

A BABY CHANGES OUR WORLD

A Christmas Nativity Story

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A BABY CHANGES OUR WORLD

Part 1

The stable in a cave

“Hurry to the stable, Matthias. We need you!”

I look up and see Mom waving her hands excitedly as she calls me, so I immediately reply, “I’ve got the Inn’s ox and it’s walking slowly after drinking at the stream.”

I pull harder on the ox’s rope tether encouraging it to move along faster and then yell, “Feed time!” It understands and picks up its pace.

Since I already swept the stable inside the cave and put on a layer of fresh straw, I wonder why Mom is calling me so urgently.

“What’s the problem, Mother?”

“Tie the ox to the fence outside the cave. A couple just arrived and they are inside. I brought them a small jug of water to drink and some bread. The woman is trying to get some rest before giving birth to her baby.”

“What? Why in a stable?”

“The innkeeper told them there is no room in the Inn nor place to stay in town. Thank God, I overheard them and suggested to them to use the Inn’s stable cave at the bottom of the hill. The innkeeper agreed.”

“Oh, OK.”

As I think about it, there should be no surprise at how over-crowded our little town of Bethlehem is today.

Once, my father told me Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David about a thousand years ago. God and the people chose him to be King of Israel. He had many wives and children—hundreds of descendants.

Mom told me last month that the new Roman Census for taxes in Judea requires everyone to return to their hometown to register. In our case, the descendants of David need to return to Bethlehem, the city of David. So, the Inn and homes of the townspeople are crowded with relatives. Bethlehem doesn’t have room for so many out-of-town visitors.

The innkeeper is a good man. He says that since his is the only inn in town, he simply names it the “Inn.” It has 12 rooms - just big enough to serve a few caravans of traders each week who stop here for their overnight stay. Today it’s full of guests awaiting the Census that’s tomorrow at noon.

As I tie the ox to the outside fence, I see a donkey tied close by. It looks tired and worn out. It probably belongs to the couple—they must have travelled a long way.

Since I am the Inn's stable boy, I grab an armful of feed from the outside bin and throw it into the hewn rock manger in front of the ox. The rain shower this afternoon moistened the barley and grass feed which now smell just right. The ox starts eating it right away.

The donkey turns its head towards the ox, then to me. So, I quickly grab another armful of feed and throw it into the broken wooden feed manger, which I have to carry over to the donkey. The donkey seems grateful and bends its head low to get at the feed.

"Hurry Matthias! Look, here come Sarah and Isaac. That's good! Sarah will take care of baby Isaac while you introduce them and yourself to the couple. I have to return to the Inn's kitchen immediately. I'm very busy cooking the evening meal for the guests, but I'll bring some food back here for everybody later."

Mom dashes off just as my sister walks over from our home holding our brother in her arms. We live in the next cave—about 40 paces away from the stable cave.

Sarah greets me, "Matthias. You have feed and hay all over your sleeves and shirt! Did you get caught in the rain?"

As I brush off my clothes I reply, "Thanks. No, I ducked into a cave in one of the hills but the ox got pretty wet. The rain washed the dust out of the air and refreshed everything so now the flowers smell like perfume. Thank God, the storm passed quickly."

When we enter the part of the stable that is inside the cave, we greet the couple as we were taught in our synagogue school. We bow and wish them peace, "Shalom!"

Little Isaac just giggles and makes funny faces. His laughing starts us all laughing.

A smiling young woman greets us. She's very pretty—and very pregnant. The man next to her looks up and smiles at the three of us.

"Shalom, children. We are very happy to see you," the young lady nods and goes on to politely ask, "What are your names and how old are you?"

"I'm Matthias, the stable boy for this Inn. I'm nine years old. This is my sister Sarah; she's eight years old, and takes care of our one-year-old brother, Isaac, while Mom is cooking at the Inn."

The lady has a kind, lovely face and replies, "You all are so nice. What a wonderful family you are. We are grateful to your mother who helped us find this place of shelter during the rainstorm. She even offered to help me deliver my first baby. We have been blessed by God through all of you."

The man stands up to introduce himself and his wife. "Shalom, children. My name is Joseph and this is Mary. I am a descendent of King David of Bethlehem. We are returning to register with our baby who will soon be among us—God willing. Matthias, your mother said I might ask you if you would take care of our donkey while we are here. Will you do that for us?"

Wow! No one greets me so politely and actually asks if I would take care of their animal—most people just curtly order me what to do. As a humble stable boy, I'm used to that. I feel very good about this courteous couple. He even reminds me of my father.

"Yes, of course I will. I like animals. They're fun. Moreover, I love taking care of them. I'm happy you asked me. I just gave your donkey some feed and later will take it to water and brush it. It looks very tired."

"Thank you. Yes, it carried Mary and our baggage a long distance for many days." Joseph inquires, "May I ask you where your father is?"

I hesitate and look at Sarah, who nods to go ahead and tell them.

"Well, our father was killed, murdered, by a gang of thieves last year. He was a shepherd in these hills and owned a small flock. One night when he was alone in the Shepherds Field they stabbed him in the back and stole his sheep."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that," Mary says sadly, as she sighs.

Joseph appears angry and asks, "Were those marauders and murderers caught and brought to justice?"

"No. No one knows who they are. They escaped with the sheep during the night. Everyone thinks they herded the flock through the rocky southern desert roads so no one could track them.

"We all grieved Dad's death including the townspeople, and neighboring shepherds.

"We no longer have relatives in the area who could help us. So, we lost our home and possessions to moneylenders. Mom said we had to pay them back the loan father arranged to initially buy the sheep.

"A month afterwards, Mom gave birth to Isaac. Later, she took the only job that was available—cooking at the Inn. In return, the innkeeper lets us use the cave next to this one for our home. His wife gives Mom the leftover food from the guests' meals for us to eat. He hires me to be the stable boy for his Inn so Mom gets a little money for our needs."

Joseph seems very surprised. "So, she is a widow raising three beautiful children. What courage, strength, and hard work! Praise God for preserving you after such a heart-breaking tragedy."

Sarah's eyes start to tear as she listens to our family's sad history repeated yet one more time. Mary notices and asks her if she and Isaac want to sit close by her. Sarah does, and the three of them hug each other closely for a little while.

Joseph breaks the tension: "Matthias, I am a carpenter by trade. Is there anything I can repair for you in your home or in this stable?"

His offer surprises me, "Hmm, yes. We only have a hewn rock manger for feed and water here at the entrance. I'd like to use our wooden mangers as well to feed the animals. Sadly, they have fallen apart. We only use this stable for the Inn's ox and for the guests' animals when the courtyard stable is too crowded. So, our best wooden mangers are in the courtyard stable up by the Inn. Could you repair these two mangers?"

