

God in Three Persons: A Spiritual Odyssey

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σπειρημα (speirema), The Serpent-Coil

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“I will open my mouth in a parable:

I will utter dark sayings of old.”

- - Psalms 78:2

Apollo boarded the intercontinental Lufthansa airplane at the San Francisco International Airport on the day of the summer solstice. The airplane took off into the air gracefully like a swan, with its outstretched wings soaring high into the heavens. Apollo looked out of his small window at the receding Bay Area, whose seven bridges spanned the mixed oceanic and fresh waters between the densely populated shores. He tried to imagine the vast valley that existed there before the rising waters at the end of the previous ice age advanced into the region to create a panorama of climactic change within the landscape.

When the airplane reached its highest altitude of 33,000 feet, Apollo leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He reflected on the events of the previous three weeks, from his camping trip in the scenic Yosemite, to his frantic search for his fiancée Sophia, and culminating in a portentous visit with the adept Salvatore D’Aura. His life had taken a drastic turn for the worse, as if fate had stepped in and altered the natural river-like course of his future. All his plans had changed, and now even his career at the university was placed in jeopardy; he had given the philosophy department notice that he had to leave the country on a mission to rescue his kidnapped fiancée. He did not know when he would be back from Athens and wherever else he needed to go to bring Sophia back home.

The one fortunate event that put a smile back on Apollo’s face was the discovery of his notes that he had used to write his manuscript on Apollonius of Tyana. He reached with his right hand inside a pocket in his light Windbreaker jacket and reassured himself that he had brought his compact notepad. He pulled it out and thumbed through the pages. He had left photocopies of all the pages locked up safely in his newly-acquired safe deposit box at the bank. As it was, he was glad the thieves didn’t look in the bottom right-hand drawer of miscellaneous items, where he kept his notepad.

Now Apollo had to attempt an accurate reconstruction of the manuscript that was stolen. He opened a spiral notebook, which he had brought with him for the task he had

set for himself while flying to his destination, and he began to write what he had written before:

The Life of Apollonius of Tyana, which was published in the year 217 A.D. by a Greek sophist (professor) named Flavius Philostratus, relates the story of an ascetic Greek philosopher, who lived during the first century of the common Christian era. The biography of this renowned teacher and world-traveler was written to prove to the world that Apollonius was not a sorcerer or wizard, but a divinely-inspired sage and reformer.

However, the wisdom-seeking philosopher, who conformed himself to the precepts of the sage Pythagoras by following a vegetarian diet and a chaste life, was later compared by a writer named Hierocles with the Christian savior. That's when the ecclesiastical bishop Eusebius wrote an apologetical treatise in which he refuted the allegation that the Christians modeled their savior on the life of Apollonius, the miracle-worker. Ever since then, the undercurrent of rivalry between the Christian savior and the Pythagorean philosopher has caused reasoning minds to look at both stories more closely, and unreasoning minds to dismiss one or the other as a wizard or magician, or worse yet, as a fake or fabrication.

This dissertation will explore the possibilities that the stories of the Christian savior, known as Jesus the Christ, and the philosopher Apollonius of Tyana are intertwined, and that a third character provides clues and answers on how the entire biblical story of the first century A.D. (Anno Domini, "in the year of the Lord") was constructed and composed as a mystery drama. That third character is the dualistic Paul/Paul of Tarsus, who is credited with being the apostle of Christianity, and yet his life and travels parallel the life and travels of Apollonius almost step by step.

The story of the life of Apollonius begins with his birth in the Greek city of Tyana, Cappadocia near the city of Nigde, which is in the present-day Central Anatolia Region of Turkey. According to legend, an apparition of the ancient sea-god Proteus appeared to his mother just prior to his birth and announced that the child would be an incarnation of the ever-changing, prophetic sea divinity. At the hour of the auspicious delivery, a flock of swans danced and sang in the meadow around the sleeping mother, and a thunderbolt from Zeus was said to have descended and ascended without falling to earth. The precise date of birth depends on which source one relies on: those who link the birth of Apollonius with Jesus give the date as 4 B.C. (Dr. Raymond Bernard gives this date); those who link the birth of Apollonius with Paul/Paul of Tarsus give the date as 2 A.D. (or in the year of Rome 756, which is 756 years "ab urbe condita", i.e. since the founding of

Rome.); one source pinpoints the date as February 16, 2 A.D. (*Antiquity Unveiled*, by J.M. Roberts).

As a young student, Apollonius was brought to Tarsus at the age of 14 to study rhetoric and general literature and philosophy. Afterwards, he transferred to the city of Aegae to study medicine and the art of healing at the Temple of Asclepius. He also learned the philosophy of Plato and Epicurus, but he was inclined to follow the Pythagorean system. So at the age of 16 he adopted the life-style of Pythagoras by following a vegetarian diet in order to purge his interior from illness, and to sharpen his mind; and he renounced the use of wine because he sought to maintain mental balance and to purify the ether in his soul. At this time in his life he also chose to wear only linen clothes, refusing all animal products, and to let his hair and beard grow long. [Note: Tarsus in Cilicia is the alleged birthplace and home of Paul/Paul of Tarsus. Coincidentally, Paul left Tarsus at the age of 14 to pursue Talmudic studies in Jerusalem with Rabbi Gamaliel. This would mean that Paul left Tarsus shortly after, or simultaneously as, Apollonius arrived there.]

The fame of Apollonius grew as his work at the Temple of Asclepius produced cures of the sick. He cured a drunk who suffered from dropsy by teaching him how to dry up his malady; even the god of healing, Asclepius, referred patients to consult the wise Apollonius. He wisely dispensed justice to petitioning patients by refusing the wealthy sacrifices of the wicked and accepting those who came with a clear conscience; to demonstrate the wisdom of the gods, he taught the following prayer: "O ye gods, grant unto me that which I deserve." (Book 1, Chapter 11).

At the age of 20, when his father died, he personally buried him beside his mother's grave, and then he divided the property with his older brother. Apollonius bestowed his share of the property on relatives who were in need and left himself only a small amount, which he later used to pay for his travel expenses. This was a turning point in his life, for Apollonius decided to remain unmarried for the rest of his life, even though he was distinguished for his beauty and intelligence. At six feet tall and weighing approximately 180 pounds, his body displayed a firm and strong masculinity. [Note: The marital status of Paul/Paul is recorded as being unmarried. 1Corinthians 7:8.]

