

Amon's Secret



Also by Arnold Ytreeide

for Advent

Jotham's Journey

Bartholomew's Passage

Tabitha's Travels

for Easter

Amon's Adventure

Amon's Secret



A Family Story of the First Christians

Arnold Ytreeide



~

For Thorin—
A blessing beyond all understanding,
a joy beyond belief.

Amon's Secret

© 2023 by Arnold Ytreeide

Illustrations © 2023 by Candace Camling

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel Inc., 2450 Oak Industrial Dr.
NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505. www.kregel.com.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without the publisher's prior written permission or by license agreement. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Other than biblical characters and events, the persons and events portrayed in this work are the creations of the author, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

The artist is represented by the literary agency of WordServe Literary Group, Ltd., www.wordserveliterary.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ytreeide, Arnold, 1954- author.

Title: Amon's secret : a family story for the church's beginning / Arnold Ytreeide.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Kregel Publications, [2023]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022029752 (print) | LCCN 2022029753 (ebook) | ISBN 9780825447709 (print) | ISBN 9780825469671 (kindle) | ISBN 9780825470127 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Church history--Primitive and early church, ca. 30-600--Juvenile literature.

Classification: LCC BR165 .Y77 2023 (print) | LCC BR165 (ebook) | DDC 270.1--dc23/eng/20220725

ISBN 978-0-8254-4770-9, print

ISBN 978-0-8254-7012-7, epub

ISBN 978-0-8254-6967-1, Kindle

Printed in China

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 / 5 4 3 2 1

Before the Story

An Important Note to Parents and Teachers

No matter how you look at it, this is a tough story for kids. The early days of the Christian church were full of relentless persecution, barbaric punishment, and cruel death. All simply because some people believed that Jesus was their Savior and wanted to spread his message of forgiveness and salvation. For that, they were whipped, stoned, beheaded, and crucified.

It's just a tough story for kids.

But it's a true story, and a story full of truth, so it's a story kids need to understand. They need to understand—at appropriate levels for appropriate ages—that our faith must not be frivolous; it must be deep, dominant, determinate. They need to understand that each of us must be ready to defend our faith.

When I sat down to write this book, I struggled with how to present that part of the story for a wide range of ages in a way that would inform but not traumatize children. My answer to that dilemma is *Amon's Secret*.

Stories are built on drama, though, and drama is based in conflict. Sometimes conflict is upsetting to children. While there is no graphic violence “on screen” in this story, the plot does lead us through some scary territory. If you have a child who is very young, or particularly sensitive, I urge you to pre-read each chapter and leave out or soften any parts you feel would be too frightening.

But still, *Amon's Secret* is a story with meanings at many levels—more, probably, than even I am aware. It is my prayer that your children—and you—will find a new and deeper appreciation for, and understanding of, this thing we call the church and the faith in each of us that brings it to life.

How to Read This Book

All the previous books in this series were built around a particular time of year—Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. Each chapter of those books was timed to coincide with the events of those

celebrations. *Amon's Secret* has no such temporal connection other than a momentary mention of a church holiday called Pentecost, which is traditionally celebrated 50 days after Jesus's resurrection.

How should you read this book? I think the answer must be, "Any way that works for you."

Like its earlier companions, *Amon's Secret* is broken into short chapters, each of which ends with a devotional thought. At whatever time of year works for you and your family, you could choose to read one chapter each morning or evening as a family or personal devotion for a month.

But because there are no external connections to think about, you can also just sit down and read it or give it to your children to read. Whatever works for you and your family.

Pronunciation Guide

Biblical names can be difficult to pronounce. In reality, no one knows what the proper pronunciations are. If you grew up in a Western culture, your mouth may not even be *capable* of pronouncing these names correctly. But for those who would like to conform to at least a pretense of a guide (admittedly inaccurate), here is how we have chosen to pronounce some of the names you'll encounter in *Amon's Secret*:

Amon = uh-MAHN
Caiaphas = KYE-uh-fuss
Cornelius = core-NEEL-yus
Gamaliel = GAM-uh-leel
Jadon = JAY-duhn
Jotham = JAW-thum
Raphu = rah-FOO
Tamar = TAY-mar
Uri = YER-ee

You can also visit the website listed below to hear pronunciations of these names.

