

God in Three Persons: A Spiritual Odyssey

333

ακολασια (akolasia), Licentiousness

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ακρασια (akrasia), Incontinence

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κ 20

ρ ...100

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333

“The Mystery of the Ineffable maketh three mysteries, although it is only one mystery; but the type of each of them is different.”

- - Pistis Sophia, Book 2, 236

Apollos headed south on Highway 101 along the San Francisco Bay towards Palo Alto. He had traveled down this road before, so he put his conscious mind on automatic pilot while he reminisced within his soul-mind about his last visit with Maestro Salvatore D’Aura several years ago.

Apollos had been introduced to the life of Apollonius of Tyana, and he found the events in the life of the great philosopher of the first century coinciding remarkably with the travels of the biblical Apostle Paul. Furthermore, he discovered to his amazement that certain scholars had unearthed documents and archival material that linked Apollonius to the Christian savior.

Could Apollonius be the World Teacher who had appeared on the stage of life in the Roman world two thousand years ago? That was the burning question that was driving Apollos to produce a manuscript that would answer that question. And now that manuscript was missing.

He tried to recall in his mind what he had written in his notebook about his previous visit with Salvatore D’Aura:

“Apollonius is Paul, Paulus, Pol, whatever you want to call him,” said Maestro Salvatore D’Aura. “You can even call him Apollo. He went by many names in the

Mediterranean world. It all depended on which location he was at and what name corresponded to the name Apollonius in the local vernacular.”

“How do you know these things?” I asked. [Apollos had written about his interview in the first person.]

“Apollonius was the ascended master who was present at my initiation into the adept life,” said Maestro. “He was one of the three masters who were required to form a triangle of spiritual power. You see, it takes three ascended masters to perform the ceremony, to coordinate the three higher bodies of man.”

“Who were the other two masters?” I asked.

“I’m not going to reveal that to you at this time, maybe next time,” said Maestro. “But I will reveal to you that Apollonius is right now, at present, living in the Himalayas in his etheric or spiritual body.”

“I’ve heard that there are seven bodies that are part of man’s consciousness,” I remarked, recalling something I had read.

“Yes, there are many levels of awareness in this world,” said Maestro. “See, it’s not just the physical world, and then there’s heaven. I mean, forget it, it’s not that way.”

“Like there are many vibratory states of existence,” I added my two-cents worth.

“Well, many,” said Maestro, picking up on his train-of-thought. “We have the physical body, like we all know. Then next to that is the astral body. That’s the body we use when we dream, and everybody dreams and goes out of the body. There’s no question about that. Then we have the causal body. You see, the causal body is what caused the ingredients that mixed the body, the material, the cohesion of the materials: bones, the flesh, the blood, and then the glands, and then the part of the body that makes this instrument a total piece.”

“Sounds like the DNA code and the genes that are part of our ancestral heredity,” I added.

“Yes, that is the cause on the physical level,” said Maestro. “On the higher level we call it the causal body, which includes all the things you brought in from previous lives. And we use the causal body only with instruction, with training, in a higher level. No more crazy dreams as are sometimes caused by the stomach or by aberrations or by bad news or situations, vibrations of this world. So then we repeat that stuff, that bad stomach, or bad digestion. The causal is a different kind of dream, a different kind of travel.”

Maestro D’Aura paused. He stopped pacing on the living room carpet and sat on the couch. He closed his eyes and tuned in to a higher level of awareness.

“Then, of course, we have the mental body,” Maestro continued with eyes closed and in a lowered voice. “And in the mental body there is another degree of more awareness. More refined. And then there are many higher powers, especially in India or South American, and Mexico, like the Mayas. Even many saints of the Catholic Church. Those who have ascended. They live when they go away, when the body is done, they dwell in the mental realm. And they believe that is heaven. So they are very happy about that. And whenever they try to communicate to a human being from that plane, so you see, it is distorted, because it’s not what we call heaven.”

Maestro D’Aura shifted his weight on the couch, crossed his legs, and leaned back. His eyes were still closed as his inner vision focused on another level of awareness.

“Then, after the mental, then we have the soul realm,” Maestro said.

“Isn’t there a Buddhic level, and a higher Atmic?” I asked, remembering those metaphysical words from an esoteric scripture.

“Wait,” said Maestro, noticing my impatience with the lower levels. He raised his voice to an elevated tone. “The soul realm is the first higher level. All the others are, ah, grammar school. The soul realm, those who are gifted can dwell there. You know when you have reached that level. But you never go there by accident or by chance. You go with a master. Then you go to school over there. You’re chosen to become a chela, a neophyte. And then you learn – two, three times a week you learn – and when you come back, you’re a different person altogether.”

Maestro D’Aura paused again. He toned down his voice as he seemed to go into a deeper level, a level which seemed to echo from the depths of antiquity.

“Then, after the soul realm, that is the first higher one,” he continued with his physical eyes closed and inner eyes fully dilated, “then we go into the second one, that is the spiritual, and we enter into the hierarchy of heaven.”

He stopped for a moment. I could see Jacob’s ladder in my mind’s eye, with angelic beings descending and ascending on the golden ladder which connected the heavens with the earth.

“Now the Indoo,” said Maestro as he opened his physical eyes and looked again at me, “when I say the Indoo I mean the Hindu from India, they have classified this in their own way. But it’s not the complete truth.”

Apollos saw the exit sign for the Embarcadero Rd. / Oregon Expressway, and he mentally switched his awareness back to the road before him. He was embarking on a venture that he hoped would provide a way for him to save his fiancée Sophia. He turned off of Highway 101 and merged onto the expressway that headed west to Salvatore D’Aura’s house on El Dorado Avenue.

Apollos drove down the tree-lined streets of Palo Alto, which was named after a tall coast redwood tree that stood beside San Francisquito Creek. He parked his Mercury vehicle in front of the modest corner-lot house with a brown rock slab foundation. He approached the door and rang the doorbell. He glanced back at the expansive tree that stood at the edge of the front lawn.

Salvatore D’Aura opened the door and invited Apollos to come in. They shook hands after Apollos crossed the threshold and entered directly into the small living room. The two-bedroom house was built in the early 1950’s after World War II, and it had approximately 1632 square feet. For a confirmed celibate who lived by himself, and who had dedicated his life to the higher path, the house provided ample room for himself and for his students.

Maestro D’Aura was known to his opera students as the master of the Bel Canto style of singing, a beautiful voice technique that he had inherited from the renowned Italian composer, Giacomo Puccini.

To his other students, like Apollos, he was known as an adept of the esoteric wisdom of the ascended masters.

“What can I do for you today?” asked Maestro D’Aura. He was dressed in beige corduroy pants and a light-colored striped sweater over a light blue turtle-neck shirt. “Your call sounded urgent.”

He motioned for Apollos to sit on the golden-colored floral patterned couch. D’Aura sat on the left side of the couch.

