

A woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored headscarf and an orange robe, stands in a stone archway. She is looking slightly to the right. The background shows more arches and columns, suggesting an ancient or historical setting.

JERUSALEM ROAD • BOOK FOUR

THE
APOSTLE'S
SISTER

ANGELA HUNT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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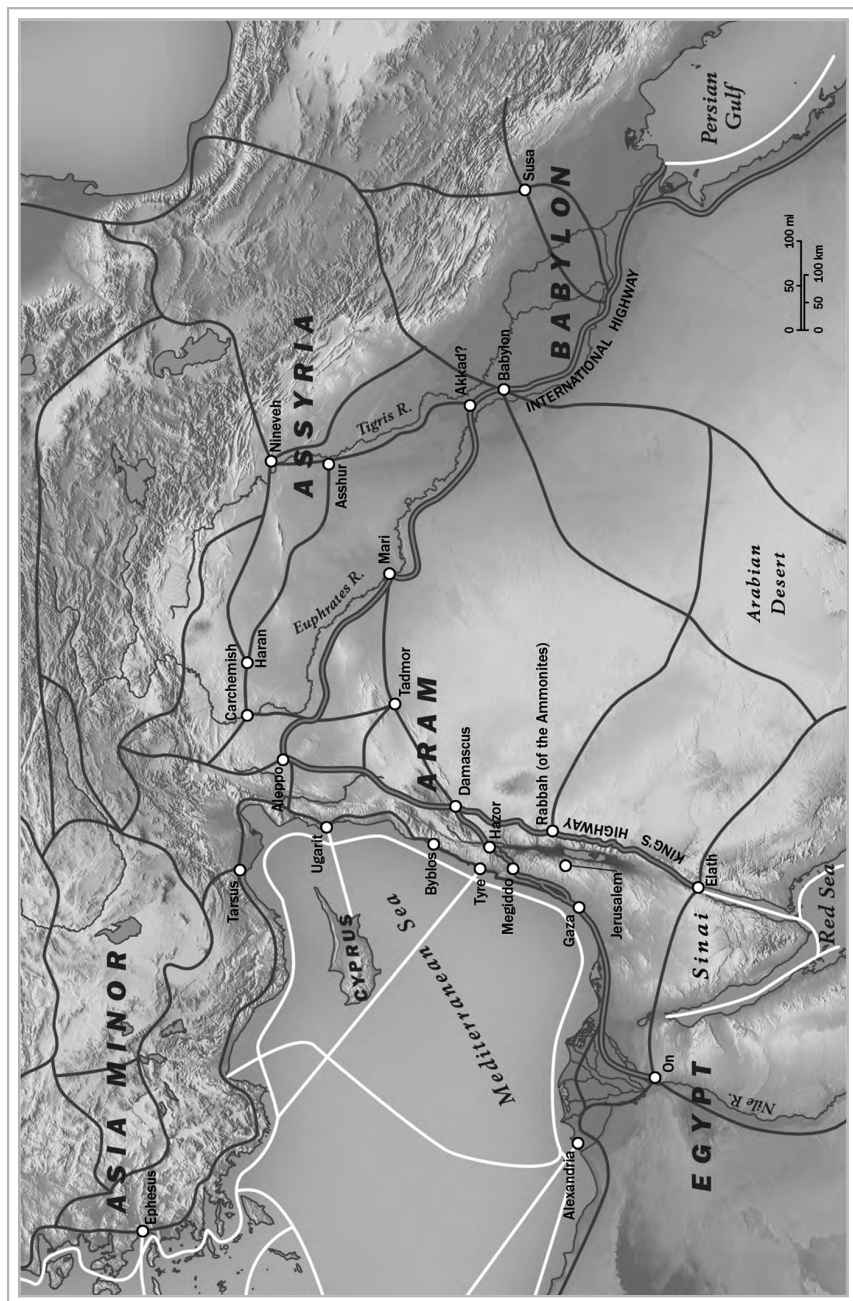
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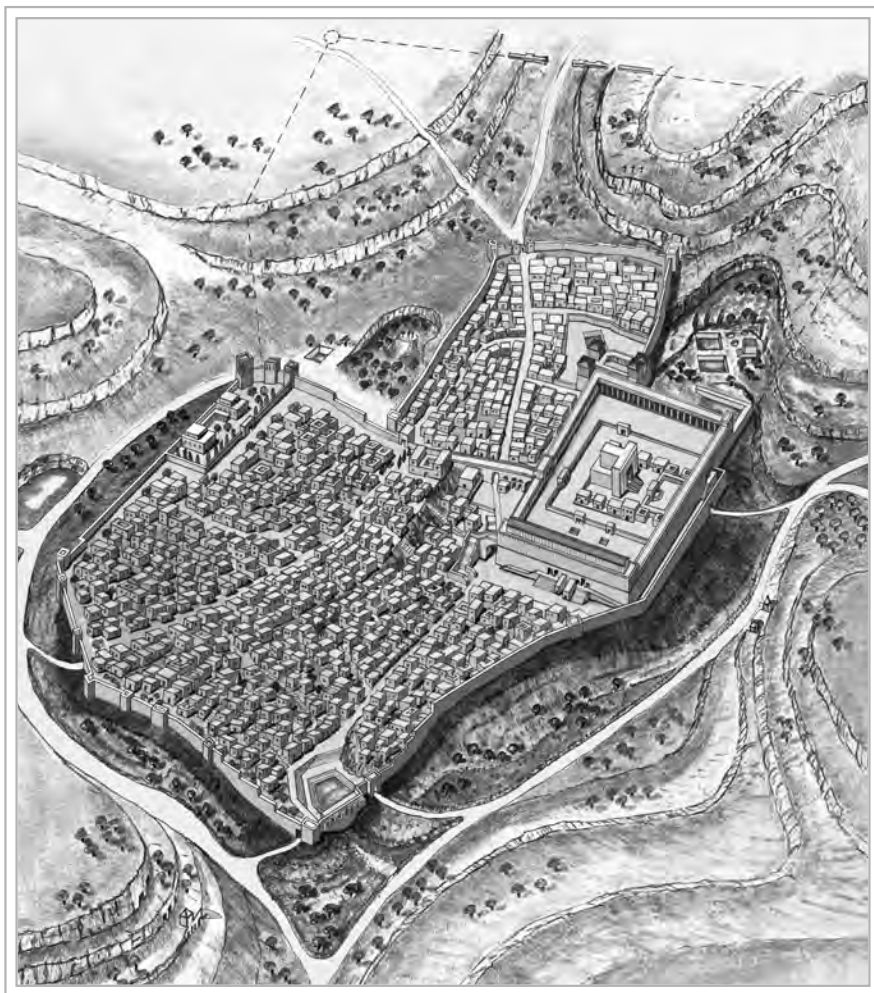
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The Old and New Testaments are filled with stories of daring men and noticeably few courageous women. This is not surprising, for the inspired writers could not recount every story of each man, woman, and child who experienced God. But even though few women's stories are recorded, they are still worthy of consideration. The JERUSALEM ROAD novels are fictional accounts of real women who met Jesus, were part of His family, or whose lives entwined with the men who followed Him.

