

Any author who has written and sold as many books as Jerry Jenkins might be forgiven a tendency to lean on familiar structure while producing yet another manuscript. Fortunately, Jenkins is not just “any author.” While the broad storyline of Jesus choosing his disciples will be familiar to some, it is the author’s deft handling of the historical language and customs of the time that give his newest release a vibrancy rarely felt by readers of any novel. *The Chosen: I Have Called You by Name* has been crafted with wise and insightful context. This is the book Jerry Jenkins was born to write.

—**Andy Andrews**, *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Traveler’s Gift, *The Noticer*, and *Just Jones*

The only thing better than the film is the book, and the only thing better than the book is the film. Jerry B. Jenkins has taken the brilliant project of Dallas Jenkins—this look into the lives of those Jesus *chose* to be his followers, his friends, and his “family”—and gone a step (or more) deeper. Readers will be drawn as quickly into the pages as viewers were into the theatrical moments of *The Chosen* film project. I cannot say enough about both.

—**Eva Marie Everson**, president, Word Weavers International,
and bestselling author

The movie series brought me to tears, but Jerry’s book showed me the Jesus I wanted to know. *The Chosen: I Have Called You by Name* draws the reader into the humanity of Jesus. This story captures authentic insight into his personality. His love, humor, wisdom, and compassion are revealed for every person he encountered. Through Jesus’ interaction with the real-life characters, I too experienced the Savior who calls the lost, poor, needy, and forsaken into an authentic relationship.

—**DiAnn Mills**, Christy Award winner and director,
Blue Ridge Mountain Christian Writers Conference

Jerry Jenkins is a master storyteller who has captured the action, drama, and emotion of *The Chosen* video series in written form. Far more than a mere synopsis of season 1, Jerry has shaped and developed the first eight episodes into a fast-paced novel. If you enjoyed the videos, you will savor the story again as Jerry brings each character to life. And if you haven’t watched the video series, this novel will make you want to start ... just as soon as you’ve finished reading the book, of course!

—**Dr. Charlie Dyer**, professor-at-large of Bible,
host of *The Land and the Book* radio program

Writing with accuracy and immediacy, Jerry Jenkins immerses us in the greatest story ever told in a fresh and powerful way. Jenkins is a master of taking profound scenes and themes from the Bible and weaving them into captivating journeys, whether they are centered on the time of Jesus or the end times. *The Chosen: I Have Called You by Name* expands on the amazing TV series and will move readers through its unique retelling of the gospel story.

—**Travis Thrasher**, bestselling author and publishing industry veteran

To a girl who cut her teeth on Bible stories, it's no easy task to transform all-too-familiar characters into an experience that is fresh and alive. That is precisely what Jerry Jenkins has done with his newest novel, *The Chosen: I Have Called You by Name*. From the first chapter, I was enamored. And by the second and third, I started to see the Jesus I've long loved with new eyes and a more open heart. This book offers the reader more than mere diversion. It offers the possibility of true transformation.

—**Michele Cushatt**, author of *Relentless: The Unshakeable Presence of a God Who Never Leaves*

What better way to bring the gospel to life than to explore the impact Jesus had upon those with whom he came into contact. And what better encouragement for those of us today who hunger for his life-changing presence. I heartily recommend both the video and the book for any who long to experience his transforming love more deeply.

—**Bill Myers**, author of the bestselling novel *Eli*

The story of Jesus has been told and re-told, but with this beautiful novelization, Jerry Jenkins brings unique and compelling perspectives to the biblical accounts of Jesus and his followers, echoing those in the acclaimed *The Chosen* video series created by Dallas Jenkins. As someone who always thinks the book was better than the movie, I was delighted to discover a book and film series that are equally enthralling and even life-changing.

—**Deborah Raney**, author of *A Nest of Sparrows* and *A Vow to Cherish*

The CHOSEN[®]

BOOK ONE I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

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JERRY B. JENKINS



BroadStreet
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I Have Called You by Name

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Editor: Larry Weeden

Cover design: Michael Harrigan

Cover photo: Michael Harrigan/Wirestock/stock.adobe.com

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978-1-64607-108-1 (revised edition hardcover)

978-1-64607-087-9 (revised edition trade paperback)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data can be found at www.loc.gov.

Printed in China

25 24 23 22 21 5 4 3 2 1

To Sister Pam,
who radiates the love of God

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Based on *The Chosen*, a multi-season TV show
created and directed by Dallas Jenkins
and written by Ryan M. Swanson, Dallas Jenkins,
and Tyler Thompson.

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“There’s little doubt *The Chosen* will become one of
the most well-known and celebrated pieces
of Christian media in history.”

MOVIEGUIDE® Magazine

NOTE

The Chosen was created by lovers of and believers in the Bible and Jesus Christ. Our deepest desire is that you delve into the New Testament Gospels yourself and discover Jesus.

