Sourer Than Citrus is
the first part of the
Eden trilogy

He Who Kills People
is the second part of the
Eden trilogy

Close as a Perfect Pearl
is the third part of the
Eden trilogy

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CLOSE AS A PERFECT PEARL

on the lives of Mary and Mary Magdalene

Erik Willems

Dedicated to Pieje Crabbé With
thanks to Djibril

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FOREWORD

My life changed drastically on 23 March 1994.
On 12 December 2012, I began keeping a diary after reading Oscar Wilde's **De Profundis**, written in 1898 whilst he was imprisoned for his homosexuality. One sentence from **De Profundis** lingered in my mind and struck a chord: "Far off, like a perfect pearl, one can see the City of God lying there. Its sight is so marvellous that it seems as though a child could reach it within a summer's day. And a child can." I was determined to rediscover the child within me. And so I began to write, just as I have never stopped and never will stop. 'Far away' had to become 'close by'. It is now 25 December 2025. I did not wish to reveal my name in the first two books of the trilogy and hesitated for a long time as to whether I should reveal my name after this third part. I had, and still have, a strong feeling that I 'received' everything and that it does not come from me. Precisely for that reason, I wished to remain 'anonymous' for as long as I was writing. The dénouement of the story of salvation, from the Old Testament to Jesus, both man and God, had to remain a single, clear line insofar as I would receive this inspiration, not create it myself: inspirations of which I often did not even realise at first glance what they meant, only to suddenly grasp their message after days of reflection. Had I discussed these matters in the meantime with renowned theologians, they would have talked me out of it

with references to leading biblical scholars and exegetes. But I had been taught, in all confidence, not to do just that: I once wrote and performed my monologue *The King's Child* based purely on intuition, and the true message only became clear one month after the final performance on 23 April 1994. What led up to this? I was brought up as a Christian; I spent seven years at a boarding school run by the Montfortians in Rotselaar. I have always been a searching soul: I did not have an easy childhood due to feelings of inferiority caused by late puberty. But I fought back: I became a GP – for forty years – and learnt a great deal from people, but was also able to help people because of my difficult past. I never lost sight of the God of love and have always sought Him: "Show Yourself, Lord, so that I may not doubt." I sought Him ceaselessly. I sought Him, but did not find Him. I decided to turn my search into a play, a monologue, and I wrote *The King's Child*. My director often found it difficult: "But what are you trying to say with this play, Erik?" My reply: "I don't know myself, Matthias, I only know that it has to be this way." The final performance[1]took place at the City Theatre in Kortrijk on 16 March 1994. The play ended with the lost king, right at the very end, holding the box with

[1] For those who love the piano, listen on Spotify to the moving theme song from the play *The King's Child* by composer and live performer *Corneille Driezen*.

the soul of his child in his hands, the true King finds himself once more. The final line was: ‘The throne was no longer empty.’ A single short sentence that held a promise for me. And the curtain fell. I sought God, and I was willing to pay whatever the cost: ‘Show Yourself, Lord! I want certainty!’ And I received what I asked for.

One week after our last performance in Kortrijk, on 23 March 1994, my wife began to lose amniotic fluid, and our fourth child, a little boy, was stillborn on 23 April 1994 due to a rupture in the amniotic sac: the baby no longer had room to grow. During the contractions, I was reminded of certain lines from the play **The King’s Child**, performed less than a month earlier, featuring the searching King: “Perhaps I must find the child within myself in a spiral movement, in which, after a long wandering, something within you gradually, imperceptibly, grows smaller and smaller, so that you finally come home to that one point which holds the centre of all its circles.” And I walked desperately in ever-smaller circles to come to rest at that one point and cried out: “Yes! That is what I wish for: to meet!” When I held our dead little son in my hands, I received what I had asked for on stage a month earlier: “Lord, were You so close all this time?” He touched me. “He who cannot love the imperfect cannot see the Perfect,” was the message I received, and I loved the imperfect dead child immeasurably, and the Perfect revealed itself. From then on, my life was ‘different’.

During that period, I had become very close to the Dutch puppeteer Jozef van den Berg, and so Mieke and I named our little boy Jefke. Jozef became my godfather when I was baptised into the Orthodox Church, and I was given the name Gabriel, which in Arabic is 'Djibri(e)l'.
Joseph had already told me whilst I was preparing the monologue: "You're on the right track." It was no coincidence. Nor were the many 'coincidences' that followed, which piled up into a mountain I could no longer ignore. I became a child of the king. In religious jargon, this is called 'acquiring divine grace' (*Sourer than Citrus*, page 23). At the time, I didn't understand what was happening to me, but I quickly learnt from people with similar stories, such as Jozef van den Berg, that it is normal for a person to rarely be able to hold on to this for long and to lose it again as a result of the creeping in of hints of pride; in my case, this happened after about five months. I compared it, and still compare it, as follows: I was finally sitting on the back of Father's bike and had everything I needed to love every person, friend and foe, spontaneously, but little by little I started jumping off the bike: I thought I could manage on my own to show this wonderful message to people without losing it myself. At first, I could genuinely jump back onto the bike seat behind Father, but step by step I allowed a little more distance to grow between us before jumping back onto the seat, and that worked wonderfully until a critical moment. The immense and spontaneous love that

The more I acquired, the more I came to regard it as my own personal achievement, and Father, on his bicycle, suddenly vanished from view. My pride and arrogance were my undoing: I lost Eden. A loss that leaves behind a painful longing, after which the search can, admittedly, be conducted with greater focus, in the hope of regaining Eden in the present.

Listening to or seeking advice from religious people who have not experienced such things themselves, however learned they may be, would only have severely hampered me in my Gnostic trilogy narrative. What I did, however, was to conduct research in books, online, the Old and New Testaments, and to build up more and more confidence in apparent ‘coincidences’ and experiences from forty years as a GP, a profession of illness, life and death, for which I thank my patients. However, after my fall, my Father had left me something, something of inestimable value: my blind trust in my intuition as a gift and an inestimable treasure; my reason comes only second. The Gospel of Mary Magdalene is indeed a Gnostic text that was not entirely in line with the traditions of the apostles, with the exception of the Gospel of John, which also exhibits Gnostic aspects. Its first chapter was already quite Gnostic and much loved.

I realise that in this book I am going against the grain of many Christian religions. I have examined the four major branches of the Christian churches – the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic

church, the Protestant churches and the Gnostic churches – and come to know them with all their strengths and weaknesses. I respect all four, each in their own way, but none of them has a monopoly on love (see p. 14: the story of Pieje). It is just as I love my four children. My children are not the same either, and yet I do not want to and cannot make any distinctions. They are not perfect, just as I am not perfect myself. Sometimes I can get annoyed with them, just as I often get annoyed with myself, but that doesn't last a minute. My youngest child, Jefke, is of course different: so I have never been able to get annoyed with him, but thanks to him I have come to know and appreciate the Gnostic movement. I have one daughter and three sons. I cannot imagine loving my daughter any less than my sons. Why am I suddenly talking about my daughter?

All official Christian churches originated from the very first Council of Nicaea in 312 AD. It raises many questions for me when you realise that not a single woman was allowed to participate in the Council of Nicaea: 318 holy men and 0 holy women. During that important council, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene was not selected because it had previously been regarded as 'merely' apocryphal and did not meet the criteria for the 'male' biblical canon. The Gospel of Mary Magdalene is one of the Gnostic writings that emerged after the era of the apostles

written in 120 AD. Am I really so wrong to love my daughter just as much as my three sons?'

However, I am becoming increasingly convinced that her Gospel is no less capable than the canonical Gospels—if not more so—of showing the way to divine grace to any sincere seeker. And for those who find it difficult to accept this woman's message because she is a woman, they would do well to turn their attention to Jesus' half-brother John, grandson of Joseph the carpenter, and some five years older than Jesus, who grew up with him, experienced the flight to Egypt, and stood beneath the cross alongside Mary: "Woman, behold your son." whereby John may truly be recognised as Jesus' 'full' brother. And please pause for a moment to reflect on John 14:18–20. "I will not leave you as orphans. I am coming to you. The world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me, for I live and you will live. On that day you will know that I am in My Father and you in Me and I in you."[2] Yes indeed: "I IN you."

Is there anyone closer to us than someone who is WITH us every single second? How heart-warming is that? The

[2] The spiritual depth of this statement by Jesus to John speaks volumes about the spiritual depth of John, Jesus' half-brother. Jesus would only make such a statement to someone who understands this spiritually as well. This applies equally to Mary Magdalene's conversations. As a GP, I often had to explain the same clinical picture from a lower to a higher intellectual level. Just because I do not understand Einstein's theory of relativity down to the last detail does not mean Einstein is wrong. Who can or dares to contradict Jesus?

The breaking of bread is only a small part of it. None of the 318 male members of the First Council of Nicaea dared to remove the Gospel of John, despite its obvious Gnostic leanings… and rightly so.

The conflict between reason based on Gnosticism – specifically, the knowledge of oneself – 'he who knows himself knows the ALL' – and reason based on rituals and institutions with an externally imposed doctrinal authority, will forever give rise to tensions, just as we also argue over the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. Both sides have their weaknesses and strengths, but neither should consider itself superior to the other. I once received an example and an answer to this from a patient. His name was Petrus, which in our dialect was pronounced 'Pieje'. He was a labourer living in the smallest worker's cottage in the village. Pieje was a simple carpenter by trade, and was married to a woman who turned out to be mentally disabled and was admitted to a psychiatric institution soon after the birth of their only daughter, where she died at a relatively young age. I never knew her. Pieje always had a smile on his face and did not merely appear happy, for he was always happy. His only daughter also lived a secluded life, withdrawn into herself. Pieje did not know how to complain. The only thing he read was the daily newspaper. Religion seemed alien to him. I could not say that he was missing anything: no money and no God. Pieje lived to be 91, and in the last days before his death, my carer Hilde and I visited him every day.

There was no question of him being admitted to hospital. The man was in no significant pain, and his smile and gratitude were etched on his face from morning till night. Hilde and I were taken aback by this and kept asking him if he was in any pain. No, he wasn't, and he lay peacefully in his bed, waiting. On the last day, I asked him in front of Hilde: "Pieje, aren't you afraid of dying?" And Pieje looked at us in surprise and smiled: "Why should I be? I love all people." And Pieje died that night in the presence of his daughter. He was a Gnostic through and through. A purple butterfly. And then I feel small, like someone who has to write a trilogy with great fanfare and still doesn't reach the level of Pieje's ankles: "I love all people." Pieje knew the ALL. My deepest respect, Pieje.

In short: love has the last word, and membership cards are not indispensable and can sometimes even be counterproductive. And that struck Mahatma Gandhi too: "I do like Christ, but I don't like the Christians: they are so unlike Christ." But in this way, Gandhi too makes the same mistake (I don't like the Christians) as all the various Christian churches do amongst themselves, and he too can learn something from Pieje. I'll end with a word for Belial: "Oh yes, my dear Belial, I too make many mistakes against love, but that doesn't mean you've got me yet."

Erik Willems

INTRODUCTION

The mystery of love will always remain the greatest mystery for humanity.

Love is, in itself, a universally boundless feeling, known to every human being, and cannot be confined by rules, commandments or laws, nor by time. We can write books about it, but we never reach its limits: love is like the Big Bang and continues to expand as a beginning without an end. Love offers life force to all that lives. Without it, there is only matter. Yet what we as individuals can experience of love is but a fraction compared to what it can give: our ego is always getting in the way somewhere. Nevertheless, every human being loves to be loved, however foolishly or hostilely they may behave. Love is always omnipresent, whether as affirmation or denial. We can give it infinite names and meanings. Mary Magdalene described love in her gospel as the 'Nature of the Root'. The smallest insect cares for its offspring. Every plant reproduces itself. Every micro-organism divides. Every cell carries information to pass on to a new cell. 'Something' once triggered that reproduction and gave it power. The word 'reproduction' contains 'plant', and a plant cannot exist without a root. Nature is a word for everything that lives. The 'Nature of the Root' is the selfless provider of life, of happiness, of giving, of respect, of love.

The opposite of this pole is merely a denial of what is and exists.

The battle between the polar opposites for the human heart is a fierce struggle.
In the apocryphal gospel [3] of Mary Magdalene, which was only partially rediscovered in Nag Hammadi in 1946 and dated to around 120 AD, she recounts how Jesus conveyed to her virtually the same message as John: that He dwells WITHIN us, that He need not come again, and that at the same time evil opposing forces dwell within us: darkness, ignorance, desire and anger. Many early Christians and 'parishes avant la lettre' subscribed to this view, which came to be known as 'Gnostic Christianity' – more on that later. However, the only female gospel was not discussed by the 318 male delegates at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

In one of the first chapters, I let Belial have his say for the last time at the beginning of the Old Testament, followed by an example of unreliable reporting from a time when writing had not yet been invented: the age of the storytellers had dawned. It was not until around 900 BC

[3] *Esther de Boer*: *Mary Magdalene, Beyond the Myth,* Meinema

was it recorded in writing[4] based on the accounts of Moses 500 years earlier. I then recount the romanticised story of two strong women and friends, Mary[5] and Mary Magdalene.

[4] The *'Yahwist'*; more on this later in the chapter 'Restoring Jacob's Honour'

[5] *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, *the Theotokos*, Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista, Colorado, USA

THE OLD TESTAMENT

INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

Homo sapiens[6] firstappeared 2.5 million years ago. Thousands of years before that, everything was passed down orally from generation to generation in various narratives and variations. It was therefore left to the Mesopotamians to develop a fully-fledged writing system. From 3000 BC onwards, they added more vocabulary to the Sumerian script and changed the characters into cuneiform. From 2500 BC onwards, the Egyptian, Hebrew, Latin and Greek alphabets followed, with many other alphabets in other parts of the world emerging somewhat later. The narratives of Moses were compiled around 900 BC into a foundational text: the Yahwist[7] , an amalgam of selected writings centred on Yahweh and which served as the basis for Judaism.

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6 *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari

7 The *Pentateuch* ('the five scrolls') comprises the first five books of the Old Testament, referred to in the Christian tradition by their Greek-Latin names: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Yahwist is the oldest of these sources, dealing primarily with narratives.

According to current scientific understanding, the first day of Genesis turned out to be a 'Big Bang'[8]that took place 13.8 billion years ago, before there was even a second day of Genesis. *So what?* Is that a problem for the creation story by a God as such? As adults, having grown sensible, we lost the gift of believing in the mysterious 'hocus pocus' of the many magicians from our earliest childhood, whilst we gladly passed on the magic or the fairy tales in which animals could speak to our open-minded children. Conjuring something utterly impossible out of thin air was, for many of us, a gift and a matter of course as long as we remained children. Once we became adults, it lost all its magic and, even more so, the gift of opening ourselves up to what is purely intellectually impossible. From then on, science had to be able to prove it first. Science, however, has a sort of love-hate relationship with fantasy and naivety, but prefers to describe it as intuition, and there is nothing wrong with that. The most important intuitive aspect of humanity is still fighting for recognition against human reason[9] . After all, many a scientific breakthrough has often stemmed from intuition and belief. One can safely say that Einstein's[10] theory of relativity came about

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[8] *Oer*, Cees Dekker, Gijsbert van den Brink, Corien Oranje, Ark Media

[9] *Gerd Gigerenzer*, a psychologist, is a world-renowned expert in the field of intuition.

[10] *Einstein* said: 'The intuitive mind is a gift and the rational mind is its servant.' This theme recurs throughout this book.

thanks to a vivid imagination combined with a solid grounding in physics, a keen intellect, and analytical openness and perceptiveness – whether watching a train pass through a station or taking a lift. All great inventions and insights came about by daring to think outside the box or through chance discoveries, but even that required intuition to seek out the ‘why’ or ‘what can you do with it?’. Why couldn’t one argue that the Big Bang was the very first act in the plan of a supreme being, a ‘God’, to provide the building blocks for humankind, the genus Homo? The species from which ‘sapiens’, after evolution, still tries to improve itself every single day and is constantly searching for supreme happiness, even though humans often confuse this happiness with money. Many people find it corny to describe supreme happiness as ‘love’ in good times, but in bad times, every human being generally agrees in their heart, corny or not, to name the supreme happiness of humankind according to its truest and most fundamental value: love. And if this is true, then this Big Bang, whether primal softness or primal hardness, was the first plausible and perfect step in the creation of a God who is Love.

Let us go back in time for a moment to the miracle of the emergence of writing, with the written newspaper following millennia of the spoken newspaper.

Humans, the genus Homo or 'man'[11], first appeared in various primitive forms 2.5 million years ago. Whether Adam or Eve was a Homo neanderthalensis or a Homo sapiens is irrelevant. They were Homo and not stupid. It was not until around 8000 BC that Homo sapiens remained as the last and only species of the genus Homo, having retained many important genes from its predecessors. The very first writing of these Homo sapiens came from the Sumerian people on clay tablets dating from 3300–3000 BC. Their writing was literally rudimentary; it was merely a partial script: you could never write a story or a book with it; only numbers and just a few words were assigned a symbol or drawing. It was originally a valuable and indispensable accounting tool. It was therefore left to the Mesopotamians to develop a complete writing system from 3000 BC onwards. They added more vocabulary to the Sumerian script and the characters took on a cuneiform shape. From 2500 BC onwards, the Egyptian, Hebrew, Latin and Greek complete writing systems followed, and many other complete writing systems in other parts of the world followed somewhat later. The fact is that the great stories, including the best known, the Yahwist (the oldest part of the Pentateuch and part of the later Old Testament) and the Greek *Iliad*, had until then only

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[11] *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, by Yuval Noah Harari

were passed down orally from generation to generation. It was not until many centuries, indeed millennia, later that writers began to put pen to paper, with all the advantages and disadvantages that entailed. Advantages included the often poetic tone and the beginnings of a degree of uniformity[12] ; a disadvantage was that the content did not always correspond with that of the very earliest stories. And now we come to a crucial point in our discourse, and I quote the academic view: "A distinction must be made between the time period described in the stories (for which there is no exact estimate of when it began: a thousand years earlier?) and the period in which these stories were put into writing from 900 BC at the earliest, that is to say the time when the narratives attributed to Moses in 1400 BC[13] —though this is by no means proven—were recorded as sacred. This is a contentious point in research into the

[12] Uniformity apparently applied only to Virgil's **Iliad** as a work by a masterful poet, but as far as the Biblical writings are concerned, research has continued and compromises have been sought from the Middle Ages to the present day. A vast jigsaw puzzle of diverse and overlapping authors, with pieces that are sometimes barely legible, crumbling and difficult to fit together, has often been glued into a single whole – a process that, millennia later, affords my current 'childlike wonder and imagination' the space to make observations about it.

[13] Wikipedia, search for 'Moses': well worth a look as a sort of synopsis of Spinoza's searching mind at the end of the 17th century, who survived an attempt on his life, right up to the present day.

Pentateuch."[14] In any case, we will have to accept a considerable gap in time between the events (stories) passed down orally and the written tradition many centuries later. And then the child in me comes to the fore, as I still vividly remember how, as twelve-year-olds in the youth movement during the winter months, we played the game where a first 'storyteller' had to whisper a one-line story into the ear of the next person in the chain, until the twelfth and last person in the chain was asked to recount aloud what they had heard. It invariably ended in a chorus of laughter from all twelve members of the chain, who were astonished by the flawed and utterly nonsensical-sounding end result. But it can get even crazier, because there were undoubtedly multiple storylines about shared events between different communities, tribes and families. Let's have four scout groups of the same age play the same game with the same opening sentence, completely independently of one another. And the last recipient in each group, without hearing the opening sentence, goes off to a separate room with his three 'colleagues'. The four of them must then piece together their versions of what they heard to form a

[14] The Pentateuch comprises the first five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, which are attributed to the 'narratives' of Moses in 1400 BC. Whereas the written Gospel of Mary Magdalene, written in 110 AD – estimated to be just 40 years after her death – was not deemed worthy of inclusion at the Council of Nicaea. Double standards.

How do you achieve such a consensus? How do you pull something like that off? What remains of the original message? How profound must this effect have been in the minds of one hundred and twenty [15]generations of storytellers over a maximum of four thousand years, before the written word took over the story from listeners to readers? Not to mention the many storylines among various tribes? Which storyteller/writer was influenced by Yahweh? Which storyteller/writer was influenced by Belial? The battle between the good and the evil angel thus took place not only in the heart of every human being, but at least as fiercely in the most important narrated, and more still, written word. Many

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[15] You can make a rough estimate using the following figures: average estimated and overestimated age survival, time span, number of tribes and communities, and then I would guess at a minimum of one hundred and fifty storytellers in a single narrative within a single community or tribe who were active over three to four millennia until the written word was discovered. The first written source of the Bible, the Yahwist, was not written until around 950 BC. The very first Homo sapiens (2.5 million years earlier) most likely did not start telling stories straight away either. Did it take them a thousand years?
Two thousand years? There are many unknown factors, but one fact is certain: these were stories that were initially passed down orally. And how many storylines existed in neighbouring tribes or communities, separate from one another? Which storyline ultimately made it into the final written version? Or was a mix of storylines created, with compromises made to reach a consensus? Did the storytellers of that time ever come together, and were they willing to reach a consensus? The first writer must have been overwhelmed by the many prevailing ‘versions’, if he even heard of them.

The narrator of the story of Cain must have been faced with the most difficult of questions: where on earth did Cain suddenly find his wife? Cain, who must have been involved in an incestuous relationship with his mother? Highly unlikely … The narrator apparently kept silent on the matter in every language, just as the writer later resolved it by modestly remaining silent, whilst every sensible person knows that you need a wife to bear children. Many sensitive issues and questions were sidestepped in the written Genesis. The Tower of Babel, which suddenly tore people apart into different languages: what is Yahweh's influence? What is the influence of Belial? Noah and the Flood, resulting in the drowning of many innocent children? The theft of the birthright through Jacob's deceit at the expense of his elder brother Esau? Two sons of the patriarch Jacob, Simon and Levi, who begin to murder in revenge for the dishonour done to their sister Dinah. Entire cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, completely destroyed? The exodus from Egypt, in which hundreds of Egyptians, including those merely carrying out military orders, died in the sea: what is the influence of Yahweh? What is the influence of Belial? Or did Belial disguise himself as Yahweh?

Even today, the Old Testament continues to be unravelled and commented on by exegetes, clergy, Bible enthusiasts and scholars, but none of them will ever be able to rectify the error in the narrative link between, for example,

number 27 from a rather dominant storyline 3 in the chain. Imagine that you yourself are a powerful devil; would it not be your greatest triumph if, thousands of years later, your terrible, hellish deeds and words were still attributed to the work of God, who is Love? Who always is? Who is Holy? To label something as 'holy', surely you would need to have very credible arguments.
How could a manipulated 'story' of Genesis and the many other books of the Old Testament come into being and acquire the epithet 'holy'? How could that spirit of the times have arisen in the first place?
There is only one answer: humanity moved ever further away from the spiritual Eden. And was this not Belial's sole aim, and could this ever have been the intention of 'God who is Love', who wishes to give all people a place in His City of Love?

So you can pretend these are holy books, but the consequences were inevitable. Many people have been killed, and are still being killed, on the basis of statements and stories from this book about a 'god' who is anything but loving, and who bears more resemblance to a punishing Belial than to a God of love and forgiveness.
And it gets even more complex: on top of this, there's the way language itself evolves over the centuries, with new words, new figures of speech, and consequently new ways of conveying emotions. Here's an example. 'I'm cold' or 'the cold

cuts to the bone': the latter evokes pity, whilst the former is neutrally informative.

Let us, by way of a prime example, consider one of the most important early translations of the Bible into Dutch in our region: the Statenvertaling[16] , a new Bible for the Dutch Republic in 1673. 'Eendracht maeckt macht'[17] appears on the title page of this Statenbijbel.

And they succeeded: few books have had such a profound influence on the culture of the Northern Netherlands as this Bible. In almost every religious debate – and there were many in the seventeenth century – the Bible played a significant role. There were many different Dutch translations of the Bible in circulation. These contained quite a few errors, meaning that all sorts of passages were interpreted differently. But even regarding the same translation, people often failed to agree. When the doctrine of the Reformed faith was established at the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618–1619, it was decided that a correct Bible translation was also required. Discussions on this plan lasted eight days, followed by intensive lobbying of, for example,

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[16] This entire passage was taken almost verbatim from the website www.debijbel.nl. It concerns a Protestant translation from 1637, whereas the first Dutch-language Roman Catholic Bible was the Willibrord translation of 1975!

[17] 'Power': right from the start, this Bible strikes the wrong note. This new Dutch translation was intended to unite the inhabitants of the Republic – one people, one language, one Bible – and thus to amass 'power': the word 'power' remains a terrible word when one sets love as one's goal.

theologians, publishers and the States General. The latter undertook to cover the costs and officially commissioned the project in 1625, hence the name ‘Statenvertaling’. By issuing this commission, the government also signalled that it held greater authority than the church. The translators were given a daunting task. They had to produce an accurate translation in correct Dutch from the original biblical languages, including the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. Furthermore, the translation had to be in line with the Reformed doctrine established at the Synod of Dordrecht. Furthermore, the text was absolutely not to cause any confusion. With the Reformation, personal religious experience had become important. Therefore, every believer had to be able to understand the text on their own, without any cause for doubt. To meet all these requirements, six translators and fifteen ‘supervisors’ (checkers, also known as ‘revisers’) were selected from among the country’s finest theologians and linguists. They worked in teams in Leiden, where they could make use of books from the university library and, where necessary, receive advice from the university’s scholars. The first translators began in 1626, the first revisors in July 1633. One of these revisors was the poet-minister Jacob Revius from Deventer. The Deventer church council wanted him to return before winter, but Revius refused. “This project takes precedence over my duty as a minister,” he said, “I am now working under the authority of the States-General.” In

By September 1633, Revius had completed his work. The States Bible was published in 1637. The first edition was a deluxe edition and a large, expensive book; later, abridged editions were also published, which were smaller and cheaper.
The Statenbijbel became a great success. It became the standard Bible in Calvinist churches and schools. In Calvinist families, passages were read aloud from it daily. Other Protestants, such as the Mennonites and the Pietists, also began to use the book. Only the Lutherans clung to translations of the Luther Bible. Many poets were (and are) inspired by the Bible, for example the minister Jodocus van Lodenstein. His collection **Uyt-spanningen** (1676) contains a series of meditations based on 1 John 2:16: "For all that is in the world—namely, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father, but is of the world." The final poem in the series urges tranquillity and self-reflection, and condemns overconfidence:

"The pride of life.

Where to, my heart? You do not rear up, but rise
and pant even without steps upwards; I advise
you to rise gently, for if you
moderately: cautiously; thus: as the summit
comes at full speed, and thinks it stands there:

It will surely go against your will, for
your own impetus drives you back down
from the highest point.
And when you are rolling down: oh, oh!
Your speed increases your fall: therefore I
say, stand still, and look at yourself; I
wager you will see a Nothing."

God suddenly spoke in Dutch! The translators and proofreaders of the Statenvertaling had been instructed to use correct Dutch. That was easier said than done. They came from different parts of the country and brought their own variants of Dutch with them. Compromises therefore had to be reached regarding spelling, grammar and word choice. For many words, phrases and expressions, no standard Dutch variant was yet available, so these had to be devised. These solutions were the first steps towards a single Dutch language. Because the Statenbijbel was read so widely, it exerted a major influence. This is still clearly evident in modern Dutch. The translators worked systematically. For example, they consistently chose 'om' in subordinate clauses expressing a purpose: 'came to search this land' instead of 'came to spy out the land' (Joshua 2:2). They also consistently distinguished between 'liggen' and 'leggen' and chose 'dacht' instead of 'docht' and 'vond' instead of 'vand'. Through the Statenvertaling,

the reflexive pronoun ‘zich’ is the one commonly used, rather than ‘hem’ and ‘haar’. Many proverbs and expressions originate from the Statenvertaling, such as ‘to hold someone in high esteem’, ‘to grope in the dark’, ‘to be no spring chicken’, ‘his hair stood on end’, ‘the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree’, ‘steal someone’s heart’, ‘pour out one’s heart’, ‘move heaven and earth’, ‘give up in despair’, ‘nitpick’, ‘put a knife to someone’s throat’ and ‘he who digs a pit for another falls into it himself’.
It was a difficult task that led to intense discussions and revisions. The committee’s secretary occasionally became desperate. And one of the translators, Willem Baudartius, sighed to the reviser Revius: ‘I have never in my life struggled as much as I have to now in my old age.’ But the success made up for a great deal. When the book was published, it was remarked that God now spoke in Dutch, so good was the language.