“My fiancée, Sophia, has been kidnapped, and I found a message that indicates she’s probably in Athens, Greece,” said Apollos.

“Hold on, back up,” said Maestro, waving his right hand in the air. “You didn’t tell me you had a fiancée.”

“She was a student in the philosophy class I was teaching at the university,” Apollo divulged. “A very bright student, I might add. Well, to make a long story short, we fell in love. We were going to get married this month during the summer solstice.”

“I understand,” said Maestro reflectively. “I had a young lady in my youth. I was only eighteen years old and I fell madly in love with her. She was my partner in the opera ‘La Boheme.’ Are you familiar with it?”

“Sorry. I haven’t heard of it,” replied Apollos apologetically, as he listened politely, waiting to relate more of his own story.

“I was a tenor at that time and I played and sang the part of Rodolfo, a poet who falls in love with a seamstress named Mimi. I called her my Lucia, or the light of my life. The tragic death of Mimi in the opera was like a foreshadowing in my life, for I lost my Lucia in a tragic auto accident. She was strangled to death by her own scarf.”

“That’s so sad,” said Apollos. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“But my life changed drastically from that moment on,” said Maestro. “It was as if the guiding hand of destiny reached down and showed me that I must remain a single man for the rest of my life. That’s when I began studying to become a priest in the Catholic Church.”

Suddenly Salvatore D’Aura got up from the couch and headed for the kitchen. “Hold on, I’ll be right back,” he said as he headed for the adjacent room. “I have something in the fire. I was cooking some vegetables in the oven, and I don’t want them to burn.”

Apollos looked around the room while Maestro was in the kitchen. Behind the couch was a golden-framed mirror that reflected two golden cherubs on a mantle on the other side of the room. The cherubs were each holding up a candelabrum with four candlesticks. Above the white mantle was a large painting of the Madonna with a child in her lap.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” said Maestro when he returned after a couple of minutes. “Now, back to your dilemma. Tell me what else happened.”

“Well, remember the manuscript that I was working on about the story of Apollonius and his connection to the Paul and Jesus stories?” asked Apollos.

“Yes, you mentioned it last time you visited,” said Maestro.

“Well, it’s missing!” stated Apollos, his voice betraying a nervous anxiety about the event that he witnessed at his apartment. “Whoever kidnapped Sophia was probably interested in getting the manuscript.”

“Absolutely!” said Maestro. “You hit the nail right on the head. And I can tell you without any doubt that the Catholic authorities somehow caught wind of your manuscript and most probably have it now in their possession.”

Apollos felt as if Maestro D’Aura had pierced the darkness of his ignorance and illuminated the mystery with a ray of light and hope.

“Did I ever tell you why I left the Catholic Church?” asked D’Aura.

"I think my friend Peter, your student who introduced me to you, said it was because you got disenchanted with the falsehoods that the Catholic Church was propagating," said Apollos.

"That's part of the story," said Maestro. "I had risen pretty high up in the church hierarchy, and I was even slated to be nominated for training to become the next pope."

"I didn't know that," said Apollos with an astonished look on his face.

"And you can imagine my surprise when I discovered in the Vatican's secret archives, to which I was given access because of my position, that the real teachings and the real history of the church were not what I had learned during my years as a young priest."

"So you left because you found out about the real story of Apollonius and Jesus?" Apollos asked.

"That and much more," replied Maestro. "When they speak of the body of Jesus, there's so many Jesuses. So many. There's the Jesus story about Yehoshua ben Pandera, which was created by Eusebius, who wanted to be a pope. There's the story of a Joseph who married a Miriam, who had a sister named Mary Magdalene, and this Miriam had a son who was cross-ified or initiated in Egypt. There was a mix-up in the Bar-abba or 'son of the father' story, where the son was delivered to the people instead of the father, and he was rescued by the Essenes. Then there's a Hesus and a Christna story. There's at least four or five, and even probably more, stories, the combination of which were compiled and mixed together to make a story you have in the Christian Bible."

"That is quite a revelation," said Apollos.

"So now, getting back to your situation," said Maestro. "You have a karmic pattern to fulfill. You must respect and follow the entanglement and the commitment you've established. Whether it's right, whether it's wrong, we're not going to judge. Whatever way of life, of living, you've chosen, you must follow."

"So you're saying I should go to Athens and rescue Sophia from the kidnapers?" asked Apollos.

"Certainly," stated Maestro. "Did they leave a clue where they might be keeping her?"

"The last clue they left me showed a picture of the Parthenon," said Apollos, pulling the card out of his shirt pocket and handing it to D'Aura.

"Ah, the Temple of Wisdom," said Maestro, as if he recognized it from another time. "I have an intuitive feeling that you will also need to go to Rome to solve the mystery of her disappearance."

"Why Rome?" asked Apollos.

"You should have asked me first, why Athens," said Maestro. "Remember, that is where the paths of the biblical Paul and Apollonius of Tyana cross. How and why is the first mystery for you to solve."

"But didn't you say Paul and Apollonius are the same person?" asked Apollos.

"Yes, I did," admitted Maestro. "But what I didn't mention to you was that the story of Paul is also made up of many personalities, only one of which was Apollonius."

"And what will I find in Rome?" asked Apollos.

"Whoever kidnapped your fiancée is trying to lure you to Athens for a reason," said Maestro. "Since they are probably working for the Catholic authorities in the Vatican, their ultimate goal is to bring you to Rome, most likely for a public humiliation."

Or, God forbid, to make a martyr out of you, as they've done to other messengers of truth and wisdom."

"Are they that afraid of the story of Apollonius?" asked Apollos.

"They've been trying to stamp out that story since the fourth century, starting at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. They will stop at nothing to make sure their religious power is not tampered with. In fact, they might even think you know something of the whereabouts of Apollonius, who they know mastered the secret wisdom of dematerialization and immortality."

"The main thing I want to know," interjected Apollos, "is whether my fiancée is safe, and will I find her."

"Don't worry about that," reassured him Maestro. "They won't harm her. They need you, and she's the bait."

Apollos pondered the significance of that statement. All at once he felt like a heavy burden had been placed on his shoulders. A hard road lay ahead for him.

"Anyway, let me tell you a story," said Maestro, who saw that Apollos was slipping into a somber state of mind. "I haven't told this story to anybody. There was this chiropractor who invited me to come to his house, and he said, 'You know, there are many things I don't understand.' So I went over there. He lived in a beautiful home, but down below is an abandoned, not a park, but an abandoned field. But nobody can build there because it belongs to the state. There's an old tree in the field and nobody can touch that tree. However, there's a legend – everybody loves a legend.

"So anyway, we had a dinner outside. Well, this outside means a big deck, a huge deck. And the deck looks on this field, or backyard. So, while we were eating, we had fireworks."

"Sounds like the 4th of July," Apollos remarked.

"No, listen," said Maestro. In his excitement to tell the story he stood on his feet and started gesturing with his arms and hands. "They were fireworks you never saw, the most beautiful fireworks I saw in all my life.

