

The Tyconus Letters

A Novel Set
In biblical Times

By John D. Boenke

The Tyconus Letters

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John D. Boenke was born in 1926 in Rossford, Ohio and grew up during the Great Depression. He served in the U. S. Army in 1946 - 47 in the Medical Corps. In 1951 he received a degree of Bachelor of Science in Physics from the University of Michigan. After college, Mr. Boenke worked in research and engineering for the General Electric Company. Later he was the Manager of an engineering test laboratory for Lau Blower Company, then Chief Engineer for Halsey Taylor Water Cooler Corp. and Senior Design Engineer for The Werner Ladder Company. Before retiring in 1989, Mr. Boenke also owned and operated a small motel in Ashtabula, Ohio.

Since retiring, Mr. Boenke has been interested in reading and studying in the areas of Cosmology, Theoretical Physics and Philosophy. In addition, he has an interest in the origins of religions. He has privately published several short stories and some poetry.

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CHARACTERS

Jeremiah	scribe and scholar
Rebecca	wife of Jeremiah
Jonas	brother of Rebecca, landlord
Michael	son of Jeremiah and Rebecca
Tyconus	scholar friend of Jeremiah
Uriah	family friend of Jeremiah and Rebecca
Naomi	wife of Uriah
Seth	Michael’s childhood friend
Darius	Roman friend of Seth
Josiah	tailor
Jedda	fruit merchant
Simon	vegetable merchant
Miriam,	wife of Simon
Ida	daughter of Simon
Adam	Ida’s younger brother
Joshua	Ida’s older brother
Zebulon	leader of local Christians
Lothar	Roman soldier

INTRODUCTION

The books and articles I have been reading in the last few years have caused me to be more interested in the events of the first Century of the Common Era (CE). This was evidently a very turbulent time in Palestine, which is the area now known as Israel. The Jews were oppressed by the Romans, and after a four year revolt by the Jews, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed circa 70 CE by the Roman, Titus, son of the Roman emperor Vespasian. Another revolt followed some years later. The Bar Kohkba Revolt circa 132 - 135 CE was led by Shimon Bar Kohkba and was successful for several years until again crushed by the Romans led by Julius Severus. There seems to have been constant turmoil throughout all of this period of time.

There have been many scholarly works examining the first century Christian stories with the intent of determining their veracity. One of these, ***Christianity Before Christ***, by John G. Jackson, explores the history of the "Jesus Story" pointing out that there are many such stories much more ancient than the first century. One such story is about the Babylonian god Bel, another is of the Iranian god Mithra, and a third concerns the Ethiopian - Egyptian god Horus. There are many similar stories, but these three are some of the outstanding ones.

The Jesus Puzzle, by Earl Doherty, is a study which looks at discrepancies and lack of connection between Pauline Christianity and Jesus Christianity, and whether Pauline Christianity is more valid than the Jesus Christianity. It points out many contradictions and disagreements in the roots of Christianity. It seems to me much of the writing of this time reflected a longing or aspiration to the immediate end of the world and instant heavenly rewards.

A third work is ***The Jesus the Jews Never Knew***, by Frank R. Zindler, which explores the historical writings of the time of the first century which are mostly of Roman origin. These have a myriad of references to Jewish activities. A thorough search of these extensive writings finds no credible reference to the man, Jesus, or the events of his purported life. There are probably other such investigative materials and source books with which I am not familiar.

Taken together, these books seem to raise a serious question as to whether the biblical occurrences actually happened. There is no independent source of information about the events of Jesus' life, nor indeed, is there any confirmation of his existence at all. As mentioned above, the historians of the time who were otherwise very thorough mention neither the man, Jesus, nor do they speak of the marvelous events surrounding his life. There is a single paragraph included in some of the writings of Flavius Josephus which mentions Jesus. This item is widely recognized as an insertion into the text done many years later and it was not part of the original writing. Flavius Josephus was born circa 37 CE well after the reported events are alleged to have happened.

In addition to these books there are current writings which pursue a more analytical evaluation of the idea that the god concept itself is wrong and cannot be supported. This further reinforces the idea that the biblical texts are man made. The thesis is that Biblical passages are constructed from simple stories of the existing culture which were common among the ordinary people of the time, and they were not the revelation of actual happenings.

One of the books investigating this idea of the non existence of god is ***God, The Failed Hypothesis*** by Victor J. Stenger. With critical reasoning and scientific examination, Mr. Stenger shows that the existence of God is highly improbable. This wide ranging examination considers

the reality of god from many angles and they all come up short. The reader is left with the strong impression that the god hypothesis is not proven.

Another recent book is ***God Is Not Great*** by Christopher Hitchens. This points out that over the centuries; Religion has been the problem, not the solution to world happenings. Religion and the persons who espouse it have done extreme damage to the culture, delayed the advancement science and held back the development of the human race. Although religions have provided solace in the childhood of humanity, they developed into great impediments to new thought by all of us as we have matured.

A third book which casts doubt on the validity of the whole god concept is ***The God Delusion*** by Richard Dawkins. Mr. Dawkins uses scientific methods to show there is no mysticism, and there is no other worldly control of the real world. Using science and statistics he argues that the existence of god is highly dubious.

All of these books are the inspiration for me to write this fictional account of the origin of the Gospels. This background of literature sets the stage and implies the questions. Whence came the Gospels? Who wrote them? Why were they written? One wonders if all of the religious history is myth, by what means did the Christian Gospels come about. My speculation on those questions resulted in the present fictional work, ***The Tyconus Letters***.

How large the population of the Middle East was during the first century is highly speculative, and it is indefinite whether it was growing, shrinking, or overpopulated. There are indications that the ordinary people were just barely able to raise enough food to feed themselves which suggests a large or even an excess population. When the Romans occupied the area, they required more taxes and caused even greater burdens. Because of debts, some of the population became slaves or tenant farmers. Many of the populace resorted to stealing and banditry to survive. The situation got progressively worse until the first revolt occurred circa 66 CE to 70 CE when Jerusalem was occupied and the temple destroyed in 70 CE.

One can well imagine that times were difficult and life was hard. This was certainly a time of conflict and struggle in all the early societies as is reflected in the surviving writings or copies of writings of the period.

The events of the New Testament were supposed to have taken place, and the whole of the Christian religion was deemed to have started during the early part of the first century CE according to the Bible. Scholars say the gospels of the New Testament were written near the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century.

There is substantial disagreement among the scholars as to exactly when all the writings were made and even who is responsible for them. There is even debate on whether any particular gospel originated from one person or from a group of persons.

One of the more commonly accepted range of dates and time sequences which is postulated for the gospel chronology is used in this story for reference points.

The various books of the bible exist in many translations, The Christian version was roughly organized into its present state in the fourth century. It has been revised and reorganized over the ages. The most accepted interpretation for many years was the King James Version done in

1611 CE. There have been many later versions also.

If indeed the gospels were written during this late first and early second century time, they had to be written by men of that period. Their exact authors are unknown, but it is speculated the stories were based on a common document which gave an account of a Messiah story, and the sayings of the Messiah. This document is referred to as Quelle or the Q document. Quelle is a German word for “source”, and the Q document is supposed to have been a piece of literature written in Greek, but which has been lost or destroyed. Actually, none of the original gospels exist anymore. These writings have changed and evolved over the centuries as the text was copied and translated and re-written again and again until we have today what is called the Christian Bible.

Another consideration is that during this time of the first and second centuries, there was much conflict with the Romans. The Jews were terribly oppressed and there was a proliferation of writings reflecting these problems. There were also many other “Gospels” written which were not considered worthy to be included in the Christian Bible when it was assembled some centuries later.

Is it any wonder there was such an abundance of Jewish writings yearning for and seeking a way out of their seemingly endless plight? People were desperately searching for salvation and release from their problems.

I can find it more understandable that the people of that time would believe some of the fantastic happenings in the gospels when I consider that even today with our much more substantial understanding of the world, our knowledge of the universe and an excellent understanding of our own biological beginnings, there are still many persons who are captivated by the mystical world and believe things which are just not physically possible. They also deny science in evolution of humans and even in the development of our physical world.

We have no way of knowing the exact intent or purpose of those who first wrote these bits of biblical history. But there is no doubt that the writers wrote them for some purpose. Thinking about who these writers were and why they wrote the stories they did, has intrigued me for a long time. They must have considered whatever reason they had in mind for writing the books to be aimed toward a useful end, and I can only speculate that they had good intentions. I assume they were thoughtful persons and that they were trying to help their current situation and not exacerbate it.

We can look at the Bible itself and try to divine what the ancient aims and reasons for the writings were, but the reasons are obscure. I have thought about this conundrum at length and I arrived at an idea which might explain the purposes of the gospel writers. This novel is devised to present one possible scenario of how the gospels came to be. There are obviously many other possible ways they could have been developed.

This story, ***The Tyconus Letters***, revolves around the idea that Jesus is completely mythical. The story proposes a way of looking at the gospels which presents a rationale for their conception and a suggestion of their purpose and evolution. The story is strictly conjectural and is intended as entertainment in an historical setting.

The time of the story is the early second century of the Common Era. The fictional setting is Palestine in the Jewish section in a mythical moderate sized town, Uxnor. Uxnor is made out to be situated near the actual town of Sepphoris which is between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee in the area not far from Nazareth.

The town center consists of a large market area which not only provides an opportunity for the exchange of goods and produce but also serves as a business and cultural center. This central community is surrounded by various housing units. Some are communal groups of buildings and some are freestanding single structures. The Synagogue and other community and public buildings are located nearby. They surround the market and the central part of the town.

There are small open spaces scattered within the city which are used for growing food. On the outer edges of the town, there are larger farms which supply the main bulk of food for the populace. Roadways extend in several directions from the market center to other towns and to the rest of the country.

I hope you enjoy this fictional story of Palestine in the first and second centuries CE. It is my purpose to entertain.

John D. Boenke

THE PLAN

The year was 3851, or as the Romans would have it 832 AUC. The Romans had no use for tradition and had to do things their own way. Aub Urb Condita or the founding of the city, their Rome, was the beginning of civilization for them. Their audacious behavior spilled over into the way they governed and the manner in which they treated other groups. The Jews were especially in disfavor with them at this time.

It was the month of Nisan, and Jeremiah's son, Michael, was concerned for his father. Jeremiah was an elderly man and lay extremely ill from the long cool wet season. Jeremiah had been a scholar and writer all his life. Although he was not well known, he was a reasonable and thoughtful person. He had not been close to anyone in power, but he had many friends in the community of scholars. Jeremiah's works were largely ignored. Yet to Michael, the most intelligent, honest and thoughtful person he knew was his father, Jeremiah.

Jeremiah and Michael lived in small living quarters which were part of what used to be a stable. The compound in which they made their home was the property of Jonas, the brother of Michael's mother. Jeremiah and Michael were dependent on Jonas's largesse to have a place to live. They had moved in here long before Michael's mother had died and they had remained as part of the greater family after her death. All the people in the compound were related in some way, even though the family connection was fairly indirect.

It was a small apartment consisting of two levels. The upper level was for sleeping and the lower one for all other activity. The furniture was scant consisting of a central table, a writing table in the corner, several chairs and cushions, and some sets of shelves. The room was fairly dark being lit by one small opening high on the outside wall. The interior light was by the flames of oil lamps, or sometimes by the small fireplace in another corner of the room.

Most of the shelves on the walls were full of papyrus and parchment scrolls. Pots of ink and bundles of reed pens were tucked into the free spaces. However, some of the storage was filled by the few cooking utensils Michael possessed and the clothes which Michael and Jeremiah were not wearing. A lower shelf held a hammer, knives and other tools which Michael used in his work. Tucked behind a bag of beans on a top shelf was a small clay cup with Michael's small supply of coins. They were mostly sestertii and some denarii with a half shekel or two occasionally.

On a day when the Sun shone and helped warm their small abode to a comfortable temperature, Jeremiah seemed anxious to speak. Although weak from disease, he was currently free of his coughing spells, and he sat up to engage Michael in conversation.

"Michael, my son, I must talk with you."

"Be still, my father, you must conserve your strength. Perhaps you will be able to eat a little bit in a while."

"No, I do not need food. I need to tell you of an important duty you must do when I am gone."

"Do not talk thus, father. When the warmer weather returns, you will be fine."

"No my son, it is not to be, and I must now tell you what I have been waiting for. You have a significant responsibility when I am gone."

"Father, you are exciting yourself. Lie back and rest. I will get you some water."

Against the protestations of the old man, Michael went to the shelves and poured out a liquid into a clay cup.

"Here father, there was a little wine left. Drink it, and try your best to be at ease."

Jeremiah did as his son would have him do, but then spoke again. "Let me tell you a story." Jeremiah gazed as though looking into the distance seeming to compose his thinking, then he continued. "Many years ago a good friend of mine had a plan to restore the greatness of the Jewish people, and I, with several others agreed to help. We were concerned about the continuing oppressions of the Romans and the seeming disillusionment of the faithful in our Jewish world. My friend came up with an idea which would restore our culture, if it were carried out correctly."

"What do you mean father? Our culture survives."

"Not as it was, my son, and many have doubts about our future. During the last century there has been much turmoil and it has been increasing. Now in our lifetimes it has happened that the Jews have revolted and the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. Many of our people have been so overburdened they have lost their land and resorted to banditry to survive."

"Yes, that is all true, but most of the people remain devoted to the scriptures."

"It is not enough. The people need a restoration of the awareness of the old teachings and rituals which are our heritage. They need to accept a renewed belief in the continuing righteousness of the ancient writings and our way of life."

The two men fell into silence as they each pursued their own thoughts. Moments of reverie were common between them, as they had lived together so long they recognized each others moods. It had been this way ever since Michael's mother had died. Michael had provided as he could, and Jeremiah had served as a scribe for the community. Jeremiah was an educated man, although it did not result in gaining him much fortune. Besides Aramaic, he was conversant with Hebrew, Latin, and Greek among other languages. He had survived by writing for others and doing translations. The pause in their conversation did not last long and Jeremiah continued.

"I must tell you the rest of the story and what you must do."

"Very well father. I will listen."

"Several of us agreed to a plan to fulfill the ancient prophecies of a Messiah who would come to save the Jewish people. The idea was to tell a story of his coming, then to release the history of it gradually and unobtrusively into the council of the elders. The purpose would be to give the people something to hold on to. It would be a method to restore faith in the future."

"That is unsettling father. Are you saying the story would be a lie? Do you mean you would perpetrate a hoax on the community? I find that

hard to believe. How could you do that?"

"Ah, what is a lie, my son? Who can speak with certainty of that which is unknowable? We felt there was a need for a new community spirit for bringing the people together in their efforts to avoid dissolution into the greater society. And why should it be a lie? If it is prophesied, is it not a true possibility?"

"I do not know, my father. You have always had ideas which were sometimes beyond my grasp. I am sure you have been discriminating in following that which was best for the faith and the people. But what then has happened with this plan?"

"That is what I must tell you. My friends have begun dying, and their influence is being felt in the rest of the society. You may have heard some years ago of a manuscript found describing the appearance of a Savior in an earlier time."

"Yes. I recall there was something about it. It did not seem that the elders paid much attention and the excitement died down after a while."

"And do you remember where it came from?"

"No, I am not sure anyone knew. It had been found in the writings of another scholar, and it was claimed to have been given to him years before."

"Yes," Jeremiah smiled. "That is the way it was. That was the way it was intended."

"Do you mean that was part of your plan? Was the document not a narrative of reality?"

"I will say only that I also knew of it, and I knew the person who had kept it till his death. But let me continue with my revelation, and please assure me you will keep this to yourself. Otherwise the work of many people will be wasted, and the objective may not be reached."

"I will do as you ask father, although I am uncomfortable with keeping secrets."

"There will be more such manuscripts found in the coming years. I know of another one which has surfaced just recently. These stories of the good news of a savior should help stabilize the current ideas which are being spread. The modern world needs a modern view of humankind and new interpretations of the intents of the old laws. They must be applied in such a way as to allow people to be treated more fairly and helpfully. My most fervent hope is that our culture maintains itself and prospers in the future."

"But what do these events have to do with you or with me? You said I would have a duty when you died. What do you mean? Am I involved somehow?"

"Yes, that is the important part. I also have written a statement of a follower of a savior. I have written it under an alias, and you must give it to the elders when I die. You must tell them nothing about it except that it was in my papers and was indicated to be a statement I had received

many years ago from some unknown person.”

“Father! I cannot do such a thing. I would be very uncomfortable doing this no matter the importance. It is against my nature. It would be dishonest. You have always counseled me to tell the truth as I know it. How can this be different?”

“You must do it my son. It would not be dishonest if you told them only that I told you to give it to them. You must not open it or read it to protect yourself from any knowledge which would implicate you. It is your duty to pass it on as I requested. The efforts of many sincere persons are on your shoulders.”

“Talk no more father. You must have rest. Let us leave further consideration of this for another day.” The old man reclined again in his pallet bed and was still. Soon the only noises were his breathing and the quiet watchfulness of Michael.

Michael thought on his father’s words. “Could this odd story be true? Or is it just the raving of a sick old man.” He felt uneasy as he recalled what his father had said. “A fabricated story? Surely his father would not do that. He was an honest man. He had always been a good Jew, and had usually observed all the rituals. Could this other pursuit be more important than that tradition?” But Michael had no time for considering it further. The necessities of maintaining life called to him.

THE MANUSCRIPT

It was many months later. The winter winds of Tevet in the year 3852 found Michael still caring for his father who had done better during the warm drier weather, but with the harsh conditions of the cool wet season, he had been declining again. Nothing more had been said of the manuscript of which Jeremiah had told previously. Michael had pondered all that his father had explained, but he was disturbed by the ideas Jeremiah had advanced.

Questions kept running through his mind. “Should he in fact do as he was asked and turn the writings over to the elders after his father died? Or would it be more honest to simply destroy them at that time when they were no longer an issue?” Michael was fearful that his father would in fact soon succumb to the hard years of his life. Then Michael would be forced to take some action. It worried him and he wished to know more about the plan.

He had heard of another such manuscript being found some months previously and was confused about the effect it was having. The first one had been the writings of a man called Mark. This later one was claimed to be the writing of another similar person called Luke. Michael had heard that the elders were quite disturbed and did not know what to do with the stories, but they had not spoken widely on the meaning of them.

Seth on the other hand was quite enthused with the writing of Luke which he had been able to read from a copy stolen from the synagogue. Seth was Michael’s friend who recently had been talking about the group which called themselves Christians. Christians were a sect which had arisen during the turbulent times of some years ago. According to Seth they had been fostered by one of the wandering fanatics named Paul.

Seth thought the Christians had a new and helpful message which spoke to the common people. He was much inclined to become a follower of the sect. The Christians had been persecuted by Emperor Nero, because he claimed they had started the fires which consumed great parts of Rome some years ago. Christians were not popular and, in fact, it was dangerous to profess being a member of the group as they were also periodically harassed and abused by the authorities even to this time.

Because of his concerns, Michael wanted to be sure of his father's desires. His opportunity came one afternoon when his father had awakened from a nap. He seemed to be much refreshed and more alert than usual. Michael considered this to be a suitable time and addressed him directly. "Father, please tell me again what you wish me to do with your writing when you have left me."

Jeremiah spent most of his time sleeping and was usually slow and lethargic even when he was awake. He turned and looked at Michael for several moments, then with some difficulty replied, "Go to my writing table and shelves and bring the papers here."

Michael did as he was asked. In a few minutes he returned with several bundles of scrolls. Some were tied and some were loosely rolled. There were also many single sheets of papyrus.

"Read to me the writings on the bundles," Jeremiah requested softly.

Michael read though the names on the outside of several of the packages. In each case Jeremiah told him, "They are nothing. They have no value. You can throw them out."

Picking up a rather large roll, Michael read the title. "The Life of Our Savior as spoken by Matthew."

"Yes, Yes," his father responded excitedly. "That is the important one. You must not open it, but leave it as it is. It will then appear to be ancient. Give it to the elders that way, saying that it came into my possession some years ago, but you know nothing else about it. Do not tell them anything which I have divulged to you. If you see that it is properly directed to them, that will complete my contribution to this effort, and I will rest in peace. Give me your word you will do as I say."

"I will do as you ask," Michael answered hesitatingly, but he still had reservations about the whole idea. He would actually decide later whether to do anything or nothing with the bundle. He was beginning to feel very strongly that the whole scheme was wrong. For now though, he was content to be sure of the request of his father, and to reassure him his wishes would be followed. He sorted through the other papers and came upon another tied package. "What are these, my father? Why are they tied together?"

"I cannot tell from here. Open them and read them to me."

Michael unrolled the documents and began scanning them. "They seem to be a series of letters. They are all addressed to you and are from a man named Tyconus. Was he not one of your fellow scholars who died some years ago?"

"Oh, oh, oh," Jeremiah was disturbed and unnaturally agitated. "Yes, yes, they are from Tyconus. I thought I had gotten rid of them long

ago. Oh, oh, this is terrible. How foolish of me not to have destroyed them as I received them. Oh, this is terrible, terrible. I did not remember that I had saved them. You must burn them. Burn them all now. They must be destroyed.” Jeremiah was suddenly very upset and provoked. This bundle of papers seemed to be of some importance to him, but only in that it should be destroyed.

Michael was quite surprised. He saw how troubled and alarmed his father was acting and wished to placate him. “Yes, yes, my father. Relax, I will burn them for you, but you must keep calm. It is not good for you to get so excited. Why must they be so completely destroyed? What harm could they do to you? They are simply old letters.”

“I cannot tell you. They are part of what I was working on, and I should have burned them years ago. If they were made public all my effort and the effort of many others would be wasted. Please, promise you will burn them. Do it as soon as possible.”

“Yes, yes, I will burn them. I promise, but you must calm yourself. Here have some water and try to rest.” Jeremiah drank a little then fell back on his pallet exhausted and dozed off again.

Michael put most of the papers back where they belonged. He took special care with the bundle which was labeled, “The Life of Our Savior as Spoken by Matthew.” This was the important document. The one which his father particularly wanted to be saved.

He determined to burn the letters which disturbed his father so much by using the flame of the oil lamp, although it would take longer. In that way, he would be sure they were totally consumed, and he could more surely allay his father’s fears. The letters were evidently in chronological order, and he selected the oldest to burn first. Just before he put the first sheet to the flame, he stopped. “Why should I not read them before they are destroyed,” he thought. “What harm could that do?” He immediately decided to do just that.

THE FIRST LETTER

Dear Jeremiah,

I am writing to you with a heavy heart. The turmoil of the time of my life has taken its toll on my aging body. My health is not the best, but I am compelled to try to help our people before I must pass on. As you and I and our two friends, Philip and Thomas, have discussed in our letters, the oppressions of the Jewish people by the Romans seem to be getting more and more severe. There is much discontent and apprehension of the future with everyone I contact. Everyone is looking for another great leader such as David or Joshua, but no one appears to lead us.

