

A Christmas Trilogy – 2016-2017

Christmas Morning, Holy Name Day, Candlemas

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**Christmas, 2016**

### **The Rabbi of Bethlehem**

The moonlight coming through the lattice windows of the synagogue highlighted the steely black hairs of the youth walking down the aisle between the benches. He didn't need much more than that to guide him to the chair next to the bema where the rabbi always sat.

"Rabbi? Rabbi? It is late, you should come home."

He waited for an answer, but there was nothing.

"Rabbi? Rabbi! It is late, you should be at home in bed."

More often than not, when his mother sent him to the synagogue, he would find his father still asleep in his chair next to the bema. Sometimes, the Torah Chest would still be open and a scroll would be unrolled on his lap.

Still nothing.

"Rabbi! Abba! Come home!"

The man of some middle age in the chair stirred, taking in a breath which became sharp as his bones began to protest their near slumber on the cold stone.

"Abba." That was the word that aroused him. Father, or in the case of the speaker, Daddy.

"Asher, my son. I was praying."

"Father, you were snoring!"

"What? A man cannot snore while he prays?"

"What were you praying father?"

“I was praying a Psalm, a song of our ancestor King David. You remember that we are the descendants of the great King David.”

Asher smiled, though no one saw in the moonlit silence of the synagogue.

“Yes, Rabbi, you have told us many times that all of us in this village are descendants of King David ... in one way or another.”

“No, son. But we really are his descendants, by the blood of our mothers and fathers.”

“Yes, Rabbi. Will you come home to bed now? My mother ...”

“No, I am still praying.”

“You mean you are still worrying. You think too much, Abba.”

The Rabbi paused for a moment, pondering of his next question. But before it formed it caught in his throat, and choked him with a dozen other possible questions.

Is thinking not praying? Do I think too much? Worrying is a sin, but can I not turn a worry into a prayer and redeem it?

Waiting for a question that was still forming, the son asked, “Father, what were you praying? Were you worrying about, praying about the Romans?”

“No, my son. The Romans do not worry me. What can they do to us that the Seleucids or the Greeks or the Babylonians or the Assyrians or even we ourselves haven’t already done to us? I was thinking about the Psalm, where our ancestor David looks into heaven and says:

‘The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’

“I was praying that God would tell me why there are two Lord’s and not the one Lord we have always believed in and served.

“I have never asked that question before.”

There was a moment, and then the Rabbi's son tugged at his tunic and asked gently, "Abba, can I walk with you back to the house?"

"No! I am not finished praying. I can find my way home in the dark and I will do so when I am finished."

He turned and walked back up the aisle and out of the door to their home.

Their home. Since his older brother had moved his family into the house – along with their few sheep and a goodly number of chickens and a couple of roosters – there wasn't much peace and quiet in the place.

No wonder his father preferred to "pray" overnight in the synagogue next door.

The son made his way around the scurrying chickens to the mattress he slept on in the corner of their quarters and quickly fell asleep.

But the rabbi, having been disturbed from his prayers, was now wide awake.

And the question that had led him peacefully to, well, begin to snore, now had his full attention.

'The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'

Who is this other Lord? Why does David think there are two Lords?

He stirred, again, in his seat.

Stone benches are comfortable only if you are mentally and physically exhausted, and he was now neither.

Standing up – perhaps straighter and taller than in some time – he began to pace the floor in front of the bema and Torah chest.

*Shema, Israel: Adonai elohenu, Adonai echad.*

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God, the Lord is One.*

David is the King, so he has no other Lord but God. So who is this other Lord that is speaking to the Lord?

Is God so great that God can speak and hear as if two different persons?  
And if that is so, how many persons can God be, and still be One?

About the umpteenth time the question formed in his mind, he looked up at the window to the north and saw a great light, unlike any that he had seen.

He made no decision to exit the synagogue and go search for the light, he just did so.

It was not a long walk to the inn that was just below the great conclave of ovens for which Bethlehem was famous.

Bethlehem: city of bread.

At this hour, close to midnight, the oven tenders were stacking wood and setting it ablaze so that the bakers could paddle their loaves into and out of the heat and take them fresh to Jerusalem, just five miles away, to be bought in the morning markets.