"So the wife and doctor asked, 'What is this? This is not July.' This was the month of August. There's no festivities. There's no state activity. So she goes on the telephone and inquires, 'What's going on? What's the occasion?' The operator said, 'What are you talking about?'

"Then I knew. They were friends of mine. You know what I mean, friends. They gave me a welcome. Well, this phenomenon, while we were eating, baffled everybody. They had other guests. We all saw it. We never saw anything so beautiful. But the city didn't know anything about it.

"So, as we continued with our dinner, then we heard – you see, there was this platform – you hear these steps. We heard bom! Bom! Bom!" D'Aura thumped on some wood three times simultaneously as he voiced the sounds.

"And they all turn around, but they could see no one. But I saw. It was a young man, an American Indian, a young boy about fourteen, fifteen. And the father with him was dressed up in the paraphernalia of their own tribe.

"So, anyway, I saw. And they greeted me. So the young man went to the daughter of this chiropractor, a beautiful girl, a very virtuous girl, about fourteen. Something like that. And, of course, he kissed her. She said, 'Oh, someone kissed me.'

“So, this is the phenomenon that I wanted to tell you about. Details are not important. The main reason I’m telling you this story is that you will have invisible friends that will be with you on your journey. You can take my word for that.”

“I appreciate that,” said Apollos. “I can use all the help I can get. Now that I know what I need to do, I guess I’ll be on my way.”

“And don’t worry,” said Maestro. “I’ll also be with you in spirit. You will feel my presence whenever you call for my help. I will be there to serve you in whichever way I can.”

Apollos got up and stood eye to eye with the six-foot-tall Maestro. He shook his hand and felt the powerful grip in his reassuring hands.

Apollos drove his vehicle to Alma Street, a scenic drive he enjoyed taking whenever he visited Palo Alto. His soul felt at peace driving on the tree-lined street that ran parallel with the railroad tracks. His destination on this soulful street was always the site of the El Palo Alto redwood tree.

At the north end of the city stood the 1059 years old coast redwood tree. The *Sequoia sempervirens* name was an apt description of the “ever-living” tree. A small creek named San Francisquito Creek flowed beside it, giving water to its thirsty roots. Apollos stood beside the tall tree and looked up at its 110 feet height. He read the inscription on the plaque, which was attached to a rock near the base of the tree:

“Under this giant redwood, the Palo Alto, November 6 to 11, 1729, camped Portola and his band on the expedition that discovered San Francisco Bay.”

Apollos sat at the base of the tall tree and thought of its history. Originally, it had twin trunks, but a flood in 1887 tore off one of the two. Somehow, the ever-living tree managed to survive even though it was no longer a double-trunked tree. And on top of it all, the ancient tree made Apollos think of Maestro Salvatore D’Aura and his quest for longevity and immortality.

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Joshua stepped down from the tour bus and followed the tour guide to the only gate on the western side of the Old City. He passed through Jaffa Gate, one of seven gates presently serving as entrances into Jerusalem’s Old City, and he looked up at the high stone structures that were part of the city wall.

The tour guide, whose name tag said Anastasia, stopped the small group after they had crossed the entrance. She faced the group and made her introductory speech:

“The Jaffa Gate, through which you just passed, was called David’s Gate by the Crusaders. The Arabic name for this entrance is Bab el-Khalil, which means ‘Beloved Friend,’ and it refers to their nickname for Abraham, known as the father of both the Jewish and Muslim people. For those of you who are not familiar with the story of Abraham, I will just say that he had offspring with his wife Sarah, and also with his Egyptian concubine Hagar. The offspring from his wife’s line came to be known as the

Jewish race, and the offspring from his concubine's line came to be known as the Arab race. The long and divisive history of those two genealogical lines is part of the ongoing drama, as you know from current world events.

"Anyway, we will begin our tour in the Christian quarter of the Old City. The entire area of the Old City, by the way, covers roughly 220 acres or one square kilometer," said Anastasia as she started to turn away from the walls and headed eastward up the main street, which was called David Street.

Joshua walked behind the group of modern-day Holy Land pilgrims. Ever since his first day in the country, he felt like he was on a pilgrimage to discover why people like himself were attracted to the land where the stories of three separate religions and cultures vied for attention and for prominence in the world. The Holy Places, which were established over the centuries, continued to demand recognition from the believers and the curiosity seekers.

Joshua watched the heterogeneous groups of foreign and domestic people as he walked along the markets lining the main street. 'What an international flavor this country has,' he thought. It almost seemed as if every race in the world was represented in this location, as if it became the center of the world for those who gravitated towards the saints and sages who walked through this city. And a major part of each person's pilgrimage was to walk in the steps of the renowned saints, prophets, and wise men, and to connect with the spiritual essence of their revered master or teacher.

David Street was the path that led to the magnetic center of the Christian faith. The tour guide Anastasia was leading the pilgrims to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Christendom's holiest shrine, which invited the pilgrim to meditate on the threefold Mystery of the Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ.

Just before Anastasia turned left to lead the group up Christians Street, Joshua noticed a Jewish rabbi walking toward the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. Something inside Joshua's mind told him to talk to the bearded rabbi.

"Good morning," said Joshua, approaching the rabbi, whose head was downcast and deep in thought.

The black-suited rabbi peered at Joshua with his bright blue eyes. An astonished look on his face concealed his disappointment that his morning meditation had been interrupted by a tourist. The rabbi readjusted the black hat on his head, pushing it further back on his gray hair so he could get a better look at the young man dressed in casual clothes.

"I wanted to ask you a question," said Joshua, who suddenly remembered a name that had been on his mind ever since the previous night's dream. In the dream he was told to seek the rabbi Jehoshua ben Perachiah. The dream woke him up in the middle of the night on his first night in Jerusalem. He had written the name down in his notebook, and he had been puzzled by the urgent sound of the voice.

"Make if fast," said the impatient rabbi. "I'm on my way to the Kotel ha-Ma'aravi to say my prayers." The rabbi used the Hebrew name for the Western Wall, which was created to support the Temple's structure.

"Where can I find the Rabbi Jehoshua ben Perachiah?" asked Joshua. He momentarily glanced to his left to see in which direction his tour group was heading.

"Where did you hear that name?" asked the rabbi, whose eyes widened and a look of concern flooded his pale face.

“I was told in a dream to seek the rabbi Jehoshua ben Perachiah,” said Joshua in a straight forward manner. He looked anxiously in the direction of his tour group. He didn’t want to lose sight of them.

“Are you with that tour group?” asked the rabbi, who noticed the young man’s anxious glances up Christians Street.

“Yes, I am,” said Joshua. “Would you mind walking with me so I don’t lose my group?”

“I usually don’t go into the Christian Quarter,” admitted the rabbi, “but for your sake I’ll make an exception.”

“So you know something about that name?” asked Joshua, who tried not to walk too fast in consideration of the old rabbi.