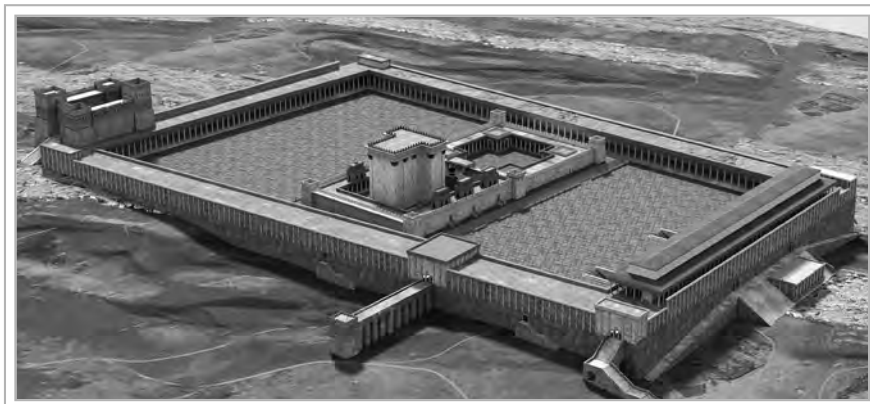
Ancient Near East and Its Road Systems



Jerusalem at the Time of the New Testament



Herod's Temple Complex



Daughter

AD 30

Only the love of God is capable of placing the
one it loves on the altar.

Julia Blum, *If You Are the Son of God*

ONE

Aya

At thirteen, I carried a secret that would have broken my mother's heart and devastated my father. My rabbi would have scolded me had he known it, and the other girls at synagogue would have been horrified.

I did not want to marry.

At fourteen, I prayed HaShem would afflict my family with scandal or poverty to make me less attractive to a suitor, but my parents kept hinting about suitable matches. Whenever I tried to broach my concerns, my parents promised that I was destined to be as blessed as Sarah, Rachel, and Leah, the mothers of Israel.

At fifteen, I began to notice an eager light in the eyes of prospective fathers-in-law. After all, my father was a leader in Tarsus, as comfortable in the governor's palace as he was in our synagogue. We were Roman citizens, we owned a successful tent-making business, and I had been educated by the finest tutors in the city.

At sixteen, I could not understand why HaShem had showered our family with more blessings than others. Our wealth, our high standing in a Gentile city, our Roman citizenship—

why did we deserve them? And why were other families so desperate to join themselves to us?

When Abba came home wearing his best tunic and an ear-to-ear smile, I feared the worst had happened. The sight of our Torah teacher, smiling like a crazy man, confirmed my suspicion.

Abba spotted me in the atrium. “Ah, my Aya,” he said, his lips the color of wine. “You are such a fortunate girl.”

“Indeed.” Gabor, the administrator of our synagogue, staggered beneath the weight of my father’s arm. “Everything has been arranged for your future happiness.”

I bit my lower lip to suppress the wail rising in my throat.

Ima must have been anticipating my reaction because she gripped my shoulders. “Is it—?”

“Avidan.” Abba lifted his chin. “A fine young man and a serious scholar. Aya will make him a fine wife.”

“Young?” Somehow the word slipped through my tight throat. “He is *old*.”

“He is but twenty and six,” Ima corrected, her grip tightening. “Only two years older than your brother.”

“But Sha’ul is also old!”

When Abba squinted, I knew I should have kept quiet. Ima kept talking, eager to repair my social gaffe. “You will be grateful for a husband who has ten years more experience. Avidan will be wiser than a youth, and better equipped to take care of you and your children.”

I bit my lip until I tasted blood, then slipped from Ima’s grip and darted down a hallway, tears blurring my vision. In my bedchamber, I threw myself upon the bed and wept, though I knew my tears could not change my future.

My parents believed in three things: HaShem, the Law, and diplomacy, but they reserved diplomacy for their interactions with Gentiles. HaShem, on the other hand, was unchangeable and eternally direct, as was His Law. So I would do as I was told and marry a man I had only glimpsed from across the

synagogue. I would be an obedient wife, I would bear my husband's children, and my own desires would not matter unless my husband was kind enough to care about them. This was the role of Jewish women, and I had been born to it.

The realization filled me with fresh despair.

"Aya." The door creaked as my mother entered the room. Her silk tunic rustled as she sank onto the bed. "I do not understand why you are so distressed. I was fifteen when I married your father, and he was twelve years older than I. I was always grateful to him for being more experienced."