“Yes, of course. I’d be happy to do that.” He goes out the cave opening and finds the donkey’s manger already empty. Then he picks up the other wooden one next to the feed bin.

He laughs. “Looks like one of these wooden mangers also may have to serve as a mobile cradle for the baby tonight. I’ll repair them right away.”

Joseph takes out some carpenter’s tools from one of his bags. He immediately begins to repair the mangers.

Mary smiles at him with pride. He looks so happy while he works with his hands.

**----- End of Part 1 Text.
Story continues in Part 2.**

A BABY CHANGES OUR WORLD

Part 2

Bethlehem and its sheep

Mary looks directly at me. “You are tall and intelligent for your young age and you speak very well, Matthias.”

“Thank you. When we were in the Shepherds Field together, my father taught me how to be a shepherd and how to memorize scripture every day. Our mother teaches us something new every night at home. I love to learn. Also, our Rabbi teaches us in the synagogue school. Sometimes my friends think I talk too much, so they don’t want to play with me.”

Joseph overhears us as he repairs the wooden mangers and comments, “It’s more than learning. You have many gifts from God – a good memory, a quick mind, and sensitivity. Early in life, you had to learn to work as hard as a man does. You are becoming the man of your family. I have not met anyone so young who is so bright. Don’t worry; your friends will understand you better as everyone grows up.”

Mary interposes, “Matthias, I have never been to Bethlehem before, so I’m hopeful you can tell me about this area.”

Excitedly, I quickly respond to her request, “I’m always happy to talk about our small town. Bethlehem is located on top of a couple of hills in Judea. Its name means ‘House of Bread’ although some say it means ‘House of Meat’ because of our sheep sold to the marketplace.

“My father told me we are next to a trade route that connects with other roads. Traders travel from Egypt in the south, through Judea, and continue up to the Roman Province of Syria in the north. Then they return the same route. Many caravans of traders load their pack animals with goods or even metal ore. That’s why they stop here on their way to or from Jerusalem. So, Bethlehem has this Inn where they can stay overnight to rest and to water and feed their animals for travel.”

Mary gets up and walks over to the entrance of the cave. “The landscape is beautiful. How large is Bethlehem?”

I enjoy answering her questions, “Bethlehem has a small synagogue, and our teacher, Rabbi Levi, says that our town and its surrounding community have a population of about 240 people including children; about 10 boys are born here each year—he knows because he circumcises them according to our Law. He says, ‘Bethlehem is really a rural town about 6 miles south of Jerusalem.’”

I point eastward. “In that beautiful valley which you see in the distance, farmers tell me they grow vegetables, olive trees, barley and hay for sale to us and to the large street markets in Jerusalem.

“The nearby Shepherds Field directly borders the east side of Bethlehem. Its springtime flowers and fall grasses are a beautiful sight also. My friends and I run through the flowers and chase each other just for the fun of it.

“Rabbi Levi says Bethlehem is best known for its unblemished sheep. God commanded a daily sacrifice of two unblemished lambs.

“In addition, the Jerusalem Temple decreed a man is to offer an unblemished lamb as sacrifice for personal sin offerings in order to receive forgiveness. So, the Rabbi tells us, many lambs are needed daily and especially during Passover when many faithful come to visit the Temple.

“Last year my father took me to see the Shepherds Field on the north-east side along the road to Jerusalem. That area contains the flocks that will become the unblemished sacrifices in the Temple. Special, scripture-trained shepherds look at each of the newborn lambs. They’re carefully inspected, separated and protected against blemishes so they can be offered for the daily Temple services.

“Standing tall in that Shepherds Field is the ‘Tower of the Flock.’ It’s a stone lookout tower and a birthing area. There, new-born lambs are wrapped in swaddling cloth to protect them from any bruises until they are strong enough to endure.

“My father told me that Micah, our prophet, predicted that in this area around the Tower and Bethlehem the Messiah would be born.” Mary and Joseph both smile broadly, but say nothing. I wonder what they are thinking.

Next, I point to the southeast. “The Shepherds Field in this other direction contains flocks of sheep grown mainly for their wool to be spun into cloth for our clothes. Also, they are sold for meat and other products such as parchment.

“My father grazed his flock in that area. I was always happy when he took me along to stay with him and the flock overnight. So, I know its landscape very well. It’s hilly with many stones and steep craggy drop offs—suited only for grazing of animals. No one raises crops in these areas. The sheep are not allowed to wander into the farmers’ crop areas in the distant valley.”

Joseph has been listening while working and smiles. “You have given Mary an excellent description of Bethlehem and its surroundings. Thank you. They are much the same as I remember when I lived here as a young boy.”

Mary turns to my sister, “Sarah, Matthias says your family lives next to this cave?”

Sarah’s face lights up with excitement as she answers, “Yes. The cave next door is our home. It’s about the same size as yours. There seems to be just enough room for the four of us. We store our few possessions on top of the shelves that were cut out of the rock years before.

“Normally Mom brings us cooked food that are leftovers from the Inn. When we have something special to cook for ourselves, we do it in the open area in front of the cave. There’s a large space in front of these caves, but the ground is made up of bumpy rocks and stones.

“We use the innkeeper’s fresh straw to cover the rock floor of our home. Mom taught me how to weave and we made some blankets from the wool of our sheep—which we sheared just before our flock was stolen. Our wool has a pretty, light purple tint because Mom adds a little dye to the

first wash. At night, we pull those cozy blankets under and over us. Mom also made some clothes for us from her weavings and sewing.”

I add my feelings, “But the main thing is we are together—very close together—in this small space we call home. And we love each other.”

Joseph laughs. “That you do. Your love and respect for each other and your love of our God is obvious. Matthias, tell me. Have you visited the monument tomb built to honor Rachel?”

“Yes,” I report, “Several times—when my Dad took us north on the road to Jerusalem for the festivals at the Temple.”

Joseph goes on, “Rachel was the wife of Jacob, our patriarchal ancestor, whom God named ‘Israel.’ As children we used to run up there and after a rest, we would race back here to see who was the fastest!”

I feel good Joseph is sharing his story about Rachel’s memorial and I ask him, “Do you know Mom was named Rachel by her parents when they lived in northern Galilee?”

“We know your mother’s name from the innkeeper who introduced her to us when she offered to help us. Rachel is a beautiful name.”

Mary interposes. “You children speak very well. You will grow up to be wise adults.”

She sighs, “But for now, I’m really thirsty. May I have a drink of water? Suddenly, I’m very tired.”

Sarah jumps up to pour some water for Mary and then passes the water jar to us. This activity awakens Isaac from his nap. He just sits up and laughs.

Joseph helps Mary back into the cave to lie down and rest.