“Yes, I do,” replied the rabbi, “although I haven’t heard that name since my early years in Talmudic studies. He was a famous rabbi, according to our oral tradition, in the time of King Alexander Jannai, who reigned from 103 before this Common Era to 76 BCE. Maybe I should have said the rabbi had a student who became famous or infamous, depending on who tells the story.”

“You mean the rabbi is a historical figure?” asked Joshua with a puzzled look on his face. “I thought he was alive and that I needed to find him.”

“The Past is always alive within us,” said the rabbi. “Look at you tourists, seeking to recreate the past by visiting all these sacred places.”

“So why do you think I was told in my dream to seek the rabbi?” asked Joshua. He noticed that his tour group had veered to the right onto St. Helen Street.

“Like I said, the rabbi had a student, whose name was Yahoshua,” said the old rabbi, who looked intently into Joshua’s eyes. “And this Yahoshua was what we call a mamzer, who was an outcast child due to his spurious birth.”

Joshua suddenly stopped walking. He grabbed his head with both of his hands and stooped low to the ground. He felt like a vice had gripped his head, and his skull was about to explode.

“What’s wrong?” asked the rabbi, stooping down and laying his hand on Joshua’s shoulder.

“My head feels like it’s going to split open,” said Joshua, struggling to voice his concern.

The rabbi placed his right hand on the crown of Joshua’s head and uttered an incomprehensible phrase softly into Joshua’s ear. Joshua steadily sensed the immense pressure in his skull slowly dispersing back into the hidden caverns from which it had risen. His head still felt a dizziness which seemed to revolve like a spiraling vortex inside his cranium. The rabbi put his arm around Joshua’s waist as he stood up and straightened himself. They slowly walked together toward the courtyard that led to the entrance of the Holy Sepulchre Church.

“Something about that name Yahoshua set my mind off like a volcano about to erupt,” said Joshua, when he realized what had caused the unexpected incident.

“That name has been the cause of wars, persecutions, inquisitions, crusades, schisms, and lots of hatred and bigotry,” said the rabbi with a stern voice. “That was why I initially hesitated to say his name, but you wanted to know the meaning of your dream.”

The tour group stopped at the entrance to the church building that appeared to be made up of a conglomeration of mismatched elements. Anastasia was waiting for the

group of tourists to form a semi-circle around her so she could begin her talk to an attentive audience. Joshua stood with the old rabbi behind the other tourists and listened to the young woman's memorized speech:

"Today's Church of the Holy Sepulchre stands at the most likely site where the ancient Golgotha or Place of the Skull was located. There are two other contenders for the location of the crucifixion: one is the Garden Tomb near the northern Damascus Gate, where you will find a hill that resembles a skull; the other more likely site is the 2,900 foot Mount Olives, which has a long history of being a sacred site, and it has a rock cave and a burial place. However, most historians, archaeologists, and theologians favor the hill that stands inside the structure of this church. Some say the hill has the shape of a person's skull; some say that the name Golgotha is derived from the tradition that Adam's skull was buried here; and others say that this was the sacrificial place where Abraham almost sacrificed his own son Isaac."

The old rabbi nudged Joshua with his elbow and said, "That is true. Our Talmudic tradition says that Abraham brought his son Isaac to this place, which was called Mount Moriah, to be offered as a sacrifice."

"Historically," continued Anastasia, "there used to be a Roman temple dedicated to the goddess Aphrodite or Venus on this site, and it was supposedly built by the Emperor Hadrian to cover the sacred place of the Christian savior's crucifixion and burial. When the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 325 AD, there was an established effort to locate and create sacred places as focal points of the new religion. Constantine's mother, who later was canonized as St. Helena, came to Jerusalem to find the sacred places. According to a Christian legend, a certain man named Judas led Helena to the site where the true cross was found. Needless to say, Helena had the pagan temple destroyed, and she ordered a basilica to be built on the holy site. According to historical records, the original Church of the Holy Sepulchre was practically completed when the anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux visited Palestine in 333 AD. During its long history, the church underwent demolition, ruin, and eventual reconstruction. Starting in the year 1099, when the Crusaders occupied Jerusalem, the church was basically rebuilt from the ground up. And most of it is still standing here today for you to see."

Anastasia concluded her speech and motioned with a wave of her right hand for the group to follow her into the sanctuary's dark and gloomy interior, at the heart of which was the traditional rock of the crucifixion, an isolated hill of antiquity about six meters high.

Joshua turned to the rabbi and asked, "Are you going inside with me?"

"I'd like to see the tomb of my ancestors one more time," answered the rabbi, "so I will go with you."

"Where is the tomb of your ancestors?" asked Joshua.

"I will show you," said the rabbi.

Joshua and the rabbi followed the group as Anastasia led them to the right up eighteen steep steps, made of pink Santa Croce (Cross) marble, to the top where an archway greeted the pilgrims. The keystone of the archway over the entrance to the chapels at the summit of Golgotha was carved with a Jerusalem Cross.

"Do you know what that sign signifies?" asked the rabbi, stopping and pointing to the inscription on the keystone.

“That looks like an equal-armed cross, like the Greeks use,” said Joshua, looking up at the keystone in the center of the archway. “And I see a small Greek cross centered in each quadrant.”

“You’ve described it fairly accurately,” said the rabbi, “except you forgot to mention the crossbar, a T-shaped form that tops the end of each arm of the central cross. The Tau-shape actually is a very old form of the cross, and the T was the mark that was placed on a person’s forehead as a sign of Life. If you notice its shape, it has the male vertical line and the female horizontal line, which in our way of looking at life signifies the union of opposites and the union of heaven and earth. Furthermore, some have interpreted a triple T to signify the Temple of Hierosolyma by combining the T and H; however, I would point out that the quadruple T brings into sight the old or earthly and the new or heavenly Yerushalayim.”

“I’ve always considered the cross to be an ancient symbol of the four cardinal directions,” said Joshua.

“On the physical plane, yes,” said the rabbi. “Have you ever heard of Ezekiel’s wheel?”

“Isn’t that where you have the ancient symbols of man, eagle, lion, and bull of the fixed cross?” asked Joshua.

“Rightly so,” said the rabbi, obviously impressed by Joshua’s knowledge. “And the four small Greek crosses centered in each quadrant of the Jerusalem Cross on Ezekiel’s wheel or zodiac circle should actually be a representation of those ancient signs, but they were replaced by crosses so that the mysteries of the universe would remain out of the hands of the common people.”

Joshua felt that there was so much more the old rabbi could have told him about the keystone symbol, but he was anxious to rejoin his group. Joshua hurried past the 10th and 11th Stations of the Cross, where the Christian Messiah was stripped of his garments and then nailed to the wooden crosspiece. They caught up with the group at the 12th station, at the place of crucifixion, which revealed the rocky summit of Golgotha enclosed by bullet-proof glass to prevent tourists and souvenir-hunters from chipping away at the rock. Joshua and the rabbi watched as the pilgrims got down on hands and knees to reach through a small opening to touch the sacred rock below.