At the age of 21, Apollonius committed himself to the great task (stipulated by the Pythagorean discipline) of observing a five years spell of absolute silence in order to learn how to restrain the tongue, control the emotions, and improve the memory. Observing such a prolonged period of silence was a prerequisite for initiation into the mysteries of mind and soul, which the sage Pythagoras advanced at the school which he established in Crotona in Southern Italy almost five centuries before Apollonius.

Throughout the five years of silence, during which time he lived mostly in the Roman provinces of Pamphylia and Cilicia (Mediterranean region of Turkey), Apollonius communicated mainly through signs of his hands and head or through writing. At the end of his term of silence, he traveled to Antioch (in the province of Syria), where he visited the Temple of Apollo, and he talked with the priests about the traditional forms of the sacred rites and suggested reforms where he thought they were needed. It was here in Antioch that he taught the duty of the philosopher (or seeker of wisdom), which was to rise at sunrise to converse with the gods and then speak with authority of the truths that were communicated to the mind. It was also in Antioch where he made many converts, who would follow him and converse with him as with an oracle who knew of what he spoke. [Note: Antioch becomes the place in the New Testament where the disciples or believers were first called Christians (Acts 11:26), although it's a word which is used only three times in the Bible. Antioch is also the base from which the biblical Paul makes his "missionary" journeys.]

At the age of 27, Apollonius made up his mind to follow in the footsteps of his spiritual mentor, Pythagoras, and he set out for India, where "wisdom and the gods lead me." (Book 1, Chapter 18) On the way through Babylon, in the ancient city of Nineveh, he found a life-long companion named Damis, who became a faithful fellow-traveler and writer of the memoirs of Apollonius. [Note: In the biblical version, Demas, which strongly sounds like Damis by transposing the position of the vowels, is a fellow-laborer who forsakes Paul in the end. 2 Timothy 4:10] As Apollonius is heading toward India in quest of wisdom, Paul/Paul as a religious zealot is heading for Damascus to persecute the church, which historically refers to the Essenes and other pre-Christian sects.

In Babylon, Apollonius met with the Magi and was initiated by them into the Chaldean mysteries, which pertained to the sacred fire of the inner nature of the initiate, by which at-one-moment the soul becomes a receptacle of a fiery body of light. The wisdom of the Magi, with the magic of the stars and the divination of magical properties in plants, minerals, and animals, was imparted to Apollonius in order to add to his storehouse of knowledge of the natural forces at work in the universe. Apollonius was provided camels and a guide by the King of Babylon, who befriended the wise man and even tried to bestow gifts on him. But the king, Vardanes, soon found out the significance of Apollonius' frequent prayer: "O ye gods, grant unto me to have little and to want nothing." (Book 1, Ch. 33) So in the summer of the year 31 A.D., Apollonius and Damis approached the borders of India as they headed over the Hindu Kush Mountains. At the age of 29, he crossed the Indus River and arrived at Taxila (near the modern city of Rawalpindi), the city of King Phraotes.

Apollo heard the announcement of the pilot that the airplane was getting ready to descend to Frankfurt in Germany, where he would transfer to a flight to Athens, Greece. Apollo put his notes and notepad away and watched as the modern-day swan landed on the runway. At the airport he boarded the Olympic Airways 737; he noticed the logo of six interlaced Olympic-type rings on the tail of the aircraft. Although there were actually five interconnected Olympic rings on the Olympic flag, Olympic Airways had six rings of different colors to represent the six continents to which the airlines flew (the five Olympic rings represented five continents, counting the Americas as one continent).

After the airplane ascended into the heavens, Apollo closed his weary eyes and imagined the long-anticipated reunion with Sophia. He visualized her beautiful face, and he stared into the dark eyes, which were full of love and wisdom. He tried to send her a mental message: "We will soon be together, again." And then he drifted off to sleep.

Apollo felt his astral body separate from its earthly mooring and soar into the heavens – into the realm of the gods – where his eagle-eye consciousness was capable of visualizing the worlds below. His mind's eye was following the journey of Apollonius in the land beyond the Indus River, in the royal palace of Taxila (an ancient Buddhist seat of learning), where King Phraotes entertained a fellow-philosopher in a simple moderate manner, sharing the vegetarian meals and discussing the merits of philosophy, "the divinest of human attainments." He watched Apollonius in his sable philosophic cloak rise in the morning and perform his devotional hour to the rising energizing rays of the sun, and he listened as the wise men discoursed on the oracular qualities of the sober mind that drank only pure water in order to maintain a rational vehicle for divination.

Apollo hovered over the developing scenery as Apollonius left the city of Taxila, which was divided into narrow streets in an irregular manner like in Athens. A new landscape unfolded as Apollonius crossed on camel into the Punjab area ("land of five rivers"), across the plain where Alexander the Great fought Porus and the elephant-riders. He crossed the Hydraotes River (presently Ravi River), and he came to the altars of Alexander to the twelve Greek gods and goddesses at the river Hyphasis (presently Sutlej River), the limit of Alexander's Empire.

Apollo rose to Olympian heights as he trailed behind the ever-ascending dragon of wisdom, Apollonius, whose goal was to reach the mysterious castle of the sages in the region of Kashmir in the Olympus-like Himalaya Mountains. A hill of about the same height as the Acropolis of Athens was the place where Apollonius was welcomed by the Indian Brahmans, who levitated above earthly concerns and could make themselves visible or invisible at will. The prescience or foreknowledge of the god-like masters spanned the pages of time, for they knew the past-life of Apollonius as well as his present life, from his being a pilot of an Egyptian vessel to his being a philosopher in quest of the uppermost regions of existence. The masters imparted to Apollonius their wisdom on the nature of the Cosmos, including the concept of five elements (earth, water, air, fire, ether) making up the body of a male-female living universe, and the nature of astronomy and divination, whereby the souls of the stars interact with the souls of human beings.

Apollo watched and listened as the variegated flora and fauna appeared in his mind's consciousness. He watched the sages bathe in a natural spring of water, and he listened to the masters talk of magical stones with mysterious powers and relate the

legends of mythological animals like the griffin (sacred to the sun) and the phoenix (symbol of longevity). Apollos continued to navigate his conscious astral body-mind as Apollonius left the heights of the gods in the Himalayas and descended in a ship down the Indus River to the ancient Erythraeum (“Red”) Sea (presently the Arabian Sea).