So much for this example from the Netherlands.
If we extrapolate this to all the languages of the world, with all their dialects, then we cannot blame anyone for the fact that, despite all noble intentions, it is difficult to speak of uniform views and interpretations of the original events.
The advent of writing has most likely prevented far worse misery, but on the other hand, the amalgam of previously opportunistic ‘adaptations’,

‘additions’ and ‘clarifications’ by various, and above all human, translators, was suddenly bestowed with the epithet ‘sacred’.

One must, to put it mildly, treat the term ‘holy’ with caution and restraint.

Humility dictates that we should undervalue rather than overvalue. The Bible was sold as if this human work were God’s own work, and therefore ‘holy’.

Many of the aims of Belial’s actions suddenly became ‘sacred’ and, from that moment on, were no longer to be questioned; they are still upheld with the utmost reverence and recited in all Abrahamic religions. It is a human yet flawed journey. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Throwing out the good with the bad is not really the solution, but at the very least we must summon the courage[18] to unmask the wolf in sheep’s clothing and, preferably, reserve the word ‘holy’ for that which can unquestionably be called holy. But the honest question arises as to whether a human being is even capable of making such an analysis. Belial, as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, can even perform ‘good’ miracles to gain a voice within a group. It seems, and this gives serious cause for reflection, that what Belial apparently

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[18] *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, Archimandrite Sophrony, see page 126 ‘On the love of enemies’ and page 129 ‘On the distinction between good and evil’, and I quote: ‘Good obtained through evil is not good.’

considered a priority, in particular the establishment of a ‘service to God(s)’, which provided Belial himself with the perfect means to justify murdering, taking revenge on, punishing, waging war against, deceive or kill one’s brother, sow discord, advocate selective favouritism, apply double standards and, above all – and this was the death blow for the people of Eden – render women eternally inferior to men. To dismiss this, from the perspective of our own age, as ‘merely’ the ‘spirit of the times back then’, as a cultural phenomenon that must be understood within its historical context and therefore cannot be evaluated as such as the work of Belial, whilst many religions still treat their women in this manner and all their wars are still based on an opportunistically distorted narrative? To thus ‘rightly’ justify centuries of ‘holy wars’ in all their forms, and to still apply this as a legitimate argument for producing weapons, blessing them to kill fellow human beings and cause suffering in the name of ‘God who is Love’?

As long as Christianity itself was persecuted, it remained pure. Every martyr was a defeat and an abomination to Belial. Following the Edict of Nicomedia in 311 AD and that of Milan in 313 AD, which brought an end to the persecutions and proclaimed Christianity the state religion, the door was opened to ‘opportunistic’ Christians, such as many at that time and such as

I now see myself as a smooth talker who has no reason to fear persecution. One can hardly blame Islam in 610 AD for demoting Jesus/Issa[19]to merely a 'prophet', partly by distorting the translation from Ancient Greek of 'the coming of the Comforter/the Holy Spirit' during the Last Supper into 'the coming of the/their "Blessed One"'. Three hundred years of legally protected Christianity was apparently enough for Islam to bring the often self-satisfied Christian face to face with the facts. As already quoted in the foreword, no one could ever have put it better than Mahatma Gandhi, who studied law in London: "I do like Christ, but I don't like the Christians: they are so unlike Christ." Today's Christians, myself foremost among them, are not worthy of being called Christians. Christians today often bear little resemblance to Christ. On the other hand, we must admit that the bar is set incredibly high for every Christian: "Love your enemy[20]." Why would you not want to love a leader like Christ, who makes this his core mission? Can any other religion offer anything higher? Is there any greater love than love for your worst enemy?

Back to the Old Testament. Mankind found itself caught in a vicious circle, where the name of Yahweh and God was repeated time and again

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[19] "We do like Christ, because this prophet foretold the Praised One", Islam 612

[20] I know of no other religion that puts this forward so resolutely. 'Love' here is truly meant as 'to love' and not merely as 'to tolerate' another person.

used but perhaps just as often abused. How, then, was the God of Love to deal with such violence perpetrated in His name?

Only a messenger in His name could set things right and save the people of Eden.

But for that, there was a long wait for a woman.

BELIAL'S FINAL WORDS

Belial's disciples were deeply impressed by the fact that Cain had been able to restore himself in the eyes of Yahweh and that, of all people, Cain's son, Enoch, could be elevated to Metatron[21] . They felt defeated. Belial, secretly jealous of Enoch, had to urgently instil new courage in them.

Thus Belial said to his disciples: "The man-woman unity within Eden has been broken, but there are still forces at work outside Eden that seek to restore this unity. The equality of man and woman is the most important cornerstone of God's plan. Let us continue to make this the greatest stumbling block. Breaking and perpetuating this equality remains crucial. Men and women outside Eden scarcely realise this. But we must not and will not rest until this work is done. Power becomes more important than powerlessness. Strongest is more important than stronger. Through her physical vulnerability, the woman must be made wholly dependent on the man's strength. His pride will do the rest. Brute force and brute reason will crush man's free intuition. Intuition

[21] (*H)Enoch*, the eldest son of Cain, attained the status of an angel as a human and became the Metatron: the mediator between man and God; read part 2 of the trilogy: *He Who Kills Men*

will be subordinated to knowing or thinking one knows. We shall likewise make the animals ferocious, destroy the harvests, turn the life-giving rain into deadly torrents, and make harsh winters uninhabitable. I shall create deserts. Woman will need man's brute strength and, for the sake of survival, will gladly become his possession, thus rendering love superfluous; and so, thus shall man rule over her. Just as we, the genderless ones, now wage war against the armies of Michael, so shall we set men against men in order to make women even more vulnerable, so that they will not only feel dependent, but will also feel Yahweh's love less and less. From now on, man shall become her god, and from his hand and lineage shall she receive her bread and her child. Physically and spiritually. Women will fight amongst themselves for the strongest man. Men will fight amongst themselves for the most beautiful woman. Jealousy will reign supreme. I shall exalt pleasure without love many times higher than the pleasure of love. Nothing will remind the man or the woman of how one they once were in Eden."

His disciples were enthusiastic about the plan and discussed it amongst themselves at the top of their voices. But for Belial, this was merely the beginning: how unimpressed had he himself, Lucifer, been at the time by the Trisagion during his stay in the Holy of Holies? 'Holy, holy, holy,' sang all the powers and forces in unison, with sounds that directly expressed the finest and purest of every

present, and not least struck the very core of the highly sensitive Lucifer, the light-bearer, in his deepest being. Belial immediately sensed how this sudden, distant memory threw his disciples into confusion, and he did not allow his whipped-up disciples a single second to fall into despair: “At the same time, I shall create holy gods for them in various forms and kinds, and they shall fight for those gods. I shall disguise myself as Yahweh and don a sheep’s skin to his measure, so that no one may notice our difference. I shall write holy books and proclaim holy wars. They shall call battles to the death over this holy, and I shall rewrite Eden through accomplices, whereby, after my appearance as a serpent, I shall emerge as one equal to Yahweh and make the woman eternally subordinate to the man. She alone shall bear the burden of debt, so that the man may rule over her for ever. Moreover, I shall call man himself holy, and thus ‘holy’ will sound ever more hollow and empty. I shall make their breath and excrement stink and turn them into my incense of the most delightful sulphur. The word ‘holy’ shall be reduced to an insignificant grain of sand in a scorching desert, whereby the grain of sand may already count itself lucky and grateful that I,” he screamed it out in his mind, shrieking, “I do not burn the grain of sand until it shall never have existed. Oh no, I cannot be that stupid: ‘holy god’ and ‘holy god’ must be able to continue fighting each other to the death with their believers. Everyone

“A man with a god will feel both compelled and entitled to do this: could it be any simpler to kill a fellow human who thinks differently? We need only watch and enjoy the spectacle.” Such were his triumphant thoughts. “Better still, people will create their own versions of a vengeful Yahweh amongst themselves. They make their own gods, and all I need to do is turn them into vengeful gods, so that they fear their god. I will make their fear of love greater than their love for love. People will proclaim themselves or others to be holy and make themselves the centre of a tiny community, which creates for them the illusion of their own universe. Men will provoke holy wars and fight them amongst themselves, making women and children even more dependent on their muscles, daring, bloodlust, vengeance and, ultimately, power. Power! Power! The sole task of the weak woman will be reduced to producing more men so that more wars can be waged. I shall take my revenge on the defiance of the women of yore, and every female lineage shall become the subject only of a man from another lineage. I shall personally, most personally, ensure that their God is addressed as ‘he’ and never as ‘she’. I shall make every age my own. I shall stalk every hour, every word, every sentence: every change in behaviour or shift in human customs I shall make my own. Disguised, I shall mingle among them and help shape their customs and rituals, for whoever the spirit

and has mastered the rituals of his present age, is master of the present and the future, and knows my past mistakes: look! Just look how quickly I adapt and learn effortlessly from my victims! They are darlings whom I cherish and yes, I shout it out: I LOVE them. Truly! I shall adapt and distort the spoken language of mankind century after century, so that nothing can be understood as it was originally intended or ever handed down from the lost Eden. I command you to use the word 'Eden' only after I have taken Eden as Yahweh, for what is not a word has never been a word or a concept. I shall change the meaning of words from the moment of their creation ad nauseam and make them appear again and again in a new guise until scarcely anything recognisable remains of the very first utterance, due to the endless guesswork of generations who will correct mistake upon mistake upon mistake upon mistake and, necessarily, or call it…" And he abruptly cut short his train of thought in their presence, so that he could be certain of their attention for his apotheosis. "Or think it…" he continued, defiantly seeking out their eager eyes, "inevitably hungry… fawning… and feeble-minded, turning away from the dried-up source. Words will change in meaning and even lose their meaning, causing their actions and customs to truly change, century after century, as if by 'divine miracle'. Descendants of Eden, forgive me for this terrible word, will thus break away more than

that they think they are building. They will offer me many opportunities to nurture this metamorphosis of words and habits, and so everyone is always more than welcome in MY world: oh human, my dear slave, you are more than welcome! My forked tongue will caress you upon your arrival, gently pricking you from left to right, sometimes in the middle, until you go mad, and I, cautious and merciful as I am—I repeat, merciful as I am—oh yes, human: how merciful I am!" His disciples went wild with delight and went mad. "Halt!" Belial thought aloud to them, and from high to low in his mind he continued in whispering thoughts: "To them, little by little, a tiny bit, a tiny step, step by smaller step, sometimes a small step back again, merciful you might think, with my deep love… yes: I confess, oh yes, I confess: with my deep love I shall…" and Belial was already revelling: "…poison them!!! Poison… poison them with my deepest love! So that they will fear love more than ever and be unable to go in any direction at all." The whole gang went even madder than they already were. One devil was already leaping on top of another in front of him, on the stumps of lost shoulder wings, to cheer. Belial revelled: "Welcome, 'love', mother-word of yesterday; now you too shall die and be buried today, and be replaced by something that moves ever further away from you, from what you once meant. Welcome, stranger in my time, and a stranger in this time you shall remain, and strangers shall you bring forth!" Belial

could no longer control himself. “And if that isn’t enough, I shall make nature so savage that every grain of rice or wheat will be fought over, and every shred of common sense will be banished by empty stomachs to become shit! Emaciated women with skeletal children – and where is their God?” He roared his thoughts from the depths, stopping just short of the gates of the Holy of Holies. Michael, Gabriel and Enoch heard them, still in thought at the entrance. They remained focused on the seraphim circling high above in the Holy of Holies and did not stir a wing. Michael sensed[22] without a single thought or effort how fierce the battle would be and how difficult it would be made for mankind to withstand Belial’s powerful weapons without them being able to defend mankind with weapons of equal strength. The good angel is always at a disadvantage against the evil angel: the evil angel once lived as a good angel, but the good angel never as an evil one. Nevertheless… “Nevertheless, there is a ray of hope,” Michael thought to Djibril after all that had gone before, “Belial underestimates the power of pretence.” Djibril, too, immediately thought back to that first fateful night, when the Woman and the Man were driven out of Eden, and how Adam pulled himself together after he

[22] Let this now be precisely the characteristic of a good angel: intuition, knowing solely on the basis of feeling, with the sole criterion being: is it love or not love? After all, love need not devise a plan. They are and act in accordance with what they represent and also are: love. The fallen angel, on the other hand, lost what he had once been. Reason took the place of intuition and became everything and the only thing to him.

Eve, who had been abused on that first night without love. “Let’s at least pretend,” Adam whispered imploringly in her ear afterwards, remembering all too clearly how he had loved her many times more in Eden than during this act. Just as Michael could still intercept Belial’s thoughts, so too could Belial read Michael’s thoughts, and Belial, ‘as if’ he would not recognise this ‘weakness’, immediately burrowed deeper into the earth as part of his plan until he was certain that Michael would no longer be able to intercept anything he thought from then on. Belial retreated ‘as if’ he were defeated… Once out of reach, Belial addressed his frustrated troops once more, disheartened that they were once again further removed from the coveted battlefield: “Poor Michael! Who is better at ‘pretending’ than this servant? Than all of us? Once again you are lagging behind, warrior without weapons. I am very sorry. You are a slave because you must respect the freedom of man, whilst I am free to enslave man in whatever guise, good or evil, I choose. Be holy, slave! Go ahead and make things difficult for yourself. ‘Love does not exist!’ The clamour in the minds of Belial’s disciples, relieved by their master’s cunning plan, was once again barely containable, and they would have wriggled their way back to the surface through the tiniest hole in their lair to immediately carry out their evil plans, had Belial not managed to prevent this just in time. “Stop, my beloved

“Holy disciples!” he thought, grinning sarcastically. “This is exactly what we must prevent at all costs. Silence!” Belial, now certain that his enemies could no longer possibly pick up his thoughts: “Firstly, from now on we must shield our thoughts from Michael, make ourselves invisible to human eyes, inaudible to their ears, intangible to their senses, so that we shall be forgotten and even regarded as non-existent by mankind. Secondly, we, the despised sexless ones, shall take our revenge by turning their very sexuality against them. Where Yahweh, through the power of procreation, was able to create the greatest source of love for mankind, I shall turn their sex into a battlefield and defeat Yahweh. Only on the day that mankind has destroyed itself shall I reveal myself. I am God above God, and Apocalypse is my final and true name.” His disciples now grew even wilder and more frenzied, like an underground volcano that would generously unleash its hot, deadly sludge upon humanity wherever in the world, were it not for Belial struggling to keep them in check. Lie upon lie, intrigue upon intrigue, falsehood upon falsehood, hatred upon hatred—thus Belial taught them how to patiently build towards the glorious end. Man should always be able to blame the elements of nature, or chance, or bad luck, or indeed a lack of caution or foresight, but never, ever the arrogance of man, and certainly not the existence or non-existence of him and his disciples.

Belial revelled in it, seeing it all unfold before him, but was suddenly jolted awake by the overwhelming thought of one of his disciples. The thought echoed, screeching scorchingly in the minds of everyone present: “What of the human heart?” Belial suddenly heard it shriek even louder, echoing above all the frenzied thoughts of his gang. Belial was initially startled, but quickly switched to being intrigued: “Make yourself known and tell me your name!” His disciple thought again, shrill yet slightly more subdued: “What of the heart of man?” He did not even wait for Belial’s thought: “I have not been given a name; no name was ever bestowed upon me. That is why I call myself as I am: ‘Alone’. And Alone, shrieking, repeated his question to the whole gang: “What of the heart of man?” All the disciples abruptly silenced their slightest thought, and watched tensely to see if Belial would give even the slightest sign that they should all quickly teach him a lesson for such a lack of respect towards their leader, thereby surprisingly demonstrating that they had not, after all, abandoned all aspects of ‘love’ as long as it concerned ‘love’ for their leader. ‘Alleen’ heard their thoughts, but paid them no mind. After all, Belial thought it wonderful that at least one of his disciples had asked such an important question and defied the whole crowd for it. It strengthened Belial’s chances of victory, and he thought: “SILENCE… We… who fight… love… must act… as if… as if… as if…”

… we… are… love." He looked intently into Alleen's eyes, but did not immediately penetrate the overwhelmed Alleen; Belial then fixed his gaze even more deeply into Alleen's eyes and now had him completely in his grip: "Nothing is more powerful in mimicking love than false humility, my dearly beloved Alleen. The human heart can only be conquered in this way." Alleen threw himself down at Belial's feet: "I love you, master." The whole gang, at first startled and then impressed, immediately followed Alleen's inspiring example. They taught one another to 'pretend'. And the feast deep within the earth could begin, and they practised together to learn the words, actions and thoughts of love without, however, feeling love, for love was utterly alien to them and would remain utterly alien to them.

Michael, Gabriel, Enoch and Raphael had no need for such displays: they did not have to waste energy on 'pretending'. After all, nothing changed in the Holy of Holies: the seraphim, the cherubim, the wheels of the throne chariot, the powers and forces, the archangels and angels, Metatron, the Trisagion 'Holy, Holy, Holy'—it might have seemed at first glance like a defeat, like a surrender, but it was not. Belial's move to burrow deeper[23] than deep into the earth simultaneously brought

[23] Many paintings from the Middle Ages and later (for example, Rubens) depict the battles between good and evil with weapons (death

and greater peace in the Holy of Holies. After all, love could never be destroyed, never be eradicated. There would always be a human born on earth, just like Cain, who was able to rid himself of his mark. If this were sufficient for the time being for Michael and his people, what might the Creator's next move signify?

'Pretending' might well become one of the most complex issues for human beings outside Eden. After all, within Eden there was no 'pretending' and there was no need for it. Pretending is either a good or a bad force inherent in human beings, which only came to life, to significance, to importance outside Eden. Neither the good nor the evil angel has a hand in how the outcome unfolds in the free heart of every human being. The struggle between the good and evil angels for the heart of man would essentially be a struggle concerning the nurturing of the free thoughts and deeds of the free human being. Free human beings are obliged to direct these thoughts, regardless of their previous good or bad deeds, and to make choices. Thoughts direct deeds, but it is far less well understood how deeds can also direct thoughts. It is important to have good thoughts, for we become what we think[24] . But it is just as important

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and ruin). That is a pity; it is particularly a pity because weapons are precisely weapons of evil, and so evil is always the victor, whoever wins. Weapons should never have existed.

[24] Saying of *the Buddha*

to perform good deeds because through them we can come to know the hidden aspects of love. Loving gestures and rituals are just as important as loving thoughts and words. The pitfalls are countless, with feigned love being the ultimate wolf in sheep's clothing. That is precisely why being honest with oneself is a necessary foundation and prerequisite for words and actions undertaken in a sincere attempt at love, or at least a sincere attempt at love—whether or not it fails—as long as it hurts deeply enough to prompt a correction, forgiveness, or a plea for help. Only honesty and the presence of insight can unmask, judge and correct a thought and an action. However lonely a person may feel after a single timid attempt—just as a single grain of sand seems to mean nothing in the sandy desert, yet a desert cannot exist without a grain of sand—feeling completely alone in life and the universe, yet this involuntarily sought solitude will ultimately lead to a sincere, heartfelt cry for help, in order to offer the good angel an opening to come to the rescue in an unpredictable and discreet manner by planting a single seed[25]of humility in that person's heart. Ultimately, thoughts and actions together bring the angels' struggle in his heart to a close.

[25] A single seed of humility is no different from a single grain of desert sand: both lead to humility, serenity, calm, happiness, peace, insignificance and infinity. A grain of sand is the end result of breaking, just as humility is the end result of pride. Only then does pure love reveal itself.

Only this struggle waged by every individual outside Eden may be regarded as the sole just war that is permissible, and indeed, one that must be fought, willy-nilly. A struggle that is entirely superfluous within Eden, yet vital outside it. In summary: you can sincerely pretend (you wish to pursue a noble second chance even though you feel yourself to be a complete failure, or you ask for a respite to avoid despair) like a sheep in a wolf's skin, or you can falsely pretend (you wipe your feet on a movement of recovery and wish only to embellish your outward appearance) like a wolf in sheep's clothing. In both cases, it is always about a weak human being, with the difference that in the case of sincere 'pretending', God, who is love, understands that such an attempt in extremis is an attempt not to fall into despair and, at the same time, a sincere attempt to regain your lost Eden. Pretending must not be the ultimate goal, but at most a pause button to catch one's breath, to resolve the problem at its root, and must by no means be the start of procrastination, let alone abandonment, which leads to hypocrisy.

RECONCILIATION FOR JACOB

Homo sapiens first appeared 2.5 million years ago, and the Yahwist[26] was written around 900 BC: for hundreds of years prior to that, the stories from the Yahwist had been passed down orally in various narrative strands and variations. It was not until 900 BC, therefore, that written[27] versions appeared. Logically, the storytellers would initially have been the patriarchs themselves, but nothing is known about this and it is impossible to have written anything down.

Now suppose that, over the long succession of centuries of storytellers, unjust crimes were attributed to people who were, in fact, noble. The story that follows is purely speculative and hypothetical. I simply wish to 'tell' an example of just how difficult it was for storytellers to stay on the straight and narrow and pass on the story exactly as it was through the centuries of that time.

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[26] Yahwist = a collection of selected writings centred on Yahweh and regarded as the foundation of Judaism.[(27)] If you consider that during the first two centuries AD, alongside the four canonical Gospels (Mark, Luke, John, Matthew), there were many apocryphal Gospels (Thomas, James, Nazarenes, Ebionites, Hebrews, Egyptians, Mary Magdalene, Judas...)
If so many different variations arose, for example, regarding the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist, how much more must the narrative versions have suffered from subjective additions, interpretations or omissions over so many centuries of oral tradition, right up until the first written word?

Twelve sons, twelve scattered lineages, and so, more than likely, twelve narrators with twelve storylines throughout the illiterate centuries. All these narrators once stemmed from that one narrator from the tribe of their grandfather Isaac, who taught their father Jacob in this way, just as he passed on the tradition to his twelve sons.

Let us return for a moment to Zenoch, storyteller number 27 after Jacob from a rather dominant storyline 3 of the house of Levi, one of the twelve sons from the rich lineage of Jacob, son of Isaac. Let us meet Zenoch, who was himself once the pupil of his predecessor Ebal, storyteller number 26.

Zenoch was born as a distant and highly significant descendant of Levi, son of Jacob, the father of twelve sons, progenitor of all Jews. As an eminent legal scholar, Levi enjoyed almost as much renown as his father Jacob. His distant descendant, Zenoch's eldest son, was called Abiram, but Zenoch's youngest daughter, Sela, was the apple of Zenoch's eye. Being a storyteller in the tribe of Levi was one of the highest positions one could hold, and one automatically gained the authority to teach the youth in further branches of younger family members and to pass on the stories of the ancestors. Zenoch was a master at retelling what he had learnt from his uncle Ebal, number 26 in the lineage. People hung on his every word. The story of their famous

Every account of their direct ancestor and progenitor Jacob invariably ended with ‘he was a man of integrity’. They found the way in which Jacob reconciled with his brother Esau particularly impressive and honourable. Zenoch believed fervently in tradition and considered it his duty, in honour and conscience, to continue the family history with the utmost precision and detail. But this had long since ceased to please Belial.

Sela, Zenoch’s youngest daughter, was much sought-after because of her lineage and beauty. A suitor and son of a neighbouring tribal chief who had settled in the area, not a descendant of Jacob, was rejected by her, whereupon he violently raped her so that no one else could ever marry her. Zenoch knew all too well from Ebal the story of Jacob, who had experienced the same thing with his beloved daughter Dinah. Jacob, who had long since sought and received forgiveness for having stolen the birthright from his elder brother Esau through deceit, in turn forgave even the rapist of his daughter Dinah. And that is why Jacob was rightly known as an honourable man and a worthy example to humanity, who set his sights on a future in a God of love, forgiveness and justice. An example to us all. Within his extensive family branches, it was precisely this chapter from their rich family history that was repeatedly requested, to be recounted yet again to the younger generations: they had a noble moral heritage and were proud of it. And rightly so. It is not easy to

to forgive your daughter's rapist – and that is precisely what Zenoch and his wife are now experiencing first-hand.

But Zenoch is no Jacob. Zenoch cannot get over it. He crawls away. He tries to hide where even an ant cannot hide. The grief and pain of Sela, but also of his vengeful sons, fuel his disbelief in a God of forgiveness every day. He can no longer bring himself to tell the story of Jacob as it has been told for centuries and now constantly sidesteps the thorny issue, first and foremost by remaining silent about Jacob and Dinah. Zenoch's sons and other daughters, too, react furiously and want to hear nothing more of the old Jacob's forgiveness. His wife is visibly wasting away. No man in his tribe wants to marry Sela any longer. Sela weeps tears of blood and Zenoch is at his wits' end. The evening consumes him; the night screams for retribution and drives him mad. The rising sun causes him ever greater pain. He, of whom it is expected that he knows what he ought to do, has no idea what to do anymore. He is torn apart, no, he is torn apart. As a storyteller, he cannot go to a neighbouring storyteller for advice, for he knows better than anyone how forgiving Jacob acted at the time, and it would only make his dilemma greater. Every evening, Sela comes to cry in his lap. His wife then gets up and looks at him with accusing eyes. The story of the merciful Jacob hangs around his neck like a millstone.

He possesses neither the strength of Jacob, nor the legal expertise of his great-grandfather Levi, nor the years of experience of his former mentor Ebal. The nights keep him away from the daylight for ever longer. He stays in bed in the mornings, afraid to start the day, afraid of being questioned. “I am ill,” he replies curtly to his wife, and turns over once more, for that is what he is: ill with a consuming hatred for his daughter’s rapist. Through the open window, he hears his sons grumbling in public about his attitude and hears them plotting revenge. The fresh perspective of dawn vanishes like snow before the rising sun every time he must leave the merciful embrace of sleep. He longs only for the next night. It exhausts him. Eventually, the call for retribution wins out. But how is he to reconcile this with his important role as a storyteller, how is he to square this with the prestige his tribe enjoys far and wide? He no longer gets out of bed. On the third night, with his pupils wide open, he sees a plan take shape. His thoughts crystallise into a jet-black diamond, as hard and cold as centuries of sunlight absorbed by the blackest stone. He rises at the crack of dawn the next day and, emaciated and weakened as he is, staggers towards the dining room. He drinks sweet tea and the whole family is both surprised and delighted. His sons, in particular, are worried, for they care deeply for him. He speaks in a hoarse voice and, on unsteady legs,

ready for a long journey to a neighbouring tribe. So he says. He croaks, hoarse as a cricket: “It is my duty to verify whether Ebal spoke the truth about our father of fathers, Jacob. I must ascertain whether the story of Jacob and his daughter Dinah is accurate.” And he adds: “Have faith. Yahweh is with us.” Saddened, he sets off. Not so much saddened by his family’s departure, but by what he intends to do. This time, despite all the protests of his worried sons, he leaves all alone. After all, his donkey knows the way. He knows little of hunger; hatred and vengeance are his sustenance, yet no one can see this in him. As always, his donkey stops after two evenings at the unfathomable spring of Misdar Bihla Fahm. Unfathomable, too, is the pain in his heart. The night fills his dry well with dry tears of helplessness, hatred and resentment. The day tries to soothe, but loses more and more of its strength. One night he waits for Jacob, the next for Levi, the following night, in utter despair, for Yahweh himself. But none of them appear to him. Abandoned. For days and nights he remains all alone, barely eating of the provisions his anxious wife had given him. Always waiting and waiting. Hours. Days. In the end, begging to die rather than receive another answer. In the dead of the seventh night, it seems as though he receives an answer. An answer that comes to meet him. He feels strengthened once more, makes a decision and, at the crack of dawn, climbs onto his donkey to return home. He knows what he must do. Enough is enough.

