

God in Three Persons: A Spiritual Odyssey

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επιστημων (epistemon), Intuitively Wise

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Jesus said, “It is to those who are worthy
Of my Mysteries that I tell
My Mysteries.”
- - The Gospel of Thomas (62)

Apollos, Sophia, and Simon had a difficult time saying good-bye to Nazar. After seven days of guiding his newfound friends through the ancient land of Anatolia (“land of the rising sun”) and its neighboring islands, Nazar was sad to see them leave. When he hugged them affectionately at the airport, he felt tears welling up in his eyes. Apollos and Simon offered to give him a good gratuity for his gracious services, but Nazar declined the generous present.

“Others have given me physical gifts of temporal value,” Nazar explained, “but you have given me spiritual gifts of eternal value.”

As the Turkish Airlines plane lifted off from the runway and soared into the eastern sky towards India, Apollos turned his thoughts from Nazar back to Apollonius. He was looking forward to a culminating and climactic experience in India—the end of a long pilgrimage in search of the ageless Apollonius. Two prominent thoughts occupied his mind as he contemplated a potential encounter with the object of his devotion: first, the fact of Apollonius’ immortality, which he demonstrated at his defense in the court of the Emperor Domitian when he announced, “For thou shalt not kill me, since I tell thee I am not mortal” (Book 8, Ch. 8); and second, the probability that Apollonius was somewhere in the Himalayas, where he had learned the wisdom of the masters, who taught him “to travel through the heavens” (Book 3, Ch. 51). Apollos was also preoccupied with the possibility that he might never encounter the physical form of Apollonius, for he was familiar with the motto that the sage imparted to his disciple, Damis: “Live unobserved, and if that cannot be, slip unobserved from life” (Book 8, Ch. 28).

Sophia had her eyes closed during the initial stages of the flight to the land of mystery. She projected her vivid thoughts into the future, imagining herself as a bride dressed in a white gown. She replayed the vision she had seen at the sanctuary of Hera (Juno) on the island of Samos over and over in her mind, lingering contemplatively at the

part where she held her newborn baby in her arms. In her mind she visualized the baby smiling at her with bright blue eyes, revealing an inner world of pure innocence. Sophia wasn't sure if the baby was a boy or a girl, and it really didn't matter. To her, the child represented a soul whose Edenic qualities of happiness and goodness overshadowed any consideration of gender or race.

Simon breathed a sigh of relief after the captain's voice welcomed the passengers and informed them of the clear weather ahead on their flight to India. He always felt uncomfortable during lift-off and landing, fearing a certain vulnerability in his physical body and thinking that most incidents and malfunctions with the airplane occurred during those two crucial events. He had never overcome his fear of flying, and it was while he was in an airplane that he prayed the most, repeating continuously the prayer to Mother Mary to "pray for us now and in the hour of our death." However, this time something dawned in his consciousness that seemed to make him reanalyze his focus on a personal mortality—the light of reason illuminated his mind as he tuned in to the instructive words of Apollonius that he had heard in his dream-state: "The soul is immortal, and after the body is wasted away, the soul leaps forward, like a swift horse freed from its earth-bound footprints, and flies into the open air of space." Simon also began to rethink his entire approach to the perplexing mystery of Apollonius.

When the airplane landed at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi, India's capital city and soul of the country, the three pilgrims took a free shuttle to the domestic terminal. There they waited for their flight to Srinagar, Kashmir. Apollos wanted to explore modern-day Delhi, whose name originated from a word meaning threshold or frontier, but there was not enough time between their connecting flights. He had read that the city was made up of seven successive cities, and he was curious to know if traces of the ancient cities were visible anywhere. Perhaps he would have an opportunity to satisfy his curiosity when they would leave the country, he thought to himself.

The beautiful valley of Kashmir—India's jeweled crown—was in full bloom, with spring-blossom fragrances permeating the air, when the three pilgrims landed at the airport near Srinagar, the summer capital of the integrated state of Jammu and Kashmir. Dal Lake—located on the eastern side of the city—was surrounded from north to south by snow-capped mountains. A water taxi took them over the slightly rippling waters of Dal Lake to an accommodating houseboat with plenty of room for the three of them. They quickly learned to utilize the shikaras—long gondola-type boats—to visit the waterfront gardens during the day and the floating vegetable market in the morning. The shikara was also an inexpensive way of exploring the labyrinth of waterways throughout the lake. Best of all, simply relaxing in a gently-swaying houseboat in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility was cause enough to believe that one was living in a paradise on earth.

However, there was an obvious undercurrent of animosity between religious and political factions in the valley. The idyllic location, amidst a tension-packed history of violent confrontations between India and Pakistan for territorial rights to the valley, was trying to regain its reputation as a popular tourist destination. Even though peaceful co-existence during the past several years was the norm, no one could guarantee that another conflict wouldn't bring turbulence to the area once again and undermine all attempts to make the beautiful location an "Eden of Bliss."

Apollos tried to keep the awareness of the previous history of conflict in the area from obstructing his present goal of adapting to the land where the masters lived. He quickly adapted to the staple diet of Kashmiri rice, which was slightly sticky and dense. His favorite daily vegetarian dish was dum-aloo—roasted potatoes in a curd-based gravy. Sophia’s favorite dish was chaman—fried paneer or cottage cheese in a thick sauce. Simon tried a popular local dish, fish and lotus root, and that soon became his favorite.

A week passed, and the splendid scenery and sites of Dal Lake and Srinagar became a thing of the past. Apollos began to rise earlier each morning in order to spend more time meditating, like Apollonius used to do. He greeted the rising sun from the sitting room in the front of the houseboat each morning. He started to send mental signals into the ether, asking for help in locating Apollonius. His intuitive mind kept reassuring him that the trip was not in vain, and Sophia kept repeating the ancient adage to him: “When the chela (student) is ready, the master will appear.”

A fortnight after their arrival in India, a young man with long brown hair appeared at the houseboat. He was wearing a light saffron-colored robe; he appeared to belong to a religious order. The youthful face was smooth and beardless; it seemed as if the face had never been shaved. The young man stood eye to eye with Apollos and announced his mission in a vibrant baritone voice:

“I have come to take you to the Master,” he said with a mysterious look in his brown eyes.

“Did Apollonius send you?” asked Apollos, whose tone of voice displayed an excitement that he couldn’t control.

“You will be told everything in due time,” answered the young man, avoiding a direct response to the question. “We will be traveling light through the forest, so take only a small pack with some extra clothes. Food will be provided, so don’t bother to bring anything to eat.”

“What is your name?” asked Sophia, who noticed a kind look in the man’s eyes.

“You may call me Ananda,” he replied, looking directly into Sophia’s eyes with a captivating smile on his face.

“The Sanskrit word meaning bliss,” said Sophia, who smiled understandingly at Ananda. “And may I add, Ananda was Buddha’s beloved disciple.”

“Your wisdom exceeds your beauty,” said Ananda as he placed his hands together and bowed his head in recognition of Sophia’s spiritual nature. Sophia bowed her head slightly, also, and made the pranam gesture with her hands as a sign of mutual respect.

“Where are you taking us?” asked Simon as he lifted his daypack on his shoulders. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to follow a stranger into the forest, least of all a young man who looked like an ascetic or a yogi.

“You may stay in the safety of the houseboat if you have apprehensions about the journey,” replied Ananda, whose eyes pierced into the depths of Simon’s mind. Simon was stunned by the young man’s perception of his innate fear of the dangers of the forest, and he stood speechless at the threshold as Ananda turned to leave. Simon had thought of abandoning his egomaniac plan of exploiting the story of Apollonius for personal gain and advancement in the hierarchy of the church ever since his encounter with the immortal words of Apollonius on the island of Patmos.

“Are you coming with us or are you staying?” asked Sophia as she followed Ananda and Apollos out the door. Simon felt comfort in knowing that Sophia cared

enough about him to ask, and he felt secure in the thought that she would look after him if anything unexpected happened.

“I just hope I can keep up with you young robust hikers,” said Simon as he followed close behind Sophia.

Ananda led the three pilgrims past the river Jhelum, which flowed through the city of Srinagar, and up into the foothills of the Himalayas. He walked in silence and stopped only at strategic places along the way where hermits or ascetics lived; there the hikers shared whatever food was available and rested for a short period of time. Then Ananda would say, “We must be on our way,” and they would start following him further up the path along the streams flowing from the glaciers. Whenever they were thirsty, they would stop by the stream and drink from the pure glacial waters. Ananda drank only water throughout the journey. At the end of each day, they would stop at a designated site, which Ananda seemed to have arranged ahead of time, and build a warm fire. There was always either a small ashram (hermitage) at the appointed place, or a small clearing beside a stream, where they would sleep.