But the light was not coming from the wood of the ovens, but from something near the cave that served as the stable for the inn.

As he skirted the ovens to his left, he noticed an odd assemblage of people also drawn to that light. A few of them were Roman soldiers, there to enforce the newly announced census and tax. A few of them were townspeople, awakened by the light and curious to see what its source was – and a few of these were young girls, giggling because they were out and about well after their curfew. Many of them smelled like shepherds. In a dark corner near the stable, the Rabbi spied the young boy he had encountered several times, an orphan, who always carried a pair of sticks with him, with which he banged out outrageously complex rhythmic patterns.

He started down the hill to where the light seemed brightest, and suddenly stopped, a chill running down his spine.

“Rabbi Gamaliel,” a voice spoke so closely in his ear that it startled him, “Fear not.

“I will show you the answer to the question you have been asking.”

Gamaliel. It had been a long time since anyone had called him by his name. “Rabbi,” was how most people addressed him, even his wife and children most of the time. “Abba,” when things seemed to need more urgent attention.

But the stranger was right. His name was Gamaliel.

“Good sir, what question is that?”

“Gamaliel, you asked many times tonight, ‘why two Lords?’

“Tonight, I will show you.”

The Rabbi stood, frozen in place, as the stranger began to walk toward the light.

He turned and said, “Come, I will show you.”

Gamaliel asked, “Who are you?” and as he heard the answer the Rabbi felt the breath sucked out of his lungs.

“God has named me Gabriel. I am his messenger.”

The Rabbi knew – and sometimes preached -- about archangels, but never in his wildest dreams did he think he would meet one, speak to one, be spoken to by one.

And yet, here he was.

As these thoughts, as this realization ricocheted through his mind, suddenly the Rabbi felt as if he were soaring in space, flying like the very angels he was told not to fear.

Gabriel said to him, “Behold!”

He looked down to see that stable in the cave behind the inn at the bottom of the hill. And as if by magic, he could see through the roof of the cave and into the space below.

There was a young woman, a newborn child that she was binding in swaddling cloths, and an older man who, exhausted by whatever ordeal

had brought them to that place, was collapsed in the hay near the animals' manger.

Just as suddenly, Gamaliel and the archangel Gabriel were standing at the doorway to the synagogue in Bethlehem.

The Rabbi asked, "What did I see?"

The archangel said, "The answer to your question."

"I do not understand."

"You will. Fear not. "

[To be Continued.]

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New Year's Day 2017

## The Rabbi of Bethlehem – Part II

The rabbi of the synagogue of Bethlehem did not remember walking home the evening the archangel Gabriel spoke with him. He slept restlessly and shortly after daybreak he returned to the inn near the town's bread baking ovens.

By this hour the ovens were cooling, and the bread that had been baked in them overnight was probably already in baskets in the market square near the Temple in Jerusalem.

There didn't seem to be much evidence that a crowd had gathered near the stable cave behind the inn, though he did catch the distinctive smell that confirmed his suspicion of the night before that shepherds and some of their sheep had been there.

As the sun rose higher in the sky it appeared to be just an ordinary day in the life of a small village, regardless of whatever had happened the night before.

Gamaliel returned to his synagogue and sat on his stone bench, setting the scroll with the psalms on his lap, unrolled to reveal Psalm 110.

People came and went, always offering a cordial greeting. Some came with questions about keeping the Law of Moses; others came with contracts to be reviewed before signing. A few came asking for help of one kind or another.

To all the rabbi seemed lost in thought, even distracted – though no one would have said so to him or anyone else out loud.

“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

He read it again for what must have been the hundredth time in the last three days.

Who is this person that David calls “my Lord” that God commands to stand?

Who can be David’s Lord but God alone?

He thought, “I have pondered and prayed and God favored me with a visit from the Archangel who said he would show me the answer.

“But instead of explaining the text, he led me to that stable to see a newborn child, as if that vision was the answer to my questions.

“I still do not understand.”

That night and the next the rabbi studied the psalm and prayed long into the night.

On Wednesday of that week a man walked into the synagogue and stood silently before the rabbi until he was acknowledged.

