



# ZWTF

Zapping You Whenever Thoughts Flow

Volume 7, Issue 28

## The Evil Empire

*Jesus Christ throws Christianity under the bus.*

### Chapter 3

#### Growing up in Nazareth.



A modern-day descendant of my father.  
New York, NY.

I wanted to be a carpenter when I grew up. This was of course because my dad was a carpenter. Like all young boys, I wanted to be like my father.

My dad never sat me down to teach me life lessons. He always did it while we were both working with our hands in the shop behind the store. He'd be planing a board and I'd be gluing some ornament to a dresser when he would say, "Son, I tell you this, Solomon's wives really threw him off course." I knew that my dad was ready to teach me a life lesson when he started a sentence with, "Son, I tell you this..." (I adopted the same habit as an adult, tweaking it slightly.) I realized very early that I almost always understood exactly what my dad meant, but I would nevertheless (and almost invariably) ask, "What do you mean, dad?" and in this case he answered, "I just think it's terrible how Satan uses something as attractive as a woman to lead men into darkness. But I'm telling you, it works almost every time. Your mother in an exception, thank God. I also thank her parents, who are good people."

My father was biased, and God love him for that. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as it must be. My mother's face kept ships in port.

My dad warned me of attractive females. I appreciated his care, but I could read hearts. As an aside, beauty is a disadvantage in that humanity lauds it inordinately, giving to the beautiful all of life's goods, unto dependence. The protective sheen of human acceptance and comfort thus builds a barrier to the things of God, which are of spirit and not of human acceptance or comfort. Those of every era consider, with sympathy, the poverty-stricken, the physically repulsive, and the mentally "unbalanced." It is wasted emotion. These are closer to God than the others, and thus they find Him. Or should I say, they seek Him. It is not the well that require the physician, but the sick. The trouble is that the well rarely face their own their sickness, for "wellness" is measured among Adamic humans by physical

height, the space between the shoulder blades, a well-shaped nose and a bulging purse. This leaves the true sickness of pride unchecked. Mary of Magdalene was the exception to all of this, but only because her father and her brothers abused her. As this is not the topic under consideration, I will provide further detail about Magdalene at another time, when appropriate. How favored of God was that woman!

### KICK THE BALL

Every generation thinks that it invented “Kick The Ball.” My brothers James and Joseph entered the family soon after me. (When I say “soon,” I mean nine months subsequent to my birth. When I say “my brothers James and Joseph,” I will add that they were twins. When I say “entered the family,” my mother and father eschewed marital relations until my birth, for it was forbidden them by Gabriel. When once it was allowed, they excelled at it and rarely took a break from it). Thus, I had people at home with whom to kick the ball.

“My mother kicked very well, and she dribbled with a dexterity generally unknown to her gender.”

We had no space behind our house, but an adjoining lot provided for our recreational needs. It was a lot where a house was torn down, where the Angert family had lived with their three dozen goats. My mother kicked very well, and she dribbled with a dexterity generally unknown to her gender. Thus, she always played with us. I cannot ever remember her refusing a game, not even while pregnant. It was my father who always had to say: “Please, dear. Sit this one out. The baby is too close. The twins can use Abarrane on their team”—he referred here to his sister who lived on Hermon street, near to us, and whose name is translated “mother of a multitude.” And indeed she was that, for I had fourteen cousins from Abarrane but, astoundingly, none of them could play.

In the early days, it was dad and me against my mother, James and Joseph—their one-person advantage due to the physical prowess of my father, which was considerable, although my mother excelled him in speed.

And I say this to you, my father refused to hold himself back for the sake of youth. If he could help it, he never let us win anything. “When you do best me,” he would explain, “assuming that you ever do, then you will know that you have truly done it.”

I will never forget one particular game, when we played under a full moon. (It was summer, and the days were hot; I always enjoyed night games because they extended my bedtime.) Neither team ever assigned anyone at the net, for we felt that it was a waste of manpower needed for the field. (The field was an acre.) If a team advanced into scoring position—that is, beyond the fifteen-meter sticks (speaking of the Greek rules now, and once again using the English measuring scale familiar to you)—the player nearest the net tended it. We framed our competitions also in accord with the Greek method, that is: play to five, win by two.

My dad and I had squandered six one-point advantages. It was during the seventh overtime period, therefore, when my mother’s team led 10-9, and with possession. The twins were practically done in, for this was our longest game ever on record, and James and Joseph were chiefly book readers.



This Nazareth souvenir shop stands on the site of the old lot where we played.