On the seventh day, as they neared an area in the mountain range known as Dunagiri, Ananda stopped on the trail and pointed to a building, which looked like a castle, on a nearby peak.

“That’s where the Masters live,” stated Ananda matter-of-factly.

Apollos instantly recalled the abode of the Dragons of Wisdom, as the sages were called, and the castle on the hill of the summit that was “about the same height as the Acropolis of Athens” (Book 3, Ch. 13). Sophia noticed a cloud floating around the castle, and the cloud seemed to obscure the castle and the hill from sight immediately after the pilgrims caught a glimpse of it. Simon felt a fear of heights overcome his senses, and he stumbled backwards a few steps.

They ascended the hill on the south side of the ridge on a well-concealed path. When they finally broke through the cloud cover that circled the hill like a protective shield, they saw the splendid castle, which resembled a city on a hill. After they entered the palatial settlement, Ananda left the guests in the care of an attendant while he went to make arrangements for their audience with the Master. They were shown their living quarters for their temporary stay, and they were escorted to warm springs where they were able to bathe themselves. Afterwards, they were given fresh fruit and vegetables to satisfy their hunger.

As they finished eating the delicious repast, they heard a melodic chant fill the air, and they saw a chorus of saffron-robed sages heading toward a circular temple in the center of the settlement. Their attendant told them that they were chanting the Gayatri, an ancient Vedic mantra:

“Om bhoor bhuwah swaha
Tat savitur varenyam
Bhargo devasya dheemahi
Dhiyo yo nah prachodayat.”

The attendant also explained the meaning of the Sanskrit words:

“O Brahma (Life), destroyer of suffering, bestower of bliss,
You are That, bright Sun, worthy One,
Purifying Light, divine and absolute,
Our intellect You guide and enlighten.”

The three pilgrims tried to chant the words along with the chorus as they followed them into the temple, where they sat in a semi-circle around a black copper stool where Ananda was sitting. Ananda was wearing a white linen garment that left his right arm and shoulder bare. He chanted along with the chorus for a prolonged period of time with his eyes closed. Apollos and Sophia also closed their eyes and chanted the sweet-sounding melody over and over until their hearts and minds were totally absorbed in the rhythm of an inner universe, transcending time and space. The movement of the earth underneath them, and the heavens above, seemed to revolve round and round in a circular path and in a repetitive motion similar to the movement of the chanting. All existence and the consciousness of all beings vibrated with the blissful music of the spheres.

When the chanting of the Gayatri finally subsided, and a long sonorous OOOOOOMMMMMMM chant was repeated three times, Apollos and Sophia opened their physical eyes and saw, with newly opened spiritual eyes, a youthful Apollonius as he appeared to Iarchus and the sages of the Himalayas when he came seeking the wisdom of the Masters in India his first time. Ananda was the youthful human form that Apollonius had used to appear incognito to the three pilgrims. Simon, however, was unaware of the darshan (seeing a holy person) that Apollos and Sophia had experienced in their inward eye of awareness; he only saw a young man who looked like a yogi, or maybe a young guru.

“Today we have guests from afar who are searching for Apollonius of Tyana,” began Ananda, looking directly at Apollos and Sophia with a perceptive gaze. “That Greek philosopher came to this same place almost two thousand years ago seeking to learn all the wisdom of the ancient masters. Here he learned to breathe in prana—the etheric substance of which the gods are made—and his mortal nature steadily transformed into an immortal nature by his union with the divine source. When he left this abode of the masters of the east, he went back to the western world and contributed to the salvation of mankind by liberating them from the darkness of ignorance and showing them the light of their true divine nature. His entire life of moral and intellectual excellence was a testament to the truth that Self-knowledge, or knowledge of the hidden wisdom of the divine within the soul, leads to God-realization, or comprehension of the Ultimate Reality. When he completed his mission in the west, he dematerialized his mortal body at Ephesus at the age of 100 and returned as an adept in an immortal body to the Himalayas to continue working for the salvation and liberation of mankind. His teachings of the Pythagorean way were dispersed through various mouthpieces to the world, and they continue to influence the course of mankind’s spiritual evolution in one form or another.

“When Apollonius transcended his mortal body by performing a secret yogic process known as the second birth, he made the conscious choice to relinquish his limited self-identity or ego-personality as Apollonius in order to become a bodhisattva, or embodiment of compassion and wisdom, for the divine purpose of demonstrating the supreme evolutionary plan for each human being.

“In the parable of the rivers and the ocean, which serves as an example of the process of that evolutionary plan, the river that flowed from the east in the Himalayas said, I am named the great Ganges River that descended from the heavens. The river that flowed from the south said, I am named the Nile River, the longest in the world. The river that flowed from the north said, I am the Father of Waters, the Mississippi River.

The river that flowed from the west said, I am the Golden Waterway, the Yangtze River. When the rivers flowed into the one ocean that circles the globe, and is known by various names in different parts of the world, the rivers no longer said, I am this river or I am that river. When the many rivers merge with the one ocean, they merge with the source of their individual life. The metaphor of the rivers and the ocean can be extended to include all living things.

“So Apollonius, who merged with the ageless Source of Life, the boundless ocean of our existence, no longer has a limited identity. Like the god Proteus—the one with many forms or shapes—the immortal soul inhabits many bodies. Apollonius in one age, Balinas in another place, Artephius in another place and time—streams that flow into a river that flows into the ocean of one life.

“All creatures, when they die, merge with the One Supreme Being. They steadily lose awareness of what they once were. From the Source of Life they continue to go through the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, just like the water rises from the ocean in order to descend on land and then return once again to the ocean. You are that river that flows to the ocean. And in the ultimate sense, you also are that boundless ocean when you merge completely in union with the infinite.

“Apollonius, who merged with the boundless and the infinite Self that contains all living creatures—the greater Self that contains all the lesser selves, the One that contains the Many—he stands before you today in the form of the Ageless Youth, the wielder of the sword of wisdom.”

Ananda at that moment stood up and materialized a fiery sword of light that he struck to the earth, and in the next instant he dematerialized his body and disappeared, just like Apollonius had done before the court of the Emperor Domitian in the first century. Apollonius felt an electrical fire descend from the crown of his head to the base of his spine at the same moment that the sword of light appeared in Ananda’s hand. Sophia closed her physical eyes and saw with her mind’s eye the smiling Ageless Youth enthroned in her consciousness. Simon couldn’t believe his eyes—at the same moment that he realized Ananda was the immortal Apollonius in another form he also felt a transformation of his own consciousness. He no longer wanted to exploit the story of Apollonius for personal gain; in fact, he knew that no one would believe him if he tried to tell the story. He would give the manuscript and tapes back to Apollonius and let him tell the story from his scholarly perspective.

Four days later, when the moon in May was waxing into its fullness, Ananda reappeared in the presence of the three pilgrims.

“You must fast and meditate for three days,” instructed Ananda. “Drink only water. On the third day, when the hour approaches the exact moment of the full moon in the constellation of Scorpio and the sun is in Taurus, I will return to take you to the sacred Wesak festival. We will travel very light. Your attendant will provide you with saffron robes for the event.”

Before Simon could ask how many days they would be traveling this time, and how far it was to the event, Ananda disappeared. Apollonius wasn’t sure if Ananda had appeared to them in the flesh or in an astral form. Sophia knew that to an ascended master like Apollonius, there was only a difference of vibration between the light particles of the physical form and the spiritual form.

Apollos couldn't help but think of Ananda's admonition to drink only water. He recalled the conversation Apollonius had with Phraotes, the moderate wine-drinking king of Taxila: "Those who drink water, as I do, see things as they really are, and they do not record in fancy things that are not; they are wide awake and thoroughly rational; and they go to bed with a clear, pure soul in order that they may drink oracular visions in a state of complete transparency. You may consider me also as a fit vehicle of the god, O king, along with all who drink water." (Book 2, Ch. 36-37)

Simon was curious to know more about the unfamiliar Wesak festival, and he discovered that it was a celebration of the three momentous days of the Buddha's last earthly life—his birth, his enlightenment, and his departure from the physical body. Apollos inquired a little further into the subject and found out that initiates and adepts from all over the world traveled in their astral bodies to the Wesak Valley to join the pilgrims arriving there by foot. Sophia intuited that the energy at the festival would be so enormous that the celestial creative force in the atmosphere would generate a transformation of consciousness within each participant.