The last image Apollos saw, before his astral body was pulled back into his physical body like a kite on a string, was the arrival of Apollonius in Greek Ionia (western coast of Asia Minor on the Aegean Sea), in the city of Ephesus, where he was welcomed by admirers, who heard of his legendary travels through the mouthpieces of the oracles. Apollos knew, as he saw the wisps of his lucid-dream fade away, that Apollonius would be traveling next to Athens, arriving in autumn at the season of the mysteries. Apollos heard the pilot announce the arrival of Olympic Airways at Athens International Airport.

Apollos boarded the E95 Syntagma Square express bus at the airport with his medium-sized suitcase and backpack. He had reserved a room at Hotel Hermes, which was within walking distance from the Syntagma bus stop. He had originally thought of reserving a room at the Adonis Hotel, but he thought it would be a bad omen to be associated with Adonis, the Greek god who was one of the dying and rising saviors of mythology. So he chose the Hermes instead, because it was the Greek name for Mercury, god of wisdom, whom Apollos revered as the guiding intuition that would lead him to Sophia.

He walked to his tourist class hotel in the 80 degree summer heat, with his suitcase in one hand and a map of Athens in the other. Apollonos Street was several irregular-shaped blocks from the downtown bus stop. It was in the historic heart of Athens – in Plaka area – which was the oldest and most picturesque quarter in the city. It was also within walking distance of the Acropolis, where Apollos hoped to be reunited with Sophia.

When Apollos arrived at 19 Apollonos Street, he checked in at the registration desk and then headed to his budget-minded room with two beds on the sixth floor. He carefully hid his notebook and notes in a false bottom in his suitcase, which he had purchased for the purpose of the security that it provided. He stepped out on his private balcony for a limited view of the surrounding neighborhood. Then he ventured up to the rooftop for a more expansive view of the Plaka area, with its taverns, restaurants, museums, shops, cathedrals, and residential homes. Apollos turned to the southwest, and his heart almost stopped as his eyes caught sight of the breathless view of the magnificent Parthenon on top of the flat-topped limestone rock which rose 512 feet above sea level. He watched as the setting sun cast its rays on the east-west axis of the 90 meter high rock, the acropolis or “high city.” Tomorrow, on Midsummer Eve, he hoped to meet Sophia on top of that sacred site.

Early in the morning, while the sun was preparing to rise and shine its life-giving solar streams on the city of seven hills, Apollos walked around the 1,000 foot long oval-shaped tawny rock to the western entrance. He quickly traversed the gradual slope up a natural pathway and waited at the gate for the ticket office to open. At eight o’clock, Apollos walked through the Beule Gate, up several flights of rock steps, and up through the Propylaia, the grand entrance of Doric columns, which opened up to the temple complex on top of the sacred rock.

As Apollos stepped through the last doorway of the Propylaea and out into the open, he stood in awe as he was overwhelmed by the majestic temple of white marble columns to his right – the Parthenon, Temple of the Virgin. His heart pounded in his chest as he intuitively sensed the momentous occasion that he had envisioned for some time now – the sight of his beloved fiancée. He approached the western side of the 101 foot wide temple, which had eight Doric columns standing about 34 feet in height; then he walked along the 228 foot long northern side, which had seventeen columns. He mentally computed that there were once 46 columns that supported the temple of Athena. He continued walking around the entire edifice, past the entrance to the temple on the eastern side and around the southern side until he reassured himself that there were 46 total columns upholding the symmetrical building, which was completed in 15 years in 438 B.C.

Apollos kept an eye open for any sign of Sophia. He glanced to his left and to his right as he continued to tour the sights of the Acropolis and what used to be a city and fortress on a hill. He stopped at the ruins of the Erechtheion, which was built to commemorate the legendary battle of Athena and Poseidon for possession of the city. He recalled reading that Poseidon had struck his trident in a rock to make sea water flow to make the city a great maritime city with its nearby seaport of Piraeus, whereas Athena had grown an olive tree on the site to make olives the agricultural staple for the Greeks. Athena was chosen as the winner of the contest and as the patron goddess of the city, which was named Athens in her honor.

The Parthenon beckoned Apollos to enter, and he had a premonition that he might encounter Sophia within the interior of the 100 x 230 foot architectural marvel. Apollos tried not to pay attention to the scaffolding that was set up for the extensive restoration of the temple and its columns, which had been ravaged by time and the elements. He subvocalized a prayer as he walked up seven stone steps and entered the home of Athena through the eastern entrance: “O, Athena, Queen of the Aegis, shield me from harm and guide me to my beloved Sophia.”

As Apollos stepped into the cella (central part) of the open-air peripteral temple, he felt an immense pressure building up in his skull, as if a vortex of energy was swirling around in his brain. He looked down on the ground, and he saw himself standing in a shallow rectangular pool of water. An image of a gold and ivory statue loomed in front of him, with a woman’s head shimmering in the reflective water at his feet. For a split second he thought he recognized the face of Sophia in the reflective image, but as he lifted his eyes upwards, he realized that he had been looking at the reflection of a 40-foot statue of the virgin goddess Athena.

The chryselephantine (made of gold and ivory) statue seemed to be speaking to him. The ivory face appeared to smile mysteriously at him, as if to say she was happy to impart the wisdom that he sought. The mythological griffin and sphinx shapes on top of her helmet looked down on the seeker of hidden worlds. The aegis (breastplate), with its awe-inspiring snake-encircling Medusa’s head, protected the unspeakable mysteries from the profane and imparted the secrets of the goddess only to the pure in heart and mind. A miniature statue of Nike in the outstretched right hand of Athena promised Victory to the conqueror of the Self. In her left hand Athena held a shield, which rested on the floor in an upright manner, and within the inner surface of the shield was a coiled serpent.

The snake in the shield looked at Apollos with its hypnotic eyes. Apollos at first recoiled at the sight of the reptilian form, but then he was charmed by its endless figure-eight movement. And then he heard the mellow voice of Athena in his mind: “Wisdom is to be found in the Serpent.”