“I am Joseph, son of Jacob son of Matthan. My new wife has blessed me with a son, and the law says he should be circumcised. Will you do this for us?”

“How is that possible? You have been married only a matter of weeks now, from what I hear. How can this son be a blessing for you? Is it not a shame that your wife was pregnant before you were married?”

“Rabbi, my wife and her family live in Nazareth, and this marriage was arranged over some distance. I was surprised and angry to find out that

she was pregnant, and made up my mind to return the dowry and forget the whole matter.

“But rabbi, one night I had a dream, the most vivid dream I have ever had. A man spoke to me, saying he was God’s angel and was to deliver a message from God to me. He said that Mary was pregnant through the power of God’s spirit and not by some shameful act. God told me to marry her and to protect her and the child and to raise him as if he was my own flesh and blood.

“Rabbi, it is hard to explain, but in the dream it made so much sense that I willingly and happily agreed.

“And so here I am, asking you to circumcise my son.”

The rabbi had made up his mind to send Joseph away in disgrace until he heard of the dream and the angel.

As he did, questions raced through his mind. Could this have been the same angel that took him to the stable? What is God trying to tell us?

Shaking his head briefly as if to clear his mind, the rabbi asked, “When was he born?”

“Early Sunday morning, just past midnight.”

“The law says a newborn son should be circumcised on the eighth day, so we should do so on Sunday morning.”

There was a pause as the rabbi wondered. “Joseph, was your son born at home.”

Joseph hesitated before he answered. “Rabbi, my story is most unusual and I am embarrassed to tell it. I wanted to make Mary’s journey to her new home as comfortable as possible, so I rented a donkey from the innkeeper, on the opposite side of the village from my home.

“The trip was difficult for her, and as we returned the donkey to the stable, she screamed out that the baby was coming. One of the girls, the innkeeper’s daughter, rushed through the building to see if there was any

place Mary could lie down. But the inn was full and there wasn't any time to waken and move people. So my son was born right there in the stable."

The rabbi's jaw opened, but no words came out. It was the vision he had seen just a few nights ago, shown to him by the archangel.

"I will show you the answer to your questions," was what the archangel said.

The rabbi remembered the dramatic feeling of floating in the air looking down at the cave and through it to see the mother and the stable girls wrapping the baby in swaddling bands, the father — exhausted — lying face down in the hay. It was Joseph, he now understood, that he saw there, with his new wife and their new baby.

"And this is the answer to my questions?" he wondered to himself. "This man? His wife who he says she has not shamed him, which he explains away with a dream? And this infant boy? How are these the answers to my questions?"

Long minutes passed before Joseph ventured to speak again.

"Rabbi, what should I do?"

Another minute.

"Joseph. Joseph, I would normally send you away to deal with your own shame, or at least the shame that Mary has brought upon you. But your story, well ... why, I almost feel as if I was there myself.

"Joseph, I trust that your story has truth in it — though I do not think I understand all of it. I will circumcise your son on Sunday.

"What name have you given him? Jacob after your father? Matthan after your grandfather? Perhaps one of our illustrious ancestors from the line of King David?"

"Rabbi, in the dream I was told to name him Jesus."

The rabbi could not resist the smile that broke over his face. Every father, every mother wanted their son to be Yahushua, "the savior." He had circumcised many third or fourth sons with that name. But it was

unusual for a firstborn to be named so. Why not a family name, which was the custom?

“Joseph, bring your son on Sunday at the sixth hour. We have prayers at the third hour and I know that many will stay for questions and for business, but they should mostly be done by then.

“Thank you, rabbi.”

At the appointed hour, Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the synagogue for the ritual bris. A young man with just a few hairs on his chin stood next to the rabbi, his young student. His ashen face and hands fumbling with the scroll betrayed his inexperience, and in fact it was the first circumcision he was to witness.

Joseph looked around and saw a few women in a corner, with needles and thread stitching a design on a new cover for a Torah scroll.

Opposite, he saw three well dressed and officious looking men, heads covered with the same shawl as the rabbi, only much more ornate. On each of their shawls was embroidered the canon, the marsh cane, that symbolized their office as members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council of priests and rabbis.