On the day of the full moon, the three pilgrims were given saffron-colored robes to wear. They sat in meditation, awaiting the arrival of Ananda. At the appointed hour, Ananda appeared and told them to rise to their feet. He had them close their eyes. Ananda placed his index finger, which was covered with consecrated oil, on the center of Apollos' forehead for several seconds. Apollos felt his pineal gland vibrating, and a warm sensation spread across the entire crown of his head. When Ananda placed the oil-drenched finger on Sophia's forehead, an instantaneous golden glow surrounded her head, and she felt a stream of etheric energy rise with the light of seven fiery rays from the back of her neck in the medulla oblongata region to the crown chakra above her head. Simon felt the chrism touch his forehead, and he felt the oil drip down his nose, bringing tears of joy to his eyes.

The next moment, the three pilgrims felt themselves lose gravitation, becoming extremely light and seeming to float above the earth. In an instant, like a twinkling of an eye, Ananda had transported them through the air to the Wesak Valley, on the northern side of the Himalayas near the mystical Mt. Kailash. A multitude of pilgrims, initiates and adepts had already gathered from the four corners of the earth in the oblong-shaped valley, forming an expansive circle around a huge block of grayish-white stone. A loud chant resounded repeatedly throughout the two-kilometer-long valley:

"OM MANI PADME HUM" (Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus)

The mantra spoke of the soul's destiny to become an embodiment of the OM (Word, Logos) by opening the jewel of the third eye (Mani) and blossoming forth as the lotus of the awakened mind (Padme) and becoming the wisdom of enlightenment (Hum).

Suddenly, at the exact moment of the full moon, which hovered over the valley like a giant eye in the sky, a speck of light appeared in the eastern sky. The speck of light turned into a four-armed cross of white light as it came closer, beaming its rays to the four directions of earth. The participants stood erect and spread their arms to the sides in imitation of the grand design in the heavens. When the light transformed itself into a five-pointed star, the participants closed their eyes and concentrated on the white star that was unveiled in the blue center of their golden-rimmed third eye. When the light beamed within the participants' consciousness—up and down the seven centers with the seven colors of the rainbow—the avatar of the age appeared in the white center of the

concentric circles of the rainbow. The participants bowed their heads and made the pranam gesture with their hands folded together next to their hearts.

Apollos wasn't sure if what he was seeing was an external event in the material world or an internal event in his inner consciousness. The inner and the outer worlds seemed to have merged in his mind. Within the center of the enormous rainbow-colored aura, he saw the Buddha sitting cross-legged in a saffron robe on an opened pink lotus flower with his right hand extended in blessing. A stream of energy seemed to flow from the mind of the Buddha directly below to the surface of the altar-like rock, where two circles of light formed a mandorla. Within the almond-shaped center of the overlapping circles appeared a Christ-like figure dressed in a white robe. Apollos simultaneously felt the light of wisdom in his head merge with the warmth of love in his heart, revealing the hidden divinity of his immortal soul within the inner sanctuary of his human body.

Sophia saw the Lord of Wisdom and Compassion all around her, within each participant and in all the natural surroundings. The blessings which streamed from the mind of the outer and the inner Buddha engulfed every aspect of her being. The entire transcendent form of the avatar (the manifestation of deity) radiated the four noble truths and the eightfold path as a message for the ages: (1) there is suffering in the world; (2) the cause of suffering is desire; (3) suffering can be ended by removing desire; (4) the eightfold path eliminates desire—right view, thought, speech, behavior, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. With her mind Sophia understood the message of the teachings of the Buddha; with her heart she felt the compassion of the Buddha to bring all sentient beings out of the depths of suffering into the heights of bliss.

Simon's mind focused on the mandorla of light that formed on the solid rock. It seemed to represent to him the interaction between two seemingly separate worlds: east and west, light and dark, feminine and masculine, heaven and earth, yin and yang, and numerous other interactive opposites. He had seen the ancient symbolic design before in the geometrical form of the vesica piscis with the fish shape in the center, representing the union of the Son of Man and the Son of God in the person of Christ. Now, he saw the figure of Krishna in one circle, and the figure of Christ in the other circle. The figure of Krishna appeared to him to metamorphose into an awe-inspiring vision of the successive stages of creation, preservation, and dissolution of the universe, which repeated in endless cycles as part of a universal drama. The figure of Christ appeared to him as a benevolent shepherd, friend, and savior. And then the two figures seemed to merge into one dynamic Pantocrator, ruler of the universe, displaying both benign and destructive aspects, forming both light and darkness, bringing both good and evil, and creating both peace and war as part of the creative process of a universe operating under the cosmic law of cause and effect.

As the three pilgrims received the inner illumination that was dispersed by the three avatars—Buddha, Krishna, and Christ—they felt rose petals fall on their heads and a wet shower of blessing sprinkle their faces. The rose petals opened their minds to the enlightenment sent from above, and the water that flowed into their mouths gave them the water of life that energized their cerebrospinal systems, the inner tree of life. Apollos thought that he was partaking of the sacraments of a new age, the age of the water-carrier Aquarius. Sophia became aware of the inner temple being regenerated by the wisdom of the enthroned higher Self. Simon realized that his mind had been transformed by the experience, as if he had been baptized or initiated into a new millennium.

The mantra OM sounded forth like a trumpet blast seven times from the adepts, who turned around and faced the initiates and the pilgrims. The adepts led the multitude in a new song for a new age, sending forth the vibrations of the creative word (Aum, Om, Amen) to produce the seven virtues (planetary attributes) that are highlighted in the new spiritual body:

“OM. Blessing and Glory and Wisdom,
and Thanksgiving and Honor,
and Power and Might,
to our God for ever and ever.
OM. AUM. AMEN. AMIN.”

Apollos, Sophia, and Simon sang the song over and over until the vision of the Buddha and the Christ faded from the sky and the valley. One final message was relayed by thought-transference to the multitude by the Great Ones: “In the new age to come, each person will enter the kingdom of his inner temple to receive wisdom and enlightenment from the inner master.”

When the message ended and the participants in the grand event contemplated the meaning of the message for each one of them, the adepts lifted their hands in blessing towards the multitude. It was at that moment that Apollos recognized the face of one of the adepts—it was Maestro Salvatore D’Aura. Even from a distance, Apollos could see that D’Aura was looking at him and sending him a personal blessing. He heard his voice in his mind saying, “Didn’t I tell you that you would have invisible friends with you on your journey? And didn’t I tell you that I would be with you in spirit, to serve you in whichever way possible? Don’t ever doubt the presence of those who serve humanity. You, too, are serving humanity by following the guidance of your inner master, the still small voice within.”

Apollos opened his eyes and looked around him. He was standing with Sophia and Simon back in the houseboat in Srinagar. They still had their saffron robes on, but Ananda/Apollonius was gone. He was nowhere in sight. Beside the open door they saw their daypacks, which were filled with the clothes they had taken on their journey into the Himalayas.

“Was it just a dream?” asked Simon, who knew his journey with Apollos and Sophia had come to an end. He had already resolved in his mind to return to Rome as soon as possible and continue his work as a servant of the church he was raised in.

“It was much more than a dream,” responded Apollos, who felt more alive and aware than ever before. He wanted to stay in India as long as possible in order to learn all the wisdom of the masters who resided in her sacred land.

“It was a revelation of the hidden mysteries that are the crown on the head of the seeker of truth and wisdom,” stated Sophia in a culminating note.

“Amen!” sang Apollos and Simon in unison.

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Joshua and Isaac sat together at the table to celebrate the Pesach (Passover). The sun had gone down on the 7th day of April, and Isaac had lit two festival candles in the center of the table. He said a prayer to the Creator of the great fire that dispersed the darkness and brought warm radiance and bright light to the world, and then he raised a cup of wine in order to sanctify the sacred occasion. Joshua drank his cup of the fruit of the vine along with Isaac. He felt a sense of communion with a momentous historical event and a profound reenactment of the soul's journey.

When Isaac washed his hands with water, Joshua was seeing the descent of the soul from the bright light of the astral world into the waters of the womb. In performing the ritual of dipping a piece of green parsley into salt water, Isaac spoke of the rebirth of the land in springtime, and Joshua was thinking of the rebirth of the soul into the hardships of physical life. As Isaac took the symbolical matzah (unleavened bread) from a separate plate and broke it into two pieces, calling it the food of slavery ("the bread of affliction") and freedom, Joshua pictured the bread of life that nourished both the body and the soul. Joshua looked at the six symbolical foods on his Seder (order) plate and thought of the story of oppression and slavery represented in the bitter herbs and horseradish, and then he thought of the great sacrifice represented by the shank bone and the roasted hard-boiled egg, which signified the deliverance from bondage and the birth into a new life.

"Do you know the epic story of our Hebrew people?" asked Isaac, breaking up Joshua's reflection on the symbolical foods.

"Yes, I've read the story of the Exodus in the Bible," answered Joshua.

