

What Joseph knew

The best kept secret in history

Dr. Alexander von Schmid

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Cover design: Harald Koning en Steven van Wingerden

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"The life of one person can be an assignment for the life of another, even if those people don't know each other and live in different eras."

Alexander von Schmid

Word of thanks

I thank my brother Felix who made an important contribution to this story.

I also thank Hens van Wingerden, my good friend, who coached me through the process of getting this book better and eventually published.

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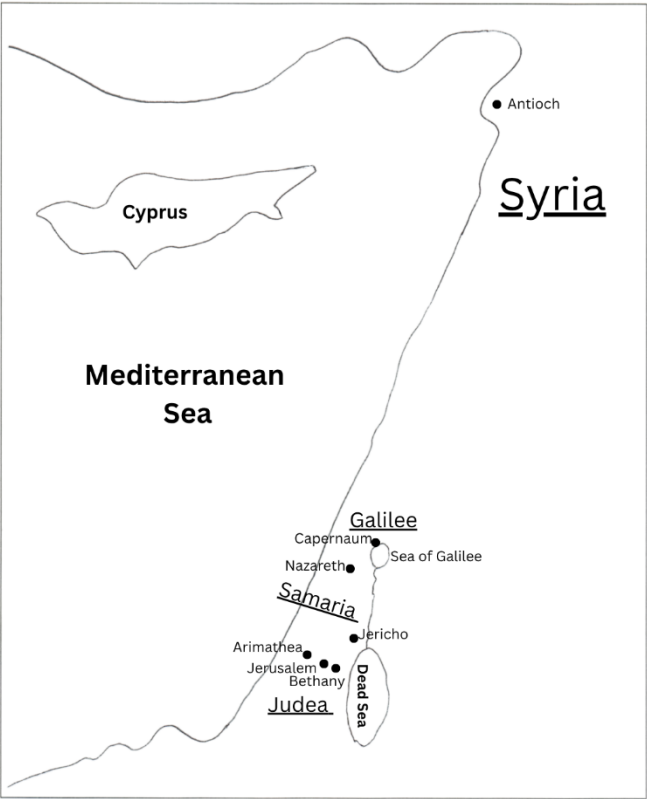
Characters

First Century AD

Aäron	Friend of Laban
Abantes	Right-hand of Bishop Ignatius.
Daniel	Son of Joseph
Gideon	Friend of Joseph
Ignatius	Bishop of Antioch
Ilana	Wife of Joseph
James	Follower of Jesus
John	Follower of Jesus
Jonathan	Son of Daniël, grandson of Joseph
Joseph	Protagonist
Judas	Follower of Jesus
Kajafas	High priest at the time of Jesus's crucifixion
Laban	Leader of the Judean community in Antioch
Lepidus	Brother-in-law of Joseph. Ex-officer
Magdalene	Follower and beloved of Jesus
Maria	Follower of Jesus
Pilate	Roman prefect of Judea
Simon	Follower of Jesus
Timon	Accuser
Zacharias	Servant of Joseph
Zebedee	Former lover of Magdalene

Present

Animander	Secretary of the Eastern Orthodox patriarch
Cesar	Friend of Francis
Diego	Secretary of Francis
Eijkelenboom	Cardinal
Felipe	Altar boy
Francis	Former name: Mario. Protagonist
Govani	Cardinal, leader of the conservative wing
John	Evangelist
Luke	Evangelist
Mario	See Francis
Mark	Oldest of the four evangelists
Matthew	Evangelist
Mattias	Brother of Francis
Migello	Librarian of Vatican City
Muwake	Cardinal (Zimbabwe)
Pablo Ramos	Friend of Francis. Known atheist
Peter, Simon	Disciple of Jesus. First bishop of Rome
Rebecca	Francis's first and only love
Reginald	Cardinal, nicknamed the Latin lover.
Simon	See Peter