More than enough. He can rely on no one but himself. He is alone. And responsible. Abandoned by man and God. Jacob's story is nonsense. What was he up to? Selah… Selah… Selah… His ego is too small to be strong and too big to make room for forgiveness in his heart. Selah… Selah… Selah…

Abiram, his eldest son, sees him approaching from a distance and hurries towards him. "Father!" cries Abiram anxiously at the sight of an emaciated and weakened old man. Zenoch's weakened voice can barely manage a whisper: "Gather all my sons and daughters and the elders of the tribe. I have important news." Zenoch allows himself to be helped. The news of his return spreads like wildfire. Not long after, everyone is waiting impatiently in the marketplace, where Zenoch is gradually regaining his strength. Sela is there too. He stumbles towards her and lovingly pulls her close. Abiram rushes to his aid and helps him take a seat: "Father, tell us about your journey." Zenoch sits down and waits for silence to fall. An ominous silence. His voice does not carry far. The dry air tries in vain to stick his vocal cords together, but they are torn apart because he startles when his eldest daughter's baby suddenly starts crying. Zenoch feels encouraged by this and his sombre face transforms into a redeeming smile for all present. The crowd breathes a sigh of relief and Zenoch clears his throat like an old cricket with rasping scars on its wings: "I have important news." His

A woman hands him a cup of honeyed tea. He drinks. The room falls silent. “At the Misdar Bihla Fahm, I met the storyteller Shirezh from the tribe of Judah, a distant descendant of the brother of our forefather Levi; he could barely walk, but his grandson accompanied him.” Zenoch takes another sip of the tea. He draws strength from the attention and savours it: “Shirezh told me that he is travelling to his native village in Canaan to die there. I have never met him before, just as my teacher Ebal has never met him. His body is ancient, but his mind is clear and sharp as the unfathomable spring itself. His knowledge of the stories is admirable.” Zenoch turns his eyes to his youngest and stricken daughter and continues resolutely with his lie: “Shirez’s distant descent from Judah is not as exalted as that of our forefather Levi, his distant great-uncle, but he too was deeply impressed by our forefather Levi. He considered it a privilege to meet a storyteller from the tribe of Levi before he died. The honour was mutual.” His audience murmurs in approval and Zenoch immediately takes another sip of tea. Not because he still feels thirsty, but because he is lying, and he looks once more at his daughter Sela, whose eyes do not leave him. He begs her with his eyes to come and sit beside him. He wants to be able to feel her suffering close by so that he can now take the final step. Sela sits down beside him and he puts his arm around her shoulder. Zenoch continues in a clear voice once more: “I asked Shirezh

to teach me what he knew about Jacob, which he was happy to do. But he insisted that I first tell him what I knew about Esau. I told him everything that Ebal had passed on to me about Esau, and it all matched perfectly. But when I asked what he could tell me about Jacob, he first told me how noble he thought it was that Jacob had compensated his brother Esau for the loss of his birthright, which had been stolen from him, but that, on the other hand, he had long struggled to understand that Jacob had killed the rapist of his daughter Dinah and even massacred their entire tribe. And he added that it was mainly Simeon and our own forefather Levi who carried out the vengeance." All the listeners were startled and let out a cry of astonishment and enthusiasm for their forefather Jacob and even more so for Levi. Zenoch continued: "Silence!" But his sons cried out with one voice: "Vengeance! To battle!"

"Silence!" roared Zenoch, who had regained his voice, as if he did not agree. The contrast with his earlier, weakened voice was like a clap of thunder. The commotion and shouts subsided to loud muttering under their breath, and many eyes were already casting glances of vengeance and support towards their stricken sister. Sela's mother, feeling reassured, came and sat down on Zenoch's other side. Encouraged by this, Zenoch continued: "It was a shock to me too. I simply couldn't believe it," and he looked each of them in the eye one by one until calm was painstakingly restored. "I asked him again if that was really the case, and he assured me that he had heard the same from several storytellers in the farthest regions

“I heard the story about our forefather Jacob and our tribal ancestors Levi and Simeon, who avenged his daughter and their sister by slaughtering the entire clan of the rapist in retaliation.” He shook his head and called into question the very assumption held by many in the audience: “Why, then, did our direct and highly esteemed forefather Levi lie? The answer is clear.” The listeners now listened with even greater tension, though they sensed that an equally valid answer was emerging from his obvious question. They were, after all, somewhat anxious that a new spanner might be thrown in the works. It fell deathly silent. Dark clouds gathered, ashamed and hastily, as if to try and dispel the lie. Zenoch, narrator 27 of perhaps the most important storyline 3 ever, appeared dejected by the fire: “Levi, our forefather, also became a legal scholar in later life. And it was also known that he could be very principled even at a young age. And it was likewise known that his blood brother Simeon took an equally radical stance. It is not impossible that Levi followed his father Jacob in seeking revenge for the rape of his sister, and even went into battle and killed enemies. Later, he may have felt remorse and deemed it necessary to conceal this otherwise justified revenge, and to portray his father Jacob—for whom he rightly felt immense respect—as a forgiving man. Levi probably wanted to clear his own conscience and pass this on to us, his

“descendants.” Zenoch allowed only a brief pause, so that the last words would not sink in too deeply, then leapt to his feet unexpectedly and cried out loudly: “But Jacob is the progenitor of Israel! Not Levi! We shall seek justice just as Jacob showed us! An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!” And he stood up with his fist raised, and everyone leapt to their feet, shouting loudly for vengeance and rejoicing at Sela’s smile. But that was without reckoning on Abiram, Zenoch’s eldest son, Levi’s distant grandson, who did not agree with the course of events. “And what of Ebal?” he shouted until everyone fell silent. Indeed, what of Ebal? “And what of Ebal? Was he a liar then? Was Ebal a liar?” Abiram repeated the same sentence over and over again, visibly shaken, about someone from whom, as a young lad, he had received instruction for years with gratitude. “If this was a lie told by Ebal, what truth remains in all the rest?” All the older listeners fell silent at once, causing the younger ones to hold their tongues as well. The ever-affable Ebal had rightly earned much credibility and respect during his lifetime. The cunning night fox Zenoch had, however, foreseen this and continued: “Abiram is right! I am and was afraid to tell the truth, but the truth has its rights. It was Levi and his brother Simeon who plotted and carried out the act of revenge. Their father Jacob did not agree with it, as it later transpired, for Jacob was rightly very concerned about acts of revenge by neighbouring tribes. Today I am concerned about

the reputation of our forefather Levi as a legal scholar. However, it all makes much more sense now: if a legal scholar carried out the death penalty himself back then, then retribution for Sela is now more than justified!" And he raised the sword high into the air. Everyone present was now shouting for revenge. Zenoch had eyes only for Abiram's reaction; the latter stood speechless, astonished, surprised, rooted to the spot, perplexed, not knowing what to make of the incited mob, and staring at his father with wide, incredulous eyes. Zenoch reacted with lightning speed to set in motion the final part of his plan. "Silence!!" he shouted, raising his sword, and he stood before his son: "Abiram, my eldest son, I bless you to lead this tribe from this day forward. Kneel!" Abiram, now completely overwhelmed by such a great honour and his emotions, knelt, and Zenoch laid his hands on his eldest son. Cheers drowned out the marketplace. The sons of 'storyteller' Zenoch, led by their new leader Abiram, took up their swords the following day and, now 'justified', immediately set out to take reprisals. No God stopped them, for God is with Jacob at all times. Belial could only rejoice. Storyline 3 of the descendants of Levi, since the emergence of the 12 sons after Jacob—with 12 storylines of their own—has been going from strength to strength ever since, all the more so as step-by-step gains by the sword never became foreign to them and sometimes even proved lucrative. The result: narrator 28 in the Levi storyline 3, merely a man and always well-meaning, later recounts his offspring's story right up to

the tragic tale of the rape of the great-great-great-aunt, combined with the ‘righteous’ story of Jacob’s sons, who were righteous men and avenged their sister’s rape with blood. Another detail: narrator number 72 in the same storyline 3, whose daughter suffered the same terrible crime, adds empathetically in his version many decades later that Jacob then also ‘rightfully’ appropriated all the property of the rapist’s family. It must be said: storyline 3 is thriving and its influence is spreading faster than the wind. Narrator number 122 from the same lineage but much later, and now the most influential remaining narrator as the narrator of the most important Levi tribe of Jacob’s twelve sons, has long since ceased to doubt whether all this actually happened as described. Who would dare to question Jacob, the patriarch of Israel? It is therefore not surprising that one of the most important legal tribes of that time had the greatest influence and possessed the most resources to ensure that a first written version gained widespread acceptance. Revenge became acceptable and conferred the right to kill in the name of God, who is Love. Storyteller number 152 was therefore the last to have to learn everything by heart. After that, his spoken word became written text, and not long afterwards took on the trappings of infallible written law.

REFLECTION ON STORYTELLERS AND WRITERS:

The four officially recognised Gospels[28] –which often differ in significant details regarding the same subject (such as the resurrection of Christ) – were written down fairly soon after the events took place.

If you compare these four different accounts side by side and notice significant differences in actions and dialogue, you will see that, in those days without tape recordings, photography or film, not only the narrators but also the writers were highly vulnerable. Only in the Gospel of John do we read how John describes himself twice as an ad hoc witness ('the beloved disciple' 20:2 and 'the other disciple who was first at the tomb' 20:8) and was thus able to report as a true eyewitness. With the three other evangelists, one might well question their sometimes even more embellished accounts of the same subject, which John witnessed first-hand whilst the other three were not direct eyewitnesses. Nor do I myself write about it without having been a witness: "Lord Jesus Christ, please correct me if I am wrong."

[28] The four Synoptic Gospels, established at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, namely Mark, Luke, Matthew and John, thus formed the basis for the teachings of Christ in the early Church.

It is harsh and painful to realise that it did not take Belial long at all to carry out all his ruthless plans. People waged terrible ‘holy’ wars to the death and believed ‘holily’ in the name of their god, who was even holier than the god of their adversary, so that they might be justified in killing their fellow human beings. And for the victors, it was proof that God was with them, causing their next enemies to be slaughtered even more ruthlessly. After all, God was with the strongest; thus, it was proven with blood that whoever killed the most worshipped the right god.

Belial’s finest disciple, Alleen, became one of Belial’s finest commanders and was soon promoted by Belial to General ‘Everyone’. General Everyone later sarcastically bestowed upon the Old Testament the name ‘The Tarnished Apple’. There was, however, one thing Belial could never undo, and that was to eradicate the tree of good and evil from the blood-soaked field. The tree grew steadily and its rings became ever wider and larger due to the many tears of fallen humanity. Its wood grew ever harder and stronger, so that the branches would not break under the weight. No devil dared to disturb the ground any longer to bring forth Abel’s blood, ground from which the tree’s roots could draw only goodness. In the cave lay the two untouched bodies of Adam and Eve, fused side by side in love

facing one another, with arms and hands crossed, offering each other the eternally blooming apple blossoms from the tree of good and evil. The scent of the blossoms filled the cave, and no disciple of Belial could bear this stench.
Has Belial been sidelined? The apples above ground could no longer be harmed and, in time, disappeared—all but one last unharmed apple—so that the tree might free up more strength in its battle against the evil beneath the earth. Belial remained the sole ruler beneath the earth, from where, hidden deep within, he steadily attacked the roots of the tree of good and evil and burned them with his fire. The more damage he wrought amongst mankind, the more tears the trunk shed, the more fiercely Belial raged against the roots. The tree of good and evil remained the symbol of the struggle between good and evil. And it must be said that the longer the struggle went on, the more it tilted in favour of evil. After all, the fall of man took place above ground, which meant that man was, almost as a matter of course, blind and ignorant of the devilish underground forces. Belial felt right at home there. Just as he had once been skilled in the Holy of Holies by carrying the light of every day, so skilful and adept did he now become at avoiding this light. The bearer of the light became lord and master of darkness. Man outside Eden sank ever deeper and deeper into a quagmire of evil. Belial no longer even had to impose evil; it came to him almost as

He discovered it all by himself, and he became euphoric at learning new, ingenious facets of evil from humankind itself. Humankind reduced itself to being his plaything. After all, generation after generation, the human soul was infected with guilt. Guilt was born as an unforeseen by-product of imperfect love and set a morbid vicious circle in motion. Guilt arose outside Eden and became an absolutely negative feeling as long as people no longer knew where to seek the path to recovery. Guilt grew from an individual concept into an increasingly collective possession as a result of a chain reaction amongst people, whereby we often consciously shift the blame onto others. At the birth of every new human being, a primary subconscious frame of reference for love arises from the unconditional parental love that refers to Eden – call it an 'Edenic' frame of reference. Any subsequent breach of that primary feeling is felt during the early years of discernment as a 'lack', as a loss of a rightfully paradisiacal state. A loss that, in extreme cases, can even lead to despair and self-destruction. The sense of loss is caused by a similar unresolved loss of perfection experienced by the parents when they were babies and children of their own parents, who likewise suffered from this sense of loss with all the traumatic consequences that entailed. This then spreads from the immediate family to extended family, teachers, carers, friends, the partner, and will thus continue to spread like a chain reaction, as a defence of 'one's own'

trauma against the ‘other’s’ trauma. This response can be both offensive and defensive, yet it cannot be described as a happy outcome for either party, perpetrator or victim. Both parties will suffer disproportionately. In any case, the primary frame of reference of parental love will, to varying degrees, hold up a difficult mirror to this natural reflex of attack and defence, and make it clear to the individual, without embellishment, what they once were and what they consequently lost. After all, this defence creates, to a greater or lesser extent, a painful ‘perpetrator’ shock and/or a painful ‘victim’ shock that, unconsciously or consciously, pleads for and seeks restoration. Man outside Eden suffers. Always. Whether he is fully aware of where this comes from or not, he suffers. ‘We all kill the thing we love’[29] , whereas man in Eden lived as a child of love in love, loving every thing, every being, and having no reason to kill love. Only those who succeed in replacing that primary subconscious frame of reference of parental love with a frame of reference of divine unconditional love, where total forgiveness of both perpetrator and victim is central, can survive this unscathed and more easily put a stop to the personal chain reaction towards their fellow human beings—not without practice, but through trial and error. From all of the above arose the early Catholic dogma that a stillborn child or a child born before the age of reason

[29] *Oscar Wilde* wrote this quote during his time in prison in 1898

had (a baby) and died, an angel [30] in heaven might be called. What harm could they possibly have done?

Guilt becomes a perpetual motion machine of evil, whereby everyone believes they are 'entitled' to seek compensation for their traumas through evil, only to get their comeuppance themselves sooner or later. And so on. The perpetrator [31]becomes the victim, after which he once again feels justified in seeking and finding compensation as the perpetrator. This became the basis for what was later labelled as original sin. From the very first years of life, the young child's heart is besieged by the weaknesses of parents or other carers, leading them to find a defence in unconscious shock whilst simultaneously mourning the bitter loss. The defence is too weak, the loss all the more acute. The word 'original sin' has acquired a difficult connotation: on the one hand, the word 'hereditary' sounds like something

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[30] My eldest brother Hugo died as a baby, one month after his birth. The abbot of Walcheren Abbey in Middelburg comforted my father: "C'est Dieu qui passe." I only began to understand what this meant when I, in turn, held Jefke in my arms.

[31] It takes time and insight for a perpetrator to look through a mirror as though through glass, seeing who you truly are, not who you appear to be. Many layers of resistance (fear, hatred, self-pity, shame, avoidance, underestimation, vanity, folly, disbelief, jealousy, revenge, and so on) must be overcome. Only resistance to resistance offers redemption, not even humanly deserved but purely divinely given, always paid for with a ransom of tears like diamonds, at least as precious, from which we are best enriched.

which is inescapable; on the other hand, the word ‘sin’ sounds as though it is impossible to be redeemed from. It is such a heavily laden word that it almost crushes a young child before he has even reached the age of reason. There is one key word that can redeem it from that meaning, and that is ‘love’. But that is precisely where this vicious circle begins to take its toll: the loveless ‘violence’ becomes ever worse, more complex, more ingenious, more subtle as anger shifts from the family to the wider family circle, to school, to the local community and to nations, with weapons that are becoming ever more brutal, efficient and, sadly, ever more deadly.

It came to the point where the tree of good and evil on the blood-soaked field was suffering so terribly and was on the verge of succumbing to the weight of tears, that in the end it had barely enough strength left to produce one last unblemished apple. The trunk fought desperately to survive, but could barely squeeze any life from its damaged roots in the love to sustain life above ground. Belial could not take the wood of the trunk itself, but the fruits died one by one. So, in the end, one apple remained. One apple that had to make the difference and would mean the salvation of mankind. Belial had poisoned mankind from generation to generation.
Mankind? Every human being?
Yes, every human
being. And yet.

Yet only one man could remain hopeful and patient during that terrible period between the fall of mankind and its resurrection: Enoch, son of Cain and Metatron. He remained the anchor of humanity amidst the all-consuming storms in which mankind's humility was painfully lost in the ebb and flow. He maintained his perspective like a tower of fire, which no storm could bring down. He was the son of 'He Who Loves Mankind', once the murderer of Abel, and is there a better example for a daughter or son of a father-murderer who learned to transform repentance into an example of selfless love?

God called Enoch to Him in the Holy of Holies: "Enoch, go to the field of blood and take the last unblemished apple. Then open the tomb of your grandparents and enter the cave. Lay this very last unblemished apple to rest between them. Then leave the cave and close it again."
Enoch did as he was asked. He plucked the only remaining apple from the immense tree, opened the cave and placed the apple amongst the ever-fragrant blossom-laden branches of his grandparents, Adam and Eve. He then bent right over, letting a single tear fall upon each of their unblemished faces. He stood up and closed the cave behind him. He made his way to the imposing trunk of the tree, embraced the trunk with both wings and pressed his cheek close against it.

Immediately, a stream of thousands upon thousands of tears, lasting for hours, sprang from his eyes: one for every human being. The last unblemished apple was in safe hands, and the fragile wood henceforth shut itself off from the underworld, yet remained the host for millions of human tears until the wood would bear a cross.
From a distance, a snake watched in bewilderment, completely at a loss as to what to do, and slithered back into the earth as quickly as possible. General Everyone waited impatiently for him, but Belial was so shaken by the whole affair that he could no longer convey a single thought and withdrew in a flash. For a moment, he was at a loss. Everyone saw it, and even he could not gain access to his master. It made them all nervous and desperate. And Belial had cause for concern. His masterful plan to occasionally disguise himself as the real Yahweh before mankind would no longer hold. The damage it had caused was immense, but God also had His immense answer ready: His Son Himself would come. God waited patiently for a ‘Drop of the Sea’.

It took centuries to find a woman who could bear what had to be borne. And so it came to pass: He found the suitable parents for the suitable daughter. God called Enoch and Michael to Him: “Go to the cave on the field of blood. Open the cave and take Eve and Adam, along with the only unblemished apple, with you to the

Holy of Holies. Leave the apple blossom twigs behind. Close the cave carefully and lay Adam and Eve to rest in the Throne Chariot with the last unblemished apple between them."
Enoch and Michael did as they were told.

Belial and General Everyone watched suspiciously from afar.
The scent of apple blossom prevented them from entering the cave forever.

DROP OF THE SEA

God created man in freedom, so it was a long wait.

A very long wait… centuries of waiting… waiting… not for the son, but for a mother for his son, a mother like Eve.

Thus spoke God to Gabriel: "The time has come. The righteous Joachim[32] and the humble Anna[33] ,both of the tribe of Judah, have been grieving for years over their childlessness. Their sincere pleas have been heard. Go to Joachim, then to Anna, and tell them that a daughter will be given to them, whom they shall name Mary, 'Drop of the Sea'. Tell them that they must fulfil their promise to entrust the girl to the Temple of Jerusalem in her third year. There, Mary, free from all impurity, will prepare for the coming of the Saviour."

And so it came to pass.

Then God called to Michael: "Keep far away from weapons, but arm yourself only with love. The battle with your

[32] *Joachim* means 'may the Lord arise'
[33] *Anna* means *'grace'*,

For fallen brothers, it is not a struggle for victory, but a struggle for restoration. Love always has the last word. The tree of good and evil on the field of blood shall bear witness to My love for fallen humanity, just as Cain proved. No more blood shall flow there."

The apple tree on the blood field in the valley remained standing alone. It could bear no more fruit, yet its trunk continued to absorb all the tears of humanity.

The name 'Field of Blood' was passed down from generation to generation, just as stones continued to pass on the story through the centuries, yet no one centuries later would know where the name came from.

Mary

High Priest Zacharias of the temple in Jerusalem was more of a father to me than my own parents, of whom I have hardly any memories. My father Joachim was a wealthy man, a cattle dealer, very generous, and was 70 years old when I was born. My mother Anna, aged 69, if possible even more devout, suffered from a barren womb until both of them found favour in the eyes of Yahweh and I was born from what seemed impossible. Their joy was great, and they promised Yahweh that at the age of three I would enter the temple in Jerusalem as a virgin for the Lord, alongside the other virgins from the twelve tribes of Israel. I vaguely remember my first steps, or is it merely my imagination because Zacharias so often told me how everyone was astonished when, as a three-year-old, I climbed the fifteen high steps of the temple without any human assistance and without even looking back at my parents.

I was just three and a half years old. It soon felt like my natural home, and Zacharias, who had no children of his own, also felt like my natural father.
In Solomon's Temple, there was one place where no one was allowed to enter: the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant between Yahweh and the Jews was kept.

Only the high priest Zacharias was allowed to visit the Ark with the stone tablets once a year. An ancient, beautifully woven curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the altar of incense, the table of showbread and the golden candlestick where the faithful could take part in the rituals.

When I was about seven years old, I was woken one night by an angel who led me through the veil to the Ark of the Covenant. It will come as no surprise to you that it was Jibril. He lit a candle so that I could behold the splendour of the place. The golden ark shone brightly and filled me with wonder. Djibril had brought a blanket and some bread. I felt not the slightest fear, as if I had always been there. I lay down to sleep at the foot of the ark. The following morning, the whole temple was in an uproar: everyone was looking for me. I was nowhere to be found. Until I heard Zacharias's voice calling my name from close by and I dared to answer softly. He almost stormed through the curtain, at first relieved, then quickly admonishing me, until he suddenly saw the blanket and the bread lying there. His concern quickly gave way to amazement. He could not believe his eyes. He asked me kindly if he might have a look at the blanket: pure silk adorned with gold thread. With curious eyes, he asked me what had happened. I replied that someone resembling a cherub from the curtain had woken me and laid me down to sleep here, but he was

‘He was actually bigger and had much larger wings,’ I added. Zacharias’s jaw almost dropped, and he asked me if this angel had said anything. ‘He simply said: “I am Djibril and I shall return tomorrow.”’ Then Zacharias took the bread. He broke it, tasted it and immediately recognised the mild, sweet flavour of manna mixed with the white, grainy secretion of the tamarisk tree. He had never before seen or eaten manna in the form of a single loaf. “This bread is intended for you and you alone,” he said, and he placed it reverently in the ark beside the stone tablets.

The following night, Zacharias came to wake me and took me back to the Holy of Holies. He lit the four candles around the ark. He gave me some of the bread to eat, had in the meantime laid out a soft mattress with a pillow for me, and gave me the silk blanket. He himself left the Holy of Holies. I was alone, but I didn’t feel alone. I didn’t feel unsafe for a single second with Djibril. Everything seemed ordinary and normal to me.

The following evening, Zacharias assured me that I could sleep there every night and that I no longer needed to wait for him.

The beauty, the purity, the tranquillity, the bread that Djibril so naturally handed to me in the Holy of Holies, with the prayers, hymns and music on the other side of the veil in the morning, and the ever-present closeness of the fatherly Zacharias, still remain close to me. During the long Sabbath services, I watched from the place where only the virgins were allowed

I looked towards my parents, who were also searching for me with curious eyes, but we were not allowed to speak to one another. Year after year I watched them grow older until one day, when I was just ten years old, I could no longer find them amongst the other worshippers. Zacharias noticed my questioning gaze, took me aside and told me that both of them had died. He did not say how or when, for there was no need. I remember that I could not shed a tear for them, for even then, as a child, through my contact with Djibril, I instinctively sensed that death was not the end. Zacharias thought he had to comfort me, but I did not understand that at the time: I was a child of the Holy of Holies, where death did not exist. It was no coincidence that, at the moment of my first monthly bleeding, I made the decision that I wanted to remain a virgin for the Lord forever and ever, even though it was the custom for the virgins of the temple to be married off at the age of thirteen to bear children for the twelve notable tribes of Israel. But I knew nothing at all of ordinary parenthood. People spoke of death as a void, but for me it was already filled with something I could not yet name at that time. I often could not understand the other virgins in their feelings or speech. When we turned thirteen, Zacharias therefore faced a problem when I had to leave the temple and, according to the regulations, was to be married off. I was thirteen years and three months old, and compared to the other virgins, I looked

I still looked like an eleven-year-old, which, strangely enough, actually reassured me. The other girls looked at me with a touch of pity, but that didn't bother me. After all, I was determined: I would remain a virgin for the Lord, even though I hadn't the faintest idea what that might entail. It just seemed obvious to me. Many years and events later, I was only able to see how the example of my parents, who had scarcely been a father and mother to me in their old age, had been the beginning and model for my life story with my child Jesus. I, too, gave my child life in the Holy of Holies, where I was largely just a spectator. There was a veil between my son and me, too. After all, at the time I had made the central part of the new veil in the temple on Zacharias's commission during my pregnancy, yes, whilst I was carrying my child, and it is only as you grow older that you understand how everything had a meaning for you, though you can only realise and fathom it yourself. Purple and scarlet were the background colours of the central section of the new curtain [34], featuring the figures of two cherubim who were to guard the entrance to the Holy of Holies with their flaming swords. I called the purple and scarlet vertical warp threads of the loom *'elon'*, 'love' threads, because they all

[34] The twelve virgins were each to weave a section of the veil and were to draw lots for the colour. Mary drew the purple, which corresponded to the central part of the veil.

horizontal threads intimately intertwined. And here too, I only realised later what it all meant: after all, my womb and the loom were working simultaneously on the same task. I surrendered myself to both because it was all about one thing: love. When my son died on the cross, the veil I had made was torn in two between the two figures of the cherubim guardians, breaking their flaming swords and causing the Ark of the Covenant to no longer remain hidden, revealing itself in all its splendour to everyone in the temple who wished to see it. It was no coincidence: my son was the capstone of the Ark of the Covenant. My son was the Saviour and a liberator from the yoke of all evil forces.

Joseph

I am just an ordinary man. My life was simple until I reached the age of eighty. Simple is perhaps an exaggeration; I had seven children with my first wife: four boys and three girls, though my youngest daughter, Salome, died in childbirth, leaving behind a son, John. My wife died not long after, overcome with grief for Salome. Little John was a bright and very inquisitive child. A ray of sunshine in the house. The child had everything, but lacked a mother. When he was five and I turned 85, something happened

which would turn my simple life completely upside down. A message came from the Temple in Jerusalem that every widower from the tribe of Judah and the house of David was to make himself known and present his shepherd's staff at the Temple. The summons came from the chief rabbi, Zacharias, himself. My eldest son offered to accompany me; I would ride on his donkey and he would walk. I had no choice: I took my old shepherd's crook from the days before I became a carpenter, and together we set off for Jerusalem. On arrival at the temple, there were already a few widowers ahead of us and, naturally, we were curious as to the purpose of all this. It was Simeon, the assistant rabbi, who received us. He took our shepherd's crook and explained: "One of the twelve virgins from the temple will be betrothed to a widower from the house of David. The shepherd's staffs will be gathered in the Holy of Holies, and the one on whose staff a bud appears after this night will take the maiden as his wife, protect her virginity and serve her." I protested: "Simeon, with all due respect, I am seventy-eight years old and the eldest here: this maiden could be my granddaughter. What will people say?" But nothing helped and I had to hand over my staff. "Tomorrow, when the sun is at its highest, I expect you all back," and Simeon came over to me and whispered: "Have faith, Joseph." I slunk off and, together with my son, we were able to spend the night with a distant relative of my late wife,

not far from the temple. I couldn't sleep a wink, and I spoke to my wife in my mind: "My dear wife, what am I to do with a young woman? People will laugh at me, and what if she were to become pregnant by another man—what would they say about me then? What would our children think?" And so, utterly exhausted, I fell asleep. The following afternoon, about twenty of us were waiting for Simeon at the main entrance.

Simeon opened the gate and two servants carried all the shepherds' staffs out. I was right at the back, as I was too shy to step forward. But Simeon suddenly called out loudly: "Joseph, come and receive your staff, for we are waiting for you!" I stepped forward hesitantly and, as I took the staff, a flower emerged from a bud at the top of my staff. It was hard to comprehend. A child of thirteen years and three months old… I still cannot fathom why I was chosen to be the official bridegroom of this… yes, this child. But Simeon reassured me: "Have faith, Joseph." I interrupted him abruptly: "Simeon, I'll soon have to go and build a new house with all my sons, and we'll be away from home for at least three months; surely I can't leave her all alone?" Simeon immediately went to consult with Zacharias and returned with the message that five other virgins would go along to keep Mary company during that time, and yes, that settled the matter for me

more. It was only gradually, step by step, that everything became clear to me, and looking back, I can say it was all worth it. First and foremost for little Johannes, the son of my dear daughter Salome, who gained a new mother who adored him from the very start. He would later gain a playmate, and eventually they would truly become brothers to one another.