"That's the next part of our Pesach Seder," said Isaac. "Would you like to tell the story as you know it?"

"I would be honored," responded Joshua. "The way I understand the great epic of the Hebrews is that it, like other epic journeys, describes not only the story of an enslaved nation that leaves the land of bondage and journeys to a land of freedom, but it also simultaneously depicts the great pilgrimage of the spirit through matter and the soul in the physical body. Didn't you tell me that your Zohar, the Book of Splendor, encourages the seeker of truth to penetrate beyond the outer garment of the simple stories of the scriptures?"

"Yes, I remember telling you that every story has an inner garment of truth that can only be seen when the outer garment of literal historical facts is discarded," admitted Isaac.

"And so it is with the physical body, which is the outer garment of the inner soul," continued Joshua. "The physical body must be transcended in order to see the soul. So if we look at the story of the Israelites leaving the land of Canaan and coming to Egypt as the descent of the soul from the heavenly world into the physical world, then we can follow the rest of the story in Egypt and the journey through the wilderness as the human condition in the flesh. And the subsequent Exodus, or release from the human condition, is not consummated until the soul returns in its ascent back to the Promised Land. The first part of the epic journey explains the manner in which certain conditions caused the Israelites, or the manifold soul, to fall into physical slavery; the middle part of the journey describes the struggle and the suffering encountered throughout the life of the soul as it tries to overcome limitations and difficulties, which are represented by the plagues that are inflicted on the Egyptians (the physical body); and the last part of the

journey shows the redemption that comes to the soul when it discovers the inner redeemer, the initiate Moses, who leads the soul from the darkness of Egypt or bondage in the body to the light of Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey. On the upward path back to the source from where it originally came, the soul is given the great Law (Torah) that serves as a guiding principle for its ascent up the fifteen steps to the inner temple, the true House of God. Once the soul achieves this grand pilgrimage through life, it passes over into the land of Canaan (land of Spirit) where the soul at long last experiences freedom from all bodily concerns. The spiritual soul must sacrifice or transcend the physical body in order to be liberated or achieve redemption. That's the way I see the allegorical story of Exodus, the great pilgrimage of the soul from bondage to freedom."

When Joshua finished telling the story, Isaac recited a blessing, raised the second cup of wine, and said, "The fruit of the vine. With it, let us drink to peace, freedom, and to Life! L'Chayim!" They both swallowed the red liquid and felt it flowing through their bodies, through their veins, and through all humanity, signifying that the same red blood courses through each living person from the same stream of Life.

Isaac continued with the prescribed fifteen-step Seder (order) of the celebration: the washing of hands before partaking of the matzah, symbol of bondage and freedom, and the eating of bitter herbs to recall the time of bitter slavery. When Isaac finally arrived at the ritual where the door was opened for the hopeful arrival of Elijah, the forerunner of the arrival of the Messiah, Joshua cried out, "My Father, my Father, the Chariot of Israel and its horsemen!" His spine was on fire, as if a spiraling pillar of fire ascended from the base of his spine to the crown of his head.

"What are you experiencing?" asked Isaac, who noticed Joshua's eyes roll upward, as if he were looking into the spiritual eye in the center of his head.

"My kundalini is rising in my spinal cord and I feel like I'm on fire," replied Joshua, whose gaze continued to turn inward.

"The Shekinah, the union of the soul with the spirit in the most Holy Place," acclaimed Isaac, whose face beamed with joy at the sight of what he was witnessing.

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Joshua as a beam of light filled his mind. Within the light he recognized a familiar face.

"Yes, Yeshua, that is your true nature," cooed the soft dove-like voice of Binah as Joshua was entranced by the beatific vision.

"Isaac!" called out Joshua as he was overwhelmed by the feeling of euphoria and bliss. "The Messiah dwells in each one of us. It is through us that he brings the kingdom of heaven on earth. It is through our minds that his wisdom flows, and it is through our hearts that his love is manifested. When we seek to bring peace and justice to the world we live in, it is the Messiah-nature that operates in us. When we help our fellow man, it is the hand of the Messiah reaching out to offer help."

Isaac broke out in song at the jubilation he felt in his heart:

"Bless the Lord, oh my soul.

The Lord is my strength and song,
and is become my salvation.

I shall not die, but live,
and declare the works of the Lord."

Joshua joined Isaac in the singing of the joyful song. They sang it over and over until tears of joy were flowing down both of their faces. Isaac embraced Joshua and said, "Our Pesach Seder has been accepted, and we are truly blessed."

Isaac concluded the evening with the proclamation, "Next year may we be in Jerusalem rebuilt!"

"Next year may we be in the New Jerusalem with a spiritual body as our temple!" added Joshua.

The following week, Joshua went to the Old City early in the morning by himself. He knew that his pilgrimage in the Holy Land was soon coming to an end, and he would have to return home. He wanted to walk down the Via Dolorosa (the Way of Sorrow) in the solitude of his own mind. There was heaviness in his heart as he followed the path that the Essene Teacher of Righteousness epitomized in his life.

Each step that Joshua took along the way that the Essene Master traveled was like a grand procession of the Ancient Mysteries. Joshua realized that everything in the life of the Master was done in a mystery that only the participant in the mysteries could comprehend. Each step was a stage of the path that the soul of Everyman (everyone) had to travel on in order to accomplish the grand design of the cosmos. From the first step on the path when Joshua sensed the need for self-knowledge, to the second step when he took up his own cross of the burdens of physical existence, he realized that there was a long road ahead that required self-discipline, dedication, and perseverance. He saw himself fall many times as he struggled with his physical, emotional, and mental natures. He began to understand that life was an ocean of suffering that needed to be crossed on the ship of soul-awareness. He became aware of the Divine Mother, the compassionate principle of nature, who commiserated with the suffering pilgrim and offered encouragement each step of the way. She brought help to the aspiring initiate in the form of fellow travelers who would help the pilgrim carry his personal burden and perform acts of kindness and love. Joshua, as the initiate, became cognizant of masculine and feminine forces, the sons and daughters of man, cooperating with the soul's quest for wholeness and union with the divine. When he finally arrived at the place of the great renunciation, he knew that he would need to divest himself of the three garments of the physical, emotional, and lower mental bodies in order to be clothed in the royal spiritual body. Joshua saw himself make the final decision to crucify the horizontal feminine nature and the vertical masculine nature on the cross of finite matter in exchange for infinite repose in the deathless androgynous body. As soon as he felt himself liberated from the body, the cross of material awareness, Joshua knew that death had been overcome. In one climactic final act, Joshua saw his physical body placed in the tomb of matter, where the physical elements were dissolved, and the spirit rose in the deathless body. The fifteen-step drama of the Way of Sorrow culminated in the Way of Attainment. The Son of Man (the physical self) had become the Son of God (the spiritual Self).

Three weeks later, on the full moon of May, Joshua ascended with Isaac to the top of the Mount of Olives. From an area near the Seven Arches Hotel, they looked down at the Temple Mount and the Old City of Jerusalem.

"So today is your last day in the Holy Land," sighed Isaac, holding back a tear that was forming in his eye.

“You’ve been a great teacher and a great friend,” said Joshua, showing his gratitude for the rabbi’s generous hospitality. “And you’ve been like a father to me.”

“And you’ve been like a son to me,” said Isaac. “Hopefully, you’ll be back sometime in the future. My door will always be open for you.”

“Like the saying goes, next year in Jerusalem,” chuckled Joshua with an infectious laughter that caused Isaac to join in the merriment.

“And may those golden gates be open so the Messiah can appear on Mount Moriah, the Temple Mount,” said Isaac, expressing a deep-felt desire that was his inherent way of thinking about the future.

“This entire Holy Land is Mount Moriah,” said Joshua, expressing his way of looking at the world. “In fact, all the bickering and fighting over physical holy sites would end if everyone realized that the true Mount Moriah, and the Temple Mount, exists in the heart and mind of man. It’s the spiritual essence that matters, doesn’t it?”

“You’re right, my friend,” replied Isaac. “Nevertheless, the heart and mind of physical man wants a physical temple to worship at.”

“And a physical Messiah to appear as a deliverer and king of a physical kingdom,” remarked Joshua, who smiled at Isaac with an understanding heart.

“It is very difficult for the human being to sacrifice his physical consciousness on the altar of selflessness,” commented Isaac, reflecting on his own life.

“I know what you mean,” said Joshua, sympathizing with the old rabbi who was set in his ways.

They sat on the ground in silence for several minutes, reflecting on their life in relationship to the Old City in front of them. Joshua felt like a pilgrim just passing through, while Isaac thought of himself as an old patriarch who had lived there forever.