Whenever this happened to the twins, my mom would take over. She relished taking over. I remember her telling me one time, “Between you and me, the twins hold me back. But I must include them, mustn’t I? You know, for the development of their characters.”

On this night, midway through the seventh overtime period and with the opposition a goal from victory, my dad said, “You take her,” meaning that he would watch the net while I guarded my mother. This was against our usual strategy, for my father would ordinarily “take her,” for they were more or less equally matched: he excelling in strength, she in speed. “Besides,” my father said, “I will have more mass in the net.”

This role-reversal proved fatal to our chances, for mass bows always to speed. My mother brought the ball up; I can still see her long brown hair swinging back and forth, flowing toward me with an independent confidence. I knew what she would do—as I always did—but at my age (10), my body yet lagged a pace behind my will. (I don’t know why I say “yet,” for my body, in flesh, never did match my determinations, at least not in terms of speed.)

I knew that I would see something I’d never seen before, and indeed that is what happened. Instead of dribbling Greek-style (that is, with the heels) to her right (her favored side), my mother stopped in mid dribble to “hoof”

the ball, that is, to rest it atop her kicking foot. From here, she flipped the ball to head-height (bending her leg sideways at the knee) popping it up with the side of her foot. As I said, I knew this was coming—knowing also what would follow—but I could not stop it. Because next, she head-flicked the stuffed goatskin so sharply to the left that her neck made a loud clicking sound. (Her right-leaning feint did not trick me, for as I said, I knew about it. Her neck was not hurt in the least, I also knew that. But I am telling you and I *will* tell you: besides her

“She let my father regain his equilibrium, but only long enough to torment him.”

dexterity, the woman knew speed.) Catching up with her own pass (it was not a problem for her) and leaving me alone in the moonlight (the twins were already sitting down), she made for my father.

Unlike me, my father had no idea what she was going to do, and was about to prove it. She feigned a scoring shot, my mother did, though only as an excuse to tap the ball laterally with her non-scoring foot. My father dove to stop the “scoring shot,” of course, leaving the bearer of his children alone with the ball, the net, and a considerable look of satisfaction upon her face. She let my father regain his equilibrium, but only long enough to torment him. Before his full recovery, she nudged the ball into the net as slowly as possible while still assuring herself that he would miss it. The result was her team’s eleventh goal, and the win.

My father brooded for the rest of the evening. When I went to say “good night” to him, he still had not recovered. He could not return my well-wish immediately, but instead said, “I thought that you would have been prepared for that.”

“Prepared for what?” I said. “For the head pass?”

“Yes,” he said. “The head pass.”

“But no one has ever seen it before. Have you ever seen such a thing? She passed it to herself.”

He turned thoughtful. “No, I have never seen anything like that before. No one has.”

“Good night then, father.”

“Good night.”



A modern-day descendant of my mother; Nashua, NH.

But then, before turning into my room, I could not resist turning back to him and saying, “Father, I thought that you would have been prepared for the feigned scoring shot.”

“Go to bed,” he said.

And so I did.

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#### IMMEDIATELY BEFORE

I was eating breakfast with my brothers before work on a significant day that set the course of my life—but not in a good way, as humans would measure “good.” This was September of my tenth year, just before Tabernacles. My dad was already in the shop. Breakfast was the usual blend of barley and wheat. My mother would prepare it in a large vat on a fire outside of our front porch. She stirred it with a large spoon, and while doing so resembled an enchantress mixing a cauldron of boiling ox bones and blood—as though for a curse—except my mother would say, “Come and get your *goop*” (she would call the cereal “goop”), and up and out would come ladlefuls of the stuff into large stone bowls that we held before her like street urchins at the district dispensary.

Next came the coffee, her true specialty. We each had our own cups with our names etched on the sides by a nail that we dragged into the wet clay (our mother taught us ceramics as well), and we always drank it black so that we could be “the simplest of coffee drinkers,” in accord with my mother’s wishes. My dad imported the beans from Egypt and my mother roasted them and ground them with her “coffee rock” into a stone sink beside the barn. I learned to drink coffee from my fifth year, which was the year “that my own father taught me to drink it,” she said.

I will share one further aside before attending to history, and that is: my mother stretched food and clothing into Sinai-style miracles that were not miracles at all but rather noble acts of thrift. But I will say this, that thrift never tasted, smelled, or felt so good as those things which emerged, with love, from my mother’s long fingers and her ingenious mind.

If a man wants to work a small business at home and have enough time for his children and for the loving-arts due his wife, then he must accomplish one of two things: he must either increase his income, or he must pray to God to find a woman able to wring from every limited natural resource (those available to her) whatever

spoonful (or ladlefull) of sustenance needed for her family. For *our* family, it was the latter course.