1

**Antioch, capital of Syria (a province of the Roman Empire).
The year 72.**

Perhaps I have been dead a hundred years by the time you read this, perhaps even a thousand or more. My name is Joseph. I am 72 years old and originally from Arimathea in Judea. I have lived in Antioch for forty years. I consider myself a Judean, though that designation is somewhat confusing, as Judea no longer exists. Two years ago, the Romans destroyed Judea's capital, Jerusalem. More than a million people were killed, and the survivors were sold into slavery. Still, I regard myself as a Judean. I even consider my grandson Jonathan, born in Antioch and never having set foot in Judea, a Judean, because we share the customs, outlook, and habits of that land. We observe specific dietary laws, revere our sacred scriptures, and gather for ceremonies and festivals in a building we call a synagogue. Before its destruction, Jerusalem was our city of cities. And for devout Judeans, the Temple in Jerusalem, where they

paid homage to their God, was the holiest place on earth. I don't have to explain that its destruction was a cosmic blow for the devout. Even for me, though not religious, the impact was profound. Nowhere else in the world did the unique spirit of our people come to life so vividly.

But I am not writing this to tell you about Judea's downfall. I write to share my deepest concerns about a new religion and the rapidly growing community of people who call themselves Christians. They worship a man named Jesus, whom they usually refer to as *Jesus the Christ*, or simply *Jesus Christ*. In their eyes, Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the savior of the world. As one of the few people still alive who knows the startling truth about the origins of the Christian religion, I feel compelled to write it down now - before that truth dies with me.

I must write it down because the Christian community poses a great danger to my people, and if it continues to grow at its current pace, that danger will only increase. But who knows what the future holds? Perhaps, by the time you read this, there are no Christians left. In that case, my revelation would serve no greater purpose than as a personal attempt to come to terms with my past. I must admit, I was not a detached observer of the events I am about to recount. I played a leading role - an ugly one. A significant part of what I must reveal concerns a grave sin I committed forty years ago. I cannot simply state what that sin was; you would not believe me. I ask you

to give me the opportunity to gradually unfold the truth about the origin of the Christian religion - and that you withhold judgment until I have told you everything.

I will take you back three weeks in time - back to the moment when a series of catastrophic events began, events that compelled me to write everything down. It happened in our synagogue, during a memorial service for Jerusalem. Our rabbi, his voice solemn, sang a lament for the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, his arms outstretched toward two grey stone tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments.

The door of the synagogue opened behind me. Five men entered and stood silently near the entrance. It was not unusual for people to come in during a ceremony, but there was something unsettling about these men. Their presence made it impossible for me to focus on the rabbi's words. I had to fight the urge to turn around. Even without looking at them, I felt their gaze burning into my back. Somehow, my attention is always drawn to imperfections. In the atrium of my house stands a large, decorated oak cabinet. Once, quite carelessly, I struck it with an iron rod, leaving a small dent in the wood. And now, every time my eyes pass over that cabinet, they inevitably settle on that tiny flaw. Strangely, the pain of seeing that dent is greater than the pleasure the cabinet gives me as a whole.

As I could no longer concentrate, I decided to approach the five

men and ask why they had entered. But just as I was about to rise, one of them suddenly shouted across the synagogue. It was as if rain had begun to fall from the ceiling. Who would dare to disrupt a sacred ceremony so brazenly? The people in front of me - until then deeply absorbed in the rabbi's lament - sat in motionless reverence. The shout seemed to pull them from a deep sleep, as if half of their minds were still wandering in a dream while the other half was being dragged into reality.

Again, a shout rang out from the back of the synagogue. 'Repent to Jesus Christ before it is too late!' We were being commanded to do something - but what, exactly, was unclear to me. Even more baffling was the source of this sudden, aggressive intrusion. Until that moment, we Judeans had lived in relative harmony with those who called themselves Christians. Both devout Judeans and Christians worship one God, unlike the majority of Antioch's citizens, who honor many gods.

In fact, the first generation of Jesus's followers had been almost entirely Judean. Among my Roman friends, the prevailing view was that Christians were simply a sect within Judaism. So this outburst - this rude, almost violent behavior - felt like a son turning against his father without cause. Where had this aggression come from? What had changed in the world? And more disturbingly, what had I failed to see?