Joshua’s eyes were diverted to the life-size icon behind the altar depicting a crucified Christ with a 12-rayed aureole surrounding his head, with the mother Mary standing to the left and the beloved disciple John standing to the right. Joshua was not aware of the 12-rayed sunburst that he was standing on.

The rabbi felt uncomfortable looking at the suffering portrayed on the cross, and he patted Joshua on the shoulder. “Let me show you the place of my ancestors,” he said, hoping to distract Joshua from the torturous scene. The rabbi seemed to feel his own inner agony as he recalled the oft-repeated story of Abraham and the helpless son who was tied up and ready to be offered up as a burnt offering on the rocky summit.

“I really wanted to see the final station, the actual tomb,” said Joshua.

“You will,” said the rabbi, “but let me first take you back down to the main floor, to the base of this place of the skull. It’s located directly below the traditional Golgotha. Legend has it that there once was a stone quarry here and that it developed a crack from top to bottom during an earthquake, which the Christian tradition attributes to the time of

the Crucifixion.”

Joshua reluctantly followed the rabbi to the Chapel of Adam.

“This is the Cave of Treasures,” said the rabbi after they entered the small Chapel of Adam, “the place where the first man, Adam, was laid to rest when he died at the age of 930 years. Our tradition holds that Adam’s body was deposited in the center of the earth. There’s also a legend that the cave was a repository for sacred treasures.”

The rabbi’s voice droned on as Joshua sat on the ground and listened. He noticed a fissure in the rock. There was a hypnotic quality to the rabbi’s words, as if they were recalling ancient mysteries. Joshua’s mind began to swirl, and he felt as if he were spiraling downward into the womb of Mother Earth.

Joshua felt a sudden jolt in his body, the kind he usually felt when falling asleep and when his astral body was leaving his physical body. He sensed a shift in consciousness, from the physical body to an out-of-body consciousness. He saw the curtain of darkness lift from the surface of his soul’s eye, and he entered a stillness where everything seemed to stop moving, including his heartbeat and his breathing.

A picture unfolded in his soul’s eye of a certain time and place: A mysterious visitor approaches a chaste Jewish maiden’s bedroom in the middle of the night. The maiden, thinking that he’s her betrothed husband, pushes him away, telling him it’s not the right time. The mysterious visitor, providentially announcing news that her eternal reign abounds, reassures the Essene maiden that it’s the will of a higher power. The young woman is left in tears as she bewails her loss, and the mysterious stranger slips off into the dark night. The same night, the betrothed husband appears at the maiden’s house and wants to enter:

“Yohanan, you have already done your will with me. Why do you come to me a second time?”

“Miriam, what are you talking about? This is my first time here this night.”

“But you were here less than an hour ago, and I tried to push you away,” Miriam speaks through her tears.

“Oh, what evil has befallen us? Who could have done such a deed?” Yohanan mourns with a loud voice.

“It was a mysterious visitor that took advantage of my naivety,” Miriam acknowledges.

“Oh, what shame, what disgrace! What will I do now?” Yohanan wails.

“I’m still your betrothed wife, if you still want me,” Miriam opens up her heart to her betrothed husband.

Three months pass, and Miriam tells Yohanan that she is with child.

“I will not be able to face the accusations and the knowledge that this is not my child,” Yohanan confesses.

Yohanan leaves and never comes back. Some people say he probably went to Babylon.

A baby boy is born and Miriam calls him Yahoshua. The child is treated as an outcast by the local villagers. The children are told by their parents to avoid him. The boy has a troublesome childhood. He is disrespectful to his teachers. Finally, he is introduced to a teacher who takes him under his wings. The teacher’s name is Rabbi Jehoshua ben Perachiah.

Joshua realized the significance of the panoramic picture that was swiftly unfolding before his soul's eye. He was being given a glimpse into the Hall of Records, which existed in the Universal Mind that he had tapped into. He was seeing another facet of his soul's existence, another past-life, as his benevolent angel Binah had taught him. At the thought of her name, Joshua felt a warm glow envelop his entire body, mind, and soul. 'Now you will see why I told you to seek Jehoshua ben Perachiah in your next life time,' he heard her sweet voice sound in his inner temple, as the seer and the seen became one.

"Yahoshua," called the Rabbi Jehoshua ben Perachiah. "The time has come for us to go to Egypt."

"Is it because of the persecution of the Pharisees by the Sadducee-lover Alexander Jannai?" asked the astute Yahoshua, who was busy reading religious scrolls.

"That's part of the reason," said the revered head of the Sanhedrin, Rabbi Jehoshua. "The slaughter of innocent rabbis is now widespread, and many of my fellow-rabbis are fleeing this religious war. However, there is another reason."

"What might that be?" asked Yahoshua, putting down the scroll and waiting patiently for his teacher's explanation.

"I have taught you all that I know of Jewish religious law and of the sacred teachings," said the dignified looking rabbi, who had a large intertwined white beard. "The rest you will have to learn in the temples and pyramids of Egypt."

Yahoshua followed his revered teacher down into the Land of Mystery, the land where Moses, Plato, and Pythagoras were taught the wisdom of the Egyptians.

Yahoshua cautiously approached the antediluvian beast. The half-human, half-animal, Sphinx seemed to rise from the sands of time. Its leonine paws pointed to an age when Leo ruled the heavens. An age, according to Plato, where the Atlanteans spread their civilization around the globe before impending doom sent their world to the depths of the ocean.

Yahoshua looked up at the man-beast, which rose about 66 feet high in the desert sky. The Great Sphinx of Giza stood as a silent sentinel as Yahoshua walked down to the grand stone stele-door that guarded the entrance to the subterranean halls and temples. Plato had gained entrance through the door when he was 49 years old; Yahoshua was hoping to gain admittance to the secret chambers of the Egyptian mysteries at the age of 30.

The stele-door opened slightly, and a bull-like voice bellowed from within: "Who seeks to enter these sacred halls of divine wisdom?"

"It is I, Yahoshua, who seek to enter," answered Yahoshua in a steady voice. He had been instructed by his teacher, the Rabbi Yehoshua, to be strong and courageous, and to face all the tests and trials of initiation without any sign of fear.

The voice continued. "To enter, you must provide the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx: What animal is it that goes on four feet in the morning, on two feet at noon, and on three feet in the evening?"

Yahoshua thought for a while, and then carefully worded his reply: "The answer is Man, who crawls on his hands and knees in childhood, walks upright on two legs in adulthood, and uses a staff as a third leg in old age."

The door swung open, and Yahoshua entered. A young bare-chested and bare-headed priest ushered the new candidate through the secret gate into the underworld of the ancient mysteries. The young priest carried an ankh, the symbol of eternal life, in his hand. They silently descended thirteen steps to an entrance hall, which was illumined by torches mounted on the walls. Here Yahoshua saw incomprehensible pictures of Egyptian deities and hieroglyphs that told a story of cosmic proportions.