I jump up too, “That reminds me, I promised to take your donkey to the stream to drink some water. I’ll do that now!”

**----- End of Part 2 Text.
Story continues in Part 3.**

A BABY CHANGES OUR WORLD

Part 3

Surprises and our first meal together

Inside the stable cave, Mary suddenly groans with pain. Sarah grabs Isaac, jumps up and shouts to me: “She’s having labor pains! Her baby is getting ready to come out. Matthias, you better run and tell Mom.”

I stand up quickly.

Mary calmly replies, “Oh no. Do not worry. It will not happen right away, but soon, maybe tonight. I attended to my cousins while they prepared for the birth of their children and so I know what to expect. As long as I rest now, I’ll be all right. This may be a good time for you to take Isaac home, so my cries do not frighten the child later.”

“OK,” Sarah replies as she holds Isaac. She and Isaac give hugs and kisses to each of us and then head home. We bid her “Shalom.”

Joseph moves over to Mary to comfort her.

I turn to leave, “Joseph, I’ll take the donkey and go to the Inn’s kitchen to tell Mom what’s happening. Afterwards, I’ll go over to the wells to get water for us and to water your donkey. Shalom.”

The donkey and I walk up the hill to the doorway of the Inn’s kitchen where I tell Mom about Mary’s cry of pain and what she said. Mom replies, “Yes, Mary is correct. This is just the beginning birth pains during the birth of a baby.

“Here, take these two jugs for water you filled this morning at the well and give them to Joseph and Mary. What they do not drink, we will surely use when the baby arrives. Quickly, go now. I’m very busy. I will see you all later.”

I tie the necks of the water jugs together and pull them over the donkey’s back. We return to the stable cave to give two jugs filled with water to Joseph and Mary.

Then, I tie up eight empty jugs from the stable and put them over the donkey’s back. I lead it to the town’s King David water wells.

My Father said these wells were named in honor of King David, whom legend tells us actually dug the wells when he was a shepherd boy here.

The donkey drinks the water from the well's run-off. Meanwhile, I fill the water jugs and again load and tie them on the donkey's back. No one is at the wells at mid-afternoon so my tasks go very quickly. Soon, we leave for the Inn's courtyard stable.

Once there, I make sure all the animals have water and feed in their mangers. Also, they need enough slack in their tie ropes to give them room to lay down. Next, I sweep the areas and bring some fresh straw for the ground. As we leave, I tie the courtyard's gate with rope to secure it.

The donkey and I walk quickly down the hill toward our caves still with two of the jugs filled with water. Surprisingly, their donkey has been very cooperative, not stubborn as some can be. I like this donkey.

As I look closer, I see it has the features of a Syrian-bred donkey that is popular in Galilee. It's a strong and docile donkey bred for setting a smooth gait, which makes riding more comfortable. I hope that Mary's long, hard journey to Bethlehem was a little easier by riding this breed of donkey.

By the time I arrive at the lower stable cave, Mom already returned to our home. Having finished cooking at the Inn, she's now gathering our few dishes and cups for dinner. She walks next door to set the dishes on the small worktable Joseph places on the ground close to Mary. Yea! Soon we'll eat! I hurriedly tie up the donkey to the stable fence and bring over the two extra jugs of water.

Mom tells us, "The innkeeper's wife generously gave me extra food for Joseph and Mary as well as for us. We always treat Jewish visitors to our homes 'as family' and to love them and offer them food and rest."

Mom announces proudly, "Tonight's meal is a special treat. Since some of the Inn's guests are influential people, the innkeeper decided to purchase a young sheep for this evening's meal. He had our Rabbi supervise the butcher as he prepared the lamb according to the kosher rules.

The butcher roasted it all day in his own fire pit. Then the innkeeper had me add some of the roasted lamb meat to my vegetable stew for everyone at the Inn and for us." We all happily bless the innkeeper and his wife.

For our meal, Mom infuses her special spices and simmers everything in the kettle that hangs over the fire pit outside our home. Mom also made fresh bread that is still warm and really smells good. Mom is a great cook!

Our customs for a weekday meal are not as strict as for our Sabbath meal. So, we are starting our meal this late afternoon rather than at sundown. After the ritual of washing our hands, we recline around the table.

Our custom is to begin with prayers over a cup of wine. However, we cannot afford wine, so instead we can only serve water to our guests.

Joseph leads us in our Jewish prayers of blessings before our meal:

"Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth, Who creates the fruit of the earth, and by Whose word all things came to be."

Next, Mom serves the bread, vegetables, and meat stew. We pass it around the table and eat with great joy. Joseph is really hungry after their long trip and his repair work, so he eats heartily.

Mary only drinks water and some broth from the stew; she has no appetite right now. Mom encourages her to keep up her strength for the baby will be born tonight.

While Mom nurses Isaac, Sarah and I eat our tasty dinner with our youthful appetites. God provides plenty of food tonight.

We are excited to have these two visitors join our meal. We want to hear all about their adventures in travelling from the hillsides of Nazareth to the hills of Bethlehem in Judea. Bravely, I ask Joseph to tell us about their trip.

Joseph replies, "We travelled for 15 days including two Sabbath days of rest. It is about a hundred-mile trip using the route we took. We tried to travel eight to ten miles each day by foot with Mary sometimes riding on the donkey. We went slowly because of Mary's pregnancy. Moreover, we did not want to wear out our donkey who also carried our modest baggage.

"We carried blankets, clothes, a few tools, and food. My cousin loaned me his donkey for this trip.

"We left Nazareth on Wednesday morning and took the trade routes which were easier to travel along. We purposely used the trade route that is a few miles from the Jordan River. This way, we were close to water and shelter when needed. Eventually we had to buy food along the way for our journey.

"We avoided the more direct route that crossed Samaria which is dryer and the people are known to be less hospitable to Jews heading toward Jerusalem.

"Weather permitting, we usually started at dawn each day, paused mid-day, and ended when the sun set. We had to take some rest stops due to the steep hills, fatigue, rain, or the heat of the mid-day in the Jordan valley.

"We were blessed by meeting kind merchant caravans who let us stay with them during the nights. They had guards protecting their encampments from roaming thieves and wild animals. During the day we sometimes met travelers who were very welcoming and encouraging, but our pace slowed them, so they would travel ahead of us after a while.

"We camped right next to the Jordan River at sundown on Fridays and spent two Sabbaths with fellow Jewish travelers. We shared what little food we had among our small group and prayed and celebrated together. Getting a few days of rest during the long journey was a real blessing for Mary and me.

"Finally we reached Jericho near the Jordan River and slowly journeyed up the steep hills to reach Jerusalem, 3,400 feet up and a distance of 15 miles.