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“Fear not,
for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name,
you are mine.”

Isaiah 43:1

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The Shepherd

When Augustus Caesar became emperor of Rome, Judea was made a Roman province.

For 400 years the prophets of Israel had been silent. Priests read the Scriptures aloud in synagogues while Roman officers patrolled the streets, heavily taxing the Hebrews.

The prophecies whispered of a coming Messiah who would save God's people.

Chapter 1

OBSESSION

Kedron, Israel

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Short but well-muscled, with a cascade of curls bouncing on his forehead, Shimon knows he looks younger than his twenty years. Yet he'll be responsible for his three younger sisters once he's bequeathed his father's land and sheep. Which could happen today if it's why his parents have summoned him when he should be in the pasture.

His father has been sickly for nearly two years and unable to join him in the fields. Shimon misses his father's help and mentoring, but he has been forced to learn much. Officials from Kedron had visited his parents the day before. While Shimon wished he had been included, he assumes he will be informed of the details today.

They meet in his parents' bedchamber, where his father lies. "I have failed," the old man begins.

"Don't say that," Shimon says. "You have done all you could."

"Let him speak," his mother says. "He's trying to apologize."

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“But he has nothing to apologize for! I know he would be out there with me if not for—”

His father raises a hand. “We have lost everything. I have nothing to leave you.”

“But—”

“Let me speak!” his father rasps. “I feel terrible, but I have failed you all.”

“What are you saying?”

“You need not return to the fields. The new owners are already here.”

Shimon reels. “But the sheep, my sisters, our fut—”

“It’s my fault,” his father says. “I’m sorry! There’s no more to say.”

Stunned, yet eager to console his father, Shimon wants to thank him for all he has taught him, how he’s fed the boy’s obsession with the Scriptures, the prophecies, the promised Messiah. What will he do now? And what will become of all that study?

“You’ll have to leave and find work,” his mother says. “We’re left with this home but no land, no livestock. And still five mouths to feed.”

“I’ll do whatever I have to, of course,” Shimon says. “But where will I go? What should I do?”

His father rises onto an elbow. “You’ve always wanted to go to Bethlehem. Their herds supply the Jerusalem temple with sacrifices. Shepherders there must always need help.”

Bethlehem! Just more than twenty miles east but named in the prophecies! Shimon can only imagine visiting the synagogue there. But would he ever have time? He’d need to become a hireling if he hoped to keep his parents and sisters alive.

Shimon’s entire future has changed in an instant, yet the prospect of relocating to Bethlehem has already softened the blow.



One week later

Desperate to keep up, Shimon yanks the tether on a white lamb and forces himself along on the rough-hewn crutch he's fashioned from a tree branch. Ahead, the three older shepherds he serves—each leading his own lamb toward Bethlehem—pause and turn to needle him. Aaron, ebony skin stark against his white cotton tunic, mimics Shimon's limp, pretending his own walking stick is a crutch.

"C'mon!" Yoram, the eldest, shouts, his white-rimmed head gleaming in the relentless sun. "Let's go!"

Shimon's eagerness to prove he cares as much about their sheep as his bosses do had resulted in his injury. He'd led a flock into a limestone cave during a storm, and when one escaped, he chased after it, plunging into a ravine and badly rolling his left ankle. He would have welcomed a little sympathy—or gratitude—but he got only disdain. And no help, save for a gruff suggestion from dark-bearded Natan to "wrap it tight." Natan is the only one who even looks at the young man when he speaks.

Shimon hopes to catch the three men when they stop at the well on the way into the city, so he pushes himself. He winces with every stride, sweat pouring from his grimy face.

From a short distance, Shimon sees the other shepherds reaching the well. Five women bearing clay pots and leathern buckets busy themselves there until the shepherds approach. It strikes Shimon that the women make no attempt to hide their aversion, four of them immediately backing away, holding their noses.

"Lovely day today, isn't it?" Natan says loudly to one, nodding and smiling, but she covers her face and hurries off. "Come back!" he calls after her.

By the time Shimon reaches the well, the other shepherds

have filled their goatskin water sacs and begin to move on. The only remaining woman leaves as Shimon arrives. He fills his sac and hurries off, trying not to let the others get too far ahead. Passing the sign pointing to Bethlehem, he's reminded of the Scriptures he so cherishes, his father having raised him to study the Torah. Though Aaron and the others mock his passion, Shimon has memorized lengthy passages, especially about his new home. As he forces himself along, the lamb bleating, Shimon rehearses aloud:

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.’

“Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.

“And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.

“And he shall be their peace.”

Could it be? The Messiah could come from right here? It seems too much to hope for, and yet Shimon believes the prophets with his whole heart. He imagines the Chosen One defending the Jews and setting things right between them and the Romans.