At that precise moment, Apollos’ head seemed to split open, as if an axe was thrust into the top of his skull, and he felt his mind soaring into the Olympian heights of the gods. He sensed himself suspended between heaven and earth, and his eyes looked directly into the bejeweled blue eyes of the goddess, who embraced Apollos with her mental acuity and imparted her wisdom to his intellect. He was enraptured by her eternal fount of wisdom, which seemed to flow from her vast mind to his infinitesimally minute mind, like cascades of waterfalls from the highest mountains to the lowest valley.

When Apollos recovered from his stupendous vision of Athena, he saw Sophia facing him from the exact space where he had an eternal moment ago seen the goddess.

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Joshua stumbled out of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in a semi-dazed state of mind. Images of his soul experience in the Chapel of Adam bombarded his inner being, causing him to become disoriented. All he knew at the moment was that he needed to get away from his tour group and go to a place where he could be alone.

He found himself walking down the Via Dolorosa in an easterly direction, past the traditional Stations of the Cross in reverse order. He walked with head lowered past the column at the entrance to a Coptic Monastery where the Son of Man fell down for the third time. His thoughts were still centered on his own failures in the past as he maneuvered past the oncoming pilgrims, who were moving in a steady procession past the Greek Orthodox Monastery where an equal-sided cross with the inscribed letters ICXCNIKA were carved on the wall, declaring Iesous Christos as the Conqueror. The question of man’s destiny weighed hard on his soul as he passed the second place where the Man of Sorrows fell down under the weight of the cross he had to bear: ‘How many times must a man fall down before he is liberated from the wheel of birth and rebirth?’ he thought to himself. He glanced up momentarily at the Greek Catholic Church, where the legendary story of Veronica’s silk veil preserved the memory and imprint of the savior’s face. He continued left as the Way of the Cross turned and twisted towards the Muslim Quarter. He pondered the significance of the inscription of the name Simoni Cyrenaeo, the cross-bearer, on the architrave of a door of a Franciscan Chapel; he wondered if anyone could lighten the burden he felt. At the small oratory where the Son encountered the Mother, he breathed a prayer for divine assistance. He passed the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate Chapel, where the Son of Man fell the first time, and he turned right to the place where the remains of a Roman arch commemorated the humanistic utterance of Pilate, “Behold the Man.” When Joshua finally arrived at the Monastery of the Flagellation, where the infamous Fortress Antonio once stood, he couldn’t bear the pain anymore. He broke down and cried.

By the time Joshua exited the Old City of Jerusalem through St. Stephen's Gate, his face was drenched. He was totally immersed in the humiliation he had suffered at the hands of his countrymen in his past-life. The stones kept pelting his conscious mind, and for the first time in his present life, Joshua realized that it was not a good thing to remember past-lives.

"Yeshua, why are you crying?" a still small voice spoke in the inner recesses of Joshua's mind.

"Binah, my dear angel," spoke Joshua through his tears and his sobs. "I'm trying to make sense of the pain and suffering that mankind is inflicted with life after life."

"Trials and tribulations are like the storms of life, after which come the rainbow and the promise of a better life in the sunshine," said Binah in her reassuring voice.

"But why must the pain hurt so much, and why must the suffering go on life after life?" asked Joshua. His face was twisted with an anguish that reflected his soul's torment.

"Let me take you on a pilgrimage up the sacred Mount of Olives," said Binah. "You have some lessons to learn, and you need to distinguish between the fleeting sensations of the ephemeral body and the immortal essence of the soul."

Joshua followed Binah's promptings across Jericho Road to the foot of the Mount of Olives. On the other side of the road, Joshua walked to the fork in the road which veered left to the Tomb of the Virgin Mary. As he descended the forty-eight steps to the dark interior of a cave-like church, he felt as if he were descending into the underworld, the dark and mysterious world of Sheol.

"You are now entering into the womb of Mother Nature," softly breathed Binah into Joshua's inner ear. "Mary, like the original Eve, is the conduit through which the physical world comes into being; she is the sacred vessel through whom intelligent life is born."

Joshua thought he was a child being led to its origins. He slowly stepped to the right through the darkened church to a sarcophagus that stood under a dome of rock. He looked inside the sarcophagus and saw that it was open, and there was nothing inside.

"There is no one body which can contain the expansive nature of the Mother," explained Binah. "Even though she gives birth to all physical life, giving of herself, she remains empty. That's why she remains a Virgin."

Joshua wasn't sure that he understood Binah's explanation. The whole issue remained a mystery to him. He walked out of the Greek Orthodox Church of the Assumption thinking of the paradox of life and death, and of life after life.

He walked up Jericho Road, in through a gate to a garden of eight ancient olive trees, and towards the Church of the Agony, set in the biblical Garden of Gethsemane.

"Your body is the garden in which a tree of life is located, and the tree produces an oil which moves throughout the nervous system, anointing your entire body with light-substance," said Binah, her impressions filling his mind with images. He imagined olive branches with silvery green leaves making his body a veritable promised land of olive oil and honey.

He approached the three-arched entrance to the church and looked up at the colorful mosaic within the triangular area over the grand portal (tympanum). His eyes were drawn to the image of the Ancient of Days, whose right hand offered peace and left hand held a stone tablet inscribed with the Greek letters ΑΩ (Alpha and Omega –

beginning and end); below the tablet was the Son of God symbolically connecting the Triune Supreme Being and humanity. He tried to read the Latin inscription beneath the mosaic: “PRECES SUPPLICATIONESQUE SUM CLAMORE VALIDO ET LACRIMIS OFFERENS EXAUDITUS EST PRO SUA REVERENTIA.” A voice in his inner ear resounded with the memorable words: “Offering up prayers and supplications with a strong cry and tears, he was heard because of his reverence.”

“Go ahead inside,” said Binah, whose voice he had learned to obey.

Joshua entered the violet-colored semi-dark interior and immediately felt as if the day had turned into night. The sadness that he had experienced earlier in the day on the Via Dolorosa returned to his soul as he looked up at the somber blue star-studded ceiling, which was built in the shape of twelve domes. A cold lonely feeling descended on him, and he no longer sensed the warm presence of his angelic Binah. As he approached the front of the church, he noticed a rocky mass surrounded by an iron wreath, which was shaped like a crown of thorns.