In addition, the wild stories of some of the itinerant mad men are serving to divide and bewilder the otherwise steadfast and abiding common men. We hear again and again of persons proclaiming new ideas which challenge the established teachings of the Torah without offering new insights. The corruptions of the ancient texts by some who talk only of a spiritual savior rather than the Messiah are disturbing and confounding to many people.

Just yesterday, a passing traveler told me of a charismatic and charming orator who was traveling from village to village and exhorting the crowds in the markets to take up arms against our enemies, the Romans. This would, of course, only lead to our complete destruction. We must find more effective methods

to counteract the deeds of those in power.

Because of these unsettling conditions, I have a proposition for you. I am writing to our two friends also, as I perceive them to be of our same frame of mind, and that they are trustworthy and resolute men. I have been thinking on this for a long time and have arrived at the necessary action to save our culture and our Jewish heritage. Let me outline what I think we must do.

As we four have agreed, the Messiah is needed now more than ever. As we also agreed, it seems as though he will in fact never appear. Perhaps it is a prophesy which is not destined to be fulfilled. And yet, His arrival would generate a greater cohesiveness among our people which may tide us through these difficult times.

As I see it, the solution to this dilemma is to recount the history of the Savior's appearance in statements by his followers. These statements would imply that He had already been here. We would then subtly leak these treatises into the mainstream of scholars who will be so desirous of the truth of the story as to pick up the good news and pass it on without very much critical analysis. Indeed there are those who preach of the coming of a savior already,. There are many stories rampant in all times, but especially now they seem more prevalent. There are those among these irrational enthusiasts who foment the crowds with their wild tales. But they speak of a spiritual being who will save us. I am intent on there being a history of a real person who is the Messiah.

Our Messiah would be indeed the Messiah of the Prophecies. He will have come to fulfill God's promises to the Jewish people. We must create him with the texts of the Torah in mind.

These wild and turbulent times have spawned many orators and rabble rousers. There have also been many unfortunate events in every part of our world. Ferment is everywhere, so much so that no one can be aware of all that is going on. This condition is ideal to foster the introduction of a report of a Messiah whose presence had been obscured by all the other disturbances which have transpired.

I submit that we, and our close friends, could nurture the belief that the Messiah was here in an earlier period during a time of much tribulation and that he offered new directions for our salvation. With all the confusion of the last few decades, it should be easy to introduce a secretive story and intermingle it with all the writings and public oratory currently going on. It is my earnest desire to do something to bring the Jewish People back to a time of greatness and importance in the world. As I think about it, I am convinced the apparent coming of the Messiah will do this. Will you help me in this endeavor? I have ideas about how it could be done by several of us who are dedicated to our Jewish culture and the abiding truth and hope of the prophecies.

Please send me your ideas on my proposal, and we will proceed as expedient. I look forward to hearing from you and the others. Burn this letter to destroy it completely after you have read it so that it may not be traced. As a matter of caution, you must also burn and thoroughly destroy all such material so there is no direct link to us. This should be our regular procedure, and I will likewise burn any responses from you after reading them.

Your Friend in God, Tyconus

REFLECTIONS

Michael was dismayed. "What sort of suggestion is this?" he whispered to himself. It seemed Tyconus was putting forward a plan that an unauthenticated story be instigated to justify the belief that the Messiah had already appeared here in the world. What would this do? It seemed strange to Michael and he wanted to know more. He had heard his father talk of Tyconus over the years. He was evidently a serious and quite bright person who had written some very useful tracts during his lifetime, but this idea was certainly different.

He recalled though that Tyconus had died years ago in the year 3830 in the time after the Temple had been destroyed. His father had expressed great sorrow then and grieved the passing of a true friend. But what was this idea he had proposed? "It does not sound like a good idea to me," Michael mused. "I must know more about it." Although it was late, he turned to the next letter.

THE SECOND LETTER

Dear Jeremiah,

I am much encouraged by your reply and the comments I have received from our two friends. They are constructive and certainly make our project seem more feasible. I am pleased you all agree with my idea of generating a Messiah story which we can let evolve and slowly come to light over the years. As our friend, Thomas, points out, there is already such a Messiah story which might be very adaptable, although it is fairly old. . It includes the salient points with which you are all familiar. The story consists of a virgin birth, a humble beginning, an ordinary life with a few extraordinary events, a period of teaching, healing and performance of miracles, and finally a martyr's death.

It is convenient that Thomas has a copy in Greek which we can largely adapt to our use. I appreciate that he has volunteered to send us all a synopsis. This should not pose much of a problem if we use this ancient account, as you well know it has been customary to retell old tales in modern form ever since we scholars have been writing. Also, although I appreciate we are all fairly fluent in several languages. I think it best if we do these writings in Greek. Much religious writing is already in Greek, and it will seem to be more authentic.

The time of our Messiah must be set prior to or around 3787 to precede the preaching of the radical known as Paul who speaks of a spiritual Christ. He describes this spiritual being as the one who is supposedly the savior of mankind. We may as well use real situations and actual history as much as is practical.

Fortunately for our cause, I have heard that one of the wandering extremists already claims there was such a divine person in the recent past although the details are vague. He claims this person had twelve disciples of whom he was the principle one. I have not heard anything of the other supposed followers, if they ever existed. Of course, these reports surface periodically among the obsessed persons who are so common during these troubled times.

I think the declarations of this champion of an emancipator are the seeds we need. If we adapt to them properly, we may be able to succeed in bringing into being a real Messiah in recent modern history. Since there are professed to be twelve of these followers of this particular redeemer, let us also each adopt the identity of one of the twelve and write the story of the life of our Messiah from that individual disciple's viewpoint and memory. This can be possible because it is my impression that the kinds of persons involved in this specific report would have little education and would be unable to write the story themselves. I have decided that my account will be ascribed to a man named Mark who was one of the twelve according to what I hear. Other possible names are James, Matthew, Judas, Thomas, Luke, Phillip or John. I think each of you could select any of these for your anonymous story. The choice of an appropriate pseudonym is yours.

It is unfortunate that we must work only by letter, as the mail takes so long. If we were able to be in close contact we could make the stories identical, but that is difficult for all of us. That action would, of course, also bring on the possibility that we are more closely associated and perhaps work to the detriment of our purpose of keeping separate and anonymous. We must then agree on the general form and events of the history, but we shall all probably be slightly different to a degree. This is no great handicap as human memory is fallible anyway.

Please consider these things carefully, and let me have your thoughts. We must plan this in as great detail as we can. I shall be waiting to receive your further comments.

Again, you must burn this letter to destroy it completely after you have read it so that our work may not be traced. I have likewise burned your response and the responses of our friends after reading them.

Your Friend in God,

Tyconus

THE REVELATION

Michael was astounded. His father seemed to be in the middle of a conspiracy to create a false history of a Jewish Messiah for the people. He muttered, "My father is cooperating with the venture which had been suggested by this Tyconus. The man evidently had the help of many of his friends including father. He mentioned Phillip and Thomas, but how can I be sure there are not others?" This idea was difficult for Michael to grasp and perplexing to believe. "How could my father come to such a consideration?" he asked himself. "What would cause such an aberration in an otherwise scholarly person?" Michael realized that the Jews were heavily oppressed, but to do something so out of character and morally questionable was not a quality of the father he knew.

He looked again at the two letters he had just read. "Yes," he mused, "They should certainly be destroyed, if for no other reason than they are incriminating and would bring disgrace on my father and myself if they were ever made public."

Michael was distraught, and fumbled with the documents to feed them into the small flame of the lamp. Although the material was old, it did

not burn well and he had to keep picking up the scraps and re-igniting them. It was tedious and the action produced an odor which was not very pleasant either.

As Michael worked, he went over in his mind everything that he had learned. "This Tyconus must have been a person who much impressed my father for him to be persuasive enough to convince my father to join with him in this endeavor. I wonder who the others are and what mischief they are up to. Are they the ones who have in the last few years released the documents which purport to record the appearance of a savior? Are these the very papers which have caused such a stir among the elders and encouraged some of the radicals?"

Jeremiah moved restlessly on his pallet. "What do I smell my son? What are you doing there with the lamp?"

"I am burning those letters which upset you so much. It is slow work, but it goes well."

"Yes, yes, burn the letters. Thank you for doing as I wish. I know you are dependable and they will be gone and off my mind. I trust you to do that which is right."

As Michael fed the last little pieces of the first two letters into the flame, his father turned to the wall and seemed to rest again. Michael finished his task and looked at the remaining letters. He decided he needed to rest himself before continuing and went outside to drink in the night air. He needed a short rest to refresh his mind. It was only a few steps from his door down the alleyway to the opening to the market street. He leaned against the archway and renewed his breath and his brain with the night air. It was not terribly cold and he lingered in the doorway watching his neighbors pass by.

His friend Seth appeared in the shadows on his way home for the evening, and greeted him. "Michael, shalom, I am glad to see you. How is your father doing?"

"Shalom, Seth. Not well I fear. I do not know how he can hold on much longer. He does not eat much, and the disease is relentless. He periodically has coughing spells which shake his whole body."

"I am sorry to hear that. He is a fine person and does not deserve such trouble. You do not deserve the trouble either. I wish there were something I could do to help."

"I believe we are beyond help now. It is in the hands of God, and we must accept each day as it comes."

"Yes, there comes a time when all we can do is wait. My thoughts are with you." They fell silent for a few minutes. Then Seth continued, "Can you take some time to talk with me? There is a pressing issue I need to discuss, and I seek your help in deciding what to do."

Michael hesitated to invite Seth in. With the letters lying about and the odor of the burning, he did not feel it was a good time. "I am sorry. I cannot take time tonight. I am tired and must get some rest. But I could plan on some time tomorrow while my father is sleeping. Could we meet at your house though to avoid disturbing him unnecessarily?"

"Yes that would be fine. Come in when you are free. I will look for you tomorrow." After Seth left, Michael stumbled in the dim light back inside to continue his chore. The odor had dissipated somewhat and his father was resting. He picked up the third letter and looked at it. Suddenly he felt very weary. "Tomorrow will be a busy day," he muttered to himself. "I will put off any more of this destruction until I have more time." He checked to see that his father rested well and then took himself to bed.

SETH'S PROBLEM

In the morning Michael was busy with the necessary chores of life. He carried water from the public well, and went to market for necessities. The well was in the center of the market which made it only 200 cubits for him to carry water to his house. The market was a square in the middle of town about 300 cubits on each side, and was busy with many vendors during the week. It was possible to buy all the necessities of life in the variety of stalls located in the market area. From food to clothing and tools, there were vendors ready and willing to sell, if one had money. Michael bought a measure of grain and a flask of wine with his sesterii, and was left with a handful of denarii in change. It was enough to purchase a few figs also.

Michael returned home, and after a scant mid day meal of bread, cheese and figs, he recalled Seth's invitation of the previous evening. Seeing that his father would be all right alone for a while, he stepped out to go to Seth's house. It was not a great distance, but it was beyond the other side of the market, and in only a few minutes Michael was entering Seth's modest dwelling. "Shalom, my friend, I hope you are having a good day," he greeted Seth.

"Shalom, Michael. Thank you for coming. The day goes well enough, but I am much in need of some counsel, and you are the only one I can really trust."

Michael noted that Seth seemed a little disturbed which he had not observed the evening before. "What can I do to help you? I have little expertise with solving problems as you must be aware. However, I will certainly listen to you as you know."

"I know you will listen as a friend. But let us speak softly as I am unsure who might overhear us or what might be their reaction. To begin with, you know I have always been a good Jew, or at least a fairly good one," he added with a smile. "As you also know I have heard some of the new oration of the Christian sect and have formed some friendships with a few of the followers. Further, you know I have even read one of the new texts. The people I have met and talked with are quite sincere in their belief of this story, and what I must confess to you is that I am becoming absorbed with it. I also am impressed with the strength of their belief, and I feel compelled to believe it, also."

This admission jarred Michael. His immediate reaction was not to know how to respond. He sat outwardly quiet a few minutes while many disturbing thoughts raced through his head. "Has Seth fallen for this false history which is emerging from mysterious origins? Should I dissuade him because of what I have recently learned from the letters and my father?" He reacted immediately and thought, "No, that would positively expose my father and myself and would be completely unacceptable. But what must I do?"

Seth broke the silence, "Did you understand what I said? What is your opinion of my idea?"

"Yes, I heard you, but I do not know what to think of it, Seth. How can you be sure the events these people talk about actually happened? What evidence do they have? Why are you so convinced they are right?" Michael was thinking rapidly to find some way to talk Seth out of this madness, but in the process he knew he must not betray his father's involvement with the proceedings.

"It seems to be easy. When I listen to them and hear their obvious sincerity, something happens inside of me and I just feel they are correct. Their wholehearted commitment to this idea and the Jesus that is talked about convinces me they are honest in their feeling and have a genuine determination to spread this new good word of a savior who can save us all. I feel it is such a strong movement it must be so. And as I said, I am compelled to believe the teachings of love and compassion for others."

"But you are a rational person, Seth. Can they tell you where their stories came from? Surely there must be some history or other reliable documents which will corroborate their claims. Do you not want some real solid evidence before you ally yourself with such a stunning revelation and disconcerting new idea?"

"What proof do we have of anything Michael, except what we are told? Do not the elders always have the power to tell us whatever they want to? Besides, the new doctrines which are taught are very appealing. They talk of love and simply treating others honestly and fairly just as you wish to be treated. Surely there is nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"No, I cannot say there is, but what of your heritage? Is not the tradition of our fathers important also? What will the rest of your friends and family say if you profess this new idea? Can you afford to make yourself an outsider?"

"It feels to me the risks involved are worth the effort and the cost. It is just that I feel so good when I am with the others and that is such a new experience for me. I like to be included with a group whose basic ideas are loving and accepting. The teachings of salvation and escaping eternal pain give me a feeling of serenity which I have never before experienced. It would be most pleasant to be in this company forever, and be safe from harm."

"That is a strange idea to me, Seth. What is wrong with the teachings of our parents and the old ways which we have known all our lives?" Michael was at a loss to argue further. He felt constrained by his desire to protect Seth from a falsehood on the one side and his inability to expose it as not being valid on the other side without jeopardizing himself and his father. He did not know what to do or say and felt helpless.

The two talked on for some time but made no other progress. Finally, Michael offered, "Seth whatever you do, you will still be my friend, although I wish I could convince you not to follow this new group. But it is getting late and the hour for the evening meal approaches. I must get back to my father and see that he is all right."

"Yes, I understand. Thank you for listening to me, and trying to guide me. I appreciate that, but I must follow my own way, and I will always be your friend also."

Michael made his way home, but he carried with him a lot of troubles in his mind. "What is the right thing to do?" he thought. "How could he convince Seth of the inaccuracy of these stories without revealing how he knew that fact? Then again how important was it anyway? There were many different ideas around, and what does it matter what one believes as long as they behave well." These thoughts brought to mind his own reservations about the truth of the ancient texts. He whispered, "Who knows with certainty whether all the ideas they require us to believe are really true. Many of the ancient stories are rather fantastic also. Much of the Torah and the ancient writing are difficult to believe." Michael's troubled mind pursued him and bedeviled him all the way home.

His father was awake when he returned and Michael became engaged with the duties of the household. He had little time to think of his problems. It was quite late when he finished feeding his father some boiled grain and figs, and making him comfortable for the night. He completed the household chores of cleaning up and packing away their few utensils.

Michael sat for a while resting and began thinking of the letters and things Seth had said. He mused, "It is wrong to tell lies, but then again Seth seems to be so content with these new ideas. What is right anyway? How can we really know the truth of anything? Sometimes things seem true but then turn out to be false. Magicians and other charlatans can always confuse those of us who do not have great educations about reality. Sometimes I think others do not understand and do not realize they are speaking falsehoods either. It is difficult to know the truth"

He was tired, but the letters lured him with their intrigue. "I will read one more this evening. That will make one more I can burn and dispose of." He picked up the next letter and began.

THE THIRD LETTER

Dear Jeremiah,

I am much enthused by the way you all have embraced this task. I have sent my thanks to Thomas for his suggestions on the details of the Messiah story and the name, Jesus, for the man (or God as you will). It is particularly useful to have an outline and general idea of the tale we are trying to get across.

My writing is well under way. I will adapt to the recent suggestions and talk of the beginnings of Jesus' orations and miracles of curing. I shall also describe how our Jesus called his twelve disciples to follow him. Or should we call them apostles?

Using the information Thomas provided, I shall include many of the sayings and miraculous events necessary for a true divine person to display. Is he divine or is he a highly motivated religious fanatic? I believe it is probably not too important whichever we decide it to be, although the claim of divinity would certainly be more powerful. I suggest you do your manuscript in a similar fashion. It will be significant if we can all include and use the actual words which Thomas

supplied which the savoir is purported to use. However this is your choice at your discretion. The story will conclude naturally with the ultimate act of sacrifice, and a new promise of hope and a glorious time in the future.

I feel a real sense of purpose and I am motivated by the energy this project has inspired. I know I can devote much time to the writing as I am convinced we are doing a good thing for the future of our civilization, and particularly the Jewish people. Although we will not be here to witness it, I am positive it is an honorable pursuit, and we can be satisfied that our efforts are worthwhile.

If we are diligent in following the details Thomas provided, our stories will be reasonably the same and our general stories will hold together although we shall have no opportunity to compare them. While you are writing also consider how we can make this story be relevant to the revitalization of Jewish culture. This will be the difficult part. We need these new ideas to be related to the old texts, but we need to revise the ancient thoughts to fit modern times without destroying the original sentiments. That is our challenge.

I will mention something else only briefly. I saw a trusted friend recently whom I have not seen for years. He pressed me to know my current activities and I told him of our project. He was so interested in it he offered that he would also pursue some writings by himself and his friends which shall remain completely hidden and anonymous as are our writings. He and his friends will concern themselves with other characters in our story. My friend is old and lives quite far from here. I may never know what form his writings will take. So do not be surprised if other “ancient” histories are found some day.

I wish you all well in your endeavors. Now is the time for us to concentrate on writing and developing our ideas. We may be small and unimportant people, but our purpose is just. Though there are many of us who write, there are no great writers since the Roman, Ovid, died. However all of us ordinary scribes may add a little piece to the fabric of our history. It is my intention and my fervent hope our actions will benefit our cherished Jewish community.

A reminder once again, burn all correspondence and notes. We must remain anonymous. Leave only one finished manuscript to be found after you have died.

Your Friend in God,

Tyconus

MICHAEL'S DOUBTS

Michael finished the letter and looked at it almost in disbelief. Now there was no doubt at all in his mind. “This really is a conspiracy,” he muttered to himself. “How can my father be involved with such a thing,” he thought. “Is it as he says, the work is for the profit of the Jewish people and the Jewish Culture? I do not believe it is good. How can this help preserve the ancient ways? I could not be a part of this plan. But what can I do? Father has made me promise to release the document after he dies. How can I do that in good conscience?”

Michael was even more amazed than before. But he had also become very confused. His thoughts wandered, "How had his father become enmeshed in this conspiracy? What had motivated him to be involved with such a dubious undertaking? He had said he wanted to do something for the Jewish culture, but was this going to help? Making the ancient prophecies come true might satisfy some people, but if it were all a lie, is that constructive? Certainly times were bad, but times had always been bad for the Jews. Nothing is going to change, at least not in this lifetime."

He worked almost automatically as he fed the scraps into the flame. The glow of the candle mesmerized him and his mind seemed to hold still in time. He did not want to think of the future. He did not want to think of his father dying. He did not want to be a part of perpetuating a lie and a fraudulent history. Why was this perplexing problem visited on him? But he had promised. He had promised his father he would do as his father asked and he felt bound by his word.

For a long time after the letter was consumed, he sat and pondered this turn of events in his life. It had not been an easy life, but no one had easy times these days. Life was a struggle and the only sure things to hold onto were his family, friends and culture. But how steady was a heritage, if it could be distorted so easily? Finding enough work to keep his father and himself alive was all he could do. But in his experience his culture was kind and helpful to him.

His father had always seemed to him to be an honest and sincere person. This newly revealed aspect of Jeremiah's character was a little unsettling. All his life, the old man had served as a scribe and translator. He had always been interested in talking with people and reading all that was available. He knew much of what happened in the society, although it did not seem to affect their family very much.

They had never had many material things, but they had enough to live modestly and were solid members of the community. In their own little world they were able to insulate themselves from most of the troubles which beset the world and particularly the Jewish people. After his mother died, Michael had taken on the responsibility for caring for his father's needs, and they lived quietly together.

Perhaps, since his father served the community so long and so well before he became ill, their neighbors were more understanding and could always find a way to help them with a little work for Michael or some surplus food or goods they passed on to them. Michael remembered when he was small, his parents seemed to be helping their friends on many occasions and even passing strangers were freely offered whatever they needed. Jeremiah's income was never very great, but it was sufficient for the life they led.

Yet to subvert and purposefully try to change the way things had been and to do it secretly seemed to Michael to be dishonest or somehow immoral. He asked himself, "Does my father really believe these actions would improve their life and the future of the Jews? Would this false history have any effect on the way people lived or the fate of the Jewish community?"

Michael struggled long and hard with these questions. They would absorb his thoughts during much of his daily activity. It was not an easy time. But the days did pass. It was more than a week later when he found time and opportunity on another evening to read yet another of the letters. His father slept and the night was quiet. Michael withdrew the letters from his hiding place and sat down by the lamp.

THE FOURTH LETTER

Dear Jeremiah,

My efforts continue and I am pleased with my progress. I agree with your suggestion that we exchange writings. This is somewhat of a burden though to make multiple copies. I will instead send you a copy of what I have and you can send it on to the others after you have read it. Perhaps with the next letter I can include a copy. You are a better writer than I am, and I hope you can elaborate the story with your greater talent. I like your idea of using parables and healing opportunities for the Messiah to make his religious points to the people he contacts. The others may follow or expand on this as they see fit.

In working on this project, I feel better than I have in a great while. I think we are doing an important work which will have a useful outcome for our people. Perhaps we can again come together as a nation and maintain our culture as it should be. I feel we are being guided by God in our efforts, and our success will be to His glory.

A caution however, we must work as quickly as we can. I hear already that the farmers who have been forced into banditry by the Roman taxes are beginning to organize to fight against Rome. They call themselves the Zealots and have lost everything due to the excessive taxes on their crops. This can only mean trouble for all the Jews, if they bring on the wrath of the Romans.

A reminder once again, burn all correspondence and notes. Leave only one finished manuscript to be found after you have died.

Your Friend in God,

Tyconus

SETH THE CHRISTIAN

Michael finished this fourth letter which was shorter than the earlier ones. He slumped over the table and stared into the flame of the lamp. What curious turns of his world's events had brought him to this point? Here he was, a poor Jew trying to find some meaning in his life. All there was in his experience was his father, and his few friends. Now it seemed the whole world was coming apart. All he had ever been taught was being challenged by the actions his father had chosen to take late in his life.