Online Extras

Bonus Features for this title include:

- facts about life in Jerusalem during the time of this story
- a floor plan of Amon's house, the temple, the Antonia Fortress, and the house of Caiaphas

- maps of the markets and other locations inside Jerusalem
- drawings of the temple
- photos of Jerusalem today

You can access all of these for free at www.JothamsJourney.com.

Chapter One

Celebration



T*his must be what it feels like after you get kicked in the head by a mule,* Amon thought. He had seen such a thing once, and afterward the man had walked around in a daze, not knowing what was going on, where he should go, or even who he was. *I feel like a thousand bees are buzzing in my head.*

Amon walked through the crowded streets of Jerusalem with his father, Jotham, his mother, Tabitha, and his younger brothers, Jadon and Uri. At thirteen he had already been declared by the rabbis to be a man, but at the moment he felt very much like a child.

Everyone else must be feeling the same way, he decided. It seemed as if the entire city of Jerusalem was celebrating. In a courtyard on one side street, women in colorful scarves danced. On another street a man from the east threw into a fire some kind of powder that exploded in flashes and smoke to the cheers of a crowd. And everywhere Amon looked, people were eating and singing and celebrating.

“I do not believe I have ever seen such a big grin on your face,” Amon’s father said as they walked.

“Nor have I ever been accused of having a big grin,” Amon laughed with an even bigger grin. He had always been known as a serious boy, and now a serious young man—always inventing, always creating, always thinking serious thoughts. “Do you not see, Father, how the entire city of Jerusalem is celebrating?”

Jotham scanned the streets. “I believe, my son, that most of Jerusalem is simply doing what they do every day. It is only you and I and a few others who are celebrating.”

As Amon checked all the streets again, he realized his father was probably right. While many friends and families had been at the Mount of Olives and were indeed celebrating, most of the people in Jerusalem were merely going about their business. How could they not know and not be excited about what he and the others had just witnessed?

I just saw a man, a human being, rise into the air and enter the kingdom of heaven, he thought for the thousandth time since it had happened an hour before. *How is that possible?*

He knew the answer, of course. Knew it was a miracle of God, and the man—Jesus—was himself God. But it was all so impossible to think about with his logical, rational mind. Jesus, first rising from the dead, then ascending into heaven. How could such a thing be true?

I just have to accept it, even if it seems impossible, Amon thought. And that's what brought the huge grin to his face and the faces of certain others in the city. They seemed to make little circles of excitement wherever they gathered.

But then there were the others in Jerusalem. The priests, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and many of the common Jews. They made a much bigger circle. They didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah, hadn't been there to see him walking and talking and ascending to heaven. They couldn't accept the miracles he worked. All this brought a bit of a frown to Amon's face.

Amon forced thoughts of those doubters aside and the grin returned.

This was the day that Jesus had proven himself to be the Messiah, the Savior of the world, and nothing at all could spoil that.

"Father, maybe we could *not* take our sheep to market today?"

Jotham laughed. "No, my son, we will not be going to market today. This is a day of celebration, because"—and here he threw his head back and yelled, not caring who heard him—"Jesus is the Messiah!"

The whole family cheered, then Tabitha said to Jotham, "Your aunt was so happy."

Amon looked from his mother to his father and back again. "*Whose* aunt?"

"My aunt," his father said. "Mary."

Amon gasped. "Mary, the mother of Jesus? She's your aunt? How can that be?"

"Joseph was my father's brother, so his wife is my aunt."

"No, I mean how can we be related to Mary and I not know it?"

"You've just forgotten," Tabitha said as they continued walking.

"But you never *talked* about it."