Chapter 2

A SIGN

On the final stretch of the more than 100 mile walk from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Joseph realizes that his hope that this arduous journey would be some sort of respite from his work was a fantasy. How he would love to be back on the job right now, sweating in the sun because he and his mates were building something—something that would last! But now he smells of another kind of sweat as he leads his powerful but ratty-looking donkey slowly along, his pregnant fiancée delicately balanced on its back. He can't help believing this compulsory registration and taxation has come at the worst possible time.

Mary is due any day, and he silently prays it is not *this* very day. What will he do? What *can* he do in the middle of the desert on this dusty road? Sure, strangers pass from both directions, but who will stop to help a couple whose very garb makes it clear they are Nazarenes? They'd more likely be spit upon than helped in the hour of their greatest need. Fortunately, the last person to have blessed them with a sip of his own water had been a shepherd, nearly as much an outcast as they are.

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Joseph is desperate to get to Bethlehem, as much to find a well as to find a place for Mary to rest. She barely complains, but he knows she must be miserable.

There is, he must confess, a bit of relief from all they've already endured. His betrothed is the godliest woman he has ever known, even having privately learned to read so she could study the Torah, though only males are allowed in Hebrew school. So when she began to show—long before their wedding had even been scheduled—he was as shocked and disappointed, yes, in her, as anyone in Nazareth. Knowing her as he did, he could in no way make it make sense. And while many naturally blamed him for her predicament, he refused to protect his own reputation by breaking the marriage contract as any offended fiancé would have been justified to do.

But then had come the messenger from heaven, who appeared to him in a dream and assured him the baby Mary carried was the son of God. Filled with wonder and still finding it hard to believe, he traded stories with Mary, only to discover that their heavenly messengers had urged them both to fear not. That, they agreed, was one thing to be told and quite another to practice.

Right now, Joseph is afraid. He assures Mary he will look up Samuel, a distant relative, as soon as they arrive in Bethlehem. He has to confess it's been a long time since he's seen him. "I don't know if he's living in the same home."

"I hope so," Mary says. "You've said so much about him."

Joseph sighs. "We will see. We won't have any time to look for him if he's moved, of course."

"We'll see," she says, fingering the water sac as if hoping something, anything, will appear in it.

"Not even a drop?" Joseph says.

She shakes her head.

He sighs as the donkey stalls. Joseph clicks his tongue and jerks the beast on.

“Um, Joseph?”

“Yes.”

“Can you stop please? I’d like to walk for a bit.”

“No, Mary! Why would you want to walk?” He worries about her and the baby, of course, but mainly he wants to get to Bethlehem—for his own sake as well as hers. She’s strong, he knows. She went to visit her cousin Elizabeth by herself, walking 100 miles uphill the other direction from Nazareth, while three and a half months pregnant! She traversed a route known for bandits and other dangers, then stayed with Elizabeth for three months, returning alone more than six months into her pregnancy.

That temporarily saved her from ridicule in her hometown, ridicule that Joseph was not spared. His coworkers mocked and jeered, and some—painfully—just silently looked upon him with obvious disgust, having considered him a devout Jew. All he could do was rest in the promise of God.

But this trek is different. Mary cannot seem to stifle her cries of discomfort and pain, so Joseph teeters between rushing and slowing. They must find shelter, but he must also be so careful with his beloved and her child. He hopes to discourage her from dismounting the donkey. “It’s dangerous.”

“I’m getting a bit uncomfortable ...”

How is she able to sound so sweet, so precious, despite her agony?

“... Elizabeth actually told me it’s good to walk and move when I feel up to it.”

He sighs again, looking into the distance and then behind them. “We won’t have any water until I get you to town. You need your rest.” He stops the donkey. “Let me get you more

comfortable, eh?" He tucks his walking stick under his arm and tries to straighten the blanket beneath her.

"Joseph," she says, "you don't need to be the only one walking. Plus we're far enough away from Nazareth that I don't have to hide my condition anymore."

"Mary, this blanket is stuck! There is no way that you are comfortable."

"Joseph. I'd like to walk with you. Please."

What is he to do? Deep inside he wants to do whatever she wants him to. But he feels the weight of it. "I am responsible for you, Mary. For you and ..." He lays a hand gently on her belly.

"You protect us ..."

"Yes!"

"I'll let you help me down."

This amuses him, and he points at her. "All right, you can walk for a few minutes, huh? But please, not too far!" He moves back to the head of the donkey to urge it on. "You need to save your strength."

"I actually need you to help me down," she says.

"Aah, yes, sorry." He heads back and supports her as she reaches for him. "Slowly, slowly. Watch the baby."

She whimpers as he lowers her to the ground.