Michael felt restless and unsettled. He was about to begin burning the letter, when he heard someone approaching outside the door. Quickly he tucked the letters into his small pantry behind a pot of meal. As he turned, Seth appeared and knocked tentatively at the doorway.

"Good Evening, Michael. May I come in?"

“Certainly Seth, have the seat with the blanket on it. What is on your mind this evening?”

Seth looked above undecidedly at the form of Jeremiah on the small bed. “May we talk without disturbing your Father?”

“I believe so. He sleeps rather soundly, and if we are quiet, it will be all right.”

After sitting down and settling into the seat, Seth began a little excitedly, “I have had the most wonderful experience. I have read another manuscript which my Christian friends have obtained. It is a story of the men who followed Jesus and their actions after he was gone. It also speaks of a man, Paul, who was miraculously converted in a vision of the Christ. He accepted the new teachings, and it tells of his work and experiences also. Further, it says the ancient Scriptures are being fulfilled in these days, and the news is inspiring and making us stronger in our souls. It is a great time to be alive and to learn of the wondrous events which have happened.”

Michael struggled to control his reaction to this news. He mused silently as he absorbed what Seth had said, “Was this another of Tyconus’ friends who had left a document concerning this savior Jesus? What am I to think?” He was aware Seth was expecting an answer, so he spoke aloud. “Where did this story come from? Who wrote it?” He asked skeptically.

“I do not know the source of it, but it reinforces all that I have read so far. I believe the Christians speak the real truth of God. The Messiah was here and left a rich body of knowledge for us to learn and to follow. As good Jews, we should accept new teachings as God reveals them. The ancient texts are fine, but we need a modern look at them. The Christians are providing that, and they seem to have a solid justification and a clear explanation for the ideas they talk about. It worries me though that many of my Jewish friends look on the Christians as some sort of threat and they disdain the stories. Some even disparage the good people who have accepted these new ideas.”

Michael was amazed as his thoughts raced through his head. “Seth is a rational person. I have known him all my life and I love him as a brother, but it seems he has taken leave of his otherwise good judgment and is deeply embroiled in these new ideas. What has happened?”

Aloud, he replied, “How do you know all this is true, Seth? Who are these people that are speaking of these new things and spreading these stories?”

“Who are they? They are just people. Some are trades men and their wives, some are farmers and herders, some are even among the elders, but we must all keep a little secretive about our faith. We are not looked upon very well in all parts of the community. If you want to know more, why not come to one of our meetings? I could take you.”

“No my friend, I am not enthused to seek change. I have my father to think of, and frankly, your new ideas disturb me. I don’t like things which do not fit in with the traditions and ideas I know. You may consider me to be old fashioned but it does not appeal to me.”

“Certainly, you must do whatever is comfortable for you, but you would always be welcome, I am sure.”

"I am content to hear you speak of it, Seth. I will be interested in what you find out, but that is as close as I wish to come to your new ideas. Would you like a glass of wine while we talk?"

"Yes, Thank you, I would."

Michael went to his small larder and poured into two clay cups from an almost empty flask and gave one to Seth. The two continued talking of their friends and the current troubles until Seth grew tired and withdrew to return to his home.

After Seth had left, Michael retrieved the old letter from behind the pot where he had hid it. He looked at it again. "Yes," he whispered. "You must be destroyed. I see great trouble if you are found, and this conspiracy is revealed." Although it was late and Michael was weary, he took the time to feed the letter bit by bit into the flame of the lamp.

As he sat at his task, Michael thoughts chased around in his mind. He was bedeviled by all that he had learned. "Why did my father and the others get involved with this crazy scheme? Evidently they all thought that by showing that the Messiah had been here and was offering salvation for the Jews, they would be helping the community. What good will it do though? I do not think it is a good idea. It is a false story. However, father did say, 'What is a lie? If it has been prophesied, could it not be actually true also. Who is to say what is true or not true?'"

"I realize these men, including my father, have acted with good intentions, but with what result?" He whispered. "What would be the future of this strange tale? I cannot fathom the consequent reactions in the time to come. Even now, it does not seem to me to be working the way they envisioned it. Instead of bringing the Jews together, they seem to be creating a schism. Traditional Jews do not like these new ideas, and those that do and leave the faith reduce our numbers and our strength. I do not think I can honor my father's request and give his manuscript to the authorities. The situation is bad enough now, how can I justify making it worse?"

Eventually the letter was nothing but ash. He breathed out a sigh of relief and went to attend to his father. After he was sure all was well for the night, he turned to his own pallet and sought sleep.

URIAH'S WISDOM

The following day was very busy for Michael. He had promised to help some friends in re-building a wall around their garden. Time and weather had taken their toll and repairs were needed. It was a long day with several trips back to see that his father was still all right and had food and water. The work on the wall was slow and difficult. The rocks and the clay were heavy. It was late when Michael returned home for the night. He had agreed to return again the next day, so he got to bed early to be ready for tomorrow.

Tomorrow came and went as did many tomorrows. There was very little change to Michael's life. Just meeting the necessities of keeping food in the house and some fuel to provide a little resistance to the elements were full time jobs for Michael. Michael felt quite fortunate. Whenever his little cash reserve got low, it seemed another job came along to give him work and income. Although it was a marginal existence, he always seemed to manage. He helped friends with the tasks they needed to have done. He built and repaired furniture and walls, carried water for those

unable to carry their own, dug gardens for those who could afford them, and even helped some shop keepers when they were overwhelmed with re-arranging their merchandise.

On a Sabbath when the weather was dry and clear, Michael sat outside his door trying to get a little warmth from the Sun. It was his pleasure to see Seth approaching down the alley.

“Shalom, Michael. How are you on this fine sunny Sabbath?”

“Shalom, Seth, welcome. I have not seen you for quite a while. How is life treating you, my friend?”

“Ah, I survive. I am luckier than most. The merchant, Isaac, keeps me busy in his shop as I have done these many years. He is stern but fair with me. As long as I keep things in order and move the merchandise from the other traders to where he wants it, all is well. He insists I bargain firmly with the customers, but that is not difficult, and it provides some diversion during the day.”

“Yes, I wish my work were more steady. I scratch a little here and a little there to make a living, but I also survive.”

“And how is your father? Is there any change?”

“No, he just gradually declines. He sleeps most of the time, and it is a chore to get him to eat anything. He does not seem to suffer though. At least, he does not complain. It seems he has been sick so long, he is accustomed to it.”

“I am truly sorry. He is a fine man.”

The two friends fell silent and were comfortable in just sitting together and following their own thoughts.

It was some minutes before Seth spoke again. “I have other news which I wish to share. I have seen an even earlier account of the Christian story. This agrees with the others and for me is the most convincing. It is the revelations of a man called Mark, and it is the oldest of the stories. For all the Christians, it is the most revered. It was a special circumstance that I was allowed to see it. An old man has a copy of it and a friend in the group got permission for me to read it. The writing was most convincing, and it has given me a new perspective on how to live. For me, there is great hope for the future now. I have never been more content with my life. And all my recently acquired friends I know are good and kind.”

Michael was befuddled by the mixed emotions this news caused him. He did not immediately respond, but struggled with how he should react. He knew the story was not true, but could not ever reveal that information. It would destroy him and his father, if he let anyone know the truth. Yet Seth was a friend and deserved to know that he was being deceived. He silently asked himself. “Where is my greater loyalty?” The answer would not readily come and he must reply. Finally he offered his comments, “Seth, my friend, if you are happy, I am happy for you. We all must follow our own path, and I wish the best for you. You certainly are a smart person and can make your own decisions. This group of yours is not for me however.”

“Thank you, Michael. I understand how you feel, and I respect that also. Would you at least come to a meeting with me to see for yourself what these people are like, and hear the good news they offer?”

“Thank you my friend, but think I would rather not. I am very content with who and what I am. I do not want to change at my age in life. Besides I am usually working or taking care of my father and really do not have time.”

“I certainly realize that completely. But if you ever change your mind, I would gladly take you to meet with us and to observe our group. They would welcome you.”

Seth took his leave and left Michael sitting in the light of the Sun. He sat a long time musing on the predicament he felt. One on hand there was the devotion to his father; on the other hand there was his strong friendship with Seth. To whom should he be true? Is it fair to let a lie prosper at the expense of a person whose commitment to life is under a cloud? He was disturbed and needed to talk with someone. “I will talk with Uriah,” he whispered.

Uriah and Naomi lived in the same alley as Michael’s abode, but in the direction away from the market and in another compound. Michael did not know how many years they had known his parents, but it was long before he had been born. Through the years Uriah and Naomi had been constant visitors and often spent time with Jeremiah and Rebecca. They were particularly helpful when Rebecca died. Naomi had guided Michael in learning to do cooking and the necessary chores in maintaining a household and become familiar with the routines required to care for a sick man. Besides Seth, they were the closest long time friends Michael had.

A two minute walk brought him to Uriah’s dwelling. Uriah was also sitting in the sunshine and relaxing in observance of the Sabbath as was the common practice.

“Shalom, Uriah. I hope you are prospering these days.”

“Shalom, Michael. I do well enough. And you, do you have all you and your father need?”

“Yes, though it is a continual struggle. I do manage to find work most of the time.”

“How is your father today?”

“He is not well, but he at least is comfortable. The coughing does not seem to be as bad today. I worry about him even though there is nothing I can do to help.”

“Yes, it is sad. I stopped in to see him some days ago. He was awake and we talked a little. It was at a time that you were working on a wall, according to him.”

“Thank you for visiting. I was quite busy then. I am pleased that you were able to talk with him. I know he respects you very much and

must have appreciated your concern.”

“Yes, we had a good conversation. It was a little strange however. He kept wanting to know what I had heard of that group called Christians, and what I thought of them.”

“Oh? That is interesting. What did you tell him?” Michael was grateful that Uriah had brought up exactly the topic he wanted to discuss.

“I told him I knew very little of them, but what I did know was not good. They seem to me to be twisting the old teachings to give them new meanings. I think they do that to suit their own ideas, but I do not think they are God’s ways as I learned them. The new ideas are confusing to me, and do not seem to be the things I have always been taught. I added that it was the sort of thing we could expect when the world is in so much trouble, and there are so many demented mad men around talking of all sorts of strange ideas.”

“I have heard that most of the Christians are good gentle people,” Michael offered. “People say that the Christians talk of loving everyone, and having greater respect for each other. They speak of new ways for the people to follow for satisfaction in life and in serving God.”

“Yes, I have heard that also, Michael, but to me it seems dangerous to try to change the old ways. We have lived and survived by the ancient teachings for a long time now. I think it is unprofitable to try making new rules and then deciding to abide by new untested ways. I think the Christians are a crazy lot. They may prosper for a while but eventually they will die out again and our lives will return to normal. Good Jews should have nothing to do with them.”

“I seem to meet more and more of them. They appear to be gentle and considerate in what they do.”

“Well you may think what you like. I will have as little to do with them as possible.”

“How do you explain all these writings they are uncovering telling of the coming of the Messiah some years ago?”

“Oh!” responded Uriah, “They are just writings. Anyone can tell a story. When we truly need the Messiah, he will come. I do not think He has been here yet. As Jews, I think it will be well to continue the ways of our heritage and not question those who know better than we do.”

The two continued talking about events in the neighborhood until dusk settled. Naomi came then out carrying a tray with several items arranged on it.

“Shalom, Michael, I have heard you two talking a long time. Now that the Sabbath is over, will you celebrate Havdalah (separation ceremony) with us?”

“Shalom, Naomi, you are very kind. I would indeed like to do that, but then I must get back to my father. He may be needing something by now.”

Naomi picked up a container of fragrant herbs which was passed around for them all to enjoy smelling. Uriah blessed the wine which was then poured. He blessed the Havdalah candle which was then lit. The three spent a few more minutes talking together quietly. After enjoying their wine and a few little sweet wafers, Michael left with the parting words, Shavuah tov! (have a good week).

On the way returning to his own home Michael was lost in thought. "Uriah does not think highly of these Christians. However, Seth does regard them well. Who is right? Can they both have valid arguments? I wish I could decide for myself, but it is all so confusing. My father must have strong convictions that this is the right way to go, and I respect his ideas very much. It is all so new to me though. My life is difficult enough. I will not think of it further."

JEREMIAH AND REBECCA

The week was busy with the task of making a living again. Michael was very lucky. He had many requests for his help in doing odd jobs and performing the heavier work which some could not do. His parents had many friends in the community, and those friends were able to provide the work which Michael needed. He kept busy helping them in exchange for pay or food or whatever else they could supply. As he sat eating a small breakfast of bread and fish before starting his work day, Michael thought back on his young life.

Jeremiah and Rebecca had been a typical married couple. They were good Jews and reliable members of their little community who were committed to assisting people however they could. They were regularly as generous as possible with their friends and were always helping those in want. It was the custom for members of the community to care for each other, but Jeremiah and Rebecca did more than most and could always be depended on in time of need. Jeremiah was the Scholar, scribe and translator, and Rebecca was the practical one who consistently knew what to do in important situations.

Michael was the only son of Jeremiah and Rebecca. They had hoped he would be a Rabbi but he did not like all the studying. He had preferred to work with his hands and was able to find other occupations for himself. He enjoyed repairing and building and all manner of physical work. Michael was not a large person, but he had a muscular build and was strong. He had the dark hair and well tanned skin which was more like his mother's side of the family.

The three had lived quietly together until Rebecca suddenly died at an early age. She contracted an unexplained illness causing her death from a high fever. Jeremiah was quite a bit older than Rebecca, and he was already in declining health when she died several years ago.

Even though he was younger then, Michael remembered the day very well. His mother had been ill for several days. One morning his father hurried him out of the house without any breakfast. His mother had been very quiet during the night and seemed to be asleep on her pallet. It was a day for classes with the Rabbi, and by the time Michael returned, his father was sitting in the courtyard with Uriah and some other friends while the women from the community appeared to be busy in his father's house.

"Michael, come here." his father called.

“Yes, father.”

“I must tell you something sad.” There were tears in Jeremiah’s eyes, but he continued. “Your mother has not been able to resist the fever. I must tell you she has died.” The men with Jeremiah were somber and quiet.

“Died? Oh, no, no. That cannot be. I must see her.” Michael was suddenly dismayed and his features contorted in fright and horror.

As he turned to go into the house, Jeremiah held him and restrained him. “No, you may not. The women are preparing the body for burial, and you must not disturb them.” Michael, who was still an adolescent fell into his fathers arms and wept.

As they were talking, Uncle Jonas arrived with two servants who were carrying a plain wooden coffin.

Jeremiah greeted him. “Thank you for providing a coffin, Jonas. I must go now and speak with the Rabbi about the funeral.”

“No, Jeremiah, you stay here with Michael. I will go and make the arrangements.”

“That is kind of you Jonas. I appreciate your concern and help.”

“Well, she was my sister, and I am as upset as you are. All of our families are involved. It is only proper.”

Michael stayed with his father and the men who talked quietly together. Michael was dismayed. He was crying and stayed next to his father. He did not know what to think or what to do. He had been completely unprepared for this to happen. Silently he pursued his thoughts, “Why did this happen? Is God angry with us? Did I do anything wrong? My parents are good people, why should we have this sorrow?” The full realization of the event did not occur to him until later after the funeral and after returning to a house without his mother. It seemed like a long painful time until Uncle Jonas returned, but finally he was back.

“The Rabbi wants to proceed as soon as the body is ready, Jeremiah. He will be here soon.”

Thank you, Jonas.”

The small group talked quietly together as other people gathered with them. Michael could not keep track of the passing of time, but eventually all was ready.

Jonas was the strong person in the group and by mutual acquiescence took charge of the proceedings.

“Michael you walk here with your father and me. Cousin Uriah will walk with us also.” The Rabbi led the way followed by the men carrying the coffin. Next were the immediate family followed the rest of the family and then their friends. Michael remembered how long the trip to the cemetery was, how brief the burial was, and how long the trip home was. He realized on the way he was walking away from his mother and would

never see her again and wept as he walked.

Before he attained manhood, Michael found himself responsible for helping to maintain the household. It was convenient that Michael's uncle Jonas allowed them to remain in the living quarters, but Michael still had to help earn enough for food and fuel for himself and his father. He gave up his classes and devoted himself to working full time.

Jeremiah had always enjoyed his work. He was a small man of slight build and not inclined to heavy work, so it suited him very well to work with his mind rather than his body. It had been a pleasure for him to deal with words and meanings. He had relished talking with people and putting their words into writing whenever they required a written record. Reading, Writing and Studying had been his life's work, and he seemed most content when he was working and producing useful information.

After his wife's death however, Jeremiah's health seemed to decline more rapidly. He lost interest in his work and was not the happy person he had been before. He became morose, and his usual pleasant attitude disappeared. Michael recognized that his father seemed to have given up on life.

Rebecca on the other hand had been a more robust person who came from a large family of sheep herders. Of plain and unremarkable features, she was nevertheless a cheerful and gregarious personality. It was from her that Michael had received his love of hard work and the satisfaction he felt when he had accomplished something tangible and had made a physical difference in the world no matter how small. Even repairing a stool so that it stood firmly on its legs again gave him pleasure. Rebecca had seemed the more alive and healthier of the couple, which made it doubly strange when she was the one to suffer illness and die. That is why her death had been a shock to all who knew her.

But Michael did not have time to dwell on those kinds of thoughts. His physical labor kept him busy and tired. And the responsibility of tending to his father's needs filled his time and his life to overflowing with things to do. This week there was work for Michael with a friend the other side of the market. It was a full day of moving dirt and replanting many shrubs. He set off early in the morning, and returned at mid day to be sure his father had all that he required. Michael heated some broth with vegetables, and left his father in bed taking a nap as he returned to work very late until dusk. When he came back in the evening, the lamp was not lit. He took a candle to the fire in the courtyard and came back with a small flame to light the oil lamp.

A NEW FUTURE

After Michael lit the lamp, he began to think of the evening meal and what he might get his father as was his custom. In the shadows of their small rooms, he could see his father curled up on the bed. He went to speak to him, as he had not stirred when Michael entered. "Father, are you awake?" There was no reply. Michael approached closer and reached out to touch Jeremiah's shoulder to rouse him. He still did not stir. "Father?" he paused, "Father, are you all right?" In sudden panic Michael shook his father more firmly, but there was no response. He felt for his father's heart but felt nothing. His father was not breathing.

The abrupt realization that his father was dead shook Michael. He suddenly felt sick and began weeping as he held his father. He had long

known this day would come, but who can truly be prepared for such an event. He wept freely and held his father hoping he would awake, but he after a time he realized that was not to be. He took a few minutes to partially compose himself. He did not know what to do, but he was aware he must get assistance. Uriah was closest. He would help.

Michael stumbled out into the darkened passageway and found his way to Uriah's place. In a short time he was calling as he entered their house. "Uriah, Naomi, my father has died. What must I do? Oh! What can I do? Please help me. Oh! Oh! Oh!"

His friends were sitting at their supper table, and they arose quickly when Michael entered. They too had long expected such a moment. As the elderly are more resigned to dealing with death, they accepted the news more calmly and embraced and comforted Michael. After sitting him down and learning more of what had happened, they insisted that Michael stay there with Naomi while Uriah tended to the necessary details. "I will go to tell the Rabbi and your friends. We will take care of the fitting rituals and proper procedures. Sit here Michael and have a little wine. It will be all right. We will help."

Naomi and Michael sat quietly, talking only occasionally. It was not long before Seth appeared at the doorway. "Shalom, my friends, may I come in? I have heard the sad news. May I help in some way?"

"Shalom, Seth," replied Naomi, "Come and sit with us, I will get you a cup of wine, also." Michael sat quietly and disconsolately unable to speak to his friend, but he rose and the two friends embraced as Seth offered his sympathy and comfort.

"Your father was a good and righteous man. You must now be proud of the good life he lived. Remember you have many friends in the community, and we are all sorry to lose such a decent, caring person as your father."

The three sat and talked as the night progressed. After a time, Uriah returned. "All is taken care of, Michael. We have a friend who has offered a burial spot and the neighbors are doing all that is necessary to prepare the body. It is so late, the Rabbi told us it would be acceptable to perform the burial rituals in the morning."

It was decided that Michael should spend the night with Uriah and Naomi, and let the friends and neighbors take care of the details of death. After further condolences, Seth left to return to his home.

In later days, Michael did not remember well all that followed. He did not sleep easily that night, and the subsequent day was more a dream than reality as the proper rituals were observed.

He spent the day in mourning and being surrounded by his friends and neighbors. His Uncle Jonas spent all day with him and received the condolences of friends also. This was more attention than Michael ever remembered Uncle Jonas granting him even when his mother died, but of course Michael was much younger then, and at that time Jonas was concerned mainly with Jeremiah.

Uncle Jonas had business interests besides the responsibility of managing his flocks outside the city, so he was often gone for many days. His family and his business kept him occupied most of the time, and Michael had never had much opportunity to talk with Jonas. Besides being upset,

Michael felt ill at ease with his Uncle. Conversation was strained.

"Your father was a good man Michael. I respected him very much. My sister was very devoted to him and I was pleased to be able to provide them, and you, a place to live."

"They always appreciated that Uncle Jonas. And so do I."

"You are part of the family, Michael. I did not quite agree when your mother wished to marry Jeremiah, but it turned out to be a good match. I know they were happy together."

"Yes, we were happy, but it was a great burden when my mother died. The last few years taking care of my father have been difficult."

"I understand that, Michael. You have been a good son to Jeremiah and Rebecca. Although I cannot spend much time with you, you are dear to me also. Please be comfortable in staying in your home as long as you wish. I do not need the building for anything and you are welcome to it."

"I am grateful, Uncle Jonas."

After the burial, Michael spent the rest of the week in seclusion. Neighbors left him food and did not disturb him. After several days, he started wandering in the market during the day or even took long walks out of town. He had to do something and needed time to think of himself and the future. Even on the Sabbath, he walked farther than the Sabbath laws allowed, but he felt comfortable doing it. God did not strike him down for his misdeeds.

After another week, he rather mechanically brought himself back to his own life and engaged in repairing a roof which he had promised to a friend several weeks previously. His neighbors treated him kindly and considerately. Gradually he fell back into his old ways. At the end of one day in which he did some particularly satisfying constructive work he returned home; and as he ate his evening meal of stewed meat and vegetables, he finally felt a sense of peace. "I will go on with my life," he said to himself determinedly. "It is the right thing to do." He slept much better that night than he had slept since his father's death.

THE LAST LETTERS

It was several days later, when Michael again thought of the letters. In the evening he gathered the remaining letters which amounted to only three more small sheets and sat by the dim smoking lamp. As he held the letters in his hands his thoughts wandered into the past.