On our 13th day of travel, we made it to Jerusalem. We stayed with Mary's elderly mother, Anne, in the same home of Mary's birth.

On that day, Mary's cousin Elizabeth and husband Zechariah arrived from their home just west of Jerusalem. They have a six-month old son, their first-born, so we were able to celebrate that joyful event with them too.

“Mary had visited Elizabeth during her pregnancy. We call it their Visitation.

“Zechariah is a Priest in the Temple. Someday we’ll tell you about the miracle of the birth of their son, John. It is quite extraordinary. The Spirit of God has been upon them.

“Anyway, it was very restful and enjoyable to be with them again. I was even able to pray at the Temple that day. Zechariah offered to officiate the circumcision of Mary’s first born on the eighth day after his birth.

“We left on Wednesday and travelled through Jerusalem towards Bethlehem. Along the way, we got caught in a heavy rain. Since we were just passing Rachel’s tomb when it occurred, we stopped to pray in a small shelter connected to the monument. The rain refreshed the dryness of the air and ground and resulted in the sweet smell of flowers.

“Finally we arrived around noon at the Inn and met the innkeeper and your mother.

“We are very grateful to God who gave Mary the strength for this trip. She is young and strong and will be a very good mother. We will thank God always for the wonderful people we met along the way as well. The trade routes are filled with all kinds of people from many countries.”

We sit at the table fascinated by Joseph’s description of their trip. Everybody thanked Joseph for his description of their trip. What an adventure! I would love to travel.

Our Jewish custom at meals is to set apart some time to encourage children in their faith. Today, Joseph decides to translate for us the meanings of our names.

“Sarah, you have a name great in Jewish history. Sarah was the wife of Abraham; it means ‘princess.’ You are bright and beautiful as a princess.”

Sarah blushes, but she also smiles at hearing such wonderful compliments as she says “Thank you.”

As Joseph picks up and embraces Isaac he comments: “Isaac means ‘laughing.’ You are aptly named for you laugh a lot and cause us to laugh with you as well. In scripture, Isaac was Sarah’s son whom God saved. He stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac to His Name. By that act God showed He does not want humans sacrificed.”

Isaac just giggles and laughs. Sarah and I nod to each other in amazement how good Joseph’s teaching is.

Next, Joseph puts his hand on my head: “Matthias, your name means ‘gift of God.’ You are very intelligent for your young age. Your help has been a gift of God to us as well as to the innkeeper, his guests and to the animals. You love all the animals God has created. They love you. We love you and God loves you.”

I am so overwhelmed by what he just told us I can barely speak. “Thank you. And I love you both,” is all I can say.

Surprisingly, he turns from us children over to Mom, “Rachel, as you know your name means ‘ewe, to be a good traveler.’ You have been another gift of God to us at the end of our travel to Bethlehem. You realize how difficult our journey has been, you know what our needs are, and you fulfill them. You are a special blessing to us and to your family.”

Mom is touched by Joseph's sincere comments. She tears up a little bit. Her lips part with a smile, and she gratefully says, "Thank you."

Mom hesitates, "May I ask you, what names you have selected for your baby who will be born soon?"

Joseph looks to Mary who nods her approval—so he announces, "His name will be Jesus, meaning 'Yahweh is salvation.' He will be known as Immanuel, meaning 'God is with us.'"

I want to ask him what their baby's name will be if it is a girl. However, I feel very uneasy to do that. I'm not sure why; perhaps it is because Joseph says the name "Jesus" with such confidence. However, Mom does not ask either. So, I think it best for me to skip my question for now.

We sing some psalms and are have such a good time that we forget how late it is. It's twilight outside now, and Mary looks tired.

Joseph notices and ends the meal quickly with our prayer of thanksgiving. He adds a blessing for Mary and the delivery of her child.

"We are commanded by scripture that when we eat and are satisfied, we must bless the Lord our God.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, for providing this food, for our ancestors' Exodus from Egypt, for Jerusalem, for the goodness of Your work, and today especially for Mary and her baby."

Afterwards, I step outside to look up the hill at the Inn's windows. Some guests are shutting off their oil lamps to retire for the evening. It should be a cool and quiet night for all to sleep well. Even their animals sound quiet and peaceful

Isaac already is asleep at Mom's side.

My stomach feels full from the delicious meal and I am exhausted from a busy day.

Mom sees me yawn and says, "I brought our oil lamp over here, so Sarah and I can take care of the dishes and clean up, Matthias. Why don't you get some sleep? I will come home later. Do not forget to say your night prayers."

"Yes Mother."

I don't need any more encouragement to leave. Tomorrow will be a busy day because the Inn's guests will leave to return home after their registration for the Census. They will need me to prepare all the animals for their journeys.

I hug and kiss everyone goodnight, wish them "Shalom," and leave.

On the way out, I notice the two wooden mangers that Joseph repaired. They look like new and seem very sturdy. He even cleaned and washed the stone manger and moved the ox to the other side of the outside stable. All seems ready for the arrival of the baby.

As I look up, I can see the first stars of the night above the western horizon. Hmm... I noticed in the twilight of this morning that one of the moving stars—the planet the Romans call Jupiter—

was hidden behind the moon. Now, the other star-planets seem to have moved closer together. They are still bright in the sky tonight. Strange, but beautiful.

I walk the short distance to our home next door and crawl under my blanket for a good sleep. I barely have the strength to say my night prayers which Father had taught me. I feel so good – and so very sleepy.

It feels as if the Spirit of God is upon Bethlehem—it is quiet, calm and peaceful.

**----- End of Part 3 Text.
Story continues in Part 4.**

A BABY CHANGES OUR WORLD

Part 4

A baby is born and the sky lights up

As I sleep, a dream appears where I am traveling all around Israel! I can go everywhere. But now, something seems to be stopping me. Someone seems to be pulling on my arm.

Startled, I awaken and jump up. Since Dad was killed, I have been a light sleeper – perhaps afraid of a surprise night attack like the one that took his life.

I open my eyes to see Sarah laughing and shaking my arm.

“Matthias, Matthias! Wake up. Shh... Listen! The new baby has arrived and is crying! Isn’t that wonderful? Mom is still there helping Mary deliver her baby!”

Yes, I hear the sounds of the baby’s first cries! In addition, I can hear the voices of Joseph and Mom excitedly talking as well—but I cannot make out what they are saying. We cannot see into their cave next door, but we can see the flickering light of their oil lamp shining at the stable’s entrance and on the ground.

I’m happy for them, but I want to get back to sleep.

Sarah steps outside our cave. She enthusiastically points above her: “Look at the sky! All those stars— isn’t it beautiful? See, one star appears brighter than the others do. Its light shines on the top of the cave of Joseph and Mary.”