Jotham and Tabitha exchanged a look, then he gently said to Amon, "We tried. When you were young you didn't care, and when you got older you wouldn't listen because you thought we were . . . 'sick in the head' is how you put it."

Amon's face grew red and he turned away, saying only, "Oh."

They walked up through the center of the big city, past the Hippodrome where Roman-style chariot races and other games took place, and Herod's theater, a huge semicircular building for entertainment.

As they passed the Pool of Siloam, Amon noticed a small crowd gathered at the edge of the water, including Peter, one of the disciples of Jesus. Uri ran over and hugged him, and Amon shook his hand, saying, “Isn’t it miraculous?”

Peter laughed and roughed up Amon’s hair. “It is indeed, my young friend.” Then turning to Amon’s father, he said, “We have just baptized a dozen people into The Way of Jesus. Is your family ready to make such a public statement?”

Jotham looked at his wife, then at Amon, Jadon, and Uri. All of them nodded, but he knelt down in front of Uri. “Do you understand what we’re talking about, Uri?”

“No. But it sounds like fun.”

Amon had a sad feeling inside, watching Uri. Even though the boy was eight years old, he had trouble understanding much of the world. He was happy, though, and just needed a little extra time and patience.

“Do you remember who Jesus is?” Jotham asked the boy.

“Of course. He’s the one we saw go into the sky today.”

“Well, what we’re doing here is called baptism, and it’s a way we can show ourselves and others that we believe Jesus is God. Would you like to do that?”

Uri frowned. “Will we still be home in time for lunch?”

Jotham turned away, and Amon wasn’t sure if he was smiling or crying. Uri seemed to have that effect on people. Jotham looked back at him. “Yes, we will be home long before lunch.”

Uri shrugged his little shoulders. “Okay.”

Peter led them back to the pool. When it was Amon’s turn, he stepped into the cool water up to his waist. Peter put one hand behind his head, and one in the small of his back, then spoke the words, “I baptize you in the name of God the Father and Jesus the Christ, his only son, the Messiah.”

Amon kept his eyes open as Peter laid him back into the water—water that flooded across the life he’d always known—and it washed away the stains of his sin. When he emerged from the waters a moment later, he knew his life would never be the same.

Once the entire family had been baptized, Jotham gathered them and prayed. Then he turned to Peter and said, “Thank you, my friend.”

“It is my great honor. Now, if I may ask for your hospitality, could we perhaps use your upper room once again?”

Amon’s father quickly agreed, and they all walked up the steep streets to Amon’s house, close to where the Essene Gate created a passage through the tall stone wall that surrounded the entire city. Amon watched as all eleven remaining disciples of Jesus, including Matthew and Bartholomew,



entered the house. Behind them followed Jesus's mother, Mary, several other women, and James and the other brothers and sisters of Jesus. Amon had met James on many occasions already but had only seen the other siblings of Jesus from afar. As they filed past him up the stairs, he wondered what it must have been like to have Jesus as an older brother.

Amon sat on the stairs and listened as the apostles prayed for God's guidance and elected Mathias as a new disciple to replace Judas Iscariot, who had betrayed Jesus. The other Judas, who remained faithful to Jesus, kept begging everyone to refer to him as "Judas *not* Iscariot," or by his other name, Thaddaeus, so people didn't get him mixed up with the betrayer.

After the meeting, the believers spent the rest of the day celebrating in the streets with friends and neighbors. Even as the sun began to set, the excitement through much of the city did not. The laughter and stories and speculation simply moved indoors. Amon's own house filled with people. Families brought food, lamps, and oil, and kept streaming through the door. As he climbed from the bottom floor to the upper room, then up to the open rooftop, Amon was amazed at the bright light from all those lamps and at the plates of meat, cheese, and bread. Dozens of small groups of people talked and laughed.

Amon looked over the edge of the roof. The children of all those families played in his father's sheep pens behind the house. Tamar and Benjamin approached the back door, so Amon ran down the stairs to greet them.

"My friends!" he said as they entered the house, "I thought I had lost you forever. Where have you been?"