Isaac suddenly rose to his feet. “I’ll be back in a moment,” he said hurriedly. “I want to visit the Tomb of the Prophets and then pay my respects to my ancestors at the nearby Jewish cemetery.” Isaac picked up a stone to place on the grave of a cherished ancestor; the stone would be a sign that the ancestor is still remembered and is dear to someone’s heart.

As soon as Isaac left, Binah’s still small voice sounded in Joshua’s mind: “It’s time for you to make your final journey on your way home.” Joshua closed his eyes and waited for the inner vision to unfold. Within minutes he felt a cloud envelop him and carry him through the opened golden gate of the Old City. He was dressed in a white robe, and he was walking with several followers to the Essene Quarters of the city. “The Essene Master,” he heard Binah’s voice through his elevated consciousness. He heard the Essene Master speaking of a Heavenly Father, who brings sunshine and light from above, and an Earthly Mother, who provides food and nourishment from below.

“There are creative forces that operate in the earth and in our bodies,” taught the Essene. “They are the intelligent agents of creation, bringing us air in our lungs, water in our blood vessels, and fire in our nervous system. When we give homage to the Earth Mother, we commune with the forces of life in our physical being. When you breathe, you should think of the higher atmospheric energies that enliven you. When you drink water or the fruit of the vine, you should contemplate the circulation of water in the earth as being the same as the circulation of fluids in your body. When you stand in the sunshine in your morning communions, remember that the solar deity is the fire of life in all living beings, including the plants and trees. Live in harmony with all the energies

flowing in you and around you, and you will have joy in your life, and you will appreciate the beauty in all life. And when you stand with your bare feet on the green ground of Earth Mother, let her generative and regenerative forces enter into your organs; feel her sap flowing through your being like the sap of a tree flows to give energy to its limbs and leaves.”

Joshua followed the life of the Essene Master to Mount Carmel, where he continued to teach: “Remember that you and your Heavenly Father are one. You are a reflection of his peace and tranquility, like the light of the moon reflected on a calm lake. You have in your being the stars of the heavens empowering your nervous system and connecting you with the higher worlds. In your heart dwells the ocean of love that flows from the center of the universe and connects the hearts of all living beings. In your mind dwells the wisdom and creative intelligence that flows from the Universal Mind. In your soul dwells the Eternal One that joins the separate parts of your being into a cohesive wholeness, like a wise king that rules the cities of his kingdom.”

Joshua continued to follow the Essene Master to India, where he was called Issa (Lord of all things) and Yuz Asaf (the divine Healer). There he taught the yogic science of union with the divine: “It has been said that there are two trees within man: the Tree of Knowledge, through which man gains self-knowledge, and the Tree of Life, through which man gains immortal life. However, in reality there is one tree within man, whose roots reach into the earth and whose branches reach into the heavens: the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life in man unites his soul with Brahma, the Lord of the creative consciousness, and his body with Prakriti, or Mother Nature. The soul and the body of man continually unite to perform the great dance of the universe, with Brahma and his consort Prakriti leading the dance. When you become one in your inner kingdom—joining soul and body, the above and the below, the male and the female—and you no longer differentiate between the two opposing forces of the same reality, then you become Ishvara, the Lord of your inner universe.”

Joshua watched with his divine eye of inner consciousness as the vision expanded in his mind, and he felt at one with the Essene Master. He saw himself materialize in two bodies, one which was known as Judas Thomas (the twin), and the other as Issa-Masih (Lord Messiah). The form of Judas Thomas was identical in appearance to the form of Issa, and so they were called brothers of one another. Issa called Thomas his twin, referring to him as “one who knows his higher Self.” Issa told Thomas the hidden mystery of his existence in three mystical letters: I, A, O (I AM Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end). Thomas was called a sorcerer and a wizard by some people because he was accused of manufacturing an astral double of himself.

Finally, he felt himself transcend the physical body, which was laid in a tomb, and he saw the astral and physical bodies dissolved back into the elements. Later, when people would visit the tomb in Srinagar’s Kanyar district and would enter the building called Rozabal (Tomb of the Prophet), they would find only an empty tomb. A rumor was spread that some disciples stole the body and took it to Mesopotamia, but others insisted that it was only the Twin, Thomas the Knower, who was interred in the sepulcher.

Suddenly, Joshua became aware of Binah’s hand on the crown of his head. She spoke softly to him: “Yeshua, you will now see your final vision as the multiform Lord.” The sky seemed to open up at the crown of his head, and he saw his own transcendent

nature: Adam Kadmon, the archetypal Universal Man; Enoch, the heavenly scribe; Melchizedek, the high priest; Joseph, the dreamer and ruler of Egypt; Joshua, the conqueror; Jeshua, the rebuilder of the temple; Yahoshua, the initiate; Issa, the Essene Master; and many others. “You are one with Ishvara, the Lord of the universe, and the Christ, the creative intelligence in all life,” explained Binah.

Joshua all of a sudden saw himself standing in a circle wearing a white robe. All around him circled a multitude of people, dancing the dance of the world mystery, imitating the circular path of the constellations within the zodiac. Joshua felt in harmony with the rhythm of the revolving universe. He felt like he was Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer at the center of the universe, and he was leading the dance with the accompaniment of a cosmic chant that caused the manifestation of all worlds:

“OM, hear the first creative sound,
AMEN, the Word that was, is, and always will be,
OM, the redemption from bondage,
AMEN, the release from death to life,
OM, the light that pierces the heart,
AMEN, the birth of a new man,
OM, the absorption of all living substance,
AMEN, the creation of the visible from the invisible,
OM, the thought from the Universal Mind,
AMEN, the immersion in the waters of Oneness,
OM, the harmony of all vibrations.”

Joshua moved around in the circle dance with all the participants, and he felt himself enter a consciousness wherein he knew that he was part of the entire cosmic movement through time and space. He saw himself adorned in a robe of pure light, and he felt at-one with all places, temples, and people. He saw an inner light illuminate his being, and the light reflected its rays of warmth and love into the hearts of all who danced the dance of life.

As Joshua danced, he looked at the multitude of faces that danced with him. One particular face caught his attention—the face of his father, who was looking at Joshua with a beaming smile on his face. Something jolted in Joshua’s mind and jarred his memory, and he remembered driving in a car with his father.

“What happened, Dad?” Joshua mentally transmitted the words to his father.

“You will be told everything when you return home,” said Joshua’s father mentally. Joshua heard the words in his mind, and at the same time he felt a strange sensation of bodily awareness returning to him, something he hadn’t felt in a long time. “Your mother is calling you. It’s not time for you to leave this world, yet.” Those were the last words he heard his father transmit mentally to him as he became aware that the vision of the dance was fading from his consciousness.

“Joshua,” he heard a voice calling him. He opened his eyes, expecting to see the angelic face of Binah greet him. Instead, it was his earthly mother, who was holding his hand.

“Mother,” whispered Joshua, who barely managed to say the words through his dry throat.

“Son, you’re back!” cried Joshua’s mother. She gave him some water to drink.

“What happened, Mom?” asked Joshua after he drank the water and cleared his throat, enabling him to speak.

“You were in a car accident with your father,” answered his mother. “Your dad was killed, and you were left in a coma.”

“How long have I been gone?” asked Joshua, who was beginning to notice his surroundings in a hospital room.

“You’ve been gone a whole year,” answered his mother, who was wiping the tears from her eyes with a napkin.

“Three hundred and sixty-five days?” asked Joshua incredulously. He thought of his encounter with Enoch, who lived the exact same number of years.

“Yes,” answered his mother. “Where have you been all this time?”

“That’s a long story,” replied Joshua with a smile on his face. “It’ll take me a whole year to tell you all about it.”

“We have all the time in the world,” said Joshua’s mother. She leaned over and gave Joshua a big kiss on the forehead.

“I saw Dad,” said Joshua, reflecting on the last image that he saw before he awakened from his long dream.

“Where?” asked Joshua’s mother.

“In a valley, somewhere in or near India, where there was a multitude of people dancing the Dance of Life,” replied Joshua, who wanted to close his eyes and return to the Edenic valley.

“I’m so happy that you’re finally back home,” said Joshua’s mother, giving him a warm embrace.

“I’m glad to be back home, too,” responded Joshua. He hugged his mother and felt the warmth of her love. He closed his eyes momentarily, and he saw the angelic face of Binah appear on the screen of his mind. Her loving smile told him that both the physical mother and the spiritual mother were part of his life and would watch over him at all times.

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Paul and his nephew Theodas sat side by side on top of the Mount of Olives. They looked from their Olympian heights down on the turmoil brewing in their beloved city, Jerusalem. The city was convulsing in the throes of civil war. An ominous dark cloud had descended on the inhabitants of the city, creating a madness that threatened to tear the city apart. Paul had recently returned from a voyage to Greece as an emissary to the emperor, appealing for immediate assistance in saving Jerusalem. Now he waited to see if the efforts of the pro-Roman party would produce the desired results – to drive the liberty-loving rebels out of the city and bring life back to a semblance of normalcy.