"Mother, Father, what will become of me? I have no plan for my life. Everything which has happened to me just seemed to happen without any planning. There was never any time to think ahead or consider what I should do. Now it seems there is nothing but time; time to think and worry about the future. What will it be like? Will we ever escape oppression? Will father and his friends with their plan make our culture better and stronger or will it just become worse?"

He gradually realized he had been sitting and thinking a long time and became aware again the letters in his hand. He took the top one and started reading.

THE FIFTH LETTER

Dear Jeremiah,

The outline of the story of Mark is complete. I am filling in the details as I am able although my strength is ebbing. With this letter is also a brief synopsis of the work. I cannot send more than this because of the effort of all the writing.

I will be doing well to finish this task before it finishes me, but I am confident I can do it. I hear of the terrible conflicts between the Romans and the Jews occurring and I wonder whether our efforts will in the end be useful or just too late. I am tired, but still hopeful.

Remember, you must burn all correspondence and notes. One inconspicuous manuscript among your papers will do.

Your Friend in God,

Tyconus

MUSINGS

With no one around he spoke out loud, "So Tyconus had finished his writing. He sounds older and more concerned. He must have been a caring person to have worked so hard and so long on something he considered important. Dedication such as that exhibits a strong conviction. I wish I were more the scholar my father was. Perhaps I would understand better what they are trying to do. Is their purpose good or bad? Where will this all lead?" He pondered for several minutes, then slowly looked again to his hands. "What does the last letter say?"

THE SIXTH LETTER

Dear Jeremiah,

It is finished and conveniently stored with the rest of my writings. It is identified only as the Memories of Mark.

Please pass the synopsis on to Philip soon so that he may complete the Luke writing. Events in the world seem only to get worse. Now the Temple has been destroyed. What will happen next? I am old and tired. I cannot do more.

Burn this.

Your Friend in God,

Tyconus

END OF ANXIETY

The last letter was very brief. It said nothing new but seemed to finalize the whole project. It did not take Michael very long to feed the small scraps into the flame of oblivion. It was done. He felt relieved as the writing disappeared, but the smell again was overpowering and distasteful.

As he fed the last bits of the last letter into the flame, he thought, "Now it is over. The letters are gone. No one will ever be able to read them, and only I know their content." It was the end of the worry of being exposed, but he still had another, heavier concern hanging over him. "I still do not know what to do about the writing my father left. Should I honor his wishes and turn it over to the authorities, or is the flame a more appropriate destiny?" By the time he had finished with the burning, it was late and he decided to lie down on his pallet. His thoughts accompanied him to bed though, and he tossed restlessly most of the night.

THE INVITATION

Seth began visiting Michael more often. Without the concern of the care of Jeremiah, there was more time for talking and being together. Their conversation always gravitated toward the Christians and the new ideas they were espousing. Seth was enthusiastic and had become a committed follower. Michael, because of his knowledge of the origins of the ideas was much less interested in the group.

"Shalom, Michael." Seth greeted Michael one evening as he wandered into Michael's house. He held on to the old greeting by force of habit and because it felt comfortable to him.

"Shalom, Seth. Have you had a good day?"

"Certainly. Every day is a good day, if the good Lord allows me to wake up and enjoy it. And you? How was your day?"

"It was a little better than most days. I worked for a friend cleaning his walls and enjoyed his company all day also. But did you hear? A

Roman column marched through the market square today. They stole goods and food from the vendors as they passed by. It is just another instance of the disrespect we are shown. Jedda the grocer lost a lot of fruit in the incident.”

“We must pity the Romans then, because they do not know any better. Everyone will get their just treatment in the end of days.”

“Perhaps, but until then it is a hardship on those who are mistreated and unfairly deprived of their possessions. The Romans are always taking advantage of us. Someday we may have the power again. Then we will see what being fair is like.”

“Michael, my friend, it sounds as though you have much dislike in your heart. The new teachings say we should love our enemies and do good to them that hurt us.”

“I do not understand these new ideas. It is not the way of the world. It does not seem to me to be the way to survive in the conditions which we see around us every day.”

“I wish you would come just once to our meeting and get acquainted with the good people there. It might change your mind for the better.”

“My Jewish upbringing is strong. I admire and respect my parents, and I believe in the traditions I have grown up with and which my culture and neighbors follow also. I cannot change. It is not my nature to change.”

As they fell into a silent period, Michael considered Seth’s invitation. In his thoughts he argued with himself, “I really do not know what these people are saying or what they believe. I have never read the scrolls that have been generated by my father’s friends. I have never even read what my father wrote. He said just to keep it and turn it over to the authorities after he died. I have still not decided to do that. I think it would be better just to burn it along with the letters from Tyconus which are no longer a problem. But what if I am wrong? Who can advise me? No one must know about the plot behind these writings, so how can I ask anyone, even Uriah, about what I should do. It may be that I should learn a little more about these Christians. That may be the way to decide what path I should take to solve the worry of my father’s writing. Yes, that would be an appropriate course of action.”

“Michael my friend, you are deep in thought. Is something troubling you, or is it just the remaining sorrow you feel for the loss of Jeremiah?”

“Oh. Seth, many things trouble me, but I am getting adjusted to living alone now. I am through grieving, as my father was an old man and had lived a full life. I am sure he was relieved to escape the pain and suffering. He did not have much of a life near the end anyway. He existed, but that was all.”

“It might be good for you to have some new experiences. At present you know only your own close little groups.”

Michael smiled, “You are still encouraging me to attend your meeting. I always knew you were persistent.” He turned away and stared at the flickering of the lamp, and became silent.

Seth also smiled. "You know me too well, my friend. Yes, I am persistent when I think I am right, but I am also concerned for your well being."

Michael recognized he was feeling a profound gratitude for a friend like Seth. "Yes, he cares for me," he thought. "Yes, he is an outgoing person and thinks of others. I should humor him. Perhaps I can learn something in the process also."

Turning again to Seth he spoke decisively. "Seth, my friend, I will come to your meeting just once. It is possible we can then lay this issue to rest. I feel I should learn something about these Christians, although I am more sure that their ideas are not for me. The old ways are what I feel are the right ways. Nevertheless, when do you meet again? Are you sure it is all right if I come with you?"

Seth smiled broadly. "I am quite sure it is all right. I have already spoken to them about you, and they would welcome you. You might even be surprised to see who is there."

"All right, I will come."

"We meet after sundown following the Sabbath. Come to my place then and I will show you the way. It is on the edge of town in the lower area of a large house, where we can meet without attracting attention."

"Fine, I will plan on it then."

The two talked of other small happenings in the neighborhood, and as it grew late, Seth took his leave. "Shalom Michael, I will see you after the Sabbath."

"Yes, after sundown of the Sabbath. Shalom, Seth."

THE MEETING

The Sabbath was a clear bright day. Michael stayed close to home and did very little. He had been busy all week and was grateful for some respite. After sundown, he ate several slices of bread with honey, some nuts and a few raisins. Thus satisfied, he set off to find Seth.

As he approached Seth's quarters, the man himself came strolling out. "Shalom, Seth, here I am."

"Shalom, Michael, I thought you would be coming along soon."

The two set off in the gathering twilight with Seth determining the way. "I always take a slightly different route. It is a little idiosyncrasy of mine. I do not like to get into habits. I feel they restrict the way I can experience the world."

Michael followed along. They walked to the far side of town on streets Michael had not explored before. As they approached a corner, Seth greeted another person coming from the other direction. "Darius, my friend, it is good to see you again. This is Michael, another friend of mine. He is my guest tonight."

"God be with you, Michael. Anyone who is a friend of Seth is always welcome. Have you been to any meetings before?"

"No, I must admit, I am here out of curiosity only. Seth has spoken so highly of this meeting, that I decided I must see for myself. I consider myself a reasonably good Jew, although I may not always do what is correct or go to the Synagogue as often as I should. I think this new idea is not for me, but I am interested and want to learn about it."

"We always welcome those who are seeking. We believe we have new truths to offer, and many of us ordinary people find them appealing. That is what convinced me to come here from Rome. I left my Roman upbringing and the Roman Gods behind to come here and become a Christian myself."

The three walked a few more minutes until they came to a large old structure. It looked rather well weathered and in some places needed repair. They approached it from the rear and entered a door at the bottom of a flight of steps going to the lower level.

The interior was an immense hall which must have been under the entire building. Michael noticed all the windows, which were small, were also well covered to prevent light from escaping, but the room was still light from many lamps. The atmosphere was a little dank, but it was warm enough, and it was a comfortable room. Seth introduced Michael to many people, but Michael could not remember all the names. Everyone seemed genuinely glad to see him and made him feel welcome.

After a few more persons arrived, an older man whose name was Zebulon, started speaking. "Welcome my friends, God be with you."

Most in the group responded, "And with you."

Zebulon continued, "First, I have some exciting news. My old friend who loaned us our copy of the writings of Mark has told me now that we may keep it. There are more and more copies being made, and he does not need to have this one back. It is now ours for our exclusive use."

There were muted cries of joy from the assemblage. People whispered between themselves and there was a general feeling of pleasure. Darius spoke up for all to hear, "Zebulon, would you convey our great thanks and appreciation to your friend. Tell him we will cherish it and use it wisely."

"Yes, yes," was heard throughout the room.

"Yes. Darius, I will tell him. I have already thanked him, but he will be pleased to hear your response also."

Zebulon then began reading. The story was of the man called Jesus and of a time when he spoke to a large crowd. He spoke for such a great

time that the multitude became hungry, but they had little food. Jesus instructed his helpers to gather whatever food anyone had and bring it to him. It was only a small amount, but Jesus blessed it and it became enough to feed everyone. This miracle authenticated Jesus as a divine person and many of the multitude became true believers.

After the reading, everyone joined hands and Zebulon talked further in terms of prayers for the less fortunate, for the safety and good health of all the members, for the softening of the Roman oppressor's hearts, and for peace until the joyous events at the end of time.

Then Zebulon allowed a time for individuals to talk about themselves and their experiences to the group. Many expressed how well they felt since they had been coming to the meetings. Now that they had heard many times the good words of the writings, they were happy to be following the new ideas of love and acceptance.

Michael lost interest at this point and began looking more intently at others in the room. Some looked vaguely familiar as persons he had seen in the market and other places. There were several he was sure he had seen in the past in the Synagogue. Most were unknown to him though, and were new acquaintances.

There was a young woman, who was quite attractive, and whom Michael remembered clearly seeing somewhere in the market on many occasions when he was buying food. He struggled to remember her name from when Darius was introducing the members. Finally it came to him. Ida, her name was Ida, and he also remembered exactly where he had seen her. She was usually in the back mostly out of sight at the vegetable stall of old Simon. Could she be his daughter?

The loud deep voice of Zebulon brought Michael abruptly back to the present. The black robed leader raised his hand and gave some sort of parting words and a blessing until they might meet the next time.

Afterward the individuals of the group were in no hurry to leave. They stood around in groups exchanging news and stories. Darius approached Michael and began, "Michael, I am told you do all types of repair and manual labor. Seth says you do exceptionally good work. Is that true?"

"Well, I am pleased that he thinks so. I try to do my best. I believe if people are satisfied with my work, they will ask me back again in the future."

"I have a group of workers, and we keep busy with many jobs in the community. I can always use more help, and if you are interested and if you can do what I need, I would be glad to hire you occasionally."

Michael felt a leap of excitement in his mind. This was good news, but he tried to hide his pleasure. "Yes, I often have days when my usual work is not needed. I would be pleased to help you, if I can."

"What exactly do you do, Michael?"

"I think I must have done every type of physical work there is, but I prefer construction. I have built houses, fences, walls, walkways and even helped with a roadway, and I have generally repaired all types of structures."

"That sounds like exactly like what I need. I will talk to you again when my need is more immediate."

Michael accompanied Seth as he talked with other persons and met trades people, and other businessmen and some scholars also. All this was more than Michael could absorb, for he had never spoken to so many enthusiastic men and women. As Seth and Michael left the building, it happened that Ida was also leaving. The three walked mostly in silence for the short distance to where she turned in the opposite direction to that of Seth and Michael.

"God be with you," were her parting words.

"And with you," replied Seth.

Michael was astonished to find himself following in the same spirit and answering, "God be with you."

After proceeding a short distance, Seth asked, "Well, what do you think of my friends, Michael?"

Michael did not speak immediately. After a moment or two he found some carefully chosen words. "They are certainly all friendly people. They are pleasant to talk with and seem to be happy and content with the ideas that they have learned with your group. I must admit I enjoyed the experience. But I am not sure what to think beyond that. I will have to contemplate it for a while. I guess I will reserve any judgment for later."

"That is fine. New ideas are not easily accepted. I hope it was a constructive experience for you."

"Yes, it was, and I was glad to meet Darius also. He may have work for me in the future. You must have told him good things about me, and I appreciate that. Thank you."

"Well, my friend, I did not tell him anything that was not true. You have a good reputation in our neighborhood."

"But what about you, Seth, do you accept all these new ideas? Do you believe the stories which are told about the man Jesus?"

"My experience in accepting the teachings is they give me a great new view of my life. I work easier and with less anxiety. I enjoy being with people more. I do not worry about the future. Having faith makes all the difference. I feel connected to something great and good and I know it is right. Who am I to doubt the stories? They are related by very learned men, and there must be truth in them. I do not know anyone who says they could not have happened. I do not think it is a matter of them being true, though. It is having faith, and believing in the Savior which makes the stories real for me. I do not care whether they are true or not. I get great comfort from them, and that is what I want. One comes to a point where one just has to have faith, and all the rest follows."

The two friends continued walking without much conversation as they picked their way through the darkened streets and alleys. Seth seemed to know the area very well and Michael was glad to have him as a guide. Eventually they came to Seth's door and parted.

A few minutes later, Michael was relieved to finally reach his own place. He hardly remembered getting to bed and going to sleep.

JOSIAH AND JEDDA

Morning came too early, and Michael was out of the house at sunup after a quick breakfast. His day was spent traveling from one to another of several places where he had previously arranged to help. First there was Josiah the tailor who needed a table repaired. This was in exchange for mending Michael's robe some while ago.

"Shalom Josiah."

"Shalom Michael. It is good to see you."

"And you Josiah. I am sorry it has taken me so long to come to repair your table."

Josiah was a small wizened man who looked older than he was. He had a self deprecating appearance which was confirmed by the way he spoke.

"That is alright Michael. I have been able to manage even though the table is unsound."

"Yes, I see it needs much attention."

Michael set to work with his cutting tools and formed a new leg from the wood Josiah had acquired. It was slow cutting and fitting, but Michael was very adept at his work. They conversed occasionally as each pursued their own craft. The tailor and the carpenter were absorbed in doing the best they could.

"Did the Romans disturb you when they came through last week, Josiah?"

"No, my shop is small enough and out of the main route. Also as you can see, I have no sign to let my presence be known. I keep as obscure as possible. Those who need my services know where to find me, and I do not need to guide the Romans to my door."

"That is probably wise. The Romans are usually up to no good. It is best to avoid them."

"I agree. Recently they have begun to be more annoying. They seem to go after these Christians wherever they find them. At least, if they

are doing that, they are leaving the Jews alone.”

“What do you think of the Christians, Josiah?”

“I do not know anything about them. I do not want to know anything about them. I am a good Jew and I go to the Synagogue regularly. I mind my own business and hope others do the same. The world would be a better place if everyone were like me and they did not interfere with other honest people.”

Michael worked diligently with his tools and finally assembled and glued on the new leg. As he packed up his equipment, he took his leave of Josiah.

“Do not use the table until tomorrow. The glue needs to dry and set without being disturbed.”

“I will do as you say. I appreciate that you fixed it for me.”

“That is my pleasure. And you have been most kind in mending my robe when it needed repairing. Shalom, Josiah. I hope you continue to prosper.”

“Shalom, Michael, you are a good person.”

Next there was Jedda the fruit merchant who needed a newer, larger stand on which to place his produce. The old one had been badly damaged in the melee when the Romans stole fruit some days earlier. A few minutes walk brought him to the center of the market.

“Shalom, Jedda. I have come to rebuild your fruit stand. How is your business today?”

“Shalom to you, Michael. Although I do not feel very peaceful these days. Business is fine, but I will appreciate getting a new larger bench on which to display my fruit. The Romans left me in bad shape, and it has been difficult.”

“I understand. I see you have acquired the pieces of wood I suggested. I can have this together soon and relieve your problem.” Michael set to work with his knives and other tools. Using pegs he had whittled and prepared at home, he was soon assembling a sturdy bench which was strong enough to hold much of Jedda’s fruits and nuts.

While he worked he took an opportunity during a lull in the selling activity to talk to Jedda. “I am sorry the Romans treated you so badly. Why do they feel they can always take advantage of us?”

“It has always been the Roman nature to be aggressive. Perhaps it is God’s way of punishing us for our sins. I must admit though, I do not feel sinful and sometimes I wonder at the ways of our strict and demanding God. There are times when I think I could do better without him.”

“Do not let the Elders hear you say that. I am sure they could use it for an excuse to cause you trouble also.”

“Oh, the Rabbi knows my feelings. I am outspoken often enough with him. We have an understanding.”

“Perhaps you need to join the Christians,” Michael joked. “They seem to see the world a little differently.”

Jedda grinned, “I went to one of their meetings once, but I decided they are just as confused and in their own way as unbelievable as everyone else. I did not hear anything to convince me to change my thinking. I am a Jew because that is what I am. What I think has nothing to do with it.”

“I suppose you are as right as anyone else. I have begun to wonder what is right also. These days it seems the whole world is unsettled and it is difficult to be sure of what will happen next.”

“I tell you Michael, I am afraid we are in for difficult times yet. The Romans are not satisfied to have made war on us in the past. It really resulted in no changes. I think it will happen again. Never trust a Roman.”

As Jedda took care of customers for his fruit, Michael followed his own thoughts. He whispered in his mind, “Never trust a Roman? But what about Darius? He seems to be an honest person and he is Roman. Perhaps it is more about individuals than groups. Or is living in harmony with others more about accepting the different ideas and views that spring up in our own separate minds? I wish I understood my life better.”

Jedda marveled at the bench when it was finished, “You do very good work, Michael. It will last a long time, even with Roman onslaughts. I am indebted to you. How may I pay you? Do you want coins or produce?”

He answered with a smile, “Food is always better than money as food is edible and money is not.”

“Then take what you wish and what you think is fair.”

Michael selected a little of each of the apples, figs, dates and nuts. “This will do me very well, Jedda. If you ever have trouble with the bench, let me know. Shalom.”

“Yes, Shalom, Michael. May we live in peace.”

There were a variety of smaller jobs of hauling water and doing errands for which he was paid in sestertii or denarii, and although the day was long it passed quickly enough because of the changes of locations and types of work. He felt satisfied with what he had been able to accomplish during the day. He reviewed the jobs in his mind as he made his way home and hoped the oven in the courtyard would still be hot. Michael wanted a hearty, hot evening meal.

DARIUS

After darkness had fallen, and he had finished eating, he sat outside his doorway just relaxing and greeting neighbors as they passed by. It was a pleasant evening like most evenings, and he took a simple pleasure in just being part of the scene in his own quiet way. This was something he had not had time to do for a long while. But since his father's death, he was more free to do nothing, which he was enjoying to the fullest.

As he sat, he noticed a figure approach from the direction of the market. It was a taller person who walked with a certain casual manner, although he kept looking as though not knowing quite where he was going. As he passed a lighted doorway, Michael recognized him, "Darius," he called, "Is that you?"

"Michael? Have I found you? I followed Seth's directions and evidently they were very good."

"Darius," exclaimed Michael. "I am pleased to see you. Come have a seat here where it is comfortable. It is too warm to sit in the house."

Darius was a taller and a lighter skinned person with fine features. He exuded a confident and engaging manner. Seth had told Michael that Darius was a Roman who had traveled to their country years earlier and had blended into the culture because he felt more comfortable here. Seth said Darius did not speak much about having been Roman except that he had not liked what he saw them doing nor their attitudes. He had become a Christian some years ago and left Rome to find more honest people.

"This is a cozy neighborhood. You are lucky here. You are close to the market and do not have to go far for your activity."

"Yes, I like it. I have lived here as long as I can remember. Nowhere else would feel the same for me."

"I have not previously explored this part of the city. It seems to be a rather thriving place."

"Yes, there are many people here, and there is much business going on."

"I wanted to come and see you and talk a little to get to know you better. Tell me more about yourself, Michael. Do you have family in the area?"

Michael turned downcast, but answered quietly, "No, I am alone. My mother died years ago from some unknown illness. Since then I have cared for my father, until he died only a short while ago from an illness which consumed him slowly."

"I am sorry. I did not know, and I did not mean to intrude on your feelings."

"That is all right. I am getting adjusted to the situation. It is easier for me now. I have only myself to worry about. And my father was old and had lived a good life. He was a scribe and scholar. I learned some languages and writing from him, but that is not what I enjoy doing. For him, however, it was his whole life, and he knew other scholars in other parts of the country."

“He sounds like an interesting person. I wish I had known him.”

They fell to silence briefly, then Darius added, “I came to determine whether you could do some work for me this week. The day after tomorrow we are starting a big job constructing a warehouse building. Would you have some time to help?”

Michael again felt an elation. He asked himself, “Is this really going to be an advantage for me?” Aloud, he answered, “I have some time to help. I have two commitments on the day before Sabbath which I must do, but otherwise I am free.”

“Would you then plan on helping me the day after tomorrow?”

“I would be pleased to do that. Where do you want me to be?”

Darius explained the job and described where Michael should go. He also talked a little about what would be required and Michael assured him he would be able to help with the work.

Then they sat silent for a short while enjoying the night breeze until Michael remarked, “My parents wanted me to become a Rabbi, but that just did not suit me. I enjoy physical work more, and I like to be outdoors whenever possible. My mother came from a family of sheep herders who were quite a hardy family. I think I am more like her and her family than I am like my father. And what about you, Darius. What is your history?”

“Ah, yes, my past. I come from Rome, and the rest of my family is there. My father was an official in the government, and I guess I could have been also. But it is a harsh place for most of the population. Those in power have a good life but the rest struggle. I did not like what I saw, and one day I met a man who revealed to me he was a Christian. He seemed to have such good ideas that I immediately began learning more of the background of the religion. After a while, I decided the best thing for me to do was to come here, near the Sea of Galilee where Christianity seems to have started and live my life in the manner prescribed by the teachings. So that is what I have done.”

Michael was intensely interested to know more. He had not yet decided what to do with the writing which Jeremiah had left in his charge. It quietly occupied a back corner of a shelf waiting for Michael either to deliver it or destroy it. Everything he could learn about this Christianity might help him decide his course of action. “What was this person like, and what sort of writings did he have?”