"You okay?"

"Yes, yes. Ooh, this feels better."

"Mm," he says, not so sure he should have allowed this but grateful she seems to enjoy it.

"Thank you."

He doesn't know how to respond.

"Thank you for protecting me," she adds. "I don't know that I've said that yet."

How can she say that? She's been thanking him for days

since they left home. “We have a little ways to go yet. Let’s see how the night goes and—”

“I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about—before.”

“Oh. Ah ...”

“I’ve been meaning to say something this whole journey. And I just ... I didn’t, and I should have.”

Again, Joseph doesn’t know what to say. She’s so much better at such conversations. “Mm.”

“I should have months ago.”

“You don’t have to,” he says, eyes straight ahead as they mosey on, she a step behind. Where is she going with this? He very nearly put her away privately before God visited him.

“Yes, yes, I do. You could have gotten all the bride price back from my father.”

The bride price! “It was never about the money.”

“I know it wasn’t, and I know it’s not polite to talk about. But no one would have blamed you.”

“For what?”

“For divorcing me. Publicly.”

“Mary, I—”

“You could be betrothed to someone whom you don’t have to hide. And people wouldn’t be gossiping about you. And you could go be registered without having to drag me on this donkey all day for five days.”

Now he’s totally at a loss. He would never dream of such a thing, not after ...

He feels her hand on his arm. “Joseph?”

He stops and turns to face her.

“You are a brave man, and you are godly. And I should have said thank you.”

He stares at her. How he loves this woman! He points to the sky with his stick. “God told me to.”

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“I know He did. But you had a choice.”

A choice? When God speaks? “Ah, ha! I don’t believe that I did. But I’m glad either way. I wouldn’t change a single thing that has happened, since that dream, hm?”

She smiles at him. “Neither would I.”

They walk on again. “Oh, this all seems impossible, huh?” he says.

“Yes, yes. But remember what the messenger said to me?”

“Hm?”

“Nothing is impossible with God.”

“My messenger didn’t say that. That would have been nice, huh?”

She sighs and smiles but looks weary. He draws her close.

“Are you feeling better?”

“A bit, yes.”

“Okay. Up, up.”

She grunts as she mounts the donkey.

“We need to move quicker,” Joseph says. “You need water, and I planned to get settled for the part where your messenger and my messenger said the same thing. And she will give birth to a son ...”

They speak together. “And you shall call his name Jesus.”

“Yes,” he says. “That part.”

• • •

Children frolic in the crowded Bethlehem marketplace as men loudly haggle. Merchants are buying, filling their pens with animals they will sell to pilgrims for sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem, fewer than six miles away. Shimon and his superiors have culled only the best from their herds, eager to garner the highest prices.

The merchants cajole shepherds and farmers to cut their

prices, while the shepherds and farmers laud the quality of their livestock and produce. Yoram gestures passionately as he wrangles with a merchant near where a child runs his hands through a freshly shorn hide of wool. Aaron bends at a stall to sniff fresh spices. As Shimon gingerly shoulders his way through the crowd, bleats and baas rise from all over, assaulting him with the stench of dung.

A Pharisee emerges from the local synagogue to judge the potential sacrifices, and Shimon sees his opportunity. The holy man holds Natan's black lamb, turning it this way and that as Natan entreats, "Perfect! Nothing, no blemish, nothing. Nothing wrong. See?"

"Spotless!" the Pharisee says. "This one's good."

Now Shimon's turn, he lifts his white lamb to the Pharisee and speaks over its plaintive cry. "Teacher, I have a question about the Messiah. I've studied Torah every day and—"

The Pharisee sighs, not looking up from his inspection. "A *shepherd* wants to learn ..."

"Yes!" Shimon says, smiling, then turns serious again. "Do you believe the Messiah will set us free from the occupation?"

"Yes," the Pharisee says flatly, clearly bored. "He will make a great military leader."

"Are you sure?" Shimon says, rushing to continue, "because last Shabbat the priest read from prophet Ezekiel, and he did not say—"

"How dare you!" the Pharisee says.

Aaron rushes over. "I'm sorry, Teacher. He is obsessed—"

"You brought this animal?"

Shimon and Aaron nod.

"I said 'spotless!'" the Pharisee says.

"Spotless, yes!" Aaron says.

The Pharisee turns the animal so they can see a wound on

its flank. “These are for righteous men, for the *perfect* sacrifice.” He sets the animal down. “I can’t send this to Jerusalem!”

Aaron grabs its rope and begins to lead it away, bowing. “Very sorry. Very sorry. Very sorry.”

The Pharisee wags a finger in Shimon’s face as Yoram and Natan approach. “You wonder why the Messiah hasn’t come? It’s because of people like you, keeping him away with your stains! If you come back here without a *perfect* lamb, I will banish you all from the marketplace.”