After weeks of preparation, the candidate was led through a narrow tunnel to the Great Pyramid. Yahoshua felt his first pangs of apprehension as he descended a long dark passageway into what seemed to be the bowels of the earth.

The ceremony of the first initiation was timed to occur during the winter solstice. The darkness of the season coincided with the darkness that Yahoshua felt in the cavern-like subterranean chamber, where he was left alone for three days and three nights. On the first night, he encountered the Lord of the Underworld, Osiris, who revealed to Yahoshua the mystery of life and death, the cycle of generation into the world of matter, and the laws of karma and reincarnation. Yahoshua saw himself crucified on a cross in space, descending through seven vibrational levels to earth. On the second night, he encountered his earthly mother, whose image reminded him of the act of generation that produced the physical body for his incarnation. Yahoshua saw himself as a willing participant in the drama that provided him a suitable body to inhabit. On the third night, he encountered the evolution of man in the womb, where he witnessed the embryonic development from a fish in the water, to an amphibian shape, to half-animal and half-human, and finally to a physical being that resembled a miniature human. Yahoshua saw himself as continuing to evolve; he had a glimpse of himself as being on the verge of becoming a man-god.

“Oh, my god,” cried out Yahoshua when he saw the fleeting vision of himself as a semi-divine creature. It was as if a star had illuminated the sky of his consciousness and revealed to his conscious mind the present phase of his evolution. All his inner fears and doubts vanished in the light of that realization.

A hidden door opened, and the young priest appeared with a torch in his hand. “I heard you cry out,” he said.

“I had a stunning vision of myself as a man-god,” said Yahoshua.

“You have successfully passed the first initiation,” said the young priest with a smile on his face. “Come with me. We have to prepare you with purification rituals for your next initiation.”

Three months later, at the vernal equinox, the candidate-initiate Yahoshua was brought to a pool of water, where he was bathed and cleansed from inner and outer impurities before proceeding to the next ceremonial chamber.

Yahoshua ascended a passageway with the young priest in front of him and a young priestess behind him lighting the way for him into the heart of the grand inner temple. They reached a level passageway, which they followed for a short distance, and then they stopped at the vestibule in front of the Queen’s Chamber.

“This is the Temple of Isis,” said the priestess, who had a veil covering her face. “I will introduce you to her mysteries.” The young priest left Yahoshua alone with the young priestess, whose face was turned away from him.

She read the inscription above the archway: “I, Isis, am all that has been, that is, and that shall be; no mortal has ever unveiled me.”

The young priestess led Yahoshua into the Queen's Chamber, where Yahoshua saw an altar and a throne. The altar was a rectangular-shaped table with three horizontal panels that had pictures of Egyptian deities representing cosmic and natural principles.

"This is the Mensa Isiaca or the Table of Isis," said the priestess. "The inscriptions on this table depict the three-fold nature of the world: the archetypal, the intellectual, and the physical. If you successfully pass the initiation in this chamber, Isis herself will appear to you on her throne and teach you the mysteries of the World Mother."

The young priestess placed her torch in a heart-shaped urn beside the throne of Isis and turned around to face Yahoshua. It was at that moment, with the flickering light from the torch dancing across the figure of the priestess, that Yahoshua saw the body of the thinly-clad female figure. He felt a burning sensation in his loins as she approached him. His heart was racing, and the blood in his veins surged through his entire body.

"I am a priestess of the Virgin Isis," said the young priestess as she came within an arm's distance of Yeshua. "And as her priestess, I carry within me her generative and creative powers."

Yahoshua was burning up with desire. The tempting wiles of the beautiful female figure made it hard for him to think or reason. His emotions had full sway over him.

Yahoshua was just about to reach out and touch the body of the young priestess when he happened to look through the veil to see eyes that appeared familiar.

"Let me see your face," said Yahoshua, looking intently at the eyes behind the veil.

The priestess slowly lifted the veil.

"Binah!" exclaimed a shocked Yahoshua. "Why?"

"You are being tested," explained Binah. "I am every woman, and I play every role that exists through the female principle in the world. I am the Virgin, the Temptress, the Prostitute, the Adulteress, the Mother, the One through whom life comes into the world."

Yahoshua stood in awe as Binah transfigured herself into the multi-faced Isis. He saw each feminine aspect as she named them.

"Do not judge by appearance," said Binah. "I am also the feminine principle that exists in you, which is why you were attracted to the female figure I presented to you in an illusionary form. Someday, when you reach the androgynous stage of evolution, you will understand what I mean. In the meantime, you must learn the secrets of your heart and how to control your emotional body."

Binah vanished into thin air, and Yahoshua was left standing alone. For the next seven days he wrestled with every conceivable emotion that arose in his heart: love, hate, anger, fear, lust, envy, jealousy, and a host of other emotions. He learned that all the negative emotions stemmed from his lower animal nature, and all the positive emotions, like joy, peace, and contentment, arose from man's higher nature.

At the end of the seventh day, the young priest arrived to take Yahoshua back to the entrance hall, where Yahoshua remained in a state of abeyance. He didn't know if he had completed his previous initiation successfully or not. He wasn't sure if he would be permitted to continue onto the third and fourth initiations. He was told by the young priest that if he was granted permission by the hierophant of the temple, then he would

ascend through the seven stages of the Grand Gallery during the summer solstice; and hopefully, he would meet Ra, the sun-god, in the King's Chamber in a grand resurrection ceremony during the autumnal equinox.

Yahoshua never met the hierophant of the temple nor Ra, the sun-god, during his visit to the Grand Pyramid in Egypt.

"The hierophant says that you still need to overcome the temptations of the flesh that you displayed in the Temple of Isis," said the young priest, who accompanied Yahoshua. "He says maybe you'll return in your next life time to complete your initiations."

"How will I know in my next life time that I need to come back here?" asked Yahoshua.

"Your higher mind will awaken to your soul's destiny when you hear the sacred name that Isis, according to legend, coaxed out of Ra," answered the young priest.

"And what is that sacred name?" asked Yahoshua.

"Nuk Pu Nuk," said the young priest, "which means, I am becoming that which I am to be."

"Thank you," said Yahoshua. "By the way, what is your name?"

"I am called El-Aton," said the young priest, "which means, the one who bows down to the One God."

Yahoshua returned to Alexandria in Egypt, where his teacher, the Rabbi Yehoshua, was waiting for him.

"You're back earlier than I thought you'd be," said the rabbi. "What happened?"

"I passed the first initiation, but I couldn't complete the second initiation in the Temple of Isis," said Yahoshua. "I looked at a young priestess with lust." Yahoshua hung his head down in shame.

"What?" said the surprised rabbi. "After all that I taught you! And after all the effort I put into your training to become a rabbi! Get away from me, you ungrateful so-and-so!" The rabbi pushed Yahoshua away from him with both of his hands.

"But she was only an illusion!" exclaimed Yeshua. "It was a fleeting temptation."