#### IT HAPPENS

I knocked on the door. “Come in.” I approached him, but he never took his eyes from his saw.

“Are we going to Sepphoris today?”

“Yes. We need to take these chairs to Kanna.”

“I like Kanna.”

“Kanna likes *you*. He likes the work that you do. He could barely believe that the table came only from your hands, with no help from me.”

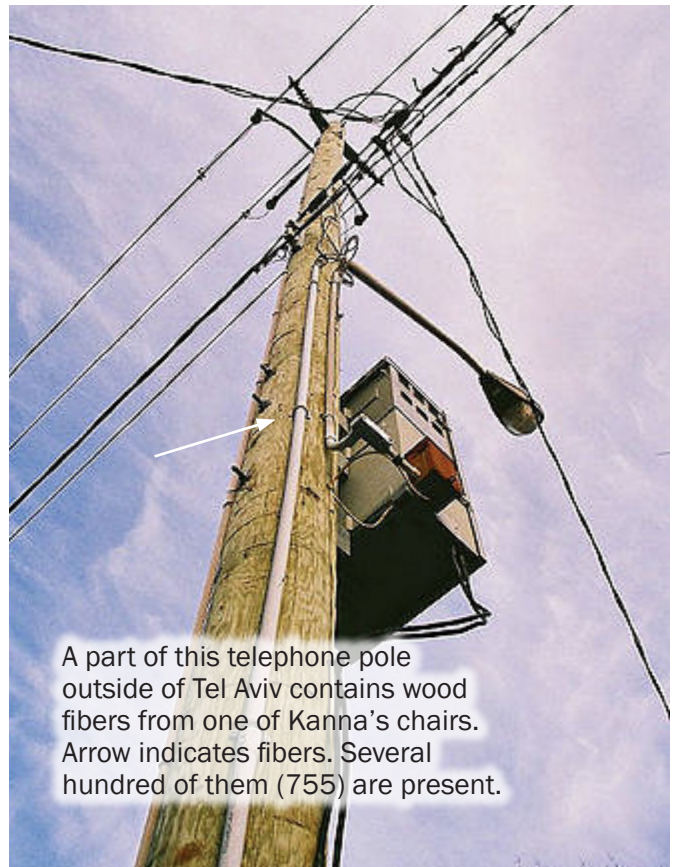
“I never miss a nail.”

“I know.”

“You don’t understand. I never miss a nail. Literally. My hammer has never missed a nail. Ever. I have tried many times to miss, but I can’t.”

He stopped sawing. “I suppose it is unusual?”

“I was over at Eban and Eder’s yesterday. Their mother came in and said, ‘Please stay for soup.’ I knew that she was going to say that before she said it. I wanted to say ‘Yes, I will’ before she said it, but I restrained myself. And I knew that she would next address her sons and say, ‘Your father



will not be home this evening until he shoes the mare.' I was so sure of it that I wrote it down. I wrote it down and I gave it to Eban. As Eban was reading it, his mother said, 'Your father will not be home this evening until he shoes the mare.' Eban just looked at me. He did not know what to say. He did not know what was happening. It was too much for him. It was too fast.

"I went outside, crying. Why? Because I know that Eder will be dead by a wild animal before he turns another year. I have tried to shake this away since yesterday, but I can't. I know that Eder is good, but that Eban has a dark spirit in him. And so the light one dies while the dark one lives. What would you say if I told you that I spoke to the spirit inside of Eban? And that it answered me?" I sighed deeply. "There is so much evil in the world."

My father had stopped sawing and was staring at me. He stared at me as though it were my last day on Earth. His gaze then faltered, and he diverted it to the half-sawed board. The instrument, however, did not move.

"God tells me," I continued, "that you know something that I do not know. It is for you to tell me. I am of age. You may disagree with that, but it is true. I am of age, not by law, but by God. Now is the time. Help me, because I am foundering here. I am going to go down into the abyss

“What would you say if I  
told you that I spoke to the  
spirit inside of Eban? And  
that it answered me?”

if I cannot get help for these things that agitate me. My help will be in the knowing. I feel much older than ten years. What I mean by that is that I do not think that this is my first life. I cannot take another day of this, and what other human besides you could tell me? If you do not tell me, I am afraid of what may happen. It is your place, not mother's. So please."

He put his hand on my shoulder and spoke slowly. "We must go to Kanna. After all, the chairs are for his daughter, who is to be married soon. There will be happy times of celebration; we are all invited to the wedding, which comes after Tabernacles." He now squeezed his fingers on the round muscle of my shoulder and massaged it. "I think Kanna knows a vinedresser, and there will be wine all around, when the time comes. Anyway, my son, on the

way back from Sepphoris, we will speak. I know a place beside the Nazareth road where there is a large tree."

