

CATACOMBS

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A MYSTERY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE BIBLE CODE

It is a fact that in the mid-1980s, Israeli scientists discovered encoded information about the past and future within the first five books of the original Hebrew Bible. These scientists, Doron Witztum, Eliyahu Rips, and Yoav Rosenberg, wrote a paper with the intent to study the phenomenon systematically and to disclose their methods so scientists around the world could use them.

They submitted their article "Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis" to the prestigious journal *Statistical Science*. Of course, the journal was skeptical and ordered an unprecedented three separate, independent reviews of the work. The outcome of each review confirmed the Israelis' conclusions. In fact, the odds of finding the encoded information in Genesis simply by random chance were calculated to be 1 in 10 million.

Even Harold Gans, a senior cryptologic mathematician in the United States National Security Agency conducted an independent study and verified the Israeli's conclusions. *Statistical Science* ultimately printed the article in 1994 (Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 429–438).

PROLOGUE

Jerusalem, 743 B.C.

Ahaz's sandals made scuffing noises as they slid across the cold stone floor of the cavernous palace throne room. The palace was hallmarked by great cedar pillars supporting the walls and cedar beams supporting the ceiling, both covered with cedar paneling and decorated with a hundred golden shields.

Streams of bright morning sun flowed through three tiers of windows, each tier consisting of three rows of fourteen. The massive gilded throne mirrored light onto the golden shields, which ricocheted to other shields in a slow-moving light show.

King Solomon had built the elaborate palace before the twelve tribes of Israel split into Judah (a southern kingdom of two tribes) and Israel (a northern kingdom of ten tribes). The kings of Judah had ruled from this very palace in Jerusalem for over two hundred years. It was currently the center of King Ahaz's dominion.

Ahaz had a thick salt-and-pepper colored beard shrouding the lower half of his face, but it did not hide the tortured expression on his leathery features. His shoulders slumped as he stood near the throne. *If Israel finds an ally, how can our two tribes defeat those ten? The city is protected, but we could hold out for only so long. Maybe I should seek help . . . The Egyptians might . . . for enough gold.*

Onam, a gangling man with a bald, bare head sneaked into the chamber. He held a large scroll. The fine weaves of his outer garment looked out of place over his coarse tunic that earmarked him as a servant.

He came before Ahaz and froze, except for his trembling jaw. “K . . . K . . . King Ahaz, it’s nearly time to start the day’s business. Do . . . do you want me to preview the cases you will be hearing today?”

Ahaz did not disguise his anger as his head jerked around. “Haven’t you heard the rumors about Israel invading us? If they do, we cannot prevail alone.” He glanced at the scroll hanging from Onam’s hand. “I know today’s agenda fully, but put everything off.”

The servant swallowed hard as his body quivered. With obvious effort, he forced himself to meet the king’s glare. “My King, I . . . I am aware, but . . .”

Ahaz stomped his foot, his voice a bullhorn. “But nothing! I said no routine business today.”

The servant dropped the scroll as he bolted from the throne room, barely avoiding a collision with a large, bearded man. He was dressed in a short tunic covered with a leather breastplate and an outer coat pulled back like a cape.

The bearded man pointed his spear toward the ceiling, gave Onam a bemused glance, and marched in. As governor of Judah, Shaphan had the immediate task of reconnaissance of all elements who might threaten the kingdom. He was tall, well built, and carried himself with confidence.

Ahaz stared into the man’s dark orbs, an ominous feeling crushing him. “Shaphan . . . have you been able to obtain any information about our enemies?”

The governor held the king’s gaze and set the butt of the spear near his foot. “My king, our spies have reported that Israel has allied herself with Syria.”

Ahaz cringed, his hands betraying a faint tremble. He had dreaded what he was sure would be Shaphan’s assessment of the situation. A Syrian-Israeli alliance would result in the loss of his kingdom and likely his life. Hearing the news caused the alliance to become more real than he had ever allowed himself to feel it before.

Frowning, Shaphan continued, “They intend to destroy us by splitting Judah in two and each getting half. They also intend to replace you with a son of Tabeel.”