As the Pharisee spits on the ground in front of the shepherds, Shimon hesitates as if he wants to apologize. But Natan whispers, “Now, come. Come.”

Shimon moves to follow, but Yoram steps before him. “We warned you about this! Are you deaf as well as lame?”

“I’m sorry!”

“We are not slowing down for you! You take this runt back up the hill. And try to keep up or find your own way back.”

Shimon stares at the ground, and as the others leave, Natan stops and cups the young man’s cheek.

Humiliated but not wanting to return to the flocks alone, Shimon tries to make his way through the crowd to catch the three. But his ankle and the lamb slow him, and his crutch slips in the mud. He falls hard on his right elbow and gashes his forearm. From his knees he scans the crowd for the others, but they have disappeared.

Shimon struggles to his feet and hears a sonorous voice. He finds he is just outside the small synagogue, so praying no one will notice him, he slips through a curtained side door to find an elegantly appointed sanctuary.

At the bimah, the priest reads from a scroll: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

“You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.”

At the back of the synagogue, a man glares at Shimon in the doorway with his lamb. The man rises and hurries to him, scowling at the sight of Shimon’s elbow, which—to Shimon’s horror—drips blood onto the threshold. He shoves Shimon. “You need to go!”

“Can I not just listen?”

“No! This is a holy place!”

“Please!”

“Go! Get out!” He pushes Shimon back through the curtain and wipes the floor as the priest continues to speak. Shimon listens from outside.

“For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.”

Shimon hobbles back into the bustle of the marketplace, thrilled with what he has heard about the Messiah but crestfallen at having been banished. He merely wants to learn, to understand, to worship. He averts his eyes from the Pharisee who had berated him and avoids a Roman guard.

As Shimon makes his way through the crowd, a bedraggled, sharp-featured wayfarer approaches—his dirty face streaked with sweat. He leads a donkey bearing a pregnant young woman. “Excuse me, friend,” the man says. “Could you point me to a well in this town? My wife hasn’t had a drink in hours.”

Shimon nods. “Yes. The other end of the square.”

“Thank you, brother.”

As the man pulls the donkey away, Shimon gets a better look at the woman, great with child and clearly suffering. He

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must act. “Wait, wait. Here.” Shimon hands the man his own water sac.

“Oh, thank you for your kindness,” the man says, handing it to the woman. She drinks greedily.

They appear to have been on the road for days. “How far have you come?” Shimon says.

“From Galilee. Nazareth.”

Shimon looks around and whispers, “Don’t say that too loud here. You know they say nothing good can come from—”

“I know what they say about Nazareth,” the man says, smiling. He seems so kind, despite how exhausted he looks.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone. Your secret’s safe with me.”

“Thank you for your kindness,” the Nazarene says, and his wife smiles shyly.

Shimon reaches to shake the man’s hand and introduces himself.

But before the man can respond, the Pharisee approaches, shouting, “Out of my way!”

“We have to go,” the man says, and his wife hands back the water sac as they move on.

As Shimon leads his lamb out of the market, he can still faintly hear the priest: “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.’”

• • •

Joseph was bone weary and could only imagine how Mary was feeling as they finally trudged through the small gate into the tiny, but somehow bustling, village of Bethlehem. He had no idea how many of the house and lineage of David would be required to sojourn here from all over the land. Now, the water from the

shepherd has slightly refreshed Mary, but does it still make sense to try to find his distant relative, whom he has not, of course, had opportunity to inform of his and Mary's unique situation?

Distracted by the crowds, he desperately tries to keep everything in his mind at once. Mary is tired, still thirsty, in pain, and due. He has no idea where to turn. He looks this way and that, up one street and down another alley. "I believe Samuel's house is through here," he says, trying to sound surer than he feels. It's been so long. "I'm not sure how he'll respond to your, uh, condition, but he will have water, and it will be nice to see him."

She appears relieved to hear that, but the more Joseph stares, scanning the market and all the intersecting streets, the less sure he is—of anything. "Actually, I don't know if this is it. It looks so different. Maybe because there are so many people. I think if we, um—" But he doesn't like Mary's look. She appears ready to topple off the donkey, pressing her fist against her glistening face, eyes shut.

She gazes at him. "Yes?"

"We don't have time to look for Samuel," he decides.

"No," she says, "no, it will be fine. I know you wanted to find him."

"I need to get you to the inn, Mary. You need your rest. Maybe I can find a well so you can drink more fully, and I'll take you straight to the inn, eh?"

She nods, looking relieved. "Thank you."

He carefully guides the donkey, with its precious cargo, through the square. "Aah, so many people ..."

