

PROLOGUE

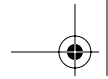
TWO KINGS, TWO KINGDOMS

DECEMBER A.D. 32: CAPREAE

An elderly but upright figure walks weightily along the wide balcony, looking to his left as usual at the high Monte Solaro, catching the early sun across the dip in the island. Then Tiberius's eyes take in the dark blue sea far below as he moves on. In a couple of minutes he reaches the end of the balcony. Here the emperor can see the whole of the Gulf of Neapolis, from the islands of Aenaria and Prochyta close by the imperial base of Misenum, along the villa-dotted bay and Vesuvius's high pyramid, and right around to the point of Campania, separated from Capreae by a narrow channel. His eyes sweep back to the northernmost point of vision, the cool horizon mist beyond the distant islands. There, somewhere solitary in the deep ocean, is the tiny island of Pandateria. It gives him satisfaction to know that Agrippina, granddaughter of the former Augustus himself, is tormented there by her exile—queen of the only territory he allows her. Maybe she is looking this way at the moment, in hatred of him. He smiles at the thought. If she is, it would only be through one eye, thanks to the beating he caused her.

Even this early, of course, Tiberius is not alone; there are the inevitable background slaves, keeping a distance, awaiting any order he might utter. The emperor is a man of few words; missing them may incur his dangerous anger. There are other fears, too. Those who are young—whether female or boys—are in terror of stories of his obscene, scrabbling hands, and of what may follow in private, away from eyes that may judge. Yesterday, a slave had carelessly spilled wine over the emperor's toga. It looked like blood—there was panic for a second in the superstitious Tiberius's face. After torture—"exquisite torture" is how the emperor likes to put it—he had the trembling slave thrown over the precipice upon which the villa stands. The



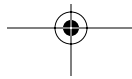


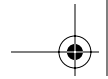
slaves knew he enjoyed watching how far his victims could fall in a clean drop before scraping the cliff face and bouncing off. Such an interruption in the fall usually silenced the screams. If it didn't, he was delighted.

Tiberius liked to have as much of the first hour as he could here on the roofed promenade, even though the air was still sharp this winter morning. Away from the thrall of Rome he could enjoy the idea of it. The city, with its order and its humane law, extended throughout the world. This broad sea before him was the road to all his kingdoms. It was his—only one almost like a god could have so much. In this stillness before the day he would think around the provinces, from Hispania and Gaul in the west to Judea and Syria in the east, from wooded Germania in the north—so familiar to him as a soldier—to the hot lands of Africa in the south. He could usually see the daily naval ship from the mainland passing below, its oars flashing or sail swelling and its wake widening, as it made its way to Capreae's modest harbor. Today was no exception. The vessel was moving swiftly in the breeze. There might be a dispatch from his friend Avilius Flaccus, enthusiastic in his new governorship of Egypt. In his last dispatch he had mentioned speculation about a possible reappearance of the phoenix, the fabled bird of the sun which stood for undying life. Tiberius is not yet expecting an answer from Pontius Pilate, in Caesarea Maritima. His order to remove the offensive votive shields from Jerusalem would barely have reached him, given the winter travel conditions—a long, hard journey overland for the courier. What offense that man had already caused to the stubborn Jews, before this! It is just as well that he is kept informed of his governor's occasional misjudgments.

His thoughts are interrupted by a greeting from Thrasyllus, his personal astrologer. Tiberius, a keen amateur himself, is always anxious to hear his prognostications. Thrasyllus clutches a parchment in his hands. The two sit down on a bench while Thrasyllus unfurls the document. It is inscribed with intricate patterns relating to movements in the heavens. "There was a good omen, last night," Thrasyllus begins. "I was walking as usual down to the Specularium. On the path in front of me I saw a snake. The serpent followed the path before me a while, as if leading me, before disappearing. The omen confirms what I saw in the skies last night. My chart shows a good year ahead for the world. Soon you will appoint an heir, and he will be a serpent to Rome."

"Excellent!" Tiberius says. "I think the shadow of Sejanus will be gone before long—after I make more of those who were his friends take their jour-





ney across the Styx. I dreamed of him last night, and your words have eased the disquiet this gave me.”