"That's what they all say," said the rabbi. "You will have to find yourself another teacher. Or get yourself a study companion. I am no longer your teacher."

Yahoshua stayed in Alexandria for another two years, learning whatever he could from the magicians in the city. On the third year of his stay in Egypt, the Rabbi Yehoshua told him that the wicked king had died and the wife Salome Alexandra was on the throne. A friend had sent him a letter saying that the queen was a friend of the Pharisees, and it was safe for them to return to Jerusalem.

On his first day back, Yahoshua was found on the temple steps bragging about his exploits in the Great Pyramid and about the Egyptian mysteries that he had learned there. "I saw myself as a man-god!" he professed.

Word soon spread that the young Egyptian heretic was deceiving the people. He was even called an apostate for renouncing his religious faith.

"Isn't this the mamser (the outcast)?" asked the religious leaders.

When Yahoshua used the sacred name to heal a lame man, the people claimed that he was practicing sorcery.

The anger toward Yahoshua soon escalated to a fever pitch, and one day, when Yahoshua repeated that he was a man-god, the people picked up stones and hurled them at the apostate.

“Do not your scriptures teach that you are gods?” Yahoshua spoke out in self-defense.

“We have one God, and it’s not you!” yelled back the self-righteous people.

“I only want to teach you what was revealed to me,” cried out Yahoshua, whose skull was bleeding from wounds inflicted by the stone-throwers.

“Our Law says not to allow a blasphemer to live!” yelled back an old rabbi as he hurled a stone at Yahoshua. “You will die like Balaam died, for he too was a corrupter of the people.”

“You will one day see that the evolution of man is destined to continue through many life times until he becomes a god,” cried out Yahoshua with his last breath.

“Blasphemy! False prophet!” yelled the people as an avalanche of stones ended the life of the young thirty-three years old man.

Someone said the last words they heard from the bleeding mouth of the outcast was, “Nuk Pu Nuk.”

The Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachiah afterwards reprimanded the accusers by telling them, “When you judge people, give them the benefit of the doubt.”

The last image that Joshua saw through the lens of his soul’s eye was Yahoshua hanging on a carob-tree, which was in bloom with male, female, and hermaphroditic flowers.

“Wake up!” exclaimed the tour guide, Anastasia, as she shook Joshua’s rigid body with both of her hands.

Joshua slowly opened his physical eyes. He felt like he had come back from the dead. He looked up at Anastasia’s face, and he thought he saw Binah’s angelic face.

“Binah,” he said softly.

“I’m Anastasia,” the tour guide corrected him.

Joshua looked around for the old rabbi. “Where’s the old rabbi?” he asked.

“He left just before our group came into the Chapel of Adam,” said Anastasia. “He told me to tell you that his name is Isaac.”

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Paul/Saul moved back one step and looked into his sister Phoebe’s dark brown eyes. Her long dark black hair was tied back into a pony-tail, to keep it from falling into her face as she worked in the vegetable garden. Her face radiated with excitement.

“What are you doing here?” Phoebe asked, echoing Paul’s question.

“No, no. I asked first,” said Paul, laughing with joy at seeing his twin sister again.

“Mine is a very long story,” said Phoebe, smiling back at her brother.

“So is mine,” teased Paul in return.

“All right, you win, like you always do,” teased back Phoebe. “Let’s go under the shade of the palm tree, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Phoebe led her brother away from the curiosity-seekers who had assembled to witness the reunion of brother and sister. Elijahu, the elder Essene, looked approvingly at the friendship that the brother and sister displayed to the onlookers. Elijahu, after a few minutes of contemplation, motioned for the members of the desert community to get back to their specified work.

The women went to work on processing dates from the palm trees. The men went to work on collecting and storing the local resources of salt from the nearby Dead Sea, which the Hebrews called Yam HaMelakh (Salt Sea). Both men and women worked on the cultivation of grapes in the small vineyard. And then, of course, there was plenty of work to do in the garden, for the small village of Ein Feshka was a community of vegetarian Essenes.

Phoebe and Paul reached the palm trees, which grew near the springs that flowed through the reeds and tumbled down into small pools. Phoebe sat down at the base of the tree, and Paul sat beside her. He was anxious to hear her story. He was also anxious to ask about the family members, but that would have to wait until he heard how she had ended up with the Essenes.

“Let’s see, where should I begin?” said Phoebe, musefully.

“Start at the beginning, from the last time I saw you in Jerusalem, when our family was living there, right about the time the Herodian Temple was rebuilt and Pontius Pilate was just starting his term of office as procurator.”

“That’s when father and mother decided to leave Jerusalem because of the turmoil and predictions of impending doom,” said Phoebe.

“Right,” said Paul, “and they thought it would be safer for them to be with the Jewish community in Cyrene.”

“And they had to travel with Rufus and Alexander, poor little boys, how they cried,” said Phoebe.

“And Lucius, Jason, and Herodian stayed with you in Jerusalem,” added Paul.

“Yes, although we pretty much went our separate ways after a while,” said Phoebe. “That’s when I met a young handsome man who invited me to visit the Essene Quarter. Remember the small section in the southwestern part of Jerusalem, where we wandered into when we were exploring the city when we first moved there?”

“Yes, I do,” said Paul. “I felt like I had wandered into a monastery with only men wandering about, as if they were in a trance or something.”

“Well, I found out they at times allowed women to visit, but not to stay,” said Phoebe. “So this young Essene, who said his name was Alexander, brought me to visit some elders. I guess I kind of liked Alexander because of his name. It had the sound of a Greek god. Remember how we studied Greek history in school and learned about Alexander the Great conquering the world, and then taking Palestine in 333 B.C.?”

“Do I remember?” asked Paul. “Of course I do. I even remember daydreaming about conquering the world some day, just like he did.”

“When I looked at Alexander, I imagined him as a conqueror of my heart,” said Phoebe. “And he seemed to like me, also. However, I soon found out why he had chosen me. He was the son of the high priest, and he had left the Pharisees to join the Essenes. The simplicity of their teachings about piety and righteousness, and love of mankind, including their contempt of money, fame, and pleasures, somehow made him feel that he wanted to follow their Way. He also liked the fact that they had no rich or poor amongst them, for they brought all their possessions into a common treasury, from which each took only what they really needed. At first, he thought it would be hard to adapt to their strict code of vegetarianism, but he soon learned that he could adjust to their common meals, where everyone ate the same healthy food, basically.”

“So did he propose to marry you?” asked Paul impatiently.

“Wait, I’m getting to that part,” said Phoebe, gently placing her hand on his knee for a moment. “What he was shy about telling me was that the Essenes taught strict continence, and marriage was only for the purpose of producing children. Most of the men that belonged to their order were of the belief that sexual abstinence was a prerequisite for resurrection from the dead. I had never heard that teaching in all my life, not even from any of the Pharisees who taught in the temple.”