“Ah, back then there were no writings. The stories were simply memorized and passed on orally. It was only later that the writings came to be known and confirmed the old stories. The Christian man I met was simply a wanderer who lived off the compassion of the ones he met along the way.”

“But how then do you know these stories are true? Where did they come from?”

“That is a good question. Who has the final word on what is true? There are many things which exist only in the spoken form, and they come

from ancient times.”

Michael suddenly remembered his father saying something similar about questioning the factuality of history. He looked at Darius in a more inquiring way, but Darius only looked down at the ground in a sort of meditative mood.

Darius continued, “I have even heard that some of your Torah was devised and constructed out of the imagination of men so that the Jews could show a documented history. It is said it was generated at a time when the Jews had to authenticate their claim to being an ancient clan. This was to demonstrate they had a right to continue existing where they were. This may have been five or six centuries ago in a time when the Jewish people were allied with the Egyptians and protected by their king. I do not know. It is only a story I have heard.”

“That is strange, Darius. I did not know that, I have always been taught that the Torah was holy and it was the actual story of my people. It is difficult to imagine otherwise. But it bothers me that the stories we hold so dear may be just fabrication. Could some of your Christian writings also be the inventions of unscrupulous men? Does it not disturb you that some religious writings may be just falsehoods?”

“Oh perhaps it does to some extent, but I do not see that as the ultimate purpose of our religion. I think one’s religion should be a guide to living and result in an honest life wherein we are kind, helpful and respectful of one another.”

“That would certainly be a good way for all to live, but it does not seem possible.”

“I believe it is more possible with the Jewish idea of one God and the new interpretations which the Christians have for the teachings. You know that the Egyptians, Greeks and the Romans all have many Gods. That is a system which has not worked well since the Gods are always fighting among themselves which is just like the people who created them.”

“I do not know much beyond what I learned at the Synagogue. You have knowledge of much more than I have ever learned.”

Darius smiled, “That may be so, but it does not make me smarter. It is part of the reason I left the Romans to follow the Christian teachings.”

Michael grew silent and looked down in thought. After a few moments he spoke again. “What you say may be true, but for me, the Jewish way is the only way I know. It works for me and I am comfortable with it. I do not think I could change even if I wanted to.”

“Yes, I understand. We are all indoctrinated in our own culture. It is the way of the world. But does that make it right? I believe we must all follow our own instinct, and for me that is believing in Jesus and the Christian teachings. They have made my life worthwhile and I find my peace in them.”

After a few moments of thought, Michael responded, “I think the ideas are worth exploring, at least. There seem to be so many who hold to them. At this time, I would like to know more about the ancient history also.”

“Does that mean you will be coming to the meeting after the next Sabbath?”

Michael had not really thought about that possibility, but on the spur of the moment he said, "Yes, I think I will come again."

"Fine, I am sure you will be most welcome again."

The two talked until it grew late. Then Darius arose and bid Michael. "God be with you. I will see you the day after tomorrow."

"Yes, Darius, I will be there."

Michael slept very well that night.

IDA

It was the day before Sabbath when Michael needed to replenish his food supply. He had been busy most of the week on the new job with Darius installing foundations and building walls. All had gone well there. Now he was glad to have finished his morning work doing small favors for friends in the neighborhood and had time to prepare for the Sabbath. He browsed around his favorite stalls in the market, but somehow he did not find exactly what he wanted. Wandering up and down the rows of merchants, he found himself in front of Simon's produce store. He remembered Ida, and slowly examined the foods as he worked his way into the store.

Looking up he noticed Ida coming from behind the curtain. At the same moment he heard a gruff voice behind him. Turning he saw three Roman soldiers coming through the market outside. One had seen Ida and entered calling out, "Here is a beauty, men. Let's talk with her. Maybe she would like to come with us."

He advanced into the store. As he came abreast of where Michael was, Michael stepped out in front of him. The soldier abruptly stopped as there was no room to pass, "Ho, Jew! What are you trying to do?"

"Nothing," replied Michael.

"Get out of my way."

"No."

"You no good Jew dog." The Roman raised his fist and readied to attack Michael. Michael was small but solid and quick in his reactions. He deftly stepped back, and the Roman soldier almost lost his balance as his arm swung wildly in the air.

The Roman glared at Michael and began to advance again when the other soldiers called and attracted his attention. "Lothar, Lothar, come quick, the Centurion has returned and he wants us now."

"All right, Jew dog. You are lucky this time. You will not be as fortunate the next time." He turned and angrily strode away in embarrassment and rejoined his two friends.

Michael stood transfixed. He could not believe he had done what he had just done. As his shock subsided, he became aware of a stirring behind him. He turned to see Ida facing him.

"Thank you, Michael."

He was astonished to see she was still there, and did not know what to say. He blurted, "You remember my name?"

"Of course. Thank you for stopping the soldier."

"I did only what I could. If he had not been called away, I might be in much trouble. He was larger than I, but I am strong also."

"You are strong in more ways than one, Michael." Ida reached to the side and picked up a bundle of edible roots. "May I give you these? I think you will find them sweet and very good tasting."

Michael found himself a little stupefied and not in complete control of himself. He accepted the roots with a simple, "Thank you." He also began to feel a little shaky and excused himself. "I must get home Ida, shalom." It also felt a little strange saying her name to her.

Ida smiled, "Shalom, Michael. I will see you again."

Michael returned the smile and added, "Yes. I will see you again."

Michael stumbled out of the shop and slowly found his way home. Sitting down, he tried to collect his thoughts.

"What a strange week this has been," he thought, "First the meeting, then Darius, the new job, and now this unsettling event in the market. What if I had not been there? Why was I there? It is not my usual routine. Now it seems nothing is usual anymore. What has happened to me?"

Michael sat for a long while contemplating these things. Finally he realized it was getting late and he must do some cooking and other preparations before the beginning of Sabbath at sundown. He cut vegetables and put them on to boil with a small piece of meat. By the late afternoon, he could sit and enjoy his food quietly before the Sabbath.

Later on he had nothing to do. He chose to sit inside where it was warmer, and relax. As he sat, thoughts ran through his mind. "My parents were always good Jews it seems to me. They did not always go to the Synagogue but they usually observed all the holidays and rituals as everyone else. They were certainly good to me and allowed me to do as I thought best for myself. Now that they are gone, what must I do? What can I do? I am no one special and all I know is my little Jewish life. I have no responsibilities and can do as I wish, but I do not really know what I want to

do.”

As he pondered these things, the flame from the flickering lamp cast shadows around the small room. He had the impression the shadows were ghosts from his past. There was his mother in her slow steady way, always ready to do what ever was needed to help. She smiled but did not seem to give any special message. There was his father in his quiet way saying, “Michael, why have you not yet done as I asked with the manuscript? It is important for you to do this. It is the culmination of my life’s work.”

He even imagined Tyconus and his letters circling around in the air and worrying the atmosphere with their discontent. They were restless and persistent in flitting about and distracting him. He did not even know Tyconus and here he was urging Michael to do his bidding.

He began to accost the fluttering elusive ghosts with their implied chastisements, and began to talk back to them. “Why did you leave me with this problem? Why did you do this thing and create a lie for me to aid in perpetuating? This is not fair.” He became more and more agitated and distraught. He rose and began pacing around his small room. With a burst of determination he exclaimed, “I will settle it now!”

Roughly he bolted to the shelves of the larder, and pulled the manuscript from its hiding place. The reed pens and dried ink pots of his father clattered to the floor, but he ignored them. He sat himself again at the table next to the lamp and readied himself to begin burning the bundle. Something held him back. Racing through his mind was the thought, “I am defying my father. I am dishonoring his work and ideas. Do I have the right to do that?” As he looked down at the bundle he again became perplexed. He did nothing. He could not actually bring himself to start the destruction of it.

“You ghosts have caused me trouble by assaulting me. Why do you not leave me alone? I do not deserve this. You have caused me to begin doubting all I was taught. But the new ideas do not inspire me either, because I know they come from lies.”

He thought of the Christians he had met. They all seemed to be good and decent people. “Why should they have only lies on which to base what they believe? I do not want to hurt them. They do not warrant being treated like that. They should not be oppressed or taken advantage of any more then we other Jews should be. Seth and Darius and Ida are entitled to something better, but what is right?”

The thought of Ida struck him fiercely. He suddenly felt very emotional. “I am glad I was there when Ida needed me. She is a lovely woman, but,” he suddenly hesitated, “she is a Christian, and true Jews should not question the Torah.”

He threw his head down in his hands on the table and wept. It was several minutes before he could regain his composure. His thoughts continued, “Perhaps I should read some of these Christian ideas. That may give me more insight and some answers.” He looked at the manuscript again. It was tightly tied and sealed with wax.

Michael remembered his father saying, “You must not open it or read it to protect yourself.”

“Yes,” he murmured, “I must leave it closed to preserve the ancient appearance. I can still decide in the future whether to open it or not.”

He picked up The Life of Our Savior as spoken by Matthew and slowly he returned it to its hiding place. He tucked it back out of the way on the top shelf. The reed pens and writing materials strewn on the floor were useless and he began collecting them and throwing them into the trash. "They will not be used any more," he thought. He then began to prepare for bed and again whispered to himself, "I must talk to someone. But who? I do not know what to do. Yes, I do know, I will talk with Uriah. He is a wise man, perhaps I can get some hints from him. I will see him as soon as I can."

Michael fell into a fitful sleep.

THE SECOND MEETING

After finally getting to sleep in the early morning, Michael slept late and did not feel like arising until well after the Sun was up. Indecision plagued him at every turn while he was deciding on what to do. He took time to go walking in the market which was always strangely quiet on the Sabbath. Before he realized it, the day had passed. Distractions had been sufficient enough that it was late in the afternoon. The Christian meeting was at sundown and he needed Seth to show him the way.

He thought ahead of what he could eat and get to Seth's home promptly, because wanted to be there before Seth left to go to the meeting. He boiled the roots which Ida had given him, so they would be ready. At the end of the Sabbath he had his simple meal of nuts and grains with the roots, and set off to find Seth. When he reached Seth's door, it was shut tightly. No amount of knocking or calling brought a response, and he realized Seth had already left. Michael realized he had not planned well.

Quickly he set off in the direction of the meeting hall. He followed the streets and turns as he remembered them when Seth had led the way, but something was not going right. He soon found himself on the edge of the town and did not know which way to go. A person was coming from the other direction and Michael stopped to wait until they reached him to ask whether they knew where the big old building was. The small person drew close, and seeing Michael called out, "Michael? Is that you? What are you doing this far from town?"

It was Ida. "Ida? Is that you?" As she approached it was indeed apparent that Michael had chanced upon his new friend Ida. "I was looking for the meeting and got lost. Are you headed there?"

Ida smiled and replied graciously, "Yes, I am going to the meeting. First you must turn around and walk in the other direction. You are almost out to my father's farm. Follow me."

Michael turned and walked with Ida. "I thank you for finding me. I was hopelessly lost and never would have gotten there alone." He added then, "You say your father has a farm?"

"Yes, it is not a large place, but it is sufficient so that we can raise enough vegetables to sell them at the market. We make a living and have all that we need to eat also. We have a fairly large vineyard and usually have grapes at the end of summer."

"That must be difficult though. Does not farming take a lot of time and work?"

"Yes, although it is what we know how to do, and we do it well. No work is easy, and at least we have our own place. We can work outside at our own rate, and if God is generous with the rain at the right time of the year, we can do well."

"I can attest that you raise good food. You were right. The roots you gave me were sweet and had an excellent flavor."

Ida looked down and replied softly, "It was the least I could do after your bravery in protecting me."

In the twilight, it was dark enough that Ida could not see Michael blush, "Oh, I do not -- I did not ---" he stammered.

In a silvery voice, Ida relieved him, "Whatever you did. I appreciated it. It made me feel good also. But look, we are almost there. The building is just down this road."

When they entered, they saw there was a large crowd, and Zebulon was just beginning. "God be with you."

Michael joined in with the rest, "And with you."

Zebulon took up the revered copy of the writings, and began reading parts of it. These were narrations of various miracles and cures effected by Jesus. There was commentary between him and his followers. At the end of the readings, Zebulon went on to make observations about them and expressed his belief that this was proof Jesus had been divine. Jesus was thus a person to learn about and to obey his teachings, and accept him as their savior and appreciate his sacrifice for saving their souls. There were muted sounds of approval in the group as he spoke. As the meeting went on, Michael took note that Seth and Darius were also there. "I must talk with them afterward," he thought.

Again, there was a group prayer for their safety, for peace, and for the softening of their oppressor's hearts. Again, individuals were allowed to speak of their personal experience with Christianity. Many had very forceful stories to tell. As soon as the meeting was over, Michael moved to where Seth was standing and engaged in conversation.

"Seth, I missed you. I decided to come to the meeting, but you were gone when I reached your door."

"I am sorry. I did not know you were planning on coming."

"It is my fault. I should have let you know, but it did not matter. I happened to meet Ida, and she guided me here. I must learn the way, if I am to come again."

Seth looked around, "Where is Ida? Oh, I see her just going out the door." Ida had disappeared as soon as the meeting finished.

Darius joined the two friends, "God be with you both."

“And with you,” Seth and Michael replied.

“Seth, you were right. Michael is a good worker. He helped me much of the week, and even taught us some new skills and tricks we did not know before.”

Michael shifted uneasily, but offered, “It is just that I have done so many different things, I am able to apply knowledge in one skill to another kind of work.”

“You are too modest, Michael. I am pleased to have found you. I am sure we will be able to work together on many occasions.”

“Well. Darius, I have known Michael all my life. Besides being a good worker, he is a good person. I am sure you two will get along well.”

“Thank you Seth, I try my best. That will have to do in any case.”

The three men talked for a while longer, and gradually moved out of the meeting room and into the night. Chatting idly they walked to the point where Darius turned to go his own way. “I will see you at the work site tomorrow, Michael.”

“Yes, I will be there, God willing.”

“Fine. Good night, my friends, God be with you.”

“And with you,” they replied.

The two continued on their way, but Michael commented, “Seth, let me pay close attention to the directions you take. I do not want to get lost the next time I might try to find the hall.”

As they proceeded Seth pointed out landmarks for the correct path and different ways to follow. In the process, Michael began to feel more familiar with that part of town and felt he could find the way alone if necessary.

While they were walking Seth also asked, “What do you think of the group, Michael?”

“What do I think? I think all the persons that I have met are fine people. I still do not know what to think of the ideas I have heard. They seem strange to me. Some of them even seem impossible. I hope you do not mind my saying that.”

“No, I do not mind. I understand that some of the events are unusual, and are difficult to comprehend. However, I feel so good with the suggested approach to life and with the new methods of dealing with others, that I am willing to accept those things which are a bit strange. Whether it is all true or not, I find it very reassuring.”

"I have noticed you always seem to be in a good mood these days. Has this new religion had that much effect on your life?"

"Not only does it have a great effect on my life, I think it is the best thing which has happened to me ever. I feel so much better these days. For me the whole world has changed."

"Certainly such an effect is useful," Michael offered. "We live only once and life should be an enjoyable experience. Unfortunately, there is much to make it difficult and a burden."

"It is a burden only if we let it be. I try to view the good parts and deal with the bad parts only as necessary."

"I am much impressed, my friend."

They were just approaching Seth's door, and parted.

"God be with you, Michael."

"And with you, Seth."

A USEFUL WORK DAY

Michael arrived at the work site early. Darius was already there and looking over the needs of the day. He asked Michael to take a small group of the men and work on a particular wall, and explained what he wanted done. The day was warm, but the work went well, and Michael and his crew made very good progress.

Darius stopped by occasionally, but mostly he spent his time with the other groups which needed more supervision. When they finished in late afternoon, Michael sat for a while to rest and look at their accomplishment. The site was deserted, except for Darius who came along and sat beside Michael.

"So, what do you think, Michael?"

Michael laughed, "You are the second person in two days to ask me that question. But yesterday it was religion, and today it is a more material inquiry. I think the day went well. I am pleased with what we did, the men worked hard and the construction will turn out to be very substantial."

Darius laughed also. "I did mean the construction, and you are right, it is coming along very well. I appreciate that you can lead a group and produce a good result without a lot of supervision. That is very useful for me. But with whom are you having religious conversations?"

"Seth and I talked on the way home last night. He is very committed to your Christianity, and says it has changed his life. He certainly seems changed to me."

"Seth is a good man and I respect him. He does seem to get quite involved. That is not all bad if he is happy. So what do you think of Christianity?"

Michael noticed the emphasis on him, and responded, "As I told Seth, I like the people, but have trouble with some of the ideas. Some of the events seem simply impossible to me. It does not seem such things could have happened. I feel very Jewish. I am happy with that, and I am not sure I want to change."

"Yes, I can understand your feelings all right."

Darius sat quietly for a moment, then spoke again, "I told you before that I come from Rome, and I do not generally tell people of my past. As you may have guessed, I come from a wealthy and influential family. They have been associated with the elite of the country for many years. I will tell you this in confidence if you agree not to pass it on to anyone."

"Of course, Darius. I know how to respect confidences."

"Yes, I believe you do. My family was well known and my grandfather was a close friend of Philo Judaeus who was a great writer. He also knew other writers and historians of the time. This was during the years when these events of the Christian writings were supposed to have happened. But as my grandfather told me when I was a small child, the surprising thing is that those historians who wrote about the Jews and Jewish happenings did not know about this Jesus and never made mention of these amazing events.

"When I met a Christian, and learned of this set of new ideas, I knew the stories were just myths and fabrication. They are the imaginings of some unknown persons who were evidently trying to bring a change for the good of the Jews. Whether they succeeded or not is yet to be seen.

"Although I knew the stories were only stories, I became a Christian anyway because the basic ideas appeal to me. Even so, it is not the ideas one holds, but the way one acts in the world which is most important. We are judged by what we do, not by what we believe. And I therefore have always tried to act fairly and enjoy the company of others who are of a similar mind. Whether we agree on the details is unimportant to me."

Michael was amazed. That someone else knew the stories were false was a little unsettling. He thought carefully before he replied, "You are most impressive Darius. I certainly will never divulge what you have said, but it gives me a new perspective on the whole of the area we call religion. Thank you for your frankness. I will respect it." Michael did not add that keeping the faulty background of the writings was to his advantage also. He went on, "Previously when we talked you spoke of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans and the many 'Created' gods which were part of their beliefs. Did you actually mean that the gods were fabrications and not real?"

"Reality, my friend is a difficult thing to grasp. We do not know all of reality. There are wise men who know that many of the concepts we hold in everyday life are simply not true, but they do not have ways of proving that. Perhaps some day they will, as they learn more about our world. My view of the gods is that they are useful ideas which the leaders offer to the people. Otherwise the common people do not understand our

world, but religion gives them a way to cope with the difficulties of life. Whether gods exist or not is not important to me. The important thing is being able to live life comfortably and in good conscience while being able to find some happiness in it."

"That is fascinating, Darius. I am impressed by your wide range of knowledge. There are probably not many who share your ideas. Personally, I do not know what to think, but you do make a lot of sense. I will consider what you say very seriously."

They sat quietly a few more moments before Michael continued, "Thank you for your interest and help, Darius. I appreciate it. Now I must be getting home. I am hungry and I must rest to be ready for tomorrow. God be with you."

"And with you, Michael."

URIAH'S COUNSEL

That evening, Michael arrived home tired, as it had been a long, but rewarding day. He had appreciated talking with Darius who was a most interesting person. He was weary from the effort of the work, but not so exhausted that he was deterred from his plan to talk with Uriah. He ate his supper and then waited until he was sure Uriah and Naomi would also be finished, and then walked up the alley.

Uriah was already sitting out in front of his door, as Michael approached. "Shalom, Uriah."

"Shalom, Michael. How was your day?"

"Fine, a fine day. Better than most, I would say."

"I am glad to hear that. What made it so good for you?"

"I have been working with a new friend who has a large crew of workers. He likes my experience and gives me important jobs to do which I find very satisfying."

"Oh? Who is this great person?" he asked with a smile.

"His name is Darius and he is quite knowledgeable. He is also very good in planning and guiding the work."

"I have never heard of a Darius. Where does he come from?"

"He came from Rome, but he is no longer a Roman. He has joined with the Christians. He seems to be a very good person though."

"Christians! You would do better to stay away from them."

“Why do you say that, Uriah? The ones I know seem to be good people. At least they do not try to hurt others.”

“You sound as though you are getting to know too many of them.”

“What do you have against them? They do not seem to do any harm.”

Uriah turned thoughtful and took several moments to reply. “I guess I am too old to change. Their ideas are unsettling to me because they are different. I would say to you, Michael, but to no one else, that I have many years of habits and feel too comfortable in my ways and beliefs. It closes my mind and I do not want to hear new things. I would not be able to accept something so radical. It may be different for you though. Since your father died, I am sure you are a little confused in how to proceed. That is natural. You need to find your own way. You need to follow your own dreams and longings.”

“But this Christianity, how can I know it is true and that it would be a good course to follow?”

“I cannot attest to the accuracy of anything, my son. I have been surprised often in my life by the elusive nature of the facts. Even my eyes have deceived me at times, and what I thought I saw was not what actually happened. Have you not seen a magician in a trick do that which is impossible? Yet he makes you believe it is so. And what is true for one person is not necessarily true for another. Religion is a necessity of life. Do not tell anyone I said it, but religion, that is, all religions are founded only on myths and the dreams of the people. The religious stories do not have to be true. That is unimportant. The basic requirement is just to live in a manner which is fair to everyone. Nevertheless, religions provide a necessary part of life in offering comfort and security to those in need.”

“It is very interesting to hear you say that, Uriah. In the last few days I have heard many new and absorbing ideas. But as you say, I must find my own way.”

“Whatever you do Michael, I was your father’s friend and I shall always be your friend.”

“Thank you, Uriah. At least I know that is true.” he added with a smile.

The two talked on until dark about more trivial matters in the community. Finally, Michael took his leave and went home to bed.

THE THIRD MEETING

It was a busy week. At the end, he was ready for a rest. Before Sabbath began he went to do some shopping and wandered into Simon’s store. He had not had an opportunity to thank Ida for leading him to the meeting and wanted to correct that omission. He did not see Ida about though. He spent time looking at the food but Ida never arrived. Strangely disappointed, he bought the vegetables he needed and went home.

It was a lonely supper and a quiet evening. It felt good to get to bed for a long rest, and he rested well. The following day he did practically

nothing. He had arranged with Seth to meet him to go together to the meeting so his day was spent in idleness, sitting in the warmth of the Sun and reflecting on his life.

“The Sabbath was certainly a good idea. Resting is as important as working.” he murmured. He looked forward to the meeting and wondered what the story would be tonight. There must have been a real wealth of myths, legends, and ancient stories to work with. He thought, “I am impressed with Tyconus’ writing skill. He presents things quite well although, it would be better to read it by oneself rather than being read to. Zebulon’s voice is not easy to listen to sometimes.”