“What was your dream?” asks Thrasyllus on cue.

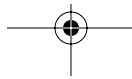
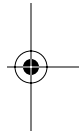
“I dreamed of having all the kingdoms of the earth, beyond the empire to Britannia, Parthia, Bactria and further east. But a dark figure who looked like Sejanus mockingly said he had given them to me. Sejanus—if it was he—took me to the cliff-drop beside the villa and said that I was a god. If I threw myself off the angeli would carry me down unharmed. He then took up a large stone from the ground and began to eat it like a starving man.”

“The weight of Sejanus is indeed heavy. But he is gone, and deceives as usual. He starves for your soul. Laugh at him in torment in hell. Better times are ahead.”¹



The unpleasant Tiberius just pictured may partly be created by the second-century histories of Tacitus and Suetonius. Dio Cassius similarly creates a negative picture of the emperor’s life in Capreae, perhaps influenced by those earlier historians. It may be that they did not realize the extent to which Tiberius kept his private and public life in separate compartments. A contemporary, Philo of Alexandria, portrays Tiberius in a much more favorable light, perhaps in contrast to Gaius Caligula’s wickedness when he succeeded Tiberius as emperor. Philo may, however, have had limited access to official documents. Certainly Tiberius, following the example of Augustus, tended to restrain injustices in the provinces, typically enjoining one of his governors (a previous prefect of Egypt, Aemilius Rectus): “I want my sheep shorn, not flayed.” He may have liked to see himself as a Shepherd Prince. As part of this shepherding he protected the Jewish populations in the empire, both in Palestine and in the Diaspora. It is unlikely that he was aware of the strong anti-Jewish tendencies of his deputy Sejanus, who in effect administered Rome for many years until Tiberius realized his treachery and swiftly acted to remove him in A.D. 31.

Tiberius had forsaken Rome and had lived in Capreae since A.D. 27. Astrologers had predicted that he would not set foot in Rome again, so he never did, in case it would mean his death. He was prone to voluntary exile. Before he was prince of the empire, in the days of Augustus, he had gone to Rhodes for many years. There he had met Thrasyllus, who had taught him his Chaldean brand of astrology. Tiberius was no mean amateur—according





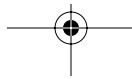
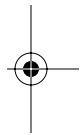
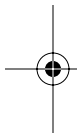
to Roman historians he would predict the brief reign of Galba in A.D. 69, the “year of four emperors.”

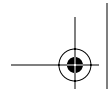
His magnificent Villa Jovis in Capreae, named after the main Roman deity, Jupiter, was in effect a palace, with its court. Along with thousands of slaves, Tiberius surrounded himself with Greek scholars (a custom he had long followed) as well as his personal astrologer (who was a restraining influence on his excesses). One such scholar was Seleucis the grammarian.² It was Tiberius’s practice at supper to raise questions, based on what he had been reading during the day. Seleucis had the bright idea of inquiring of his attendants which authors he was currently reading. This allowed him to come prepared for Tiberius’s questions. When the strongly built Tiberius discovered this, he was furious, laying into Seleucis and throwing him out of his household. As well as reading widely, the emperor had an absorbing interest in rhetoric and philosophy.

It is plausible that his excesses increased as he became elderly and his sexual powers decreased. Despite his indulgent, predatory sexual life (if the accounts have a core of truth, which is likely) he tried to be plain living and kept a grip on the worldwide affairs of the empire through his provincial governors, whom he encouraged to stay long term, and to whom he allowed initiative and discretion in their administration. He particularly followed the work of the imperial appointees—those governing frontier provinces like Judea and Syria. They would be either *legati* or lesser *procuratores*, depending on the perceived importance of the province. Both kinds had extensive discretionary powers in enforcing Roman rule and law. The *legati*, however, had a much more formidable military backing. By ill-judgment Judea had been assigned a prefect rather than a high-ranking ambassador. Pontius Pilate was appointed back in A.D. 26, almost certainly chosen by Sejanus, Tiberius’s former deputy, on the emperor’s behalf. Any former friend of Sejanus feared the emperor now. The ruthless slaughter of his associates by Tiberius continued, though perhaps not on the scale reported by his historians.³