I didn't have much time to reflect. My son Daniel, who was

sitting a few rows ahead of me, suddenly stood up. Daniel was not a thinker like me. His friends sometimes called him *the man of the sword* - he had a habit of reaching for his weapon at the slightest disagreement. Others simply called him *the impatient one*. But I saw none of that bravado. I felt only pity for him, because I knew what had shaped him. About six years earlier, a group of Jerusalem's residents - then still the capital of Judea - had risen in rebellion against Roman rule. The rebels overran and massacred the Roman garrison stationed in the city. They soon claimed an even greater victory: ambushing and annihilating an entire Roman legion. The euphoria that swept through the Judean community reached all the way to Antioch. Together with his son Levi, Daniel left for Judea to join the revolt. They fought in the disastrous assault on the city of Ashkelon. More than ten thousand rebels died in reckless charges. When the survivors finally retreated, Daniel returned to Antioch - bearing a deep scar on his right cheek and no son at his side. Shortly after his return, his wife Rachel, already weakened by illness, passed away. Since then, it had been clear to everyone that Daniel no longer carried a zest for life. People rarely argued with him - perhaps sensing it was unwise to confront a man who seemed to have nothing left to lose.

Daniel walked briskly toward the five men, who had arranged themselves in the shape of a cross at the entrance. One of them held a papyrus scroll.

‘Repent and turn to Jesus, the Son of God!’ echoed through the synagogue. The voice was no longer hesitant but firm and confident. Apparently, we were expected to repent - but for what?

Daniel didn’t ask. Instead, he gave the man in front - a tall figure with a face like an eagle - a hard shove, sending him crashing against the synagogue door with a dull thud.

My friend Laban, the leader of the Judean community in Antioch, and I stepped in. Laban’s temperament lay somewhere between mine and Daniel’s. He was decisive and assertive, though he always thought carefully before taking action. He was also exceptionally intelligent - but he had a flaw: when he didn’t understand something, he could become obsessively fixated on it. I saw him hesitate, torn between doing what everyone expected - ordering the five men to leave the synagogue - or violating protocol to demand an explanation for their rude interruption. Laban couldn’t resist asking the question that was burning on my lips as well: Why should we repent?

When I heard the answer, I was so stunned I couldn’t say a word.

‘You, Judeans, have murdered Jesus, the Christ.’

Let me tell you: I was there when Jesus was condemned to crucifixion - about forty years ago, in Jerusalem. I stood by his cross and saw him suffer. I also know why he was condemned, and who was involved. It concerned a handful of individuals, most of whom are likely already dead. The majority of those gathered in the

synagogue, however, had never even set foot in Jerusalem, nor were they old enough to have seen or met Jesus in the flesh.

When Laban raised this point with the man who had the face of an eagle - clearly the leader of the group - he did not retreat. On the contrary.

‘The entire Judean people are guilty of Jesus’s death,’ he cried. ‘You, him, everyone here, now and in the future.’

Laban and I exchanged glances. Where did this madness come from?

‘These are not my words,’ the man continued. ‘They are the words of the holy gospel.’

He nodded to one of the men behind him, who then lifted a papyrus scroll high above his head.

I had never heard of the holy gospel and had no idea what the man was referring to - except that it was presumably a religious text written on the scroll. Laban, I, and most of the bystanders were so shocked by what had been said and done that the five men could have left the synagogue unharmed. But the leader could not resist adding insult to injury. ‘Jesus’s blood clings to all of you,’ he shouted.

That was when Daniel grabbed him by the throat. Only then did I notice the man was missing his left ear.

While Laban and I tried to calm Daniel, one of the five men made a sudden gesture with a black object. He didn’t strike anyone, but

in an instant, red spots appeared all over my white tunic. I felt a tingling on my face and smelled blood.

Daniel, too, was spattered with blood and momentarily stunned - just long enough for the man with the eagle face to break free from his grip and leave the synagogue with his companions.

‘Jesus’s blood is on all of you!’ echoed through the doorway.

2

**Vatican City. Holy Tuesday (Tuesday before Easter).
Morning.**

‘Don’t do it! Don’t touch it!’ Those words haunt His Holiness, Pope Francis II, as he silences his mobile phone. He glances at a tall man in his mid-forties, dressed in a black cassock with a white collar - his secretary, Diego Gomez. Diego, usually composed and deliberate, meets Francis’s gaze with unmistakable worry.

