rome," Pilate whispered. "Tiberius has become a tyrant."

Never before had Pilate spoken of the emperor with disrespect, and his candor frightened me. There were servants in the room. Anyone overhearing his remark could denounce him and bring about the very fall that Minucius warned of. Yet, by sharing his innermost thoughts, I realized, he affirmed his high regard for me. He was telling me, in effect, that he trusted me with his life.

"It baffles me," said I. "It has been years since Sejanus' passing, and you have repeatedly demonstrated your loyalty. Even my mother-in-law doesn't bear grudges so long."

Pilate found no mirth in my attempt at humor. "His reign began auspiciously. I had such high hopes."

Tiberius had never wanted to become emperor, Pilate reminisced. He served only because Caesar Augustus had thrust the obligation upon him. Entertaining no grand ambitions, he conceived no grand designs – no foreign conquests, no great building schemes -- and he did not distress the people with exactions to pay for them. Frugal in his personal affairs, he was likewise parsimonious when dispensing public funds: He cut stipends to actors and curtailed payments for gladiatorial games. Seeking neither glory nor public honors, he refused vainglorious

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<sup>29</sup> Roman soldiers committed suicide by impaling themselves upon their own swords. The act was considered an honorable death. No source but Nicolaus attests to the story of Quintus Minucius.

titles, and striving not to amass power, he delegated authority to others. All substantive affairs – taxes and monopolies, the building and repair of edifices, the levying and disbanding of soldiers, the appointment of generals and disposal of legions, and the correspondence with foreign princes – he laid before the Senate. If that assembly voted down his proposals, he took no great umbrage and registered no complaint. He thought that the people, not he, knew best how to better their own condition.<sup>30</sup>

“In the early days of his reign,” said Pilate, “Rome had fewer conquests and triumphs -- and fewer widows and orphans. Rome built fewer statues and monuments, but the treasury never lacked for gold or silver.”

Tiberius had sound precepts for governing, and Pilate had modeled his own rule of Judea and Samaria upon them. The emperor prized above all else the maintenance of public order and the repression of piracies, banditries, and seditions. Banditry, he had said, disrupted trade, interfered with the collection of taxes and compounded the miseries of the people. He urged his governors to quash tumults with dispatch and severity.

“And so have you done, Dominus,” said I. “The Jews are as tumultuous as any people in the world, yet the land is as peaceful and prosperous as I have ever known it.”

“Even so, I have earned no gratitude from the priests, who hate me in direct proportion to the riches they have amassed,” Pilate grumbled. “Many are the great temples in the world, and many are the priests who have grown wealthy peddling their superstitions to the people, but in no other nation are priests so arrogant as to think themselves entitled to run the country.”

“Perhaps that is because in no other country are the people as inclined to prostrate themselves before them.”

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<sup>30</sup> This description of Tiberius is consistent with the accounts of Tacitus in his “Annals” (Book IV) and C. Suetonius Tranquilis in his “Twelve Caesars.” However, Nicolaus glosses over the emperor’s negative traits. In his “Roman History,” Cassius Dio describes how, late in life, Tiberius confiscated estates of the families and friends of his enemies.

I knew from my own experience how ungovernable the high priests could be. In the second year of his reign,<sup>31</sup> Tiberius had appointed Valerius Gratus as prefect of Judea and Samaria with but two instructions: to rule with a firm hand, permitting no banditry or sedition, and to remit the tribute due to Rome. For twelve years Gratus carried out his duties scrupulously but never easily. His great challenge was putting to a halt the squabbling between priestly factions over the distribution of temple offices, honors, and emoluments. Any of the four great houses – Annas, Phabi, Boethus and Kantheros – could mobilize enough priests, relatives, servants, partisans, and hangers on to foment disorder in the streets of Jerusalem. If one house grew too powerful, which happened with some frequency, the others joined forces against it. So bitter were their enmities that Gratus was compelled to depose one high priest after another – first Annas, then Ishmael of House Phabi, then Eleazar the son of Annas, and then Simon of House Boethus – before finding a candidate, Joseph Caiapahas, the son-in-law of Annas, who settled into the title. The latter appointment was made possible only by a complex sharing of remunerative offices with the other houses. As rickety and jury-rigged as the arrangement seemed at the time, it would last 18 years. It was Gratus' greatest accomplishment.<sup>32</sup>

During his last two years in Judea, Gratus engaged me as his advisor. My grandfather Nicolaus was remembered by Herod's sons, who still held him in high esteem, as well as by the Samaritans and the Greek inhabitants of the independent cities whose interests he upheld. My father was respected as steward of the royal warehouses in Caesarea and well known to the Roman administrators there. Young though I was, Gratus took a liking to me and entrusted me with many important tasks. I soon excelled at the art of hiring spies, gathering information and sorting through the mountain of lies, rumors, and dissembling to find the

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<sup>31</sup> 15 C.E.

<sup>32</sup> Other than the fact that he appointed the five high priests, historical sources know nothing about Gratus' rule. Nicolaus provides us the only insight we have into his actions.

occasional nugget of truth. I can say without boasting that Gratus placed the greatest confidence in me.

Around the time that Gratus took me on, Tiberius began shirking his responsibilities as Caesar. In one of Rome's incessant intrigues, his son Drusus died from poisoning. Devastated by the loss and wearying of burdens of office, indeed of life itself, Tiberius withdrew to the island of Capri. There, say the whisperers, he diverted himself with the most lascivious behavior imaginable. He summoned companies of girls and catamites, whom he urged to engage in the most unnatural of copulations. He trained little boys, whom he called tiddlers, to swim between his thighs and tease him with their licks and nibbles. It is even said that he put unweaned babies to his member as though to the teat.<sup>33</sup> Preoccupied by such unholy activities, the aging emperor rarely bestirred himself to travel to the mainland, much less to Rome. To ease his burdens, he entrusted an increasing share of his authority to Sejanus, whom he took to calling the "partner in my labors."

Sejanus had inherited command of the Praetorian Guard, the emperor's personal bodyguard, from his father at a young age. Showing great energy, he consolidated scattered outposts and night watches into a common barracks to ensure that the guard could receive its orders promptly in defense of the emperor. There was no added task that he would not take on, and Tiberius increasingly leaned upon him to carry out the responsibilities of empire. In time, all Romans bowed down to him. The people offered prayers and sacrifices to both men, and in the name of both did they bind themselves in oaths. Rather than journey to Tiberius in remote Capri, senators, dignitaries, petitioners, and even foreign legations sought audiences with Sejanus in Rome. All the world looked to him as if he were Caesar himself.

Sejanus made it his practice to place in positions of authority men whom he knew and trusted. Around the 12<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius' reign,<sup>34</sup> an aging Valerius Gratus asked to retire from public life. In his place, Sejanus appointed a soldier who had fought beside

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<sup>33</sup> The stories of these perversities circulated widely. This is but a sampling of the scandalous tales recounted by Suetonius.

<sup>34</sup> 26 C.E.

him in Armenia and later served as a cohort commander in the Praetorian Guard: Pontius Pilate.<sup>35</sup> Sejanus' instructions to Pilate mirrored those that Tiberius had given other governors: Maintain the peace and remand the tribute to Rome.

Pilate knew no more about the Jews than what was common knowledge among all Romans: They worshiped no god but their own, they refused to eat pork, they rested every seventh day, and they cut the foreskins from their privy members. While their customs were odd, he thought most no worse than those of the blue-faced Celts or the dog-worshipping Egyptians, and if they were devoted to a single god, that was no concern of his.

One trait did offend him, however: the refusal of the Jews to serve in the Roman army. They could not perform their military duties on the sabbath while adhering to their commandment to rest, they said. No less august a personage than Julius Caesar had exempted them from military duty, so Pilate grudgingly respected their privilege. Still, he intended to remind the Jews whom their sovereign was. Upon arriving in Judea, he conveyed to Jerusalem a set of military standards bearing the effigy of Tiberius. It was common practice throughout the empire for Roman legions and native cohorts to honor the emperor in this way. As the Judean cohorts consisted of non-Jewish levies – mostly Samaritans, Greeks and a few Arabs and Syrians – the soldiers offered no objection.

Among all of Pilate's advisors, only I counseled against the effigies. Only I explained that the laws of the Jews forbade them from tolerating graven images of man or beast. I told him how King Herod in his waning days had mounted a golden eagle over the great gate of the temple in violation of the law against graven images, and how two teachers of the law had incited their followers to tear it down. Enraged, Herod had ordered the rabbis burned alive. The king died not long thereafter, and the multitude, still mourning the teachers' deaths, rose in insurrection and expelled the Romans from the city. It took the intervention of the

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<sup>35</sup> Scholars have speculated, based upon other sources, that Sejanus was a patron of Pontius Pilate, but Nicolaus is the only source stating that they had served together in the military and the Praetorian Guard.

Syrian legate to restore order. Provoking another such sedition, I counseled Pilate at the time, would be an unpropitious way to commence his rule in Judea. Gratus and his predecessors had respected the Jews' sensitivities regarding graven images, and so should he. If he conveyed the effigies to Jerusalem, I warned him, things would end badly.

But Pilate barely knew me then and, discounting my tender years, took no heed. "I will not dishonor Caesar to assuage the superstitions of the Jews," said he.

The Jews needed no teachers this time to persuade them that the effigies violated their laws. Joined by countrymen from towns and villages all around, a multitude struck out for Caesarea. At the governor's palace, the Jews crowded the *praetorium*, blocked anyone from approaching, and prevented Pilate from conducting business. For fear of dishonoring the emperor and losing face after so short a time in the country, Pilate refused to relent. But the Jews persisted. By the sixth day Pilate had exhausted his patience. When the Jews assembled to berate him yet again, he surrounded them with soldiers and threatened them with death if they did not disperse. Rather than submit, many threw themselves to the ground and lay bare their necks. Astonished by their zealotry, Pilate recalled the standards from Jerusalem.<sup>36</sup>

From that day on, he heeded my advice regarding the Jews.

From this episode Pilate learned how obstreperous and unbending the Jews could be in the preservation of their customs – and the Jews learned that for all his hard words, Pilate hesitated to spill the blood of innocents. Never again did he make the mistake of introducing graven images into the temple precincts. He turned his attention to more practical matters: suppressing banditry, repairing roads, facilitating trade and easing the travel of Jews from Egypt, Syria, Babylon, Greece and Rome to the great temple. Under his rule, commerce and pilgrimage prospered mightily and the flood of visitors to Judea swelled the festival multitudes to a size never seen before -- benefiting the high priests above all else, for they controlled the buying and selling in the

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<sup>36</sup> Nicolaus' retelling of this incident strongly resembles that of Flavius Josephus in his works, "The Jewish War" and "The Antiquities of the Jews."

