

THE SINDON

A MYSTERY OF CHRIST'S BURIAL LINEN

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L A R R Y M A S S A

AUTHOR *of the* BEST-SELLING BOOKS
ARMAGEDDON NOW and CATACOMBS



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PROLOGUE

Masada, Israel: 35 AD

Mazis' sandals crunched the fine rock with each step. Living on the opposite side of the city, he trekked this route toward the magnate's office many times. Bucket in hand, his tour tonight would include a visit to the cistern.

Although the same routine, somehow it seemed different this evening. His mind wandered along with the path to twenty-five years earlier when his gift had vaulted him into the position of kabbalist. He fingered his long beard. It wasn't so long when, as a young man, his skill at creating and breaking codes became widely known. The Great Assembly of Jewish mystics heard of it and took him into their secret society to find deeper truths in the Hebrew Bible, an honor which humbled and challenged him.

Spying an ever-present Empire flag, even here, in this sanctuary, he said a quick thanks that very few people—certainly

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not the Romans—recognized the work he actually did, which involved far more than simple translation. He glanced around. But they knew about his gift. That was dangerous enough. The thought of a certain hidden package sent a shiver through his spine worse than the windy breeze. *No, it is safe. No one could possibly find it.*

The high walls of Masada's mountain shelter towered over him like a fortress in King David's songs. He had moved to Masada, created by the now-dead King Herod as a refuge sixty years earlier, because it matched his solitary life. Breathing in the cool air, he thought how this place—his home—had truly been a shelter, giving him the quiet and safety he needed to dig deep, like a fortune seeker, into the words of Yahweh. But the treasure turned out greater than he'd dreamed.

The street rose slightly from his room in the casement wall to the Roman garrison's headquarters. At this late hour, none of the few city inhabitants walked on it.

Wind always blew through the plateau atop the mountain. The cool breeze of evening replaced the heat of the day. Mazis pulled his topcoat tighter.

Since joining the society, he spent years searching the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, to find meaning beyond the plain text. As he continued his passage, he could almost hear Asher, his teacher and mentor, telling him he would be the first one to find some hidden truth. But, it was the Roman advocate, Joseph Justus, who had accomplished it.

Mazis smiled inwardly. The information Justus found thrilled him. After all, it changed his life by leading him to Christian faith. His study of the establishment and growth of Christian churches during the last two years convinced him of world change, also.

His eyes caught four vultures high in the air floating in a large circle. Their wings did not move as they followed each other on unseen updrafts. *Something's dead.* The Judean desert could be a dangerous place.

Mazis straightened his head and focused on the courtyard in front of the largest building in the city. He knew why he had been summoned. He'd again have to leave behind his passion for studying the Torah and figure out another message for the Romans. *What would the cipher be this time?* Although others might see him as valuable, he felt used. After moving the empty water bucket away from his leg, he brought it back to tap repeatedly. Few in the past required much effort.

The challenge of breaking a code kindled his internal gift, but the requests were starting to dominate his psyche. They originated with the Roman governor in Caesarea, and how the army might use his information concerned him.

This familiar courtyard had hosted him too many times in the past few months. Stunted fig trees showed the beginning of their fruit. Large branches of a palm tree at the edge of the courtyard moved back and forth in the strong breeze. His robe furled out like a miniature sail.

Multilevel buildings rose up the city wall opposite the gate like stair steps. Though empty now, they had made up Herod's elaborate former residence. They cast a long shadow over the courtyard in the setting sun. Mazis passed the palm tree. His rock scrunching steps gave way to the silence of grass.

All three buildings of the edifice on the opposite side of the courtyard connected one another and attached to the exterior wall. Their fronts opened to the courtyard. Imagining the half-blood King Herod conducting official business in the one farthest to the left caused an internal smile in Mazis. The next

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had been for administration personnel to work and stay; the last, a residence for high-ranking visitors.

A Jew could not enter the house of a non-Jew without being defiled, so he turned in the direction of a small fire and continued his gait. The blaze appeared new. Wood popped, sending miniature fireballs into the grass. *Wonder why no one is here.* He held his hands above the flames, catching some heat.

Within seconds, two soldiers came from the residence building, both in full uniform. Mazis did not recognize either and judged them as new replacements. The taller held a cleaned, raw shoulder of lamb with a long stick protruding from either side. The duo stopped by the fire.

The shorter scowled at Mazis. "What do you want?"

Mazis caught the tone as one he had heard many times from non-Jews. "I was summoned by . . ."