“Huh?” I am amazed. As a shepherd boy while in the fields, I saw many kinds of stars, shooting stars, moving stars, and the moon. During those long nights, Dad taught me what to look for on starry nights – how to tell the star clusters apart from each other. It was fun to draw imaginary lines between certain stars and envision a hunter, a dipper, a fish, or some familiar figure.

I get up and join her outside to look up and reply, “I’ve not seen that star before. It’s very bright.”

Finally, the baby stops crying and gets its first nap. It becomes a silent night, again.

In the quiet of the night now, Sarah hears something. She points towards the Shepherd’s Field, “Over there, Matthias. Do you hear that? Listen! There’s the sound of singing.”

I perk my head up and yes, I do hear something, but not singing. “No Sarah. That’s probably just thunder and lightning from a distant rainstorm. The pitch of sound is too low to be singing.”

“I don’t know about that—I don’t see any clouds around us, just stars and the moon,” she argues.

Maybe she’s right.

Sarah goes on, “The night sky always seems so fascinating with its uncountable pinpoints of light. On moonless nights, you can see hundreds more in the clear sky. I feel so overwhelmed by it all as they seem to move so slowly from east to west. Every season we see different stars.”

“Yes,” I reply. “Dad told me once he had met some caravan traders from Babylon. During their conversations, they decided to buy one of our sheep. They confided to him that in their country they have a book describing the locations of stars and planets observed for hundreds of years. Sarah, they claim that by using those observations and secret mathematics they can navigate on land as well as on sea!”

Sarah nods her head in agreement and adds, “Daddy told me that the Babylonians think the stars and moving stars, which they call wandering planets, can predict major events in our world. The movements of some planets and star groups are identified with the Jews of Israel. They told him the movements of certain planets are connected with our history. The Aries sign represents Israel, and a drawing of its star cluster looks like a sheep or ram in the sky. But I don’t know what that all means.”

“Sorry, Sarah. I don’t understand either. Hmm, yesterday morning I awoke before dawn and noticed the star-planets seemed to have moved closer together as they have been doing for several days. They brighten the sky and add light to our area. Dad once showed me a diagram of the background stars that resembled a ram—much like our sheep. I saw that star cluster again tonight after the sunset. The sign of the ram is next to the stars that can be drawn as a sign of a fish. I wonder if it is a prophecy of something that will happen.”

I think about it some more and recall, “Rabbi Levi told us in school: ‘To believe stars have power to control us would be wrong because you then may think their powers are greater than God’s power.’

“He taught us that our God created all the stars and the universe to point out important events. Nevertheless, He gave us free will. No star controls our destiny. The scriptures begin with the story of the creation of our world—in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. He created everything.”

Sarah’s face brightens and she shares another interesting story, “Once while you were out with Daddy grazing the flock, the innkeeper showed everyone in town two shiny Roman coins. He had received them from the head of a large trade caravan as part of their payment for staying at his Inn.

“One coin shows the image of the Roman Dictator Julius Caesar. On the back of the coin, there is a big image of a comet with the words ‘divine Julius’ as if he were a god.

“The innkeeper told us the Romans believe that the super bright comet which appeared years after he was murdered was really a form of Julius as a god. They say his soul now wanders the universe in a comet as depicted on their coin.”

Sarah seems excited as she describes the coins. “The other coin shows an image of the current Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar, who is the adopted son of Julius. The words meaning ‘son

of god' appear next to him. On the back of the coin 'divine Julius' is embossed showing his heavenly comet.

"The innkeeper let me actually hold the coins in my hand. It was really exciting! They were beautiful and shiny."

She becomes very serious now, "However, the townspeople became angry because the Romans claim their emperor is a god and place his graven image on coins our people must use to buy or sell food. This is an insult to our Jewish beliefs! Therefore, the innkeeper promised he'd only use those two coins to pay his taxes to the Romans and to Herod whom they appointed as King in Jerusalem. Everyone promised not to talk about it again so that the Romans would not hear of our dissatisfaction and accuse us of treason."

Wow! I jumped back in surprise hearing this story about those coins. "Rabbi Levi taught us that Jewish scripture predicts that a star will announce the appearance of our Messiah to be sent by God.

"He said when Balaam, the seer, was moved by the Spirit of God he predicted:

'A star shall advance from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel.'"

I'm inspired and tell Sarah another story about our Father, "I'm not sure I told you before, but Dad made me memorize some sayings from our scriptures about the promised Messiah.

"His favorite was from the prophet, Isaiah:

'The Lord himself shall give you a sign, Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son.'

"But how could that possibly happen? A virgin giving birth to a son? That's not the way nature works – not for animals nor us humans.

"Dad also insisted that I remember one prophecy word-for-word because it concerned our town. It is from Micah the prophet:

*'But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah
least among the clans of Judah,
From you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel;
Whose origin is from of old,
from ancient times.
Therefore, the Lord will give them up,
until the time when she
who is to give birth has borne,
Then the rest of his kindred shall
return to the children of Israel.'*"

Sarah appears impressed, "You sound inspired and you really remember scripture very well. You should be a teacher, Matthias."

I yawn again and blurt out, "Maybe, but I honestly don't understand what those sayings mean. I understand stable animals better.

“Well, there is nothing we can do about anything right now. Let’s silently thank God for the new life of a baby – and go back to sleep.”

Sarah laughs, “Aren’t you even curious whether it’s a boy or a girl?”

“Yes, but the baby will be the same sex in the morning. Remember, Joseph and Mary insisted it would be a baby boy. Anyway, I’m really tired right now.”

“Well, Shalom, Matthias. I love you. Sleep well I will not bother you again tonight.”

“Shalom, Sarah. It’s OK that you woke me—so much is happening. I love you too.”

Sarah settles into her wool blankets beside my brother Isaac. He seems unaffected by all this excitement and continues sleeping through everything.

I’m filled with awe at all the things that have happened today because of this newborn baby. Now, everything is both peaceful and quiet again, so sleep comes easily.

**----- End of Part 4 Text.
Story continues in Part 5.**

A BABY CHANGES OUR WORLD

Part 5

Shepherds arrive

Suddenly, the sound of lambs bleating awaken me. Startled, I look up to see a group of shepherds. Two of the shepherd boys are carrying little lambs over their shoulders. They are coming in from the Shepherds Field—slowly approaching the stable cave next to ours.

I see Mary and Joseph at the entrance with their baby laying on the stable's manger. Mary is curled up sleeping on some straw and blankets next to it. She looks exhausted from giving birth several hours ago. Joseph is sitting next to her, but awake and watchful. He stands up with his staff in his hand when he sees all the shepherds advancing.

It's the middle of the night, but the stars and the partial moon light-up these hills. Strangely, a glow surrounds all the shepherds, the baby, Joseph and the stable cave.