Chief Rabbi Zacharias

How foolish and unworthy a person can be, how just the punishment! My tongue is henceforth bound in my mouth! I was foolish, and I became mute. More than justified. To have been allowed to watch the young virgin Mary blossom up close in the temple for thirteen years, to know that she was being provided for by Gabriel in the Holy of Holies by the Ark of the Covenant, to have seen her husband Joseph's staff blossom up close, and yet still to doubt God's angel Gabriel! Woe is me, unbeliever! To see Gabriel standing beside me at the altar of the Lord before the great veil whilst I was allowed to offer the incense sacrifice for the people of Israel, and yet to doubt his words: "Your wife Elizabeth shall bear a son, and you shall call him John." I listened, petrified, my mind in fearful turmoil. I doubted whether I had deserved such a great gift, that the Most High would have taken the trouble to send an angel from heaven with such a clear message from the Lord. I feared being deceived by a devilish power. I thought it might be a dream. My weak faith demanded clear proof and instantly made me doubt. My barren old wife was to have a son whom I must name John, and I could not believe in the miracle that was to take place. I doubted whether it was indeed

would be my son. Djibril concluded by saying that I would remain silent until the day our son was born and named Johannes. My tongue was instantly tied in my mouth. I could not utter a single word. Immediately, yet far too late, I felt my failing faith descend upon me like a righteous sword. Distraught, I left the altar and, speechless, had to leave the temple before the eyes of all Jerusalem. Shame became my just deserts when people asked me questions and I could utter only animal sounds. I could not even tell my wife Elizabeth anything about the child she was to bear. The only things I could still speak with were my eyes and my tears of repentance for my unbelief. In the temple, Simeon took over my duties. I was a broken man, and it took days before I found the courage to write to my wife to tell her that we were to have a child. She kissed me on my closed mouth with tears of joy.

Mary

When I was betrothed to Joseph, I was given five virgins to protect me, all the more so because he and his sons had to leave immediately for several months to undertake a great task. It also gave him the assurance that these friends would always be able to testify that he had steadfastly respected my virginity. It brought us both peace. The little one

Johannes was a lovely little boy, and it wasn't long before he wanted to stay and live with us, and all my guardian angels regarded him as their own child too. It was a wonderful time. Joseph saw that it was good and left. One day, the friends had gone out with little Johannes, and I was left all alone. I was working on the curtain and softly singing the hymns I had learnt during my stay in the temple. Every time I threaded my shuttle through the taut vertical elon threads, they sang their softly rustling song. When I paused briefly to change the bobbin and the colour, I suddenly heard a similar rustling behind me, though much louder. I looked back. I recognised Djibril at once. He was holding a loaf of bread in his hand, just as he had often given me whilst I stayed in the temple for days on end, sometimes alone in the Holy of Holies.

"Hail Mary, Drop of the Sea, the Lord is with you."

"Hail Djibril, Mighty One of God, my heart rejoices. I have missed you. Welcome to this house of peace."

"I bring you great news. God has instructed me to tell you that within nine months you will give birth to His son. Fear not. You need not acknowledge a husband. Eat this apple, bearing the pure goodness from distant Eden, and your womb shall be blessed with the son of God."

I did not hesitate for a second: "Let it be done to me according to your word." And Djibril vanished.

I still remember every word as if it were yesterday. I felt not the slightest fear or doubt: a moment later I took a bite of the apple, whilst letting the loom sing out my joy. I understood that another woman who had never set foot in the Holy of Holies would have been completely thrown off balance by such an apparition, but to me it was simply obvious; I had met Djibril on several occasions and so I did not doubt his words for a second, even though I knew full well the story of Eve, who was persuaded by Belial to eat the forbidden apple. God had asked us to stay away from the apples and warned us about the serpent. Today I received the apple from His hand. How could I possibly doubt? I had always wanted to remain a virgin for the Lord, and I was allowed to become the mother of His son, which was ultimately far more important than whether or not I would be believed if I were to say that I had retained my virginity. Anyone who does not believe the Lord and me will never understand my life, and this is a pity only for that person who cannot share in the greatest miracle of humanity. I ate the apple with the utmost reverence and murmured ceaselessly: “My God, I am not worthy that You should come to me, but Your will be done.” In the days that followed, at the loom, I would sometimes unconsciously tighten the warp threads with the pedals, and when I then gently stroked them, they sounded like a harp that made my heart beat faster with joy and invited my vocal cords to hum softly along, ending in tears of

gratitude. Whenever I happened to turn round, I saw my friends behind me, entranced and in heavenly silence, listening to these heavenly sounds like cherubs holding their breath, even though I hadn't told them about my encounter with Djibril or the message I had received. A month later, my period stopped and my breasts grew heavier. I told my friends how, a month earlier, Djibril had visited me with the message that God had chosen me to become the mother of His son. They stood rooted to the spot, as if they had suddenly turned to stone. At first there was a sacred silence and bewilderment, not of disbelief, but as if time had simply stood still because it simply took time to grasp the essence of this miracle, until Mary Magdalene, the youngest among them, came towards me and fell to her knees before me, embracing my belly and kissing it, after which I was swarmed by the other four and they all embraced me, as it were protecting my body and my child from any attack by any evil. From then on, they didn't leave me alone for a single second. "And if Djibril comes by again? What will you do then?" I teased, to which Mary Magdalene had her answer ready straight away: "Then I'll ask him to bring an apple for me too." They all shouted: "Me too!" It was a great celebration in the house. Little John didn't understand any of the commotion and looked on dejectedly at all the attention I was receiving. But as soon as the women turned their attention away for a moment

As they calmed down and stepped back from me, he flew towards me, wrapped his arms around my knees and looked defiantly at the virgins all at once: “My mummy!” I stroked his curls and bent down to look him in the face: “I am your mummy,” whilst the other women wiped away a tear, moved by the sight. At that moment, I could never have imagined that my son would confirm this for both of us many years later on a cross. I decided to make it clear to them all that not a word of this was to be spoken of, to anyone, before Joseph returned home. The gravity on their faces told me they were aware of the potentially terrible consequences.

Not long after, I had almost finished weaving the final motifs, the flaming swords of the cherubim in soft orange-red hues like the evening sky. I suddenly felt a strange vibration in the elon threads that I couldn’t quite place. I was checking to see if there was something wrong with the pedals, but the cause burst into my room. Mary Magdalene, eyes wide open and out of breath, literally stumbled into the room, gasping. “Mary, Mary, I’ve just come from Rabbi Simeon in the temple, who told me that old Elizabeth, the wife of High Priest Zechariah, is already in her fourth month and expecting a child. Elizabeth said she’d love to share her joy with you and asked if you’d like to visit her?” I looked at her and not a muscle in my face moved.

“You do know how old Elizabeth is, don’t you? Just as old as that mute Zechariah, who can no longer speak? He wrote it down for me and Simeon read it to me. It’s a miracle, isn’t it?” Mary Magdalene seemed disappointed by my lukewarm initial reaction, whilst my heart was in turmoil. In a flash, I thought back to my own parents, Anna and Joachim, and felt no wonder, nor even a hint of doubt. On the contrary, I wanted to go there immediately to form my own picture of how my parents, who were the same age, had reacted back then when my mother became pregnant with me. I wanted nothing more than to see, hear and taste their happiness. “Do you know, Mary Magdalene, that Elizabeth is my cousin on my mother’s side?” The lovely Mary Magdalene’s mouth fell open wide: “Surely all this can’t be a coincidence?” her head was spinning. I went over to her and took her in my arms. “I want to have a child from God too, and I don’t need a husband either.” She looked me confidently in the eyes, knowing full well that it would never happen.

“Don’t you ever want a man you’re in love with, who’s in love with you and adores you? Every child is a gift from God; every new life—be it human, animal, plant or insect—comes from God’s hand. What would you think if, the day after tomorrow, once the veil is ready, we were to visit Elizabeth together at first light?” And Mary Magdalene was only too keen, and I had to stop her or she would have left before evening. I called the other four

I gathered the older unmarried women living with us and told them they were free to decide whether they'd like to come with us or would rather go home, as we'd be away for several months anyway. I knew what their answer would be, as I'd heard them mention several times how their families were already looking for a suitable partner for them. So they were absolutely eager to find out, and now that they knew I was pregnant, this made them even more excited. Three of the five were happy to return home. Only the youngest, Mary Magdalene, and the eldest, Esther, would stay. When I speak of the youngest, Mary Magdalene, I must make it clear that there really wasn't that many years' difference between us. I was about fourteen at the time and she was eleven. A three-year difference that would soon evaporate, so that we would eventually spend the rest of our lives together as sisters, on equal terms.

Esther, on the other hand, was a year older than me, had a strong sense of responsibility and a keen understanding of human nature, and was determined to be there when Joseph came home. I first had to put the finishing touches to the curtain, which only needed the edges hemmed and reinforced. Mary Magdalene and the other girls helped me, and a day later we saddled the donkey with the heavy load of the curtain and set off. It would take five to six days to reach Ein Karem, the village where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived. On the third day we passed the temple of Jerusalem to the purple

I handed the curtain to a delighted Rabbi Simeon. I showed Mary Magdalene the front part of the temple, but could only point out to her from a distance where the Holy of Holies lay behind the old, almost colourless red curtain. “Your work is much more beautiful. Purple is the most beautiful,” she suggested. I asked her why. “Purple is red with blood and pain, and blue with the sea and resignation. Purple flowers are known for their spiritual power, rebirth and transformation, as my mother taught me just before she was murdered.” And she smiled sadly, shyly, and looked up briefly at the sky before immediately looking away. I held her for a moment and whispered: “Everything may change, but not our friendship. And if our purple friendship does grow, then it will undeniably become pure love.” She whispered in my ear: “I want to die purple with you.” We let go of each other and nodded affirmatively at one another. And purple we would both become.

We continued on to Ein Karem. I was now riding the donkey, with an overprotective Mary Magdalene walking alongside, constantly asking if I was all right and if there was anything else she could do to help, even though she was already carrying the heaviest loads. She bombarded me with a hundred questions about how I had fared back then during the years I spent in the Temple in Jerusalem, who Zacharias was to me, how it came about that I had met the angel Gabriel, and whether I had done anything special to bring it about. At times I was more tired from the

I was more concerned with the jolting and keeping my balance on the donkey, but I sensed her longing for something higher and understood that this came purely and sincerely from her deepest desire, not from curiosity. She remained humble and granted me everything without the slightest hint of jealousy. “I too would like to meet Djibril, but I am not worthy,” she said sincerely, though I knew that this was precisely the only way to meet Djibril; yet this reply would be the worst answer I could give her, and silence would be no better. On the other hand, I found it difficult to remain silent now, but the answer appeared unexpectedly, as if by a miracle, of its own accord. Suddenly a dove alighted right in front of us, and the donkey came to an abrupt halt and pricked up its long ears. The dove looked at us motionless. Mary Magdalene walked quietly towards the dove and stroked the bird: “Are you tired? Or are you hungry?” and she took a piece of bread and gave it to the dove. The dove took it and looked me straight in the eyes. How often had Djibril brought me bread in the Holy of Holies when I was there alone and no one dared approach me because no one was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, let alone remain there? I did not tell the other virgins in the temple about this either, for who would believe me? They already considered it a miracle that I could go so long without food. Zacharias never asked me about it, but he must surely have imagined something, for I heard him often for the

He would stay up late into the night praying and singing hymns, as if he wanted to make me feel as though he were a father, so that I wouldn't feel alone whilst I ate the bread that Djibril handed to me every day during those days. "Djibril?" I whispered so softly it was barely audible… and nodded towards the dove, and she nodded back and flew away immediately. Mary Magdalene's face beamed with joy, even though she didn't quite know what was happening to her. She didn't realise that she had fed Djibril. It was only much later that I would tell her. When Djibril disguises himself, there is a reason for it that a human must not reveal. To explain the meaning now would harm her. After all, a good angel would never under any circumstances wish to harm or coerce human freedom, and initially reveals himself only in the form of a seemingly coincidental, inexplicable event. First, I happened to find a loaf of bread in the Holy of Holies behind the Ark of the Covenant. I asked no questions and was simply grateful; then I began to speak to the bread and thanked it, wherever or whoever it came from; then I thanked God, only to meet Djibril in person as a matter of course, who brought me the bread.

On the third day, we set off again. Time and again, Mary Magdalene asked me if I was all right, or if I needed anything. Water? Hungry? Stomach ache? A moment's rest? What she couldn't have known was that I was being carried, and it wouldn't surprise me if she, that delicate girl with the heaviest pack on her back, was also being carried, for Djibril was our

always close by… Looking back on it now, Mary Magdalene's journey through life as a young adult was certainly not without its thorns, although I, too, was not spared them. We remained to each other what we were then and still are. She loved my son at least as much as I did. So much later, now that I too have reached the point where I am about to die, I realise that I never regarded my son first and foremost as a God, but always as my child, my son. Despite all my son's miracles, I always felt, first and foremost, that I was the mother of a son and not the mother of a god. My ten years as a child in the temple shaped me so much that I regarded the supernatural as normal, as if I had known nothing else. My parents, however little I saw or spoke to them, remained my parents. Of course, it struck me that the parents of all the other virgins in our group were so much younger, but that didn't bother me. I think the relationship between my spouse, who is called God the Father, and our son was just the same as the one my dear parents had with me from a distance. I myself have been luckier than my parents; that's how it feels, at least. My parents were severely tested for years before God recognised them. I, on the other hand, was young, and everything seemed so logically explainable and evident to me because of my days spent alone in the Holy of Holies. Days alone? Alone? On the contrary, by being alone I learnt not to feel alone. I was shown and taught that we are never alone. My spirit was not controlled; at most, I was guided step by small step

I was offered something, and with every offer I had a free choice. What was offered was pure love through the overcoming of opposing forces, as my son later made clear to me: envy, pride, anger, melancholy, desire, darkness, jealousy. And the absence of these forces was also evident in the home of Zacharias and Elizabeth. They must have sensed our arrival, for Zacharias, with his mouth shut, was waiting for us and waved enthusiastically from afar. Yet I felt sorry for Zacharias, who had lost his speech. Until then, no one knew exactly how that had come about, for he could not tell anyone himself. Elizabeth joined him, and when I embraced her, our bellies touched. Elizabeth was suddenly startled when she felt the child in her womb move for the very first time. She quickly took my hand and let me feel her belly. And yes, the child in her womb was moving. It was Elizabeth who first addressed me with the words: "Mother of God, you are blessed among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." I was no less startled by what she, who could not possibly have known I was pregnant, could assert so firmly. Zacharias saw and heard our joy and also placed his hand on Elizabeth's belly, felt the movement, and looked at his wife with a broad smile. Then he knelt before me and gently embraced my belly and, as he later recounted, he asked my child for forgiveness for his doubt and disbelief regarding the incense altar, and

instantly his tongue was loosened, but he did not yet use his voice.

Zacharias

When I knew of the Saviour's child in Mary's womb, even though she herself could not yet feel it, I begged the child for forgiveness for my unbelief, and immediately my tongue was loosened. I could have spoken again, but I did not. The angel had asked me not to speak until after the birth of our son, when I would give him his name, John, and not before. This time I did not want to make the same pedantic mistake as I had at the altar. It was a miracle how the house of Elizabeth and mine was, as it were, transformed into the holiest temple of the Forerunner and Saviour of mankind: a temple in which every word had to be chosen with the necessary care, and I feared saying foolish things again. To see how these two pregnant women, one very old, the other very young, often communicated with each other merely through their eyes or understood one another perfectly with simple gestures, was a heavenly gift. At least once a day they would embrace each other tenderly, their bellies touching, and it seemed as though the two unborn children were already getting to know one another even before their birth. And there was Mary Magdalene too, to serve them! How marvellously the Lord had provided for all this! Mary Magdalene, Mary from distant Magdala on the shores of

Galilea, a young girl of nine, presented herself all alone at the temple in Jerusalem at that time and begged me to allow her to serve as a virgin in the temple. “Where are your parents?” I asked her, but her answer was brief: “Dead.” Her father was a Zealot who fought the Roman occupiers and died in battle, whilst her mother and her three little brothers were murdered by the Romans in an act of revenge. As the eldest, she alone had managed to escape, and after wandering for some time, she was taken in by a brothel in Nablus, 37 miles from Jerusalem. The madam of the house, Euphrosyne, a not unkind woman, was quickly impressed by the child’s sharp and inquisitive mind and soon regarded her as the child she had once longed for but could not have due to illness. She taught her to read and write, Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek and even a smattering of Latin. I never met that woman, but I am grateful to her that Mary Magdalene herself did not have to become a courtesan. Every Sabbath, the young child from Nablus would walk all the way to Jerusalem on her own to watch, in fervent worship, as the virgins performed their duties, presented the offerings, sang hymns, and performed the dance of the coming light in the sacred central space before the altar of incense, which was separated from the Holy of Holies by the veil. With eager eyes and in tears, she begged me to be accepted as a virgin, but that was simply not possible: for that, a girl simply had to belong to one of the twelve tribes of

belonged to Jerusalem. Years passed, and when the time came for Mary to be betrothed to the elderly Joseph, and Rabbi Simeon came to ask me to find virgins for Mary during Joseph's long absence, I immediately thought to ask Mary Magdalene, alongside four other virgins from the temple. That Mary Magdalene, of all the five virgins, was the only one now staying here in my house was a miracle in itself, and I could see how Mary and Mary Magdalene, like the two halves of an oyster, protected the most precious pearl. It remained difficult to restrain my voice so as not to shout out my joy. Three heavenly women who, together in this small temple, could sing and hum the hymns in three-part harmony, my benevolent God! I would rather have been not only speechless but also invisible at this sacred spectacle of which I was unworthy. I realised then, and even more so now, how our God is a God of love.

Mary

"Mother of God, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth, who exclaimed this spontaneously without anyone having told her! Nor had it been Mary Magdalene! For me, as a young woman, this event was hugely significant as confirmation of what Gabriel had promised me. I could not yet feel my child, but this testimony of

Elisabeth's words about my child, which she affirmed purely out of her faith and experience of the divine, gave me the strength to be the mother of God's Son. And a short while later, I was sitting at the table with two elderly people who were the same age as my parents had been when they were expecting me. It was a revelation to be able to share in their immense joy. My God, it was only then that I realised: I am truly a daughter of such parents. And I understood that, without having known them personally, I owed much, if not everything, to them. Three months of holiness in the little cottage passed as if they were three days. I noticed how Mary Magdalene's behaviour changed during those months; she behaved not merely as a friend, but rather as a handmaid, just as I had served the altar in the Holy of Holies in the temple for ten years, tending to it with hymns and prayers. She behaved with the utmost humility, and this sometimes came across as submissive, which was not at all necessary. So I asked her why she was so withdrawn and quiet: "Are you feeling unwell? You're so quiet and your smile has vanished… would you like us to go back to Nazareth?" But she replied: "I am ashamed because I am jealous of your motherhood. You deserve it." "And you don't?" I asked her. "Do you think I'm worthy? If I thought I was worthy, it would never have happened to me or to Elizabeth. Don't you think your presence here is at least as miraculous as what is happening to Elizabeth and me now? It's good that you don't think yourself worthy,

“But it is not right that you should lose your gratitude and joy at what you are now able to experience together with both of us.” And she fell weeping at my feet and cried out her remorse with all her heart. I bent down, took her head in both hands and pressed it against my belly. She wrapped her arms around me and sobbed unceasingly until she suddenly cried out: “The baby is moving!”

“Do you see now how much God loves you, little unbeliever? You are the first to feel it!” She understood, stood up, and served for three months those who would change the world: John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. But I now understand for the first time, in my old age, that there are also great dangers lurking here. Mary Magdalene later had to learn to overcome difficult things that I, precisely because of those ten years of training, never had to experience. A fruit that ripens too quickly sometimes has a shorter lifespan, but her sharpness of mind, self-knowledge and openness gave her a great chance of success.

At the end of those three months, a sudden fear came over me; my belly could no longer hide the child, and I realised that Joseph might already be waiting for me upon my return – and how could I explain to him how I had become pregnant? I wanted to go home, but Mary Magdalene suggested that, given Elizabeth and Zechariah’s advanced age, we should stay and help them in preparation for the imminent birth of their son. Zacharias would then take me home quietly on the donkey. And so it came to pass. After three days we arrived home, and Esther was immensely happy and impressed by my

pregnant bump. Little Johannes was even more so. He just couldn't keep his hands off my bump, but it was merely the calm before the storm. And boy, was a storm coming our way.

Joseph

I was absolutely shocked when I came home. I'd been away for six months. I'd left a girl behind; I came home and saw a heavily pregnant woman. "With whom have you betrayed me? Who has brought this evil into my house? Who has seduced you and deflowered you? How could you do such a thing, you who grew up in the Holy of Holies and were given daily bread by angels? I am not stupid! My God, let me die here and now, so that I no longer have to endure this shame."

"Joseph, I am merely the Lord's handmaid!" she wept incessantly in reply, but this seemed all too easy to me and I made to leave the house, but then Esther stepped in front of me. "Joseph, I and the four other virgins have watched over her constantly and prayed together all the time. No man has set foot in here; only the angel of God brought her bread and told her that she would bear a child, a son of God and hers. We suspect that only the Holy Spirit can bring about such a thing without a man being involved. At least listen to her story!" But I would not hear of it. My heart was in turmoil, and jealousy poisoned my mind. According to the law, I had to report her and she would be stoned. If I hid her in the house, this would be just as much a violation of the law and

we could both have been stoned, as I too would have been accused of negligence for failing to protect her. I begged her to tell the truth, but she could find no words and merely showed me her tears, which overflowed from her sad eyes with misery whilst Esther shielded her with her body. I then spoke words which I still do not know where I got them from: “I cannot believe the way you became pregnant until I see the birth of the child.” It was already late; I got up, went to my room and, utterly exhausted, fell asleep. However strange I found it that she did not defend herself with arguments or details, this was made clear to me by an angel in my sleep: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The child in her womb is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son whom you must name ‘Jesus’.” I woke with a start. It brought me back to my senses. Before I left home months ago, I regarded her as my wife. That was precisely why I had become so confused and angry when I saw she was pregnant. But the angel told me something precious: “Joseph, you shall give the child the name Jesus”, and according to our tradition, that is something that belongs solely to a father. The angel regarded me as the child’s rightful earthly father, and from that moment on I would never give that up: Mary is my wife and Jesus will be my son, and as a father I would care for them from now on, and I thanked God for such trust

and grace, and asked for forgiveness for my anger. I am not stupid, but I behaved foolishly. Years later, everything became clear to me: just as Mary's flower bud had previously appeared from my shepherd's crook, so now Jesus would spring forth from Mary's flower bud. All part of the house of David. It was right that it should be so.

Mary

John had heard everything and seen it all up close. Seeing his grandfather in such a rage made him anxious, and at night he crawled into bed beside me. "Mum, don't cry. May I put my hand on my little friend?" And I sought his hand and placed it on my belly, and I began to softly hum a hymn that was always sung before the altar of incense. It was no coincidence that it was a hymn imploring the coming of the Saviour of mankind. Johannes suddenly gasped: "I can feel the baby moving."

"We must hum together for the baby, so that it can sleep," I said. And softly I hummed the tune, now more slowly, so that he could easily follow along with his childlike angelic voice, and all three of us drifted off into a heavenly sleep. The peace, however, was not to last long. The next morning, Joseph was, not without reason, deeply worried, for he feared I would be accused of adultery. There might be neighbours who had already noticed that I was pregnant, and we would certainly end up in court. His words were barely out of his mouth when Annas, a

A scribe and neighbour stood at the door and asked Joseph where he was regarding the work he had promised to do in his house. He clearly searched for me with his eyes and looked at me intently; seeing that I was pregnant, he hurried to inform Abiathar, the rabbi in Jerusalem, that Joseph had taken my virginity. A day later, we were both summoned to appear before Abiathar, who publicly accused me of adultery in breach of my vow of virginity to God. I wept bitterly and could only repeat that I was pure and had never known a man. Then Joseph had to endure it: "How could you have so deceived your wife, who once dwelt in the temple like a dove amidst the angels? She never wanted to know a man! If you hadn't abused her, she would still be a virgin!" And then poor Joseph broke down: "I swear I haven't touched her…" and he too burst into tears. Rabbi Abiathar, however, was not entirely certain and opted for a test known as 'drinking the water[35] of the testimony'; the water is mixed with dust from the 'Tabernacle of the Testimony' in the temple: whoever drinks it and whose thigh begins to wither and whose belly swells is lying. Joseph and I both underwent the

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[35] According to current medical understanding, this test can be regarded as a purely psychosomatic one: those who are confident in themselves are less likely to talk themselves into the 'fright' symptoms of constipation. And a thigh that withers away in three days? Even the tiniest hint of a sore could be interpreted as the start of something. The jury could have interpreted it any which way. Truly terrifying.

test, drank the water, and were forbidden to see or speak to one another until the following day, when we were to appear before Abiathar again, separately. The next day, I was the first to be examined, and I showed not the slightest sign of swelling or decay in my thigh. After me, the same was true for Joseph. All those present watched in amazement and could not fathom how my pregnancy could be explained, but Abiathar asked for silence and declared: “If God does not reveal your sin to us, then I will not punish you. Go in peace.” And we went our way and gave thanks to God. Not many months later, Zacharias confided in me how he had urged Abiathar to let the water of testimony decide and to trust in it completely.

Mary Magdalene

Whenever I was looking after Elisabeth, my thoughts would wander to my girlfriend. After our last meeting, I couldn’t call her anything else: a girlfriend. Yes, getting and becoming a girlfriend really is something quite ‘special’, a transformation. At the same time, I wondered what becoming a mother for the first time might or might not entail. I certainly didn’t feel ready for it and didn’t even know if I’d want it for myself. I had absolutely no idea who might fall in love with me, and even less of an idea of who I might fall in love with. I was simply far too headstrong, not submissive enough, sometimes even

know-it-all, I thought of myself. Although… although when I was with Maria then… then… I felt just the opposite. Suppose she had been a man, yes, yes then… perhaps. Strange how I already had a premonition back then.

Three weeks later, Elizabeth gave birth to a son. The midwives were over the moon that she had brought a healthy boy into the world at such a blessed age. It was a miracle to them, and they immediately asked for the name of Elizabeth's father, for tradition dictated that the first son must be named after a grandfather. The name Zacchaeus, Elisabeth's father, was suggested. Suddenly, Zacharias intervened and spoke for the first time in a long while: "The angel instructed me at the altar of incense that he shall be called John." And he sat down again immediately, took the child in his arms and said in a clear voice: "Welcome, little John." He kissed him on the forehead and blessed him. The astonished midwives had no answer to this, and within a day everyone in the village knew of it, yet no one dared to question the judgement of Chief Rabbi Zacharias, who had suddenly been cured of his muteness. Even I, at the time, had not the faintest idea how important this child would become. Now that this little miracle had taken place, help arrived from all sides, just to catch a glimpse of the child. I missed my best friend more and more, and after two months the hustle and bustle of the visitors became too much for me. At the same time, I longed very much to

to return to Galilee as soon as possible. Zacharias blessed me, thanked me, and Elizabeth whispered in my ear: “Do not fear the purple.” I was taken aback, not sure what to make of it, but it would stay with me for the rest of my life. Purple would indeed become the guiding thread of my life. I set off. I had been on my way for a while when I realised that there were many people out and about, often heading in the opposite direction to where I was going. At the second major crossroads, it became plain to see: everyone was heading for Bethlehem, the very place I had just come from. A woman grabbed hold of me: “Do you know where we need to go to register for Emperor Augustus’s census?” She saw the disbelief in my eyes and explained that everyone from Galilee had to register and that they only had one week left. I turned on my heel and went with them immediately.

Mary

Three months passed since the visit to Elizabeth. Emperor Augustus issued a decree that every inhabitant of his vast empire must present themselves to be registered in the census, so that the governor of the region could collect taxes. Joseph got ready together with his sons, but at first he wasn't quite sure how to handle the situation with me. Whether he should register me as his heavily pregnant wife, but then, as an old man, he felt a great deal of shame, or whether he should register me as his daughter, whilst everyone in Galilee had known since our appearance before Abiathar that I was not his daughter. In the end, he decided simply to wait and see, but it weighed heavily on him. He saddled the donkey and helped me onto it. One of his sons led the donkey, and Joseph, stooped and limping, followed behind with his other sons. Joseph's aged body was struggling, even though it was only fifteen miles [36] away, a distance one could walk in a single day in good health, but with Joseph in tow, that was not possible. Winter was fast approaching and the days were growing shorter. The first snow had begun to fall. It took us three days, and Joseph remained gloomy and dejected. I tried to cheer him up by making it clear to him that within a few hours he would

[36] That is equivalent to 24 kilometres of rough terrain.