"Me," a third soldier interjected with a bright expression as he exited the former administration building. "I will tell the commander you are here." The warrior spun on a heel and re-entered the structure.

After the original two exchanged looks, the shorter one shook his head faintly and crouched to the fire. He snatched a log and stirred the burning wood harshly. Bright embers soared up only to be snuffed out in the evening air several feet up. His grip firm on the log, he frowned at Mazis but said to his counterpart, "I'll be back." Standing and turning, he tromped to a dark torch in the courtyard, lit it, and moved on. The nightly drill would be the same. After all the torches in the courtyard burned, the city wall sticks with tallow would follow.

Without looking, the soldier holding the meat bent forward. "He doesn't like Jews," the man said in a matter-of-fact voice. Stones on opposite sides of the fire held the meat above

the flames as the man placed the stick onto them. The lamb shoulder sizzled.

Mazis nodded and tightened his lips. “Lot of that going around.”

The pleasant smell of roasting meat drifted across the courtyard. Mazis’ stomach growled. Knowing he would not be offered any, he meandered to the porch of the administration building.

He set the bucket onto the ground and used the fingers of both hands to comb the hair just above his ears. His hands met in the back and held his head. *Maybe rest tonight.*

Head still up, his eyes fixated on the city gate. Although fifty yards away, he could see the thick iron handles that prevented each half of the massive door from opening flat against the city’s interior wall. The outside route to it threaded a single, narrow, steep path snaking up the cliff opposite the one that dropped to the Dead Sea.

Two men trudged through the gate. Each had opposite ends of the same pole on a shoulder. Several sacks hung from the middle. Mazis smiled. *Fruit and vegetables, I’ll bet. It’s the market tomorrow.*

Behind the toting pair prowled a man towering over the other two. A dirty white robe and long, greasy black hair stood out. His beard matched his hair. Two massive bags hung over each shoulder. An emotionless face stared at Mazis; his black eyes penetrating. The hair on the back of Mazis’ neck rose.

The man and his companions turned away from the courtyard and moved to the first of a dozen low storerooms near the gate. It primarily held food. They disappeared inside.

Knobby boots of a Roman centurion sounded on the mosaic tile floor of the veranda. The centurion had a common physique: clean-shaven, rippling muscles, broad chest,

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and square chin. Although in uniform, he wore no helmet. A parchment lay in his left hand. Stopping in front of Mazis, he hit a fist lightly to the chest plate over his heart. “We need your assistance again.”

The soldier’s forehead narrowed over his bright blue eyes as he discreetly handed the sheet to Mazis, coded side up.

Mazis took it and noted more concern on the man’s face than normal. *Must be important.* “Is there a timetable?” he asked searching deep into the warrior’s eyes.

“Tomorrow.”

Mazis hated these last-minute drills, but earlier ciphers had been easy to decode. Rocking his head back and forth, he raised an eyebrow. “I’ll try.”

“Thank you.” He turned and marched across the tile back into the administration office.

This assignment abolished Mazis’ plan to use a new approach for searching the Torah tonight. He stuffed the cipher into his robe pocket. Gripping the bucket, he strode to the cistern, a part of the city’s network of reservoirs. Laying a hand on the cool rock from which the small pond had been hewn, he thanked Yahweh for the winter rains that filled it and provided water for the city.

Cool and clear water droplets hit Mazis’ face as he pushed the bucket in. His thoughts hovered around the cryptogram and the Torah.

Standing, his right bicep bulged as the filled bucket left the water. From the cistern, he moved past the synagogue, his thoughts reverting to only the Torah. Justus had found the word *Jesus* intersecting the word *Messiah* using equidistant skips of seven on a matrix of letters in the book of Genesis. Mazis found the word *church* on a similar matrix with a skip

of seventy-seven letters. He just needed more time to examine what words might be embedded in close proximity.

The torches fixed at discrete intervals on the walls provided enough light to see the pathway. The wind pushed his beard sideways as he stopped at the wood door of a room in the casement wall that had housed him for twenty years.

Mazis opened the door, entered, but did not close it. The room was quiet as a tomb. Light from the nearest flame outside allowed him to find his lamp. Setting the bucket near a stool in the corner, he grabbed it, eased to the light, and lit the wick. The lamplight would allow him to examine the cipher. Now back in his room, he placed it on a narrow shelf attached to the wall specially designed for that purpose. A pallet lay on the floor opposite the stool. A large scroll wrapped in a red, woven cloth was propped up in the corner.