“How did our country and our people manage to arrive at such a terrible impasse?” asked Theodas, breaking the profound silence in which their minds were absorbed.

“We’ve come a long way in the struggle for religious freedom and national independence,” answered Paul, looking thoughtfully into the heart of the matter as his eyes stared at the city below. “There were times when I sided with the zealots, who have been fighting for over sixty years to achieve independence from the stifling grip of the Roman taskmasters and occupiers of our country; and there have been times when I sided with the pro-Roman authorities in order to maintain the status quo and be a loyal subject of the empire. Our country and our people are fighting the same eternal battle that the soul fights with the body: will the soul be in bondage to the flesh, or will it be liberated from that bondage and soar like a bird to the heights of freedom?”

“I don’t think I want to live in a country where fear and terror reign, and the battles of life and death never cease,” asserted Theodas, who had learned to think and talk in multiple layers of meaning, like his uncle. He knew that his uncle loved to give a spiritual perspective to physical manifestations, and he had been trained to think that every action stemmed from a thought, which was derived from a higher source. He remembered the first time his uncle – who was his personal tutor throughout the formative years of his life while growing up in the peaceful environment of Tarsus in Cilicia – showed him a crystal ball. He recalled his uncle telling him to peer into the mirror-like crystal and asking, ‘What do you see?’ At first he saw only a reflection of his own face, but with practice and concentration he began to see a projection of his innermost thoughts. Then he was taught to close his eyes and trace the images, which his thoughts projected, back to their source. His uncle called the inner crystal ball a mystic bowl into which the thinker peered to see reflections of the inner Lord or spiritual Self. He could always tell when his uncle was turning his gaze from the outward world and turning it inward into his mystic bowl, as he was doing at the present moment.

“You and your mother will have to decide what you want to do and where you want to go,” announced Paul after a minute of reflecting on the present situation. “I already know what I have to do.” Paul knew that the master-disciple relationship had to come to an end on the physical level. He had been the wise master-builder that had laid the foundation of knowledge for his pupil, who had voluntarily decided to become a disciple and develop an awareness of the hidden wisdom that Paul had learned from his master, Bannus. Paul knew that the guru-disciple relationship would continue on a spiritual level; nevertheless, he felt a tinge of sorrow at the thought of parting from his nephew and his beloved devotee and disciple.

“Here comes mother,” said Theodas with a sense of anticipation. They watched as the blue-robed figure crossed the brook at the bottom of the hill and started to ascend towards them. “What are you going to do?” asked Theodas, recalling the thought that stood out in his mind.

“Remember when you and your mother decided to come back to Jerusalem with me nearly ten years ago?” asked Paul, bringing into focus a sequence of events that jeopardized all of their lives.

“How can I ever forget?” stated Theodas. “After all, if I hadn’t uncovered the plot to kill you, you would have had the knives of forty sicarii in you.” Theodas shuddered each time he thought of what the assassins, the extremist zealots, had in mind for his uncle and master.

“I remember the day I came up to this mount – the day people thought I would lead a charge into the city – like it was yesterday,” continued Paul. He evaded the

question that Theodas posed about his future plans. “I had left you and your mother in the Essene quarter, and I had come up to this mount to spend the night in meditation. All night I wrestled with my conscience, like Jacob wrestling with the angel. The past tormented me – my dual life, sometimes Saul the Roman agent, and sometimes Paul the God-fearing zealot, kept revolving in my mind like an unstoppable wheel of fate. Ten years previously, I had tried to rectify the wrong that I had done to James, the Nazarene leader, by accepting a mission to bring food to Jerusalem during the great famine in the time of the procurator Tiberius Alexander. That mission ended in disaster – no sooner had I arrived in Jerusalem with Joses, the brother of James, and extended the hand of fellowship to James, when word got around that the apostate was back in the city, and a mob gathered and demanded my head; ‘this man should not be allowed to live,’ they cried. When the Roman authorities arrived to break up the mob uproar, they took me in for questioning. They wanted to get to the bottom of the uprising before it turned into a full-scale insurrection. I made the God-awful blunder of telling the Roman commanders about the incident with James at the temple steps, and how the brother of James warned me to leave the city. When the Roman commander reported the mob uproar to the governor, Tiberius Alexander, he demanded to speak to me immediately. I was taken to him in Caesarea, where he told me that the only way he could protect me and ensure my safety was for me to divulge the names of the zealots who were responsible for the mob tumult. I honestly didn’t know if any one person was responsible, I told the governor. He asked me if I knew Jacob and Simeon, the brothers of James. I told him that I had met them, and that Simeon had relayed the message from James to leave the city. The governor said that he had his spies from the temple watching those zealot brothers, sons of Judas of Galilee, and they were suspected of masterminding raids on villages and revolts in cities. The next thing I knew, the governor decided to show the zealots that he wouldn’t tolerate their insurrections against the Roman government, and he had the seditious Jacob and Simeon crucified as an example of what would happen to any of the zealots who threatened the stability of the Roman Empire. I felt as if I were personally responsible for their deaths. I left the city, and I didn’t ever want to come back.”

Paul paused in his personal recollection. A solitary tear flowed down his cheek. He looked down at the city that had caused him so much sorrow.

“Uncle Paul, you started telling the story of the time the people thought you were going to lead the charge into the city from this mount,” reminded Theodas, who was well aware of his uncle’s idiosyncrasy of going off on a tangent in his discourse.

“I’m sorry I digressed,” apologized Paul, wiping the tear from his face with the palm of his hand. “When I wrestled with my inner angel, I became so exhausted that I fell into a trance, and I saw Hermes. It was the same Mercurius, the messenger of the gods, who appeared to me at the holy mount in the wilderness and revealed to me the ten archetypal forms of existence on an emerald tablet: Light, Duality, the Sacred Three that bring forth the sacred elements of fire, water, air, and earth; everything happens in the archetypal Man, who is the microcosm that reflects the macrocosm; within man is the sacred candelabrum of seven centers of light that light up the eightfold path that spirals along the spinal column, generating a Tree of Light. The heavenly vision reappeared in my mind once again, and the sacred word vibrated in my consciousness, so that when I came down from the mount and began to speak about my vision to the pilgrims who were streaming toward the city to commemorate the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot, or seven weeks

after Passover), they thought they saw a light around me and that I was an angel. Some pilgrims from Alexandria said that I spoke like Thoth, who personified the wisdom of the Egyptians; others said that I spoke with the authority of Moses. Thoth-Moses-Mercurius-Hermes, they all seemed to represent the wisdom that resided in me and overshadowed my mind as I spoke. I told them that I had been to the holy mount, and they all compelled me to lead them to that mount, prodding me with their hands toward the top of the Mount of Olives. I told them that the walls of the city would fall down at the command of the Lord from heaven, signifying the manner of defeat that the physical body would undergo when the spiritual man took control of the body. They thought I was going to produce a miracle and deliver them from the Romans and lead them to the promised land of liberation and independence. Word quickly spread that an Egyptian prophet had foretold the destruction of the city walls, and pilgrims flocked to the Mount of Olives to witness the event. There must have been at least 30,000 people that had been diverted from celebrating the harvest festival and commemorating the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Instead, here they were, on top of the Mount of Olives, expecting me to be a messianic deliverer, at once delivering them from Roman rule and leading them to the land of milk and honey, freedom and independence. It didn't take long for the Roman authorities to become informed of the unusual convocation on the mount, and the procurator Felix sent Roman soldiers against the assembled mob. Many innocent people died that day at the hands of the Roman soldiers, but most of them ran down the mount and dispersed in all directions and concealed themselves. I ran into the city and managed to make it to the Essene quarter without detection."

Phoebe arrived at the top of the mount just as Paul finished telling his story. She stopped in front of them to catch her breath, and then she blurted out, "What story are you telling my son this time?"

"Uncle just finished telling me the story of the Egyptian at the pilgrimage festival Shavuot," answered Theodas in Paul's place.

"Did he tell you that he cowered in our temporary dwelling in the Essene quarter for several weeks before he felt it was safe to come out of hiding?" asked Phoebe, putting her brother in an uncomfortable position. Phoebe found a soft grassy spot and sat down next to her son.

"No, he didn't," responded Theodas. "I was waiting for him to get to the part where I saved him from the sicarii conspirators."

"You're skipping the aftermath of that Egyptian story, where the chief captain recognized me as the Egyptian on the Mount of Olives," interjected Paul.