• • •

The sun hangs low on the horizon as Shimon begins the long trek back to the hill and the rest of the sheep, hoping his employers can forgive him. His emotions have risen and fallen so quickly in

such a short time. He'd been eager to sell what he thought was a perfect lamb. Then he'd hoped to sit—or at least stand—under a formal synagogue reading of the Scriptures. His disappointment had been briefly assuaged when he was able to aid the bedraggled traveling couple, only to see the gentle husband quickly retreat from the anger of the Pharisee.

• • •

Mary sits atop the donkey, her body telling her the time is near. She watches as Joseph finally reaches the front of the line at the entrance to the inn, where he had long ago arranged their lodging. It does not appear to be going well between him and the innkeeper, an elderly man with a full white beard. The man seems earnest, trying to explain something, and Joseph is clearly exercised. He's waving a rolled document he has kept deep in a pocket throughout the entire journey.

“So this is what, bull droppings?” he says. “How can you send confirmation and now—”

The man appears to be apologizing, but Joseph is having none of it. “You’re lying to me now!” he shouts, and when he glances Mary’s way, she pretends to focus elsewhere so he won’t know she’s witnessing his outburst. When she peeks back, the two men are in earnest conversation.

Pain digs at her abdomen, and she presses a palm against it, raising her gaze to the darkening sky. “Oh, God,” she breathes quietly, “You are my God. Earnestly I seek You. My soul thirsts for You. My flesh faints for You, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”

Her abdomen clenches, and she winces, stifling a cry. As Joseph approaches, looking defeated, she desperately composes herself.

“Mary ...” It’s as if he can’t speak.

She forces a smile in spite of herself. *Please don't let it be bad news.* But she fears the worst. "Well, what did he say?"

"You won't believe it. He said they are completely full. With the census, the whole town is overrun." As he shakes the water sac in vain, he adds, "I think it's because he knows we aren't exactly, you know, that I can't just give him more money like the others can. I was furious, but I kept my calm as I promised."

"Of course."

"I told him about our situation, but that didn't make a difference either."

Mary struggles not to panic. The last thing she wants is to give birth right here, not only in public, but also in the busiest area of Bethlehem. She looks up eagerly as Joseph continues.

"Finally, his wife said that if we wanted, we could try—camping in the stable. They promised us water and blankets to help, even lamb's cloths for the baby. They promised they would be clean. But I can go look for Samuel. If he's living in the same home, then he will have room."

Mary decides this has all been her doing. "I'm sorry I slowed us down. I should have stayed on the don—"

"Oh, Mary, it's not your fault."

"Joseph," she says gravely, grasping his hand. "We can't keep looking."

He looks alarmed. "Have the pangs started?"

She nods. "He's coming."

His eyes go wide. "I'm sorry, he said there was nothing."

"I know. I know."

"All right," he says. "All right. We will make it work, hm?"

"Yes, yes, we will make it work."

Joseph has for months been puzzling over all that has happened between him and young Mary. One day he marvels at the invasion of his dream and the message from the angel, and the

next he wonders if it could really be true. He has of course studied the Torah from his youth and knows of such visitations from God. But as far as he knows, it has been hundreds of years since anyone has experienced such a thing.

Naturally he knew and trusted and believed Mary's account of her own angel's message, and when he allows himself to dwell on it, it makes some irrational sense. He has seen in his beloved what God sees in her—a woman of true and pure character. Would he have thought in a million years that she would be chosen to carry and deliver the very son of God? Such a thing had never crossed his mind. He and every Jew before him awaited the promised Messiah, and that the man was to be born of a virgin was a great mystery that even many learned rabbis interpreted in different ways. Who is Joseph that he should be betrothed to the very woman God chose for such a task?

If any of this makes any sense, the choice of Mary does. But surely God knew who her fiancé would be. Joseph has never before even considered that the Creator could make a mistake. Yet why a carpenter, a builder, a man with a short temper? He tries to be devout, certainly, and he loves God. But he also knows who he is—and who he isn't.

Against his better judgment, Joseph timidly leads Mary inside to tell the innkeeper they will take him up on his offer. "The baby is coming, and we have no choice."

The man loads Joseph with the promised supplies—a basin of water and blankets—and his wife hands Mary strips of cloth she says are used to wrap lambs to keep them unblemished as they're transported to the temple for sacrifice. Busy with other guests filling the place, they point Joseph and Mary to the stable, crowded with animals.

Once there, Joseph can tell Mary has the same reaction he does to the squalor and the stench. Large, curious eyes of cows,

sheep, goats, and donkeys peer passively at them in the low flickering of a few meager lamps. Tentative bleats and moos greet them as Joseph carefully leads Mary around heaps of dung.

“There’s enough wood here,” he says, struck by how ashen she looks. “I can put something together for you.”

“There’s no time. They’re coming faster now.”