"I know of it. It is the fig tree that grows out of nowhere, halfway between here and there. So I am not wrong then?"

"No. You are not wrong. All will be known there, under that tree. And now, please get me my scrolls, for we must take them. I will load the chairs and hitch up Mahria. I am so happy that the sun is out today."

"Me too. The sun speaks of God's favor."

"Indeed it does."

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## THE ROAD TO SEPPHORIS

The road to Sepphoris was hot and vacant, mostly void of vegetation. The tree was an anomaly. We passed it on the way up, not even turning to look at it.

Kanna was pleased with the chairs. It was because our business attended to detail that other carpentry outlets did not. It was because we would do a job once and it was done. It would be right the first time, because we made it so. No customer ever returned a product.

I know of those who memorize long passages of Scripture. They set themselves out to do it. They memorize, but they do not understand. And so what advantage is it? I turn now to wood. What use to memorize various kinds of wood, and what tree it comes from, and what the grain is? When one works with the wood, one becomes familiar with it *because of one's purpose*. It is because one makes tables and chairs and lattices from it that one comes to memorize the wood, not by rote, but out of the necessity to become friendly with the product from which a practical thing comes. It ought to be that way with Scripture then, yes? It ought to be known not by memorization, but by a daily working with it to produce an understanding of God, for that is the ultimate purpose. Thus, the Word becomes known by functional use and not by the need to locate "text weapons" to prove one's points to spiritual antagonists.

My dad was like that, and he taught me to be like him. He would say to me, "By this, we will come to know God." That was the purpose of Scripture to him: to come to know God. He was right. He understood the Scripture to be, not a recipe book for right behavior, but a revelation of Yahweh. The revelation of the character of God would, in turn, lead to propriety of action. "It must start with the light," my dad would say. "For without

the light, there is no fruit. As in the natural, thus also in the spiritual.”

On the way back from Sepphoris, the tension of the coming conversation weighed upon us. Even Mahria felt it, for she slowed her pace as we approached the halfway point. It must have weighed particularly heavy on my dad. I had known for some time that he possessed a secret knowledge that I needed and that it was his task, from God, to relay that knowledge to me. I say here that I considered him but the conduit of the knowledge, and that it was I who would bear the brunt of the coming revelation. (Not that he did not suffer.) Because of that, the thorns of agitation arose in my stomach when I saw the tree rising up out of the brown horizon. “We should have brought sandwiches,” my father said, hoping to ease the tension. I thought that I might as well participate in his attempt, so I said, “If only it were the season for pickles.”

#### “THE MAN WITH THE FIRST BURDEN”

The blanket that had been spread on the bed of the cart to protect the chairs was now spread out beneath us, beneath the God-given tree. The tree above us had been alive for one-hundred and fifty three years, exactly. I did not need to count the rings to know that. That tree is gone now, but the memories remain. I took my disciples there one day, the day after I had multiplied

the loaves and the fishes. We needed to get away then, for the populace wanted to make me king. I brought them to this tree—it was still forty years from death—and I said to them, “This is where my father told me.” And Peter had said, “God told you here. Let us build a tabernacle, then.” I said, “No, not *that* Father. I speak of the one that you know as Joseph. The man with the first burden.” Then my disciples bowed their heads in their respect for my earthly caretaker, and with the greatest admiration for a man whom they had never met and whom they would not meet before the resurrection of the dead, that is, the resurrection of the worthies of Israel.

“Thank God for this shade,” my dad said.

“I existed before this life, didn’t I.”

He tightened his scroll of Daniel, placed it to one eye and trained it into the heavens. “I do not know about that,” he said. “It could very well be. But this, I do not know. God will reveal to you further unfoldings in His own time. I can only tell you what He has told me.”

“How did He tell you?”

“It happened first through the messenger Gabriel.”

“Gabriel spoke to you?”

“Directly.”

“Why? How?”

“In a dream. It was a dream more real than any dream I have ever had. In fact, as I sit before you, I am not altogether certain that it was a dream at all.”

“There was a need for this.”



The modern road between  
Nazareth and Sepphoris.

“There always is. Messengers never come except for some practicality. I had met your mother at her sister’s wedding and she could not stop looking at me, and I at her. These were the kinds of looks that should stop due to propriety, but that continue. You know all of this. We were meant to be together.