"I remember you had to submit yourself to a seven-day purification rite before James the Nazarene would admit you back into their community and into the temple," said Phoebe, recollecting the days after their return to Jerusalem. At the time, she was not in favor of leaving Antioch, where they had settled down in the Jewish sector of the cosmopolitan city. Phoebe had initially traveled to Antioch with Theodas when Paul traveled through there on his way to Jerusalem on his famine relief mission. She decided to stay in Antioch with her son, her pride and joy. He wanted to study Greek, which was the primary language of the city, and Antioch was the perfect place to be for a young man who wanted to immerse himself in the Hellenistic culture. For Phoebe, the scenic beauty of the valley with surrounding mountain ranges, especially the majestic snow-capped Mount Silpios to the south, and the meandering Orontes River that flowed through the

city to the sea, made it all worthwhile to stay. The third largest city in the Roman Empire was aptly called the “Queen of the East” by the Romans. Phoebe, on the other hand, preferred the title bestowed on the city by the Greeks – “Crown of the East.”

“Much good it did me,” said Paul in a sorrowful voice of dejection. “Even after I proved to James and his community of followers that I was a law-abiding Jew, the people who knew me from the past spread rumors that I was still teaching people to forsake Moses and the Law. I had tried that strategy, which Elijahu suggested, as a method of preserving the religion of the Jews in its pure state and as a means of separating the Zealots from them. However, I saw that James and his Nazarene movement, which was not as militant a movement as the Zealots, nevertheless sided with the Zealots in their anti-Roman position. There was to be no compromise with the Romans, I remember James saying. So James, who believed that I would always side with the Herodians and the Romans because of my family’s connection to them, did not defend me when the Zealots attacked me in the temple and dragged me out with the intention of killing me outside the sacred refuge. Lucky for me, the watchers from the towers of the nearby Antonia fortress saw the mob riot, and the chief captain and his soldiers quickly arrived to save me from certain death. That’s when the chief captain recognized me, just as he was about to take me into the fortress for questioning. He asked me, ‘Aren’t you that Egyptian who caused such an uproar not too long ago with four thousand zealots?’ That was the first time I had heard that zealots were in the crowd of pilgrims. When I thought about it later on, I realized it was the zealots who spurred on the maddening crowd and turned them, as they usually do, into a tumultuous mob. I told the chief captain, whose name was Claudius of Lycia, that I was a Jew and that I wanted to speak to the people, which I did in Hebrew to convince the chief captain that I was not the Egyptian.”

“I remember, I heard that speech, like all the other speeches you’ve made,” chimed in Phoebe. “That’s when you told the listeners about the trance that you experienced just before you pushed James the Nazarene down the temple steps. That wasn’t too smart of you. Some of those people in the audience remembered that you nearly killed James, and they cried out that you shouldn’t be allowed to live because of what you had done.”

“You’re right, I shouldn’t have tried to explain what happened, for it seemed as if I was trying to justify my actions,” acknowledged Paul. “As it turned out, Ananus, the high priest, condemned James four years later and had him thrown down from a parapet, beaten by a club, and stoned to death. It seemed as if the sons of Judas of Galilee, who had a messianic claim to the throne of David, were being eliminated one by one.”

“Uncle Paul,” impatiently interposed Theodas. “You skipped completely over the conspiracy to kill you.”

“Go ahead, son, you tell the story,” intervened Phoebe, who wanted to give her son a chance to develop his story-telling skills. Paul looked at his nephew with a glance of approval.

“The way I remember it,” began Theodas, who was glad to have a chance to relate the momentous event in his life, “you were held in custody in the fortress, where the chief captain found out that you were previously a Roman agent, and a Herodian. He couldn’t do anything to you except to try and find out why the mob wanted you dead. By submitting you to face Ananias the high priest, the chief captain discovered that there was a religious feud between the pro-Roman group and the pro-Zealot group. He did not

uncover the real cause for the high priest's anger against you, which was that you had left the pro-Roman party and no longer sought out seditious zealots; instead, you had sided with the Zealots in their fight for independence. The Zealots, on the other hand, felt betrayed by you because you wanted them to leave their Jewish ways, laws, and customs, and you wanted them to follow a strange new way. They did not understand that Elijahu had proposed the plan, and you had embellished it in your own way, in order to save the Jewish religion from being overrun by the Zealot's militant philosophy. You were basically caught between a rock and a hard place, and both parties wanted to see you terminated. That's why, the following morning, when I saw a band of suspicious-looking Roman sympathizers head out from the market in the upper city to the palace of Ananias, the high priest, I decided to follow them. I sneaked into the palace behind the group of forty conspirators. I heard the sicarii, knife-carrying bandits, vow to kill you the next day, and the high priest agreed to help their murderous plan succeed. That's when I discovered that the pro-Roman group would do anything in their power to maintain their positions of authority. And since you were a threat to their authority, you needed to be eliminated. So I came to the fortress and told you about the nefarious plot to kill you, and you told me to inform the chief captain, who took immediate action and had Roman soldiers escort you by night out of Jerusalem. After that, we didn't see you for two whole years. We only knew, from the word of the chief captain, that you were taken to the praetorium in Caesarea for your own protection, probably because you were a Roman citizen, and a relative of the Herodian family."

"Well done, son," applauded Phoebe when she saw that her son had finished relating the story of the conspiracy to kill her brother. "You were a brave young man to risk your life for your uncle."

"Yes, my dear nephew," concurred Paul. "Your mother gives credit where credit is due. Your heroic efforts saved my life once, but this time I go to Jerusalem knowing that I cannot avert my fate any longer."

"Is that your decision, to stay in Jerusalem in the midst of a civil war?" sobbed Theodas, who suddenly realized that he wouldn't see his dear uncle, and beloved master, anymore.

"Brother, what is the meaning of this announcement?" questioned Phoebe. "I thought you asked us to come up to this mount to discuss our plans to leave the city and determine where we should seek refuge from the tide of imminent war with the Romans."

"Way back when I was confined to the Praetorium, the military headquarters of the imperial forces," explained Paul in his usual digressive manner, "I did a lot of thinking about my purpose in life. When I was brought to trial before the procurator Felix in Caesarea, I was accused of being a ringleader of the seditious Zealot branch of the Nazarene movement. That greedy Felix thought I would pay him a large bribe to obtain my freedom. I wasn't about to pay for my soul's freedom, and I let him know that his love of money was the root of his evil ways. So he left me in confinement. I had to wait two more years before a new procurator came to Caesarea. Festus, the new governor, was no better. He thought I was mad. So I appealed to the representative of Caesar in the provinces of our part of the world – King Herod Agrippa II. When he found out I was a former Roman agent and had brought many Zealots who rebelled against the Roman Empire to justice, he struck a deal with me. He had me promise, for

my freedom, that I would be his emissary to Caesar, if and when he needed me, to appeal to Caesar for help in saving Jerusalem and our country.”

“So that’s how you managed to get released,” said Theodas in amazement.

“Festus was partly right, though,” inserted Phoebe what she considered to be her personal observation, “for you were never the same afterwards. A year or so after you came back, you started going around the city like a prophet of doom, crying, ‘Woe to Jerusalem.’ You told me you were having nightmares – you called them visions – of the destruction of the temple and the city. You looked so terrible, and your beard and hair were so long that nobody recognized you. They thought you were a prophet of the coming of the Messiah when you foretold that a star would come out of Jacob, and a scepter would rise out of our land.”

“And sure enough, a Messiah did come to Jerusalem, about six months ago,” added Theodas. “Everybody thought he was the anointed king. He even entered the temple in a royal robe.”

“That was a false messiah,” asserted Paul angrily. “He was Menahem, the youngest son of Judas of Galilee, who thought, like the other sons of Judas, that he was the rightful heir to the throne of David.”

“That was a short-lived reign,” recalled Phoebe. “He thought he could be high priest and king at the same time, so he killed the high priest and assumed complete authority. The captain of the temple revolted against the despotic messiah and killed him, yelling as he stabbed the unwanted messiah, ‘We will have no master but the Lord!’ And so another hope for liberation and independence was wiped out.”