Ahaz reeled, his voice a hiss. “Surely, this cannot be true. Can your spies be mistaken?”

Shaphan shifted his weight and breathed a haunting sigh. “No, they are my most trusted agents. And worse . . . the news is spreading in the streets. Our citizens are beginning to panic.”

Ahaz staggered the short distance to the throne and slumped against its back.

Again, Onam appeared at the door, shuddered, and cleared his throat. “King Ahaz.”

Ahaz swung his lion-like head to glare at the attendant. “What!”

“Sir, you have a visitor. He says he urgently needs to talk to you about Syria and Israel.”

“Who is it?”

“Shear-jashub, son of Isaiah.”

Noticing Isaiah’s son standing a distance beyond the door, Ahaz moved to a more stately position. Isaiah was the most well-known and renowned prophet in both Judah and Israel. He clearly spoke the word of God. His prophecies always were accurate, although not always pleasant. “Send him in.”

Fear squeezed the king’s throat as he watched the young man’s advance to the throne. Shear-jashub wore a short, white, tightly woven robe. A finely braided rope drew the robe snug and showed his thick quads rippling with each step. “What news do you have?”

Shear-jashub genuflected, his expression stoic. “My king, good health to you. I have no news, but my father does. He wants to talk to you”—he glanced at Shaphan—“in private.”

“He does?” The request piqued Ahaz’s interest and hope chinked at his depression. “Where in private?”

“He wants you to meet him at the end of the aqueduct for the Upper Pool on the highway to Fuller’s field about the ninth hour today.”

The small seed of optimism started to flower in Ahaz’s mind, for he knew God spoke through Isaiah. “I will be there. My attendants will accompany me but will remain far from the upper pool.”



Although the aqueduct for the Upper Pool had been constructed one hundred years earlier, the chiseled stone flow channel had worn very little by the continually running water. The channel was supported by cut stones and stacked to form arches where the ground level was not high enough to support it in a continual descent.

Ahaz stumbled as he followed the dirt path weaving in and out of the stone supports. The soft gurgle of water flowing into the Upper Pool floated through the air, providing a calming, almost musical score for the meeting. Ahaz wore no crown and continually combed back his long hair with his stiff fingers as he trudged along the path.

Isaiah sat with Shear-jashub on a rotting log and scanned the path for Ahaz. He caught sight of the king passing through the last arch and stood, the sweet smell of rotting wood still in his nose.

The two men heard only the soft sound of trickling water, occasionally pierced by the caw of a crow announcing its territory as the king lumbered toward them.

Isaiah's long white beard and white hair danced in the balmy breeze, which did little to soothe his foreboding. He scrutinized the approaching king and winced at Ahaz's cowering body language. Isaiah had a long and close relationship with God and had passed to the Jews many of His prophecies, but he was very impatient with people who did not believe God's words. As he evaluated Ahaz's manner, internal doubts probed his being.

Ahaz faltered as he gawked at the two standing men. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Isaiah's weathered appearance held the formal expression fitting for conversation with a king, his voice pleasant. "Long life to you, King Ahaz. I have a message from the Lord."

Ahaz grimaced and he swallowed hard. "What is it?"

Isaiah sensed the internal pressure he always felt when he had a message to deliver. It began to ease as he took a deep breath. "The Lord says to not be afraid of these two smoking stubs . . . Rezin, King of Syria and Pekah, the usurper of the throne of Israel. Though they devise a plan to combine forces and split the land into two parts, the Lord says it will not happen."

Ahaz avoided Isaiah's look and remained silent.

Knowing the intent of the Lord's message was to remove Ahaz's fear of the alliance, Isaiah was surprised at his unchanged expression, but continued, "In fact, the Lord says in sixty-five years, Israel will become so shattered a people, they will no longer remain a nation."

Ahaz nearly collapsed onto the fallen tree trunk with a fearful countenance. He held his head in his hands with his elbows propped on his knees. "What if that doesn't happen? I need a way to defeat them, not out-wait them."