“We began seeing each other after the wedding. I came to know her parents, and then before the passing of the year, asked for her hand in marriage. Thus, we were betrothed. Again, you already know this. But what I am about to tell you, you do not know: before I had known her—in the progeny-bearing sense—she had come to be with child. You remember what I told you about how human beings come into the world?”

“Yes.”

“Well, hear this then: you did not come that way.”

“I didn’t?”

“No.”

“Then—”

“You ask the same question that I asked. She told me that she was pregnant by ‘other’ means. I can tell you exactly where it was. It was at our favorite restaurant in Nazareth.”

“El Bekkers.”

“That’s the place. We were only months away from the wedding when she said, ‘I am with child.’ I fell apart. I made a scene there. What was I supposed to do? As I said, I had not known her. I naturally assumed that your mother had been with another man. What else was there? My world caved in. My reputation was ruined, and she could face stoning if I were to bring up charges. At that

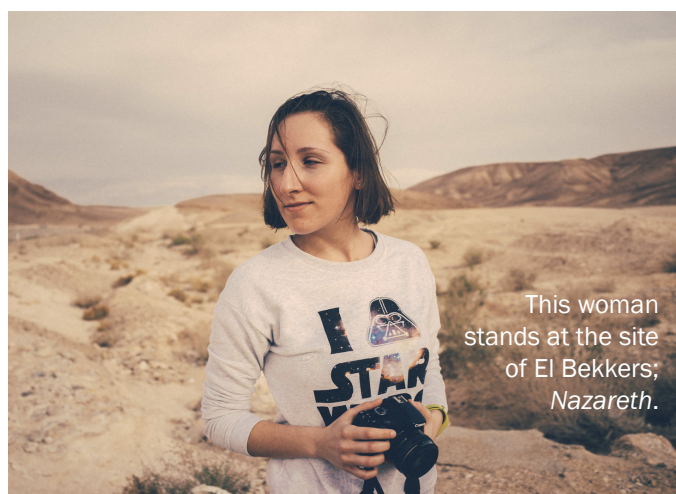
“Besides, we have since figured out mathematically that your birth corresponded with the prophecy of Daniel.”

moment, I wanted to kill the other man—and I think I would have—with my bare hands. Oh, but what did she tell me? Only this: that the messenger Gabriel had appeared to her in the dark of night, in her bedroom after her family had eaten dinner, and one of the most esteemed messengers in Israel told her this—I will never forget these words, for I have rehearsed them in my mind

every day since then, and I have waited for years to tell you this; the messenger Gabriel had said to her: ‘You shall be conceiving and be pregnant and be bringing forth a Son. And you shall be calling His name Jesus. He shall be great, and Son of the Most High shall He be called. And the Lord God shall be giving Him the throne of David, His father, and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for the eons. And of His Kingdom there shall be no consummation.’”

“I cannot believe that I am hearing this.”

“Don’t think too hard yet. My seed did not create you. God created you—with His breath—but your mother



This woman stands at the site of El Bekkers; Nazareth.

carried you. You are descended from her, according to flesh. From her, you are of David and thus of Adam. We know the genealogy. But from me? Nothing. I am also of David, but it does not matter. Your father is God.”

Tears formed in my eyes. “Dad.”

He reached for my hand. “I will always love you. I am still your dad, and I always will be that. I call you my son and I always will. You *are* my son. Nothing changes. I *feel* as though I generated you, but I did not. There is no mistaking that. We were never together before you, your mother and I. I promise you that. There is no chance of it. Besides, we have since figured it out mathematically that your birth corresponded with the prophecy of Daniel. The seventy weeks of seven. But when you were prophesied to come, the sixty-ninth week was nigh.”

“My Father is God.”

“I’m glad ‘the Daniel bit’ that I just mentioned went over your head just now.”

(It didn’t, but I let him continue.)

“But let me tell you the rest of this. Try to put yourself

into my sandals there, at El Bekkers. I did not believe her! It was the most absurd excuse for adultery that I had ever heard. I was insulted by it. What kind of idiot did she think I was? I then thought that she might be drunk. We were drinking wine, as we always did. I think that perhaps you understand what she was telling me.”

“She was bearing the Messiah of Israel.”

“Don’t concentrate on that just yet. We must sneak up on that, otherwise I can’t do this and neither can you. Put that on the back fire, please. I ran over and over again in my mind who it could have been. Who your mother was with. We were at El Bekkers when she told me this, as I said. She thought that our favorite place would soothe me. It was a mistake to do it publicly. It was poor judgment on her part.”

“No matter what you tell me, I will always love you.”