His room copied the multitude of other ones built between the outer wall and the inner walls of the city, all the same small size with very few occupied.

After closing the door, he swung a heavy metal bracket attached to it into a slot in the wall nearby. Intellectually, he knew no reason to lock the portal. His simple act had formed into a habit when he had lived in Jerusalem.

He strolled to the bucket. Cupping his hands, he dipped into the water and drank. A fair amount slipped through his palms and fell back. The splashing sound rebounded off the walls, shattering the silence. His face still wet, he moved to a small opening in the outer bulwark. Peering out, he saw the moon's mirrored image as it danced in the rippling water of the Dead Sea fifteen hundred feet below. An owl screeched in the distance.

Mazis sat on the stool, pulled the parchment from his pocket, and held it higher so more of the lamp's flickering light

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shown on it. *So, what is this?* The code consisted of five rows of letters with no spaces between them.

His first choice to decode was the Atbash method. This simple technique replaces the first letter in the alphabet with the last, the second one by the next to last, and so on. It revealed nothing. Multiple other methods existed but all increasingly complex. However, one by one, they failed.

The night gate watchman yelled, “Midnight . . . all is well,” but Mazis barely heard it. The code was impervious to his methodologies, and suspicion began to clutch his thoughts.

A single dull thud sounded on his door. Mazis jerked and stood rigidly. A chill shot down his back. Another single thump landed but much louder this time.

“What do you want?” Mazis asked. Kabbalists needed no tools or weapons and Mazis owned neither. Scanning the room, he saw that he only had the stool.

A baritone voice replied, “You know what I want. Open the door, and give it to me now.”

Fear clutched Mazis’ chest, not over his safety, but for the hidden item. *How could anyone know?* It couldn’t be lost. Not this.

Although he was strong, such a late-night encounter put him on edge. Picking up the stool, he raised it. “I don’t know what you want. I have nothing.”

A heartbeat later the door exploded. Fragments from the door jamb showered the room. The metal lock clanged against the wall near Mazis’ head. It caused him to dodge and fall below the window.

The shoulder of a huge man pushed through the broken door. A Roman, two-edged sword filled one hand. His black, curly hair jostled violently as he ducked and entered.

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Mazis recognized him as the one carrying bags into the city earlier. He regained his feet and launched the stool at the intruder, but the man's enormous left arm deflected it. The other held the sword and hacked into Mazis' right arm. Screaming, he fell to the floor and tried to make sense of the attack. No one lived close enough to hear the commotion, but he hoped someone would.

The invader pounced on him. One knee pinned his good arm. His non-sword forearm pushed into Mazis' throat. Little air made it past his constricted passage when he inhaled.

The man's voice escalated in volume. "If it is not here, tell me where it is."

Mazis was no match for the veritable giant. The fear of death swamped his mind, but determination dammed it. He would not reveal the secret. Mazis squeaked out from the choke hold, "I don't know what you are talking about."

Thick lips curled up in a grim smile. "No one will ever know its location," he replied and pushed the blade to the hilt in Mazis' gut, its point digging into the floor under him.

Mazis closed his eyes and fought to not lose consciousness. The intense pain in his stomach jolted to other parts of his body. His strength to struggle drained away, and he felt the attacker could sense it.

The man bounced up and pulled the sword out. After surveying the room, he used the blade to rip open the scarlet bag. When only a scroll fell onto the floor, the giant kicked it to the wall. A grimy hand threw the pallet over. Finding nothing, he bounded out the doorway.

Once again, the room returned to complete silence. Mazis' stomach pain eased, and he blinked several times. Using his left hand, he pushed up enough to lean against the wall. Its coolness helped.

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With eyes tightly closed, he thought of the hidden location. Only he knew where, but he felt a glimmer of hope. The plan he devised two years ago had to work. *The church must find it.*

His face contorted as he dipped the forefinger of his left hand into the blood pumping out of his wound. The code needed to be generated in only the few minutes of life he had left. His head rested on the wall as his mind swirled. Bending forward, he wrote six numbers on the rock floor.

8 23 4 11 9 5

Mazis rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand as he faded in and out of consciousness. The pain became overwhelming. *Soon I will rest with my fathers*, he thought. *Receive me, Yshua.* Yet, his determination to pass the invaluable item to the church held fast, and underneath the numbers, his hand shook as he marked three last symbols.

∟∟∟

Finished, his blood-covered hand fell lifeless to the ground.