I recognize one of the shepherd boys—it's Joab! I met him and his family in the Shepherds Field last year when Dad took me along to graze our flock of sheep. He's friendly and about nine years old, my age.

I look around me and find that Mom had returned after helping Mary deliver her baby. She is sleeping soundly. I quietly awaken her and point to the stable. She gasps and is amazed at what we are witnessing. "Matthias, This *IS* a very special baby," Mom says in a low tone.

I turn to her and softly ask why she said that, but she just puts her hand up over her mouth and replies, "It's a secret for now—I will tell you why later."

A secret? I wonder what that's all about! What does she mean?

All the shepherds bow down in front of Joseph, Mary, and their child. The baby lies in the manger that was hewn from rock and stands at the cave's entrance. Mary awakens and seems surprised but not startled. She stands and places her hand on her baby.

The baby is wrapped in swaddling cloth to protect him—as is our custom. The straw also cushions him and keeps him from the coolness of the stone of the stable's outdoor manger. The fresh air outside is better for the newborn than inside the stable cave.

We can hear the shepherds speaking as they stand close to the manger.

The shepherd leading the group explains: "Shalom. We were tending our flocks in the field tonight and suddenly saw Angels in the sky surrounded by a bright light. One Angel approached us and said:

'Fear not. I bring you news of great joy for all people! Today in the town of David, a Savior, which is the Messiah, Christ, has been born unto you. This will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.'

We immediately came to Bethlehem to see what has happened, as the Lord told us. Now we have found him just as the Angel said."

Joseph and Mary do not seem surprised about Angels being close by. They invite a few of the shepherds at a time for a closer view of the baby in the manger crib. Joseph lights an oil lamp.

The shepherds reverently kneel and are ecstatic at what they see. Then the two shepherd boys present Joseph with the little white lambs they carried over their shoulders. A third shepherd leads their mother sheep to him as a gift.

Mom and I are curious and arise to quietly move closer and look for ourselves.

Wow! I recognize the purple color tint of the cloth wrapped around the baby. It's from the wool that Mom had woven and dyed for us. I laugh—she must have given it to Mary and Joseph to wrap the newborn baby. The baby is clothed with the wool that was sheared from our family's sheep before they were stolen. How wonderful!

The baby awakens now. A soft glow of light illuminates his face. He is beautiful. Just looking at him brings us a feeling of happiness and uplifts our spirits. He smiles at us with his chubby cheeks and makes some baby sounds through his lips. He's as cute as a new baby can be.

The shepherds also appear happy and joyful at the sight of this baby. They continue to tell Joseph and Mary that hundreds of Angels appeared this night: "Those messengers of God exclaimed,

'Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace, good will toward all!'"

My Mother and I approach closer to the manger. When Joseph sees us, he pleads: "Please, Rachel, would you allow Matthias to take care of these two little lambs and the mother ewe? This generous family of shepherds gave them as gifts from their own flock."

Mom nods approval to me, so I pick up the two little lambs and cuddle them. They lick my face. They are so cute, soft, and playful. They appear unblemished. As I happily carry them off, their mother ewe follows. I take them into a nearby small cave in this hill and tie some rope around their necks and through the bushes at the cave's entrance to serve as a temporary fence. They appear sleepy. The mother ewe will suckle her lambs. I will bring water and feed her at dawn.

What splendid gifts for the shepherds to give the baby and his family—it is from their hearts and livelihood. As I think about it, everybody here is giving the baby a special gift as well as their love, caring, and time.

One of the shepherds pulls out a wooden flute from his coat and asks Joseph and Mary if he may play a soft melody. They agree readily. Soon, beautiful sounds of music surround us, and it adds to the delight of this event.

Sarah awakens and walks over to join us while holding a sleeping Isaac. Mom hugs the three of us—what a delightful feeling of love and peace surrounds us!

The shepherds repeat to us their story about the appearance of the Angels. Sarah turns to look at me and confidently boasts that she was right when she had told me that she had heard some voices in the Shepherds Field earlier this night. In fact, that happened soon after the baby was born.

Joab comes over to me and says “Shalom, Matthias.”

I remember Joab well. He taught me how to use a sling shot to scare away the wild dogs when they tried to attack our sheep for food. I did not have a good aim, but he was very accurate. He would laugh when I called him “King David.” David had developed his skill with a slingshot as a shepherd boy and later felled Goliath who had insulted our God and our country.

“Shalom, Joab. Yes. It’s great to see you again! I’ve been very busy in town working as a stable boy here, so I don’t get out to the Shepherds Field anymore. How’s your sling shot, ‘King David?’”

We both giggle at our little insider joke. Then he responds somberly, “Matthias, I still feel so sad about what happened to your father. I want you to know our family cares and still prays for your family. You look taller and stronger than last year. I’m glad your family has survived that tragedy.”

“Thank you, Joab. And how is your family?”

“They are healthy and have been prosperous this year. The Shepherds Field has abundant grass. It’s quiet as usual out there. That is, until tonight. It was a shock to see such a bright light in the night sky and then the Angels—they even spoke to us. I was scared.

“Their first words were,

‘Fear not, do not be afraid.’

Those words kept me from running away or using my sling shot—anyway, I don’t think an Angel could be hurt by a stone.”

Joab continues, “My Dad handled the situation very bravely and knelt before the Angels. Then we all did the same and listened carefully. Afterwards, there were many more of them appearing and I heard them repeating,

‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests!’

Yes, a peacefulness came upon all of us. A few of the Angels appeared to be as young as we are – some appeared older. All of them looked very happy. It was a wonderful sight. I wish you could have seen it.”

I excitedly reply, “Yes, I do wish I had been there! Maybe they will return another time. We learned about Angels in our synagogue school and how they would appear at some important events described in scripture.”

Joab laughs, “There you go again, referencing scripture. You should be a Rabbi, Matthias. But, this time your answer may explain the mystery surrounding this child, so thanks.”

While everyone is talking about the Angels, they are still looking at the baby and listening to the melodic notes of the flute player.

Joab asks me, "Have you noticed the stars just before dawn and after sunset? They are very unusual. We have been watching them in the sky from the Shepherds Field for weeks and noticed how two stars are moving closer together. Today they seem to be like one star—and show a very bright light."

'Yes. Saw them! I wonder if they're a sign like the stars mentioned in our scriptures. There are prophecies about stars appearing at such an event."

I continue and ask Joab, "Did those Angels really say "a Savior, a Messiah," was born tonight?"

"True." Joab answers. "They really did say that. They clearly meant it was this baby and told us how to find him. Nevertheless, how can he be a Messiah? A little baby is not a Messiah warrior king."