Evening finally arrived. He had his quick supper and set off. Seth was waiting outside as he approached. “God be with you, Michael.”

“And with you, Seth.”

The two friends set off together. Seth led the way, and Michael noted the streets and turns. He smiled when he anticipated the correct move. Michael went into detail about his busy week with Darius, and all that they had accomplished. Seth related his week had been rather ordinary, but still satisfying. He added, “I feel much more calm with everyday occurrences. When things go wrong, I seem to be able to overcome them more easily and set them right again.”

“You always were easy going. I cannot imagine you being very upset anyway.”

“That may be, but even though I acted unruffled, I was very upset inside. But that was before, and this is now. Now I am calm inside also.”

Michael got the message that the before and after were before and after his commitment to Christianity. He realized it must mean a lot to Seth to have a new anchor to his life. It was not long before they were approaching the meeting hall. They were just on time and most were already there. As soon as they entered, the meeting began.

Zebulon again read from the copy of writings he had in his possession. Michael was paying close attention when Zebulon stated the writing was the History of Mark. Michael thought, “How fascinating to hear the actual words which Tyconus wrote. It is strange to know more about the source of the writing than anyone else in the room.” He listened carefully to absorb the story.

Michael realized Zebulon was reading about some events in the Temple in Jerusalem. He had just read that the destruction of the temple had been prophesized. Jesus said, “Not one stone shall be left upon another.” Michael was astonished to hear that. Knowing from the letters that Tyconus was still writing the account well after the destruction of the temple, how easy would it be to “prophesize” the event?

Michael’s mind dwelt on that fact. These were elaborate lies which were made to sound like the absolute, authoritative truth. Michael marveled at Tyconus’ writing skills and his obvious sincerity in his work. Uriah had said, “All religion is founded on myths and the dreams of the people.” Michael thought to himself, “If all religions are made up out of nothing, what does it matter which one I follow. Uriah said I need to follow my own dreams and longings. Perhaps, I could be a Christian. Especially if all my friends are Christian also. I can as easily support this as the old ways I was taught.”

Zebulon's voice droned on and Michael became more involved with his thoughts, "Seth is happy with this Christianity, and it has changed his life. Darius purposely lives with it because he believes it is better than the old ways even though he does not believe the stories are true. So why not join with them? I feel better myself when I am here."

A sudden thought came to Michael. "Perhaps this is the solution to my problem for which I have been waiting. I could give the manuscript to Zebulon and not have to deal with the Elders at all. It would accomplish the same thing. The manuscript can be given to those who would use it, and I can probably remain anonymous." Then he said aloud, though softly, "I'll do it." A person next to him looked at him a little strangely, but said nothing.

The usual prayers and recitations followed, but when it was over, Michael went directly to Zebulon. He was busy packing up his materials as Michael approached. "Zebulon, May I speak with you?"

"Of course, my son. How may I help you?"

"I would like to talk with you, but in private. Would you have time to do that this week?"

"Yes, I am usually available, or I can be interrupted. I have no firm commitments. Even tomorrow would be fine."

"Would you tell me where you live, and I will come to see you tomorrow afternoon."

Zebulon gave Michael some directions starting from the meeting hall, and Michael knew he understood them, even though he was not yet completely comfortable finding his way in this part of the town. "Thank, you, I will be there."

Michael returned to Seth and Darius, beginning with a comment, "Darius, I would like to leave work early tomorrow. I have some business I must attend to."

"Certainly Michael, our schedule is flexible and you may always have whatever time you need."

Michael then looked around for Ida, but could not see her. He wanted to let her know he appreciated her help the week before, but she seemed to be gone already.

The three talked for a while and spoke with others of the group also. Michael continued to be impressed at the sincerity and gentleness of the persons he met. Finally, they set off for home and bed. As they walked, Michael noted to himself, "How satisfying it is being with these friends. I am glad I have them."

ZEBULON

Michael worked rapidly in the morning. By afternoon he felt comfortable with leaving as the work was progressing well. He hurried home and drew the manuscript from its hiding place on the shelf. He wrapped it carefully in a cloth, and tucked it under his robe. He took a deep breath and set out the door.

Finding the Meeting hall did not turn out to be difficult although the way looked different in full daylight. While he was walking, he thought through Zebulon's directions. Carefully setting out from the hall, he made the turns he had been told and soon was approaching the small building Zebulon had described.

Again taking a deep breath, he knocked at the doorway and called out, "Zebulon."

In only a moment the small doorway was filled with the old man. Zebulon was of medium height, and had a long gray beard. His features were sharp but showed the years. He was wearing his customary long black robe and looked every bit the scholar that he was.

"Michael, please come in and have a seat."

The interior was small, but neatly arranged. There was plenty of room for the two of them to sit and talk. After settling into a soft seat, Zebulon asked, "How may I help you, Michael?"

Nervously, Michael began, "I have a problem which I think you can solve for me. Please let me explain completely before you ask more. My father was Jeremiah, a local scribe and scholar."

Zebulon nodded, "I think I may have heard of him."

"He had a long life and knew people all over the country. He contacted many different people in his work also. Before he died he told me there was a particular writing in his possession which must be turned over to the elders after his death. I think it had been given to him years ago for safe keeping until more settled times arrived. Although the world is still an uneasy place, he felt it was time to make the document known. I have been worried as I did not know exactly how to do this properly or explain why I have it. I think it is an important document, but I feel I want to distance myself from it also. What I would like you to do, if you are willing, is to let me give it to you with one condition. Are you interested in it?"

"What sort of document is it my son?"

"I have not read it, but I think it a history of a man which was narrated to another scribe many years ago. To even show it to you, I must have your solemn promise you will never divulge where it came from. That is the condition I require."

“That is a great deal to ask in advance, my son.”

“Well, it is the only way I will do it. My father did not want any notoriety and he is dead. I am trying to respect his wishes and still pass it on as he intended. He said I should give it to the elders, but I am not sure that is the best idea now. I am fearful of being associated with it, but as I said, I think it is important.”

Zebulon sat back as in a reverie, and after a few moments, replied, “I can probably do as you ask. There are always new writings coming along, and their history is often obscure. I can find a way to introduce it without giving its history.”

“Very well. If I have your agreement, let me show you.”

Michael removed the bundle from under his robe. Carefully he removed it from the cloth wrapping and laid it on the table. The outside writing was very visible. Zebulon read out loud, “The Life of Our Savior as spoken by Matthew.”

Zebulon gasped. He gently and respectfully ran his hand over the words of the title. “Oh! Oh! Oh! Can this be? Can this really be?” Carefully he untied the bundle. Slowly he unrolled the many pages. He selected one and began reading with a rapt look on his face. He continued for several minutes, then unrolled it to another page and read again. He seemed to have left his simple surroundings and entered another world. His face beamed beatifically as he read more and more. Michael waited patiently until Zebulon finally put the scroll down. He turned and addressed Michael directly. “Michael, what you have here is an absolute treasure. It is the story of our Savior told by Matthew who was one of Jesus’ followers. This is beyond value. It is priceless. And how did your father come to have it?”

“As I said, I am not sure except I believe it was given to him for safe keeping many years ago. I do not know more than that. Is it truly the words of one of the twelve? That is amazing. But it is even more reason why I do not wish to be closely identified with it.”

“Yes, my son, these are dangerous times. I understand. I also do not mind taking on whatever difficulties it may produce. I am an old man and can accept all of that.”

“Good. I appreciate your help. But as I said, I do not know more than what my father told me. If you want to have the manuscript now you must remember you have agreed to obscure the source. You must forget about my father and me, and we shall never speak about this again. Not ever.” He emphasized the last two words.

Zebulon looked intensely at Michael, “My son, this is so important, I would agree to anything to have it. You have my solemn word with Jesus as my witness you shall never be revealed as the one who brought this to light.” He repeated and spoke slowly, forcefully and confidently. “You have my solemn word with Jesus as my witness, you are secure.”

“Then it is yours. Thank you, Zebulon. You have relieved me of a worry and enriched yourself. We both are better off. I am satisfied you are a man of your word. I will leave you with the manuscript. I am truly amazed at what it is. God be with you, Zebulon.”

“And with you, Michael. And with you. Thank you from the depth of my soul.”

While walking back to town Michael mused, “I believe Zebulon believed all I said. I do not like to mislead him, but I must protect my father and myself. It was necessary to do.”

THE MARKET PLACE

On his way home Michael passed through the market. He purposely went to Simon’s store and began examining the produce. In a few moments Ida came out and greeted him. “Michael, it is good to see you. How are you?”

“Better, now that I am seeing you. I missed talking with you last night, and the previous week you left early also, before I could more sincerely thank you for guiding me to the meeting that night.”

“Perhaps, it is because my father wants me home as early as possible after the meeting,” she answered with a mischievous smile.

“And perhaps it is that you did not want to talk with me.”

Her eyes twinkled, “A girl must not be too forward. It does not enhance her mystical nature.”

Michael smiled and added, “I stopped in here one day last week to thank you, but you were not here.”

“That was probably a day I worked at home. There is much to be done there also.”

“I wanted you to be sure you knew that I really appreciated your being my guide. Thank you.”

Ida smiled a warm smile, “You are welcome. I am sure you are learning your way by now though.”

“Yes, I am learning. It is an interesting area of the town. Would it make your father more comfortable if I walked home with you after the meeting?”

“Yes, I am sure *he* would appreciate that very much.” She emphasized the “he”. “But that is not the major consideration,” she added. Michael noted there was something musical in her voice and her eyes again exhibited a playful sparkle.

Michael smiled at her and responded again, asking slowly, “Ida, if I walked home with you after the next meeting would *you* like it?” He emphasized the “you”.

She laughed her bright laugh, and added, “Yes, I would find that very agreeable.” Michael joined her in the laughter.

“Very good. Now if you will sell me some vegetables, I’ll be on my way.”

A NEW LIFE

In the evening Michael sat at his table reflecting on all that had happened. It had been a most useful day. “I have completed that which my father wanted. The Matthew Manuscript is in the proper hands, and my father and I are free of any complicity. Now only I know the source of these writings, and that is something I shall never reveal.”

The shadows from the flickering lamp danced in their usual way on the walls, but that is all they were, simply shadows. There were no more ghosts haunting him. He admitted out loud, “There never were any ghosts. It was only my imagination playing tricks on my vision, and my mind dealing with my problems.”

Michael realized he felt very comfortable and more at ease than he had felt in a long time. It was a good feeling. “I resolve to remember this moment, and cherish it the rest of my life,” he said aloud. He had no great worries since his father was no longer a burden. “I am grateful my father is relieved of his suffering.” The incriminating letters were ashes and existed only in his mind. “Those letters had bothered me very much,” he admitted softly to himself. “The Life of Our Savior as spoken by Matthew is out of my hands now, and it is doing whatever it was meant to do.” Most importantly to him, it was no longer an ominous phantom in the pantry. It would no longer be able to disturb his thoughts and prevent his sleep.

There were other comfortable feelings. “Darius is a good friend and a source of a good livelihood. I am thankful to Seth for having convinced me to go to the meetings and meet people. Uriah is a help, and I can always depend on him and Naomi for friendship and support. And then there is Ida. Yes, Ida is very pleasant and a joy to know. Perhaps there are other possibilities with her also.”

This brought him to thinking about the Christians. He had been intrigued by hearing the actual words Tyconus had written. Now it was certain that one day the words his father (Matthew) had written would be read also. That idea suddenly demanded his attention. It would be interesting to hear his father’s words. He now had some curiosity in knowing the rest of the story and what better way then to have it read to him. Aloud he said hesitatingly, “I guess - - I guess I will keep going to the meetings. At least, I will go for a while longer. I want to hear my father’s words, and I may as well know all there is to know about this total conspiracy.” The idea of learning all about Christianity and the ideas it proposed made him grin. He would have a unique perspective on the stories. Thinking about it made him laugh out loud.

“Seth will be pleased!” He laughed again. “And it is enjoyable meeting and talking with other people.” The possibility of having a large group of friends instantly appealed to him. “I will do it,” he said with determination.

IDA AND MICHAEL

By the afternoon of the Sabbath, Michael was very restless. It had seemed to him to be a long week, but much was accomplished on the warehouse building. Michael was pleased with the work he had done, but all week he had been looking forward to the Christian meeting again, and now the Sabbath afternoon seemed to drag on interminably. Finally it was time to go. He walked to Seth's house as prearranged so they could walk together to the meeting house. Again they met Darius as he was coming from the other direction, and the three walked together engaging in light conversation.

"So how is my protégé doing in the building business? Is he a good student?" asked Seth.

Darius laughed his hearty laugh and replied, "He is doing fine. In fact, he teaches us a few things also. But what I appreciate most of all is that I can give him a responsibility, and he can organize the others to accomplish it. That makes the work go much more smoothly and efficiently."

Michael was obviously pleased and grinned at his two companions, but he remained modestly silent. To himself he thought, "What good fortune for me to have met Darius and been able to fit in with the needs of his business. I hope we can work together on many jobs. I will certainly do my best."

"Seth and Michael, I have some wonderful news to share. Zebulon will announce tonight that there is another writing of a follower of Jesus which has been found."

In the darkness Michael's startled reaction was not noticed as Seth inquired in shock, "What! Another writing? How do you know? Where did it come from? What is it about?"

Michael said nothing, but thought, "Already? Is Zebulon talking about it already?" Michael did not quite realize he may be listening to the words of his father so soon. He had thought the process of bringing the Matthew writing to light would have taken longer.

Darius continued, "I saw Zebulon yesterday and he told me the news. He will speak more of it tonight I am sure. I do not know where the Manuscript came from. I understand though it further corroborates the story of Jesus found in the writing of the follower, Mark, which Zebulon has been reading."

As they entered the meeting hall, it seemed to Michael there were more people there than previously. The three worked their way to the front of the hall where Zebulon was just beginning. "God be with you," he greeted the assemblage.

"And with you," most replied.

"Friends, I have an important announcement. Nay, it is an overwhelming and significant bit of news. This week another writing of one of the twelve followers of Jesus has been found."

Before he could continue, there were exclamations and cries of joy. "God be praised" "God is gracious." "What great fortune." "Oh. Oh." "Where did it come from?" There was a general noisy reaction and commotion which lasted several minutes before Zebulon could quiet the meeting

again.

“I do not have it with me. It is in safe hands, and many scribes are making copies as we speak. In the next few weeks we will begin public readings from it, but for now just let me say it is a marvelous piece of work. The narration retells the story we know in a new and even more enlightening way.”

“But where did it come from?” someone shouted from the rear. “Yes, Yes, where did it come from? Who gave it to you?”

Zebulon raised his hands for quiet and spoke again. “It was delivered to me by a courier from the far south. It is from a person whom I barely knew. He died some while ago, but left instructions that the manuscript should be given to me after he died. He was aware that in my position, I would know best how to handle it. The message from him was that it had been given to him many years previously for safe keeping. The document seems to have come from the turbulent times after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.”

For a moment Michael shivered as he felt a chill even in the warm room and in the midst of the agitated crowd. Suddenly, he fully understood what he had done. This new writing would undoubtedly give great new impetus to the Christians and their movement.

The group was stirred up and excited while Zebulon went ahead with the planned meeting. Michael did not pay much attention as he returned to his own thoughts. “So, it is accomplished. Whether it is right or wrong is no longer an issue for me. I have no more responsibility and can learn about it along with everyone else. I do feel relieved. I do think I did the right thing. And I respected my father’s wishes. Only time will tell whether it is good or bad. The result is in the future which none of us can know in advance.” The meeting droned on and Michael immersed himself in it.

Michael had noticed that Ida came in after the meeting had started, and was standing near the door. Gradually he edged his way to her side while Zebulon was reading. She smiled and nodded at him as he approached.

After Zebulon closed the meeting, Michael immediately turned to Ida and asked, “Would you still like me to walk home with you?”

Her face could not hide a radiance, as she smiled and replied. “Yes, I would like that, if you are willing.”

“Fine. Let us go talk with Seth so that he knows I will not be going back with him.”

The two made their way towards Seth through the hubbub of the crowd of people. Everyone was talking excitedly about the new writing which had been found. They were speculating on what it was like, and expressing eagerness to hear the reading of it. Seth and Darius were talking as Michael and Ida neared them.

“Well, what do you two think of the good news?” Seth spoke in greeting.

Ida was excited. “I look forward with much anticipation to hear the words of it. It seems so fortunate that there is still more information

coming to light about the events concerning our Messiah. We are truly living in great times.”

Michael was more reserved. “All of this is so new to me, I do not know what to think, except that it is all interesting and it intrigues me. I wonder what will happen.”

The four talked for a few more minutes until Darius observed, “It is hot in here. Let us go outside and start towards home.” Without comment the four started to the door and the night air.

It was a clear night and as they walked along, a sudden bright streak slashed across the clear sky briefly and captured their attention.

Darius ventured, “Those lights are periodically seen in various seasons. There is much speculation as to where they come from. Some say a piece of the firmament has fallen, but I think there must be other explanations. Perhaps someday our astronomers will be able to tell us.”

“Could it be a good omen from God? Is he pleased the new writing will be available to us soon?” Ida questioned.

Darius responded, “Some might say that, but I believe there are probably other explanations. I do not think God wastes his time in simple displays just to please us.”

“I do not know,” added Seth. “But it is unusual that it should happen now. Perhaps there is some meaning. How can we know the mind of God?”

Michael kept silent, but wondered, “Why would any God concern himself with what some men write. I agree with Darius. God should have better things to do.”

As they approached the corner where they would all take separate paths, Michael spoke up. “Seth, I meant to tell you sooner, but I guess I got distracted. I am going to walk Ida to her house, before I go home myself.”

“That is a lot of walking. Ida can surely find her way by herself. She does it often.”

“That is so,” Ida broke in, “but it will be reassuring to have company. My father at times has been very critical of my coming home alone. I will appreciate Michael accompanying me very much.”

“Then I shall see you in the morning, Michael,” Darius spoke. “And all of you next week. God be with you.”

“And with you,” they responded as they set out on their various paths.”

Ida and Michael began in the direction away from town. He paid particular attention the roads and lanes so that he would not get lost on the return trip. Ida explained ways to remember the route. As they approached Ida’s house, another brief streak caromed across the sky.

"Oh!" Ida exclaimed. "I am sure the unusual light is an omen of something."

"Perhaps it only means you are doing the right thing in letting me walk you home." Michael offered with a grin.

Ida laughed her bright musical laugh. "No, it is rewarding you for being willing to come with me."

"Tell me." asked Michael. "What do you think of the Christian group and how do you happen to be going there?"

"Oh My!" exclaimed Ida. "What do I think? I think they are mostly very nice people. I like the ideas they seem to embrace. They talk of loving one another, trying to get along together and that we will all be rewarded if we try to be good persons. All of that appeals to me. My father was Jewish, but he no longer identifies that way. We were not encouraged to go to the synagogue. He feels the Jews are unreliable.

"I have wanted to know other persons though, and I feel I have a right to do what I want to do. A while ago a friend of mine told me of this group. When she explained it to me, I pleaded with my father to let me find out more about it. He was feeling a little guilty because of not ever teaching me Judaism rituals, so he allowed me to attend the meetings. That was at least a year ago." She turned and looked at him directly, "And how about you? Why are you there?"

The question momentarily stopped Michael. "Why am I there?" After a pause, he added, "I must admit I am there because of the urging of Seth. He likes the group very much and the ideas they espouse as you do. I confess, I was just being curious." Michael could not at all mention the involvement of his father or his own knowledge of the sources of the stories. He realized he would forever find himself needing to be careful not to reveal that involvement. He mentally made a note to remember to be on guard whenever the question came up. It would be a lifelong burden. He continued, "I do like the group and the people. I think that is the best part of it for me."

For a few moments they both retreated to their own thoughts. Ida quietly contemplated the young man beside her, "He seems very nice, but where did he come from? What was his family like? What does he really think?"

Michel for his part thought of similar ideas. They whirled through his mind. "What attracts me to this woman? I really know very little about her. I have not known many such persons though. She is very comfortable to be with. I like that."

As they reached the house, Ida stopped and turned to Michael. "I do appreciate that you accompanied me home. It made me feel safer, and I really do not want to worry my father. He is very generous to allow me to go out to the meeting at all. I am sorry I may not ask you in. It is late and I am sure everyone is asleep. If you will come back one day in the daytime though, I will show you around the farm."

"I would like to do that. But when would you have the time? I know you are busy. We are all busy."

"Tomorrow I will be in the market, but on the second day, my brother, Adam, and I will be at home planting lentils." With a smile and a twinkle in her eye she added, "If you come to help us plant the seeds there will be more time to see the farm."

Michael laughed, "That sounds fair to me. I must help Darius tomorrow, but the day after that it will be easier for me to get away. Would the afternoon be all right? I am sure I can take the time then."

"I will look for you in the afternoon."

As they talked the door of the house opened. A gruff voice called out. "Ida, is that you?"

"Yes, father. I am here."

"Then come in. It is late."

"Yes, father." To Michael she warmly spoke in parting. "God be with you."

"And with you." he replied, and then she was gone.

THE FARM

While at work during the next day, Michael found it no problem at all to arrange with Darius to leave early on the following day. He planned the work ahead and made sure they had sufficient material for to keep them supplied for several days.

He arose early the next morning, and worked extra fast when he arrived early on the job. Before he left the site, Michael saw to it again that all was arranged for the other workers to keep busy while he was gone.

Walking to the edge of town, he mused on how much he had learned of the rest of the city in the last few weeks. There was the South section where he was presently working on the warehouse with Darius. He had been in the area prior to this, but had never spent much time there. He had not had much time to spend anywhere while his father still lived, but now it was different. Now he had more time for everything.

The East part of the city where he lived was in the direction of Sepphoris. Although, that city was a journey of at least a day, and Michael had never had any need to go there. Towards the West was where Simon's farm was situated. Going in that direction beyond the farm, it was a journey of several days to reach the Sea.

He hurried along and passed through the market and headed out the other side. It was not long before he was passing near by the meeting house and was thinking of the route he had to follow to reach the farm. His memory was good, and before too long he found himself at the house and farm of Simon.

Michael paused at the gate for a moment undecided on how to proceed. Then with determination he swung the gate open. It had been left unlatched which reassured Michael that he was expected. The house was on one side of the lane and he saw an expanse of fields on the other side.

No one was in sight. Following the path around to the rear of the house, more fields came into view. In a far corner he saw two figures bent over and working. Assuming these were Ida and her brother Adam, he proceeded in that direction.

Ida saw him coming and rose up and waved to him. As he approached she spoke, "Michael, this is Adam." Adam was obviously much younger than Ida, but had a muscular body, a pleasant face and a quiet manner. The similarity in facial features between the two was obvious. They were working in a field which Michael estimated to be about twenty cubits by forty cubits in size. It had been freshly tilled and they were using hoes to break up the soil to a finer and smother texture.