CHAPTER 1

Joseph Justus woke early and stroked the thick hair stuck to his stubbled cheek. Before disembarking, he would need to shave. Even though a clean-shaven jaw stood out among non-Romans, he didn't care. Citizenship in the Empire made him proud.

A small, but uncharacteristic porthole allowed sunlight to beam into his compact stateroom. He bent for a better view and watched as the shoreline's golden sand became visible. Knowing they would soon dock, he grabbed his dagger and quickly regained a shaven face.

Justus loved travel by water. He thought back to when arriving in Rome from Nazareth as a teenager, his parents found a scholar in the harbor district of Ostia to serve as a teacher. After classes, he would spend hours at the pier area watching shipbuilders work. When close to the end of training, his father supported him in designing ships and supervising the guilds who built them. Rather than work for himself, though,

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he chose an alternate career, one to help others by defending them when in need.

Serving as Caesar's Chief Advocate required him to work long hours and hampered his leisure time. But Tiberius gave him this occasion free, and with Rome and its courts behind, he could at last travel to Athens to see the love of his life. Although his last case had kept him away too long, that changed today.

His extra tunic folded, he palmed its geometric black trim. *Have I grown too accustomed to status symbols?* He reflected to Asher's courtyard three years ago. During his chance encounter, Mazis suggested using Atbash to solve the mystery of the location of Abram's Tithe. It didn't directly work, but when he applied it to a paired alphabet, he found the vast treasure. Though becoming very wealthy, he chose to continue as an advocate. It made him feel good when he proved a person innocent.

Loud noises sounded outside his door as other passengers left their rooms and struggled along the deck. Everyone would want to disembark as soon as the vessel was moored, and he did, too.

The trip from Rome to Sicily took two days. On arrival, he had transferred to this Alexandrian cargo ship. Three days later, it stopped for some of last year's harvested grain in Sparta. It only took one day to make the trip from there to this harbor near Athens.

He imagined the reunion he'd waited three years for, and his pulse raced. Even after so long, the thought of her still rammed him with an array of emotions. Yet, what if she wouldn't forgive him? Fiercely independent, Michal would take him to task for not coming sooner. She would scowl in anger at his broken promise. He took in a breath as he draped a white toga over his tunic. But she would forgive him, wouldn't she? Anxiety brewed

in his stomach like the coiling waves slapping the shore. They had partnered in Jerusalem, growing more than friendly, trusting and caring for each other. The only woman who knew his good and bad points, she accepted them all. They were equals. Surely she would want to regain their close relationship. She had to. He could never find another woman like her.

Forcing away any gloomy thoughts, he basked in the joy of anticipation as his eyes swept the interior searching for anything he may have missed. His exhaustion from doing nothing during the entire voyage vaporized. One last survey convinced him he had collected it all, so he stuck everything into a large trunk. After opening the cabin door, he walked the heavy container through it onto the deck.

Several passengers already lined the railings. A short, fat man leaned on the banister directly in front of him. He wore a finely knitted robe accented by a thick gold chain for a belt. Next to him, a slender woman stood straight with hands coupled behind her. Two large rings adorned each hand. Justus guessed them as wealthy tourists coming to see the dramatic Athens architecture.

The mild wind crossing the deck brought fragrances from nearby land: blooming irises mixed with freshly cut grass. Remembering similar aromas when with Michal, he smiled. Justus inhaled deeply. The days of high humidity and salt water smells had dulled his senses, but they came back quickly.

Taller than the other passengers, Justus could easily look over them. The land appeared larger, and his enthusiasm expanded. His gaze went to the ship's bow where a gangplank would soon be lowered, but a man standing on the small deck blocked the view. Although Justus did not see him board the day before, he instantly classed him as Spartan.

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Slightly shorter than Justus, he appeared very athletic. Spartan children of both sexes trained from an early age to compete in multiple sports. They also learned a myriad of warfare techniques. Most resented Roman control.

The Spartan did not look sickly, but quite thin. His gray tunic hung shorter than most. A square jaw sprouted a well clipped, sand-colored beard that angled out from his chin giving the illusion it bent forward. Standing in the middle of the narrow passageway between the railing and ship structure, his eyes went to half-mast.

Justus assumed the man would display common courtesy and yield right-of-way. As he pulled, the edge of the trunk made a loud scraping noise. The man did not move.

Why would the Grecian intentionally block me? Although Justus had never served in the army, as the son of a Roman Proconsul, his father required him to be trained in the art of hand-to-hand combat by some of the finest Roman warriors. He would brag that his first pick would be Justus to fight next to him in close quarters.