Temple. As trade spread, there arose a shortage of money with which to transact it. For three years Pilate minted coins to relieve the scarcity. Unlike the coins struck elsewhere in the empire, these bore no images of Caesar, nor those of any other man, deity or beast that could provoke the Jews' aversion. The symbols were innocuous: laurel wreaths, ears of barley, a *simpulum*<sup>37</sup> and a *lituus*.<sup>38</sup> The latter two instruments, though used in the religious rites of Pilate's Greek subjects, did not contravene any Jewish laws. The coins did, however, bear the following inscription: "Of Tiberius Caesar." Some coins added: "and Empress Julia." I mention this because neither the images nor inscriptions caused any consternation at the time – a subject to which I shall return.<sup>39</sup>

As the province prospered, there arose a clamor for a new aqueduct. The population of Jerusalem was growing, spilling beyond the city walls. And the number of pilgrims and proselytes – for the Jews converted many followers among my people – swelled during Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of the Tabernacles. During Passover especially, the priests slaughtered vast herds of animals. The inhabitants of Jerusalem needed more water to drink and the priests needed more water to wash the gore from the altar. None among the Jews was willing to undertake the expansion of the water supply, so all eyes turned to Pilate.

The nearest source of water was twenty-five miles distant, and construction of an aqueduct was a tremendous expense. Pilate had no funds for such a project and, knowing that any new levy would be ill received and held against the Romans, he was disinclined to impose one. But there was one large source of wealth in Jerusalem – the temple treasury, also known as the corban. Now, some of this treasury consisted of funds deposited for safe-keeping and some of the sacred tithe paid by all Jews, and Pilate did not propose to touch these. But large sums had been contributed by pious Jews for the maintenance and betterment of the temple, and it sat there like King Midas' hoard, being put to no good use. It seemed evident to Pilate that if the aqueduct was

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<sup>37</sup> A ladle used by priests during religious ceremonies.

<sup>38</sup> A wooden staff used by diviners.

<sup>39</sup> Coins from Pilate's mint were struck in the years 29-31 C.E.



to be built in part for the benefit of the temple, then the temple should defray the cost. He commanded Caiaphas to relinquish the treasure, which the High Priest did begrudgingly. Once the other houses heard of this, however, they objected not only to giving Jewish treasure to the Romans, no matter what good it was to be put, but they saw an opportunity to embarrass Caiaphas and his father-in-law Annas. Before long, priests of the rival houses began protesting that the money was sacred, to be dedicated to the glory of Yahweh only. They stirred up the people with the memory of how Crassus, the triumvir and ally of Julius Caesar, had looted the temple decades before to finance his ill-fated invasion of Parthia. Caiaphas they compared to Eleazar, the guardian of the sacred treasures whom Crassus had gulled through false promises to reveal the beam of beaten gold that had held up the veil.

When Pilate traveled to Jerusalem and took his judgment seat,<sup>40</sup> as was his custom, a multitude filled the square, hurling taunts and reproaches. Thanks to my informants among the lower-ranking priests, who enjoyed not the riches of the chief priests and were all too willing to reveal their machinations, we were forewarned how ringleaders of the riot wanted to disrupt any reconciliation between Pilate and Caiaphas. To counter their scheme, Pilate ordered his soldiers to wear robes over their armor, arm themselves with staves, and mix with the crowd. Upon his order, they set upon the ruffians who were calling out insults. Some soldiers went about the task with excessive alacrity, injuring the guilty and innocent alike and setting off a stampede in which many were trodden to death. Pilate regretted the loss of life, which he had not intended. But the tumult ended, the priests conceded defeat, Pilate built the aqueduct, and he used the corban to pay for it.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Judgment seats were portable folding stools, often crafted from ivory.

<sup>41</sup> Flavius Josephus tells this story in both “The Antiquities of the Jews,” Book 18:2, and “The Jewish War,” Book 2:4. Nicolaus expands the narrative somewhat, noting that Caiaphas consented to relinquishing the corban, explaining the role played by the other

Soon thereafter, events turned to Pilate's disadvantage. Back in Italy, it dawned upon Tiberius that the senators and other great men of Rome were treating Sejanus as the emperor in fact, if not in name. He grew frightened, thinking that Sejanus might seek to dispense with him and take the full honors and glory for himself. So completely had he won over the Praetorian Guard and the Senate that Tiberius dared not move against him openly. Instead, he professed his gratitude and devotion to the prefect. He refrained from naming a successor and let it be known that he was failing in health, and might soon die, in the hope that Sejanus would not be tempted to seize by force, at some risk, what he might inherit shortly if he would but be patient. To lull him, Tiberius honored some of his friends, but to undermine him, he disgraced others and drove them from their offices. By delivering praise and then criticism, he kept Sejanus in constant suspense. When he sensed that public opinion was turning in his favor, Tiberius lured Sejanus to the Senate on the pretext of giving him tribunician status, augmenting his power all the more. But instead of exalting him, Tiberius ordered him placed under arrest. By the Senate's order, Sejanus was strangled to death and thrown down the Gemonian stairs, the so-called stairs of mourning, where the people abused his corpse for three days before casting it into the Tiber.

Tiberius then abandoned himself to every form of cruelty. He ordered Sejanus' children put to death as well as his wife Livilla. Then, with single-minded purpose, he dedicated himself to extirpating all of Sejanus' friends and acquaintances. The prefect's relatives, partisans, business associates, senate allies, flatterers and hand kissers were brought to trial and many were executed. A madness descended upon Rome in which anyone seeking to do an enemy harm had to do no more than denounce him of friendship with Sejanus. Before long, everyone was besmirching everyone else – for Sejanus, at the height of his power, had innumerable friends and favor seekers – and one's best hope of survival was to accuse before being accused.

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priestly houses, and presenting the thinking behind Pilate's actions.

Sejanus was executed in the 17<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius' reign.<sup>42</sup> The news from Rome put Pilate in a state of agitation and alarm. Each ship arriving in Caesarea brought news of new trials, executions and banishments. Pilate now found himself friendless in the capital. His old acquaintances had been slain, exiled or forced into hiding. Only Quintus Minucius, a cohort commander in the Praetorian Guard, held onto his post, and he dared not raise his head.<sup>43</sup>

Pilate deemed it wise to express his loyalty to the emperor. In Caesarea, he erected a temple of beautiful white stone, which he dedicated to Tiberius. And in the palace of Herod in Jerusalem, he dedicated four great silver-gilded shields to him. These shields bore no images of any kind, only an inscription noting Pilate's name and Tiberius'. The inscriptions seemed harmless enough but Pilate had learned from experience to be cautious – in Jerusalem a single candle flame could start a conflagration. Pilate sought my advice, and I contacted my chameleons. No one raised an alarm. The garden of Herod's palace contained statues of heroes and nymphs, and the walls bore mosaics and frescos, and no one was taking notice of them. Likewise, the newly struck coins bore inscriptions naming Tiberius and his wife, and no one had objected to them. I saw no grounds for anyone to complain about this new inscription.

The prefect displayed the shields in the judgment hall, and they were little commented upon at first. But people began whispering, deeming it an innovation even to praise the emperor by name in Jerusalem, for the Romans revered him as a god. Then the whispers turned to murmurs, and the murmurs to grumbling, and the grumbling to sharp words. Before long, crowds gathered outside the *praetorium* and called for Pilate to remove the shields. My chameleons suggested that Caiaphas was orchestrating the demonstrations to regain the stature he had lost over the aqueduct.

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<sup>42</sup> 31 C.E.

<sup>43</sup> Nicolaus varies little from the Roman sources on Sejanus -- Tacitus, Dio Cassius and Suetonius – and adds little to what we know through them. Quintus Minucius is unknown to any source but Nicolaus.

Rather than oppose Pilate openly and risk having the prefect replace him as high priest, he instructed his surrogates to make an issue of the inscriptions. The leading Jews of Jerusalem recruited to their cause Herod Antipas, Philip and other sons of King Herod who were thought to enjoy standing in the court of Tiberius. The sons of Herod pleaded with Pilate to rectify the offense, which they described as an insult to their laws and customs. Yet their arguments were so vague and convoluted that they could never explain how the shields violated Jewish law.

The Jews made up for the shortfall in their logic with the shrillness of their shouts and accusations. “Do not destroy the peace,” they cried. “Tiberius does not wish any of our laws to be destroyed. Show us some command from him, or some letter, to prove that you are doing his bidding.”

That Pilate could not do, for he had acted entirely on his own. Yet he dared not remove the shields, an action that Tiberius might see as traitorous. No matter which path he chose, Pilate ran the risk of angering the emperor. In either case he could be recalled and executed. In the end, he chose the course that preserved his dignity as a Roman – honoring his ruler and bowing not to the Jews.

“If they wish to send an embassy to Tiberius,” he told me, “they had better make a more intelligible case than they did to me, for a madman would utter less nonsense!”

The leaders of the Jews did write a letter to Tiberius, and I composed one pleading Pilate’s cause. My grandfather, said the prefect, could not have made a stronger case. I cannot say what happened in Rome, nor why Tiberius responded the way he did. All I can report reliably is what he wrote in his letter of reply. Reciting all the privileges awarded the Jews by Julius Caesar, and reminding Pilate that he personally paid for sacrifices of burnt offerings to be made to the god of the Jews, carrying on the tradition inaugurated by Augustus, the emperor said in the most heated language imaginable that it was not the place of a lowly prefect to reverse the proclamations of three emperors. Unless Pilate wanted to join Sejanus at the bottom of the River Tiber, he would remove the shields immediately and thereafter respect the sensibilities of the Jews in all things regarding the worship of their god.

Given the Emperor's rancor toward anyone associated with Sejanus, Pilate was grateful to have escaped so lightly. He told me more than once that he owed his life to the power and eloquence of my letter. Duly chastened, Pilate took the shields from Jerusalem and installed them in the temple he had dedicated to Tiberius in Caesarea.<sup>44</sup>

Returning to the subject of bad news from Rome, Pilate told me, "I am doomed if I come to the emperor's notice. I dare not provoke Caiaphas, for if the Jews petition the emperor a second time, I am lost."

"Truly, you are caught between the miller's grinding stones," said I. "If you chastise Caiaphas, he will surely appeal to Caesar. But if he learns of the power he holds over you, his audacity will know no bounds. If the high priest over-reaches and angers the rival houses, *they* will send a delegation to the emperor. Then Tiberius will despise you for your weakness."

"Then we must find something to hang over the head of Caiaphas."

"I think I have the answer," said I. "Jesus of Nazareth."

"The miracle worker?"

"Caiaphas fears him more than Beelzebub, the prince of demons himself, and for good reason. The people think him to be their redeemer. He could be the perfect foil."

"Yes, yes. Perhaps we can turn this Jesus to our advantage."

"There is one more thing you can do, Dominus. Make peace with your other enemies."

"You are referring to Herod Antipas, I suppose."

"Exactly."

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<sup>44</sup> This account bears many similarities to the one found in Philo Judeaus' "On the Embassy to Gaius." However, it differs in several particulars. Telling the story from the perspective of the Jews, Philo refers to Pilate's "corruption, and his acts of insolence, and his rapine, and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity" – a very different picture of Pilate than the one Nicolaus draws. Also, Philo says that Pilate installed the shields in a temple dedicated to Augustus, not Tiberius.

Pilate grimaced. “That is a hard thing to do. But I see the sense of it. Arrange a parlay.”