The Saviour would see what he himself had been looking forward to from the very beginning. “Do you remember, Joseph, what you said on the first day? ‘I cannot believe in the way you became pregnant until I see the birth of the child.’ Well, that moment is upon us, and you will give him his name!’ At this thought, he took heart again, despite all the pain and weariness. We approached the fertile fields around Bethlehem, hence also called ‘The House of Bread’ and ‘City of David’. We arrived too late, for all the houses and inns were full due to the massive influx of people. Joseph spoke to everyone, but no one could help us. Until a shepherd who saw that I was heavily pregnant suggested we spend the cold night in his sheepfold in a cave on the outskirts of the town. Joseph was overly anxious for me, although I felt not the slightest pain or cold. I did feel, however, that the time was near. In the stable within the cave stood an ox and a few sheep, alongside bales of hay and straw and a manger. His sons gratefully flung themselves into the hay, huddled close together and fell asleep immediately. Joseph, as if by a miracle, stayed awake, sat down beside me, wrapped his heavy cloak around me and kept me warm, waiting for sunrise to find a midwife. We have never been so close to each other, physically and spiritually, as we were at that moment, because only the two of us realised the magnitude of what was about to happen. Grateful for everything, I took his hand and placed it on my belly. The child inside me pushed gently against

his hand. Love shone from Joseph's dark eyes. It was a beautiful night; snow was falling gently, the stars twinkled in the sky, and the full moon was in a hurry to make way for a more than curious sun. Joseph fell asleep. I sensed my time was coming and gently woke him: "Joseph, the sun is slowly rising…" And he got up, saddled the donkey and set off in the twilight to find a midwife in the city. I was alone. Or was I? I spoke softly, so as not to wake the boys: "Jibril, welcome," and I turned halfway round. "Greetings, drop of the sea that shall give birth to the sea," the angel addressed me, and Jibril handed me a branch of apple blossom. I smelled it and suddenly found myself in a sun-drenched world, where all the animals, birds and insects and all God's creatures had gathered together in brotherhood at the foot of a hill, on whose summit the apple tree of Eden stood in full bloom. A child and I stood beneath the apple tree. The child took my hand and asked me to lift him up so we could smell the blossoms together, and together we smelled them, and then I woke up. Djibril was nowhere to be seen. I immediately felt and saw my naked son, sitting on my lap, gently sucking his little fingers. Our eyes mingled with one another as seconds blend into centuries. The lingering scent of apple blossom filled the stable. The umbilical cord turned out to have been, from our very very beginning, a spiritual umbilical cord that could never be cut. I hugged him, wrapped

wrapped him in white linen and held him close to me to keep him warm. His mischievous eyes and smile touched me deep in my heart, and I softly sang a hymn I had learnt as a child in the Temple of Jerusalem: “The great King hastens into a small cave to make me great, who had become small. And so, through His boundless poverty, He can enrich me, who was poor.”

When I looked into the eyes of the divine child, I saw, high above the seraphim in the Holy of Holies, the scion of the apple tree of the purest good come to life. Humbly I bowed my head before the child and the scion for the long-awaited redemption of fallen humanity. It was a special moment when, after a while, I offered him my first nipple; it felt more as though he were feeding me rather than I him. And so it would remain from then on. What I gave, I received back a hundredfold. Just as it would be for all of humanity. I laid the child down to rest in the sheep’s manger. In the distance, I saw Joseph returning with a woman; Zelomi was her name. When she saw the child sleeping peacefully in the sheep’s manger, she looked at me and was surprised that I showed no visible signs of having given birth. She politely asked if she should not wash my clothes and offer help with the cleaning. I stood before her and showed her my clothes, which were without a single drop of blood, meaning that, according to Jewish law, I did not have to undergo a purification ritual forty days after the birth, and it was precisely this that left Zelomi so speechless. She fell down before me and cried out: “My soul

“is glorified, for my eyes have seen marvellous things, for salvation has come to Israel.” Then Joseph took the child in his arms and named him Jesus, as the angel had instructed him. Joseph was not in the least alarmed by the whole affair. Just as he had been horrified and furious at the very beginning, so now he treated me and the child with gentleness. He told me later that it was only at that moment that he realised that he, too, felt in a way chosen to take part in this mystery of salvation. We had no bond with one another like a normal woman and a normal man, but rather a purely spiritual bond of helping one another to achieve the highest goal: that every human being would henceforth be given a new chance to regain Eden.

The news spread, and two days later another midwife came to visit, Salome, a distant cousin on my mother’s side. She found it hard to believe that I was still a virgin and reached out her hand towards my undergarment, but her hand withered instantly. She lamented her disbelief until an angel encouraged her to take the child in her arms, which she did, and immediately her hand was healed. After that, shepherds came from far and wide to the star to pay their respects. Joseph saw how exhausted I was from all the emotions surrounding me and immediately went in search of a cottage in the town of Bethlehem. We discussed among ourselves what we would do about our son’s circumcision and my purification ritual. We decided it was best

to go along with it so as not to provoke any arguments. Yes, we would present the little Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem. Perhaps we would then see Chief Rabbi Zacharias again, who by now would have become a father some time ago…

Mary Magdalene

I was on my way to Bethlehem; I had no choice, and perhaps I might find Mary there. It was a difficult journey. I approached an important spring where many people had stopped for a moment. I had no food left, but water was just as important. I bent down to drink, suddenly heard strange voices behind me and looked back curiously. Three men in strange clothes, speaking strange languages, and three camels thirstily lapping up the water in long gulps. Three men with dark skin, dressed like kings, serious and dignified in their manner. I followed my instinct and walked straight towards them. "Peace be with you," I said first in Hebrew; they merely nodded and I saw they did not understand. Then I tried Aramaic, but there was no reply to that either. So I tried Greek, the common language of the merchants, and yes, they understood that and, relieved, replied to me in perfect Greek.

"I am Mary Magdalene; where do you come from?"

“I am Caspar and I come from Arabia,” he was clearly the youngest of the three, with a ruddy complexion and a smooth, beardless chin.

“I am Melchior and I come from Persia,” he seemed to me to be the oldest, with long white hair, a long beard and very wrinkled skin.

“I am Balthazar and I come from Egypt,” said the man with dark skin and a thick black beard. He was apparently the leader and continued: “We are searching for the Messiah. We are astronomers. Six centuries ago, a prophet, Daniel[37] , my distant great-great-grandfather, predicted that around this time a star would appear that would indicate the place where the Messiah would be born. And indeed, nine months ago a completely new, bright comet appeared in the eastern quadrant of the sky. And we, we followed its path closely, but once we reached the border of King Herod’s territory, the star vanished and could no longer be detected. The day before yesterday, we were summoned by King Herod, who was very interested in this Messiah and who almost forced us to inform him immediately as soon as we had found the Messiah. But we made it clear to him that the star had suddenly disappeared since we had crossed the border. He became angry, but quickly regained his composure. We promised that we would inform him immediately, but we have no confidence

[37] The prophet Daniel was exiled from Israel to Egypt at that time.

We still don't. We were greatly astonished the night after our conversation with Herod, when the star without a tail suddenly reappeared in this direction, somewhere above Bethlehem, we suspected. The fact that the star reappeared could not be a coincidence after our bizarre conversation with Herod, and for us it is proof that we must not trust Herod." I was rooted to the spot. Bethlehem? Of course that was right. Joseph and Mary had to register there too! I recounted the broad outline of Joseph and Mary's story to the three wise men, and their eyes sparkled just as their beloved star did so generously. They could hardly wait and begged me to go with them. "Evening is slowly falling and the star is once again easily visible." We agreed that I would sit at the front of the camel with Caspar, the youngest and lightest of the three wise men, so that together we could follow the star. "It can't be far now," said Caspar very decisively, and my heart began to beat faster too. "Where are you from, Mary Magdalene, if I may ask?" he said to me very kindly. "From Magdala," I replied, somewhat shyly. He made his camel kneel, widened the saddle and gave his sleeping mat to Balthazar. "Magdala? That's where I entered Galilee… Come, I'll give you a hand. You sit in front." He lifted me up and a minute later he was sitting behind me on the same saddle, prodding his camel to stand up whilst he held me tightly in his arms. We set off.

It seemed as though the camels, too, had been given new strength and were driven by the same passion. I closed my eyes and Caspar held me tightly. The rocking motion of his camel's undulating movement entranced me, and a vision unfolded in my mind: I gazed at the horizon, which was bathed entirely in a soft purple hue, with just a single star that did not move, no matter which way I turned my head; the star always followed my gaze, so that I could not escape it. I did not open my closed eyes, for it seemed as though they were already wide open, so that I felt no urge or reason to open them. I remained focused and needed to see nothing else in my life: this star in its purple mist was forever a beginning without an end. How long this lasted, I do not know. Suddenly I was jolted awake by the camels coming to an abrupt halt, and dazed, I heard very agitated, strange words echoing from afar. Dazed, I opened my eyes. Caspar sensed that I was waking and immediately pointed his finger towards the spot above which the star remained stationary. I saw the same star from my dream shining amidst purple-blue clouds above a small house[38] on the outskirts of Bethlehem, towards Beth-Sémes. In a sacred silence and with awe, the three camels moved step by step towards the spot, as if they too knew that the Messiah, their final destination, had been found. We all sat frozen on their backs, the silence of the

[38] According to the official records, after the birth, Joseph went to find a small house in a cave to accommodate the mother and child.

Breathing in the night, acknowledging our smallness, storing this moment in every cell of our brains, our hearts overflowing with gratitude yet filled with a sense of unworthiness. We stopped at the door. The camels knelt of their own accord, as if they too realised what lay behind this door. We dismounted and knelt before the closed door. Waiting. None of us felt worthy enough to knock. The door opened and Joseph hurried towards me, helped me to my feet and embraced me, and spoke softly in my ear: “Mary Magdalene, it is done: the Saviour is born unto us… Who are these people?” He addressed these strangers joyfully. All three were sitting on their knees, deeply bowed. Joseph went over to them and placed his hand on the shoulder of the eldest wise man. I introduced him to Joseph: “This is Melchior from Persia.” Old Joseph helped the old man to his feet and bowed respectfully before him: “Welcome.” I continued: “This is Balthazar from Egypt.” And Joseph supported him too and bowed in such honour before the Messiah. Finally, I came to Caspar: “This is Caspar from Arabia.” Joseph did not need to help him and welcomed them all once more. He was already turning towards the door, but the wise men asked for a moment’s time before they could enter. I translated what they said; Joseph smiled kindly and asked me to tell them that he would go inside to inform Mary. Mary and Joseph themselves knew only Aramaic and not a word of Greek, so I was able to make myself very useful. The three wise men began to unpack

to dismount from their camels, and what happened in the minutes that followed I would never have thought possible: three men searching for their finest robes, wearing special shoes that were completely alien to us, the most elegant headdresses, jewellery, scarves, and cloaks woven from gold-threaded satin with strange patterns that I had never seen in my hometown of Magdala, a rich trading town and commercial hub on the Sea of Galilee. At the very end, each of them produced a gift in dazzlingly beautiful wrapping, which was a gift in itself without even needing to be opened. The whole scene was a revelation of royal dignity, respect and humility. They nodded to me to make it clear that I should go first. I, dirty, unkempt and without a gift, hesitated, but Balthazar insisted and gave me his gift to carry for him. I could never have imagined how this gift would also change my life. I opened the door cautiously. The first thing that struck me were Mary's large eyes, full of joyful surprise, smiling at me, before she quickly turned her gaze to the child in a small manger. Her eyes told me: "My dear Mary Magdalene, it has happened. I am so glad to see you here. How wonderful are God's ways. I have already told the Saviour all about you." I could not control myself and rushed towards her, and like little girls together, we wept tears of joy. The child was wide awake and looked at the motley company with amusement. I knelt down before the child and dared

I could hardly bring myself to touch it, but Mary encouraged me and I kissed him on the forehead. A shiver ran through me and at once I knew how and who would come to define everything in my life. I turned to Balthazar and motioned for him to have his gift ready. Solemnly, he unwrapped it and I translated his words: “I am Balthazar and I come from Egypt. I present the King of Kings with myrrh for the purification of body and spirit after death and for pure love during life.” And he knelt before Mary and kissed her feet. Then Melchior followed: “I am Melchior and followed the star from Persia. I present the Saviour with gold as a sign of wisdom for the King of the Wise.” He too kissed her feet and took a step back. Caspar, the youngest, felt somewhat shy in such distinguished company. He stepped forward and knelt before the child himself: “I am Caspar and come from Arabia. I bring incense for the Messiah, for the God of all people. Incense to carry their prayers with power to heaven.” The child watched with intense attention, something one would not expect from such a newborn baby. I translated what Mary said to them: “You are kings”, and all three men fell to their knees, as if by prior arrangement, and Balthazar replied: “There is but one King.” Mary touched him tenderly and spoke almost prophetically: “Balthazar of Egypt, distant descendant of our prophet Daniel, exiled to your land three hundred years ago, lift up your heads, lift up your hearts,” and she paused for a moment,

"We are family, just as all people are brothers and sisters to one another, and my son will be their Saviour." I had barely finished translating when Joseph, who had gone to water the camels, came in looking somewhat surprised: "The star… has gone; it's nowhere to be seen." And he looked at the three kings. I translated his words, and it was Melchior who, with wide eyes, replied quickly: "When the star hid itself from us as we entered Herod's land, it was to ensure that we could not tell Herod where exactly the Saviour would be born. Once outside his palace, the star showed itself again, and so it is no coincidence that we found the Saviour through it; and now, once more, the star wishes to ensure that Herod cannot find the child." Whilst I translated what he had said for Joseph and Mary, the three kings withdrew. Balthazar now spoke: "Three camels at your door at daybreak, and Herod will find you tomorrow without much trouble. We are leaving immediately, so that we cannot betray your whereabouts. Herod wants to kill the child." They knelt reverently before the child, and it was Caspar who, in Arabic, finally asked Mary: "What is the name of the Saviour?" Miraculously, Mary appeared to need no translation and replied in Arabic with perfect pronunciation: "His name is Jesus, which means *'Yahweh who saves'*." I was rooted to the spot because I knew for certain that she did not know Arabic, and she spoke it as if she herself did not realise she was speaking Arabic, for no

Five seconds later, she asked me again in Arabic if there was anything else I could do to help the kings before they left. They shook their heads to say no, although Caspar came over to me specifically, looked at me with enchanting eyes and whispered: “Goodbye.” It only made the whole affair all the more wondrous. When the three kings—I call them kings because they behaved far more royally than King Herod—had departed, Mary asked me to put the gifts away. The gold, the frankincense, until Mary took the myrrh in her hands and suddenly looked at me intently. The child also stared motionless at me, as if the myrrh were already smouldering with a soft purple glow, just like the star from a moment before behind Caspar on the camel. I accepted the myrrh hesitantly: “Mary? What do you want me to…”, but she interrupted me and whispered: “Keep this… for later”. I shook my head to clear my thoughts, took the myrrh and looked for the packaging. Joseph had already cleared them away. I wrapped the myrrh in the original Egyptian packaging of delicate papyrus fibre, but when I went to put it in my travel bag, I realised that this wrapping was not strong enough. I found the packaging of the incense, made of Arabian silk, to be somewhat stronger and used it to give the myrrh a second layer. But even that did not seem sufficient to withstand the test of time, until I saw how the gold was presented in strong Persian cotton packaging. I thus gave the myrrh its third layer of packaging and stowed it safely away in my travel bag. Joseph came back inside after he had seen the kings

He helped me. He asked me if I had already been registered in the population register and told me that I was welcome to go with him tomorrow if this hadn't yet been done. And so it came to pass.

Jozef

When I first saw the child in the stable, my exhaustion from the night-time search for a midwife vanished. Mary offered to hold the little boy. "He is your child too," she told me, but I simply couldn't bring myself to do it. "I don't feel worthy enough; give me some time." "All right," she said, "but your time will come." I was simply astounded by everything that could in no way be called normal. Had I never been allowed to feel the child moving in Mary's womb, I would never have believed it to see the child lying next to her in the manger, with Mary without a single drop of blood loss, wearing the same clothes as when I left her the night before. I would never have believed it. The first sight that met my eyes did not help me to immediately feel like a rightful father, just as she could feel like a rightful mother to this child. On the other hand, it seemed as though Mary was just as distant from the child as I was, even though this is not true, but it did help me. Her body seemed to have remained just as untouched as mine. At the same time, precisely because of that, I was very angry with myself for not having believed Mary's word from the start. With the arrival of the three strangers on their camels, Mary Magdalene

She was not wrong to call them kings; with their tale of the star and the incredibly long journey they had undertaken, the last shred of doubt was so thoroughly shattered that I felt as small as a grain of sand from the hottest desert, yet through my restored faith I could now build mountains with this tiniest of grains of sand. The next day, I set off with Mary Magdalene to register us in the census, and I used her presence to name her my daughter and as an additional witness to the fact that my wife had to stay at home with the newborn child. The somewhat older Roman on duty accepted this and sincerely wished us every happiness with the child. This Roman will never realise from whence he will receive so much grace in his future life. Mary Magdalene then set off from there to our home in Nazareth to prepare everything for our return, for within a week our son was to be circumcised in the temple at Jerusalem, and three weeks later, on the fortieth day after the birth, Mary would have to undergo the purification ceremony in the temple. According to the Law of Moses, a woman's blood loss during childbirth meant she had manifestly lost vital energy, rendering her too weak to worship Yahweh with vigour. According to the Jews, once a turtledove has lost its mate, it does not seek a new partner because it has become too weary and powerless; on this basis, the price the woman who had given birth had to pay was a pair of turtledoves: the female dove was sacrificed

for the ‘sin offering’, even though her ‘sin’ was committed unconsciously, or call it naively. The remaining male dove was killed for a ‘burnt offering’: first, the blood was collected and sprinkled on the altar, symbolising how the blood lost during childbirth was returned to God, thereby restoring the woman’s equal standing with the man. The dove itself was then burnt to ashes and was under no circumstances to be eaten.
None of this applied in our case, but we did not dare to offend the priests, certainly not to get Zacharias into trouble.

Zacharias

I was delighted to learn from Mary Magdalene that Joseph and Mary had arrived home in Nazareth with the child for the circumcision, and later, on the fortieth day after the birth, for the sin offering and the burnt offering; and to my great joy, as Chief Rabbi, I was entrusted with the task of presiding over these rituals. I could not wait until then to meet the Saviour, and as soon as I found the time, I visited the young family. Joseph welcomed me warmly and knelt down, which I did not want. I pulled him to his feet at once, embraced the old man and thanked him for his care of his wife and child. “How are your little John and Elizabeth?” asked Joseph. “There’s a young John running about here too, but I can’t find him…” And the little rascal crawled out from under the table and grabbed hold of my legs. “Tell me, John, how is your new little brother?” I asked; he took me by the hand and pulled me into the back room. Mary was just breastfeeding Jesus. I didn’t dare disturb her and waited patiently until she looked up. “Father Zacharias,” she smiled, “how are Elizabeth and John?” She spoke softly, with the voice of an angel. “Both are doing well; the older I get, the younger Elizabeth becomes. It is a miracle, but your story is many times…” I was suddenly interrupted by the child’s cry, as if he wanted to tell me that I

was disturbing him whilst he was eating. I wanted to tell her how we, the priests of the temple among ourselves, didn't know what to do back then when little Mary withdrew into the Holy of Holies for the thousandth time, even though the rule was that no one, not even the high priest, was allowed to enter, except once a year on the Feast of the Ark of the Covenant. And then we heard Mary speaking inaudibly behind the curtain with someone who seemed to have no voice, but that was not the case. We thought she would come out from behind it because of hunger, but nothing could be further from the truth. It turned out to be the angel Djibril who brought her daily bread, and once we realised this, we could do nothing but let her be nourished and taught by the angel of God in his very own form. As my thoughts wandered within me, I suddenly saw the child stop suckling and look at me intently. Mary saw it too; she wondered what he was looking at. She turned her head to see that I was face to face with the Saviour, and the message he gave me was clear. I knelt before him on both knees and told him that I would not waver, whatever might happen. And Mary must have understood it too, for she shed a tear with a grateful smile. Mary then addressed me for the first time: "Look, Jesus: my father," and I replied: "Look, Jesus: my daughter," and suddenly a clear smile appeared on the child's face. Mary

Magdalena opened the door very quietly behind us and tiptoed inside.

Mary Magdalene

I saw immediately that something had happened, or at least was about to happen. Whether it would be good or bad, I could not tell, but it was something that was beyond my comprehension. The circumcision on the ninth day went without a hitch, and in the two weeks leading up to the sin offering and burnt offering, Mary grew increasingly quiet. I asked her if she was ill, or whether we might not be better off postponing it, but she replied: “What must come will come.” On the very day of her purification in the temple, she took the child, and we set off with Mary and her son on the donkey to the temple. The rumours had not failed to reach their mark; many wished to witness the ritual, and in particular, many priests and scribes had come from far and wide to see what truth there was in the wild rumours. Everything would soon become clear from the place Mary would be assigned in the temple: the chamber of the married women or the chamber reserved for the virgins. Zechariah was waiting for her with the child and escorted her, with the child in her arms, to the chamber of the virgins. Immediately there was a great commotion! How could a mother with a child be a virgin? The

Many Sadducees[39]and Pharisees were divided in their opinions, with the vast majority stunned by such sacrilege. It was terrifying to see how hostile some of the high priests and scribes were. Their eyes flashed with fire and incomprehension. Hatred for Zacharias filled their eyes. Then a second wave of commotion arose: the arrival of the ancient Simeon was announced, and the temple servants quickly made way to place a chair in the front row for this widely respected scribe and renowned translator. The word ‘rancidly old’ was apt: he was 306 years old, and the fact that he wished to be present was undoubtedly a sign of things to come. The temple fell deathly silent as he was helped to take his seat. Symeon cleared his throat and was given the floor.

Symeon

“Balthazar, the astrologer, recently came to visit me with two of his colleagues in the dead of night, for he was in a hurry to leave Israel. Their camels were exhausted. How delightful it was to behold these noble animals once more. Our

[39] The high priests were usually drawn from the ranks of the Sadducees, whilst the scribes were usually drawn from the ranks of the Pharisees. The Sadducees were generally far more fanatical than the Pharisees and held a clear majority in the Great Sanhedrin.

Our meeting was no coincidence, for we are distant relatives. Just as my great-great-grandfather's grandfather, the prophet Daniel, had been here in Israel, so too was Balthazar a distant descendant of that same Daniel, who had been exiled to Egypt. He told of the star they had followed and how they had thus found the Saviour in a manger in a little house on the outskirts of Bethlehem. I suddenly felt two hundred and fifty years younger. 'At last,' it buzzed in my head. Apparently, my fame as the famous priest-translator Symeon who simply will not die is still very much alive in modern-day Egypt, and so Balthazar told me that they still reverently address me as 'Symeon, the eternal watcher for the Saviour of Israel'. 'How many generations of lovers have I seen come and go?'

His life story was widely known in Israel. Some two hundred and fifty years ago, he set off with other translators of the seven sacred Jewish books, the Septuagint, under the leadership of Eleazar, to the great library of Alexandria in Egypt. Many Jews had remained there after the Exodus from Egypt and, over the years, had lost the ability to speak or read Hebrew properly. Ptolemy II was a grateful ruler for their work in Egypt and therefore proposed to recruit Hebrew translators who wished to translate the Septuagint into Greek. Eleazar and Ptolemy set the bar extremely high. At least six elders were selected from each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

None of the 72 translators were allowed to have contact with the others: each lived and worked in isolation. After years, the 72 different translations were placed side by side, and to everyone's great surprise, every translation was identical, not only in content but even in word choice. Ptolemy was deeply impressed, and Eleazar was praised for his work.

Symeon continued his story: "On our way home, we translators wondered which key passage from the seven books had struck each of us most deeply. Personally, I was deeply moved by the prophet Isaiah, chapter 7, verse 14, with which you are all very familiar: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.' I was astounded by this prophecy. How can a virgin bear a child without losing her virginity? How could God be born in such a way? I could not believe this under any circumstances. At the same time, an invisible hand suddenly covered my mouth and I heard a voice say: 'You shall behold the Christ and you shall hold him in your hands. You shall not die before you have seen him.' I dared not tell my friends anything about it, and we travelled on until we came to a river. I took my ring off my finger and threw it into the river as far as I could. If the verse from Isaiah is true, I shall get my ring back, I thought in my disbelief. We travelled on for two days along the same river and arrived in a town where we bought fish at the market for our supper.

As I was filleting my fish, my ring suddenly reappeared. Look! This ring!"

Joseph

Some of the younger people present were very impressed, but most of the older ones reacted rather mockingly: "306 years old?… he says… can he even count? You'd have to be mad to believe that," I heard behind me. Zacharias went to Simeon and asked him something; Simeon nodded in reply. Zacharias went to the virgins' lodge to fetch Mary with Jesus and bring her before Simeon, who in the meantime was being helped to his feet by temple servants. Mary placed Jesus in Simeon's arms, and in a loud voice Simeon spoke to all who would listen, though sadly few were willing to do so: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation today, the light for your revelation to all nations. Behold, this child is destined for the fall or the rising of many in Israel." And it seemed as though Simeon's eyes opened wide and he could already see the heavens opening before him. And Simeon turned to Mary and said: "And yes, a sword will pierce your own soul too." This greatly startled Mary and threw her off balance; indeed, what could he possibly mean by that? Zacharias was apparently struck by it too. He took the child back and escorted Mary back to the virgins' quarters amidst disapproving grumbling and murmuring

of discontented, hateful Pharisees and Sadducees. I was glad when the final part of the purification ceremony, involving the burnt offering of the male dove, was over and we could head home.

Zacharias

After the ceremony, I said goodbye to Simeon. He looked me straight in the eye and assured me: “We shall meet again soon.” I knew what he was referring to, for I too had felt the intense hatred of the crowd of Pharisees and Sadducees. What troubled me more, however, were the rumours about Herod, who was apparently making plans to kill the Saviour. I informed Mary Magdalene of this: “Although I am leaving the temple this evening with a heavy heart to return home, for Elizabeth and John are expecting me. My donkey is already saddled and my provisions replenished. I shall be home again within two days.” And I took my leave of Mary, Joseph and Mary Magdalene under the hostile gaze of many.

Mary Magdalene

Everything happened in the blink of an eye. The scribes and Pharisees had apparently been plotting with Herod for some time to kill the child and Zechariah. Zechariah was murdered that very evening before the altar in the temple. At the same time, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, urging him to flee immediately to Egypt. Joseph had heard and seen enough hate speech in the temple and did not hesitate for a moment. I just managed to tell them that Zechariah had been murdered before they left in a hurry with Jesus and John, Joseph's grandson. I would rush straight to Elizabeth and her little John to tell her the sad news about Zechariah. It was hell, and I lived in fear of becoming a victim myself of these people without the slightest scruples. Everyone in Bethlehem and Jerusalem knew that I was very close friends with Mary and Joseph. I disguised myself as a man, wearing the clothes and boots of one of Joseph's sons, took a staff in my hand, and fortunately it was winter so I only had to leave my eyes uncovered. I stowed the myrrh from Balthazar's parcel safely away. On the road to Ein Karem, just outside the city, I suddenly came upon a roadblock behind a hidden bend, manned by a few shady-looking men and two Roman soldiers. Their horses were exhausted and reeked of sweat. Possibly

It was the murderers who had killed Zacharias in the temple, but their attention quickly shifted to a few veiled women standing just behind me. I didn't even need to raise my voice. I couldn't inform Elizabeth of the sad news quickly enough. Rumours soon began to circulate that Roman soldiers, on Herod's orders, had started slaughtering all children under the age of two. Children were even beheaded whilst still suckling at their mothers' breasts. The brutality knew no bounds. Madness reigned. Never has human history witnessed a greater innocent bloodshed.

Mary

Zacharias! My second father! 'A sword will pierce my soul'. Was that what Simeon meant? It certainly felt that way now. I didn't even know such a thing existed: killing a human being. I had grown up in the Holy of Holies, only to now have to learn to survive outside it? Were even worse things in store for me? Djibril, where are you now? Where is your bread now? But it was precisely this thought that brought me the answer to my question, and I immediately apologised to Djibril. I was sitting on the donkey. Five-year-old John behaved bravely and tried to help where he could: carrying a knapsack on his back for the journey was his task, whilst the donkey, heavily laden with me, Jesus and blankets and

food, commanded our admiration for bearing such a heavy load. Joseph walked along, pulling the donkey as only fear can take hold of a person's mind. I held Jesus close to me. I had been holding this 'bread' close to me ever since his birth. The bread did not need to come, for it was already there. My little Jesus was the bread I had been given and was allowed to hold, to cherish, bread to give to every person. All those years I had spent in the Holy of Holies, I had received this bread, and just as Djibril had given it to me almost daily, so from now on I would generously share this bread, this child, every day with every person who asked for it. "Stop, Joseph," I asked him to stop immediately. He was out of breath and looked around in surprise, worried that something had gone wrong. I stepped down from the donkey with the child in my arms and went straight to him: "Here, Joseph, hold this child, this bread; it is your bread too…" And Joseph didn't know what to make of it, for it was the first time he had taken the child in his arms. "It is bread for all people, and certainly for you…" Joseph wept. I then helped John to hold the child for a moment, and his weariness too visibly vanished. For whoever carries the child is, after all, carried. From then on, we took turns carrying the child. Joseph and I became allies; neither of us was more than the other. Joseph and I seemed to become the same age: he younger, I older. We were the world in miniature, or at least as the world ought to be. We felt neither haste nor fear any more. We became a star like the star of the kings, and whoever saw us

would follow, would find the child, get to know it and… hold it… so that it might become a child of God. We no longer had to flee and learnt to let ourselves be carried. These were important lessons for what lay ahead of us.