“I have avowed before God to tell you everything, so I accept your grace—thank you—and shall continue. She told me that the holy spirit had generated the life within her. I was beside myself. I said to her, ‘The holy spirit has a penis. My! It’s a new revelation, that the holy spirit hangs between the legs.’ This is what I said. I was livid. I had never spoken like that to her, or to any woman. Many

“If a witness stands at the edge of the crowd behind a man who is fat, that witness can hear bones break.”

people heard it. Then I said, ‘What is his name?’ She could not believe that I would even say or think such things. She told me to shut up. Can you imagine that? Those were her words. ‘Shut up, Joseph!’ And she said it loudly, so that everyone in the restaurant looked at us. I said to her, ‘I think I *will* shut up,’ and I threw down my napkin and left. I decided that I would never see her again.

“No wonder you have never told me this.”

“I went home and I threw things against the wall. I said terrible things to God while kicking the fragments of the things that I threw. She had committed a capital offense. We were betrothed. Because here is the law, son, and I quote it directly to you: ‘In case there should be a maiden, a virgin, who is betrothed to a man, and another man finds her in the city, and he lies with her, then you must bring forth both of them to the gate of that city and

stone them with stones so that they die, the maiden on the score that she did not cry for help in the city, and the man on the score that he humiliated the wife of his associate. Thus you will eradicate the evil from among you.’”

“You thought for a moment that you could do this?”

“Not even. You have never seen a stoning, son.”

“No.”

“Lucky you. They tie up the people and carry them to the pit. Two people do the carrying, three if there’s a struggle. The condemned are still human until the ring of the pit, where they graduate in tears to victimhood. The rocks come so hard because the killers are repulsed, themselves, by the killing—isn’t that strange? If a witness stands at the edge of the crowd behind a man who is fat, that witness can hear bones break. If the witness cranes his neck to look out from behind this man, he eventually discovers that bones are white. The skin turns black, they say, but the witness—yours truly—doesn’t get that far.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Look, I did not hate your mother. I didn’t. I didn’t even hate the man. I might have been able to kill him in his sleep, with my fists, in the dark, if I’d thought hard enough about what he’d done. But I couldn’t bring anyone to the pit. He’d brought it on himself, I knew, but Mary would go with him, and there was no way, not a way in the world, that I would let that happen—if not for the man’s sake, but certainly for her’s.

“I kicked more pieces of the things that I broke and then I swept the floor because I am fastidious that way, even in my agony, but it was mostly nervous energy. *If only we hadn’t been betrothed.* That’s what I kept thinking to myself. But it was official. In Israel, betrothal is the same as marriage. The only alternative to stoning was divorce.”



Pottery shards unearthed in Nazareth. They are actual pieces of a vase my father broke. The man has no idea what he is holding—naturally.

August, 2013



“You actually considered it.”

“Oh, I had to. It was the lesser of so many evils. Son, I can’t thank you enough for bearing with this, for listening to me. Your mother knows all of this, but I have wanted to tell you for years. Honestly, I have wanted to write a book about it. But who would publish it? Not a soul in Israel would publish it. I tell you this, we would be run out of Nazareth were this story told. No one in the neighborhood

“Maybe I’m looking for relevance in your life, I don’t know. I feel selfish talking about this, but it is coming easily to me.”

knows anything about this. No one knows about you, not even the priests of the circumcision or of the Dedication. Two prophets in Israel know and a handful of shepherds, but that’s it. I’ll tell you about them later. Oh, and three strange men from the East came. We have their presents to you, still wrapped up in the closet at home. We can bring them out when we get home, if you would like. We have been saving them in case there comes a day when we are unable to make rent. The frankincense alone would provide us a year’s rent.”

“I’ve already found them.”

“Oh.”

“Please continue though.”

“This is all difficult enough as it is. It wouldn’t be worth it, to tell anyone. So many people could be educated and should be educated, but education is the last thing that Nazarenes want.”

“I know. I can already tell this.”

“It is the last thing that Israel as a whole wants. Son, you have no idea of the darkness in this country. Gross darkness covers the people. Your mother and I have felt like lepers for years. And neither of us has reason for it. They just hate us. It’s as though we are too free for them. Too light. We are of a different spirit. Who else in the neighborhood plays Kick The Ball? That is just one example. They see us kissing out in the front yard. I grab her behind in the back yard. We feel a lightness of spirit, but at the same time we have carried this burden. I am so happy that this day has come.”

“So am I.”