DECEMBER 18, A.D. 32 (KISLEV 25)

The charismatic rabbi from Galilee is again in Jerusalem. Though the inhabitants, beginning their joyful Feast of Hanukkah, do not know it, this is to be the valedictory of his public teaching. On this winter’s day he has made his way to Jerusalem, two miles from the small village of Bethany, over the





hills to the west, where he habitually stays while visiting the holy city.

He has already entertained a crowd with his vivid, figurative teaching. As usual he teaches, like others, under the broad colonnade that skirts the lower court of the temple, known as the Court of the Gentiles. Its broad pillars provide shelter from cold winds in the winter and shade from the sun the rest of the year. Though Jesus of Nazareth lacks the educated Judean accent of the official religious teachers, he speaks with authority. As usual, the common people hear him gladly. Today there has been a hard edge to his words, for, as he expected, in the crowd are a number of the religious professionals—chief priests, scribes and others of Jerusalem’s wealthy elite. He has spoken of being the good shepherd, and of being the protective gate for his sheep, for whom he cares. He has talked about gathering his flock and laying down his life for them. This bit of his teaching is easy for the crowd—they know the sheep are the Jews, God’s chosen people, defined by the life and procedures of the temple in Judea. The result of his words, inevitably, is a division among his hearers. Some say he is insane, demon-possessed.

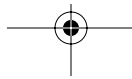
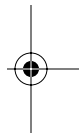
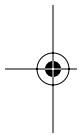
Afterward, Jesus walks in the long colonnade of Solomon’s Portico, which runs along the edge of the huge artificial plateau of the temple area. He can see in the center of the court, raised above balustrades, the colossal temple proper, the sanctuary which only Jews can enter. Stone tablets warn Gentiles not to go in. Walking to Jerusalem early that morning, in the first hour, he had seen the rising sun’s rays burn back from the gold plate of the high temple. It looked like a mountain covered with snow—the blaze of fire was so intense he saw its after-image as he turned away his gaze.

The temple, with its vast lower courtyard and high colonnades, is an immense structure, taking up one-sixth of the area of the city. The colonnade of Solomon extends along the eastern side of the temple complex.

Jesus does not enjoy the peace of his walk very long, or his professional appreciation of the cedarwork of its ceiling high above. Some of the religious leaders wall him about and confront him impatiently, stirred up by his teaching about being the one true shepherd of the Jews. There had been many in Israel before him with messianic claims.

“How long are you going to goad us? You hide your words in parables and figures of speech. Out with it, man! Are you the Messiah who has been promised through the ages? Come on, spit it out!”

Jesus answers in a deliberate and measured tone, “I’ve already told you





many times, but you don't believe. What I've done in my father's name bears witness to who I am." (He is referring to his much-talked-about teaching, healings and other supernatural signs.) "The only reason you don't believe is because you are not part of my flock." As he says "my flock," his gesture takes in some men and women listening nearby who are known to be his disciples. Among them are individuals who are certainly not fit company for pious Jews.

He continues to speak penetratingly over the rising murmurs of dissent on the part of his interrogators: "As I said to you, my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give to them life that is everlasting, and they shall never perish, neither shall anyone pluck them out of my hand. My father, who gave them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to take them out of my father's hand."

Then there is a pause before the punchline, as Jesus looks directly at his critics, knowingly condemning himself to destruction: "And I and my father are one."⁴

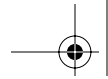


We are told in John's Gospel that, at this point, his accusers picked up stones (which they may have brought with them). They were incensed by his blasphemy—his claim to be one with God, Maker of heaven and earth. Jesus was known by contemporary historians such as Tacitus and Josephus as the "Christ," or as claiming to be the Christ (Greek, *Christos*, Messiah). A messianic claim by itself would not be blasphemy. Jewish belief at this time was diverse. Some groups looked for a messiah who would deliver the nation by force as an insurrectionist leader. Others placed their hope in a holy man or priest who would come apocalyptically at the end times. None of these concepts of messiah implied a divine claim.