Joseph whispered to the rabbi, “They seem to be waiting for you. Do you want us to wait?”

“No. This is what is most important today, to welcome your son into the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Whatever they want, it is not as important as this. They can wait.”

And so the rabbi began the prayers and performed the ritual. He had done so many that the rabbi could close his eyes and actually prayed while he chanted.

When the chant was over, he picked up the sharpened flint stone — the rabbi did not like the new steel knives that others used — and was finished in just seconds.

There was less blood than Joseph expected, but more than the young student expected, and he turned visibly pale.

He sang the second chant, as the baby Jesus was anointed with the balm that would stop the bleeding and wrapped up again — not for the last time — in the swaddling bands that felt like a mother’s close hug.

Joseph led Mary and Jesus out from the synagogue, pausing at the alms basin to put in just a couple of copper pennies. The rabbi raised his hand in a gesture of blessing as they left.

He then closed his eyes for a long moment before turning to greet his guests.

Why would three members of the council be here in his humble sanctuary?

“Rabbi Gamaliel.” His name again, which he heard so infrequently.

“Rabbi, we come at the request of Hillel, the president of the Sanhedrin.”

“Oh, have I done something wrong? Have I spoken something offensive? Please tell me, so that I may make amends.”

“No, rabbi, you have not. And we three have seen today why you are held in such high esteem. For though we bear the insignia of the council, you took pains to serve your village first before turning to us.

“No, rabbi, it is because of your faithfulness that Hillel would speak with you, about filling a seat on the council.”

“But why me, the rabbi of such a small and humble village? And I have hardly the age to be considered an elder. Surely there are others who are more worthy of such a promotion?”

“Gamaliel, Hillel was quite clear that we were to come here to Bethlehem and ask you. He told us that you have spent much time pondering a question that he himself is vexed with.”

“And what question is that?”

“At the request of Hillel, we have all been wondering about the psalm where King David says,

'The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'

"Yesterday, he asked the three of us to travel here and invite you to come speak with him, because he believes you may understand this puzzle."

"My teachers, it is true that I have been up late many nights thinking about this very thing. But how could the president have known? And how could he possibly know, uh, about this, could, uh ..."

The speaker blushed. "Apparently, Gamaliel, the great Hillel had a dream in which a messenger spoke your name and directed him to find you. So here we are."

Silence.

"What do you want me to do?"

"The council has offered you this" — and he handed Gamaliel a small purse of coins — "to help bring your affairs here to an end and requests that you be present at the Temple to take your oath of office in a month. Your student is very young but promising, and we will provide for him and supervise his training. There is a house waiting for you and your family in Jerusalem."

The rabbi suddenly became aware that he was staring at the dirt floor of his synagogue, his head nodding up and down in assent to everything he was told.

There was another long silence, long enough for the rabbi's lips to break into a smile. "I have not heard so much silence in a long time," he thought to himself.

Taking a deep breath and standing up straight, the rabbi said, "May God's will be done. I will go."

He took the purse to his wife and instructed her to prepare for the move. He summoned his sons and explained, to the best of his ability, what was going to happen. His older son wanted to stay, near to his wife's family, and the purse would pay for a small house for them. His younger

son, the one so often sent to the synagogue to beg him to come home, would go with them to Jerusalem.

All of this decided in just a few exchanges, the rabbi then went to the back of the house and fell asleep and slept soundly through the afternoon and all night long.

He dreamed.

He dreamed of angels surrounding him and watching him and protecting him.

He awoke, and for days shook his head from side to side as if to dislodge the experience of that Christmas morning, and the circumcision of that child eight days later, and his call to Jerusalem. Many times he wished to wake up and discover that that was the dream. Many times he wondered how this dream would end.

That is the end of this story, but there is a coda, a footnote.

30 days later, the rabbi Gamaliel packed a few belongings on the back of a donkey and set out for Jerusalem, his wife and son to follow with the rest of his belongings a few days later.

In a linen pouch at the top of his rucksack was his most prized possession: the collection of hooks given to him by his grandfather for which to fish. He so hoped to have time to go, once in a while, to the Jordan or even to the sea of Galilee and fish.