“That was a time of great upheaval, the beginning of the end,” sighed Paul. “Some people thought the great war for liberation had begun. I, on the other hand, knew that desperate times called for desperate measures, and I went to King Agrippa and asked for assistance against the revolutionaries that had invaded our city. When I returned to Jerusalem, I found out that Agrippa’s cavalymen, which he had sent to suppress the uprising, had suffered defeat. Even Cestius Gallus – who was commanded to descend from his headquarters in Antioch, Syria, which was 300 miles from Jerusalem, a two weeks journey – couldn’t subdue the rebellion in the city. After the defeat of the Roman forces, commanded by the inept commander Cestius, the rebels in the city became even bolder in their insurrection. The pro-Roman party turned to me in desperation and begged me to appeal to King Herod Agrippa II for help from Caesar. Agrippa told me he had pleaded with the militant people of Jerusalem to reconsider what they were doing, starting with the tribute they refused to pay, and their suspension of the daily sacrifices for the Roman emperor. Agrippa had given up reasoning with the stubborn, rebellious people. However, he reminded me of the promise I had made to act as his emissary to Caesar, and that the time had arrived for me to travel to Caesar and appeal for help in saving Jerusalem and our country. As it turned out, Emperor Nero was in Greece attending the special Olympics that were held in his honor, and he wasn’t at all pleased to hear bad news in the middle of his athletic contests and drama spectacles, in which he participated. The Greeks were ingenious in awarding him hundreds of prizes, for which they were rewarded with freedom from Roman taxation. When I told Nero all about the Roman defeats in Judea, he turned to his trusted general Vespasian, who had fallen asleep during the emperor’s singing recital, and assigned him the task of bringing Roman law and order to the lawless inhabitants of Judea.”

“So now our entire country awaits the arrival of the Roman savior, Vespasian, who will subdue the rebellion and restore the land to peace and tranquility,” acclaimed Theodas with a voice of expectant victory. He was brought up by his mother and uncle in the Essene tradition of loving peace more than war.

“Or he might be the destroyer, who ravages our villages, our people, and our way of life and belief,” envisioned Phoebe in a somber mood.

“So we come to the decisive moment, my dear sister, and my beloved nephew,” said Paul, sounding a plaintive note of finality. “We have come to a parting of the Way: You must both continue to fight the great battle of life and persevere to the end; I have completed my mission in this life, and I must descend to Jerusalem to face my final judgment. Throughout my life, I’ve learned to accept death on a daily basis; I’ve faced the ‘little death’ initiation by crucifying the flesh and the material world. Now I am ready for initiation into the mystery of the final release of the soul from the body. For me, being imprisoned in a mortal body and partaking of the calamities and miseries of the flesh no longer holds any appeal. I seek to be crowned with the immortal body. I know I will emerge from this mortal life and rise in my immortal body – a resurrection from what I am into what I am going to become.”

“And where are we supposed to go without you?” cried Theodas, voicing a concern that Phoebe shared with her distraught son.

“I’ve thought a lot about your future,” revealed Paul, “and I saw you following in my footsteps and becoming a master of the hidden wisdom, and passing it on to other disciples. The best place to further your development in that direction would be in Alexandria, which is a safe haven for our people. It is also the greatest center of learning in the Roman Empire, and I know you would thrive there. I believe your mother would support you in your decision to seek a peaceful and edifying life there.”

“So you’ve already made the decision for both of us,” contested Phoebe, who was torn between her brother’s wish and what she thought was best for her son.

“Mother, I think Uncle Paul wants what is beneficent for both of us,” affirmed Theodas. “Besides, I’ve always wanted to visit the great library in Alexandria and encounter the great thinkers of the world.” His eyes beamed with an inner light and joy that melted his mother’s heart and determined their future.

“We’ll go to Alexandria, if that is your desire,” said Phoebe, resigning herself to a life with her son. She wouldn’t want it any other way.

The three members of the close-knit family descended the Mount of Olives and entered the east gate together for the last time. Phoebe and Theodas left the Essene quarters later that morning with other refugees who were leaving the divided city and dispersing to other places, other lands; Phoebe and Theodas each carried a bundle of necessary belongings on their backs. Phoebe’s bundle contained a hand-written scroll that her brother had asked her to keep in her possession; the scroll contained his writings, which he had worked on throughout his life, starting in Tarsus while in exile, and ending in Caesarea while in confinement.

Years later, when Theodas was writing his memoirs, he had a special section devoted to his master-teacher, his uncle, about whom he wrote the following memorable testimonial:

“Yesterday I had a visitor from the land of Judea. He said he was the last surviving member of the royal family of Herodians to which my uncle belonged. His name was Costobarus, and he told me that before he escaped from the murderous anti-Roman rebels in Jerusalem, his brother, my uncle Paul, told him to inform me and my mother of the tragic fate that awaited him. Costobarus said that when Vespasian arrived and began destroying all of Galilee, the stronghold of the rebels since the time of Judas of Galilee, people started fleeing south to the walled city of Jerusalem for safety. That caused chaos in the city, and the civil war escalated to unbearable heights, with daily atrocities perpetrated by all the factions, pro-war and pro-peace, that fought each other. In the winter, as Vespasian was launching his attack on Jerusalem, the remaining royalists were being systematically executed by the militant zealots, who wanted to ensure complete loyalty to the anti-Roman cause in the remaining inhabitants. According to Costobarus, my uncle was executed with a Roman sword; the person who beheaded him was Judas Barjudas, the last remaining son of Judas of Galilee. According to witnesses, Judas said that he was avenging the blood of his brothers, for he blamed my uncle for their deaths. Costobarus reported that slain corpses were cast outside the city walls into the valley of Gehenna without proper burial. That was all he had to report. He considered himself fortunate to have escaped before they could capture and execute him. He said he was sorry to be the messenger of bad news, but he wanted to fulfill his brother's last wish.

“My uncle will continue to live in my heart and mind. There isn't a day that I don't think of him and his life's mission, which I'm determined to carry on for him. My mother showed me the scroll of his writings that she preserved for him. I copied the contents for my personal perusal and study. Someday my master's writing will be shared with the world, but for the present I will continue to incorporate his three basic principles into my own life and into my writings: (1) Redemption for the soul begins with crucifixion – the world of self, the flesh, and the material body must be crucified; the lower, animal body, must perish. (2) Regeneration of the body and mind is an ongoing process that involves a daily renewal of the mind from material things to spiritual things. (3) Resurrection of the dead is a mystical experience where the soul rises from the lower mind to a union with the higher mind, the spiritual higher Self.

“There was a vision that my uncle once told me about, which I will never forget. The vision was about a young scribe named Lucanus, whom he had met in Antioch and to whom he had told his life story. In the vision, my uncle saw the scribe writing a story of a young Hebrew man named Saul, who came to Jerusalem. The story sounded familiar at first, but when the scribe began to write of Saul's journeys throughout the Roman world, my uncle tried to stop the scribe, saying, 'That wasn't me.' My uncle said he saw the face of a Greek philosopher as the famed teacher of the Roman world. When the scribe wrote about Saul making a sea voyage and being in a shipwreck, my uncle tried to stop the scribe, saying, 'That wasn't me.' Instead, a face of a Jewish historian on his way to Rome appeared on the scroll. Then the vision

moved on to another scribe writing about Saul, now named Paul, becoming a martyr and being beheaded in Rome, and my uncle tried to stop that scribe, also, saying, 'My beheading occurred when I was crucified to the world, when my master initiated me into the mystery of death and the resurrection of the dead; I had to slay my mortal mind in order to perceive the immortal mind.' The vision finally ended with the official Church making him into a saint, and my uncle wagged his finger in disapproval at the priestly authorities, saying, 'I was just a man, whom some considered to be a pestilent fellow and a mover of sedition among the Jews, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. Some even considered me to be an Apostate.'

"My uncle, whose disciple I remain to this day, once told me that during his lifetime on earth he felt privileged to have been the recipient of many revelations. One revelation, which he claimed to have received from Hermes, involved the mystery of his own life, which spanned the ages. Hermes told him that the story of his life, as told by others, would be like a great tree with two trunks: One trunk grew tall and spread its branches into a world where a Hebrew man named Saul of Tarsus would grow up and spread a new message about crucifying the old natural man and resurrecting the new spiritual man; the other trunk also grew tall and spread its branches, but its branches tapped into the sap flowing from the deep roots of the ancient mysteries, which were spread throughout the ancient world by the Greek philosopher, Apollonius of Tyana. To an outside observer, the double-trunked tree seemed to be two different trees growing side by side; however, to an inside observer, who became one with the roots, the branches, and the sap of the tree, it was One Tree of the Hidden Wisdom of the Mysteries of Life.

"In conclusion, I would be remiss in my memoirs if I failed to mention a secret that I believe my uncle entrusted to me alone. It concerns the overarching theme of his mind, his writings, and his great work on earth – the resurrection of the dead. My uncle told me of his out-of-the-body experience, where he went into the future and saw his lifetime during the time of a future Messiah named Bar Kochba, 'the Star,' who was prophesied to come: 'Behold a Star will come.' My dear uncle firmly believed that when he left this life, he would return during the time of the future Messiah. He affirmed that he would be born again and be called Elisha ben Abuyah."