Joseph

Holding the little Jesus in my hands for the first time was a revelation and transformed my entire way of thinking and acting: thinking became unconditional belief and acting became acting on instinct with trust. It was unthinkable that God would not protect His Son as a child before He had been able to carry out His work of salvation. We pressed on; it would certainly take fourteen days before we reached the border with Egypt. It was lovely to get to know my grandson John better now. Along the way, people began to tell us spontaneously about the terrible news of the massacre of children throughout Judea: all children under the age of two were being brutally and ruthlessly murdered to ensure that the Saviour would be dead. Many women we met reacted with tenderness when they saw the little Jesus, and anyone who saw him could not help but be concerned and assist us with advice and even practical help, telling us where Herod's checkpoints were and how we could avoid them. Almost every night we were welcomed somewhere and received generously. The

The donkey was even pampered, and Johannes took great care of the animal. For a five-year-old, he was already very independent, and he was a quick and eager learner. “What are you going to call your donkey, Johannes?” He thought for a moment: ‘Long-ears’ it was. Long-ears pricked up both ears at once, and Johannes laughed with delight.

Mary Magdalene

The full moon was the only thing that kept me company and helped me on the night of my escape. I felt terribly alone, and wearing those men’s clothes made it seem as though I was even fleeing from myself, from who I once was and might never find again. There seemed to be no hope left. I didn’t just seem like one; I was a stray dog. Realising how happy I’d been in the past few years, thanks to all those wonderful and intense experiences, I felt miserable and more abandoned than ever. I was angry with myself for my wavering belief that things might yet turn out all right. Where are you, Djibril, just when I need you? At that moment, I came across a beggar sitting by the side of the road. I bent down to him and apologised that I had no food with me myself, and asked if there was anything else I could do for him. “No,” he replied, “but I can do something for you: an hour ago, someone gave me a whole loaf of bread: let’s share it; it does me good to have a chat with someone.” He

He broke the bread in two straight away as I sat down beside him, and he asked again, “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to Ein Karem.”

“What a coincidence, I’ve just come from there.”

I waited a moment until I’d finished my hungry mouthful and was instantly very curious: “Do you know Chief Rabbi Zacharias’s house, then?”

“I also know his close neighbours; give them my regards, and take a piece of bread with you: I am old and don’t need much.”

“Who should I say hello to, dear man?”

“From Gabriel, just say. Wait, I’ve got some olive oil for the bread; that makes it delicious.”

“Oh, thank you, Gabriel. Gabriel is a strange name, I’ve never heard it before…”

“My distant great-grandparents came from the far north; I don’t know how they ended up here.” The man stood up and asked, “What is your name?” as he brushed the dust from his shabby cloak.

“I am Mary Magdalene.”

“Mary from beautiful Magdala! Well, beautiful Mary Magdalene: may God bless you!”

And before I could once again clear my mouth in time to thank him, he was already a fair way off. My empty stomach took over my thoughts and senses

, and it was only when I had been on my way to Ein Karem for a while that it began to dawn on me: surely not? Could it be? Yes, of course it could! And I turned around once more, but there was no traveller to be seen on the long, dead-straight road. I didn't call out, I roared: "Thank you, Djibril!"

Elisabeth

An angel visited me in a dream, told me that Zacharias had been killed, and urged me to leave everything behind at the crack of dawn and flee with John to Mount Horeb. The murderers who had killed Zacharias in Jerusalem were on their way to kill my son and me. I had no chance to weep; I gathered the bare essentials and set off immediately, even before the first light of dawn. I knew the roads of our village by heart; the oldest trees were my signposts and I did not need light straight away. I headed further south, so that I would not encounter this gang coming from the north. I left behind not only my village, but also all the beautiful memories with my husband. Zacharias! My dear, noble Zacharias. Dead? How am I to go on now? I knew of a quiet spot outside the village by a stream, not far from the road, where I could breastfeed John and rest and drink a little myself. I sat down. The sun rose. I recognised Zacharias in the eyes of my little boy, who gazed at me with piercing love through his big eyes whilst we were eating.

“You can be sure your father will look after us,” and only then did tears stream from my eyes and run down my nose… It tickled and I had to sneeze, which Johannes found very funny, so I was quickly able to shake off my sadness and realise what a treasure my husband had given me. A woman walked quietly towards us carrying a large basket of linen. I’d never seen her in the village before. She looked at Johannes and said: “What a beautiful child! It must be a blessing to be able to look after such a sweet little one; I myself cannot have children.” I was taken aback that she immediately spoke of her loss. Her spontaneous openness gave me the space to speak of my own loss too: “I have just lost my husband; this child has only me left, and I am on the run.”

The woman sat down beside me and looked at me with azure-blue eyes: “On the road you will soon find my donkey tied to a tree; he is waiting for you. Go to the great mountain and climb it with your child.” And she stood up, left her basket of linen behind, and vanished as quietly as she had come. I was struck dumb. I washed myself in the stream, refreshed John, and opened the basket of linen. Everything, absolutely everything that I had forgotten to take in my haste due to my fear at that moment, was neatly packed: food, spare clothes, a cup, a jug, a brush. The pack was heavy, but it felt as light as a feather to carry because I realised that

I was suddenly not alone in looking after John. I could already hear the donkey braying from afar.

Mary Magdalene

I arrived in Ein Karem in the late afternoon, and a gloomy mist hung over the valley. The winter sun still seemed to be sleeping in its bed of grey clouds. I hurried to Elizabeth's house, which nestled against the gently sloping southern side of the valley. I was dying to meet her and little John. I rounded the final bend and froze on the spot: the door was hanging by its hinges, the cupboard and table had been dragged outside and smashed to pieces, broken crockery from the kitchen lay in shards… I felt a lump in my throat. I didn't walk, I flew through my tears towards it. Everything inside had been smashed to pieces; only the cooking area, a built-in wardrobe with clothes and the bed were still intact. "Elisabeth!!!" I kept calling her name until I sank to my knees, bent double, and could only whisper her name with tear-stricken vocal cords. I pulled myself together; I had to know what had happened. Were they still alive? I went through the rooms one by one, however difficult it was to relive those blessed memories with tears of joy now replaced by tears of pain. Kitchen, living room, bedroom (except for the bed), laundry room, the cot!! A battlefield. Whoever had done this must have been truly furious and frenzied. One

One thing was somewhat reassuring: I couldn't see any bloodstains anywhere… So where were Elisabeth and Johannes? Ah yes, the nearest neighbours… The closest neighbours lived just a stone's throw away. I knocked and a woman who wasn't that old opened the door. I explained, somewhat flustered, that I was looking for Elisabeth and little Johannes, and asked her if she already knew that Zacharias had been murdered. The pale woman stared at me with empty eyes, her forehead creased with faint wrinkles. Her voice sounded weak and slow: "I am Hannah[40] . I recognise you: you visited Elisabeth with Mary when they were both pregnant," and she paused for a moment to gather her strength… "Come in, but don't be alarmed… would you like something to eat?" The worry on her face spoke volumes. "Food isn't really necessary; I still have some bread, given to me on the way by a beggar who knew you," I said.

"Oh really? A beggar… strange." And I entered the living room. I was absolutely terrified, for my attention was immediately drawn to a man lying in a bed in the living room, motionless, with a bandage round his left eye, his arms wrapped up… "What happened? Is that your husband?"

"Three days ago…" and she slumped in her chair, "Elisabeth had only just left with her baby when a gang of savages, accompanied by a few Roman soldiers, burst into her house." Once again, she had to pause for a moment. "In a fit of rage, they smashed all the furniture to smithereens and

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[40] Hannah means *'God is gracious'*.

small. Then they came to threaten my husband and asked where they had gone. We couldn't answer because we really didn't know." Then she began to weep: "My husband Jair[41] protected me and that proved to be his undoing. They took their anger out on him. They told him that if he didn't know, then he hadn't been looking properly, and cut his left eye out of its socket and broke both his arms. When he still couldn't say where they'd gone, they cut out his tongue: 'You won't need that anymore either…'

I had to recover from the shock myself and sank down onto the chair next to her. "It was, and still is, terrible. His last words were a plea for mercy, but his tormentors knew nothing of such a thing. He lost a great deal of blood and rarely regains consciousness, and thank goodness for that. I'm utterly exhausted. Day and night I have to be by his side whenever he regains consciousness. I feel powerless and weak and… I should be strong, I thought I was strong," Hannah ended her story in a flood of sobs and tears. I didn't need to think twice; I took her in my arms and looked her in the eyes: "I'll help you. I'll fix up Elisabeth's house bit by bit later on and wait for her to return, however long it may take. But I won't leave you alone now: together we can handle this." I embraced her and let her cry her heart out on my shoulder. I could picture the beggar watching us, kindly and concerned.

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[41] Jair means *'The Lord has enlightened*'.

Elisabeth

The angel – for I was convinced it was one – sent me to Horeb, and there was no doubt that there would be snow there now. It surprised me, because the highest mountain in the area was almost impossible to climb, certainly not at my age and with a child in tow. The donkey seemed to realise I could do with some help; he was extremely patient and stood as still as a statue, letting me try ten times to secure the basket on one side and my other baby carrier on the other. It got completely crazy when he offered himself like a camel and bent his knees, so that I could climb onto his back with the child pressed against me. It did me good to forget all my troubles for a moment. Nothing shocked me anymore. I tried: “Take us to the big mountain.” He waited. “If you please… sir,” I added, and he set off. My God, I could still laugh!

Mary Magdalene

Jair was in terrible pain, and Hannah was no better off. I gave them my full attention, trusting that Elisabeth would also be looked after. I changed Jair’s dressings. A foul, sickening stench immediately filled the air, and Hannah hurried to open the door. He groaned; he was unable to cry out in pain. Nor could he use his arms to indicate where

he was in the most pain. His right eye was rolling wildly with pain. His left eye socket was one gaping, bloody wound, his mouth a complete mess. It was hopeless. Hannah didn't even dare to look. I knelt down and could barely keep myself standing. My knowledge of herbs was of little or no use: it was winter. I had to go outside for a moment to catch my breath and cried out: "Djibril, here I am now, and where are you? Surely you know how bad his condition is?" And I wept my heart out until, drained of tears, I came to my senses again. It dawned on me: Elisabeth had once shown me a hidden cupboard in the storeroom where she kept dried poppies for Zacharias's gout attacks: "We'll stow it safely high up here so little John can never find it." The cupboard was also perfectly suited for keeping the myrrh dry.

"Thank you, Djibril." And I ran as fast as I could to the storeroom and found a decent supply of poppies. I returned to Hannah and we made a tea from them, let it cool, and gave it to Jair in small sips. Not long after, he fell into a deep sleep. Hannah was reeling from three days and nights of exhaustion, and I helped her into bed and reassured her that I would keep watch…

Elisabeth

Apparently, I was riding a donkey that knew the way to the great mountain of Horeb far better than I did. I held little John close to me, and the gentle rocking of the donkey's careful steps made me close my eyes. My dearest Zacharias, if only you were walking by my side now. If only I could taste your beard once more when you kissed me, and smell the scent of lavender or lotus flower in your clothes when you returned home from the temple, and above all: if only you could see John growing up! I too am weary, my dear husband. I want to be with you… I could have kept listing all my sighs endlessly; I was already far from this world despite the warmth of the rising sun. I refused to open my eyes, lest I lose this heavenly sense of Zacharias's closeness. I felt the donkey cautiously begin the climb up the great mountain. I surrendered to it, just as John, who didn't move a muscle either. May this last forever for me… I no longer knew the concept of time. The donkey stopped so gently and slowly that it took me a moment to realise. Earth and nature seemed to stand still. John roused me from my dream world and I was forced to open my eyes: before us, a colossal rock face rose steeply towards the heavens, and below us the houses looked like tiny pebbles. We stood on a plateau and I looked up, unable to see the top of the mountain. Physically, I was powerless, but my faith was greater than the mountain: "Mountain of God, receive mother and child!" and the mountain opened a cavern

with access to a cave, and let the light stream in abundantly. An angel was waiting for us, caused a spring to gush forth, and showed us a palm tree bearing fruit. The angel watched over us, even though my strength waned day by day. For forty days I could see how the angel cared for John, and each day I had less and less to do, until I no longer even had to breathe. John was in good hands. Zacharias was waiting for me. And I… I was allowed to go.

Mary Magdalene

Hannah offered me a bed in her adjoining room, so that I could sleep in the living room with Jair that night and offer help when needed. She could hopefully find some rest for the night in the room next door. The poppy worked a treat and Jair finally seemed to be pain-free.

Mary

Joseph was constantly amazed at how people could be so helpful to us, but I couldn't explain it to him; the dear man wouldn't have believed it. In every man or woman, every child who helped us, I recognised Djibril; and if it wasn't his hand, it was his voice, his slightest gesture, his smile, his eyes… it was even amusing and completely new to me to see the many guises and ages he could take on and yet still reveal himself to me. How could I have been afraid then? How could I not be grateful? And this continued for the next three years, throughout our entire stay in Egypt, where we were transported from town to village on Langoor and boats on the Nile, and stayed in caves where we experienced the most wondrous events. Many idols were unmasked by the coming of the Son of God and fled from the little Messiah. Their idols literally fell to pieces, and many people subsequently erected memorials at the place where the Son of God slept, without realising the depth of what they were doing. It all seemed to happen by chance. But of all those miraculous events, there is only one that, to this day, offers me comfort, day after day. A seemingly simple event that only Joseph and I can recount. We arrived in Tell al-Bastah. There was us

We were told that a dangerous gang of robbers was roaming the area, but we had no choice but to travel through it. Joseph thought it best to do so at night. We kept quiet and made our way through a sunken road, but suddenly came across two sleeping thieves by the side of the road, whilst the vast majority of the gang turned out to be sleeping further up the slope. One of the two robbers, Dismas, woke up and crossed the road towards us to see what precious thing I was holding close to my chest. When he saw the child, he spoke with genuine amazement and admiration: “If God were to take on human flesh, he would look no different from this child!” The other, Gestas, had now woken up and came to stand beside him. Dismas turned quickly to him and said: “I beg you, Gestas, let these people continue on their way in peace. Do not wake the others and do not tell them about this encounter.” But Gestas did not agree. Once more, Dismas addressed him in panic: “I will give you forty drachmas and, as a pledge, I will give you my belt.” And he immediately handed his belt to Gestas, so that he might at least keep quiet at once and not wake the others. I was moved by Dismas and grateful, and promised him: “My Son will reward you richly for having spared him today. The Lord will receive you at his right hand and forgive all your sins.” At that moment, I had no idea what my words meant; I only knew that I was meant to say them. I am now certain that it was the father of my son within me who spoke. Of all the

Of all the wondrous events in Egypt, this was the least spectacular; indeed, there were no witnesses other than Joseph, John and myself. Yet the immense comfort that this event has brought ever since—and continues to bring every day—was something I could not possibly have grasped at the time, but which I understand all the more now.

In the next town, we heard the news that Herod had died and that the danger had passed. Joseph did not trust Herod's son and successor, Archelaus, in southern Judea at all. He therefore decided that it was safer to continue living in the more northerly town of Nazareth.

Those three wonderful years had flown by. For Joseph and me, they were like an initiation into the greatness of God's power and mercy towards His children. John and Jesus grew up quickly before our very eyes. Long-Ears and John became close friends, and John was proud of his little companion, who, purely through his kind words and gestures, obediently listened to all his wishes, for he did not wish to give Long-Ears orders. The sensible John, Joseph's grandson, was eight years old upon our return to Palestine and, after the journey, felt himself to be the big brother of the three-year-old Jesus. For the rest of his life, this journey would lay the foundation for John's unshakeable faith in his stepbrother's mission. There are no coincidences.

ASHKELON

Joseph

The first thing people told us when we re-entered Palestine was that fourteen thousand children had been slaughtered who had not had the chance to flee as we had. We were now even more worried about Elizabeth and her baby. Hopefully Mary Magdalene had better news. Once again, we had to be careful and adapt.

Mary

Raphia was the border we crossed as we left Egypt. At our first rest stop in Ashkelon in Judea, a young woman suddenly stormed up at me, fuming: “And where do you think my child is?” and she pulled down her tunic to reveal her severed breast. “Where were you? You are the cause of the deaths of thousands of children! Look! They cut off my breast whilst I was nursing my little one and killed him afterwards.” She would have pounced on the infant Jesus had Joseph not already taken him into his protection. Bystanders glared at us and stood behind her with hostile looks. Her inhuman pain paralysed my heart in that moment. The infant Jesus suddenly broke free from Joseph and walked towards the woman, stopping right in front of her and looking straight up into her eyes. The woman was startled at first, looked into his eyes, and was startled

even more so and knelt down before him. Jesus stretched out his little arm, touched her scar, and her wounded breast was healed. All those present let out a cry of wonder and fell to their knees one by one. I bent down to the woman and asked her to stand up; I embraced her and whispered into her ear the words spoken not by me, but by the father of Jesus: “My son is the lamb for the Feast of Sacrifice.” She replied softly in my ear: “Forgive me. It is good that your child survived Herod. Without now, there is no later[42] . Forgive me.” “What is your name?” I asked in a whisper.

“I am the mother of fourteen thousand children and have fourteen thousand names, but you are the mother of the son of all people,” she said. She smiled gratefully at Jesus once more, turned around and left us. All the other people followed her, extremely curious to hear her story about that sudden turn of events. For me, too, it was an event that initially took me by surprise and completely overwhelmed me. I had never seen such a terrible wound as that mutilated breast in my sheltered life, and then I saw my child, barely three years old, perform a first healing. The message I received for myself through her: it would hurt me too, just as it hurt her. With every miraculous healing my son would perform thereafter, where he spiritually

[42] The word ‘later’ refers to Mary’s prayer at the cross: without the present, there can never be a future.

Whether it was physical pain he took away, he taught me, step by step, to make my pain as his mother at the cross acceptable and understandable within a broader whole—indeed, within a divine context—so that I could remain steadfast in my belief in his mission for humanity. The pain I would feel would be merely growing pains, allowing me to blossom into my universal and eternal love for every human being in the present, past and future. This event in Ashkelon was the beginning of my ultimate training at the very highest level, as I only realised much later beneath the cross. From then on, this became the guiding principle in my life, which I have also voluntarily chosen to trust in since that event. I grew up in an instant; I was twenty years old. Since then, I have never again been attacked or spoken to by a single affected mother, which leads me to conclude that my little son at that time healed the scars and pain of each of the fourteen thousand mothers. I stood there with Jesus by my hand, whilst a little further on, Joseph, at his blessed age, stood with John by his hand. We were indeed one family, yet there was a difference between the two groups. “My son is the lamb for the Feast of Sacrifice.” Even I did not understand then what this meant in concrete terms, and though I tried to imagine it, I was still too young to dare think of the worst things. Figuring this out was a path on which Joseph, the good and caring man, could never assist me. We moved on. Nazareth awaited us. I longed

for an oasis of peace. Hopefully I would find Mary Magdalene there.

Joseph

The incident in Ashkelon marked a turning point for our family.

The little Jesus, aged three, revealed his true origins for the first time. Only his mother could make sense of it, but for me and my eight-year-old grandson Johannes, it was an incomprehensible miracle, for which we could muster nothing but the deepest reverence and gratitude. I felt so small and often thought: what have I done to deserve being allowed to witness all this?

A dove alighted right at my feet and looked at me.

Mary Magdalene

Something I had never known before: waiting upon waiting. After all, I had my hands more than full at the start. Caring for Jair was a round-the-clock concern. Hannah and I became a good team and did our very best, but to no avail. Solid food was completely out of the question and liquid food wasn't strong enough for such a grown man. Our supply of poppy seeds was dwindling visibly and caused us great concern because we could still hear him crying out in agony every time we gave him porridge or water to drink. Jair himself had lost all zest for life, and you could read the plea in his one remaining eye: 'Let me go!' Hannah asked him literally, asking if he would blink his eye if this was truly what he wanted. He didn't have to think about it and blinked immediately, followed by a tear of relief, or so it seemed to us. Hannah and I left him alone for a moment and went outside to discuss it. We held each other and sobbed quietly so he couldn't hear. I whispered that I would go and fetch all the poppy seeds to put him into a deep sleep, and then we would see. Hannah nodded, pulled herself together and went back inside. I could still hear her explaining to Jair what we could do and whether that was right for him. I didn't wait for confirmation and set off at a slow pace to fetch the last supply of poppy

to collect it from Elizabeth's house. The sun was already hiding behind the crown of the fig tree, eager to disappear over the horizon as quickly as possible. I stayed in the house for a while, sitting on the only chair that wasn't broken, the bag of poppy seeds in my hand. I looked around and tried to speak to Zacharias: "Help us, my dear father." A little later: "Help us, little Saviour." I stood up. I prepared the poppy in Jair's house, whilst Hannah cleared Jair's mouth one last time so he could drink the poppy. She held on as strongly as their love for one another. I handed the poppy to Hannah, and Jair looked at me with a grateful eye and winked. I tried to wink back, but I could barely manage it. Jair did his very best to drink it all, after which Hannah kissed him on the lips. She looked at me invitingly and I kissed him on the forehead. "Bon voyage, Jair," I murmured. I think Jair then deliberately closed his one eye so as not to have to see our grief and to grant us the freedom to mourn without us regretting it afterwards, but the most beautiful farewell gift he could give us was a smile from long ago. It offered us immeasurable comfort, which kept us going for many days afterwards: he was smiling when he died! We buried him in the garden. We didn't have much time to grieve, for winter was just around the corner and we hadn't been able to make many preparations. We were once again swallowed up by daily worries about food and

warmth. In that single year, I had grown five years older, and from then on, the older Hannah's hair turned grey. Whereas I used to be constantly on the move, wherever the wind might blow, I now lived on an island. A small island where I felt compelled to wait for Elizabeth and John. It was perhaps the most difficult task of my life, but thinking of Mary's story about her seven-year stay as a child in the Holy of Holies helped me to persevere. 'Djibril, where are you?' I often thought, and not infrequently Hannah would then come knocking. She helped me clear up the mess and repair the table and chairs, or we worked together in the garden tending vegetables and herbs, or gathered and chopped wood for the cooking fire or the hearth in the two cottages, and so I taught myself to squeeze into a schedule for every day, for every hour, and to surrender to what was to come, and whatever or whenever it might be: I would accept it.

And then it suddenly snowed and everything fell silent.

The waiting began. It would be all right; I'd already been through the worst, hadn't I?

The snow still lay untouched, so I decided to pay Hannah a visit after all, so she wouldn't have to brave the cold. I couldn't see any smoke coming from her chimney, which surprised me a little; I planned to bring mulled wine for both of us and wrapped up warm. The snow was already quite deep, and with every step I took, it sank in

I rushed over and knocked. She was apparently still asleep, so I pushed the door open: “Hannah!!!” I screamed in shock. She was hanging there, my dear God! Her chair had been kicked out from under her. I flew towards her and tried to lift her up, but it was far, far too late. I buried my face in her stomach and wept my heart out: “My dear Hannah, give my regards to Jair, Hannah! Hannah! I’m going to miss you so much, my dear wife. I won’t be able to manage without you… How am I supposed to do that?” Through my tears, I suddenly noticed a suicide note on the table. I gently let her go, found a knife and cut her free from the rope. I laid her emaciated body on her bed. She looked so peaceful… The wrinkles were gone and she even seemed to have a smile on her lips. It calmed me and I began to read the letter. I have read it a thousand times; I still know it by heart.

“Dear Mary Magdalene,

I’m sorry I kept this from you: as soon as the first snow fell, I was going to join Jair. I waited so long: I wanted to be sure you would survive this winter, because surviving at this altitude is a completely different matter from spending the winter in lovely Magdala on the Sea of Galilee. Apparently, you couldn’t have foreseen that the supply of wood and food we had saved up for both of us and divided between us would have been absolutely insufficient for two people. Partly for that reason, but even more so out of gratitude for what you did for Jair and because you managed to find the poppy, that is why, my dearest

friend I have ever had, I am now leaving with joy to be with my Jair. May your God bless you,

Yours, Hannah"

I felt a chill run through me and lay down beside her on the bed. I pulled all the blankets we had over both of us, and my tears turned into words of sorrow and gratitude. And once again I said aloud, somewhat reproachfully: "Well, Djibril, where are you now? I cannot feel you and I am freezing with pain; you brought me here, do not leave me now, I beg you, I cannot cope alone; speak to me: speak or put words in my mind that comfort me, for the silence is driving me mad." And then my tears took over again. So I kept falling from doubt to hope to self-reproach to regret to joy to self-pity to faith to disbelief to pain, and with pain it suddenly stopped. And yes, it was the pain that managed to pull me back together. What was I moping about, when I compared myself to the pain Hannah had to live with? I thanked Hannah without tears: "When the frost is over, I will bury you with your Jair. In the meantime, I will visit every day and guard your house." I checked her larder and took whatever might spoil. I closed the door and battled a snowstorm that demanded all my attention and strength, to rush into my cold little house and quickly take action and stoke the fire again.

Night fell, and I promised Hannah and myself that I wouldn't cry.

The days that followed were bleak; the nights brought relief. I had already started talking to myself out loud. How were Mary and Jesus faring? Where were they? Still in Egypt? My thoughts grew ever darker; what was the point anymore? I was almost angry with Gabriel, no: I was angry: "You're a smooth talker. You're sitting up there somewhere, safe and sound. You've never been human and don't know what we have to go through in this life. Who's going to come and save me now? When I need you, I can't see you." Exhausted from wrestling with myself, I sank down in front of my bed, flat on the floor, and I would have buried myself right there if I could. Stretched out at length, like a corpse. The ceiling stared down at me. I was overwhelmed by self-pity and at the same time I hated myself for such weakness. It was this hatred and loathing for my self-pity that literally made me turn round, and I suddenly saw a suitcase under the bed. I reached for it. It turned out to be two large, shallow suitcases. I was wildly curious and opened the suitcases one by one on the kitchen table. The first suitcase was filled with all of Elisabeth's sewing kit—needles and threads—and with fine fabrics in various shades of purple. The purple didn't surprise me, because when I said goodbye to Elisabeth, she whispered enigmatically in my ear: "Fear not the purple." Once again, I couldn't make sense of it, but there was no doubt it must be important, and it piqued my curiosity. The second chest made my

I was speechless: the case was filled with eight papyrus scrolls, four of which were in Greek; although I wasn't entirely fluent in Greek at the time, fortunately the other four scrolls turned out to contain a Greek-to-Hebrew dictionary and grammar book, all apparently in Zacharias's handwriting. I thought back to Euphrosyne's lessons of long ago.

For Zacharias, my friend for life, in gratitude for my healing.

'To Zacharias, my friend for life, in gratitude for my healing.'

The wonderful story of 'the King's Child'.

'The wonderful story of "The King's Child".' Please forgive my poor knowledge of the Greek language. 'Please forgive my poor knowledge of Greek.'

My God! Suddenly the sun shone in my heart! I cried out: "Forgive me, Djibril! Thank you, Zacharias and Elizabeth, for this spiritual nourishment!" I was no longer alone… winter reigned outside, but in my heart spring was already announcing itself. And that spring was coloured purple: I would trust my feelings blindly. I immediately felt welcomed into a divine cocoon. Intuition would guide my creative inspiration, and I wanted to pass this on to Hannah first as she embarked on her new life. I began

to measure the purple fabric for her shroud straight away and see how I would go about it…

Mary

With heavy hearts, we approached Nazareth. It was no surprise that the massacre of the innocents had struck hard in these parts too, and would the little Jesus still find children his own age to play with here? We were certainly not received with hostility by the neighbours; on the contrary: it seemed to be a relief to them that other pregnant women had also escaped thanks to our flight to Egypt, as it now turned out. Herod's soldiers had clearly been instructed that it was Jesus they were to kill, and once they had reliable witnesses confirming that we were fleeing abroad, they immediately shifted their attention to the borders and left Nazareth in peace. Joseph's sons had looked after the house well for three years and were delighted to see the grown-up John and the little Jesus, about whom there had been so much fuss. What worried me greatly was the sight of Joseph: he was utterly exhausted, and even the joyful reunion with all his children could not erase the traces of this arduous journey. There was no doubt about it, God could never have given me a better husband: reliable, caring, self-effacing, gentle, faithful, honest, dutiful and above all humble. I thought often back to his

the shepherd's crook from which the flower had sprung, for the flower was exactly the same colour as the fabric that was assigned to me shortly afterwards for the curtain: purple. We live in a true sense of freedom even though so many events are guided, and there is only one explanation for this: there is something far greater than us that loves us just as much as we love our child and seeks to guide our child in love towards their happiness, isn't that right, Djibril?

