

The Witness

The story you are about to hear is fictitious. But many details are true.

Dateline—Jerusalem, A.D. 57. The scene is a Roman courtroom where several soldiers are being tried for failing to perform their duties. Oddly enough, they are not Romans, but Jews. The charges stem from an incident that took place on a morning nearly thirty years ago. Authorities have reopened the case because those events have critically affected the Empire in the years since. Some who were involved are now dead. The rest have testified in their own defense. Except one. The bailiff calls him to the stand.

“In the name of the emperor, do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“I do.”

“Please be seated. State your name, your address and your occupation.”

“My name is Elam Ben-Asher and I live in Jerusalem. I am of the tribe of Levi, and I own a small fleet of merchant vessels.”

In this courtroom, there is neither prosecutor nor defense counsel. Only the judge. He addresses Elam.

“Were you a mariner when this incident took place?”

“No. I was then serving among the ranks of the temple police, a position I held for three years. Shortly after the incident, I quit the force and have been involved in shipping since that time.”

Elam smiles a bit, “My memory’s not as clear as it might have been twenty-eight years ago, but

“I’ll try to give you as much detail as possible.”

“Proceed.”

“I served as a temple guard proudly. On the day I was chosen, my father offered up many prayers of thanksgiving, and selected the best ram from our flock for a fellowship offering. My mother pouted for days. She had prayed I would become a rabbi.”

Elam pauses, picturing himself trying to teach unruly schoolboys the Torah. Suppressing a grin he continued.

"But my father was a temple guard, and his great great-grandfather fought alongside Judas Maccabbeus during our revolt against the Greeks. As you can imagine, that kind of history captures a boy's imagination. I was drawn to the sword, not to the books.

"For two years, I served my people well. During that time, most of my responsibilities were carried out inside the temple walls. Aside from a brief scuffle with 2 thieves trying to scale the courtyard wall, no one breached the security of the temple complex during my patrols. My record was spotless.

"Well, a new teacher arrived on the scene: Jesus. My job took on new twists. This rabbi was ruffling all kinds of feathers up on the temple mount. First, he accused the teachers of the law, the priests, and the rest of them of being hypocrites. It was true; they were. But by bringing it out in the open, he undermined their authority. He also taught things that unsettled the beliefs of common folk. And because he did miracles, the people paid attention to what he said. The Sanhedrin wanted him silenced."

Irritated, the judge interrupts. "Mr. Ben-Asher, this court has a busy schedule. Please get to the point."

Elam chooses his words carefully. "Your honor, since my companions and I are on trial for our lives, please allow me ample time to explain matters fully. I assure you all this has a bearing on the case."

Staring intently at Elam, the judge sees clear eyes holding his gaze firmly. Deciding his orders allowed for full disclosure in this case, he relented. "Very well. But please be concise."

"The Feast of Tabernacles holiday was in full swing. No one thought Jesus would show up in Jerusalem because the Sanhedrin had spread the word they wanted him dead. If he could convince the masses he really *was* Messiah, there might be war. And war would mean you Romans would come and take both their country, and their lofty positions."

Elam notices the judge's discomfort with satisfaction. A fair man, the judge never knew how to deal with criticism of the empire. He could not condone many of Rome's policies, yet he did keep order. Anarchy was a terrifying alternative. Elam interrupted the judge's thoughts.

"Anyway, he *did* show up and began to teach in the temple courts. The chief priests and Pharisees sent our company to arrest him. We were to do it quietly without triggering a riot. Positioning ourselves around the perimeter of the crowd, we waited for the right opportunity. That was a mistake. After listening to him for a while, none of us wanted to arrest him.

'If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him'

Seeing the judge's blank look, Elam shrugged, "I guess you had to be there. He said more; I just know none of us had ever heard anything quite like it. And, that's what we told the Sanhedrin when we came back empty-handed. They were not impressed. My captain lost his command."

Elam felt his cheeks flush with anger remembering his friend's ruined career. Joshua couldn't find a job. Who needs an out-of-work temple guard? Jewish merchants refused to buy his wool. He died a broken, miserable man ignored by his neighbors and hated by his wife and children. Elam swallowed hard and continued.

"I couldn't get Jesus or his words out of my mind. Over the next six months I asked several scribes at the temple what the Scriptures said about Messiah. But it seems like when I had time they were busy. When they had time, I was busy. I never got any answers.

"Finally a break came for the Sanhedrin. One of Jesus' followers—Judas—contacted the chief priests offering to hand Jesus over to us—for a price. Seems he had lost enthusiasm for the movement. With this gift, we made plans for the arrest. We recruited some thugs in case things went badly and we needed scapegoats. One night we intercepted Jesus in a garden. He didn't resist, but one of his men drew his sword and swung it wildly. A glancing blow struck Malchus' helmet. As the blade slid off, it severed his right ear. I tell you, if we had brought back the high priests' slave in that condition, he would *not* have been pleased. But Jesus scolded his man, stepped forward and touched the bleeding scalp. Instantly the ear reappeared. It looked like magic but it wasn't. I picked up the severed ear. It was real. So was the blood."

Elam listened for the stir he expected. He was not disappointed. Murmurs raced through the crowded courtroom. People looked at one another in disbelief. This story had never got out. The high priest had threatened every guard and misfit involved. Anyone who leaked the story would die. Imagine the jokes. Evidence of Jesus' power living right in the high priest's home!