## Chapter 4

It was my intention the next morning to hasten to the temple, but I was detained by an incident that requires retelling, for it bore upon subsequent events. Around the first hour of the day,<sup>45</sup> a peddler by the name of Barabbas delivered a cart of wood to fuel the fires at the altar. Just as animals sacrificed to Yahweh needed to be pure and unblemished, so did the wood that consumed them. The priest in charge of inspecting the wood offering, a certain Yeshua in the employ of House Phabi, rejected the logs as wormy and unsatisfactory. Barabbas took offense, an argument ensued, and he stabbed and killed the priest with a dagger. This all took place in the bowels of the temple where the animals and offerings were received, hidden from the view of the pilgrims in the courts above. Rather than flee from the scene of his crime, Barabbas boldly made his way to the Court of the Gentiles and, without informing anyone of the deed he had just committed, began haranguing the people there. Fulminating against the rapacious priests of the temple, with special jaundice reserved for the aforesaid Yeshua and House Phabi, he whipped up a mob ready to dispense some rough justice.<sup>46</sup>

House Phabi, it must be told, was one of the four great priestly clans that controlled the temple; it was surpassed in wealth and honor only by the House of Annas. Joseph Caiaphas, son-in-law of Annas, occupied the office of high priest, but the kinsmen of Phabi held lofty positions as well, most of which attended to

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<sup>45</sup> The first hour in Roman reckoning was dawn.

<sup>46</sup> The Gospels contain none of this detail. The Gospel of Mark says only, "There was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection." (Mark 15:7.) The Gospel of John describes him as "a robber." (John 18:40.)

the temple treasury and sacrificial offerings. Ishmael son of Phabi had displaced Annas as high priest several years previously before being replaced in turn by Caiaphas, and at this time was governor of the temple, which put him in charge of the collection and dispensation of tithes, taxes, first fruits, meat from sacrificial animals and donations of coin.<sup>47</sup> Although the leading families unified to defend their priestly perquisites against anyone else such as Levites,<sup>48</sup> Herodians or Romans who would dip their finger into the temple honey pot, they maneuvered incessantly to undercut one another if it meant acquiring more for themselves. It was impossible to understand any action undertaken by Caiaphas, Ishmael or the other high priests without reference to how it affected their standing with the other houses, their control over temple offices, and the riches that flowed therefrom.

The boundless greed of the temple priests was known to the people, however, and many pilgrims attending the Passover festival had felt the sharp edge of their ways when exchanging impure coinage and purchasing offerings. It did not take long for Barabbas to recruit volunteers to march upon the palatial residence of Ishmael with the purpose of chastising him. But the temple captain caught wind of the scheme before the mob could bestir itself to depart. Armed with shields and spears, the police arrested Barabbas along with two of his henchmen. The penalties for both murder and insurrection were death, but capital punishment was a prerogative jealously guarded by the Romans – usurping the rule was itself punishable by death – so the temple priests turned

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<sup>47</sup> None of this is to be found in other sources. Ishmael of House Phabi is alluded to in the works of Flavius Josephus and the Talmud, composed much later, but he is never described as governor of the temple. However, the Mishnah, a compilation of Jewish oral law from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. contains this lament: “Woe to the house of Ishmael ben Phabi! For they are high priests and their sons, treasurers and their sons-in-law who were temple officers. And their servants came and beat us up with staves!”

<sup>48</sup> The levites were a lower-status caste of priests known mostly for their singing but also given menial tasks in the temple.



Barabbas and two of his companions over to Pilate and petitioned to have the scoundrels executed.

After many inquiries and much ado, the hearing took place two days later. Pilate summoned me to participate as translator and advisor. We listened to the charges leveled by the priests and then heard from Barabbas, a man of fierce aspect and belligerent intensity. There were so many witnesses testifying to his words in the temple, Barabbas' denials were so self-contradictory, and the case was so clear cut that the proceedings lasted but two hours. As unbending as always in matters of this sort, Pilate sentenced Barabbas and his two colleagues to death by crucifixion and ordered them held in the Antonia fortress.

After winding up the Barabbas affair, Pilate received an envoy from Herod Antipas agreeing to a parlay. The prefect ordered me to set up the meeting as soon as I could, that very day if possible. I dropped all plans for returning to the temple, for I had many details to attend to. Given Antipas' inflated pride and sensitivity to imperceptible slights and indignities, it was imperative that all diplomatic protocols be observed.

The great King Herod had assembled a kingdom of many provinces in reward for his service to Caesar Augustus. The king's will divided his lands between three of his many sons. Archelaus, the eldest, inherited the southern portion: Judea, Samaria and Idumea. Antipas was bequeathed Galilee to the north and the Perea to the east. And Philip was given lands further north in Syria – Iturea, Gaulanitis and Trachonitis – populated mainly by gentiles and a few Jews only. Of all these provinces the largest and most populous were Judea and Samaria, but Galilee was the most fertile. Early in his reign, Archelaus angered his subjects, who rose in revolt. The Jews evicted the Romans from Jerusalem, drowned the land in banditry and disorder, and compelled the consul of Syria to bring his legions south to restore calm. The Romans snatched Archelaus' lands from him and appointed prefects to rule in his stead. Of these, Valerius Gratus was the fourth and Pontius Pilate the fifth. I served Gratus during the last two years of his tenure and the full ten years of Pilate's.

In contrast to his brother, Antipas contrived to maintain the peace, and the Romans suffered to keep in him power. Among his worthwhile traits, he had a passion for public works. Unlike King

Herod, who spread his benefactions across the empire from Alexandria to Rhodes, Antipas erected local works with an eye to benefiting the people of his own kingdom. He raised a wall around Sepphoris, the leading city of Galilee, from where he ruled the tetrarchy. He built a wall around Betharamphtha, renaming the city for Julia, the emperor's wife. Forgetting not his Greek subjects, he funded theaters, gymnasia, pools and public porticoes. Most audaciously, he built an entirely new city on the Sea of Galilee, which he named Tiberias after the Emperor.

But Antipas was impetuous as well, inclined to rash judgment and miscalculation. When selecting the site for Tiberias, he ignored warnings that the land contained many ancient tombs. It surprised no one but Antipas that the Jews refused to live amidst the dead. Seeking to appease the naysayers, he had the sepulchers moved, which served to anger the descendants of those whose bodies had been entombed without altering in any way the refusal of the Jews to settle upon desecrated land. Antipas found himself in a quandary, for it would embarrass the emperor, not honor him, to build an empty city in his name. Desperate to populate Tiberias, Antipas granted debt slaves their freedom, gave land to landless farmers, and built houses for the poor as a reward for settling there.<sup>49</sup>

I knew from my chameleons that Antipas felt shaky in his position. Caesar had designated him ethnarch, a title less elevated than king, which diminished his esteem in the eyes of the people and in Rome. Furthermore, he had made many enemies, who now intrigued against him, seeking redress for the insults he had done them. While in Rome, Antipas had scandalized his Jewish subjects by coaxing his cousin Herodias to divorce his half-brother Philip and marry him. Devout Jews said her action was contrary to their laws. Among those was John, a desert ascetic known as the Baptist, whose opinion the multitudes held in high regard. He castigated Herodias as an adulteress and a sinner and called for Antipas to put her away. The Baptist's calumnies angered her greatly, and she would not rest until her husband had arrested him. Antipas duly imprisoned the holy man in the fortress of Macherus

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<sup>49</sup> A similar account is found in Flavius Josephus; *Jewish Antiquities*, Book 18, Chapter 2:3.

but was afraid to kill him because the people deemed him a prophet. Indeed, he wondered himself if it might not be so. Still, Herodias, a granddaughter of King Herod<sup>50</sup> and a willful woman, would not leave him in peace until John was put to death. At length, Antipas ordered John beheaded.

Upon hearing this news, Pilate judged Antipas a weak man for truckling to his wife and a fool for making so many enemies in the bargain. In one sweep of the scythe he had insulted his brother Philip, who ruled one neighboring kingdom, by stealing his wife, and enraged his father-in-law Aretas, ruler of another neighboring kingdom, for casting aside his daughter. Furthermore, his actions offended the more pious of his subjects. The people not only refused to forgive Antipas for marrying his brother's wife, they now viewed him as a tyrant for slaying the Baptist.<sup>51</sup>

"It takes a rare talent to make so many enemies in a single stroke," Pilate remarked.

The source of Pilate's ill disposition toward Antipas is thus: As I have recounted, Pilate had dedicated silver gilt shields inscribed with the name of Tiberius. The priests and scribes prevailed upon four sons of King Herod, of whom Antipas was one, to denounce Pilate in a letter to Tiberius. The animosity that Pilate and Antipas bore one another was rekindled the following year during the feast of the Passover when Pilate's soldiers slew five Galileans for riotous conduct in the temple.<sup>52</sup> Seeking

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<sup>50</sup> The genealogy of King Herod's family was mind-numbingly complicated. Herod Antipas was Herod's son by Malthace. Aristobulus IV was his son by Mariamne. Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus and a different Mariamne, making Antipas simultaneously her uncle and her cousin.

<sup>51</sup> Nicolaus' account is generally consistent with those found in the Gospels and the works of Flavius Josephus, although he omits the popular story in the Gospel of Mark in which Salome, the daughter of Herodias, danced for Antipas and, as a reward, demanded the head of the Baptist.

<sup>52</sup> Luke 13:1 refers to "Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." He did not say how many were slain.

restitution for his subjects, Antipas wrote a rude and intemperate letter demanding recompense.

Now Pilate was determined to make amends. Fortunately, the meeting was easily arranged. It was Antipas' custom to visit Jerusalem every Passover festival and to stay in the palace of his father, King Herod, though in a different part of the complex than Pilate, who had made it his Jerusalem abode as well.

The palace was an impregnable stronghold located within the city walls, built to protect the king from his own people as much as to fortify Jerusalem. With high walls and three mighty towers, the palace sat upon an eminence that overlooked the Upper City where the high priests and other wealthy families lived. Surrounded by moats and groves of trees, the palace complex consisted of two vast buildings, each with banquet halls, baths and rooms for hundreds of guests. King Herod had hired master builders from Rome and spared no expense in installing courtyards, pools, fountains, porticoes, and other embellishments. Likewise, he had brought in artists from Greece and Asia Minor to adorn the walls with beautiful frescoes and the floors with mosaics and to decorate the gardens with bronze statues of heroes, nymphs and wild beasts.<sup>53</sup>

Four of us met in King Herod's private dining chamber: Pilate, Antipas, his wife Herodias, and myself. (Procula had not yet arrived from Caesarea.) We dined in the Roman style, eating, drinking and storytelling while reclining upon couches. At the prefect's signal, I steered the conversation to the purpose of the meeting: how to set things right between the two rulers. Under the guise of polite conversation, I inquired into the health of Herodias' younger brother, Herod Agrippa.

Antipas scowled upon hearing the name of his brother-in-law, as I knew he would. "He lives in Antioch, sponging off the generosity of Lucius Flaccus," he said, referring to the consul of Syria. "I dare say he will dawdle there until Flaccus tires of supporting him."

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<sup>53</sup> We have it only upon Nicolaus' word that the Greek artists rendered such murals and sculptures, which would have been impious in the minds of the Jews. None of them survive.

Herodias smiled weakly. “My brother is very generous – with money he borrows from others. He has even asked me for a loan, but I have never known him to pay back a debt.”