It was that he was dreaming about when, just beyond the gate, he saw a couple, themselves headed in the same direction, bearing a small burden.

In just a minute the rabbi caught up with them. And then recognized them.

Joseph said, "Rabbi, we have all heard the good news. You are to become a member of the council. How wonderful that Bethlehem is recognized in your honor."

Gamaliel asked, "Has the time passed so quickly? Are you going to the Temple to present your son there?"

“Yes, rabbi. On Thursday it will be 40 days already.”

“Well, then, let us walk together. Or perhaps Mary would like to ride on the donkey?”

She shot her husband a sharp look. “Thank you, no. I have had my fill of traveling by donkey and do not wish to do so again.”

Joseph looked at his rabbi and found sympathetic eyes.

As if they were twins, together they shrugged.

### The Rabbi of Jerusalem – Part 3

The rabbi walked with Mary and Joseph the six miles or so between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. It was the first day of February, and the next day their son Jesus would be 40 days old. As a firstborn son, the law required that he be presented and dedicated to God at the Temple, and then be bought back or redeemed by his family for the price of two turtledoves.

Gamaliel himself had made this very trip twice, once for each of his sons, and said a blessing for his daughter and her husband as they journeyed with their firstborn son to make the same offering.

The road was a good road, wide and well worn, thanks to the dozens of donkeys and carts that traveled back and forth every day delivering fresh bread to the city's several markets.

The rabbi knew that he could make the trip in about two hours, but he chose to walk more slowly with father, mother and infant son, and so they were on the road closer to three hours.

At times they talked about village life and who was related to whom and whether Herod's outrage at the refusal of the magi to return to him with news of this new king they were seeking would inspire some violent retaliation against them or against the people of Judea. At other times they walked together in silence, each wondering what God was doing in this complicated and confusing world.

As the city walls came into view, the rabbi asked whether Joseph and Mary and their son were going to stay in Jerusalem and if so where.

Mary replied that her cousin Elizabeth was in the city with her husband, Zechariah, who was a temple priest, and that they would be staying overnight with them.

The rabbi nodded. "Then we are all going to the Lion's Gate at the foot of the Temple mount. My new apartment is near to there, next to the Hall of Hewn stones, where the Sanhedrin meets."

They continued to walk around the city walls to the east along the road following the Kidron Valley between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. It was impossible not to stop every once in a while and stare at the temple itself, towering over the entire city and gleaming in the bright sunshine.

There was a pretty typical crowd at the gate, merchants coming and going with wares or bags of profits, petitioners seeking judgments and defendants pleading their cases, and families who had that day presented their sons like Mary and Joseph would tomorrow. All those entering had to announce themselves to the Roman Guards standing there and state their business.

The travelers from Bethlehem waited patiently and soon enough they were inside the city and walking toward the steep stairs that would take them up the Temple mount to the edifice itself.

It was now late in the day, and as they came to a landing, they saw the stairs ahead them clear as an old woman made her way down, her right hand pressed firmly on the wall for balance and support. As she passed, she smiled at the rabbi and thanked him for his courtesy.

"Who was that?" Joseph asked a minute later.

"I believe that was the woman they call Anna. She has come to the Temple and stood in the Women's court every day since her husband died decades and decades ago. She sings and she prays and she greets visitors and she always has a word of hope about the future.

“You will undoubtedly meet her tomorrow, since she is especially fond of families who bring their sons for presentation.”

Joseph glanced at Mary, who was gently rocking Jesus in her arms. He had slept most of the time they were on the road, but now seemed to stretch and squirm the closer they got to the Temple itself.

The companions parted as they reached the lower courtyard, and Mary and Joseph soon spotted Elizabeth and Zechariah waiting for them in the atrium of the dormitory that the Temple priests occupied during their month of service each year. After warm embraces all around, they sat around the central fire and shared a simple supper of barley bread and soup.