"Shalom, Adam."

"And God be with you." Adam replied.

Michael smiled. "I see your sister has had some influence on you."

"Yes," he smiled. "If I were older, I would be allowed to go to the meetings also."

Michael could easily detect the perennial yearning of the young man to be the adult man.

"I am sure Ida will share the ideas with you until then."

"Yes, but it is not the same."

"I understand how you feel. Adam," Michael replied. Then he added, "But what can I do to help here?"

"We are done getting the soil ready. I will mark the rows, and you and Adam can plant the seeds. You use this wooden tool. Space the seeds the length of the tool and make a hole with it, drop in the seed and push the soil down again. Here, I will show you." Ida demonstrated the procedure.

"I think I can do that with no problem."

The three set to work. After Ida had finished marking the rows, she also began planting. Out of the corner of his eye, Michael observed her and marveled at how much more adept she was at the job compared with his awkward efforts. She was much more rapid and sure in measuring and making holes. Adam was fairly fast also, but Michael was the most inept. When they were about half done though, he was beginning to catch up.

Ida stood up to stretch and called to the others, "Time for a rest."

They sat at the edge of the field and shared drinks of water and some nuts from the provisions Ida had brought along.

Michael ventured, "You two are much better at this than I am. You must have had lots of practice. It is difficult for my clumsy hands. I am more comfortable handling bigger, heavier things like stones and timbers."

Ida smiled. "We have done it a long time, but it is a learned skill like everything else."

"Yes," added Adam, "It seems I have worked in the fields ever since I was able to stand up and walk."

"Oh! Adam. You exaggerate. We are very lucky actually. It is easy work, but we do work long hours."

"It is difficult for me to realize all these seeds grow into plants which produce food. That must be satisfying for you."

"Well, not all of them do. Some never sprout at all. But that is not completely bad. We come back in two weeks and replant where nothing has grown. That also spreads out the crop over time, and we have a more continuous supply of Lentils."

"Growing things is not something I know much about. I am impressed that you are able to do that."

"However, they will not grow, if we do not plant them. Shall we go ahead and finish the other half of the field?" Ida gently urged.

To Michael it seemed no time at all until they had planted the last seed and were putting away the equipment. "Now Ida, will you show me the rest of the farm?"

"Yes, I would be pleased to. After all, that is the reason you came, is it not?" She spoke with a sparkle in her voice and her eyes.

"Yes it is." But Michael suddenly realized it was more than that. He thought to himself and admitted, "I guess I enjoy being with Ida also."

She led the way to far side of the land away from the house. Michael could see there were trees and vines growing there. As they walked, Ida spoke. "The far back is where the grape vines and olive trees are located. Those are what father calls the tax fields."

"Why is that?"

"Father can usually trick the tax collectors into believing the grapes and olives are the most valuable crops. Actually they do not sell well as they are quite plentiful in the area. We make more on the produce, fruits, and vegetables we sell. The tax collectors then take the grapes and olives and leave the things we really need."

"But do you not use the grapes to make wine?"

Ida smiled, "Yes, we do, but we get better grapes from our friends who live in the mountains. They have more grapes, because the tax collectors do not like traveling into their area. Some of the fields are not too accessible. Mountain people can be difficult at times. Also the tax collectors prefer our sweet grapes and do not bother with the less accessible ones. They do not appreciate the drier mountain grapes. We think the mountain grapes have a better flavor because of the variety and the climate, so we use them for our wine."

They had arrived at the olive trees. "Our trees are relatively young. They are only about 30 years old, but we get good crops from them. We usually save enough for ourselves and our friends, but most of the rest pay our taxes."

"I am impressed by how informed you are about your farm and your business. Your father must be a good teacher. However, you seem to me to be someone who likes to learn new things. You even seem to favor new ideas about God and religion."

"I think it is well for women to know just as much as men. Sometimes it is very important for a woman to know what to do or how to handle a situation."

As they continued walking they arrived at another open area. On one side of a patch of plants, a man was bent over picking beans. "That is my older brother, Joshua," offered Ida. They walked directly to him. As they neared, Ida called out, "Joshua, this is Michael, a new friend of mine."

Michael greeted, "Shalom, Joshua."

Joshua looked up and nodded and turned back to his picking. He was near the end of the row and seemed to want to finish it. Michael was beginning to realize "Shalom" was not the most respected of greetings here. He did not know what to say.

Ida went on, "These are the fields where we grow the beans and root plants. It is some of the best soil we have and produces very good vegetables."

"You really have a well planned farm. I am impressed. I have not seen such a farm before. Actually I have not seen any sizable farms before. I have not had the time to investigate them."

"We try to make it the best we can. Father is very particular that way and wants to have the best possible produce."

While they were talking, Joshua completed his task and joined them. "There, now we have enough beans for the market tomorrow." Joshua was older than Ida and had sharper features than either Adam or Ida. He had a dark weathered face and long hair. In a rough sort of way he was quite handsome. "I am going to the house. I need to rest a while, and our parents should be home soon."

Michael suddenly realized the afternoon had passed and meal time was approaching. "I must be returning home also, but thank you for showing me your farm, Ida. I think it is a very nice place. I am greatly impressed."

They strolled towards the gate, but just before they reached it two persons pushing carts came in. "Oh, Mother and Father are home from

the market. Let us help them unload.”

By now Michael was confused as to the accepted greeting here on the farm. Adam had replied to “Shalom” with “God be with you” as the Christians do. Joshua was uncommitted. Ida greeted her parents fondly, “Mother, Father, this is Michael whom I have been showing around the farm. Michael, my father, Simon, and my mother, Miriam.”

Michael gambled, “God be with you both.”

Simon looked sharply at Michael. “Yes, I remember seeing you at our market stall. Are you one of those Christians also?”

Michael was taken aback, but replied, “I have attended a few meetings recently. I am not sure whether I am or not. I have always been a Jew until now.”

“Michael walked home with me from the last meeting. I was glad to have his company on the way.”

“Well, if you are a friend of Ida’s you are welcome on this farm. I am sorry we do not have time to talk now. We must unload and prepare our evening meal. It looks like you are just leaving. Will you come back another time when we can talk?”

“Michael looked at Ida, who was studiously avoiding looking at him. “Yes, I would like that very much.”

“Good, would you be able to come this Sabbath? Then you could walk Ida to the meeting also.”

Michael was a little flustered by the sudden turn of events, but managed to answer, “Yes, that would be fine.”

“Come in the afternoon so there is time to talk before we eat.”

“Thank you, I will.” He turned to Ida, “I will look forward to seeing you on the Sabbath. God be with you.”

“And with you.” she smiled in reply.

Michael turned and left with a friendly wave.

SIMON

It was a busy week. There was much progress on the building, and Darius was eager to finish it as another project was being offered to him. Darius was already planning the new project and developing ideas about it. He spent much time with it, so Michael took on more responsibility in supervising the warehouse construction to be sure it proceeded efficiently.

By the end of the week Michael was tired and slept late on the Sabbath morning. After his habit of the last few years, he did not bother with going to the synagogue. When he arose he ate only a little bread and had a glass of wine.

Michael wanted to be hungry enough to do justice to whatever Simon and his family offered him that day. He sat in the courtyard sunning himself until it was mid afternoon. Then he began the walk to Simon's farm.

It was a pleasant walk during the daytime. The weather was not too hot, and somehow Michael found it enjoyable to get out of the city and away from the crowding of the buildings. It was unusual for him to feel the openness of the countryside. It almost felt as though some sort of weight had been lifted from his shoulders. There were trees along many of the paths, and occasionally he heard a bird calling out.

When the farmhouse came into view, he could make out someone sitting on a bench under the shade of a tree. As he drew nearer, he could see the person was Simon. Entering through the gateway, he came into earshot of Simon. Simon called out. "God be with you, Michael."

Greatly relieved to understand the accepted greeting of the household, he called back, "And with you, Simon."

"Come sit beside me here, and enjoy the shade."

"Thank you, I am warm from the walk."

"We were working in the fields this morning. I am happy to have a little rest now."

"You must put in very long hours. I do not think I would like to be a farmer. Just planting a few seeds last week convinced me my hands are better for other work."

"What sort of work do you do, Michael?"

"Recently, it has all been construction. Before that, while I needed to tend my father it was mostly small jobs of all sorts of work."

"And what happened with your father?"

"He died several months ago from a long illness."

"I am sorry. That is always difficult. You have my sympathy. And your mother?"

"She was a herder's daughter and died some years ago from an illness which came on suddenly. We do not know what it was, but since then I have spent all my time working and taking care of my father. It has been only in the last few months that I have had any time to myself, and it feels strange to me."

"Well, I am sorry you have had such troubles, but we all have to deal with the troubles which come our way. Life is not an easy proposition. I hope it goes better for you now."

"Yes, I understand that. My parents struggled to exist and to make a life for me. My father never earned very much. He was a scribe and knew several languages. He did translations and wrote letters for those who could not write. That did not appeal to me though. I prefer to work with my whole body, not just my hands."

"Yes, there is a lot of satisfaction in seeing what you may build take shape or to see what you can cause to happen. That is why I am a farmer. I have pride in being able to grow good nourishing food for those who need it. I like to grow the best varieties and most flavorful plants that I can."

"I can attest that your produce is tasteful. Everything that I have purchased has been most satisfying."

"I am pleased. But tell me about these Christians. Everything I know, I have learned from Ida. I do not know any others and they are a mystery to me. Ida seems to be content with them though. What do you think?"

"I do not know much. I have attended only a few of the meetings. What I have seen are people who are kind and caring of others. The stories from their writings are sometimes quite strange, but if they result in making good people, I believe they are useful." Michael recalled Darius' idea that just because you cannot believe the stories or even know they are just imaginary does not mean the ideas about how to live are wrong. Michael realized he had subconsciously just adopted the same position.

Michael continued, "My parents were Jews and I am Jewish. We were not very good at going to the synagogue regularly, and while my father was ill, it was almost impossible to go. We did abide by the rituals and tried to live according to the teachings, though."

Simon considered all Michael had said for a few moments, then offered, "I am a Jew, but not a very good Jew. I haven't been to the synagogue for a good while. My father was a good Jew when we lived in the south, and he had a prosperous farm. But the Jewish community provided no protection from the Romans. He had to pay Roman taxes greater than he could ever afford. He borrowed money and finally lost his land and his livelihood."

"I am sorry to learn that. It must have been a very difficult time for you all."

"Yes, it was difficult. My father lost all his taste for the Jewish ways. He felt God had deserted him, and he had grave doubts about the truth of the Torah. He told me that friends of his even told of ancient Greek wise men who disbelieved in all the Greek gods and a few even said there was no god of any sort. That is an intriguing idea to me. It seems that if there is a god, he is quite erratic in the ways he treats his people.

"My Jewish friends seem to think that God periodically visits catastrophes on us just to test us. Some say it is punishment for our bad behavior. I have come to think both ideas are ridiculous. The Jews have a history of being bad, feeling they are being punished, admitting wrong and being contrite, then finally claiming to regain God's favor.

"I have trouble believing all these things. They are the nonsense of Rabbis who have nothing better to do. The community would be better served if the clergy did some physical work once in a while. It is difficult for me to believe in God even though it seems everyone else does believe. Sometimes I think we would all be better off without one."

After this outburst from Simon, they were both quiet for a few minutes before Simon continued, "Growing up for me was very difficult, and I resolved not to let the same thing happen to me as happened to my father. So far I have been successful."

"What did your father do after the loss of his land?"

"Sad to say, he resorted to being a bandit with many others of his friends who had the same problems. It was all he could do. There was no other way to get the necessities of life, and he was determined to survive. He participated in the revolt and was lucky to get away without being killed. Simon, my name sake, was named King of the Jews at that time. Simon was captured in Jerusalem and executed in the year 3830 when Jerusalem was defeated and the Temple was destroyed by the Roman General, Titus. That is when my father and our family escaped to the north to try farming again. I was only a child at that time, but my father established a good farm for us, and I have tried to carry it on."

"It is probably most profitable to do the work you know best. You certainly have a good looking farm here."

"Farming is what I know and have done all my life. Here in Uxnor we are off the main routes and the Romans do not bother us as much. I also have ways of meeting their tax demands without ruining my business."

Michael thought it best not to mention that Ida had told him some of these tricks, but he replied. "The Romans cause all of us problems. When will we ever be free of them?"

"The Romans only understand force, but I think there are more subtle ways to use their stupidity against them and to survive quite well. So far, I have accommodated to their taxing and interference, but who knows what tomorrow brings."

Michael offered, "Ida says they take most of your grapes and olives."

Simon smiled and his eyes sparkled with amusement, "Yes, the tax collector is happy with them. However, we keep enough olives well hidden for ourselves, and we get grapes for wine up in the remote hills. The mountain grapes are much better tasting and make a very good wine. We shall have some today."

The two talked on about many local affairs as the sun traveled lower in the sky. After a while Adam and Ida appeared bearing pots of food. They set them on the rough wooden table. Ida turned to Michael and with a twinkle in her eye spoke, "Shalom, Michael."

With a grin he replied, "And may God be with you also."

"Mother said we will eat outside this evening since the weather is so pleasant. What have you two been talking about?"

“Michael chuckled, “We have been solving the problems of the world.”

“No,” added Simon, “We have been discussing how difficult it is to raise respectful daughters.”

Adam laughed and went back in to carry out more food, and Ida sat down on a nearby stool. “Thank you for coming today, Michael. I look forward to the meeting this evening.”

“Well I appreciate not having to cook for myself, and I enjoy talking with interesting people.” He realized he had approached this meal with some trepidation, but was now completely at ease with being there.

Miriam and Joshua returned with Adam and brought the rest of the food. They all sat down around the table.

Simon spoke, “A moment before we eat.” He paused briefly, then continued, “Let us remember to be thankful for the bountiful earth which gave us this meal. Let us also remember that friendship holds our society together and we must be respectful of everyone.” He then began breaking the bread and putting out the stew. It was a hearty meal and abundantly enjoyed by all.

Later Ida and Michael walked to the meeting and met Seth and Darius on the way. Michael found himself listening more carefully as Zebulon read from the writings. He was trying to understand better the intent of the writers. It was the inspiration of Tyconus which caused these writings to appear. It would be well to grasp his underlying meaning as completely as possible. Michael thought, “It would be to my advantage to understand as thoroughly as possible what had transpired. These were the people, including my father, who had set out to change the Jewish world.” Now he found himself intensely interested in hearing the words and trying to decide exactly what they had in mind. It had become very important to him. He thought again, “I know they had good intentions, but how is it working out? Could they have foreseen the different paths their ideas might take? It seems the Jews are not changing and the new ideas are starting a whole new culture. Or is that perhaps what Tyconus had in mind?” Michael remained perplexed.

On the walk home, they talked a lot about the meeting and what the readings meant. After a brief silence, Ida asked, “What do you think of my father?”

Michael thought a moment then replied, “A gruff voice hides a very caring and smart person. I enjoyed talking with him. I think he has good ideas.”

Ida smiled.

When they reached her house, she turned to Michael. “Thank you for walking home with me. Father said I should ask you to come to eat with us again next Sabbath. Would you be willing to do that?”

“I would like it indeed, and appreciate it very much.”

“Fine, I will see you then,” and added with a sly grin, “Shalom, Michael,” then added, “and God be with you.”

He smiled. “And with you, Ida.”

The walk to his own home seemed short and pleasant to Michael.

THE EXPANDING FUTURE

Michael’s work week was anything but routine. In the mornings, he would rise early and have a brief breakfast of nuts and dates. Although he knew what tasks would be ready for the day, there were usually complications. A worker might not show up, or the material which had been brought in for the construction might be inferior and he would have to compensate somehow. The building was nearing completion, and Darius left Michael in charge most of the time while he, Darius, went off to take care of the details of starting a new job. Sometimes they had to work late to reach a satisfactory stopping point. Sometimes they ran out of material or had to wait for parts to dry and could leave early. It was on a day such as that when Michael had extra time and stopped in the market square on the way home to supplement his larder.

“Michael! I am pleased to see you.” Simon called to Michael as he approached.”

“God be with you, Simon.”

“If you are looking for Ida, she is working at home today.”

“Well, I am sorry to miss her, but I also need to buy some things to eat tonight. I particularly want beans, but you can sell me whatever you have.”

“I have beans and there are other good things here.” Simon offered a variety of vegetables and roots and Michael selected his purchases. “Did Ida tell you that you are invited to eat with us again on the evening of the Sabbath?”

“Yes, she did, and I appreciate that. It is kind of you to ask me. Miriam’s cooking is much better than mine. I look forward to being there.”

“Well, I enjoy talking with you, and we have plenty to share.”

Michael completed his transactions and turned toward his home. His mind was full of ideas and memories as he fixed and ate his evening meal. Reviewing all that had happened in the last few weeks, his thoughts whispered to him as he sat contemplating the flame of the lamp.

“I am feeling very good. Suddenly, I am free of worry and obligations and I am doing many more things than I ever did before. I want to

hear the words of the writings. They might reveal something about my father. Perhaps more than I ever knew before. I wonder how his friends wrote their stories and how much they are alike and how different. I will find out. -- And my work is going well. Darius has been very generous in allowing me to oversee the progress of the building. It is comfortable working for him. He is also such an interesting person. He is very committed to the Christians even though he is sure the stories are all just fantasy. It must have been difficult for him to make such a great change from a rather elite Roman to an ordinary person living in another country. He has remarkable qualities.

"And Seth," He smiled. "Dear Seth. A true and solid friend who is content to go along with the Christians without a question. He seems quite happy with the choice also.

"And Ida and her family." He stopped momentarily. "Ida is interesting and attractive. What do I think about her?" The sudden question stopped his thoughts and he just stared at the candle. It was many minutes later when he realized he had been thinking of the times he had spent with Ida, and had recalled them all with great clarity. Aloud he said, "She is a lovely woman." Weariness overwhelmed him and he went to bed.

At the end of the week, the Sabbath dawned bright and clear. It promised to be a beautiful day. The days had gone by quickly and well but Michael was ready to relax and do as little as possible. He slowly ate a small breakfast of parched wheat and figs. Then he sat just outside his doorway in the courtyard. By mid morning he needed to talk to someone, and Uriah came to mind. He set off up the alley to Uriah's abode.

Uriah was sitting under an olive tree where the sunshine was filtered by the olive leaves. He was reclining on the ground with his head conveniently supported by a low branch. His eyes were closed.

"Shalom, Uriah." Michael whispered softly. Uriah's eyes remained closed, so Michael took up a place near him and waited.

After a few minutes Uriah stirred and his eyes eased open slowly. He gradually came to life and focused on Michael. "Michael, when did you get here? Have I been sleeping?"

"Shalom Uriah. You were asleep when I arrived a few minutes ago and I did not want to wake you." Michael responded with a grin. "I appreciate a man who knows how to relax."

"Ah, I have had many years experience in relaxing. It is one of my more well developed abilities."

"Well, that is what the Sabbath is for, so you are doing only what is required of you."

"I have not seen you for a while. How is life treating you these days?"

"I remember some while ago, you said I had to find my own way. So I have been finding my way." he added with a chuckle.

"And what way might that be?"

"I am not sure I should tell you. You may not be pleased."

"Have you come to disturb my sleep to tell me you are not going to tell me of yourself? That does not seem rational to me."

Michael laughed again. "No Uriah, I will tell you because I want you to know and to understand."

"I will listen and pay attention, but I do not guarantee to understand. Sometimes I do not understand young people these days."

"I have been going more often with Seth to the Christian meetings. I am learning more about them, and I do not find them to be so dreadful. They are honest sincere people, but they do have new approaches to the problems of the world. They try to settle disagreements by other ways than by fighting. They believe all people are worthy of life and deserve respect. Actually I like a lot of what they say."

"Ah, you are beginning to sound like a Christian to me all right."

"I met a man there for whom I now work, and he gives me important responsible things to do. He is a very interesting person. I mentioned him to you before. He was a Roman and came here from Rome just to be in this country where the stories of Jesus have originated."

"That is strange," Uriah commented.

"Perhaps so. But more strange is that his family was high in the government and knew the important people there. He related to me that when he was a child his grandfather told him the writings of many years ago, who wrote of all the happenings of the Jews, made no mention of the strange stories which appear in these writings which are so popular now. Darius does not believe they are true. That is his name, Darius. Even so, he likes the sentiments and principles the Christians declare. The ideas they follow conform with his thinking, so he joined them anyway. I am much impressed by that."

"He sounds a bit strange, but certainly no fool."

Michael suddenly realized he had told Darius he would not reveal his secret, but then immediately reassured himself silently to himself, "But it is only Uriah. Uriah will not repeat the idea to anyone and the two will never meet. I must be more careful in the future, though." Aloud, he went on, "No, he is quite intelligent, and I respect him very much. I want to hear all these writings now and find out for myself what they are all about."

"You surely may do as you wish. I am not the person to stop you. I told you before my thought on religions is that they are only to help us over the difficult times. Who really knows what is true and what is not?"

"I seem to find myself adopting Darius' viewpoint myself. His thinking feels comfortable to me."

"I understand the Christians preach that the end of times is getting near. Is that true? Of course, there are some Jews who say the same thing."

"I have not heard enough to know that. It has not been mentioned while I was paying attention anyway. What difference does it make? All we really need are good rules to live by. I think I have found the rules I need for now. We cannot know the future, so why concern ourselves with it?"

The two friends talked on about many things enjoying each other's company. It was well past midday when Michael arose and began to leave.

"Where are you off to now?"

"Simon, the vegetable farmer has asked me to come and share the evening meal with his family. He wants to talk with me before we eat and I find him an interesting person to talk with. He has had an eventful life."

"How does Simon come to have an interest in you?"

"He wants to know more about the Christians also. I walked his daughter, Ida, home from the meetings twice and he appreciated that."

"He is a gruff old man. Almost as bad as me."

"He is quite nice after you get to know him, and intelligent also. He takes his farming very seriously."

"You say you take his daughter home? Is there anything else you want to tell me?" Uriah asked with a slight twinkle in his eye.

"No. why should there be anything else?"

"You are old enough to think of getting married. I was only wondering whether you ---"

Michael cut him off, "No. I am not thinking of that. We are merely friends."

Uriah laughed. "Merely 'friends' is good enough for now."

A little flustered, Michael responded, "I must be going. Thank you for talking with me Uriah, Shalom."

"Shalom, Michael. I will look forward to talking with you again."

Michael started away.

"Michael."

"Yes?" he asked as he turned back.

"I'll dance at your wedding." Then Uriah laughed his playful laugh.

Michael shook his head and grinned as he made his way to the market square. He walked westward with the advancing Sun towards Simon's farm. It seemed to him the sunlight pointed the way especially brightly and he thought. "Wedding? Wedding?" He pondered the idea.