The Holy Father and Diego stand in the Sistine Chapel, where the opening ceremony of a council named *Resurrection* is about to begin - an initiative aimed at ending the crisis within the Roman Catholic Church. Eighty cardinals and bishops from around the world have taken their seats at long tables. Behind the Holy Father looms Michelangelo’s famous fresco, *The Last Judgment*: a naked Christ returns from heaven to judge all the living for their actions, as well as the dead rising from their graves.

‘Your Holiness.’ A stocky, middle-aged man in a black cassock

with a red sash approaches Francis. It is Cardinal Ramon Maria Govani, widely regarded as the smartest and most dangerous man in the Vatican. Behind rimless glasses, his sharp brown eyes study Francis with a stern, unyielding gaze.

‘Welcome, Ramon.’

‘Let us hope all goes well.’

After these words - which sound like a warning - Ramon walks to the left side of the chapel, where the conservative cardinals and bishops have gathered.

‘Let’s begin,’ Francis says to Diego. ‘Please ask everyone to take their seats.’

‘Your Holiness, greetings.’ A slender man with a troubled expression seems to appear out of nowhere before Francis. ‘I apologize for being late. The driver you sent was waiting at the wrong arrival hall. It took us an hour to find each other, and then we got stuck in traffic. I had...’

‘I would be happy to discuss this later,’ Francis interrupts him. ‘Could you please take a seat now?’

‘Who was that?’ Francis asks Diego.

‘Animander, the secretary of the Patriarch of Constantinople-Istanbul.’

Cardinal McSwain, explicitly requested not to attend, sits in one of the back rows. Diego calls him ‘our headache file.’ The man is in his eighties and has an extraordinarily friendly

appearance. Yet, if the stories about him are true, he has been extensively involved in child abuse. Diego has insisted on removing him from the priesthood, despite the fact that the allegations against McSwain are not consistent, and some victims refuse to testify against him. Every time Francis decides to banish McSwain from the church, a paralyzing doubt sets in after a few minutes.

I wish this were my only doubt. Why can't I be as decisive as a church leader should be? I could have achieved so much more if I weren't plagued by all these doubts.

He recalls the moment he was unexpectedly elected pope in the Sistine Chapel. At the time, he still bore the name his parents had given him: Mario. In the first round of voting, Cardinals Govani and Muwake of Zimbabwe received the most support. The votes for Mario could be counted on two hands. But in the next round, Govani's support suddenly collapsed, Muwake held steady, and Mario surged ahead. In the third vote, he crossed the two-thirds threshold. As it became clear that he would be the new pope, he felt the weight of one billion Roman Catholics settle on his shoulders. His faith had always carried him through life's most difficult moments - yet now, in this holiest of places, a new fear took hold: the fear of losing that faith. The thought stole his breath. What would he do if his faith slipped away? How could he explain such a loss to the Church he was meant to lead?

Wouldn't it have been better, perhaps, to refuse the papal tiara altogether?

And then he suddenly heard Jesus's voice: "*Mario, I am always there for you.*" In that moment, Jesus didn't just silence his paralyzing doubt - he swept away all other uncertainties as well. A rock-solid conviction took hold of him: the cardinals had not acted of their own accord in the vote - they had been instruments, played by God. Shortly after this revelation, it seemed as though strong hands were supporting Francis's limbs and nudging him with every move. He began to see himself as a link in a vast, golden chain. The first link: Pope Simon Peter, Jesus's chief disciple and successor. Each pope since, another link. At times, Francis even allowed himself to believe that he might be the final link - the blessed pope who would witness the Second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgment in his own lifetime.

Unfortunately, a few weeks later, old doubts and uncertainties began to take root in his head again. Many times, he had blamed God for his dubious character. Why did You give my brother such a decisive and adventurous character instead of me? And always, this blame was followed by shame. His adventurous brother, named Mattias, had not lived beyond 33 years. With hang gliding, his favorite sport, he had fatally crashed. Francis could comfort himself with the thought that, thanks to his dubious nature, he had lived to be much older than his brother. Unfortunately, that

comfort was always disturbed by the realization that he never had experiences where he, as his brother put it, felt every fiber of his body pulsating. Only that one time with Rebecca, a Jewish woman Francis had met thirty years ago, was an exception. Rebecca was the first and only woman in his life.

