

EXCERPT



Killing a Messiah A Novel

Available January 14, 2020 | \$22, 240 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5277-2

As Passover approaches, the city of Jerusalem is a political tinderbox. When rumors start spreading about the popular prophet Jesus, unexpected alliances emerge between Roman and Jewish leaders. In *Killing a Messiah*, New Testament scholar Adam Winn weaves together stories of historical and fictional characters in a fresh reimagining of the events leading up to Jesus' execution, shedding new light on our reading of biblical texts.

Jerusalem, on the Eve of Passover

The streets in Jerusalem were quiet and empty this late at night. Though he rarely walked them at this hour, Caleb enjoyed the peacefulness that was absent during the day. It was not simply absent because of the hustle and bustle of a large city; it was absent because the heart of the city and the hearts of its citizens were restless with longing. Jerusalem—the name itself meant “city of peace.” But it had not known peace for a long time—not in Caleb’s lifetime. Rome, the current foreign occupier of his beloved city, claimed to be the bearers of peace, and in a sense the claim was true. By its sword Rome had brought the entire world to heel, and “peace”—the mere absence of war—was the result. The city had not seen war in a long time. But the peace Rome claimed for Jerusalem was a thin veneer under which restlessness, resentment, and desperation boiled in the hearts of a people longing to be free from tyranny.

Caleb had just come from a meeting of shopkeepers in which such longings were palpable. He owned and operated a middling sized pottery shop in Jerusalem, a shop he had grown up in and had recently inherited from his late father. His father had been instrumental in organizing a network of shop owners and artisans in the city for the purpose of navigating the complicated economic problems created by Roman occupation, with the idea that economic survival in this atmosphere would be better accomplished if the many worked together. They considered pricing, trade, taxation, and any number of issues that had a bearing on economic success. They sought to adapt as a group to ever-changing Roman policies, a strategy that on the whole had been quite successful. They kept these meetings as well as the names of all who attended secret, since Roman authorities would likely perceive these meetings as dangerous. Sedition was not their purpose, though seditious sentiments occasionally found their way into the meetings.

Tonight the group had discussed a rumor that the local Roman officials planned to introduce a new tax during the upcoming Passover celebration. Passover saw a great influx of people to Jerusalem as Jewish pilgrims from all over the empire came to celebrate the sacred festival in the capital city of the Jews. The population of the city regularly grew fivefold during the Passover celebration, reaching upwards of 300,000 people. With this influx of people came increased success for local businesses, many of whom relied on this boom to carry them through year’s end. The threat of a new tax that might significantly reduce their gains had many anxious and angry. Perhaps if all agreed to certain price adjustments, they could survive.

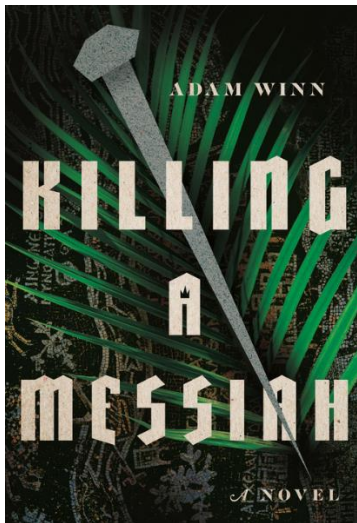
Perhaps *they* could. But Caleb doubted whether *he* could. Since his father’s death, his shop had seen a slow but steady decline in customers. His father was well loved, a gregarious man with a personality that effortlessly drew people to him. People told Caleb he was much more like his mother: quiet and analytical, kind but private. Not that Caleb could confirm such a comparison; his mother had died giving birth to his sister when he was only three years old. While these traits from his mother had served him well in his education and study of Torah, they had not served him well in the daily operation of the pottery shop. The quality of the pottery, made primarily by his sister Mariam and one of his cousins, had not changed, yet sales had declined. It was clear to Caleb that the sole factor was a change in the personality people encountered when they came to shop. At first, customers had remained loyal. They came to shop and also brought gifts, food, and stories of what a wonderful man his father had been. But in time, their loyalty waned. The man they loved was gone, and



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so was the experience they so closely associated with the shop. Of course, close friends and family still came, but their business was barely enough to keep the shop running or put food on the table.