“All right. We can do this. Try to find a spot to sit on this blanket, and I’ll put *something* together for you. And I’ll clean up, huh?”

• • •

It will be dark by the time young herder hireling Shimon arrives back at the sheepfold, and hunger gnaws at him. But despite what he’s endured, he has been buoyed by the priest’s reading, and as he leads the blemished lamb, he reminds himself of the rest of the passage from the prophet Isaiah. He recites:

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.”

• • •

In the pitch darkness, Shimon reaches the hill where the sheep lie for the night. Yoram, Natan, and Aaron sit around a small fire, enjoying their evening meal. They laugh, plainly recounting the marketplace encounter. Aaron says, “Yes, well, next time I will wipe my hands with his robe. He will faint!”

Natan gestures with a crust of bread. “A Pharisee is so cheap, when he writes his will, he names himself as the heir!”

“And he still doesn’t get much!” Aaron says.

Yoram turns as Shimon steps into the light of the campfire. Pots of flame hang from the tent, giving light as well. “Huh! Finally! He’s back!”

“Hello, Shimon,” Natan says.

“Stay with the sheep!” Yoram calls out.

“He is useless,” Aaron says. “Why do you keep him around?”

“He’s a good boy,” Yoram shrugs. “He’ll want some dinner.”

“Aaron made dinner tonight,” Natan says. “So, nothing is cooked!”

As Yoram laughs, Aaron says, “The food is fine. It’s my grandmother’s recipe, so leave it alone!”

“That is why your grandfather left,” Yoram says, and Natan howls.

Shimon wearily returns the lamb to its mother and watches as they settle in the grass. When he starts up toward the others again, he finds his ankle has grown only worse, and he can barely move. The older three are still recounting the day.

“I wish that woman wouldn’t have left the well,” Natan says.

Aaron nods, eyes distant. “She was very beautiful.”

“Very pretty, very pretty,” Yoram says.

Shimon leans on his crutch, his stomach growling. “Can I have my dinner now?”

“Not with us.” Aaron shakes his head. “Take your plate over there.” He points back toward the flocks.

“After what happened this morning,” Yoram says, “you sleep with the sheep tonight.”

“And pay attention this time,” Aaron tells him.

Yoram points at Shimon. “Watch out for wolves.”

Natan shakes a morsel of food in his palm. “Watch out for the Pharisee—he might come after you.”

Shimon grabs a torch and holds it in the fire till it bursts into flame.

“A Roman took another sheep yesterday,” Aaron tells the others.

Grateful not to have to try to speak over the lump in his throat, Shimon shuffles off with his plate. Natan calls out. “Shimon! They’re talking about the Romans again.”

“He cooked it right in front of me!” Aaron says. “They take whatever they want!”

Yoram shakes his head. “Let’s talk about something else.”

Shimon trudges down a grassy embankment toward a brook, panting now, each step taking more out of him. He has never felt so lonely. He sets his plate on a rock and wades into the marshy shallows, pokes his torch into the mud, and slowly bends to dip his gouged arm into the stream, gingerly rinsing it.

Above him, the other three have fallen silent, and all he hears are the pokes of their sticks into the fire.

• • •

“He needs a place to sleep,” Mary says.

“What?” Joseph says.

“When he gets here, he needs a place to lie down. You make my bed. I’ll make his.”

“Already a mother, eh?”

Joseph finds not a square foot on the floor not covered with dung. He finds a shovel and quickly begins to clear a spot where he can spread hay and a blanket. Meanwhile, Mary—clearly hurrying in her distress—wipes a small feed trough with water and layers it with straw. Working largely with one hand—the other on her stomach—she folds and spreads a blanket in the manger. A goat sticks his nose over a wood railing, and she reaches to push it away. She winces and groans.

Mary presses the back of her hand against her forehead. “My soul magnifies the Lord,” she whispers. “And my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant.”

Joseph stops shoveling and straightens. “What is that?” he says.

“What?”

“What are you saying?”

“Oh, nothing ...”

“Is it a song of David? We could use one right about now.”

“No, sorry, it’s—just something to myself.”

He gets back to working quickly. “A poem you created?”

“Yes, but—”

“When?”

“Several months ago.”

“I would love to hear it.”

She looks self-conscious and shakes her head.

• • •

Shimon sets his crutch aside and slides down to sit next to his plate. Weary, he continues to fight tears. His wound makes him feel unclean, and he is too exhausted to eat. With his torch illuminating the water, he is surprised to find it murky. In the daylight, the stream had been clear.

Abruptly the air stills, and sheep and birds and insects fall silent. When the wind kicks up again, the sheep are on their feet. Branches sway, leaves flutter, and Shimon’s torch blows out. He steals a glance up the hill where Yoram, Natan, and Aaron struggle to their feet, pulling their garments about them in the wind. Their fire and their hanging pots blow out, and the three disappear from sight—until the sky fills with light brighter than the noonday sun. The men fall to their knees, Yoram burying

his face in the dirt, Natan and Aaron staring wide-eyed, mouths agape.