"I never told a soul what happened. No one did. But in the days that followed, I talked with Malchus—alone. Your honor, he was a different man. He couldn't tell me why exactly—and Malchus was an articulate, well-educated man. But there was a change, and he confided that he believed Jesus was who he said he was.

"You are well aware of what took place over the next several days. Jesus was bounced from the Sanhedrin to Pilate to Herod and back to Pilate again. Finally these so-called 'men of God' had their way, and Jesus was executed." The bored Sanhedrin clerk taking notes for the council glances up at hearing the venom in Elam's words.

"In their paranoia, they actually feared what even Jesus' own disciples didn't believe—that though dead, Jesus might somehow escape the tomb as he had threatened. The chief priests and the Pharisees asked Pilate for centurions to guard the tomb. Pilate mocked them and said 'Yes, yes, by all means take a guard—your *temple* guards—and make the tomb secure as you know how.'

"Although furious at the snub, the priests did as Pilate suggested. Six of us positioned ourselves around the entrance of the tomb. We even placed a wax seal on the joint where the stone door met the cave. That way if anything strange happened, we would know."

Elam stops and looks at his co-defendants. This is where his story will begin to depart from theirs. He takes a deep breath and plunges on.

"Your honor. My fellow guards have testified that we fell asleep and then Jesus' disciples stole his body. As you know, that account has been widely accepted, at least among my people. But it is a false account."

Elam glances over at the other defendants who are now sitting upright in their chairs.

"What I am about to tell you is the truth. Early in the morning hours that Sunday, the ground underneath us began to move. That morning's earthquake is well-documented. But no one has publicly tied it to what happened at the tomb."

The other guards are now watching Elam in horror. Their lives depend on each man staying with the story.

"A.....man—if you can call him a man, in blinding white clothes, suddenly appeared in front of us, walked over to the tomb, and threw the stone aside like it was a pebble from the beach. Your honor, I am not a timid man, but that's all I remember, because I passed out from fear. We all did.

"I was the first one to come around. I ran over to the tomb's entrance and looked in. Except for the burial linens, it was empty. I got the rest of the men up and we reported back to the Sanhedrin. You should have seen their faces when we told them what happened."

"So how did the story of the theft get started?" The judge is all ears now.

"The chief priests called an emergency meeting with the elders. They decided to....," Elam lowered his voice, ".....to buy us off."

"Exactly what do you mean Mr. Ben-Asher?" The judge's voice is iron. Unlike many colleagues, he has not achieved his position with influence and wealth, but with genuine ability, and.....integrity. To him, the crime of bribery ranks right up there with assassination.

"I think you know what I mean, your honor. We were paid to spread the story that Jesus' disciples stole his body while we were asleep on watch. In turn, the council members promised to cover for us in case Pilate took a dim view of our performance. Most of us have lived very well thanks to that little compromise. I turned my payoff into shipping."

Elam's head falls, his eyes avoiding the men he has just betrayed. Yet he doubts the judge even *believes* him since he has just proved he will lie for a price. More explanation is useless.

The judge keeps probing. "Why would you reveal this story now? The other men have kept to their original testimony. What's made you change yours?"

Elam nods, knowing this was going to come out sooner or later. Gulping, he shifts his body and mumbles something under his breath. Then he replies.

"Your honor, are you familiar with the name Saul of Tarsus? He's also known by his Greek name Paul."

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am. He stirred up considerable commotion here in Jerusalem recently. Started a riot. We whipped him as I recall, before learning of his Roman citizenship. After uncovering a plot to kill him, we sent him to Caesarea for Governor Felix to deal with."

"Yes, yes, he's the one. Because of my shipping interests I travel extensively. About a year ago, I was in Corinth to examine some merchandise and a manufacturer invited me to a meeting the day after Sabbath. My Jewish brothers would not have approved of my acquaintance for he was a Gentile. But I respected him and accepted his invitation.

"It turned out to be an assembly of followers of the Way." Seeing the puzzled look on the judge's face, Elam explains, "Christians, followers of Jesus."

Elam hears the clatter of a chair as one of the shackled men lunges for him. Before Elam can react, a nearby centurion drops the would-be attacker with the flat of his sword. Hatred flashes in the other men's eyes. Elam forges ahead, his voice getting stronger with each sentence.

"They were reading part of a letter Saul had sent them.

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead.And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.....

Those closest to the front notice tears on Elam's cheeks.

"Don't you see? I knew. Of all people, I *knew* this man had been raised. I was there. I realized that these people worshiped a risen Lord. Your honor, Christians don't seek to undermine the empire. They only want to worship Jesus. He *was* the Messiah. By his death, he paid the price for our sins. By his resurrection, he proved his death to be valid as payment. Jesus' disciples didn't steal his body. He took it himself. For all who believe in him, that empty tomb is a promise of eternal life. You see, I too have become a Christian. This is why I have now told the truth."

The only sound is the awkward scuffling of sandaled feet. The centurion stands over the unconscious prisoner, his sword still drawn. At their posts, the remaining soldiers stand at attention. The spectators seem confused, but remain quiet. The Sanhedrin clerk is shaking his head in disbelief that the court seems to be taking this turncoat Jew, seriously. The bailiff waits for someone to speak.

Finally, the judge does.

“If what you say is true Mr. Ben-Asher, each of us must reconsider what has taken place, not only on that fateful morning, but in the years that have followed, as well as.....those which still lie ahead. This court will recess until the sixth hour. Mr. Ben-Asher, I’d like to see you in my chambers.