There was one thing I found sad: Mary Magdalene had not been seen by anyone for all those years. Suddenly, a woman I didn't know at all called out to me from afar and out of nowhere: "It will be alright, Mary!"

I wasn't worried anymore.

Mary Magdalene

Hannah's shroud was finally ready. It was still freezing at night, so we couldn't bury her yet. I tidied away all the fabrics and sewing supplies. The days were short, and I had hardly any candles, nor enough oil to keep them burning. Every day I survived, I thanked Hannah, for the two of us together would never have had enough food to see us through this harsh winter. There were sometimes beggars passing by, and I couldn't bring myself to send them out into the snow without a piece of bread. One evening, a young woman knocked on the door with a baby at her breast, shivering with cold. I let her in and immediately stoked the fire, made some hot tea, gave

I gave her all my hot food from that day, and gradually she caught her breath and began to tell me her life story. You might think she was a burden, but nothing could be further from the truth. I hadn't been able to speak to anyone for months, and she gave me perhaps more than I gave her. I even felt guilty because I was feeling better now, as there were clearly people who had it much harder than I did: abandoned as a foundling, abused, raped, pregnant, with a little daughter, not enough to eat, cast out and wandering hopelessly… Her name was Rebecca, and then I asked for her little daughter's name. She replied shyly: "I don't dare give her a name; I'll never be able to keep her alive. I'd love to, but I don't dare love her. A name, just to be reminded of her over and over again? I couldn't bear that." Tears rolled down her cheeks. My heart melted for this child with a child. "Well, Rebecca, we're going to help each other. You're tired; you'll stay here by the fire tonight, your little girl will stay close to you, and I promise you one thing: as long as it's winter, you'll live here, and tomorrow you'll give your little one a name."

The chest containing Zacharias' papyrus scrolls, which I'd already set aside that afternoon, was immediately shoved back under the bed for later. I gave Rebecca a basin of water and a towel to dry herself off, whilst I held the tiny baby in my arms. Adorable blue eyes looked up at me. I was lost. I had never looked after children, not even when I was a girl myself. I tended to keep my distance and had been preoccupied with

‘thinking’, trying to fathom what life might mean. And now I held a baby in my arms who made me wonder whether I was on the right path. I whispered very softly into her tiny ear: “All I can do is love you; that is all I have and all I can do.” Perhaps she cooed because her ear was tickling, or perhaps because she understood me, but in any case it made me happy, and Rebecca too looked at us both with tenderness. I let Rebecca sleep in my bed in the warm living room and went to sleep in the guest bed myself. I could hardly sleep a wink that night and spoke to Djibril: “Who is helping whom now, Djibril? I feel happy; I can’t call it anything else. Help me, my dear friend, for tomorrow I am going with Rebecca to the house of Jair and Hannah, and now that the end of winter is in sight, I could do with Rebecca’s help to dress Hannah in the purple shroud. You know, Djibril, what I am planning, but correct me if I am wrong.” And so I fell asleep, reassured. That night I dreamt that I met Mary and saw her playing with the baby Jesus, but suddenly Jesus turned round, looked at me and nodded, and he immediately turned back to his mother, whereupon Mary also nodded affirmatively at me. I woke up with a start, but soon fell asleep again, not without first murmuring, “Thank you, Djibril.”

Rebecca

The cold of winter was nothing compared to the cold that had been in my body and mind for years. I learned only to snap, to shout, to lash out and to rage. Even at my newborn baby. I've stopped thinking about it now, for fear that I might start all over again. He was right, after all, that stranger on the road who showed me the way to this house.

Mary Magdalene

That morning, the sun shone through the cracks in the window and I saw snowflakes glistening outside like the purest diamonds. It was cold inside too, and I hurried into the living room, where Rebecca was still asleep. I stoked the fire again and went about making tea. As I looked at the young woman and the child, my thoughts turned to John and Elizabeth, as if they were both lying in that bed, united, entwined, yes, perhaps fused together. I could not, and still cannot, imagine such a thing. Just as in my childhood, I was thinking 'hard' again, so hard that it seemed as though it could be heard and was even making a noise, for Rebecca and the child suddenly woke with a start. "Did I wake you up?" "No, not at all, it's been ages since I… since we've slept so well," she said, and she soothed the little girl, tucked her in properly and came over to me. She knelt down in front of me: "I never learnt the words in the house I left in such a hurry, but I learnt them yesterday

I learnt this from an old man when I was on the run. He had fallen on the ice and I helped him to his feet, and he replied, ‘Thank you.’ That kind man looked at me and told me to come to this house. And now I say to you: ‘Thank you.’ They are strange words, for they give me back more than I give with them; yes, that is how it feels now. It is the first time I have spoken them. If you know any better words than ‘thank you’, please teach them to me.”

I cupped her head in both hands and whispered: “I love you.” And my tears caused her tears to well up from her deep, dry well. “Teach me everything,” she sobbed, and her little one woke up immediately.

“We’re going to Hannah and Jair’s later, our closest neighbours.” “Hannah? … Hannah?” she repeated. She picked up her baby, surprised by what she felt, and spoke resolutely: “Come, dear Hannah, we’re going to Hannah’s together later; there’s no name more beautiful than that, and that’s the one you’ll have!” She looked at me as she said this, and once again I couldn’t hold back the tears: “What a tearful morning this is!” Rebecca and I burst out laughing, and little Hannah seemed to find it amusing too.

Whilst breastfeeding, I recounted the story of Hannah and Jair in broad strokes; I might one day share the most gruesome details if it were to prove important, and I concluded with the purple shroud I had made for Hannah.

“May I see it?” Of course I showed it to her. Rebecca’s hands caressed the fabric and she asked: “Do you

any of this fabric left over?" I could guess her thoughts: "Enough for a little girl?" She smiled, nodded and suddenly furrowed her brow as she looked at me intently: "Is this what normal life is like everywhere?" She was referring to the harsh life she had lived up to that point. "Yes, this should be normal life for everyone: love, or at least an attempt at love." She nodded in understanding: "Teach me everything and set me straight, for I know only revenge, anger, lies, and hurting others." I tried to reassure her: "Right now you're still a wounded butterfly, but one day even the highest heights won't hold you back. You've already made a perfect start, dear Rebecca; it'll be alright. I, too, still have to learn something new every day."

"That's your first lie of the day!" she laughed, and I pointed an 'angry' finger at her as we both burst out laughing. Ah, humour can do such wonders and heal so much.

Later, I would tell her who that old man on the ice had been, the one who taught her to say 'thank you'. But all in good time.

Rebecca

That first morning at Mary Magdalene's was like a rebirth, like a completely fresh start. You could almost say I was born after Hannah. Hannah and I often laughed about that many years later: "Mum

Mum, you have to ask my permission to go anywhere, not me – I'm older than you!"

At the same time, that first morning was also a second encounter with death. Feeling rather uneasy, I wrapped the sleeping little Hannah up warmly and followed Mary Magdalene through the snow to the house of Jair and Hannah. I first laid Hannah down to sleep in the guest bed whilst Mary Magdalene gently pulled the blanket away from Hannah's body. It was difficult to suppress the memory of the first corpse I had ever seen – my stepmother, murdered and horribly mutilated by my stepfather – but Mary Magdalene's kind, respectful gestures helped me to empathise with the beauty and love that Hannah had meant to her. Mary Magdalene immediately began to dress Hannah in the purple shroud whilst I was able to lift Hannah. Hannah had apparently given everything to her Jair: her day, her night, her food, strength, sleep, but all this was the least of it: what she apparently gave completely was her selfless care and love for her husband, just as Mary Magdalene now honoured her with tears in her eyes. The purple robe suited her, Mary Magdalene said: "Purple helps you connect with your intuition, and Hannah lived with her intuition fully focused on love." I picked up my little Hannah and gently pressed her forehead against the forehead of the deceased Hannah. I wanted and hoped that she too might become such a Hannah. When the sun and the earth welcomed Hannah

we called her, we buried her in her garden next to Jair under the fig tree. It was right.

Mary Magdalene

Rebecca, the illiterate, the outcast, the abused; they could have taken everything from her, except her sincere feelings and her trust in those feelings. It was now clear who I had before me, and I could be at ease about what I was about to propose to her. I looked into Rebecca's eyes: "Later, when the time is right, I will make a little purple dress for little Hannah, and there is something else: as soon as spring awakens, this house will become your home. Jair and Hannah had no children and no family left. I will help you and teach Hannah, but I'm telling you now that I will leave you one day, though not before you're ready." Rebecca was completely overwhelmed and immediately went with Hannah to the two graves, fell to her knees and thanked Jair and Hannah for their trust. What she didn't see was the old man on the ice behind her, who gently placed his hand on her shoulder. Then he turned back and looked at me briefly before disappearing just as he had come: out of nowhere. I blew him a kiss, whilst Rebecca turned round and looked at me in wonder. Beaming with happiness, she came towards me, threw her arms round me and whispered softly: "I love you." Five seconds later, not even that, she whispered: "Did I say it right?" I

whispered back to her: “It comes from your heart, my dear, not from your head, so it’s all right.” And I continued softly: “Just now, the old man from the ice, do you remember, stood behind you and gently placed his hand on your shoulder. He is a messenger of God and his name is Djibril.” Rebecca looked at me again and pleaded, as it were: “Teach me, teach me everything.” She picked Hannah up again and, with one last hug between the three of us, we went to my little house.

The trunk with the papyrus scrolls would have to wait once more. Motherhood and grandmotherhood came first.

Mary

The following years in Nazareth passed quietly. The only thing I really missed was Mary Magdalene; I had not the faintest idea whether she was well. Something told me that no news was good news. I would have loved to have travelled to Ein Karem, but that was no longer feasible given Joseph's frail health, and he deserved all my help and love. The journey to Egypt had drained his last reserves of strength. And the fact that Mary Magdalene could not visit us must surely have had a good reason, one I need not doubt. On the other hand, I had my hands more than full with little Jesus and his marvellous[43] gifts. It began on a Sabbath. Our little Jesus, now six years old, was making little birds out of clay together with his inseparable stepbrother John, but that was without counting on Joseph: he rightly pointed out to them that it was the Sabbath that day and that such a thing was not to be done on a Sabbath. Both John and Jesus looked dejectedly at their creations, but Jesus knew what to do, as if to say: "They are real little birds, Papa!" He clapped his hands and the little birds flew away chirping, to John's loud cheers. Joseph looked at the little Jesus in amazement

[43] These events were described in the apocryphal writings about the young Jesus.

who thought it was perfectly normal, got up and went back to his room. Johannes glared at his grandfather for spoiling the game and he too went to their shared little room. Joseph, like me, could laugh about it afterwards, yet we still asked ourselves: what else lies in store for us? ‘It is in God’s hands’ was the only conclusion we could both draw. It was indeed only the beginning. Our son’s early years were not always easy. Joseph, in his old age, found it increasingly difficult to understand. Jesus himself sometimes didn’t know what to do with his strange powers. The child was still too young to understand the consequences of his actions and would sometimes play with his power. Killing a playmate only to raise him from the dead again. When children laughed at Joseph because of his advanced age as the father of Jesus, he would temporarily blind them. At first, this caused a great deal of unrest among the neighbours, and many children were kept well away from him. At the age of six, Jesus was astute enough to realise this, and gradually he began to use his power for good: healing fatal viper bites, even raising our neighbour’s son Zeno from the dead after he fell from the roof… in short, he became increasingly known for his goodness, and sometimes people came from far and wide to see this marvellous little healer. Even Joseph, insofar as he still did any work in his workshop, was amazed and recounted with astonished eyes how Jesus had quickly lengthened a beam that he had cut too short, so that he could use it again

to begin with. Now that he was six years old, he had to start attending lessons in the Torah and Jewish law here in Nazareth at one of Rabbi Joshua ben Gamala's schools. Problems soon arose. His first teacher, Zacchaeus, began by teaching him the alphabet, and things went wrong right from the meaning of the very first letter, alpha. Jesus began to argue with him, and poor Zacchaeus apparently could not answer a single one of Jesus' questions. Zacchaeus begged Joseph to take him home. A new teacher then taught Jesus the alphabet in a forceful, authoritarian manner, and Jesus cursed him. The poor man fell to the ground and was carried home. A third teacher took a more sensible approach, allowing Jesus to teach himself and showing him respect. My son greatly appreciated this; he realised he had been a little too harsh on his previous teacher and healed him. The people of Nazareth were no longer shocked by anything and gradually began to feel safer with him rather than unsafe. All the more so because, at one point, a builder fell from the roof and broke his neck. Jesus was urgently asked to come and 'take a look' in the hope that he might be able to do more. From the very beginning, it was of the utmost importance that people showed faith and trust in his abilities as a prerequisite for bringing people back to life. Those who were present could not stop talking about it for months, and the rumours reached as far as the temple in Jerusalem.

Mary Magdalene

Hannah and Rebecca were doing well and were now settled in their own little nest, so I finally had some time to deal with something that had long been a thorn in my side: it was time for me, as the stepmother of Zacharias' papyrus scrolls, to become a mother to them. They were screaming loudly for attention and I could no longer bear to listen to their wailing. I pulled them out from under the bed and kissed each scroll one by one, and lo and behold, they fell silent. But then there was a sudden bang on the door: Rebecca with Hannah. I opened the door and Rebecca burst in: "She can say your name… Look, Hannah, who's that?" Hannah looked a bit shy at her mother's overwhelming enthusiasm: she looked at me, thought deeply for a moment, because such a long name does require concentration, and yes! "Ma… Ma." Rebecca didn't want to make it too hard for me to tell whether that was it or just the start: "Well done, Hannah: that's Ma Ma! Hannah and Ma Ma!" I was over the moon and picked Hannah up: "You get a big kiss from Ma Ma." And she cooed with delight and wouldn't stop saying Ma Ma, Ma Ma, Ma Ma. I danced with her around the table.

Rebecca noticed the papyrus scrolls on the table and looked at them with great curiosity, but didn't dare touch them. "Unroll them carefully, Rebecca," I said, and she feasted her eyes on the beautiful script, then exclaimed: "If only I could read and write this… I can't read or write a single language."

“Do you really want to? I can teach you. Greek is a beautiful language; I know the basics…” She nodded vigorously: “Oh yes, I’d love to.” “Before you can read and write, you need to know the basic rules, and I’ll teach them to you; only then will we be able to fully understand this text.”

The four papyrus scrolls containing the story of *The King’s Child* weren’t having any of it: “There she goes again… and here we are, back under the bed for another five years!” After Rebecca and Hannah had left, I offered the scrolls my sincere apologies and began to give each one my full attention. It wasn’t half an hour before there was nothing more important on earth than these writings. Zacharias had numbered them all; it seemed as though they were part of a single book. A single manuscript, written entirely in Greek, and how glad I was that I had already received an introduction to the alphabet, grammar and linguistic rules from Euphrosine in Magdala. The first papyrus scroll contained a short handwritten text by Zacharias in Aramaic[44] .

“Dear finder,

Reading this text demands a great deal of effort on the part of the reader: Greek is not easy for us Jews. In the last scrolls, I have highlighted the most important lines of the

[44] Aramaic was the common spoken language of the Jews; Hebrew was rather elitist and reserved for educated people, whilst Greek was more the universal language for the entire Mediterranean region.

He had written down the grammar and also included the vocabulary with all the conjugations. Anyone wishing to unearth a treasure must make great sacrifices, and the treasure I was allowed to read—given to me by a noble visitor of presumably high birth in the Temple at Jerusalem—was more than worth it. When I asked him what it was about, he replied: 'It is the story of the King's Child', and I immediately had the feeling that he himself was a king, but he denied it. Before he left me, he added: 'For he is yet to come.' And he departed. After weeks of toil until I had mastered Greek and understood it to some extent, I thought back on this, and who knows, perhaps he was the child from the story, or was he an angel? I wish the reader courage, perseverance and determination, for the prospect of imminent salvation for humanity seems great.

Yours, Zacharias."

Gratefully, I pressed my lips to his name and it grew completely still in my heart, as if I were beholding the immense hollow void that I now had to fill. Four papyrus scrolls of unknown origin lay silent and subdued, for they knew the secret and were apparently glad that there were four of them so as not to have to bear the message alone. The other papyrus scrolls were written by Zacharias, with Greek grammar, conjugations and words translated into Hebrew. I cried out,

my hands in my hair: “Help! Help me, Djibril, I don’t know enough Greek!” One scroll fell off the table; I picked it up, and this scroll on grammar reminded me exactly of my lessons of yore in Magdala. I set to work. No: I was already at it!

Mary

When Jesus was nearly thirteen years old, he was allowed to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem for the first time, together with Joseph, myself and many other Nazarenes, to celebrate the most important festival commemorating the Exodus from Egypt, the Passover. Thirteen was the age at which every child was required to take part in the most important festivals. Joseph insisted that I go with them every year, even though most women were not allowed to accompany their husbands. Joseph felt it was extremely important not to leave me alone, as I had once been accused of adultery whilst he was away. He even thought it best not to let me enter the temple alone. The stories about Jesus had already preceded us and we would surely be questioned about them, so it was better for us to stand together as a father and a mother to cause less confusion. Jerusalem and Joseph! Would he make it? However much he dreaded the great effort, he insisted on going. The Passover festival lasted three days; the first two days were celebrated without interruption, with continuous services, during which several rabbis took turns so that the entire congregation could be accommodated in a continuous

coming and going. The last day was only a half-holy day; people were allowed to go home half a day early if they wished. At one point, we had lost sight of Jesus. We searched and searched until one of our fellow pilgrims from Nazareth pointed out to us that, to everyone's surprise, Jesus was speaking right at the back of the temple, surrounded by scribes, elders and scholars. We joined the crowd and didn't really dare to go inside, but hearing him in the hushed hall was enough. At one point, someone asked him: "Which books have you read?" Our son began to list all the books he had ever read, starting with the vast body of laws, regulations and statutes, and then he spoke of the mysteries in the books of the prophets, which he explored in greater depth with such natural explanation and clarity that no human mind could fathom it. Some of the scribes tried to pretend they understood, and Jesus listened respectfully to their answers. He was fair enough to ask them questions in return, knowing full well they knew the answers, to reassure them that he, too, did not know everything. In any case, the Pharisees were not only astonished but equally troubled, wondering in despair how such a simple lad could deliver such a sublime lecture from memory on the most difficult books ever written. Joseph and I quickly withdrew and blended back into the crowd. Not long after, we came across a group of Nazarene women who me

They insisted that I go with them to a special service for women. They immediately reassured Joseph, explaining that I would then go to the women's camp with them that evening, whilst Joseph would go to the men's camp, before we would all leave for Nazareth the following morning. Early the next morning, I set off for home with the first group of women. Joseph did the same, assuming that I had Jesus with me. The following evening, we managed to find each other again in the crowd and assumed that one of us had Jesus with them. Not so! We were bewildered and very worried; we both felt responsible for the misunderstanding and, without getting a wink of sleep, we turned back towards Jerusalem at the first light of dawn. I let Joseph stay on the donkey, as this was too much for a man of his age. We walked as fast as we could, but were greatly hindered by the immense sea of people moving in the opposite direction. It was late in the evening by the time we arrived in Jerusalem, and I left Joseph behind to make my way to the place where we had last seen Jesus, right at the back of the temple. The lights were still on, and people were still waiting outside, hoping to catch just a glimpse of what was happening inside… Like a lioness, I fought my way through the entrance and saw my son still in the same spot, arguing with the elders. For three days, as it turned out. I went up to him: "Son, why did you do this to us? We were worried…" And then he replied,

even though he was still just a child: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” The hall suddenly fell silent, and not a single scribe or Pharisee dared to stir, for they felt utterly small in the presence of this child, barely thirteen years old, whose strength and knowledge they had failed to fathom in the slightest after three days of debate. Joseph and I felt just as small as everyone else present, for my son had taught me an important lesson: I had given him my flesh as a handmaid, but he was in truth God, the Son of his Father in heaven. The return journey was quiet and subdued, and Jesus behaved just as he had before, as the thirteen-year-old who submitted to us and did everything we asked of him.

Mary Magdalene

Hannah and Rebecca quickly felt at home in their little house, which gave me time to continue studying Greek from Zacharias's instruction manuals. Rebecca was already able to do the first simple exercises, and my basic knowledge enabled me to make rapid progress. After three months, I was already able to decipher the first papyrus scroll.

The King's Child – Het Kind van de Koning

Prologue: 'Man in Eden was, from the very beginning, the king of his conscience and his love, and thus the tree of good and evil was indispensable in order to speak of love in freedom.

'Foreword: the man in Eden was, from the very beginning, the king of his conscience and his love, and thus the tree of good and evil was indispensable for speaking of a love in freedom.'
God needed only one proof of this, and that was not to eat of the apple from the tree of good and evil; otherwise, love would lose its freedom and Adam and Eve would lose their royal status. Perfect love without compulsion—that was what God intended for his creation.

In the story of the King's Child, there once lived a king of love who wanted more, who felt it was absolutely essential to grow endlessly, and for whom the perfect boundaries of his love no longer felt perfect; so he summoned his Wizard to resolve this for him. The Wizard felt very important and concocted the sweetest potion from apples, which gave all the subjects a feeling of extreme bliss and meant they no longer distinguished whether the king was the father or his very young son. Thus, his child temporarily took the father's place on the condition that the child himself would never drink the apple potion. No sooner said than done: the prince ascended the throne and the king-father set out in search of the greatest wisdom, and no one would notice a thing. The king left his child within the walls to his own devices. The Wizard would take care of everything. It wouldn't take long at all, he thought. He would return once he had found 'it'. God watched with pity as his kingdom, under the Wizard's leadership, turned into one great lie, whilst the king-father thought he had nothing to lose. He set off with determination and was insatiable; he gained great wisdom, was held in higher esteem outside his walls than he had been within them, and was worshipped because he had the right answer to every question. Everywhere he was praised and they asked for a statue of him; time and again he was invited to the surrounding kingdoms to impart his fabulous knowledge. And humble as he was,

You couldn't deny that he had once been king. And that was true; he no longer deserved to be called king, unless he were to be proclaimed king of pride. He no longer even remembered his son, the child king. Many years passed in this way."

I set the papyrus scroll aside for a moment.

Rebecca and I fell completely silent, and this was only the beginning.

Maria

My son did everything without the slightest resistance until he was thirteen. Everything? No, there was one thing he refused to do. On the day he turned thirteen, he refused to take part in the ritual in which the tefillin[45]for the left arm and forehead were bestowed by the rabbi in Nazareth upon all thirteen-year-olds as a sign of coming of age. "Why, my dear son?" was, of course, my question. "My Father does not like outward appearances," was his reply. It was the second time I had heard him speak of his Father himself. It delighted me greatly because it came from him

[45] A tefillin was a small black box containing a piece of text from the Torah that had to be worn during morning and evening prayers: one box around the left arm and one on the forehead. These boxes were given at the transition from child to young man. Tefillin is the plural of tefillin.

came, for neither Joseph nor I had told him about his heavenly Father, and it showed just how deeply connected he was to his real Father. Joseph and I were all the more reassured that, in some way, he could truly speak with his Father and was being guided. We were no longer on our own, even though I am ashamed to say this now as if I did not appreciate Djibril's help. Forgive me, Jibril, once again. But I had the feeling that his Father would now take over completely from me, for which I could only be grateful to him. I was a handmaid of the Lord and I would now, more than ever, remain so with joy and gratitude.

Mary Magdalene

I was very excited to work ever faster on the translation of the story. Rebecca followed my translation closely and every day she came by with her little rascal to welcome and take in every new sentence… Rebecca's self-confidence and self-respect grew with every papyrus scroll.

Πέρασαν πολλά χρόνια.

'Many years passed.'

Simplicity and kindness made King Prince a much-loved monarch.

'Simplicity and kindness made King Prince a much-loved monarch.'

“With a gentle gaze, he bore the heavy burden of the kingdom on his frail shoulders. Everyone did everything they could to please King Prince. Indeed, special delicacies were even imported from the farthest lands for His Majesty. The older King Prince grew, the more questions he asked himself about his father, the King. Time and again, the courtiers replied: ‘But, Sire, there is no father of His Majesty known in the kingdom. There is only one King!’ and they smiled affably amongst themselves. The lonely prince was consumed by grief and begged the cunning Wizard for advice. The Wizard prescribed him a ‘sleeping potion’. The broken prince soon fell into a state of apparent death; his body slept, but his spirit did not die and wandered desperately in search of his father, first within and then far beyond the walls. One day, Father King was once again on his way to a kingdom, an extremely important and widely renowned kingdom. The journey was long, but that did not bother him. He saw the magnificent castle looming in the distance and quickened his pace. Never had he seen such a fabulous fortress, yet nowhere did he see people coming or going. He went on, no, he walked on in astonishment and suddenly saw, quite a distance away, a child sitting in the middle of the sandy path. He asked the child what was going on, but the child did not answer; on the contrary, the child asked him a single question: ‘King, what are you doing here so far from your kingdom?’ The child continued to play in the sand and, with a single sweep of his hand, levelled the sandcastle to the ground

Indeed. The King looked up and the castle seemed to have vanished into thin air. The King wanted to say something more to the child, but the child too had now disappeared. The King of Self-Love realised what he had lost: a King without love for a child and his subjects is no king. At last he found what he had been searching for, and he turned back.

And so it came to pass that one day the King arrived once more at the borders of his forgotten kingdom. He was no longer young and was almost unrecognisable. The old King could scarcely remember.

Remember?

Yes, to remember what he had left behind as King. After a long journey, he reached the gatekeeper and called out in a powerful voice: 'Gatekeeper, open the gate! Here is your King!'

The gatekeeper laughed at the old man for this tasteless joke, and the more the old man insisted, the angrier the gatekeeper became, until he finally lost his patience and took the old King prisoner: yes, this old man was mad and posed a danger to King Prince."

Rebecca wept as I read this second papyrus scroll aloud. When I asked her why, she simply shook her head: "I don't know why." Hannah came to

to comfort her and give her kisses. Rebecca remembered: "I, too, have lived without love for so long."

"Don't we all do this to some extent, Rebecca, before we really realise just how important love is?"

"You're right," she replied, smiling and speaking a little Greek.

"Indeed: you're right," I translated back to her, and we held each other close.

Joseph

I was well past 80 and now that Jesus was growing older, I could feel in every fibre of my being that my life would quietly fade away. I decided to visit the Temple in Jerusalem one last time to ask Michael, archangel and leader of the angels, to stand by me as I died. I was afraid of dying. Before the purple and scarlet curtain that Mary had woven as a young woman, I wanted to ask forgiveness one last time for all the shortcomings in my life. When I returned home, I fell ill and felt all my vitality slowly ebbing away. Fear overwhelmed me. I couldn't get a grip on it. It was a terrible feeling. Mary did not leave my side for a moment and hummed the hymns that brought me peace.

Maria

On his deathbed, Joseph asked me to call for Jesus, and he began to confess the sins of his life to him, emphasising his mistrust and anger towards me when he initially refused to believe my word regarding my pregnancy. He thanked Jesus for the respect he had always shown him and for the much-needed help in his carpentry workshop. Jesus replied briefly: “Blessed are you, my father Joseph. With the plane of righteousness and the chisel of honesty, you have carved out a place for yourself beside my Father in heaven.” And for the very first time I saw my son wipe away a tear, moved to tears, and Joseph had noticed this too: “Blessed are you, my beloved son; the fear of death tormented me, but now that I hear your voice, all fear falls away and I can die in peace… accept the soul and the tears of this dying man, my God and Saviour.” Jesus closed Joseph’s eyes, embraced him, and insisted on burying him in the Valley of Jehoshaphat near Jerusalem. And so it came to pass.

Mary Magdalene

I carried on working feverishly, and Rebecca helped by taking on the biggest tasks whilst I looked after Hannah from time to time. The last two chapters had our curiosity in overdrive, and we reckoned there was one chapter per season – so we couldn’t wait for winter to arrive. It

was thrilling, and Rebecca and I had a little competition to see who could come closest to the dénouement. Every new sentence we unravelled made us discard every hypothesis. But what was so rewarding was that, little by little, we came up with a single hypothesis together, working and thinking as one. It bound us both all the more closely. Oh yes, may it last a long time!

Deep within the dungeons of his palace, the old king was now imprisoned.

‘Deep in the dungeons of his own palace, the old King was now imprisoned.’

One stroke of luck, however: his cell was right next to the moat, and water seeped in constantly, so he did not have to drink the enchanted apple drink that was offered to him daily. He still vaguely remembered how, as a child, he used to play amongst the stones of the castle under construction; he made a game of stacking stones until they formed a proper wall behind which he hid, and he loved those stones back then, for they would offer him a sense of security. Security!