“There is only so much imposition that a sister can bear,” said I, sympathetically.

A grandson of King Herod, Agrippa had been raised in the company of Drusus, son of Emperor Tiberius, in the imperial household. Generous to the point of extravagance, he had as a young man made many friends in Rome by dispensing gifts to one and all. He soon found himself reduced to poverty, however, relying upon loans, which he had no hope of repaying, to maintain his prodigal ways. When Drusus died unexpectedly, Tiberius could no longer bear to have Agrippa in his presence, for he reminded him of the son whom he had lost. Exiled from the Emperor’s presence and with no resources of his own, Agrippa sent letters imploring Herodias, now married to Antipas, to take him in. Antipas welcomed Agrippa, appointed him as a magistrate of Tiberias and allotted him a modest income. But Agrippa considered himself to be meanly treated for a man of his station. During a feast, the brothers-in-law exchanged recriminations: Agrippa said his position was not worthy of an intimate of the emperor while Antipas ridiculed him for his poverty and lack of gratitude. Seething with resentment, Agrippa departed Galilee and threw himself upon the mercy of Flaccus in Antioch. The Syrian consul remembered Agrippa fondly from their days in Rome and gave him a new sinecure. Agrippa then proceeded by word and letter to darken the reputation of Herod Antipas at every opportunity. Antipas worried that the scoundrel would undermine his position among his masters in Rome and among his subjects at home, a fear that I intended to exploit to the utmost.

“Agrippa does test my patience,” said Herodias. “My first loyalty is to my husband.”

Just as her loyalty once was to her first husband, thought I. As I scrutinized her, I wondered why Antipas had risked so much to possess her. She had been lovely once, to be sure, but now the best that could be said was that she had aged well. All the perfumes and eye paints, all the ointments for the skin and necklaces of gold could not hide the fact that she was neither young nor beautiful any longer. I imagined that a man like Antipas

might fall for a woman's flattery and gentle demeanor, but I saw no evidence that Herodias the harridan possessed such feminine gifts. More likely, as Herod's granddaughter, her greatest virtue consisted of her estates and revenues.

"Do you ever worry," asked I, "if Agrippa is in communication with Aretas?"

I could tell from the look of him that Antipas had in fact considered such a possibility, as anyone with a spoonful of intelligence would have. Whatever his flaws, Antipas was cunning.

"Do you know such a thing to be true?" asked he.

Aretas, Antipas' former father-in-law, ruled the desert kingdom of the Nabataeans to the east. From Petra, a city carved into a rose-stone mountainside, he controlled a lucrative caravan trade in spices. With his rich treasury, he supported a force of horsemen that was more than a match for Herod Antipas' mercenaries. It was common knowledge that before Antipas wed Herodias, his first wife had discovered his intent and by means of clever ploys escaped Galilee and made her way to her father. When informed of Antipas' scheme, Aretas, a man of volcanic temper, engendered a hatred of the ethnarch. Aretas could not readily act upon his ire, however, for he and Antipas both answered to Lucius Flaccus in Antioch.<sup>54</sup>

"I have heard nothing," said I. "But it stands to reason that Aretas would seek out Agrippa. Despite his insufferable manner and spendthrift ways, Agrippa does have the ear of Flaccus. It would surprise no one if your enemies made common cause to bend the consul against you. One word from him to the emperor..." I did not need to say more. As Antipas knew well, the consul was an old drinking companion of Tiberius and one of his closest confidants.

Antipas tightened his lips with worry. "My agents in Antioch tell me that Aretas is seeking an audience with Flaccus at this very time."

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<sup>54</sup> Nicolaus' account tracks Josephus' closely here, except that Josephus never suggests that Antipas feared that Agrippa and Aretas might be in league.

Pilate then spoke. “We hear that as well. We will be glad to pass along any reliable information we hear on the subject.”

“I appreciate the gesture,” said Antipas.

“Perhaps it is time for us to settle the grievances between us,” said Pilate.

Harkening back to the incident of the five Galileans slain in the temple, Antipas made a request: If any of his subjects were accused of a capital crime in Judea, Pilate would hand them over to him for judgment. Pilate in turn demanded a concession from Antipas. “When you petitioned Caesar over the gilded shields, you did me a great harm. What happens here in Judea – unless it affects your subjects – is none of your concern. If you swear never again to join those odious priests against me, no matter what the cause, I will swear never to involve myself in affairs of your realm.”

He was agreeable in principle, said Antipas, but he had no way of knowing what disagreements might arise, how offended Jewish sensibilities might be, nor how passionately others might petition him to intercede. However, he might agree to Pilate’s request if the prefect would agree to one thing more. “You know how the Galileans pass through Samaria to reach Jerusalem during our holy festivals. Surely you have heard how the Samaritans afflict them with insults, thefts, and injuries. The Samaritans are a scourge upon my people, but I have no power to protect them outside of Galilee. I beg of you to ease their transit to the temple.”<sup>55</sup>

Pilate and I retired to another room to discuss the proposal privately. We had heard stories of Samaritan predations before. Petty thefts and assaults could easily escalate into robbery and banditry. Little shoots must be plucked before they grow into choking weeds, said I. In his instructions dispatching Pilate to Judea, Sejanus had commanded him to preserve the peace, making him duty-bound to keep the roads safe for travelers. He would give up nothing, I counseled, by fulfilling Antipas’ wish to protect the

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<sup>55</sup> There is no historical record of such troubles during Pilate’s tenure. However, Josephus describes an incident under the procurator Ventidius Cumanus in which the Samaritan murder of Galilean pilgrims nearly led to warfare between Samaritans and Jews.

Galileans in transit through Samaria. Seeing the wisdom in my words, Pilate thanked me, and we returned to the banquet room.

“I shall do as you request,” said Pilate, as if he were making a magnanimous gesture. “I shall order my horsemen to patrol the roads of Samaria to ensure that Galileans travel safely to and from the temple.”

At this, Antipas was greatly pleased. The two men vowed oaths to their respective gods, and the deal was struck.<sup>56</sup> Little did any of us imagine how soon the agreement would be put to the test.

Other than the distractions from Barabbas and Antipas, I spent the week of Passover in the temple. I found that if I arrived at dawn and lurked by the temple’s northern gate, I could intercept Jesus and his retinue arriving from Bethany before the crowd around him grew insufferably large. In this way, I could get close enough to Jesus to observe him, though never close enough to converse. So great was the mass of humanity seeking to lay eyes upon him, to exchange a word, perhaps to touch him, I dare say it would have been easier for any Jew to seek an audience with the emperor than with Jesus of Nazareth.

Knowing of the High Priest’s wish to seize him, an inner core of followers formed a barrier between Jesus and the crowd. The largest and most intimidating of these guards were two brothers who bore proudly the moniker that Jesus had given them: Boanerges, or Sons of Thunder.<sup>57</sup> I never saw the bearded bullies harm anyone, but their constant vigilance suggested that they

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<sup>56</sup> This meeting between Pilate and Herod is not attested to in any other source. The Gospel of Luke alludes to it obliquely in 23:12: “And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together: for before they were at enmity between themselves.” Luke implies that the reconciliation took place the same day as the trial of Jesus. Nicolaus makes it clear that the key meeting took place earlier in the week.

<sup>57</sup> This was the name Jesus gave to James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Mark 3:17.



would lay down their lives if temple guards had tried to lay hands on Jesus.

These Galileans were a rough sort: farmers, artisans, and fishermen, lean, sun-beaten and sinewy. Cut from the same rustic cloth as Jesus himself, they were the first to join him, and they relinquished all their possessions to follow him. But such was his fame and his agility of mind that Jesus attracted a better sort as well. Among those who hung upon his every word were several Galilean women who, I judged by their dress and manners, came from honored families of wealthy estate. Likewise, a number of important Jerusalemites, including temple priests and scribes of the Pharisaic school, had attached themselves to Jesus' cause. He had many enemies in the temple priesthood, but he had friends there as well. Only dimly did I perceive at that time how fractured were the sentiments of the priests.

During the daylight hours, Jesus held court in the temple. All eyes were fixed upon him, as if he were a king or high priest himself. Everyone sought his attention – either to challenge him, debate him, ask for his blessing, or beg for a healing touch. Lapping up his words like thirsty dogs, those in the front of the crowd passed his utterances to those further back. To exchange words with Jesus was considered the highest honor. But one did not simply walk up to him and engage in conversation. Pilgrims had to pass a gauntlet of intermediaries: first a disciple by the name of Philip, who separated the worthy in the audience from the unworthy, and a second one named Andrew, who selected the final, lucky few. What basis these two gatekeepers used to select those to be granted an audience, I could not fathom. They accepted rich or poor, Jew or Samaritan, Greek or Syrian, Sadducee, Pharisee or Essene and turned away the very same for no reason more discernible than the cut of their robe or the crookedness of their teeth.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> This was the arrangement described in John 12: 20-22: “And there were certain Greeks among them that came up to worship at the feast: The same came therefore to Philip, which was of Bethsaida of Galilee, and desired him, saying, Sir, we would see Jesus. Philip cometh and telleth Andrew: and again Andrew and Philip tell Jesus.”

I was struck also by how many in Jesus' inner circle were women. Most notable was a coterie of high-born ladies who stood out for their refined dress and coiffeur and for the deference paid them by Jesus' associates. Although they held no formal position that I could see, they occupied Jesus' inner circle.

One woman in particular, Joanna, was notable for her beauty. Now, I will confess to being an admirer of the female form – young boys and catamites have no appeal to me – and I am prone, even in my dotage, to casting long glances at a comely woman. I could not tear my eyes from her. Indeed, I oft found myself jostling with others in the crowd to espy her from a better vantage point. Her hair was as black as obsidian, her skin as smooth as pearl. Her womanly curves filled me with uncommon desire. As I would discover later, Joanna and the others were women of wealth and status with entrée into the court of Herod Antipas. Through their contributions of coin, they supported Jesus and his retinue.

As the week passed and the holy day of Passover approached, Jesus became more agitated. He debated less and fulminated more. Although he counseled no rebellion and provoked no disorder, he became ever more pointed in his denunciations of Caiaphas, the high priests, and the temple itself. The day was fast coming, he warned, when Yahweh would cast down the rich, the powerful, and the sinful and elevate the poor, the meek, and the law abiding. Those who suffered on this earth would find their reward; the wicked would meet their punishment. When Yahweh established his kingdom on earth, the world would be turned upside down; the first would be last, and the last would be first. Just as the Jews' almighty god had sent a flood of water to scour the world clean in the time of Noah, he would cleanse the world this time with a wave of fire and destruction.

As the days passed with no sign of Yahweh's vengeance, Jesus' prophesies became progressively more dire. Yahweh would cast down the temple priests and reestablish the true priesthood. The sun would darken and the moon would lose its light. The stars of heaven would fall and the foundations of heaven would shake. The son of man would come forth in clouds boiling with power and glory, Yahweh would dispatch his angels, and calamities would fall upon scribes and priests, money lenders and tax collectors, Sadducees and Pharisees. Like Job they would be

covered with boils and scabs, or, like the Egyptians, afflicted by famine and plagues, or simply consumed by Yahweh's wrath. The temple would tumble down and its pollution would be driven from the land.