“The Rock of my Salvation,” sub-vocalized Joshua, as he recalled the words from the Song of Moses. A faint glow seemed to radiate from the sacred rock, as if hidden solar rays extended through the rock, spiritualizing it, and transforming it from crude matter to the proverbial Rock of Ages, a generative force inherent in nature.

Joshua sensed the significance of the imagery in the mural painted above the altar, which stood behind the sacred rock: the agony of the Son of Man (kneeling at the foot of the rock) as he prayed for the cup of earthly experience and suffering to pass over him represented the same earthly agony that each soul experienced as it encountered the imprisoning body of matter. Joshua recalled the biblical story of the Son of Man praying three times for the cup to pass away from him, and three times he found his three disciples asleep. Joshua felt the tears welling up in his eyes again as his soul commiserated with the suffering lot of mankind.

“Weep not,” he heard Binah’s sweet angelic voice again. “It’s part of the divine plan for man to transcend the flesh and its limitations and ascend to divinity, becoming a Son of God. That’s what the top part of the picture shows, see?” Joshua looked at the top of the semi-circular mural and saw the Son of Man ascending into the heavens.

Joshua felt refreshed in his mind and soul as he walked out of the Church of the Nations (Church of the Agony), and out into the light of day. He turned right and continued his trek up the Mount of Olives.

“You’re in for a pleasant surprise,” said Binah as they approached the Russian Orthodox Church of St. Mary Magdalene, surmounted by seven gilded onion-shaped cupolas. “This church conceals one of the mysteries of the esoteric teachings about Mary of Magdala.”

They entered the incense-filled church reverently, without saying a word. The only visible light came from oil-filled lamps and candles. Several sisters of the women’s convent were performing their sacred duties within the ornate interior of the three-storied building.

“Those are the mystical brides of Christ,” whispered Binah into Joshua’s receptive consciousness. “They have dedicated their lives in servitude to and in imitation of the Holy Bride as exemplified by Mary, the original consort of the Lord.”

Joshua let the enchanting words hover above his awe-stricken mind as he stood in front of the beautifully carved pure white marble iconostasis, the eastern orthodox

partition that separated the prayer hall from the inner sanctuary. He looked adoringly at the icons, which were like picture-windows into a sacred archetypal world, and he was amazed at the seven-arched design of the iconostasis, which reminded him simultaneously of the menorah design and the seven centers of energy within the human body.

“Look at the large arch-like canvas above the iconostasis,” whispered Binah.

Joshua’s eyes moved upward to a vast vertically displayed panorama of a woman in a long white robe showing a Roman emperor a red-colored egg.

“That’s a beautiful scene, isn’t it?” asked a nun, who was dressed completely in a black nun’s habit.

“Yes, it is,” answered Joshua, surprised to hear such a soft feminine voice.

“I saw you admiring Our Lady, and I thought you’d love to hear the story behind the picture,” said the nun with a serene look on her aging face.

“I’d love to hear it,” responded Joshua with a smile on his face.

“Our Eastern tradition tells us that after Mary Magdalene witnessed the resurrection of Our Lord, she not only told the disciples about what she had seen, but that she also traveled to Rome to speak to the Emperor Tiberius about the injustice that Our Savior suffered at the hands of Pontius Pilate, the procurator. When she told the emperor that the Master had risen, he told Our Lady that a human being was not capable of rising from the dead. She picked up an egg from a nearby dinner table and used the egg to explain the resurrection of new life from an enclosed tomb-like body. The emperor told her that a human being could no more come back to life than the egg in her hand could turn red. And miraculously, the egg in Our Lady’s hand turned red to demonstrate the reality of the resurrection. That’s what you see in the picture.”

“Thank you for that delightful story,” said Joshua. “Now the painting looks more real to me.” Joshua was just about to reach out and place his hand on the nun’s shoulder as a sign of appreciation for the story, when the nun moved a step back to prevent Joshua from touching her.

“Don’t touch me,” sternly reprimanded the nun. “Don’t you know you can’t touch a nun who has vowed not to allow a man to touch her physical body?”

“I’m sorry,” apologized Joshua. “I didn’t know that. I was only trying to thank you.”

The nun turned around and walked away without saying another word.

“They take their vows seriously,” whispered Binah. “Remember what I said about their role as the Holy Bride? Well, now you saw for yourself what I meant.”

“Yes, I see, but I still don’t understand what you meant when you said something about Mary being the consort of the Lord,” said Joshua as he walked toward the exit.

“That’s the mystery of the perfected man who has restored the male and female attributes of his being into perfect unity and harmony,” explained Binah. “Mary as the consort and companion of the Lord personifies the feminine aspect, and Christ personifies the masculine aspect. There’s a saying: the two shall become one. That’s your androgynous being. The future ideal man.”

Joshua contemplated the significance of Binah’s words as he walked out of the convent and headed further up the hill. His mind was trying to make sense of the concept of fallen man and woman rising together in unison as an androgynous being. Could that

be the coming of a future race of human beings? The question burned inside his mind as he came closer to a small church on his left.

“This is the traditional place where the Son of Man wept over the destructive forces that were about to descend on Jerusalem, the City of God,” said Binah, as they stood looking at the teardrop-shaped building called the Dominus Flevit (the Lord Wept). “He was also thinking of the temple of his body which was about to suffer dissolution.”

Joshua silently thought about the end times of a city, a country, an empire, a civilization, an age, and a person. There was a sense of impending doom and a sadness that accompanied such thoughts. Joshua didn’t like to dwell on such thoughts. He continued walking up the hill.

He came to a gate, which led to the Tombs of the Prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the last three prophets of the Old Testament. He recalled reading of their oracular statements of the coming of a deliverer, a Messiah, who would inaugurate a new age. He walked down to the candle-lit rock cave which had burial niches all around. Somehow, Joshua’s soul was still heavy-laden with all the experiences of the day, and he was feeling tired and dispirited. He wanted to find a place to rest his weary head and sleep.

“A little further, and we’ll be at the mountain-top,” encouraged Binah. Her voice was only a momentary consolation.

They reached the Church of the Pater Noster (Our Father), where the Master taught his disciples how to pray. They entered the convent’s iron gate.

“Our Father which art in heaven,” prayed Joshua as he looked at a series of ornamental panels containing the entire Lord’s Prayer. “Thy kingdom come.” He heard the voice of Binah reminding him that the kingdom of heaven was within him.