MORE OF SIMON

As Michael approached the farm, he could see Simon again sitting in the shade under a tree. Simon greeted him. "Come and sit in the shade with me, Michael. God be with you."

"And with you, Simon. Thank you."

Simon smiled. Beneath his gruff exterior there was an active mind and an interesting person. "I am not comfortable with our methods of greeting, but one must say something. Shalom has no meaning for me anymore. The Jews do not provide peace. It is an elusive quality which no one seems to be willing to work at gaining. Likewise the new Christian greeting does not mean to me that there is a God. To me it means more as though I am saying 'I am glad to see you, and you are welcome to be here.' That is my intent at least."

Michael thought a moment, then he replied, "Yes, I agree, we use the greetings without any thought of their meaning. I like your interpretation, however. That is the way people should greet each other, with interest and openness."

Simon replied, "Neither the Christians nor the Jews offer satisfying ideas to me. They both seem unbelievable in many ways. Many of their concepts are disturbing."

After a short silence, Michael continued, "I have another friend who has told me other disturbing beliefs. He says among the ancient Greeks, there were those who said no gods existed. He says further that the Torah and these new Christian writings are mere fabrications. Can you believe that? What do you think?"

Simon looked directly at Michael with a stern countenance, but he remained silent. His gaze was fixed and his face displayed his serious emotion. He began slowly in his deep voice, "I do not know whether there is a God or not. I do not believe anyone can know with certainty. To me, many of the ancient writings are beyond belief and probably did not happen. But why then are they reported? Is it only so the religious community may exercise power over us? Or are there values in a belief to comfort us when there are no answers to any of the problems and catastrophes which beset us? Our thoughts border on blasphemy, Michael, and the religious put a fear in our hearts about that also. I do not know,

and my mind grows weary when I contemplate it all too long. What is important to you or to me is what you or I think when looking at the real world.”

Again Michael reflected on what Simon had said. There was no imperative for an immediate answer and he took time to contemplate what he actually thought. He realized the events of the last few months had left him confused in many ways. Following his memories he spoke. “I was always taught that there was a God and that I must obey his laws. Of course, the laws were the realm of the Rabbis, and the religious leaders were the final authority. Although, I know at times when I was in trouble, as when my parents died, it was reassuring to think of a God protecting me.”

Simon picked up on that remark and responded forcefully, “And how much protection did He provide? God certainly did not protect us at Masada.”

“Were you at Masada? I did not realize that. It is amazing to me, as I had understood all had perished there.”

“Yes, I was there with my father and mother while I was yet an adolescent.”

“Then how did you escape?” Michael’s voice conveyed his credulousness.

“There were back ways out of the settlement and narrow paths down the hills. Those that stayed to face the Romans chose to do so. They were the fanatics, and finally all committed suicide before the Romans broke through. But my father believed it was better to get away and continue living. There was no reward in just quitting. Late one night we three traveled down one of the paths and eluded the Romans. They were not very watchful anyway. That is when we came here and started a new life.”

“Well, it is evident that your father made a good choice. You have a fine farm here.”

“Yes, more than just surviving, my father did very well. But he and my mother worked hard also. Their difficult life caught up with them a few years ago, and I received the full responsibility for this place.”

“I am sorry they are gone. I think I would have liked to know them.”

“They were fine people.”

The two lapsed into a quiet contemplative time.

Michael broke the silence with a further comment, “It sounds as though you believe somewhat as a cousin of mine who says the religious stories do not have to be true. Their veracity is unimportant. The basic requirement is just to live in a manner which is fair to everyone.”

“I can see merit in that attitude. I would not argue with it.”

After a few moments Simon spoke again, "Enough of the problems of the world. How was your week, Michael? What work did you do?"

"As I told you before, I do construction. Lately, I have been working with a friend and his crew building a warehouse in town, but it is almost finished."

"That sounds like a good kind of friend to have."

"Yes, he is very good to me," he responded, then added, "He is a Christian."

Simon smiled, "It seems more and more people are Christians these days. What else do you know about him?"

Michael mentally checked himself to be careful what he said about Darius and not betray his confidences again, "I met him at the Christian meetings to which Ida goes."

"Did I hear my name mentioned?" Ida had appeared from the house and came to sit with Michael and Simon.

"I was only speaking to your father about how Darius has been so helpful to me."

"Yes, Darius is a kind and thoughtful person. He is one of the stalwarts of the group. He is a little older and wiser. Everyone likes him."

"It is good to see you Ida. Did you have a busy week?"

"Oh, it was so hard. I had to work long hours and did not have any fun." Ida's voice was mockingly sad, but her expression could not hide her amusement at teasing her father.

"Ha!" exclaimed Simon. "Would that I had it half as good as you do when I was your age. You must be more respectful of your elders." He also betrayed playfulness in his response which was unusual among families of those days.

Michael tucked these observations away in the back of his mind for further reflection when he had the time later. He did not relate to the lightheartedness, but it pleased him somehow. He would think about it more when he was alone and not distracted. Miriam called from the house, "Ida, come help carry," and Ida disappeared inside again.

The meal Miriam provided was much the same as the week before with emphasis on vegetables from her own garden. Before they ate, Simon took time again to offer a thought about being grateful for the bountiful land and the good fortune of having honest friends. Michael noticed that the talk around the table was easy and friendly, but also that Joshua did not enter into it very much. He kept silent and mostly listened to what others had to say. Michael made a mental note to try and become better acquainted with Joshua.

THE NEW READING

The dinner was such a pleasure and the conversation so active, that Ida and Michael were late starting to the meeting. They hurried and arrived just in time for the beginning. There was a sense of excitement in the air as they entered the meeting room. Zebulon spoke. "God be with you."

"And with you." the assemblage responded.

"This is a momentous evening for me. I am ready to read from the newly found text of Matthew, and it is very exciting. In the very first part there is a great explanation of the early life of our Savior. Let me read it to you,"

Michael now realized he would be hearing his father's words for the first time, and he listened intently. The words and thoughts flowed smoothly, and although it was just a story, Michael somehow heard his father speaking and detected the special ways he would have described the events. He became engrossed in the recitation and his mind lingered on after Zebulon finished. Almost trancelike, he stood and continued thinking about the reading until a voice at his side intruded.

"Michael, Michael," Ida whispered. "Are you all right?"

Slowly returning to the present, Michael heard Zebulon in the middle of his prayer, and perceived that Ida had been talking to him.

"Yes, Yes, I am all right." But he was a little embarrassed.

When Zebulon was finished, Michael turned to Ida and lamely explained, "I am sorry I did not hear you. I was thinking of what Zebulon had read." He did not say anything about how he heard his father in the words. Mentioning that would be dangerous. It could foster difficult questions.

After the meeting, Ida introduced Michael to some more of her friends. He was beginning to recognize some of the group and even attaching names with faces of some he had met before. They ended up by leaving at the same time Seth and Darius were walking out. The four walked together to the intersection where Ida and Michael turned toward the farm.

"Is walking Ida home getting to be a weekly event?" inquired Darius.

"It is one of my more pleasant duties of the day. I shall see you at work tomorrow," Michael added with a smile.

"I certainly hope so," Darius replied half seriously.

The four parted with the customary, "God be with you."

Michael wondered what effect his father's words had on someone who did not know the true source, and after a short distance, he asked,

“What did you think of the new reading which Zebulon gave tonight?” .

“I thought it was amazing. It sounded so reassuring. It was related so simply and clearly that it must surely be true. I found it was inspiring to hear an independent confirmation of the story of our Savior.”

“Do you have any doubts about the story of Jesus?”

“Not really. So many attest to it being true that I am sure it is. But those things which are beyond personal experience are not held as firmly as the things we know ourselves. It just felt good to hear more about the history of Him.”

“Yes, I thought it was well written.” Michael enjoyed a little silent laugh inside as he was able to accept some credit on behalf of his father who had actually written the piece, but who would forever remain anonymous.

Their path was well lighted by an almost full moon. As they walked, Michael commented, “It is convenient the moon is so bright. We are lucky to have such a good light to see our way.”

“Yes. I wonder about the moon at times. Why does it grow bigger and smaller so regularly? Why does it glow the way it does?”

“No one has ever explained it to me. It is very strange. Parts of it are darker than other parts. Have you ever looked at it closely?”

Ida stopped and looked up. She studied the moon for a minute and offered, “I think you are right.”

As Ida stood looking, Michael turned towards her and gently put his arms around her.

Ida did not stir, but looked down. In her quiet voice she said, “You are standing much closer than is permitted.”

Michael relaxed his embrace and dropped his arms. “You may move as far away as you wish.”

Ida did not move. After several moments, she looked up again and spoke softly. “I have to be getting home. We must go on.” They turned and again walked, however slowly, towards the farm.

At her gate, Ida inquired, “Will you come to dinner again next week?”

“Are you sure your parents want me to come? I do not want to impose on their good will.”

“Well, I would like you to come, and I know my father likes talking with you. And mother; well mother likes to cook for every one. She says you look like you could use a good meal.” The last was accompanied by a gentle smile.

"Those all sound like good reasons to me. I will be there. Until then, God be with you, Ida."

"And with you, Michael."

URIAH BECOMES SERIOUS

The first day of work went badly. Some needed stone was not delivered, and everyone was left with nothing to do by mid-day, so they were sent home. Michael spent the unexpected time in cleaning and straightening up his little house. Afterwards, he just sat with a cup of wine and fell into a reverie. He reviewed the last few months of his life, and how it had changed. Occasionally he whispered to himself.

"How different it is now. I have a steady job. I have no great worries. The Matthew scroll is where it belongs." He thought back on that decision and felt again his father would have approved. "We are free from any involvement which is what he wanted." This brought him to the Christians. "Knowing what I do, it is simply impossible to believe that any of the Christian stories are true, and yet Seth and Ida and many others accept it as a factual story and are living their lives by the teachings. They are good people, but are mysterious stories really a good basis for one's life?" Michael pondered that point for a long time. "Darius even hints that the Torah might be simply stories made up by ancient men. But I have lived by it so far, and I feel all right. Is that a wrong thing to do; a wrong way to live?"

As he reviewed recent events in his life, and thought about these challenging ideas, his original light mood turned to deeper, brooding thoughts on the totality of life. Finally he broke free of his disturbing fascinations and spoke again to himself, "I must talk with Uriah."

Since it was now early evening, he knew Uriah and Naomi would be through with their evening meal. Setting off through the courtyard, he went looking for Uriah. As he approached their abode, Naomi was just entering it, "Shalom, Naomi, Is Uriah here?"

"Shalom, Michael, No, he went walking in the olive garden. I think he will do more sitting than walking though. He likes the benches there."

Michael smiled, "Yes, I think I know exactly where he is. One of the benches has worn over the years to fit him quite well. I will go to look for him."

Uriah was sitting quietly in the warm evening air as Michael approached. He had been entertaining himself by watching others walk by, and exchanging nods and pleasantries with friends and acquaintances."

"Shalom, Uriah."

"Shalom, Michael."

The two sat silently for several minutes. Then Uriah spoke. "What is worrying you Michael?"

"You know me well. It is true. I am disturbed."

"I have known your parents since before you were born, and have watched you grow up. But I am also an excellent observer of people, and you look troubled." All this was said with Uriah's infectious grin playing over his face.

Michael smiled back, and began unloading his mind. "It was a poor day today. We ran out of material, and Darius sent everyone home."

"Oh, well, do not let that distress you. Tomorrow will be better I am sure."

"That is not my concern. I know that situation will work out. I had a lot of free time this afternoon though, and I started thinking. What troubles me is that I have been considering all the changes in my life during last few months. I feel very confused. Should I start being a much better Jew and go to the synagogue more regularly? Or should I go on as I am and be somewhat lax? Or should I listen to the Christians and live by their rules? Many do, and they seem to be happy. I know it suits Seth and Ida. I have trouble believing the stories, though. However, I also know some who do not believe and yet follow because they think the ideas are good. Or should I be like Simon, who believes neither the Jews nor the Christians?

"Yes. I would say you are somewhat confused." Uriah smiled gently, and went on. "Just because there are many paths does not mean that whatever you choose would be wrong. They could all be good. Any one of them might work to make you comfortable with your life. That is the important thing. You must be content within yourself. It is your life, and no one else's."

Michael looked down and shook his head. "You are not very helpful."

Uriah laughed his playful laugh. Then he turned serious. "I will not tell you what to do, Michael. That would be wrong, and it is not for me to decide. You must do it yourself, but I know you are smart and will make good decisions."

Michael sat looking downcast, and Uriah waited for him to speak. Reluctantly, Michael looked at Uriah. His face gradually softened, and his smile came back. "Yes, I know you are right. I must know my own mind. It is my responsibility." Michael looked intently at Uriah. "You are a good friend. At least I know I can always talk with you, and that helps me."

"Well, we are friends and cousins. I knew your parents a long time, and I care about you." Then his eyes twinkled, as he added, "And where does Miss Ida fit into all of this?"

Michael replied quickly but a little uneasily, "I told you. We are just friends, and I enjoy being with her." He went on, "and I enjoy talking with Simon, her father. He is quite an interesting person when you get to know him."

"I do not know him very well. He seems very somber and he concentrates on his vegetables when I talk with him. But of course, that is his business, and he evidently takes it seriously." Playfulness then crept over his face and he added. "It is a good idea to know your future in - laws as well as you can."

Michael flustered, "Uriah, you are incorrigible. If I did not love you, I could learn to hate you."

Uriah laughed, "Come, come, you must not deny an old man his simple pleasures."

They sat quietly for a few minutes, then Uriah offered. "Walk with me, Michael. It is time to go home." The two wandered along together in the gathering dusk following the paths and alleys toward their courtyard.

NEW BEGINNINGS

The next morning came early after a restless night for Michael. He had hoped Uriah would tell him what to do, but then realized Uriah could not do that. As Uriah had said to him, "You must do it yourself. It would be wrong for me to tell you."

That left him as confused as ever. But it was time for work, and he had to leave his restless thoughts behind. As he arrived at the warehouse, he could see there was still no stone for the days work. Darius was standing with some of the workers and letting them know there was no work today either.

"But I am promised the stone will be here late in the day and we will be able to work tomorrow. This bothers me as much as it bothers you. I will just have to accept it, and I hope you can also."

One of the workers complained, "I need the work. I have five small children and they need food." However, most of the workers were willing to have a day off and immediately set off to enjoy it. Michael saw Darius give the complaining worker a few coins before he turned towards him with a greeting. "Michael, God be with you."

"God be with you, Darius. Do we not have the stone yet?" Michael asked Darius, as he approached the dissolving group.

"No, but it is promised later on. I am going to stay here until it arrives, or I will go to prod them if it does not come. Although, I should be at the new job to make sure it starts correctly."

Michael sat down with Darius in the deserted building site.

"It is annoying that we are prevented from working, but I must admit I enjoyed my day off yesterday. I cleaned the house and spent time talking with my cousin."

"Who is this cousin of yours?"

"Oh, he is an old man. Older than my father was, but they had been friends for many years. His name is Uriah and he lives near where I do.

He is a long time friend, and has been very supportive since my father died. We are somehow related, but I am not sure in what way. I try to get guidance from him, but sometimes he is very reluctant.”

“What guidance do you need? You seem to me to know what you need to do, and you do it quite well.”

“Oh, I am confused by all the Christian talk, I guess. I do not know what to do about it. I can not believe the stories, but I must admit the Christians I know are very reasonable people. You especially, Darius. I admire the way you handle your affairs and conduct business. I believe everyone who knows you likes you.”

Darius laughed, “That is kind of you. I try to treat everyone fairly. I just think it is the best way to live.”

“But to me it does not feel honest to go along with the teachings if the stories are not true. It seems a little cynical to do that. I do not mean to criticize, but how do you feel about it? How do you justify your position?”

“Well, perhaps I am a little cynical. However, that is my problem. As long as I can be honest and sincere in my relationships with my friends, my innermost thoughts are mine alone. I propose we all have secrets we will not let out just because there is no point in airing them. The knowledge of them by others would serve no purpose. I feel that does not make it wrong to ignore them or discount them in the ordinary business of living our lives.”

Michael contemplated Darius’ words. He was immediately reminded of his own secrets which he tries to prevent from affecting his friendships, and realized Darius made a good deal of sense. “That is very helpful, Darius. You are a very practical person. I appreciate your sharing your thoughts with me.” Michael laughed, “You are more helpful than my cousin was. I know he means well but sometimes he is annoying. He likes to tease me also.”

“What does he tease you about?”

“Oh well, he keeps asking about Ida. I guess he wonders what my interest is, and he implies I should think of getting married.”

Darius smiled, “I am sure he has your best interests at heart. I must add however, I do not think anyone else ever considered it necessary to walk Ida home. She is a very competent and resourceful young lady. It helps that she is pretty also.”

Michael was silent, but his mind was in turmoil. His thoughts careened in his head, “Darius always has such clear concepts and speaks with such self assurance. It is as though he has thought through all possible situations and has a lucid and concise comment to put the ideas into perspective. He is right, I have paid special attention to Ida. She is all that he says she is. Should I really consider this? Am I ready for marriage? Would she marry me? How would Simon react? Well, why not? Why not be the same kind of Christian that Darius is? Or maybe a bit more like Simon and not believe in any god at all. What difference does it make anyway? I know who I am and what kind of man I am. That will not change.” He gradually became aware that Darius had spoken.

“What did you say?”

“I said that you had been silent a long time. Are you all right?”

“Yes, it is just that I was reflecting on your remarks. Perhaps I am interested in Ida.”

This was followed by more silence as Michael thought about Darius and how much he respected him. He was a good friend. An idea occurred to Michael. “Darius, you do not have to waste your time here. I can wait for the stone or prod them if it does not come soon. Then you could go to the new site and do what needs doing there.”

Darius' face brightened and he answered enthusiastically, “That is a good idea, Michael. It would be very helpful. I was hoping to have this job done by now and the new job is more urgent.”

“Well let me have two good men, and I will finish this in two days when we have the stone. You will not have to concern yourself with it.”

“You are very practical, Michael. Let us do it. I will go right now and start the other job, and you shall have your two men tomorrow.” Darius rose and turned to go, “God be with you, Michael.”

“And with you, Darius.”

After Darius left, Michael was absorbed in further thought, but he became restless, and began looking at what remained to be done on the warehouse and started planning the work. This helped the time go more quickly. The needed stone arrived as promised in the late afternoon, and Michael went home for the day.

DESTINY

By the end of the week, the warehouse job was done. It took a little more than two days to finish, but Darius was quite pleased. It was a subject of conversation during the social time at the Christian meeting.

“Seth, I want to thank you again for bringing Michael here. He has been very helpful in our building work. He understands what needs doing, and he knows how to organize the others to get it done. This last week I left him alone with just two helpers and they finished the warehouse. Now all of us can go ahead with our new work. It was a good day when I met him.” Darius was in an exuberant mood as he related the events of the last week to Seth.

Seth responded, “You do not know the difficulty I had in persuading him to come to the meetings.” With a sly grin he added, “But once he started, he found other reasons to be here.”

Michael laughed, and remarked a little mockingly, "It is so reassuring to know my life is in the hands of such competent persons. Thank you for taking care of me. But I do find the new readings to be of particular interest. I think the narrative is absorbing and I want to hear it all. That is one thing which attracts me."

"Do you think we have a new convert in the making? If so I want full credit for getting him here."

"Your due recognition is acknowledged and your valuable efforts are unchallenged, Seth."

Ida was quiet during this exchange among the men, but she noted how easily and well Michael interacted with friends. She had discovered many interesting qualities in him over the last few months, but she was still not sure of how he felt about her and what he really thought about the Christian teachings. Her thoughts danced in her head, "He is evidently well trained by his parents. I wish I had known them. Besides being a good worker, he knows many other things and can carry on an interesting conversation with my father. Other people seem to be willing to follow his leadership, and he usually seems to be in a pleasant mood. I wonder whether he is always this way. He must have some faults. I wonder --"

She realized she had been spoken to. "What did you say?"

Michael looked a little askance, "I asked whether you were ready to walk home?"

"Yes, I am ready, let us go."

The night air was refreshing after the closeness of the meeting room. They walked easily and unhurriedly. Their mood had grown to become one of relaxed appreciation of each other. They appeared to be comfortable and seemed to be savoring their moments together.

As they approached the farm, Michael suddenly stopped, "Ida, I want you to know how much I enjoy your friendship. You have made my life more interesting and it is a pleasure to be with you." As he spoke, he put his arms around her and drew her close.

"And I enjoy you, Michael." She also put her arms around him.

They stood quietly, and the silent night echoed their soundless interaction.

"Michael, you are standing too close again."

"I am standing too close, and yet you do not try to move away. How do you explain that?"

"Perhaps it is because I like it." She allowed Michael to embrace her for a moment and rested her head softly against his chest.

"I like it also, Ida."

The moonlight cast their shadows carelessly onto the ground as they stood alone in the glow of the universe. Many millions of people before them had stood just like this and absorbed the wonder of the nearness of another human being. Suddenly, Michael felt compelled to open his mind to Ida. "I do not think I can believe all the stories of this new religion of yours, but I do understand and I can live by the ideas it espouses. I feel much the same as Darius, whom I admire very much. Or perhaps even more, I feel like your father who is skeptical of all the old religious teachings and yet is an admirable person. I could be like him, and still participate in your meetings. I also want to come to the meetings because you will be there, and that is important to me."

"I think that is acceptable, Michael."

As they embraced each other, they gradually realized their future was together. Indulging in the enjoyment of the moment they were completely unaware of the rest of the world. Their little universe included only them. Little did they imagine the years of the Diaspora were to be in their turbulent future. It would be a future of Roman oppression which would affect not only the Jews, but the Christians also. Many families and friends would be torn apart by the political upheaval and the religious disruption.

There would be much turmoil in the future of the young couple because of the Romans. But as long as there are Human Beings, there will be troubles. However, with individuals like Michael and Ida, the solutions or accommodations which are necessary to overcome the concerns of the unsettled and difficult world will be found somehow. Nations will rise and fall. Religions will prosper and sink into disrepute. Social organizations will change, grow and writhe with troubles guided by the whims of good and bad leaders. But life will go on, and Human Beings will, by however tortuous a route, become more intelligent and better able to deal with the conflicts between individuals and nations. As cultures mature they will find the best ways to interact for the benefit of all.

The vagaries and mindless assaults of Mother Nature will always be a factor in the fate of the human Race. But greater knowledge will enable humans to tame most of the known physical threats. However, the threats of human groups against other human groups will be the greatest challenge to tranquility and require the most social intelligence to solve. The growth and maturing of the human perspective on itself will demand the expansion of the qualities of tolerance, respect and recognition of the worth of individuals while expecting the best efforts from all members of the community. Perhaps with experience, Humankind will eventually learn the art of making the World the enjoyable and peaceful place it should be.