Benjamin, a year younger than Amon and not yet a man, spoke up. "We were at my house, trying to tell my father what happened today."

"And he wouldn't believe a word of it," Tamar added. She was only slightly younger than Amon, and they had come to be good friends during their earlier adventures trying to save Amon's father. She was the daughter of Bartholomew, the disciple of Jesus, and a woman named Muriel, who died of a fever when Tamar was quite young. When Bartholomew and Amon's parents were children, they had all been present the night Jesus was born in Bethlehem. "Why are men so stubborn?" Tamar asked, shaking her head.

Amon grinned. "I think *everyone* is stubborn sometimes, especially about things we've been taught all our lives." Tamar slumped, and Amon added, "Besides, it is stubborn men who will carry the message of Jesus across the entire world."

"You mean, men *and* women." Tamar straightened her shoulders.

Amon frowned. He didn't want to get in another argument about girls being as capable as boys, so

he tried to put an end to it before it began. “I’m just saying that Jehovah has always used *men* to do his work.”

The scowl on Tamar’s face said that the argument was far from over.

“If you two are going to start this again, I’m leaving.” Benjamin’s voice made a funny squeak, and he blushed.

“Your body is telling you it is time to become a man,” Amon said. “Now your *head* must decide the same thing.”

Benjamin just frowned and walked off.

Amon sighed. “It is just a fact, Tamar, that girls aren’t important to Jehovah. Everyone knows that. It is clear in our laws.”

Tamar pursed her lips but kept her anger under control. “I don’t believe your mother would agree with that thought. Nor Mary, Jesus’s mother, nor any of the other women who’ve supported his journey.”

Even as a young girl, Tabitha, Amon’s mother, had fought against the Romans and King Herod to save her father.

“And where in the words of Jehovah did he ever say he had no use for women?”

Amon’s eyes widened in surprise. He wasn’t used to having his words questioned by those younger than himself, at least not on matters of Jewish law. “There are many examples throughout Jewish law where Jehovah speaks to us through our rabbis.”

“Words from our rabbis, yes. Through *men*. But are they really the words of Jehovah? Are there not many places in the laws where the rabbis do not even agree with each other? Or where they admit they do not know a thing? If Jehovah is always speaking through the rabbis, how could they disagree or not know? Is Jehovah confused? Is he unsure of himself?”

Amon frowned and looked toward the floor to avoid her eyes, afraid her words were close to blasphemy. “These things are very complicated,” he said finally. “Men must study them for many years before . . .”

Tamar ignored Amon’s stammering. “Our great father Moses told us the words Jehovah spoke to him on Mount Horeb, correct?”

Amon nodded his head slowly. “Yes, of course, but . . .”

“And he spoke to Ezekiel about the sins of Jerusalem, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And we know what he said about Jonah and Hosea and Zechariah because those words were written down for us by our prophets, correct?”

Amon simply stared at her.

“Then where, please tell me, in all of the Torah, did Jehovah ever say, ‘And beware the woman—she is an inferior creature, stupid in the mind and evil in the heart. Do not listen to her for she is not to be the leader of men.’ Where in all of Scripture did he say such a thing? I’ll answer that for you. He did *not* say such a thing! Only the priests and rabbis—old men, all—ever said that women may not serve Jehovah.”

Amon noticed others starting to stare at them. “Shhh!” He looked around nervously, then pulled Tamar into the room where his mother stored their food. “Take caution,” he whispered. “You must not speak such things. The high priest has many ears.”

Tamar lowered her voice. “What about Ruth? Esther? Miriam? Rahab?” She looked Amon straight in the eye. “I am correct, no? And what of Mary of Magdala, Mary and Martha of Bethany?”

Amon fidgeted. “I do not yet know,” he whispered finally. “But my mind will think on these things.”