"You are not me, Ima."

"How can you say that? You are my daughter. You are heart of my heart, flesh of my flesh—"

"But we are different. You have never wanted to do anything but marry and raise children."

Her brows flickered. "What else could a woman want? HaShem created us for those purposes. We are the guardians of our homes, our husbands' encouragers, and those who fill the earth with new life. We lead the celebration of Shabbat and educate our sons and daughters. Without us, men would be unable to provide and study and fulfill all the commands of the Law."

I slammed my face into my pillow. Ima would never understand.

"Aya? I do not know what else you think you could do, but you cannot remain an unmarried woman. Eventually your father and I will leave this world, and then what would happen to you?"

"I never said I wanted to live in your home forever."

"Then what do you want?"

"I . . . I don't know!"

The pillow muffled my words, but it didn't matter. In truth, I was not sure I understood my feelings. My parents had arranged a good marriage for me, so why did I long for something else?

“Aya? I am waiting for an answer.”

Exasperated, I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. “I do not know how to explain. It is only . . .” I shrugged.

“What, daughter?”

Ima was struggling to understand, and I knew she loved me. She also knew I possessed a gift, but she had never understood the pleasure I felt while exercising it. How could she when she did not share my love of music? When she opened her mouth to praise HaShem, a sound as deep and rough as my father’s voice emerged. But when I sang, the melody soared up and out, like birdsong on a breeze . . .

I sat up and wiped my tears, hoping to make her understand. “Ima, I know you and Abba are trying to do the right things for me. But HaShem has given me the gift of music, just as He gifted Jubal. All I have ever wanted to do was play and sing.”

“Have I not encouraged you? Did I not find students for you to teach?” Her hand rose to pat her elaborately curled hair. “You speak as though I am ignorant of your desires, yet you are blind to everything your father and I have done to please you. I suppose that is typical of young girls.”

“I do not take you for granted, and I *do* appreciate what you have done.” I exhaled slowly, forcing my emotions to calm. “But if I marry, my husband may not allow me to teach. He may not allow me to sing at the synagogue.”

“Has Avidan not already heard you? Why would he forbid you to sing?”

“He is a scholar. Scholars build walls around the Law to restrain us.”

“The Law does not forbid singing.”

“Perhaps not, but the Pharisees certainly will. Give them time, and they will find a dozen reasons why a woman should not sing in public.”

“Now you are being foolish.” Ima folded her hands. “Yes, once you are married, you may have to abandon certain activi-

ties. You will have a household to run and a husband to please. Avidan may allow you to sing at home, but I do not think he will allow you to teach Gentiles. As for singing in public places—” she drew a deep breath—“your father and I have allowed you to sing at the occasional city festival because we did not want to offend the governor. You have been allowed unusual freedom, Aya, but things will change once you are married. You cannot know the same freedom you have in your father’s house.”

“You call this *freedom*?” I gaped in bewilderment. “I go where you tell me to go; I eat what you tell me to eat. I did not decide to sing for the governor; you arranged it to gain favor with him. I did not decide to give music lessons; you arranged them and chose my students. You and Abba have planned everything in my life since the day of my birth.”

“And what sixteen-year-old has the authority to make her own decisions? None, not even the daughters of Gentiles.”

“You could have asked what I wanted!”

“Why? If you wanted something inappropriate, we could not let you proceed. And have we not allowed you to do everything permissible?” Ima’s conciliatory tone vanished, replaced by barely bridled irritation. “You are under our authority, Aya, and will be until the day you marry. We have protected you because you do not realize who and what you are. You are a daughter of Israel, living in an idolatrous and pagan city. If we had allowed you to go where you wanted, when you wanted . . .” She looked away, her chin trembling, and I knew I had pushed her too far.