“So I decided that I would divorce her. I would do it quietly. If I did it right, betrothal would disappear and would never have been. Mary would be free, and I’d never have to say the word, ‘adultery.’ Did I really want to be married anyway? There were more reasons besides adultery to dismiss a wife. It is in the law. I could say that she changed religions. I could say I was moving and she refused to go. I could say she’d contracted leprosy. There was an obscure law—I looked it up and found it—that said I could dismiss a wife for insulting me.

“That was it, then.”

“Yes, that was it. She had insulted me; no, she had damned me to hades; everyone heard it. I have not told you that part. When I did not believe her, she said, ‘Damn you to hades, Joseph!’”

“I can’t even imagine her saying that.”

“I’d been en route to hades for nearly an hour, and felt like it. There were witnesses. There must have been a dozen people, at least, who had heard her. It was right in the middle of El Bekkers. That would be it, then. I didn’t have to say it, the witnesses were my back-up. If anyone asked, I’d say, ‘I have my reasons.’ Your mother couldn’t deny it, not with witnesses. The alternative would preclude her from denying anything. The only person who had to know about it was the lawyer. I didn’t know one, but I had a friend who did.”

“How did you end up realizing that it was all true? Was it only because of the dream? Did mother forgive you right away?”

“I will make this short.”

“You don’t have to.”

“You know about my long-distance running.”

“Of course.”

“I decided that I would run to Antioch. I had to get away and think things over. I want you to know all of this, because it is all a prelude to the dream. I feel that it is important. I need to get this out to you, and then we can talk about who you are and why you’re here.”

“I am not concerned about that right now. I am concerned about *you*. This fascinates me. Please. Tell me everything that you went through. You do not need to apologize or withhold detail.”

“Maybe I’m looking for relevance in your life, I don’t know. I feel selfish talking about this, but it is coming easily to me, so I will continue. My headship over you is so brief. Soon, you will have headship over me. And so I will take advantage of this while I can.”

I smiled.

“So I washed my face and walked across the road to the Khawalida’s. My friend Benjamin said that he could watch my cat indefinitely. I had a cat then named ‘Reuben.’ So back home I went, through the Nazareth night. So few lights out. Looking up the road, I could almost see Mary’s house, up on the hill. There was one light on. I lived down the street from her, as you know. But I had to turn away from that; it was too painful. I slipped into my door, into anonymity. The next day, very early, I would be gone. But first, tea. I told myself to find some pleasure in the misery. I always do that, and I have tried to teach you to do it as well.”

“You have succeeded.”

“You make me smile, son. So I started a fire behind the house, stirred up the fire, boiled water. I had never felt so alone. I felt perverse that there was a measure of contentment in it. That, I could not explain. I did not ask for answers. I had to trust God. I knew that all of

this had to be of Him.”

“Yes.”

“My table was empty, such simplicity. Parchment, pen, table, mug. It’s all I ever needed, really. The room was bare except for my bedroll, bag, tarp, tent, and backpack, all against the wall. There is joy in simplicity.”

“It’s so true.”

“Why did I ever want to be married in the first place?”

I shrugged.

“The roll, the floor, the earth, slip into sleep. But first, tea. Perfect. Spearmint leaves, three, into the mug. Water into it, releasing the life. Now honey, the food of the gods. All dark and quiet outside. My father used to say that I was never so happy as when planning a trip. My spoon clinked. He did not know the fear that mixed with the joy to make it bittersweet. *Clink, clink*. The spearmint smelled so good. There was much of it in the



Remains of the house my father occupied before marrying my mother; Nazareth. The archaeologists have no way of knowing that this was his—which is why I am telling you.

roadbeds between Nazareth and Sepphoris, I knew. See? I was on this very road. I knew that I would chew some of the spearmint—we should look for some now. Between there and Ptolemais? I didn't know. That was the thrill of it. I smiled inwardly. I sat and thought. Steam up my nose, clearing my head. Pleasure was coming. A fly landed on my mug though, right where I was drinking. At the exact spot on the lip came the fly and all of its diseases. Always, always, back to reality. I flicked him away and wiped where he had been. It's always something, isn't it?

“A fly, with all of its diseases,  
landed on my mug, right  
where I was drinking. Back to  
reality. It's always something,  
isn't it?”

“I started running to Antioch the next day. From Nazareth to Ptolemais, eventually to Antioch, three-hundred miles up the coast of the Great Sea, the length of Syria. Up the coast, from Mt. Carmel to Mt. Silpius, across the river and into the great city. I've always wanted to see Antioch, not from the back of a donkey, or with a gaggle of strangers in a caravan, but under my own power, solo, by the sweat of my brow. To run over the aqueduct, over the Orontes River, alone, and see it. Over the bridge, the hump of the aqueduct, then Antioch spread before me.”