Isaiah sneered and stepped uncomfortably close to the king. He had heard this type of blatant disbelief before but coming from the king of Judah, it cut him deeper than usual. Anger bubbled just below the surface as he said, "Ahaz, ask for a sign from the Lord your God . . . one that will convince you the Lord has really spoken to me and that He will keep His word."

Ahaz continued staring at the ground in front of him. He placed his hand on his brow as though trying to hide his look of despair. "No . . . I will not ask for a sign . . . neither will I tempt the Lord."

The wind felt sweltering as Isaiah's pulse pounded. He took a menacing step toward Ahaz.

Shear-jashub moved between the two.

Isaiah stopped. He shook his head in disbelief as he rose to an imposing stance. "Hear then, you leader of the house of David. It is a small thing for you to try the patience of men, but will you also try the patience of the Lord?" Isaiah's jaw clenched as he took a single step to leave but wheeled back and leveled his finger at Ahaz, his voice filled with disgust. "The Lord Himself shall give you a sign . . . Behold, the young woman who is unmarried and a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel . . ."

CHAPTER ONE

Jerusalem, approximately 770 years later:
Malchus scrunched his forty-year-old body through the narrow opening next to the inside of Jerusalem's city wall and felt the chilly air wash over him. A dank smell permeated his nostrils. Although his torch burned brightly, darkness swallowed the set of stairs immediately in front of him. An invisible creek babbled over random rocks as it coursed under the city, providing a familiar, almost comforting sound.

Malchus' dark brown hair and beard were well trimmed, a requirement for serving royalty. He was a large man. His muscles rippled in the flickering light, but fatigue from a full day's chores closed in upon him. He had spent much of the last ten nights searching the catacombs. Although a lead servant, his daily activities prevented him from fully recuperating during the day. He leaned against the clammy rock entrance and sucked in the damp air. *Maybe tonight will be the night.*

He shook his head, held the torch high, and tramped down the steps. Reaching the corridor, he headed off, ignoring the tombs on the right and the left. Soon he would be back to the area housing the oldest ones. After several minutes, he turned into a side corridor and then another and another.

As he traveled, his thoughts went back to the late afternoon when Bukki, the lead servant for his master's father-in-law had sent a new clue on a standard small scroll. Malchus had deliberately turned the scroll to its seal. It was authentic—the letter *A* embedded in the wax—just as all the others. He had carefully placed his index finger under

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one edge of the papyrus and inched it through the wax, breaking the seal and allowing the scroll to pop open. He had read the two letters: *P* and *R*.

He continued weaving through the catacombs until he reached a part he had not yet searched. He stopped and fished a hand-drawn map from a pouch tied to his belt. *Let's see . . . where have I not been? Yes . . . this is the way.*

He shoved the map back into the pouch and patrolled the new corridor. He scrutinized each tomb's stone covering, his brain fixed on the letters *P* and *R*.

Suddenly, he froze. His peripheral vision had caught something farther down the corridor. His muscles went rigid as he strained to hear. His ears captured the soft shuffling of sandals on the dirt-covered stone floor, then voices.

Malchus panicked. He flew back through the corridors he had earlier traversed. His master had selected darkness as the time for Malchus to make his search, knowing no one ventured here at night, except to occasionally entomb a body. But his master always involved Malchus in those burials.

Malchus stopped at the bottom of the stairs leading back to the alley by the city wall. His breathing was labored from more than running. His fear of being caught in the catacombs gave way to the realization someone else could be searching as well. The revelation paralyzed him. He had to be the one to find Melchizedek's Tomb—his entire future depended on it.

CHAPTER TWO

Joseph Justus inched his way up the gangplank, jostled by crewmembers carrying supplies and other passengers carrying their luggage. Being much taller, he could easily see where he was going, though he squinted from the low morning sun beaming directly at him.

Justus travelled much of the latter part of his thirty-two years and was quite seasoned, but he still became excited by the boarding process. It always marked the beginning of a new adventure. He had arrived at the dock as the sun peeked over the treetops, his spirit soaring, though this mission was sure to be difficult.