He walked down the vaulted cloistered walkway and tried to read the inscriptions of the prayer in different languages. He was emotionally moved by the colorful ceramic plaques which lined the white stone walls. The 140 prayers throughout the compound seemed to reverberate from within the panels in the various languages of the world.

“Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven,” prayed Joshua as he looked at the Latin panel and his eyes focused on the line, “Fiat voluntas tua sicut in caelo et in terra.”

“As Above, so Below.” Binah always seemed to add her intuitive perception to what his reasoning mind was trying to understand.

“Yeshua, are you ready to ascend to the mountain-top?” asked Binah as they walked back onto the main road to the summit.

Joshua nodded his consent as he turned right and proceeded to take his final steps to the 2,640 feet summit of the Mount of Olives (also known as Jabal al-Tur, Mount of the Summit). He turned around one last time to look back at the Old City; far below he saw the Lion’s Gate (St. Stephen’s Gate) through which he had exited, and to the left he saw the beautiful Golden Gate, which was walled up. Behind the closed double arched gate, whose northern portal was known as the Gate of Repentance and southern portal was called the Gate of Mercy, was the magnificent golden Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount. In front of the messianic gate, through which the Messiah was prophesied to return on Judgment Day, were graveyards extending up the slope of Mt. Olivet, with souls awaiting the resurrection of the dead.

“It was also known as the Gate of Eternal Life,” said Binah. “It appears as if there are no visible signs of entry through that gate, but to those who seek they will find, and to those who knock it will be opened.”

Binah’s words struck a chord in Joshua’s mind, and he felt his soul’s eye open slightly, revealing a light shining from the crown of his head.

The last steps to the top of the two-mile long north-to-south limestone ridge, with its four summits, ended up at the Chapel of the Ascension. For the city of seven hills, the Mount of Olives was the most sacred. Joshua paid the gatekeeper a small sum of money, and he walked through the gate to the walled compound enclosing the stone octagonal chapel. Inside the domed chapel, he looked at the enclosed rock on the floor which was said to be imprinted with the footprint of the risen Master just before he ascended into the heavens.

Joshua felt so tired at the moment that he walked over to the interior wall of the ascension chapel, sat down cross-legged on the stone floor, and leaned his back against the firm rock wall. He closed his eyes and fell asleep, shutting off his sense perceptions to the outer world and turning on the astral sensory mechanism of his inner world. He had learned, as a matter of habit, to turn his inward gaze to the region of his mind’s eye, toward the crown of his head, as he laid himself to sleep and prayed for his Lord to keep his soul from all harm.

Within moments after he drifted off to sleep, *an ethereal being of radiant light tapped Joshua lightly on the crown center and said, “Rise, Yeshua.” Yeshua rose out of the body of physical flesh and into an otherworldly consciousness. The royal figure raised his right hand with palm extended and said, “Peace be unto you.”*

Yeshua felt a shaft of golden light strike the top of his head like a spear and descend through his spinal column to the nine segments of the sacrum and coccyx region. The light appeared to ignite a red flame in the dark lower cavern of the spine, and a serpentine force uncoiled and began to ascend through the seven nerve ganglia (chakras) of his erect rod-like spine. The flame turned yellow and then blue as it dispersed itself rapidly seven-fold throughout the forty-nine sacred nerve centers of his flaming tree of life. His entire inner body was lit up with a fiery colorless light, as if it was a city all aglow.

“Who are you?” Yeshua managed to voice weakly when he finally managed to stand face to face with the celestial high priest, who had a blossoming rod of initiation in his left hand.

“I am Melchizedek, king of Salem, hierophant of the Greater Mysteries,” spoke the royal high-priest. His long blue robe appeared to reflect the stars and the seven sacred planets in the heavens, and a zodiac ring of constellations encircled the bottom of the robe. Yeshua instantaneously saw a picture in his mind’s eye of Melchizedek and Abram meeting near the ancient city of Jerusalem. He saw Abram, the Father of many nations, who came from Chaldea (center of ancient mysteries), receiving a higher form of initiation from the king of righteousness.

“Take, eat this bread, the substance of physical life,” said Melchizedek, extending a materialized grain of wheat to Yeshua, who chewed the seed and felt its life-force regenerate his body. “Take, drink this wine, the substance of astral life,” said the adept initiator, extending a materialized chalice of the fruit of the vine to Yeshua, who drank the nectar of the gods and felt a spiritual force circulate through his entire blood stream;

he sensed a spiritual intuitiveness manifesting in his circulatory system, and he saw his blood-line extending into infinity. "Take, absorb this olive oil, the substance of the soul," said one of the Immortals, placing a drop of oil on Yeshua's forehead with his index finger and blessing him with an insight of the immortal soul of man.

Melchizedek placed the rod of initiation at Yeshua's feet and the rod turned into a coiled serpent. As the serpent uncoiled, it shed its old skin, leaving it behind at Yeshua's feet. The vibrant serpent moved in a circle around Yeshua, grabbing its tail with the mouth and forming an eternal circle.

"Be wise as the serpent," said Melchizedek. "It leaves its old body behind and transforms itself into a new creature; in like manner your old coat of skin is discarded, and you resurrect into a spiritual being, like me. When you ascend to the center of your being, you become that which you have always been: an immortal soul, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life."

Yeshua looked down with the single eye of his soul at the discarded physical body, which was leaning against the rock wall of the ascension chapel. Somehow that mortal frame seemed remote and unnecessary, like a chrysalis that has served its purpose and is cast aside when the butterfly emerges.

"I am not that mortal physical body, which dies and passes away," said Yeshua, whose awareness had been raised beyond mere body-consciousness. "I am the immortal soul, which is birthless and deathless."

At that precise moment of self-realization, Yeshua saw his divine Self as a brilliant star bursting forth like a new galaxy and emanating its cosmic light throughout the universe.

"Welcome into the treasure of light," said Melchizedek, the regent of Light, whose task of reuniting the little light of Yeshua's immortal Self with the great light of the infinite fiery wheel of the Most High self-generating Being was complete. Yeshua had entered into the Order of Melchizedek, a brotherhood of priests who were kings of the eternal center of their being.

"The center contains, like the formless seed, all that has been, is, and will be," said Melchizedek. Yeshua saw a small seed, shaped like a miniature white egg, in the high priest's extended right hand. The small seed emitted a pulse of energetic white light, which beamed simultaneously into both faces.