I remind him, "But King David was born as a baby in these same hills of Bethlehem and became a great warrior for Israel. So, it is possible—it happened before."

"OK, you're right, Matthias. I wonder...." Joab appears to be lost in thought.

Neither of us understand what the full meaning of these events are. Maybe we are too young.

We move further back as more shepherds arrive to take their turn to view the baby. They bow to the child and to Mary, and then speak with Joseph. Mary now holds the baby in her arms. What a beautiful and heart-warming sight!

The shepherds praise God for this wonderful event, and thank Him for the Angels who told them where to search.

Even though everyone seems to be talking, we all are speaking in hushed tones.

Several shepherds recognize Mom, and talk with her off to the side.

What peacefulness, love and joy the arrival of this baby has brought to everyone here.

Now the dawn approaches and the shepherds begin to withdraw and return to their flocks. They are very respectful and quiet.

They know they must leave because the townspeople do not like shepherds. Many in the town think shepherds are dirty, lazy, dishonest and uneducated. But they're not!

Just as my father did, they always lead their sheep to pastures in all kinds of weather – heat, cold, rain, mud – and protect them from harm, thieves, and beasts. Of course, it is dirty work, hard work! Many shepherds are poor.

However, a few studied scripture and know it as well as some of the townspeople.

It seems unfair that these shepherds are not allowed to enter the Temple of Jerusalem. The Temple authorities consider them "ritually unclean" because of their work in the fields. This makes me angry! Some of these shepherds in the Bethlehem area are responsible to protect the same sheep that will become the sacred sacrifices at the Temple.

I notice that a few townspeople arise in time to see this very strange sight of shepherds gathered around the stable cave. They stare at us, but they do not come over—they stay distant.

As the shepherds leave, they walk by those townspeople and share the message from the Angels regarding this baby. They praise and thank God as they relate what happened here!

Some townspeople scoff and laugh at them and say, “We are amazed and curious. We just don’t know what to think or say about your Angel story. Perhaps you were drinking too much wine?”

What an insult! I feel that they want to disregard what is told to them because of their prejudice against shepherds.

The shepherds slowly return to their flocks, which their families are grazing and protecting in the Shepherds Field.

I turn to Joab and say, “Shalom.”

He replies, “Shalom, until we meet again, which I hope is soon. Please come to visit us when you can. You know where we graze our flock, Matthias—my friend.” We clasp each other’s hands and hug before he leaves.

I miss him and his loving family. I miss even more the times I spent with my Dad and his flock in the Shepherds Field.

Soon, Mom will have to bake the morning bread for the guests at the Inn. Before she leaves, she leads Sarah and carries Isaac to our home next door to tuck them into their blankets.

I’m wide-awake because of all the exciting things that have occurred. So, I tell Mom that I’ll just start my chores now, as I usually do before dawn.

I begin thinking about what the Angels had told the shepherds—this baby is our “Savior, the Messiah of Israel.” Hmm... then, what Dad told me about God’s promise to King David is fulfilled today!

Dad had me memorize what he believed about the Messiah: “From David’s descendants the Messiah is to come to rescue Israel, to reunite the tribes, to usher in universal peace, and to fulfill many of our people’s needs.”

Wonder if that is the future of this baby?

I turn to look at the baby again, but Mary is nursing him. Joseph turned around one of the wooden mangers to set it inside the cave’s entrance for Mary’s privacy.

It’s overwhelming to think that our Messiah was born right here. I hope his family will reside in Bethlehem. It will be fun to grow up as he grows up. It will be fun to see, help and play with this child and my brother Isaac.

I will teach them all I know about animals, especially about sheep. There are many things about sheep that apply to our daily lives.

I can teach them about the stars in the sky, about these fields, and about the farms around us. Our friendships will be close.

Oh well, the twilight is yielding to the approaching dawn. It’s time to feed the ewe and bring water to the lambs and her. Therefore, I grab an armful of feed and grass and pick up a jug of water to carry to them.

As I walk to their cave, I look up into the sky to see if there are any Angels, but none appear. Just like our ever-present God, Angels are usually invisible—but now I can feel their presence.

The sky is still full of thousands of stars. They are shining and twinkling as they always do on such a gorgeous, cloudless night sky.

Towards the eastern horizon, it looks like some of those moving stars, those planets, which have moved closer together since I looked yesterday. What a breathtaking sight!

I have a great idea! I'll tell my play friends in town everything that happened when get together on Saturday night after the Sabbath. Do I have a lot to tell them! Wow, it will be exciting! Praise God for a Messiah.

Oh, oh! What if they won't believe me? Maybe they'll make fun of my story and tease me. Then they won't let me join them to play our games. Now, I'm not so sure I want to tell them. I'll just wait until they ask me.

Nevertheless, I saw what I saw, and heard what I heard.

How astonishing that these humble shepherds and me, a lowly stable boy, plus my sister, baby brother, and Mother—a cook—are the first to witness his nativity.

We are celebrating the birth of this special baby—whom Joseph said he will name Jesus! Thank God for all we have seen and heard.

Perhaps there is no room in the Inn nor in the town's homes. However, God made sure there is enough room for everyone to come to meet this baby—he was born in a stable cave in front of a large open field where everyone can come visit and see for themselves.

Apparently, God invited everybody to come visit and see this epic event, the birth of a baby who is changing our world!

I hope everybody will come to see for themselves and to listen to our stories.

----- End of Part 5 Text.
Story continues in Part A - Epilogue.

A BABY CHANGES OUR WORLD

Part A – Epilogue:

Who am I?

Matthias, the replacement Apostle

There are 120 of us crowded into this hot Upper Room in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, we remain cheerful.

First, we finish our sharing and prayer. Each of us eat a morsel of bread and a sip of wine and pass the bread loaf and cup to the next disciple. Jesus asked us to do this at His last supper with the Apostles 43 days ago. We do this in honor of His body and blood in remembrance of His crucifixion and death.

Our prayer is joyful, thanking God for actually seeing Jesus after His resurrection from the dead. To us, that miracle is the overwhelming proof that Jesus is the Son of God and why we are still together.

Suddenly, a hush comes over our conversations as everyone anticipates a vote. Now, a difficult decision needs to be made—who will become the Apostle replacing Judas Iscariot? Will it be Justus or me, Matthias?

I've been a follower of Jesus our Messiah. I volunteered as a caretaker of the donkeys, which carry the food and supplies for His group. For three years, we journeyed with Him from town to town while He preached and cured people at each one.

I was born a Jew and was educated in our Synagogues. Jesus was born in my home town of Bethlehem, over 33 years ago. I was 9 years old then.

The other disciples are like brothers to me. However, I am not optimistic about being selected to join the original 12 Apostles who were chosen by Jesus Himself.