Caleb was uncertain how long he could keep the doors open—and even more about what he would do if he had to close them. How would he support his little sister? Amid these anxious thoughts, his mind drifted to the mysterious visitor who had appeared in his shop as he was closing that evening. Could his offer be the way out?

Lost in thought, Caleb almost walked past his own front door. He entered to see Mariam kneading a loaf of bread. Everyone said she looked like his mother—she had long dark hair that framed an oval face, with big dark brown eyes and olive skin. She had an innocent appearance that did not bear the hardship their family had endured. His arrival brought her usual bright, warm smile and a question about his day. Though she looked like their mother, her personality was just like their father: eternally optimistic and endlessly kind. Caleb usually tried, but today he could not match her warmth and cheer. She quickly read the anxiety on his face. “Caleb, what is wrong? Has something happened?”

“No, my sweet sister, everything is fine,” he lied, knowing it would not convince her.

“I know something is wrong Caleb; I can read it in your face. What has happened?”

“The Romans!” Caleb snapped, though he quickly restrained himself. “The Romans have happened.”

“Yes, I am aware,” she said playfully, “but they didn’t *just* happen. What have they done that is troubling you now?”

“There is a rumor they are looking to impose a new tax, one that may significantly cut our profits during the coming festivals. They see the influx of those making pilgrimage as an opportunity to profit, but that profit comes at our expense. And now, of all times!”

“We have handled these sorts of taxes before, Caleb. We can handle them again,” she replied calmly. “Are not the other shopkeepers making preparations for such a tax?”

“Yes, yes, they are. But my concern is with our own shop, Mariam. Things are bad—worse than you know.” Caleb couldn’t hide his worry and dejection.

“We have faced hard times before, brother,” she reassured him. “We will survive these hard times as well. Keep faith. God will provide.”

“Will we? Will he? I don’t share your confidence, sister.” It was not the first time such exchanges had taken place, and they exhausted Caleb.

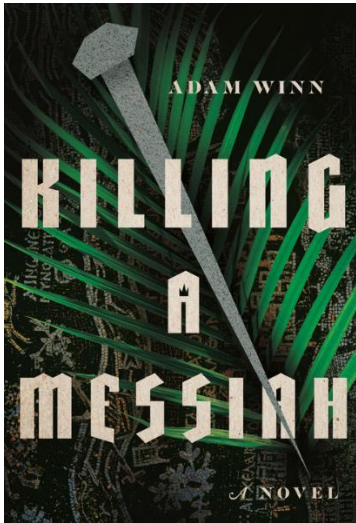
“I fear for your faith, Caleb. It was once so strong, like father’s. Father believed in God’s promises. He trusted God. You used to trust as well.” He could hear the disappointment in her voice.



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He shook his head. "You don't need to remind me of father's faith, Mariam—I know it well. But look around this city. The common people struggle to survive under heavy taxation. Those who farm the countryside live on land they once owned but lost to wealthy landowners because of unjust loans they could not repay. Most struggle to feed their families after they send the profits to Rome. Wealthy merchants control the price of materials and make deals with those in power so that they can maintain that control. As long as Rome is in control, *nothing* will change, Mariam."

"But Rome won't control this city forever. We must be patient," Miriam said confidently. Caleb sighed—he knew what she was going to say, and he could barely stand to hear it one more time.

"God *will* send his Messiah, Caleb. Father said the day was near, that the Messiah was likely already alive, perhaps in our midst, and that God would raise him up and reveal him to us all. When he comes, he will drive the Romans out. He will bring justice, righteousness, and peace to our land. You know this, Caleb!" Then she said quietly, "Or at least you used to."

"Father said a lot of things, Mariam, but father is dead now!" He saw sorrow and shame fill her face, and he felt guilty. "I am sorry sister. I shouldn't have said that. But I can't have this conversation again. I am going to bed." He kissed her forehead and left the room.