When Yeshua lifted the single eye of his soul and looked at Melchizedek, he saw as if in a mirror a reflection of his own Self. Both of them were wearing a white robe that enfolded their solar body of light.

"You will be a forerunner and revealer of the divine light in mankind," announced Melchizedek.

The words of Melchizedek echoed in the chambers of Joshua's mind as he felt his astral body return to its earthly habitation: "You will be a forerunner and revealer of the divine light in mankind."

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Paul came closer to the woman standing under the date palm tree. He saw that she had a tall, slender body, and her long tresses gracefully hung on her narrow shoulders. At her feet was a detached date stalk with clusters of dates laying on a mat made of palm fiber. Beside the date stalk was a basket woven from palm leaflets.

As Paul came even closer, he could sense that something was wrong. Asherah had her face to the ground, and he could hear her faintly sobbing. He felt awkward at the moment, thinking that he was disturbing her privacy and the right to be left alone. But somehow he wanted to share in her personal sorrow. He intentionally shuffled his sandals on the desert ground to make a loud sound in order to alert her that he was approaching.

Asherah quickly turned her face in the direction of the unwelcome disturbance. Paul saw tears rolling down her distraught face.

“Who are you?” Asherah blurted out angrily. “And what do you want?”

Paul stopped several paces from Asherah. He saw the agitated look in her reddened face.

“I am Saul, Phoebe’s brother,” said Paul, hoping to gain access to her heart by mentioning his sister’s name. “My sister told me about you, and I wanted to meet you and talk with you.”

“As you can see for yourself, I’m really in no mood for talking at this moment,” said Asherah, trying to wipe the tears from her face with the sleeve of her long light-blue robe.

Asherah bent down and pretended to be busy working on the date cluster, picking the ripe dark dates and placing them gently in the basket. She left the green dates on the stalk to ripen.

“I’m sorry if I disturbed you at the wrong time,” said Paul apologetically. “I thought I might lend a sympathetic ear and listen to your problems. That is, if you would confide in me.”

“I don’t even know who you really are,” said Asherah. “To me, you’re a total stranger. Why should I confide in you?” She looked into his eyes with a piercing look. He was taken aback by her frankness.

“Phoebe told me you were the high priest’s daughter, and I also was once interested in the priesthood,” said Paul. He wasn’t sure if he was making headway with the weeping woman, who was trying to stifle the sobs that were rising periodically from her chest. “My sister also told me that you were running away from a suitor, and I wanted to know what happened. I was compelled to come here and talk with you.”

Asherah did not respond to Paul’s advances. She kept picking the ripe dates and placing them gently in the basket. Paul squatted down beside her and started helping her pick the ripe dates and doing exactly as she was doing. They worked together for several minutes, and then Asherah broke the silence. She had stopped sobbing, and she wiped the last tears from her face with her drier sleeve.

“I’m sorry for being so rude,” she began, “but I have had problems with men and their attraction to me all my life. I can’t help it if I’m beautiful, and they are drawn to that beauty. But deep in my heart I’m just like any other woman.”

“Yes, you are very beautiful,” admitted Paul, “and I can understand how men are attracted to you.” He noticed a change in her fair complexion, as a pink blush flowed across her face.

“You are so kind to say that,” said Asherah, “but I hope you’re not like other men, who simply say that because they want my body.”

Now it was Paul’s turn to blush. He couldn’t admit to her that he was beginning to feel a flow of energy and a surge of blood to his private member. He was slightly embarrassed to realize that such an emotion could sweep through his body so quickly, without even any conscious effort. The thought of Asherah’s femininity made him conscious of how human he was, with the same desires as other men.

“I guess it’s in the nature of men to be attracted to the beauty of a woman’s body,” said Paul, trying to sound philosophical about the issue. “Our creator fashioned us with the desire to procreate, and our natural impulse is to seek a partner who would respond to that natural urge.”

“I know,” said Asherah, “and women have the same natural urge lying dormant until awakened by the male member. “However, I have decided, just like your sister Phoebe, that living a chaste life helps control those natural urges for a higher purpose.”

“Oh, no, not you, too,” said Paul in exasperation. “But why would you give up the natural purpose for which the creator fashioned your female body to be a partner in the creative process and bring new life into the world? What unnatural reason would compel you to denounce the reason for your existence?”

“Just because women have the physical mechanism to produce babies does not mean that we were created only for that purpose,” retorted Asherah. “Our inner being also strives for a higher and deeper union with a higher spiritual self.”

“So you have chosen chastity above motherhood?” asked Paul point-blankly.

“Yes, I have,” said Asherah. “After all my negative experiences with men and their seductive wiles, I no longer wish to be manipulated by their lies and forceful overtures to conquer my body.”

“What happened in your life to bring you to this point?” asked Paul. He was dismayed by the sudden realization that she had rejected him.

“Hold on a minute, and I’ll tell you,” said Asherah, as she pointed to a young man who was heading in their direction with another large date cluster for her to work on. He placed the cut stalk on the mat near her basket without saying a word. He glanced disapprovingly at the male she was consorting with, and then he turned and left to climb up the nearby female date palm tree to cut another date stalk. Paul watched curiously as the young man used a rope made of palm fibers to hoist himself step by step up the female date palm. He had another rope with him, which he used to lower the cut stalk slowly to the ground.

“The story of my life has basically revolved around my father’s work at the temple,” began Asherah. “He would take me with my brother Alexander to the temple with him from an early age, because mother had died and there was no one to look after me. So I would play with several of the other children there. Eventually, I was allowed to study the sacred scrolls, because I showed an interest in learning about religious matters. However, as I grew older and started to mature, the priests and other men at the temple started to look at me with lust in their eyes. My father tried to warn me about that lustful nature that lurked in the hearts and minds of body-centered men. He told me that

when girls reach fertile age, then their bodies change and begin to grow into a luscious fruit that men want to pick and taste for themselves. He told me the story of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden to illustrate his point. However, he always stressed the fact that temptation was something that needed to be resisted and fought against, which he illustrated with the story of Samson and Delilah. He said that Samson got into trouble because he couldn't resist Delilah, and he finally lost his powers and his sight after she seduced him. I got the impression from my father, and from Hebrew scrolls, that they always blamed the woman for being the temptress and seductress, while I always felt that it was the man who was the pursuer and seducer. At least that's how it always turned out all the time for me. I never chased any men. They always chased after me.