“You make it sound almost fun.”

“It almost was. I loaded up my backpack, stuffing as much dried meat into it as I had stored. Dried meat, walnuts, pistachios, and parched corn. I could stock up again in Ptolemais. Then, an extra set of clothes and a washing-towel. I would not tie up my bedroll until morning.”

“I am impressed.”

“Yes, but now listen to what happened on the last day, because this is what you want to hear. It was the beginning of everything for me, and I was far out of Israel when it happened. This was His design for me and, it turns out, for you. He had picked out a spot for me, just as He has piked out this tree.

“That fateful day, I unfolded my map of Syria and spread it on the table at a restaurant. It was my last stopping place, this restaurant, before Antioch. It was late afternoon; I'd had pitas and tea. As I ate and drank, I wondered about the aqueduct over the Orontes River, about how it would

be. The aqueduct separated Antioch from the jagged edge of Earth called Silpius. There would be the aqueduct, the Orontes River beneath, then Antioch itself.

“I left the restaurant. There was nothing wrong with the sun. There was not one thing wrong with the pebbles of the road, no, nor with the iced tea I'd drank at the restaurant. There was nothing wrong with the road, or with the woods that now flanked both sides of the road. The price of the



Sunset on the  
Orontes River near Antioch in  
modern-day Turkey.

meal had been fine, the running was fine, it was a fine day, cloudless, perfect, as I'd thought it would be.

"My body was doing what it always did, slowly at first, then finding itself beneath my pack and hitting the line. But the road did what it always does to me—and I began thinking of my parents who had both died, their bodies burned in a fire. Why did I think of them just then? It was of God. I had failed to mourn them when it happened; that is a story in itself. But now it came.

"My mother and father, first here, then gone; gone to the earth, or to where fire goes when it disappears from Earth, lost into the nothingness of hades, the grave. Never to be, never to speak again to me in flesh, to hug me, to kiss me, to pet Reuben, never to be seen or felt, or to wonder again upon this vale of soil.

"I need to stop, God,' I said out loud. 'My God—Almighty God—I need to be somewhere else now.' He did not ask a question of me because He knew what was coming, for He had planned it from before the disruption of the world. The world looked away as I walked alone into the thickness of the woods. All the inhabitants of heaven knew what would occur, because my tears were already coming."

*My* tears came as he spoke. They were streaming down my face by this time. *My poor father.* I could not say a word to him then, so full of emotion was I. However, his words mesmerized me, as though they were my own.

"I went into the woods where no one could see me, and I fell to my knees near a stream and a rock. I cried, and oh, how I cried! 'Mother! Father! I loved you, you know how much I loved you.' I cried hard and unashamedly for everything our family was then. I made myself so sad because I wanted to feel everything. It cut me that I was greater than they; that life was superior to death; that death had claimed them and they were no more, but that I yet knelt in this woods. *How that cut me.* But I, too, would die—they had only gone first. Then I fellowshipped with them and looked up from some roots where I knelt.

"A thorn bush was there, and the sun came through some trees and lit it. It was terrible. I was so tired. I curled up on my side on the floor of the woods, where death could find me. My tears came again because I was just so part of the soil. I needed the sanctity of the woods. The earth was dying beneath me. I think that I may have fallen asleep. And then, the next thing I knew—*he was there.*"

—JSOJ  
(To be continued.)

## FROM THE MAIL:

Martin, after my last hastily written email in which I described your first chapter of *The Evil Empire* as "fascinating," I would like to revise and extend my remarks, like some wordy politician, lest you think I was disapproving in some way with faint praise.

So, here goes. After careful consideration and more leisurely reflection, my response to *The Evil Empire* can be summed up in one carefully chosen word, a prayer really, and justifiably capitalized: WOW.

God has given you an amazing talent and it is fully on display in this captivating series. I wish I had the entire novel right now so I could read it start to finish in one sitting, for I know I wouldn't be able to put it down until I had read the final punctuation mark—duties, responsibilities, or sleep be damned. It is that compelling. Kudos, my friend.

Also, I read with great interest (and joy) the readers' responses to the first installment. I was a bit chagrined (as a sometime writer myself) that they expressed my feelings about this project even better than I could. I am elated that so many readers feel as I do about this book and took the time to let you know just how much we all appreciate you and your talent, drive, and dedication to herald the true evangel.

In the present, none of us can know what fruit this project may ultimately bear, but I have a feeling its spiritual impact on those whom God is calling will be something akin to an asteroid strike—perhaps measurable on the Richter scale.

So in closing, I repeat: WOW. Just WOW!