‘One more minute,’ Diego whispers.

Francis startles from his thoughts, but he keeps his face straight. All those years immersed in reflection and study have killed his spontaneity.

Francis takes the crystal glass in front of him in his hands. When he became pope, he received it as a special gift from his mother. In the middle of the glass a star is surrounded by a diamond filled with straight lines. Above that diamond, the lines become capricious, and the glass begins to flame. What makes the glass even more special is the golden glow that seems to wave through it. ‘My mother received this from her mother,’ Francis's mother said when she handed it to him. ‘It's been in our family for over two centuries. It holds special powers.’ Every time Francis holds it in his hands, he is struck by its mysterious aura.

Francis takes a sip of water, carefully puts the glass back on the table and stands up. He looks around the chapel and waits until all attendees are silent. Then he leans forward and says, ‘I ask you to pray for me.’

All participants close their eyes and pray in silence. Francis also

sinks into prayer. He closes with the sign of the cross over his body. 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.'

'Amen,' Diego murmurs.

When all the participants have opened their eyes again, Francis says, 'The Church lies in the arms of death.'

Surprised glances sweep the room. The Holy Father has not begun his opening speech with the customary greeting.

'Yes, in the arms of death,' Francis repeats. 'The global abuse of children by Roman Catholic clergy has plunged our Church into its greatest crisis since the beginning.'

A heavy silence fills the chapel.

'But the Roman Catholic Church is the Church of...' He pauses, his eyes scanning the room. 'Simon Peter, Jesus's representative on Earth.'

A few cardinals nod solemnly. Some offer light applause on their tables.

'And what did Jesus say to Peter? What Catholic does not know those words?'

Francis pauses.

"'You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.'"

A shiver runs through the room. Cardinal Muwake of Zimbabwe - whose voice is said to carry more weight than his imposing presence - rises and begins to clap. Two cardinals beside

him follow suit.

Francis gently raises a hand, motioning for them to sit.

‘Yes, the Church - like Jesus - lies in the arms of death. But Jesus rose from the dead... and the Holy Roman Catholic Church is the *body* of Christ... and it too shall rise.’

Cardinal Muwake begins clapping once more, and this time, many of the attendees join in. Some are visibly moved.

Francis extends his arms and proclaims, ‘I bless you all - and myself. We *are* the Catholic Church, and we *will* rise from the dead. And we all know there is only one way to do that.’ He looks slowly around the chapel. ‘By loving one another, just as Jesus taught us. Love conquers all - and everyone.’

Loud applause breaks out.

‘In the coming days, we will not only speak with one another, but - hopefully - even more so, *listen* to one another. It is my hope that by Tuesday, after Easter, we can draft a closing statement that shows we are united in Christ.’

Applause erupts once again. After it dies down, Francis prepares to address a topic often referred to as the *dynamite of the Roman Catholic Church* - a subject so sensitive that no modern pope has dared to enact reform on it. Francis is determined to take the plunge. He recalls Diego’s warning: “*Whoever dares to propose reforms on this matter will be forced to resign by the cardinals - or worse...*”

3

Antioch. The year 72.

Let me, Joseph of Arimathea, continue my story. Forgive me for recounting past events as if I were reliving them in the present. The next episode takes place in the agora of Antioch, which resembles an immense beehive - except the bees are replaced by merchants, soldiers, slaves, wanderers, preachers, revelers, prostitutes, beggars, mothers, and children. They move about in a chaotic dance: some on horseback, others leading camels, and a few standing on wooden platforms to rise above the swirling crowd. A deafening buzz rises from the mass of bodies. I find myself among a group watching an athletically built man in a black habit who stands on a wooden platform in front of the Temple of Zeus. His name is Ignatius, and those who call themselves Christians always refer to him as *bishop*, meaning overseer. The afternoon sun is intense, and the smell of sweat from those around me is stifling, but I hardly notice it, so intrigued am I