By now, either the group had moved outside the temple area through one of the great entrances where rocks could be found in the Kidron Valley, or perhaps they armed themselves with building material (parts of the temple area were still under construction nearly fifty years after its foundation was laid by Herod the Great).

History would be very different, unrecognizable in fact, if the small mob had stoned him there and then. They might have pushed him over the edge of the steep Kidron Valley, then finished off the job with rocks, smashing his head and body before soldiers had time to arrive from Fortress Antonia. His distraught followers would have dragged away his body, buried him and



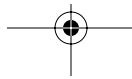


venerated his tomb for a while as one of many failed messiahs and potential saviors, more memorable perhaps than Theudas,⁵ Judas the Galilean, and his sons James and Simon,⁶ but not much more. Jesus, however, continued to reason with his interrogators in rabbinic fashion, from a point within the scriptural Torah where people entrusted as divine agents were called “sons of God,” which was clearly not blasphemous. This exposition made them remain a group instead of a mob. They may also have feared the vast number of people round about, increased because of the feast, who favored Jesus. They changed their minds about stoning, and instead tried to arrest him. We are told simply that he evaded capture and left Jerusalem, escaping beyond the River Jordan.

It was no accident that Jesus chose the Feast of Dedication for his valedictory public teaching. The winter feast was heavy with symbolism. Its purpose was to celebrate the rededication of the temple after its desecration under Syro-Grecian domination. The festival—called the “Feast of Lights” by Josephus—was established by Judas Maccabaeus in 164 B.C.⁷ The feast began on Kislev (December) 25 and lasted eight days. On each day the “Hallel” was sung, and people joyfully carried palms and other branches. The temple was magnificently illuminated, and so were all private houses. The head of the household might light one lamp for all family members or a lamp for each. The particularly devout might increase the number each day, so if a household had ten lights on the first day, there would be eighty on the last day of the festival.⁸

Jesus by his presence at the feast was signaling that this year the temple was undergoing a rededication even more radical than that of 164 B.C. It was not simply remembering that great event. In this case, according to the New Testament accounts, Jesus himself was the new temple. This claim was based on his identity—he was, he said, one with God (his Father). In the Christian view, he replaced the existing temple as the place where all are to come for forgiveness of sin and to meet God.⁹ He was simultaneously the final sacrifice and the “place” of worship. With the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, the Christian and rabbinic versions of Judaism were to gradually diverge—for Christians, Jesus replaced the temple worship and sacraments; for the rabbinic Jews, the synagogue and the Torah filled the aching void.¹⁰

Significantly, Jesus announced this claim in the Court of the Gentiles, not in the higher sanctuary of the temple proper, where non-Jews were forbidden access. As always with Jesus’ actions, a living iconography was enacted.





The apostles later understood him as signifying the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven, of which he had so often spoken, that transcended all nations, states and civilizations. In his claim it transcended even the temple of the nation of the chosen people, which was only a copy of the original. His claim was that he is the Original.¹¹



Rome and Jerusalem at this time were both cities that were symbols as well as places. Under Augustus and Tiberius, the Roman empire had established a civilizing “Pax Romana,” and Jerusalem’s very name could mean “foundation of peace.” These two cities hereafter symbolically would dominate the history of Western and world civilization. Rome represented the rule of civilized law—an idea that transcended the works of bad men like Caligula and Nero. Jerusalem, and its temple in particular, defined the monotheism, allegiance to the Torah and moral clarity of ancient Jewish faith. Rooted in this ancient faith, the new allegiance to Jesus would forever in its essence have the character of that faith, however ignorant of this inheritance some of its followers might become. By a strange irony the idea of a “new Jerusalem,” associated with following Christ, would win over the mighty empire without force in less than three hundred years. The result would be mutual enrichment and a creative tension, what George Steiner calls “the dual currents which determine Western consciousness, that of classical antiquity and that of scriptural-Christian inheritance.”¹²