An angel appears in their midst, and what Shimon can describe only as the very glory of God shines all around. He cannot move. The angel says, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Dreaming, Shimon tells himself. *I’m dreaming. This cannot be! This day? In my lifetime!*

The angel continues, “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly, there is with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

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• • •

Joseph peers outside to the horizon. “Mary, are you seeing this?” He steps past her to gaze at the sky in the distance, radiating with light and color. “Mary? Mary!”

She gasps, and he turns to find her looking terrified, liquid gushing to her feet. “Joseph, it’s time!”

Barely able to breathe, he rushes to her. “Come! I’ve got you. Come, sit.”

“Shouldn’t we call for help? You’ve never done this before! Maybe the wife could come and help?”

“No, there isn’t time. We’ve got this.” He reaches to lay her down.

“No, no, no! I don’t want you to see me like this!”

As he settles her onto the blanket, she cries out.

“Mary, look at me.”

THE CHOSEN: I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME

“No, no, no, I can wait!” she says, looking past him. “Go get someone.”

“Don’t look over there, Mary. Look at me.” With all that is within him, he wants to be for her all that she needs. Plainly terrified, she meets his eyes. “We are not alone,” he tells her.

“I am so scared.”

“Hey, remember what your messenger said—the first thing your messenger said. It was the same thing my messenger said to me, remember?”

She nods. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Don’t be afraid!”

She appears to force a smile. “I love you.”

He presses his forehead against hers. “I love you.”

“Thank you for taking care of me,” she sobs. “God gave you to me.”

“He has been our help,” Joseph says, “and in the shadow of His wings, we will sing for joy. A song of David.”

“Yes.”

“Can I hear yours now?”

She laughs through it all. “Not now.” She groans.

“I know, I know. It is time, yes?”

“Yes.”

He folds a cloth and submerges it into the basin of water, dabbing her face as she groans. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

And in the steamy night, sweat pouring down both their faces as she screams, Joseph delivers the son of God. Mary’s tears stream as he cuts and ties the cord and hands her the baby. As she wipes down the boy with a cloth, Joseph pulls a leather pouch from his tunic and pours salt into the water, immersing his fingers and helping clean the baby. The salt will toughen the baby’s velvety skin, but it also symbolically affirms that the child is Joseph’s legitimate son. The woodworker has already endured

embarrassment and disdain to claim the babe as his own. He will never waver.

Mary wraps the infant in the swaddling cloths and rocks him, gazing in wonder at Joseph.

“Are you better?” he says. “Is this comfortable?” He knows better, of course. How comfortable can it be?

But she smiles wearily at him. “Yes, thank you.”

“Are you still in pain?”

“Yes, but, uh, the blanket underneath is helping.”

They look at each other and shake their heads, and Joseph feels such relief wash over him that all he can do is lean back and laugh. “Oh, I don’t know how you did that! I feel like my heart is going to explode!”

“Oh, don’t make me laugh,” Mary says. “It hurts to laugh.”

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As quickly as they had come, the angels are gone. Shimon labors to his feet and hears his compatriots laughing like children. He knows they, like he, will light out for Bethlehem again as fast as they can go.

Shimon digs his crutch into the ground and propels himself from the brook to the hillside and begins to run. He seems to forget his damaged ankle, running as he had when he was whole. And the faster he goes, the more of his ragged bandage falls away until his left foot is bare. Soon he sheds the crutch and feels as if he’s flying toward the city.

What must the others be thinking? He has annoyed them for days, regaling them with his fascination with the ancient prophecies and his questioning of the Pharisees. But even more, what must they make of their inability to catch him? Shimon has slowed them for so long.

THE CHOSEN: I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME

Can it be true? What did the angel mean, “lying in a manger”? The *Messiah*? The king?

Shimon turns to see Yoram, Natan, and Aaron racing, yet falling farther behind. Like him, they had been paralyzed with fear, and now they whoop and holler and laugh. If Shimon is only imagining all this, they are part of his fantasy. Has he wanted this, longed for this for so many years that he has invented it in his mind? The prophets have not spoken for hundreds of years, and now angels appear with this news?

Shimon feels no pain, no fatigue, not even shortness of breath as he runs all the way across the fields to the road and past the well, verses of Scripture coming to him from endless hours of reading, studying, memorizing. *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son.*

But in a *manger*? Where? How far?

Shimon slows and stops within sight of a small barn, animals milling inside and out. Surely this cannot be the place.

And yet it is lit from within, while everything around it lies in darkness.

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