“That’s a very strange belief,” said Paul, as he furrowed his brow and tried to ascertain the rationale for such thinking.

“What I learned later from overhearing a conversation Alexander had with one of the Essene elders was that they meant the resurrection of the dead in this lifetime, not in some future state,” continued Phoebe. “When I pressed Alexander about what that meant and how it was accomplished, he said he wasn’t supposed to reveal secrets of the Essene teachings. But when he saw that I wouldn’t stop pestering him about the secret teaching, he broke down and told me. However, he made me promise that I wouldn’t say anything about what he revealed to anybody.”

“So that means you can’t tell me,” said Paul.

“Don’t be silly,” said Phoebe. “When was I ever able to keep a secret from you?”

“Never,” replied Paul confidently.

“However,” continued Phoebe, “you must promise me that you won’t tell anyone about what I’m about to tell you.”

“You know I can’t keep a secret, either,” said Paul. “But I promise to try.”

“No, that’s not good enough,” said Phoebe, becoming impatient with her brother. “You’ve got to really, and truthfully, promise.”

“All right,” conceded Paul. “I promise.”

“The Essenes teach that there is a sacred seed in the human body,” began Phoebe. “And this special seed, which they call a lunar seed because it is produced once a month, is produced in the brain, in the pituitary gland. If this seed is not lost through sexual misuse, then the lunar seed descends to the pelvis and ascends back to the brain. Alexander told me that the initiates are taught how to lift their seed to the head and reach illumination. But it takes a lot of self-discipline and dedication. It takes thirteen saved lunar seeds, plus something he called a solar seed because it makes a cycle of the sun in the body; the solar seed descends from the pineal gland down the spinal cord and ascends back again in one solar year. When the lunar and the solar seeds join in the brain, then the person resurrects from the body and is elevated into the spirit world. Isn’t that something?”

“That sure is incredible,” said Paul. “I would have never guessed that in a thousand years.”

“They teach that the regeneration of the physical body into a spiritual body begins when the marriage of the lunar and solar seeds is consummated,” added Phoebe. “And it is a life-long endeavor.”

“So that’s why they don’t get married,” said Paul as the realization struck his mind. “So why would this Alexander fellow tell you all this if he planned to marry you?”

“That’s the tricky part,” said Phoebe. “When he found out I was a virgin – I told him when he asked – he told me that the Essenes prepare themselves for what they call immaculate parenthood, which means that both husband and wife save their seed until the time is ripe to bring an advanced soul into the world of humans. They call such a soul a chosen one, because they chose to conserve the sacred seed in order to bring someone special to earth to help with the work of the Essenian order.”

“That just simply overwhelms my mind when I even try to think of it,” admitted Paul.

“So Alexander wanted me to join with him in this immaculate parenthood,” said Phoebe, whose voice started to quiver when she spoke. “I burned inside for him, and a fire raged in my body. But I was afraid to commit to such a life. That’s when he brought me to the Essene Quarter to visit with some elders, who explained the role that I would play in bringing a pure soul into the world. After several months of consultation, and after I had agreed to give up my chaste body for this worthy cause, they took me outside the Gate of the Essenes and led me up thirty-six steps on the side of Mount Zion to a miqveh, the ritual bath. It was situated on a rock shelf and was just outside the city wall. I descended some steps into the pool of water in my white linen robe, and I immersed myself in the cold water, cleansing myself and dedicating my life to purity. Then I ascended some steps on the other side of the pool and was given a blanket to keep from shivering.”

“Did you feel like a new person after the ritual bath?” asked Paul naively.

“A little,” confessed Phoebe. “Although there was no striking transformation in my body or illumination in my mind, I felt very self-confident in the task and the journey I was about to embark on. After three years of preparation, and of keeping myself chaste, and my inner temple clean from impure thoughts and deeds, I was ready for the final act.”

“With Alexander?” asked Paul.

“Yes,” answered Phoebe. “He had also prepared himself for this sacred union. We were given a special ceremony and a special place to consummate the marriage. And then I was told I would have to join the community of Essenes at Ein Feshka, where I would await the birth of the chosen one. And here I am.”

“You mean you’re with child?” asked Paul in disbelief.

“Yes, I am,” said Phoebe, standing to her feet and holding her hands to her belly to show his brother the roundness that was forming within her womb. “In three months. At the time of the autumnal equinox.” Phoebe was not aware of it, but a Son was being formed inside her.

“That’s unbelievable!” exclaimed Paul excitedly. “You are an amazing woman. And where is your husband, Alexander?”

“He’s working with the other male members collecting salt from the Salt Sea,” answered Phoebe. “We are permitted to live together. Chastely.”

Paul's head was swimming with the new information that had inundated his mind. He couldn't fathom how a person could remain chaste his entire life. It didn't seem natural to him. The concept of sexual abstinence as a prerequisite for resurrection from the physical body into a regenerated body was a foreign idea to him. He wasn't sure if he ever could control and conquer the urges within his body that arose from time to time. He wasn't even sure if he was willing to try to test the theory of physical regeneration.

"Come on," said Phoebe. "It's time for me to get back to work." She took his hand and started to lead him in the direction of the encampment.

"Wait," said Paul. "I wanted to ask you about the family and the latest news about everybody."

"I'll tell you all about them some other time," said Phoebe. She let go of his hand and walked on.

Paul took one last glance at the grove of date palms. As he did so, something caught his eye. A woman was standing beside one of the date palms, taking a break from picking dates off of the ground. He stopped and turned around.

"Wait!" he said to Phoebe, who was already several paces ahead of him. "Who is that woman?"

Phoebe turned around and looked in the direction where Paul was pointing with his outstretched arm.

"Oh, that's Alexander's sister, Asherah," said Phoebe.

"The daughter of the high priest?" asked Paul in an astonished voice.

"Yes," answered Phoebe. "She has quite a story to tell."

"What do you mean?" asked Paul. "What happened to her?" Paul kept looking in the direction of the young woman in the grove of date palms.

"She was betrothed to this Pharisee who was madly in love with her," began Phoebe. "One day she happened to hear outside of her window two Essenes discussing continence and how conserving the sacred seed brings about the resurrection or regeneration of the physical body. She was so enthralled with the prospect of remaining chaste in order to pursue the goal of transforming her body into a spiritual body that she told her betrothed that she was not going to get married to him. He was very angry. He wanted the Sanhedrin council to bring judgment upon her. When the Essenes through Alexander heard about the plight of his sister, they rescued her from the wicked intents of the council and brought her here to Ein Feshka. She's been here only a short time, and her heart is still torn with memories of the unchaste advances of some of the men she encountered in her life."

"Do you think I can talk with her?" Paul asked anxiously. His eyes were still riveted to the grove and the young woman who presented an irresistible picture of enchantment to him.

"Sure, you go ahead," said Phoebe. "I'll head back to my work. And remember, you still have to tell me what you're doing here."

Phoebe turned and walked quickly back to her garden work. Paul slowly approached the young woman in the grove.