"See these great buildings?" said Jesus, gesturing to the inner sanctuaries. "There shalt not be one stone left upon another that shall not be thrown down."<sup>59</sup>

Had I not heard the words myself, I would not believe today anyone who told me he had uttered them. I am dubious of oracles and prophecies, and in my experience, people have a way of remembering things the way they want to remember them. But I swear to the veracity of this account. While would-be messiahs in later years prophesied that Yahweh would part the Jordan River or reveal the lost tablets of Moses – predictions that never came true – Jesus predicted the destruction of the greatest temple in the world. He did so thirty-seven years before Titus razed it to the ground, long before anyone thought the Jews would rise in revolt against Rome. Do I believe that he was blessed with oracular foresight? I do not. I believe his prophecy was the product of chance. Cast lots often enough, and anyone can call the result eventually. But the prophecy was striking enough that, to this day, Jesus' followers cite it as proof of his miraculous powers. Conveniently, they seem not to remember the prophecies in which he erred. Angels did not blast the scribes and priests with scrofulous sores; money lenders and tax collectors afflict the Jewish people to this very day. The messiah did not descend, riding upon a cloud, to strike down earthly rulers; Rome still exercises dominion over Judea.

Those were not my thoughts at the time, for I had no inkling that any disaster would befall the temple or that his prophecies were remarkable in any way. Rather, I was brimming with information to share with Pilate about the enmity Jesus and his followers bore the temple priests. Around mid-day on the fourth day of his time spent in Jerusalem, Jesus ceased his tirades as the crowds melted away to attend to their sacrificial lambs.<sup>60</sup> The

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<sup>59</sup> This saying is almost identical to Mark 13:2.

<sup>60</sup> The precise day of the so-called "last supper" is a matter of scholarly dispute. In this account, Nicolaus aligns with the Gospel

temple priests had developed a system for sacrificing sheep with great dispatch: slitting their throats, draining their blood, throwing them onto the fires, fishing them from the flames, and returning the burned carcasses to the men who had offered them. Yet there were thousands to be slaughtered. All other activity came to a halt as the Jews took a place in line and trudged forward with their offerings. I saw no hope of loitering near Jesus and his retinue, as I had not procured a lamb to sacrifice, nor did I think there would be an opportunity to follow them into a private residence where they would partake of the feast.

It was pointless to stay, so I returned to Herod's palace and dallied by the *praetorium* until the prefect had time to meet with me. I told him of Jesus' warnings against the priests and the temple.

Pilate listened to my tale without comment, then said: "Hearing this, the priests will sleep uneasily tonight." Then he smiled. "But their consternation is my comfort. I shall sleep all the better."

I arose before dawn the next morning with every intent of returning to the temple. I was wolfing down a breakfast of grapes, figs and barley cake when there came a knock at the door. It was Illyrius, the commander of the night watch, who said there was a crowd outside the front gate, led by an old priest identifying himself as Annas – the father-in-law of Caiaphas and patriarch of the priestly clan. The priests, said Illyrius, had Jesus of Nazareth in their custody and they demanded to speak to Pilate.

So, the priests had finally contrived to seize Jesus, thought I. Now they had come to seek justice from Pilate – which meant that they had come to demand Jesus' death.

"Dare I wake the prefect?" asked Illyrius.

"I will do it," said I.

## **Chapter 5**

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of Mark (as well as Luke and Matthew, which were based upon Mark) and against the Gospel of John in placing it on Thursday, the day before Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

When I told Pilate in his private chambers that the chief priests had seized Jesus, he dispatched me to meet them at the entrance to Herod's palace. A crowd of a hundred or so had gathered. Some wore priestly vestments; others, I judged by their deferential manner, were servants and retainers of the High Priest. Jesus, held by two guards, seemed a mere scarecrow of a man: thin, pale and sunken-cheeked. He hung his head, saying nothing, offering no resistance. The fire had died from his eyes.

The leader of the priests was a white-bearded elder attired in linen robes with the finest embroidery. I recognized him immediately as Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas and patriarch of the household that bore his name.<sup>61</sup> A former high priest himself, he had been one of Pilate's chief accusers during the confrontation over the gilded shields. Now he was back, as arrogant as ever. "We must have an audience with Pilate!"

"The prefect will be here shortly," said I. "Come into the plaza and array yourselves before the judgment seat."

"We are forbidden to enter," said the priest, who showed no disposition to take orders from me. "We entreat Pilate to meet us here at the gate."

I knew the justification he would offer for his reticence: The priests deemed the buildings and grounds of Herod's palace to be polluted by frescoes, statues and other depictions of gods and men. But the graven images had not deterred him from visiting Herod's Palace in the past. It was only in Pilate's presence that the old priest felt affronted by their unholy taint. By insisting that Pilate come to him, I judged, he wished to remove the prefect from his seat of authority on the judgment chair and put him in the position of supplicant. And that I would not permit. If the priests wanted Pilate to bend, they would have to show more respect.

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<sup>61</sup> The gospels note Annas' role in the interrogation of Jesus by the priests in his own palace before the hearing before Pilate, but they say nothing of his appearance before Pilate. Rather, the gospels speak of unidentified "high priests" accusing Jesus.

“If your request for an audience is so urgent,” said I, “I would advise you to enter the court and petition the prefect in the customary manner.”

“It is the day of the Passover, a sacred day for us,” said Annas. “As priests, we must avoid the pollution of this place or we will be disbarred from performing the holy rites.”<sup>62</sup>

I could not refrain from goading the old man. “Please enlighten me. What is so unclean about Herod’s palace?”

“Our law, handed down from the lord god, tells us, ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.’ Upholding this law is more precious to us than our own lives. We cannot abide the statues and paintings here.”

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image,” I repeated his words back to him, emphasizing *thou shalt not make*. “I don’t understand. You did not make these statues yourselves, and neither do you worship them. How does entering into the proximity of statues made by others transgress your laws?”

“They are offensive to the almighty,” said Annas. “They are unclean, and they make us unclean.”

“Please enlighten me,” said I. “Does the mere act of looking upon statuary defile you?” I pointed to a bronzed head of Bacchus, half hidden in the cloister, which protruded from a wall and spilled water from its mouth.<sup>63</sup> “Has that image polluted you now that you have laid eyes upon it? Or is it necessary to stand near such an abomination to experience the effect? I ask this respectfully because, if you have already been polluted, then it serves no purpose to tarry by the gate – there is no undoing the defilement. If, to the contrary, the pollution extends a finite distance, beyond

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<sup>62</sup> John 18:28. “Then led they Jesus ... unto the hall of judgment: and it was early; and they themselves went not into the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the Passover.” Note that Nicolaus emphasizes the disruption to their officiating in the temple, while John mentions their participation in the Passover dinner.

<sup>63</sup> Josephus refers to “brazen statues, through which the water ran out” on the grounds of Herod’s palace. “The Jewish Wars,” Book V, Chapter 4:4.

which you are safe, perhaps you can arrange to position yourself outside that perimeter.”

“You dazzle me with your sarcasm, Nicolaus,” said Annas, irritated now. “You are as gifted as your grandfather in that regard. But your sophistry changes nothing. Today is a holy day. Once defiled, it would be a laborious thing to cleanse ourselves in time to undertake our sacred ceremonies. We will not violate our laws.”

“The Jews have their law, the Romans have theirs,” said I. “It is the Roman custom for governors to receive petitioners at the judgment seat. Perhaps you could send an envoy who conducts no holy rites today to carry your message. Surely there is one among your number whose presence in the temple is not mandatory.”

“This is not a matter for underlings,” said Annas. “We have arrested Jesus of Nazareth. He is guilty of perverting the nation and forbidding the people from paying tribute to Caesar. He has practiced sorcery, he has threatened to destroy the temple, and has proclaimed himself a king. Rome cannot countenance such sedition. Only Pilate can crucify him.”<sup>64</sup>

Pilate did not wish to crucify Jesus, but I could not say so openly for it was important to maintain the pretense of impartiality. Nor did I dare provoke Annas any more than I already had. “I will inform the prefect of your request,” said I. “The decision is his.”

I delivered the message to Pilate in his apartment. He felt compelled to hear the priests’ charges against Jesus, said he, or accusations of negligence might make their way back to Rome. Accordingly, he assumed his usual place in the judgment seat in the front courtyard of Herod’s palace. But only after a lengthy delay, making a show of consulting with me and his other advisors, did Pilate oblige Annas by walking out to the gate. “What cause brings you here today that justifies treating a prefect of Rome with such disrespect?” asked he.<sup>65</sup>

“Jesus of Nazareth has broken our law,” said Annas. “We would put him to death were it not forbidden us to do so. We bring

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<sup>64</sup> This matches the account in Luke 23:2.

<sup>65</sup> John 18: 29. “Pilate then went out unto them, and said, What accusation bring ye against this man?”

him to you, for he has broken Roman law as well as Jewish. He has stirred up unrest, urged the people to rebellion and declared himself a king. You must crucify him.”

“You say this Jesus has stirred up rebellion,” said Pilate scornfully. “Did he take up arms? He does not have the look of a warrior to me.”

“No, he took up no arms,” said Annas. “But he forbade the people to pay tribute, and he said that he would cast down the temple.”

“I know nothing of Jewish law,” said Pilate. “But in Roman law, saying a thing is not the same as doing it. If a wife confides to her handmaiden that she will sleep with a new lover but changes her mind before she does so, do you charge her with adultery? I have seen no rebellion. I have seen no stones cast down.”

“This is a matter far more grave than adultery,” said Annas. “Let me ask you: Should Tiberius have waited for Sejanus to seize the helm of state before having him killed, knowing full well that had Sejanus acted first, it would have been Tiberius who was tossed down the Gemonian stairs? Would you counsel us to wait for Jesus to launch his insurrection and kill all the priests before taking action?”

To that, Pilate had no answer. “Tell me, is this Jesus a native of Judea or Galilee?”

“Galilee,” said Annas.

“Then I have no jurisdiction,” said Pilate. “The ethnarch of Galilee should hear this case. You are fortunate, for Herod Antipas is here in Jerusalem for the festival. Perhaps he can make some time for you.” Then, turning to me, he bade me to escort the priests, their retainers and Jesus to the apartment of Antipas.<sup>66</sup>

Annas protested, but I knew his display was a show, like that of a haggler in the market pretending to have been cheated while inwardly gloating at his good fortune. Annas believed that Herod Antipas would be easier to sway than Pilate, but I would do my best to prove him wrong.

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<sup>66</sup> Luke 23:7. “As soon as [Pilate] knew that he belonged unto Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who himself also was at Jerusalem at that time.”



Antipas, having heard much of Jesus yet having never laid eyes upon him, agreed to adjudicate the case. As a Jew who understood the priests' obsession with purity, he willingly met Annas at the gate under the Tower of Phasael rather than in his own quarters.

Jesus more resembled a bedraggled beggar than a conqueror. Dispirited and listless, he seemed no danger to anyone. I knew this, but did Antipas? Pilate had instructed me to intervene, if necessary, to sway the ethnarch to release Jesus.