This voting process makes me nervous.

Justus is an excellent disciple. He and I were followers of John the Baptist when we saw Jesus baptized in the Jordan River. He listened carefully to Jesus and was a good teacher of our Jewish scriptures. He is very friendly and has a close circle of friends among the disciples.

His full name is Joseph Barsabbas, but we call him Justus—which is interpreted to mean “an upright person.” He will probably be selected instead of me.

As a humble manual laborer and herdsman for our group my work is usually been performed behind the scenes. I gather and transport the food for the meals. My mother, too, has travelled with us as a volunteer cook.

Although friendly with everyone, I really have no strong vocal supporters. I was nominated along with Justus because we had been eyewitnesses of Jesus from the time of His baptism by John the Baptist until He ascended into Heaven.

We both witnessed Jesus teaching and performing powerful miracles. I heard and saw everything from the sidelines while doing my tasks. We travelled all over the country-sides of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, many major towns such as Jerusalem, Nazareth, Caesarea Philippi, and even towns along the shores of Galilee Lake such as Capernaum and Bethsaida.

One time, Jesus chose Justus and me to become two of the 72 disciples to whom he gave authority and power to cure people who were sick and to expel demons from them when necessary. He sent us off working as a team – as one of the 36 pairs going from town to town in Judea teaching and healing people, and introducing them to the Kingdom of God same as Jesus was doing.

As He commanded, we took no food or money with us. We depended solely upon God to provide everything we needed as well as the miracles we performed in His name.

Suddenly Peter, our leader, stands up.

Peter announces:

“I will not vote. Jesus personally invited and chose each of us, the original 12 Apostles, to witness His miracles and to learn from Him. Therefore, it is appropriate that God alone should choose the replacement for Judas Iscariot.

Judas travelled with us for three years after Jesus chose him to be an Apostle. Now, he has killed himself rather than to ask for mercy, to repent, and to live in the shame of his betrayal of Jesus. Sadly, it was Judas who kissed Him that dark, evil night in order to identify Him for some of the Roman and Jewish authorities who hated and killed Jesus so cruelly.

He did all that for the thirty pieces of silver he received from the Temple’s authorities.

Our Jewish Scriptures tell us someone must take the place of Judas so that there again will be 12 in our circle of chosen leaders.

The replacement should be a respected disciple who is a witness of Jesus from the time of His baptism, as both Justus and Matthias are.”

As I listen to Peter, I am overwhelmed by the memories of everything that occurred recently. Of course, Peter and all of us became fearful and sad when Jesus was crucified, died and was buried in a tomb guarded by soldiers. We thought the authorities would imprison or crucify us next. Then came Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. He is alive again!

We became ecstatic and overjoyed when we saw Jesus—alive and walking with us for 40 days! He told us not to be afraid; we talked and ate with Him. He even forgave Peter for denying that he knew Him after He was arrested. Today, we saw Jesus physically ascend up into the heavens.

We all love and admire Him. Yet, no one asked Him about whom He wanted to replace Judas.

Now, Peter kneels and leads us in a prayer:

“You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take a place in our apostolic ministry.”

Silence follows.

You can feel the tension in the air among some of the disciples. Peter is not allowing anyone to speak in support of Justus or me. Justus had a number of strong vocal supporters eager to recommend him as the replacement.

I really fear a confrontation now, and I decide that if there is conflict over my nomination I will offer to step aside. The unity and mission of these disciples is much more important than my being chosen as an Apostle.

I remember once when the chosen 12 argued with each other as to who was the greatest among them. Even the mother of James and John, the Zebedee brothers, tried to influence Jesus to be sure that her sons would be chosen to be on His left and right hand sides when His kingdom comes. Jesus responded such an honor was not for Him to give, but for His Heavenly Father to choose. Then He asked if they were willing to drink from the same cup of pain as He was.

Jesus warned us all not to seek honors; instead, we are to serve one another. One time he even picked a child and placed him in front of all of us. He announced that unless we were as dependent, innocent, and humble as that child, we could not enter the kingdom of Heaven let alone be leaders among the Apostles.

Finally, almost all of us abandoned Jesus when He was arrested, tortured and crucified. You would think because of our reactions, we had learned our lesson about our faults, personal pride, and the need for humility. Nevertheless, we again displayed jealousy, fear, anger, in-fighting, false pride, loathing, indecisiveness, guilt and lack of forgiveness.

Fortunately, we were given 40 days to pray, contemplate, and regroup whenever Jesus appeared to us. I feel that Jesus has not abandoned us after His resurrection into Heaven. He will help us grow and understand each other as our group executes His great commission to teach the world what we witnessed. I silently put my trust in Him.

Suddenly, Peter rises up and explains God’s answer to our prayers:

“As God has done many times before, He will show by lot which person He chooses. Bring me a handful of straw sticks. We will put our trust in whatever plan God has for us.”

John, who is the youngest Apostle among us, springs up and runs downstairs to the building’s courtyard stable to gather several clean straw sticks. He immediately returns and gives them to Peter.

Peter arranges the straw sticks in his hand so that the tops are level, while strands of uneven length appears below the clasp of his hand.

He turns to us with his fist full of straw and offers them to us:

“Choose one. The person with the longer straw is God’s choice.”

Justus chooses first. It is a long straw.

I close my eyes, say a silent prayer and take a deep breath to summon my courage. Feeling serenity, I reach out and choose a straw from Peter's fist full of straw.

A loud cheer shakes the room. As I open my eyes, I am surprised to see that the straw I picked is much longer than the one drawn by Justus. He happily rushes up to me with a smile to congratulate me and to kiss my cheek - as is the custom of our time.

Each of the 11 Apostles in turn gives me a big friendly hug and kisses me on my cheek. They all praise God as they congratulate me being the choice of His Spirit to become one of the "12 chosen Apostles." Sunlight pours through the windows. Everyone appears happy.

I quickly glance over to where my mother is standing in the back of the room.

Peter's mother-in-law and Mary, the mother of Jesus, are hugging Mom as they share this happy moment—so too, is the mother of James and John.

These women travelled with us and cooked many meals for Jesus and all of His disciples. They witnessed many of His teachings, and miracles. They also have a lot of memories and thoughts to share.

What joy is in this Upper Room again! I feel the love of Jesus around us. It's as if a special blessing and strength entered my body. I am alert, without fear, and ecstatic as never before. Hallelujah!

I thank God for His mercy and love to pick me to be the "replacement." Now, I can be sent out with the authority of an "Apostle" to tell everyone what I personally witnessed Jesus say and do. I feel in me the power of the Spirit of God who will heal and cure the people. Hallelujah!

**----- End of Part A – Epilogue.
End of Text.**