Gamaliel found his way to his apartment where he was greeted by the Nasi, the president of the Sanhedrin, and several other members. They escorted the rabbi to the larger hall next to their meeting chamber where a banquet was being prepared to welcome the newest member of the council. Gamaliel was quickly surrounded with men dressed in blue and white headscarves much like his. Several joints of boiled lamb were set on the table, a gift from the priests to mark the occasion, taken from the day's sacrifices at the Temple altar.

The next morning Gamaliel and the Sanhedrin entered the Hall of Hewn Stones and took their seats to begin the day's business. There were 23 members, a number determined by ancient customs around judgments and verdicts. On a typical day they would meet in the Hall and hear a case presented to them. They would then adjourn to the Portico of Solomon, the covered porch that overlooked the Temple's courtyards, its altar and the great door to the Holy of Holies. The members would gather in groups of threes or fours and debate the issues of the case, moving from group to group until each had heard from every other. Then they would reconvene in the Hall to render their decision, almost always unanimous given their method of consultation.

The rabbi had been well coached and was deeply engaged in the morning's debate when he noticed a group gathering at the portico

balustrade. Several members were pointing to the Court of Women. Gamaliel worked his way to be able to see what was going on.

The first thing he noticed was Anna, the ancient woman with her hands raised to the heavens in prayer. She stood next to the Levite who was to receive the offerings for firstborn sons. Before them were, Gamaliel now saw, were Mary and Joseph and their son, Joseph still holding the two turtledoves that were the prescribed sacrifice. This would have been a typical enough scene except for the presence of another figure, a man wearing the distinctive black and white *Kufiyah* or headscarf identified with the party of political zealots who constantly looked for ways to force the Roman occupiers to leave Judea.

Like Anna, his arms were raised, but instead of standing he was dancing in a tight circle, whirling round and round. And he was singing, in a loud voice.

It was impossible to hear at this distance, but it was clear that the man was ecstatic, dancing and singing with a joy that Gamaliel had never experienced before.

The rabbi turned to his new colleagues hoping for some explanation. A Pharisee from Bethany, a wealthy merchant who represented that suburb of Jerusalem, said the man's name was Simeon, and that he had recently returned to town after some time away. The rumor was that he had gone to the Dead Sea to spend time at Qumran with the radical sect called the Essenes, and had been sent back to share their message that the world would come to an end soon.

"Well, he is certainly not acting like any zealot or Essene that I have ever seen," the Pharisee said.

The rabbi from Bethlehem nodded his head. "I know that family," he said. "This would not be the first time that something unusual has happened concerning him. Why, a week after I circumcised him, several strange men came from a far country to visit. Some say they came with gifts, while others say they heard incantations and smelled the incense of

death. And that's nothing compared to the rumors about visions of angels that some local shepherds were spreading."

Several of the council members stiffened as he spoke.

"If this is the child that they visited, we should report it to Herod immediately. He has been searching for him, to find out if he is indeed the descendant of some king." Gamaliel recognized the voice of the Nasi, the president of the Sanhedrin.

"I can't imagine this child is of any significance," Gamaliel asserted. "Why there was some talk before his birth that the woman was pregnant by someone else before they married. The husband is, by all accounts, a good and righteous man, and I would spare him any further scandal."

Below in the courtyard the Levite finally accepted the offering from Joseph and put the birds in the large cage behind him. The birds would be fed that evening, and resold to the merchant who would sell them again the next day to the next family. Money changing indeed!

Anna seemed unusually spent after her prayers and found a place in the shade to sit down and rest.

Simeon's whirling dance slowed steadily until he finally was standing still, and though still singing, his voice was now so soft only he could hear himself "I'm free, at last I am free. It is all finished."

He pulled his kufiyah from his head and shoulders and dropped them onto the stone pavement and began walking to the center of the city. He wondered, not that God had kept his promise, what would happen next.

Joseph and Mary made their way through the courtyard, down the long stairs and back out the Lion's Gate to begin their journey home.

And the members of the Sanhedrin, regrouped into threes and fours as they walked through the pillared corridor of Solomon's porch to their Hall of Hewn Stones below to continue their deliberations.

With one last look over his shoulder, the rabbi of Bethlehem wondered what other strange things might accompany that child as he grew into an

adult. Then he shook his head and reminded himself that in his new station as a member of the council, it was not his matter to worry about.