"I have heard much of you, Jesus," said Antipas jovially. "Joanna and Susanna have told me of the wonders you have performed.<sup>67</sup> Perform a miracle for me and I shall set you free."<sup>68</sup>

Jesus stood sullenly before Antipas, eyes downcast.

"How shall I know your power, if you do not perform a sign?" said Antipas.

"Sorcerers and conjurors perform signs. What does it signify if I do so as well?"

"People say that you are man of god," said Antipas.

"John the Baptist was a man of god, yet you slew him."

"I pledge my honor, perform a sign and I shall free you."

"I perform wonders when the spirit of god moves me, not for the amusement of princes."

The ethnarch took umbrage at the slight. "You are a fool to anger me. I know more about you than you realize. I know your manner of living, how you prey upon gullible women of high station, how they draw from their purse to support you and your band of ragamuffins. You have taken no wife, you have no

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<sup>67</sup> Luke 8:3 refers to Joanna as "the wife of Chusa, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance." Nicolaus suggests that Antipas knew both women personally.

<sup>68</sup> Luke 23:8. "And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him." Luke does not specify where the meeting took place.

children, you lift not a finger in honest toil. You are like the Egyptians who dwell in the desert, celibate, dedicating themselves to useless, idle speculations.”<sup>69</sup>

Jesus said nothing.

“This Jesus seems a most contemptible man in many ways,” said I, feigning sympathy with Antipas, “but his offenses hardly warrant crucifixion. I know of no law that says a man must wed and bear children by a particular age. If he fails to further his line, that is his personal misfortune, not a crime against the country.” I cast my eye toward Jesus to gauge his reaction, but he revealed nothing. “Who would convict a man for accepting the largesse of others? By that standard, we would hoist Caesar himself upon the cross!”

The priests would have none of my words, however, and they accused Jesus all the more vehemently. He had stirred up the people, he had proclaimed himself the son of David, a king, and so on and so forth. Annas said he could call upon witnesses to confirm his charges.

Still Jesus did not answer. He slouched and hung his head. I almost pitied the man, for I had listened to him as he spoke in the temple. I had parsed his words, and I had taken a different meaning from them than did the priests. Jesus had not declared himself a king – he let others do so for him. He had not forbidden the payment of tribute – he let others take from his words what they would. Annas’ witnesses had read into his words the sedition they wanted to hear.

At length Antipas wearied of the hearing. Addressing Jesus, he said: “You are insolent toward your betters and should mind your tongue or one day someone will rip it out. But Joanna has pleaded on your behalf. Your blood will not be on my hands.” Then to the priests, he said. “I see no evil that he has done. If you would have him crucified, take him back to Pilate.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> It is not clear to whom Antipas is referring here, but it may be the so-called Therapeutae described by Philo Judaeus in his work, “On the Speculative Life.” The Therapeutae lived in villages outside Alexandria and devoted themselves to metaphysical musings.

<sup>70</sup> Among the Gospels only Luke (23:7-12) mentions the hearing before Herod Antipas. Luke’s account and Nicolaus’ differ in three

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important regards. First, according to Luke, Jesus did not respond to Antipas at all: “Then [Antipas] questioned him in many words; but he answered him nothing.” Second, Nicolaus omits mention of Antipas’ mockery and beating of Jesus; he follows the other Gospels in assigning the mockery to Pilate. Third, Luke never mentions Joanna interceding on Jesus’ behalf.

## Chapter 6

Pilate scowled when the priests returned with Jesus to the *praetorium*. Hoping that I would have seen to it that Antipas would set him free, he was irked with me and made his feelings plain. I defended myself the best I could, saying that the priests were relentless in their determination, that Jesus had offended Antipas with his insolence, and that only my eloquence had dissuaded the ethnarch from marching Jesus straight off to Golgotha. I do confess that I exaggerated my role somewhat, but I was of no mind to be blamed for the obstinacy of the priests.

The crowd outside Herod's palace had grown in the past hour. Word was spreading that the priests had arrested Jesus and were demanding his crucifixion. People rushed to Herod's palace to see what justice Pilate might dispense. The priests still refused to enter the *praetorium* but the mob lapped around them, edging closer for a better look. Pilate's soldiers pushed back the gawkers with a wall of shields.

As the priests hurled imprecations from the gate, Pilate summoned Jesus to appear before him in the judgment seat. He cared nothing for Jesus' so-called offenses against Jewish law – sorcery, breaking the sabbath, ignoring the laws of ritual purity and the like. Those were issues for the Jews to work out amongst themselves. Only one accusation mattered – offenses against the majesty of the emperor. Had Jesus proclaimed himself a king or counseled rebellion against Rome?

As Pilate did not speak Aramaic, he beckoned me to translate. “Are you the king of the Jews?” he asked Jesus.

“How do you come by such a question? Is this what your servant tells you?” Jesus then turned to me, locking eyes. “Or did others tell you this story?”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> John 18:34-35. “Then Pilate entered into the judgment hall again, and called Jesus, and said unto him, Art thou the King of the Jews?”

I was startled that Jesus had recollected my face from the thousands in the temple crowd, especially as we had never conversed and he had never acknowledged my presence. His intelligence was keener than I had anticipated. But I refrained from comment, translating his words just as he had given them to me.

“I have my sources,” said Pilate. “I am informed that many have called you messiah and son of David.”

“I cannot control what others say,” said Jesus.

“You can tell them to stop telling lies,” said Pilate.

“*You* can command the priests to stop peddling *their* lies about me, but will that stop them?”

“The priests would sooner assent to the command of a Syrian swine than obey me,” Pilate laughed grimly. “I see your trick. You dodge my question by asking one of your own. No more artifice. Tell me plainly, do you claim to be king of the Jews?”

“It matters not what I claim,” said Jesus.

“Another evasion,” said Pilate. “A king is a king by whatever name you call it. Do you claim to be one?”

“Heed what others say,” said Jesus. “Unplug your ears.”

Pilate flicked his hand dismissively, impatient with Jesus’ wordplay. Rather than defend himself, the miracle worker had responded in the most exasperating manner possible. In other circumstances, Pilate would have had the insolent dog beaten and thrown outside the city gate. But his animosity toward the high priests pressed him to find a way to save Jesus from himself.

Pilate strode to the gate. Ignoring the imprecations of the priests, he lifted his hands and addressed the crowd. “You have a custom, dating to the days of Archelaus, son of King Herod, to release a prisoner on the Passover festival.<sup>72</sup> “Shall I release Jesus unto you?”

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Jesus answered him, Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?”

<sup>72</sup> The origin of this custom is unknown. Perhaps it was derived from an incident immediately following King Herod’s death when his son, Archelaus, in order to curry favor with the multitude in Jerusalem, agreed to “ease them in their taxes ... take off the duties

Some in the crowd applauded the idea with scattered yells and clapping. But Annas would have none of it. “No!” he shouted. “You hold another prisoner, Barabbas. Release him!”

This new demand caught me off guard, as I could see it had Pilate as well. Barabbas had nearly sparked an insurrection against the priests, while Jesus had issued only vague threats and prophecies. It made no sense for Annas to push for Barabbas’ release – except as an insult and torment to Ishmael ben Phabi.

Annas’ partisans quickly took up the cry. “Barabbas! Barabbas!” The cries grew into chants, and before long others were joining in.<sup>73</sup> Not everyone was enthusiastic about the idea, I observed as I scanned the mob, but the din raised by Annas’ retainers intimidated anyone who might have thought differently. Where were Jesus’ followers? The Sons of Thunder could have raised a good shout, but they were skulking in the shadows, no doubt fearing arrest themselves. How about the thousands who, when all eyes were upon him, had begged for an audience? They were nowhere to be seen. How fickle were the passions of man, thought I.

Pilate turned to me, confiding, “That did not turn out as I had hoped.”

“The priests will not be deterred. Now you must make good on your promise to release Barabbas.”

Pilate addressed the crowd again. “In the spirit of forgiveness and concord, I shall give you Barabbas. He is guilty of killing one of your priests and then threatening to burn down the house of Ishmael of the House of Phabi. Jesus of Nazareth has committed no crimes such as these. How much more should you show him compassion. I urge you to display mercy to him also!”

The multitude erupted into many voices. A few brave souls shouted Jesus’ name. But most clamored for Barabbas. “Release

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upon commodities [and] loose those that were in prison.” “The Jewish War,” Flavius Josephus; Book 2, Chapter 1:2.

<sup>73</sup> Mark 15:11: “The chief priests moved the people, that he should rather release Barabbas unto them.”

Barabbas! Ishmael is a cheat! He's the one who deserves to be punished! Arrest him instead!"

As the crowd grew more heated in its denunciations of Ishmael and praise for Barabbas, however, I realized that the situation was not all to our disadvantage. Just as Jesus was a thorn in the side of the chief priests, so was Barabbas. Indeed, while Jesus was a man of words, Barabbas was a man of deeds. Where Jesus spoke of Yahweh coming to chastise the priests, Barabbas was willing enough to join the task himself. Let the priests have Barabbas, they will rue their wish, I counseled Pilate. He grudgingly agreed.

Again, the prefect raised his hands to quiet the crowd. "Yes, yes. I shall give the order to release Barabbas. But what of Jesus of Nazareth?"

"Crucify him!" came the cry from Annas' minions. "Crucify him!"

"He has done no wrong under Roman law," said Pilate.

"Crucify him!"

"He is a lunatic. We do not crucify lunatics."

"He who makes himself a king is the enemy of Caesar!" shouted Annas. "He who protects such a man is no friend of Caesar! What would Caesar say about this Jesus? Would Caesar order him crucified? Do you follow Caesar's wishes?"<sup>74</sup>

That was the end of the matter. Annas had signaled his willingness to take the dispute to the emperor. Not only did Pilate risk losing the case in a hearing before Tiberius, who could rule in any number of unpredictable ways for any number of unpredictable reasons, he could well lose his head, for Tiberius' thirst for vengeance against Sejanus and all who knew him had not been slaked in the least. Pilate could not take that chance – and Annas knew it.

"So be it," said Pilate.

Retreating from earshot of the priests, Pilate turned to me. "I feared it would come to this. But I shall have the last word."

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<sup>74</sup> John 19:12: "The Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar."

The prefect ordered his soldiers to scourge Jesus with four dozen lashes. After they had shred the flesh on his back, they fashioned a wreath of thorns, which they placed upon his head, and garbed him in a purple robe. Then they mocked him, falling to their knees, saying, "Hail to the King of the Jews!" Laughing, the soldiers spit upon Jesus and struck him with a reed, raising welts upon his face. Jesus was not a sturdy man, and he sometimes faltered, but he held up his head and bore his suffering with dignity. I felt a pang of sympathy for him. I had neither seen him commit any wickedness nor urged others to do so – unless inveighing against the greed of the high priests could be said to be an evil. To the contrary, he had healed many people, or so it was thought, and relieved them of their suffering. This was not a fate he deserved. But then, I reminded myself, through his insolence he had squandered opportunities to save himself before both Antipas and Pilate.

As the soldiers mocked Jesus, Pilate ordered a sign to be mounted on the post of the cross: "Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews," written in Aramaic, Greek and Latin.