As the evening flew by and the plates of meat and cheese and bread emptied, the small groups talking excitedly melted into one large group listening quietly to many stories from those close to Jesus. People sat on the floor, stood against the walls, and sat on the stairs leading to the upper room. Stories of the day were shared, but also stories of the past, of the words they’d heard Jesus speak, and the things they’d seen him do. Mary told about the angel that had visited her, about raising Jesus as a child, and about always knowing in her heart that he was the Son of God.

A few of the children had already fallen asleep when one man, a friend of Amon’s father, said, “Jotham, you, Tabitha, and Bartholomew were all there on the night Jesus was born. Tell us what you saw.”

Amon’s father looked nervously to his wife and Bartholomew, and Amon could see they all came to a silent agreement. He knew this had always been a sensitive subject for the three of them because no one ever believed their stories. Even Amon had thought his father sick in the head when Jotham claimed to have seen angels and miracles. But now, Amon knew, all those stories had been true.

Those sitting at the table quickly moved to make room for the three. Slowly, Tabitha, Bartholomew, and Jotham came from where they had been standing around the edges of the room and sat at the table. Jotham was the first to speak. “For me,” he said softly, and everyone leaned in to hear, “it started when I was ten years old and ran away from my father’s tents.”

And with that, Jotham, Tabitha, and Bartholomew each told long and amazing adventures of how they had met and how they had each been present when the Messiah, Jesus, was born.

As the stories continued, Amon noticed Levi, one of the disciples, who was also called Matthew. He sat on a stool in the corner under the light of an oil lamp, writing on a parchment.

Amon worked his way through the crowd and stood next to Matthew. “What is it you write?” he whispered.

Matthew looked up and smiled. “Sorry, it is just my way. All my life I have kept records and ledgers of people’s affairs.”

Amon considered this. “So you would know how much to tax them.”

Matthew turned away as if ashamed.

Amon knew from stories he’d heard that the man had once been a tax collector and was one of the men most hated by the other Jews.

“Until Jesus saved me from myself,” Matthew whispered, “I was a wretched man. But when I started following him and saw a new way to live, I used my skills to record the things he said and did. Mary, over there”—he gestured toward the mother of Jesus sitting on the other side of the room—“even told me some stories about his childhood. Did you know that when he was twelve, Jesus once left his parents and went to the temple, where he taught the rabbis?”

Amon’s mouth dropped open. “Jesus wasn’t even a man yet, but he could teach the rabbis?”

“That’s what she said. In any case, I’ve been keeping all these notes about Jesus from the beginning. I just can’t help thinking that someone, someday, can make these things into a book, so those who come after us can know that Jesus is the Son of God.”

Amon’s father was just telling how *his* father, a shepherd, had been camped outside Bethlehem one night and how they all witnessed a host of heavenly angels announce the birth of Jesus.

Matthew went back to scribbling down the stories as fast as others could tell them, and Amon wandered back over to his friends. He leaned over to Tamar and whispered, “I think we might be witnessing the beginning of something big.”

The look on Tamar’s face said, “Like what?”

“I think,” Amon answered the look, “that the men—I mean, the people—in this room are going to change the world.”

Tamar scanned the crowd, her gaze passing over the people telling stories, the people listening. “Wouldn’t that be just amazing.” Then she turned to Amon. “When do we start?”



What must that day have been like! To see Jesus—a man of flesh and blood—rise into the air and change into a glorious form to rejoin God the Father. What a sight it must have been, and what an electrifying event.

All those who saw it must have shouted and cheered and cried and then told everyone who would listen what they had seen. There must have been parties that night and excited talk about a new way of living, a new future.

For those involved, it must have changed their lives forever. Their heads must have been buzzing as if full of a thousand bees, and all of life must have seemed strange and new and exciting.

What must that day have been like.

I think I know.

I think it must have been exactly like the day I decided to give my life to Jesus, confess my sins, accept his forgiveness, and follow his example of selflessness, kindness, and love. Not that I've mastered any of those things yet, but I'm trying. And ever since that day, nothing has seemed the same. Life has been strange and new and exciting.

Because of Jesus.