"Finally, when one of the older priests at the temple tried to forcefully take me one day, I promised myself that if God would deliver me from his wicked intent, I would follow a chaste life. Mercifully, I came to no harm, and I devoted myself to the chaste life, which my brother Alexander had told me about. He introduced me to the Essenes, and I started to follow their teachings about preserving the sacred seed. However, my father allowed a suitor to court me; my father didn't believe in the Essene teachings. In fact, he insisted that I marry the young priest so that I would put my foolish ideas out of my head and become a fertile woman and produce babies, like a woman was created to do. I was really hurt when he told me that, and he insisted that I become betrothed to the priest, whom I didn't like at all. And so I asked Alexander to help me escape here, especially after I learned that the council might condemn me to a life of servile submission to a man I didn't love, and a life I didn't want."

Asherah paused in her story. The basket was full, and she needed to take the basket to the encampment for processing.

"You can come with me or wait here if you like," said Asherah. "I'll be back in a little while after I empty the basket."

"I'll wait here," said Paul. He wanted to hear the rest of her story, and he didn't want to be seen in public with the high priest's daughter. People might get the wrong idea, he thought.

Paul watched Asherah as she walked gracefully, with one hand balancing the basket of ripe dates on her head. She moved with such care and balance that not a single date dropped from the full basket. After he could no longer see her, Paul strolled over to the springs whose waters fed the deep roots of the date palms. He looked back at the tall palm under which he had his conversation with Asherah. He noticed that it still had some date clusters hanging from the lower leaves; he also noticed that quite a few of the date stalks had been cut off. He realized they had been sitting under a female date palm.

Paul strolled leisurely beside the water. Suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks. There, directly in front of him, was a coiled serpent. The eyes of the serpent hypnotized him, and he couldn't move. He was too frightened to run away, and he felt as if the serpent held him in her power.

He could hear the hiss of the snake, which was sooty black with a yellow-orange stripe on each side.

Paul's mind started going into a tailspin, and he felt as if he were falling into an abyss. The dark hole seemed to swallow him and suck him into the nether regions. The hissing coiled snake stood upright and looked him straight into his eyes. For a split

second he thought he was looking into Asherah's deep eyes, whose penetrating look pierced him to his inner soul.

A flash of an electrical bolt of lightning struck the frontal lobe of his brain, and he thought he was about to succumb to his bodily infirmity and fall to the ground. However, the firm grip of the serpent's mesmerizing power held him upright. He felt a surge of energy flow through his spine, from his pelvic region to his cranium.

The serpent seemed to be transmitting thoughts and images into Paul's brain. The telepathic communication revealed an image of a beautiful woman, whom Paul instantly recognized as Asherah. The flow of energy instantly surged in orgasmic spasms through his generative organs, seeking for release from the intense pressure that had built up in that area. Paul wanted to reach out with his hands and embrace the voluptuous image of Asherah that impinged on his lower brain. He wanted to taste the aroma that exuded from her attractive and sweet-smelling flesh. A sensation of warmth pervaded his entire body as he felt the need for Asherah's body rise in his physical member.

He began to shake uncontrollably, as if a feverish wave was bouncing back and forth in his body. He recoiled at the thought that the reproductive urge had such a fierce hold on his mind. He tried to extricate himself from the seductive image, pushing the red-hot body of Asherah away with his sweaty hands.

The twisting force of the serpentine energy seemed to penetrate through a fine filament in Paul's sacrum region, and he felt the radiating force drawn up like a string through a needle into the central spinal canal at the lumbar region. Paul felt his consciousness spiraling upwards, leaving the world of enthrallment with sensual pleasure in his generative organs, ascending towards regions of the higher mind.

The pulsating flow of spinal fluid seemed to sparkle like a milky white river of snow, radiating in electrical waves through the rivulets of nerves extending from the cerebrospinal system. The wisdom of the circulating serpentine force guided Paul's consciousness through the region of the heart, where a new all-embracing form of love enfolded his soul like the arms of a mother cradling her newborn child. Then he ascended further up the ladder of spinal evolution to the region of the throat, the gateway to the higher centers in the brain.

And then he saw it: a silver-hued pool of liquid with iridescent colors radiating in all directions from a central core. The pool seemed to glow with an ethereal light, and an oceanic hum emanated from it in steady rhythms. The light became a blinding burst of golden energy, and Paul felt his entire brain and body suffused with the radiant light.

He felt as if a transformation had occurred in his mind. A rapturous sensation rose from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. He sensed the embryo of a new man emerge from the pool within the ventricle cavity in his brain. It appeared as if a super-conscious being had been born, a being surrounded with an electrical force that emitted purple sparks within its aura.

Suddenly, a sharp pain struck his coccyx bone, and a firm grip pressed hard on the back of his neck. Paul yelled out for help as he simultaneously opened his eyes. There, in front of him, stood Asherah with one foot on the tail of the snake, and the other foot on the head of the snake.

“Are you all right?” asked Asherah, with a glint in her eyes. “I saw you standing here petrified with fright from the harmless whipsnake, and I ran over here as quickly as I could.” Asherah released the whipsnake, and it scurried into the reeds beside the water.

“Oh, my God!” exclaimed Paul. “Now I know that the resurrection of the dead is real. I had a revelation of myself as a regenerated being with a body of light. It was simply amazing!”

Paul was beside himself with rapture. A joyous expression bathed his face. He wanted to embrace Asherah, to spread the happiness to her. In fact, Asherah intuitively sensed Paul’s desire, and she threw her arms around him as a welcoming gesture. She was welcoming him into the fold of believers in the Way of the Essenes.

“You are a divinely favored man,” said Asherah after she released herself from the prolonged embrace. “You have been shown what others strive for years to accomplish.”

“I wish I could have remained in that state of ecstasy forever,” said Paul, whose eyes looked heavenward.

“I’ve heard of an Essene named Bannus, who prepares initiates for the permanent state of ecstatic regeneration,” said Asherah.

“Where can I find him?” asked Paul with a sense of anticipation.

“You’ll have to ask our elder, Elijahu,” said Asherah. “He knows where the hermit Bannus resides.”