"No, no!" cried Annas. "Do not write that he is king of the Jews, write that he *said* he was king of the Jews."

Said Pilate: "What I have written, I have written."<sup>75</sup>

Pilate placed responsibility for the crucifixion in the hands of Longinus, the centurion of the second *century*.<sup>76</sup> A contingent of

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<sup>75</sup> Nicolaus is generally consistent with the accounts in Mark 15:17-20 and John 18 and 19. Notably, he omits the dramatic episodes contained in Matthew in which Pilate's wife called Jesus "a just man" and Pilate washed his hands before the multitude, declaring, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person."

<sup>76</sup> Little is known about the military under Pilate's command. Roman auxiliary troops typically were organized similarly to Roman legions in units of 80 to 100 men termed a *century*. While the soldiers were recruited from indigenous peoples, it appears from Nicolaus' account, the officers were Roman. Longinus is not mentioned in the Gospels but his name survives in later Christian tradition.



80 men would escort Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem to the crucifixion grounds just beyond the city walls on a hillock known as Golgotha, or the place of the skull, so named for the skulls and bones of the executed that littered the ground. To the Jews, it was an abomination not to entomb the dead, so the fate of going unburied only magnified the horror of a painful and lingering crucifixion. So polluted was the place in the minds of the Jews that only the families of the suffering victims would set foot on it. Even the festival pilgrims knew well enough to pitch their tents far away.

Pilate ordered me to accompany the soldiers and observe the proceedings. “We have lost this bout. The priests have carried the day,” said he. “But I don’t expect that we have seen the last of this business. I want you to gauge the temper of the Jews at the crucifixion.”

The soldiers stripped Jesus to his loincloth and knocked him to the ground. He rose unsteadily to his feet. There was little vigor in his pale, sunken body. His limbs were swollen and his back was a hash of bloody stripes. The soldiers, Greeks and Samaritans for the most part, had no more sympathy for Jesus than they would have had for any other Jew, and took great pleasure at roughing him up. But Longinus, a Roman, had no time for their antics. “Enough of that,” said he. “We have a job to do.”

Jesus was told to carry the perpendicular beam of the cross, the *patibulum*, which would be affixed to a vertical post staked in the ground. Mounting one end of the beam on his shoulder and dragging the other on the ground, he trudged in the direction his tormenters told him: out of the palace, into the streets and north to the Tyropaion Wall. Staff-wielding soldiers marched ahead, clearing the way. It had been many years since anyone as famed as Jesus had been crucified, and the streets seethed with onlookers. Some jeered, some wept, but all were drawn into the spectacle.

Halfway to the city wall, Jesus staggered and collapsed under the weight of the timber. As onlookers shrieked and spit on him, he struggled to his feet but had no strength to lift the beam. “You!”

Longinus pointed to a big man in the crowd. “Help him out – unless you want a good thrashing.”<sup>77</sup>

The pilgrim bore the beam the rest of the way, with Jesus struggling behind. Passing through the Old Gate, barely more than a hole in the magnificent Tyropaion Wall, the procession proceeded along the dirt streets and mud-brick houses outside the city, and up a steep, rocky ridge. The peak of the hill, visible to anyone standing on the wall, was studded with poles driven into the hard ground like a clutch of nails. Upon two of the timbers were mounted cross beams, and upon the beams, affixed by their wrists and feet, hung two men, accomplices of Barabbas, who had not shared in his pardon. Writhing and moaning, they were too absorbed in their own agonies to notice the newcomer.

Taking no time for ceremony, four of Longinus’ men removed Jesus’ loincloth to reveal his nakedness. Then they laid the *patibulum* on the ground and pushed him roughly down upon it. Grasping an arm, they drove a spike through the hollow spot just below the wrist, and then did the same to the other. Jesus gasped but did not cry out. Then they lifted the crossbar, jerking Jesus to his feet – this time, he howled in pain – mounted a small set of stairs under the pole, lifted the cross beam and set it into on a notch carved for the purpose. As Jesus dangled from the bar, they grabbed his feet, pinned them to opposite sides of the pole, and drove nails through his ankles.

Crucifixion is a cruel practice. The Romans, it is said, borrowed it from the Carthaginians, who took it from the Persians. I never derived pleasure from watching the pain of others, not even of malefactors. Yet, I believed then that crucifixion was a necessary punishment for a turbulent people like the Jews. So zealous were they in the observation of their customs and so attached were they to their liberties that only the prospect of extreme and certain misery deterred them from rebellion. After witnessing their ill-fated revolt three decades after the death of Jesus,<sup>78</sup> I believe in the prophylactic value of crucifixion all the

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<sup>77</sup> Mark 15:22 identifies this man as Simon, a Jew from Cyrenia in North Africa,.

<sup>78</sup> 66 to 70 C.E.

more. The Jews consumed themselves in famine, internecine warfare and the siege of Jerusalem. Hundreds of thousands died, the temple was destroyed, the priesthood obliterated and their customs desecrated. Punishments more expeditiously applied by Pilate's successors would have averted such a catastrophic end.

A crowd of thousands had followed the dolorous procession to Golgotha, and thousands more looked on from the Tyropaion Wall. But only a few ventured onto the execution grounds, scattered as it was with ribs, tibia, skulls and jawbones picked clean by vultures and jackals. Most of these spectators were the women from Jesus' inner circle who had come to lament his fate. Wailing, they sprinkled their heads with dust and tore their garments. Amidst the gloomy scene, I spotted the dark-eyed Joanna, her face still beautiful though speckled with dirt and streaked with tears.

Keening disconsolately, the women took refuge at the bottom of the hill with the curiosity seekers, the spectacle mongers and the enemies of Jesus.

I did not espy Annas, Caiaphas or any of the other high priests, whom I assumed were consumed with matters of ritual importance and of no mind to expose themselves to such a polluted place. But their retainers were much in evidence.

"He saved others," said a temple priest, "but himself he cannot save."

"Jesus, perform a miracle!" shouted another priest, whom I'd recognized as having been especially vocal in his denunciations in the *praetorium*. "Descend from the cross, and we will believe you!"<sup>79</sup>

"There is still time, Jesus! Call upon the lord god to rain down fire and lightning," yelled another.

"If god won't help you maybe Beelzebub will!" declared a fourth.

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<sup>79</sup> Mark 15:29-31. "And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself, and come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, He saved others; himself he cannot save."

“No, it appears that even the prince of demons has forsaken him,” jibed yet another.

After a time, the taunts ceased. Watching a lingering execution such as crucifixion quickly becomes boring. It’s not like a sword swing to the neck and a spurt of blood. Over the course of hours, the moans become monotonous. I sat upon a rock, bantering with the soldiers and whiling away the time. I watched as four of them cast lots to take possession of Jesus’ apparel; what they wanted with such grisly souvenirs I could not imagine.

Finally, there came a break in the tedium. The women approached, bearing water and wine. “Please,” said Joanna, addressing the centurion in Greek, “let us tend to Jesus to relieve his suffering.”

“Be gone, you fools,” said Longinus. “Suffering is the whole point. It wouldn’t be much of a crucifixion if you dulled the pain, now would it?”

The women retreated. Time crawled as the sun inched across the sky. No one had anything left to say, and, save the muffled sobbing of the women, the promontory fell quiet. The shadows were lengthening when a small drama occurred, which I recount not because I saw the significance at the time but because it would prove relevant later. The crowd was dissipating and the soldiers, in their boredom and lassitude from the watch, allowed some of Jesus’ followers to approach the cross. There were two older women and a third, much younger,<sup>80</sup> simple folk by the roughness of their attire, as well as a young man, unbearded, fair of face, and clothed in fine raiment.

I judged the older woman to be around forty to fifty years of age. Her hair was gray and her face haggard. Weeping copiously, she drew near to the cross and wrapped her hands around the base of the pole. “Oh, Jesus,” she said. “Forgive me.”

Jesus writhed as he adjusted the weight of his body to relieve the pain in his wrists and, then, when he could bear the pain in his ankles no more, back to his arms. The distress of crucifixion never grows easier with time, they say, only worse, as cramps grip the

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<sup>80</sup> John 19:25-26. “Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary of Magdala.

limbs and chest. Somehow the older woman's words penetrated his suffering. He looked down. "You did ... the best ... you could," he said, gasping the words. He closed his eyes and gathered his strength. "Behold John, my beloved friend. ... He is your son now. ... John, behold your mother."<sup>81</sup>

Jesus barely croaked the words. Upon expending the effort, he let his head fall forward. A moment later he rallied and, with all the strength left in him, he cried in anguish, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*" words in the ancient Hebrew tongue that I did not understand. Only later did I learn what they meant: "My god, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?"

"Behold," said one of the soldiers, a Samaritan who knew the ancient Hebrew scripture as well as any Jew, "Jesus calls for the prophet Elijah!" The Samaritan poured some wine from a jug onto a sponge, which he stuck on a reed and put to Jesus' mouth to drink. But it was too late; he was still. Around the tenth hour,<sup>82</sup> he gave one last groan, and that was the end of him.

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<sup>81</sup> The Gospel of John 19:26-27 describes the scene thusly: "When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home." The Gospel does not identify the beloved disciple as John, as Nicolaus does, but it is widely, though not universally, accepted in Christian tradition that John and the beloved disciple are one in the same.

<sup>82</sup> Around 5 p.m.

## Chapter 7

I returned to the *praetorium* with no thought of recovering Jesus' body. It was customary to keep corpses pinned to the cross as an example to others who thought to contest the will of Rome. Jesus would hang there, flesh picked to the bone by carrion, until room was needed for the next malefactor, and then his remains would be dumped into a pit. Such was the fate of the crucified, and I gave little thought to it. Thus, I was much surprised to find back at Herod's palace that not only had word of Jesus' death preceded me but that Joseph of Arimathea, a learned and respected member of the Sanhedrin, the high court of the Jerusalem Jews, was anxious to have an audience with Pilate.

As I approached the *praetorium*, the prefect was preoccupied with a teamster seeking redress for damages to his wagon. The man had delivered supplies to the Antonia fortress and drunken soldiers had thought it riotously funny to loosen the cart from its oxen and watch it roll down the hill and smash into the wall of a potter's workshop.

Joseph stood outside the gate among the Jews seeking audience with Pilate. Recognizing me as I entered the plaza, he beseeched me to intervene on his behalf. Thinking only of informing the prefect of Jesus' death, I was of a mind to dismiss him. But Joseph insisted: It was the law of the Jews to bury their dead before sunset, for uninterred corpses were an abomination to their deity. Jesus, whatever his offenses in the eyes of the Romans, was a holy man and did not deserve such a desecration. Would Pilate permit him to remove Jesus from the cross and provide him a proper burial?<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Mark 15: 43."Joseph of Arimathea, an honorable counsellor, which also waited for the kingdom of God, came, and went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus."

I immediately grasped the possibilities, and I was certain that Pilate would, too. Ignoring protocol, I stepped behind the judgment seat and whispered in Pilate's ear, suggesting that he could recompense the teamster at his leisure but had only one more chance, as I put it to him, to "give the high priests one last pinch in the buttocks."