After a long moment, she took my hand and encased it between hers. “One day”—she gentled her voice—“you will have children, and you will do anything in your power to keep them from harm or shame. You will forbid them to travel alone. You will shield them from people who could sully their reputations. You will choose their teachers and companions, forbidding them to associate with anyone who might poison their

minds or lead them from the worship of HaShem. And one day, HaShem willing, you will choose a suitable bride or groom for your precious child.”

I swallowed hard. “Ima, you gave yourself an impossible task. How could I not be exposed to pagans when I see idols on every street corner? How could I not meet idolaters when we attend banquets at the governor’s palace? Even though we dine at a separate table, you cannot shield my eyes from the unclean foods, from the immodest dancers, from the slaves who wink at me as they carry trays past our table.”

“Your father and I have not always been successful, but we have done our best.” Ima closed her eyes. “Tarsus is not the Holy City; it is a Gentile capital. HaShem placed us here for His reasons, and we trust the Creator of the universe to guide and direct us. But we have taken precautions—why do you think we sent Sha’ul to Jerusalem as soon as he was old enough to study at a Temple yeshiva?”

“Because he was brilliant?”

“Because we did not want him to be overly influenced by the Gentiles in Tarsus. Yes, your brother is brilliant, thanks be to HaShem, because if he had been ordinary, he could never have obtained a place in a renowned yeshiva. But HaShem heard our prayers and Gamaliel accepted him. That is why your father and I are happy for you to marry Avidan. Under his protection, we know you will be safe.”

I exhaled a long breath. Ima’s voice overflowed with sincerity, so she believed her explanation. But what she had *not* said was equally true: they had sent Sha’ul to Jerusalem because he was the beloved firstborn. They sent him away because they wanted my brother to be an esteemed Pharisee, as was my father, to be another link in a holy chain of the *Hasidim*, the set apart.

I was neither brilliant, firstborn, nor male, and I could never be a Pharisee. Even though I had been a toddling child when Sha’ul left for Jerusalem, from an early age I realized my par-

ents would never regard me with the same affection they gave my brother.

But then I discovered my gift. A voice was nothing unusual—every human had one, and many had voices more nimble than mine. But Sha’ul could not sing, a fact frequently confirmed on visits to the Holy City. Because I possessed something Sha’ul did not, I treasured my gift and honed it as best I could.

My parents had planned a traditional life for their second-born, but their refusal to acknowledge that I might be meant for more than marriage chafed like a chain around my wrists.

“Ima.” I lowered my voice. “What harm would be done if I remained unmarried? I could continue to teach my students and sing at the synagogue. Does HaShem not rejoice in music and praise? Do I not bring you joy as a daughter? If Adonai intends for me to be married, perhaps a wedding can be arranged later.”

“When you are no longer a fresh flower?” Sorrow mingled with love in my mother’s eyes. “You bring me joy, daughter,” she said. “You also bring me gray hairs because you do not know the world. The unmarried life is not for you. In time you would long for a home and children, and you would hate me for allowing you to follow your own inclination. You would yearn for a loving husband, but only widowers and old men would consider you. No, Aya, we will not let you follow your heart. You will obey us and follow HaShem’s will.”

I would have protested again, but Ima stood, settled her himation more firmly about her shoulders, and strode out of the room. She had listened to my protestations, but she had not heard the cries of my heart.

I cradled my head and wept over my frustrated desires. Did no other girls object to a planned marriage? Some of my friends had expressed reservations about their betrothed husbands, yet they did not utter a negative word after their weddings. Did they change their minds, or fear being disloyal to their husbands?

Surely some women discovered that marriage did not bring happiness or contentment.

My thoughts turned to my brother. My parents had arranged a betrothal for Sha'ul as well, and soon he would come from Jerusalem to claim his bride. My parents seemed relieved to have settled the future for both their children, but I wondered about my brother's state of mind. He had always been ambitious and focused on his studies, so could he be even less excited about the prospect of marriage than I?