He grinned as he weaved his way onto the main weather deck, easily hefting his massive trunk over the luggage and around the people on deck. It was a beautiful late-autumn day. He loved this time of year. Rather than immediately going below to the cabins, he strolled to the pier side of the ship, lowered his trunk to the deck and leaned on the exquisitely carved railing. The Alexandrian ship had the Twin Brothers, Castor and Pollux, as its figurehead.

Since it was already past the Feast of Trumpets, these ships would soon be wintering at various ports in Crete like the one here at Phoenix, an ideal location. Fortunately, none of them were wintering yet. Unfortunately, this voyage would be packed to capacity because everyone was trying to get as close to their destination as possible before the winter storms made travel almost impossible.

Justus gazed down the gangplank filled with the haphazard movements of crewmembers and passengers and tried to ignore the pounding and screeching of their loading cargo. Not only did his height cause

him to stand out in this crowd, but being clean-shaven and having short hair made him even more conspicuous. He watched the boarding passengers, trying to guess where they were from and what their standing in society might be.

Wearing an orange robe, a black man with three large gold rings about his neck and two smaller ones hanging from one ear pushed past Justus. As he did, Justus glimpsed large gems attached to rings on three fingers of each hand, and concluded he was a wealthy Ethiopian, likely close to Queen Candace.

A pasty, white-faced man with a head full of dark brown curly locks, a beard trimmed in a sharp angle from each ear, and a finely woven outer coat followed the Ethiopian. Justus detected bits of a red and yellow undergarment and deduced him to be of a royal family from the recently Roman-conquered country of Spain.

The more varied the passengers, the more exhilarated he felt until he focused on two chained men. Both were skin and bones and wore ragged, dirty tunics. Each wore anklets connected by a single chain, their hands tied together in front of their bodies. And even though they were planted on the dock behind many of the boarding passengers, Justus assessed they were both Jews. *Aha! We have royalty mixed with prisoners . . . and the two Roman centurions following them are sure to be my roommates, one of the many penalties of being the son of a Roman proconsul.*

The last of the passengers was climbing the gangway when Justus sighted a wagon wildly careening down the street toward the pier. The driver reigned in two black stallions—their heads reared back, their hooves grazing the edge of the pier.

Passengers and crew paused to gape at the commotion. A moment later, three women climbed down from the wagon.

A gnarled crewmember near Justus said, “Crazy women. What do they think they are trying to prove?” Leaning into his load, he continued across the deck to the storage hold.

Justin grinned and stretched up on his toes to follow the women’s progress. All three appeared to be about his age. This voyage may be even more interesting than he’d imagined.

Two of the women moved to the gangplank but remained on the dock, waiting for the third to register. One kept looking at the water between the ship's hull and the pier, which caused Justus to question whether she was afraid of it. The other looked at ease. Justus could tell from the style of their clothes they were from Greece. He would enjoy meeting either one of them, until the third turned from registering with the captain.

Her gait was fluid, and she held her body upright with a hint of arrogance. Her robe was fine linen and pulled back revealing a short dress, intricately bordered with miniature pomegranates. Her well-proportioned body was accentuated by the cut of the dress, and her deep tan emphasized by her garment's alabaster color.

The other two women started up the gangway as the third arrived. Justus tried to resolve the contradiction between last woman's royal mannerisms and dark tan, but he couldn't figure it out. He ended up simply gawking at the trio.

In seconds, they reached the deck. The front two brushed by Justus, making no eye contact.

The tanned woman, however, stopped directly in front of him looking galled, her short black hair wafting back from the breeze coming off the harbor, and her voice bold. "You have a question?"

The woman's surprising candor rattled Justus. He raised his right hand slightly toward her. "Ah . . . well . . . yes. What's your name?"

The woman hesitated as if evaluating his request, but raised her chin and displayed a challenging expression. "Michal." She used the Jewish soft pronunciation of *ch* as in the name *Michelle*, rather than the harsh Greek *ch* as in *church*. "And yours?"

Justus snapped to attention and replied, "Justus."

Michal's eyebrows raised and the corner of her mouth turned up slightly. "Spoken like a true Roman." She turned and followed her friends below.

Justus was frozen. All he could do was swallow his machismo and stare at her captivating back until she disappeared through the hatch.