He lay on his bed pondering his sister's words: "The Messiah will come." The people of the city were obsessed with the idea, though few could agree on what this figure would be like. The writings of Israel's prophets promised an age in which God would restore Israel to her former glory. It would be an age of peace, justice, and righteousness. Israel would no longer be the victims of oppressive foreigners; instead, their God would raise them to a place of power and glory. These same prophets seemed to allude to a figure through whom God would bring about this new age, but they only provided bits and pieces, and how to assemble them into a coherent whole was anyone's guess.

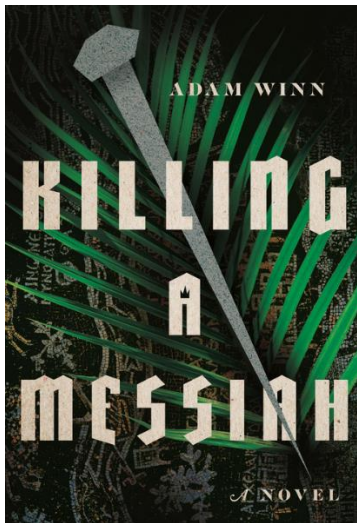
Many agreed this figure would be a descendant of King David, though the fact that at one time many Jews were willing to see Judas Maccabeus, who had no ancestral connection to David, as a Messiah demonstrated that even this marker was negotiable. Some thought there would be two Messiahs: one a priest, one a king. Some thought the Messiah was someone whom God had appointed from the beginning of time. Some thought the Messiah was one whom God would raise up because of his faithfulness. Some thought the Messiah was a human warrior who would lead the people in a successful revolt against Rome; others thought the Messiah would be a heavenly or even angelic figure who would bring heavenly armies to destroy Rome and raise Israel above the entire world. Some thought the Messiah would come as result of faithfulness to God's covenant with Israel, the Torah—a pure and obedient Israel would move God to action. But for others, a minority to be sure, the Messiah would only come when the people showed faith in God's deliverance by taking up arms against Rome—only when people showed such faith would God raise up his Messiah from among the people. Caleb's own cousin, Judah, two years younger than him, was a passionate advocate of this view, and was relentless in his efforts to bring Caleb into the fold.



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For much of his life, Caleb had engaged in such speculation and lived with a passionate messianic hope. This was in large part due to his father, a man who diligently studied the Scriptures and steeped his son in these studies from the time he was a toddler. But in the past two years since his father's death, that hope had been all but extinguished. It wasn't merely the loss of a father that shook Caleb's faith, though perhaps that played a role. It was the bleak outlook for so many of his people and the unshakeable Roman power that lay heavy not only on Jerusalem but the entire world. It had become quite clear to Caleb that the expectation of overthrowing Roman power in any significant way was nothing more than a fool's hope. He had seen many "messianic" claimants rise, but they all met a swift and violent end at the hands of the *Pax Romana*—the Roman "peace."

Most recently a prophet named John, the one called the baptizer, had rallied a large number of people around him, proclaiming that God's new age was about to dawn and that all people must ready themselves through cleansing. Caleb himself had even gone out to the wilderness to hear him speak. This John was charismatic, passionate, and compelling. His words even began to plant hope in Caleb's heart. But the Roman-appointed ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas, had arrested and executed that prophet, again confirming for Caleb that hope was foolish.

Nevertheless, the faith of many remained unflappable. Most of his Jewish brothers and sisters had a deep hope in a coming Messiah. That hope was the ultimate source of tension within his city, whose Roman occupiers were committed to the reign of Caesar and whose inhabitants were committed to the coming reign of another king. How long could such conflicting commitments coexist? Caleb did not know the answer, but he was confident that when that conflict came to a climax it would be Rome's that reigned supreme. Rome would win. Rome always won.

That thought turned his mind back to this evening's mysterious visitor and the hope he had offered.

—Taken from chapter 1, "A Fragile Peace"



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