Placing a hand on the grip of his short sword, Justus moved his face so close he could smell the Spartan's fishy breath. "I'm going to the bow . . . now."

The obstacle closed one eye, the opposite brow raised. "You Romans think you rule the world."

"We do."

His eyes narrowed as his jaw tightened like a fortress. "Maybe today."

"It's the only one that's important." Justus sensed this encounter could become ugly. Even though he didn't mind engaging a bully, he didn't want to waste time. An idea to defuse the situation flashed in his mind. "Do you know the lineage of Spartans?"

The man appeared to be calculating, wind jostled his long, brown hair. His expression turned challenging. “Our Patriarch was Simeon, son of Jacob.”

“I’m half Jew. My prime ancestor was his brother, Judah.”

The Spartan crossed his arms on his oddly thin chest. “So?” he asked as he leaned back.

“You can pick your friends, but you cannot pick your family.”

The obstruction backed some in the direction of the railing, his half-smile mostly hidden by the beard.

Justus used the extra space to squeeze between the man and the hull. As he passed, he rotated his head to maintain eye contact. Inhabitants from Sparta would not allow their children to eat enough food to be satiated. They theorized the children would pilfer food to satisfy their hunger, thus developing shrewdness and enterprise.

The scraping noise lessened as Justus picked up speed across the wood deck. *If all Spartans look like this guy, I don't think they've ever eaten enough.*

Judging where the gangplank would be extended, he stopped by the railing. The passengers’ excitement about arriving became evident with the increased volume of their voices and caused his anger to evaporate. His thoughts went back to Michal and how much he wanted to see her. *Only a little while longer.*

Justus intertwined his fingers and leaned his forearms on the rail. *I have travelled most of my thirty-five years but have never visited the Harbor of Phanari.*

Although an accomplished advocate, his uncanny ability to solve riddles swamped his thoughts. As he watched the bulky ship close in on the beach, those memories reverted to Jerusalem. His gift had not only led him and Michal to the treasure,

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it caused him to become a Christian. Cycling through the memories of that six-month quest, the deep feelings for Michal encompassed him again. Instantly, a cloud blanketed his excitement. His throat became so tight, he could barely swallow. A little-known feeling sprouted in his mind—a fear he had lost her. *Lord, please help her forgive me.*

His other relationships had always followed the same pattern. When a woman became close, he detected her growing dependency on him, and he buried himself in his work. But with Michal, he never spotted any dependence. Still, work took precedent again. This time only because it involved a dear friend.

Justus' stomach pushed into the rail when the beach stopped the ship's forward movement. Realizing the closeness of achieving a three-year goal to see Michael, woo her, and win her back, he flushed the possible consequences from his mind. He would see this through.

Six of the crew tossed ropes to waiting harbor workers who expertly caught them. They pulled the boat onto a gentle, sloping beach. A crewman near Justus stepped behind him and joined another to push the gangplank from the ship's deck out over the shore. The shrill screech caused Justus to tightly close his eyes and turn his head away. Two harbor workers waited for it and planted it firmly at the water's edge. Once the catwalk was in place, the passengers crowded to it like sand flowing through an hourglass.

Although Justus was strong, the mass of humanity moved him toward the scaffold at their pace. The overpass had small boards fixed parallel to the coastline, making descent safer. However, they made Justus' trunk thump loudly with each board crossed. The noise made him feel a little embarrassed, but no one commented.

Attaining the beach, he found four empty wagons side by side. They would be the only way he could get the trunk to Athens. So, lifting his luggage, he waded through the soft sand.

Two seagulls scurried across his path to the one close at hand.

A short and very young driver intently followed Justus' progress. His reddish hair floated with the light wind. He wore a dark robe and held the reins to a single horse in his left hand.

Justus stopped in front of the wagon and placed his trunk in the sand. His tall frame erect, he still needed to look up at the boy. "Are you for hire?"

The sun brightened the boy's red hair. Occasional floating clouds caused the color to oscillate. The boy's eyebrows went high. "Yes . . . only if you want to go to Athens."

"Perfect." Justus swung his reinforced box of belongings up over the wagon's side wall, and it banged in the back of the bed. The conveyance bounced from the impact. The horse's feet moved forward little, but its head reared.

Holding the seat with his left hand, he put a foot on the tongue and hoisted himself up onto the bench board seat. He turned to the young man, smiled, and extended his right hand. "My name is Justus. Take me to Delphi Stadium." His excitement swelled knowing the stadium was only a short distance from Michal's house.

"The Stadium? There are no games for months."