Hastily settling the matter before him, Pilate gave the quartermaster a tongue lashing for his ill attention to the behavior of his soldiers, ordered a real lashing for the drunkards who cut loose the cart, and instructed the paymaster to settle accounts with the teamster. Then he turned to Joseph. "What is it you seek?"

Joseph was a tall man and rangy, and he had a gray beard and long, lugubrious face that lent gravity to his somber mood. "Sunset approaches, eminence," said he. "I entreat you to remove Jesus from the cross and let me give him a proper entombment."

"It is our custom to punish the condemned beyond death by denying them burial," said Pilate. "Let them suffer beyond the grave as an example to others."

"It is a harsh punishment, which many richly deserve," said Joseph. "But we Jews deem it an affront to our god to leave bodies unburied. Our laws instruct us, if a man is put to death and is hung upon a tree, to bury him the same day. The corpse of a hanged man defiles the land in the eyes of the lord."<sup>84</sup>

"If I give you leave to take down Jesus, what of the two bandits beside him?" asked Pilate.

"Leaving their bodies above ground would be an offense to god as well," said Joseph. "But I wish not to ask for more than you would be willing to deliver. They are accursed by their actions and deserve no mercy. But Jesus is not a sinner as they are."

"Really?" said Pilate. "Your high priests say Jesus is a sorcerer, a charlatan, a would-be king. Do you regard him as without sin?"

"No man is without sin," said Joseph. "But Jesus is not guilty of the sins of which the high priests accused him."

"You are a member of the Sanhedrin, are you not?" asked Pilate. "The Sanhedrin condemned him last night."

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<sup>84</sup> Deuteronomy 21:22.

“The Sanhedrin was not gathered as a formal body. Annas summoned only those predisposed to support his cause,” said Joseph. “I was not called because Annas knew that I would not have condemned Jesus. For that matter, neither was Gamaliel, leader of the Sanhedrin.”

“Some say Jesus is the messiah, the king of the Jews” said Pilate. “What say you?”

“If he were the messiah acting with the power of god, neither you nor all the legions of Rome could have slain him. No, he is not the messiah. But he healed many people by the power of god. He does not bear comparison to the two men beside him.”

“If this is a matter of Jewish law,” said I, “why did the high priests not come themselves to ask for Jesus’ body?”

“Here is the plain truth of it,” said Joseph. “If Jesus’ body is not buried, the memory of him is desecrated, which they wish to see. It also suits them to blame Rome for the insult to the lord almighty.”

Pilate smiled and turned to me. “I find much virtue in this man’s request. If we honor Jesus with burial, the people will continue to venerate him – and Annas and Caiaphas will be sorely aggrieved.”

“That is so,” said I.

Pilate addressed Joseph: “Your petition has stirred my compassion. I shall grant your request.”

He instructed me to accompany Joseph to Golgotha and convey his orders directly to the centurion. “Tell Longinus to assign a detail to watch over the burial party. Jesus will be entombed with all proper ceremony; I will brook no interference. Tell Longinus also to take down the two other men, dig them a pit, cover them with dirt and conceal them from the eyes of heaven. I will not have it said that I dishonored the god of the Jews this day.”

“The lord will bless you,” said Joseph. “You are a good man.”

“I am not a good man,” said Pilate. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend. That is the long and short of it.”



The sun was approaching the eleventh hour<sup>85</sup> now as Joseph and I left the *praetorium*. Outside the gate, Joseph turned to a servant: “Go tell Nicodemus what Pilate has ordered. We will need his assistance and that of his servants.”

We hastened then to Golgotha, where I informed Longinus of Pilate’s intent to remove the three men from their crosses. The soldiers took mallets to the legs of Barabbas’ two henchmen to hurry their deaths, and one of them plunged a spearhead into Jesus beneath the ribs. Jesus did not move. Only a trickle of blood leaked from the gash.<sup>86</sup>

“He’s good and dead,” said the centurion. “You can have him.”

Soldiers pried Jesus’ ankles from the cross and ripped his wrists from their pinions, barely catching the body as it fell from its mount. Then they set to digging a fresh pit to harbor the corpses of the two bandits when they expired, which they shortly would do. At length, Nicodemus arrived from the city with six servants bearing the burial shroud and spices.

I knew nothing of Nicodemus other than what I could deduce from his appearance and the circumstances in which we found ourselves. Like Joseph, he dressed like a man of means with fine linens, not coarse wool, and a mantle fringed with blue thread. From his wrist dangled a small leather pouch, a phylactery, containing verses of scripture written on parchment, which marked him as a Pharisee. Obviously, he was a man of wealth, as testified by the retinue of servants who anticipated his every wish and by the extravagant funeral linens and spices they bore. I assumed then that Nicodemus, like Joseph, regarded Jesus simply as a good and godly man. The truth of the matter, as I would discover later, was a good deal more interesting.

As the shadows lengthened, the burial party bore Jesus about three hundred yards distant to a tomb built into the side of an escarpment. A local funerary guild had constructed the facility for

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<sup>85</sup> Around 5 p.m.

<sup>86</sup> While John 19:32-34. says “blood and water” issued from the piercing, Nicolaus mentions a trickle of blood only.

Jews whose families were not wealthy enough to maintain a sepulcher of their own.<sup>87</sup>

The crowd had thinned as the sightseers and spectacle mongers returned to their houses before the sabbath, but the onlookers had not dispersed altogether. I failed to take note of the stragglers at the time, thinking it a matter of no consequence. Only later would I become preoccupied with determining who might have known where Jesus was buried. Looking back, I would recall seeing the women who had kept witness to his suffering throughout, as well as an elderly man and woman who wept for one of the bandits hanging on the cross beside him. I would recall also three servants in the livery of House Annas, thinking that they had been assigned to report to the old villain that the crucifixion was duly carried out. There may have been a few others, but I retained no memory of them.

Weary from a long day, I had fulfilled the orders Pilate had given me. Jesus was safely in the hands of Joseph, and Joseph was under the protection of Longinus' soldiers. I'd had my fill of drama and tragedy, and I longed for nothing more than a meal, a flagon of wine and a soft bed. So, I turned my back on the scene

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<sup>87</sup> According to Christian tradition, Joseph placed Jesus in his own newly built tomb. That belief is based on the authority of Matthew 27:60, which said Joseph laid the body "in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock." But Matthew was the least reliable of the Gospels. In the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 13:19), reflecting an earlier source dating to around 50 C.E., Paul stated that unspecified "rulers of Jerusalem" took Jesus down from the tree and "laid him in a sepulcher." Mark 15:46, writing a little after 70 C.E., said that Joseph "laid him in a sepulcher which was hewn out of a rock." Later, Luke 23:53 wrote that Joseph "laid it in a sepulcher that was hewn in stone, wherein never man before was laid." And John 19:41-42, reflecting an independent tradition, stated that Joseph placed Jesus in "a new sepulcher, wherein was never man yet laid," adding by way of explanation that the sabbath was approaching and "the sepulcher was nigh at hand." Here and elsewhere, Nicolaus states that the sepulcher belonged to a funerary guild, making it neither new nor belonging to Joseph.

at Golgotha. With no thought but my comfort, I passed through the Old Gate and headed back to Herod's Palace.

The sabbath day passed uneventfully. The laws of the Jews, which required them to observe a day of rest, precluded any activity but the observance of their holy Passover rites. Then, when the sabbath ended at sunset, pilgrims prepared themselves for the journey back to their homes. As the festival wound down, so did any threat of disorder. Pilate and the Caesarea cohort prepared for the march back to the coast. I yearned to return to Caesarea and see my wife and children. Around the second hour<sup>88</sup> of Sunday, my servant Menander was helping me load my belongings onto a mule when we heard a commotion at the front gate to Herod's Palace.

Joseph of Arimathea was loudly demanding an audience with Pilate. Preoccupied with preparations for the march, the prefect was not available, so Joseph sought me out. "Jesus is gone," said he. "He is missing from the tomb!"

"How come you by this information?"

"The followers of Jesus visited the tomb this very morning. They found the rock seal rolled aside. When they entered, they saw that he was gone and is nowhere to be found!"

Without question, the situation warranted Pilate's attention. Grave robbery was an imperial crime. Most often, thieves sought the jewelry and ornamental items buried with the dead. But it was not unknown for grave robbers to steal the body itself, usually for necromantic purposes.

I interrupted Pilate's deliberations with the *primus pilus*.<sup>89</sup> "Dominus, I beg a moment."

"I am busy," Pilate said sharply. "Mind your place."

Pilate was not moved easily to anger but when his wrath was kindled, no man would wish to stand before him. Yet he had not engaged me to act his toady. At the risk of public rebuke, I persisted: "It is Jesus of Nazareth, Dominus. His body is gone!"

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<sup>88</sup> About 7 a.m.

<sup>89</sup> The senior centurion of the cohort.

The words had the same effect as if I had slapped Pilate in the face. He wheeled his horse around to face me. “Get on with it, then.”

I repeated what Joseph had told me.

“Summon the priest immediately,” said Pilate. “I would hear this from his own mouth.”

Pilate held his audience while mounted upon his war horse. Even at his age, he made a formidable martial figure.

Bowing, the councilor repeated the story he had told me. Pilate cut to the heart of the matter. “Who has done this?”

“I know not, eminence,” said Joseph.

“Whom do you suspect?” asked Pilate.

“I have no grounds to single out any party,” said Joseph. “I can only speculate.”

“Then give me the benefit of your conjecture,” Pilate ordered impatiently.

“Perhaps servants of the priests removed the body so the tomb would not become a shrine,” Joseph said.

“What think you, Nicolaus?”

“That explanation is as plausible as any,” said I. “But we know so little at this point.”

“We cannot let this crime go unpunished,” said Pilate. “Jesus is too well known to pretend this did not happen. I cannot tolerate such an insult to Roman law. Word will blow through Judea like a sirocco. If there is any chance that Caiaphas was behind this criminal act, I will know of it.”

Pilate’s thoughts were as legible as if he had carved them into a stele. If we could implicate Caiaphas and Annas in the robbery of Jesus’ tomb, the priests would have no more hold over him. Grave robbery was punishable by death throughout the empire by the order of Tiberius himself. Pilate could dangle the threat of arrest and execution over the priests like the sword of Dionysius.<sup>90</sup> They would never dare challenge him now by sending a letter to Rome.

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<sup>90</sup> More commonly known as the sword of Damocles. When the courtier Damocles said he envied Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, Dionysius let him sit in his seat – with a sword hanging above his head, suspended by a horsehair.

Pilate addressed me: “I want you to get to the bottom of this. Conduct an inquiry. Question whomever you must. Do not rest until you have uncovered the culprits.”

At this command, I was dismayed. I had important affairs to settle with the steward of my estate back in Caesarea, and I longed to see my wife and children. Some men could happily march on long campaigns or voyage to far-off lands but I was not one of them. The luxurious apartments of Herod’s palace were no substitute for my own hearth, and no tumble with a tavern whore was as satisfying as the ardor of my loving Hestia. But I saw the sense in staying in Jerusalem to sniff out the evil doers before the scent went cold.

“I shall do as you order, Dominus,” said I.

“Find those responsible and I will reward you well,” said Pilate. “Connect the crime to Caiaphas, and I shall make you a rich man.”