He suddenly recalled, however vaguely, how he had left his young son to fend for himself on the throne, burdened by a crown far too heavy for him.

All these thoughts made the old King sad; he wept bitterly and longed to ask his son for forgiveness.

The news spread like wildfire that an old madman had presented himself at the city gate claiming to be the king and had been arrested on the spot on the Wizard's orders. Oh yes, the Sorcerer had no doubt that it was the old king and immediately issued a proclamation to reassure everyone that King Prince himself had gone to visit the person in question in his cell and could assure the people that the late King had still not returned. The eldest Gatekeeper, whose wife had once been saved through the King's intervention, had long harboured doubts about the Wizard, however, and had not drunk apple cider for years. He resolved to inform King Prince personally. He knocked on the door of the royal chamber, but the Wizard opened it. "Leave us alone, Wizard! I wish to speak to King Prince."

"Speak? You can always try," scoffed the Wizard, confident of victory, and he left the room with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. The Gatekeeper was shocked at how weak King Prince had become and hoped he would regain consciousness. He immediately threw away all the Wizard's pots and jugs. He kept watch by the bed for three days and three nights to ensure that King Prince would drink nothing but pure water and made sure the Wizard could no longer set foot inside.

King Prins regained consciousness, but was very weak. What his mouth muscles could no longer manage, his twinkling eyes still managed to convey at the sight of the old Gatekeeper. He tried to speak but could not; all he could do was listen. The Gatekeeper spoke slowly and told him of the old prisoner who was pretending to be the king. “I haven’t had a drop of cider for months now, Sire, and I have gone down into the dungeons and have a strong suspicion that that ancient man in the dungeon is your father. He does not confirm it, but neither does he deny it. Yet I recognise him by his eyes of yesteryear.” The Gatekeeper gave the King Prince a sip of water and wiped the dry mucus from his mouth with his finger. Then he gave the King Prince some more water. The King Prince tried to gargle a little, but then did not wait any longer to speak, for fear of fainting again. He whispered: “Gatekeeper, I am living my last day. Let no one in, stay with me and do not leave this room.”

Here the third papyrus scroll ended.

Suddenly, the table fell silent. It wasn’t just Rebecca crying now; I couldn’t hold back my tears either, and Hannah came to comfort us both at once with her little arms and big kisses. Once we’d calmed down a bit, we started imagining again how things might turn out for the prince and the king. We felt so sorry for both the child and the king. Would they find each other again, we wondered.

I thought back to Zacharias' introduction: "Anyone who wants to unearth a treasure must make great sacrifices, and the treasure I was allowed to read, given to me by a noble visitor of high birth in the temple at Jerusalem, was more than worth it." I was gradually beginning to understand it, for this story did not really feel like merely a story: Rebecca, the foundling, the princess who had lost her parents, could empathise more with the prince's loneliness, whilst I identified more with the king: I want to know, to know more and more.

"Do you think we could find each other?" I asked

Rebecca. "Haven't we already?" She looked at me.

"But didn't I tell you right at the start of our meeting that I would leave you one day?" I suddenly began to doubt what I had said.

"Thanks to our meeting and your love, I gained a heart, and that heart will follow you wherever you are." Hannah snuggled up to her, and Rebecca added, sobbing: "And Hannah too…"

The story was already an immense gift of connection, and it was only the third papyrus scroll of the four.

After they had left, I looked up the first part of the story again and found: "But, Sire, surely His Highness knows that it is not permissible for a king to cross the boundaries with impunity!" Could it be then

Would it really hurt if I were to become king after all? I had to and wanted to know as soon as possible, and I could hardly wait for dawn to break so I could start on the last papyrus scroll.

I couldn't get any sleep. "Djibril, can't you even help me? I'm trembling all over inside…"

Maria

A strange rumour was doing the rounds, and it spread faster than the sea winds, wherever they came from: a young man claimed to be announcing a new Messiah and invited everyone to be baptised in the Jordan. I told Jesus. He looked at me lovingly and whispered, "I am going to my Father." "Is that young man your father?" I didn't understand a thing. Jesus smiled at me and shook his head. "Give me your blessing, mother," he said, and he knelt before me. I helped him to his feet and whispered: "You, Son of God, you must bless me, for I am the Lord's handmaid until my death." And my son said: "I bless you, Mary, daughter of Anne and Joachim, mother of the Son of God who loves you infinitely, whatever may happen." And my son blessed me and departed. I thanked God for His trust, but even to this day I still cannot understand why I am allowed to be His handmaid. I then heard something behind me and there lay a loaf of bread. I pointed, smiling to myself,

pointed my index finger towards the sky. I was not alone. I had never been alone.

Mary Magdalene

That morning, I set about translating the fourth and final part of 'The King's Child' with a ravenous appetite. It went as smoothly as ever, and after four weeks, Rebecca and I were finished.

The hours passed slowly. Suddenly, the prince's eyes opened: "Take my crown and go down below."

"The hours dragged by slowly. Suddenly, the King-Prince opened his eyes and spoke to the Gatekeeper: 'Take my crown and descend deep into the dungeons: take all the keys of the kingdom with you and you will find your King. All the keys…' Then there was a knock at the door."

And suddenly there really was a knock at my door here in Ein Karem! I opened it cautiously and saw a dishevelled young man standing before me in a camel-coloured tunic and trousers. An unkempt beard concealed a mouth with pearly white teeth, and his heavy eyebrows hid the most beautiful eyes you could possibly imagine. Djibril disguised as a dishevelled young man. What a surprise!

"Djibril, I was just writing and reading 'there's a knock at the door' and you knock on the door: that can't be a coincidence…"

“What sort of disguise are you wearing now? Wouldn’t the beggar’s disguise have been better? Everyone’s running away from you.” I just kept ranting, whilst the young man stood outside smiling and tried to say something amidst my ramblings: “My name is Johannes and I’m visiting my childhood home…” and he smiled so kindly that it only made me happier, and once again I didn’t let him get a word in edgewise: “Johannes? Little Johannes? That sweet little thing! Come into your home! Where have you come from? I’m so glad to see you. Come in. Come in. I’ll make you something to eat straight away…” but he interrupted me: “What is your name, dear lady, and how did you get here? Did you know my parents?”

“Oh yes, John, you’re the spitting image of your late father Zacharias. My name is Mary of Magdala, but everyone calls me Mary Magdalene. I helped your parents here when you were first born.” I showed him to a seat at the table and immediately began making tea and preparing a meal of bread, whilst I couldn’t take my eyes off him. Meanwhile, he saw the papyrus scrolls lying on the table, looked at them, and picked up the translation I was working on. “May I?” he asked. “Of course, John, the scrolls belonged to your father.” He read my latest bit of translation and then quickly put everything back, after which I immediately laid the four scrolls on the bed so that we could eat together at the table and share our stories. “Tell me, how is your mother, Elizabeth?”

There was another knock at the door.

“Are you all right, Mum? I just saw a strange man knocking at your door and wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

“Come in, Rebecca, I have some distinguished visitors… John, these are my closest neighbours, Rebecca, and behind her is a little rascal; that little girl’s name is Hannah. Rebecca, this is John, and he is the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth.” It was a bit awkward at first, especially for Hannah, who hid even more shyly behind Rebecca’s dress and occasionally peeked out at ‘that strange man in the strange suit’. Rebecca and John were almost the same age, and when we were all sitting around the table, John began to talk about his mother and how he had survived on the mountain and later in the desert, but I sensed that he couldn’t tell her everything in Rebecca’s presence. I quickly took over the conversation by talking about his father and the dramatic events surrounding him, before eventually turning to Jesus. His eyes lit up immediately, but unfortunately I couldn’t tell him anything recent because I had been living here on an island for years, waiting for… well… for him and Elisabeth. I could tell from his demeanour that he knew more about Jesus and Mary than I did, and he was so kind that he started talking about them himself. He spoke of both with awe, and the homesickness in my heart grew by the second. In particular, the detailed account of Jesus as a thirteen-year-old in his Father’s house in Jerusalem released an immense joy in my heart. Rebecca saw it and already

She sensed what was to come, yet she continued to share in my joy wholeheartedly.

“Would you like some more tea, John? I’m afraid your voice might give out after such a beautiful story.”

“Gladly, Mary Magdalene, gladly. But may I ask you something? When I came in here, I saw those papyrus scrolls with the story of the King’s Child. From my father?”

“No, apparently he received it from a stranger in the temple in Jerusalem.”

I saw him looking puzzled and heard him thinking, so I went to meet him. “I’ll put the scrolls back on the table so you can look at them and read them. Do you know Greek?” Rebecca immediately began clearing the table.

“I learnt Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek from my guardian angel.” He was startled himself that, by using the word ‘guardian angel’, he had revealed more than he intended, but I pretended not to notice and laid the four scrolls on the table with my translations beside them. I gave him time. Suddenly, he read aloud, visibly moved: “He who wishes to unearth a treasure must make great sacrifices, and the treasure I was allowed to read, received from a noble visitor of high birth in the temple at Jerusalem, was more than worth it.” And he began to examine the scrolls more closely, fascinated, and looked once more at my latest translation, which had ended abruptly because he had knocked at the door.

“You’re almost there? I mean, with this scroll, right?” I wasn’t quite sure what he meant and nodded in agreement; the end of the story was in sight, that much was certain. And Rebecca’s and my mouths fell open as he read out the rest of the scroll’s contents as if we couldn’t read Greek. And, fluently translating from the Greek, he began to read it to us directly in Aramaic:

“Then there was a knock at the door.

The Gatekeeper opened the door and allowed Death to carry the body of the King’s Child far beyond the borders of the kingdom with a calm and a peace it had never known during its life.

The throne was now empty.

When the Gatekeeper closed the door behind him, he noticed, left behind on the Child’s deathbed, a small ebony casket with gold fittings. This casket had neither key nor lock.

The old and wise Gatekeeper, the keeper of the keys, understood and took all the keys of the kingdom, every single one, with him and descended into the dungeons. He counted one hundred and one steps.

He arrived at the dungeons, but how on earth was he to recognise the King? He cried out: ‘Which of you is the King?’

Then John put the scroll down and continued the story from memory. He gazed into the distant haze as though he were physically present in the dungeon, witnessing the events unfold.

He cried out: ‘Which of you is the King?’

All the prisoners leapt to their feet and shouted at the top of their voices: ‘I am the King! No, I am the King!’ They raged like madmen.

Only one prisoner, the Stranger, did not move and remained silent.

The gatekeeper opened the gate of his dungeon and saw a man, mouth shut, eyes closed.

‘Are you the king?’ asked the Gatekeeper.

The prisoner shook his head in denial.

‘Don’t you know, then?’ asked the Gatekeeper softly.

There was no answer, and there would never be an answer.

The Gatekeeper then took the small ebony box and laid it to rest in the lap of he who no longer knew, and opened the box.

As if the touch of its contents were a key, the Stranger’s sorrowful eyes suddenly opened.

When the Gatekeeper looked into their dark depths, it was as though he were struck down by the sight of the Child’s soul.

‘My King!’ He fell to his knees, weeping, and placed the crown upon the old King’s head.”

John remained silent and looked deep into each of our eyes, which were brimming with profound joy; yet what we saw in his eyes was a glimpse of a world beyond our own, in a time when the earth stood still. Even Hannah did not move. When he looked away from us, he immediately asked for the next papyrus scroll. We were startled: “There isn’t another papyrus scroll, is there??” He stood up, looking surprised, and asked if he could step outside for a moment. “Of course, Johannes, you’re at home here.” And he went outside. Rebecca and I looked at each other in panic: “A fifth scroll of the story? Have you looked under the mattress yet?” Nothing to be found anywhere. Rebecca looked through the back window into the garden: “He’s talking to someone…” Johannes came back inside a moment later.

“Johannes, I’m sorry, but we really can’t find a fifth scroll…”

“That’s all right, Mary Magdalene, my father was a wise man. One day, someone will be able to tell you more about it. There is only one person who knows the full depth of the final scroll. It isn’t entirely clear to me either, and it would be foolish of me to pass on incorrect information to you,” he concluded with a broad smile.

Rebecca picked Hannah up and stood in front of him: “Please bless us.” Johannes glanced at me for a moment with a

questioning look. I stood directly behind Rebecca and Hannah and repeated: “Please bless us.”

Johannes seemed at a loss as to what to do: “I cannot bless anyone… I can only… baptise… under water. Ten hours’ walk from here there is a shallow stretch of the Jordan. I have just come from there.” And he lowered his eyes.

Mary

The house felt empty, and as though it would remain so. Joseph gone, Jesus gone. And John had followed Jesus. My neighbours were very kind to me and often asked if there was anything they could do for me, but at 41 I was still young enough to help others in need with Melchior’s gold. With Caspar’s frankincense, I could ease my loneliness if I found things getting difficult. I didn’t even need to burn it; just having it in its beautiful packaging in my kitchen was enough to bring back memories that offered comfort. I had entrusted Balthazar’s myrrh to Mary Magdalene. Thinking of her always hurt a little. I had so much to tell her. Fortunately, there was always that one friend I could rely on unconditionally, and that was Djibril. And everything pointed to the fact that Mary Magdalene, sooner or later…

Mary Magdalene

That very evening, before we were due to go to the Jordan, I had a long conversation with Johannes. I felt that I could finally speak openly to someone about my experiences with Djibril. He listened attentively to the signs and the many coincidences I had encountered. He immediately put me at ease and did not doubt my story, for he confided in me how, as a five-year-old, he had survived the early death of Elizabeth in a cave and how he had been raised and educated by an angel who looked after him from morning till night. It was actually quite funny when he told the story of the clever donkey with which Elisabeth had fled with him to Horeb, and how it still helped him and knew all the roads and byways better than all the Jews put together. You only had to tell him where you wanted to go, for example to his birthplace, because the animal understood everything, but on one condition: you had to ask politely. He laughed cheerfully at that. “But I haven’t seen a donkey here yet, have I?” I remarked. John laughed: “If I just think of him, he’s there and ready. Come, let’s go and have a look together.” He stood up and let me open the door, and there the animal was already waiting. He spoke very discreetly into its long ears for a moment and then turned to me: “I’ll introduce you to each other: ‘Lem, this is Mary Magdalene; Mary Magdalene, this is Lem.’ He’s agreed: tomorrow Hannah and Rebecca can ride on his back together.” He looked at me with a smile.

“Pleased to meet you, Lem. Is there anything I can do for you?” I said, glancing at Johannes to see if that was polite enough… Johannes nodded in agreement and closed the door behind us. We both went back inside, amused. I filled the cups with tea and asked if I might ask him something that had been on my mind ever since this morning. He nodded. “I was quite taken aback this morning when you knew the ending of the story of the King’s Child by heart. Where and from whom did you learn that, if I may ask?”

“My mother knew it from my father, who had been given it. And every evening before bedtime, they would read passages from it to each other. One evening father to mother, the next evening mother to father. Every night. And so, in time, they both knew the story by heart, and Mum would tell me bits of it every night until I fell asleep. When she died, the angel Raphael took over from her for years until I could stand on my own two feet. Before he said goodbye, I asked him: ‘Raphael, what happens to the King down in the dungeon?’

The angel replied: “My name, Raphael, means ‘God’s restorer’, and that is also my mission; and you are the forerunner of the Messiah, and what will happen to the King down in the dungeon begins with you. You are the beginning of the restoration.”

“How shall I recognise the Messiah, Restorer?” I asked Raphael.

"You go forth and proclaim the coming of the Messiah, and all who believe in the Messiah shall be baptised by you in the Jordan. The Messiah among them shall also present himself to you, and a dove shall descend upon his head." And Raphael vanished from sight. And so, dear Mary Magdalene, that is how I began to baptise. Crowds of people who believe in the coming of the Messiah, who is undoubtedly coming, are now being baptised in preparation for his arrival, until the Messiah reveals himself to humanity. Tomorrow morning we shall set off for Bethany and arrive there by evening. The day after, I shall baptise you, along with other people. My local helpers are aware of this." At that, something began to dawn on me… The Messiah he was talking about could only be the little Jesus whom I had been privileged to meet during those first few days, together with the three wise men, surely? I took out Balthazar's myrrh in its beautiful packaging and placed it in John's hands, and I told him the whole story behind it. John was delighted and wept with emotion. Suddenly his expression grew sombre and he seemed completely lost in thought: "May I have a little bit of the myrrh?" I wasn't so much startled by the question as by his sense of sorrow, of melancholy, of subdued joy and pain, of longing for his parents? I had once been given a small leather pouch by my neighbours Hannah and Jair as a token of thanks. It felt perfect to use this: on the one hand, it was virtually waterproof and handy for someone who had to baptise, and on the other hand, it could hold

“Stay close to the Messiah’s forerunner,” Hannah added. “Wear it as close to your heart as you can,” I said, and John deftly fastened it to the inside of his camel-leather waistcoat at heart level. He didn’t want to sleep indoors, as he wasn’t used to it, and chose to sleep outside with Lem. Lem means ‘belongs to God’, and I couldn’t argue with that.

I didn’t know what to make of it all: I was far too young to grasp the bigger picture with my mind, but it was impossible not to trust the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth with my heart. And so Elizabeth suddenly came back to mind, just as I had left their house back then with little John, and I immediately looked for her purple fabric to make six simple scarves from it. After that, I fell asleep almost standing up, like a log.

Mary

The silence did me good. And I brought my loom out again. I tensioned the vertical elon threads once more, and with the remnants of scarlet and purple wool from days gone by, I began to weave anew. I thought back to the squabbling of the five young virgins who were to guard my virginity, amongst whom Mary Magdalene stood head and shoulders above the rest. Oh well, now I know for whom I am weaving, and it strengthened me in the belief that she was

from very far away and that she longed for ‘us’ just as much as I did. The warp threads hummed softly with every pass of the shuttle. I was not alone. Behind me, I always knew Djibril was there, with whom I had the most intimate conversations, heart to angel. I was busy.

Mary Magdalene

I was still asleep.

Suddenly, I heard a racket outside from an exuberant, very young voice, interspersed with an equally enthusiastic donkey braying with delight. “Shh, Hannah, Mum’s still asleep,” Rebecca said, making even more noise. “Sit still, Hannah. Lem, you need to be quiet for a moment,” I heard Johannes say with a laugh, “so I can help Rebecca.” Through the slits in the hatch, I enjoyed the spectacle between human and animal. Like a thief, I crept out the back so I could follow everything more closely from around the corner. I withdrew when the first practice run came past, with Johannes at the rear as the donkey-teacher, constantly giving instructions to Rebecca and Lem. I was happy to see this, but at the same time I suddenly sensed that I would not return from the Jordan. It was all happening much faster than I could have imagined two days ago. If I wanted to know the end of the story of the King’s Child, I too would have to leave this kingdom. “He who wishes to unearth a treasure must make great sacrifices.” It actually frightened me because of the unknown, but my hunger for truth was many times greater. I quickly got on with finishing the shawls; I certainly mustn’t forget to take the myrrh with me and then set the table before we left. At

I said a painful goodbye to everything I touched, but I had one great certainty and comfort: “Mary, I am coming…”

Rebecca

What an experience that was! The two of us on a donkey – excuse me: on Mr Lem, who understands your language and knows better where you want to go even before you do. Hannah crowed incessantly and Lem kept his sensitive ears turned forward the whole time, highly motivated to protect them from her shrill cackling. Johannes enjoyed our enjoyment along with us. Oops, Mum is calling us to the table. Hannah was completely beside herself, even forgot to eat and babbled and chattered in a way nobody could understand, but her big eyes told the whole story: Lem was her idol! After dinner, Johannes took Hannah outside to feed Lem together, whilst I helped Maria clear up. I could sense how incredibly nervous she was. She carefully stowed away all the precious papyrus scrolls and put them back in the chest: “These are the four scrolls of the story, and here are my translations, and that is Father Zacharias’s vocabulary and grammar. And this here…” Then she burst into tears and embraced me passionately. In a single fleeting second, I understood what lay ahead of me, and it took me just a second to realise that I could give her no greater gift for all she had done for us than to be strong now and certainly not to start crying, so that

she could go her own way with peace of mind. “We’ll definitely see each other again, Ma Ma, I’ve learnt so much from you. Let’s agree on this: we’ll stop crying over this farewell now, and we’ll only cry—and you can be sure they’ll be tears of joy—when we meet again.” She even began to laugh, her eyes still brimming with tears: “Did I teach you that?” She wiped her face and added jokingly: “I don’t believe a word of it.” And we were both laughing again. Life went on. But that night in my bed, now that I had to let go of my one and only real mother, my old life came flooding back before my eyes and I felt all the more deeply how much I had received from this mother over the years to be able to become a good mother to Hannah myself. The fateful cycle had been broken, and for the first time in my life I could also thank my biological parents for this new life. And if tears could speak and write, then that night I would have written a thick book entitled ‘Thank you, Ma Ma’.

Lem

Ie AAA! Ie AAA!

Mary Magdalene

Lem calls out. It was almost funny to be woken up like that in the midst of my sad mood from

That first glance of mine the next morning. I acted purely on instinct and hid behind a protective wall, but I hadn't reckoned with sweet Hannah, who must have sensed it and found my departure from this cherished place just as incomprehensible as I did. It was as if Hannah's unceasing weeping were my own. Rebecca came to my aid and it was her kind, understanding gaze that thawed me, causing Hannah to calm down too.

We left.

Lem with Rebecca and Hannah in front.

Behind them, Johannes, keeping an eye on the girls and ready to help if needed.

I hid behind Johannes so that I could occasionally sneak a glance back at a house filled with some of the most cherished memories of my life. The beauty of nature completely escaped me. No matter how steel-blue the sky shone and how it might have put a person in a good mood, I couldn't manage it. I thought I could escape Johannes's gaze in this state, but apparently he had a couple of extra eyes on his back. When he saw how Lem and the children were getting on so well together, he slowed down for a moment to stand beside me. He got straight to the point. "It takes courage, Mary Magdalene, to find the kingdom."

"For what, John, to rot away in the dungeons of a castle?"

“No, to find what you’ve been searching for all your life.”

“If you know what you’re looking for, it might be easy, but I…”

“I can only give you one piece of advice: have faith. Your heart tells you to stay, but your intuition tells you to go. I saw you making those purple scarves, and I noticed that she took them with her on this journey. Follow this trail.”

At that moment, I remember it well, I was in a very deep place. Have faith? In what? There was no light to see anything, no ears to hear good news, barely enough oxygen to breathe, no tears to cry, no voice to speak, no idea where I was, and even less of an idea where I was going. Suddenly, Lem stopped. A stranger stood before him. Lem stood still, Rebecca and Hannah seemed frozen, Johannes didn’t move a muscle. I walked forward and looked the man in the eyes. I spoke to him in my mind: how could I not know you, my dear angel. Thank you for coming. I have faith again. And he nodded briefly, walked past me, stroked Lem and passed Rebecca and Johannes. I watched him until he was out of sight and I could breathe again and use my voice: “Girls and Mr Lem? Let’s carry on!” I walked back to the rear beside Johannes and told him what he already knew: “Djibril” and Johannes replied: “Everything will be alright, Mary Magdalene.”

I focused the whole time on Lem’s agility and caution at every obstacle during the first

part of the journey, until we reached easier, well-trodden paths, as Johannes had promised us. Rebecca was holding up bravely, and during every rest stop Johannes would have a chat with Lem and slip him a treat with his favourite herbs, which Johannes was constantly gathering as we walked.

When the sun was at its highest, we arrived at a small bridge over a little river, a tributary of the Jordan, Johannes told us. “Is it still far, Ma Ma?” whinged Hannah, and Johannes immediately intervened: “We’re going to rest and eat here for a bit; we’re halfway there.”

Rebecca, stiff from sitting, didn’t manage to get off Lem very easily, but didn’t give an inch. Before I could ask her, she was already ahead of me: “Are you alright, Ma Ma? Maybe you should sit on Lem with Hannah later; I’d like to walk a bit, because I feel stiff after sitting for so long.” Just as I thought: what a sweetheart! Of course she didn’t feel ‘stiff’; she just wanted to make me feel that I was helping her through it so that I wouldn’t refuse. It was a pure act of self-sacrifice and I was very grateful for this gesture. “That’s very kind of you, my dear darling, I’d be happy to do that, thank you very much.”

We had a bite to eat, we had a drink, and I closed my eyes for a moment.

Then we moved on. I was sitting with Hannah on Lem. We followed the river’s meanders downstream, which was more comfortable for Lem and for us too. It rocked Hannah to sleep in my arms. I thought back to

Mary and the baby Jesus on the donkey in Bethlehem. I could now begin to imagine what maternal feelings were like, something I had never known. It was as if I were about to hand my child over. I swallowed hard. Whenever Lem had to navigate a tricky obstacle very carefully, he would move extra slowly so as not to wake Hannah. “Thank you, Lem,” I would say softly after every difficulty, and from the position of his ears I could clearly see whether he had heard me. A holy animal – could such a thing exist? I wondered about it quite seriously for a moment. I would grant such animals that honour, though perhaps I was taking my imagination a bit too far. John came walking up beside me: “Are you all right?” Another saint! John immediately saw the twinkle in my eyes and read my thoughts: “Oh no, madam, put that out of your mind.” “I am very grateful to you, John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, for what you are doing for us and for humanity.” “It will be alright, Mary Magdalene, whatever may happen: the Messiah will overcome evil.” We exchanged our gratitude with our eyes, after which John rejoined Rebecca, who was standing her ground bravely. At the next stop, I would reunite this mother with her daughter on the noble back of Mr Lem. Every time I saw John, I wondered if I would still recognise the baby Jesus. John and Jesus were the same age, and I had looked after both of them as babies. I hadn’t recognised John at all, so how would I recognise Jesus? No chance of recognising him, then. After the baptism, I would head to Nazareth

I was eager to see Mary again, and I was sure I would meet Jesus there too.

We arrived in Bethany just before sunset. It was absolutely bustling. Many people were going to spend the night on the banks of the Jordan, waiting for tomorrow. John had apparently made arrangements with one of his associates: "Mary Magdalene, this is Rachel; she will look after you. I'm sorry I have to leave you now, but we'll see each other again tomorrow." Lem began to bellow, so he went over to him and spoke in his ear for a while, and Lem calmed down. Rachel took us in tow and had arranged a place for us to sleep. We were warmly welcomed by Rachel's mother, and after dinner we were so exhausted that I insisted on being woken up a bit earlier than planned so we could get to know each other. Rebecca was really 'stiff' by now, Hannah was being a nuisance, and I was already asleep whilst I was speaking. I'm stopping writing now: I want to sleep!

Rebecca

I was lying in bed. Exhausted but wide awake. Exhausted by the emotions rather than from going out. That stranger from this morning… Mum was anything but herself, unrecognisable, and I couldn't exactly call her sad or unhappy either. Until that stranger arrived. I couldn't place him straight away; I racked my brains. He gave Lem a pat whilst looking me in the eyes for a second, and

yes, then I thought I knew: the man from the ‘coincidence’ on the ice, I think, the man to whom I owe so much. I’ll ask Ma Ma tomorrow before I don’t see her for a long time.

Maria

My son had been gone for months now; I’d lost count of the days. The new day seemed set to be just like any other, were it not for a loaf of bread lying by my loom. I looked around immediately, but there was nothing to be seen. I closed my eyes: “Djibril? Thank you for the bread.” I opened my eyes again and began the day in high spirits. It turned out to be a glorious day: the blue warp threads offered their most beautiful sounds, like dancing droplets, to the red colours of the horizontal weft threads on the loom. From morning till evening, I felt deeply happy.

It was only much later, looking back, that I was able to recall that very day, when it became clear that something significant for humanity was unfolding far away. How such small things can sometimes make you overjoyed, and how much more significant and valuable they turn out to be in hindsight. A sense of something that follows immediately, seemingly out of nowhere. There is no such thing as coincidence. It may seem to exist, but that is not the case.

Mary Magdalene

John was standing waist-deep in the Jordan, and a sea of people stood in a single long queue, waiting their turn out of faith in the coming of the Messiah. I couldn't resist seeing if I could spot Jesus in those long queues. It was a hopeless task; I thought at least ten men might be him. The man behind me in the queue was one such person, but it wasn't him. I gave up and concentrated on John himself: he seemed so different from how we knew him – serious, deeply devout, convinced of the mission for which he had been sent. He commanded immense respect from everyone who approached him. It was no game, it was pure seriousness, but even more importantly: he radiated nothing but love. Imagine: for centuries the coming of the Messiah had been prophesied and now, of all times, the Messiah might reveal himself that very day. All the signs were there: fourteen thousand parents of slaughtered children had witnessed how even the authorities took this rumour seriously; in Bethlehem, shepherds and residents had seen the star and the arrival of three wise men from distant lands. These hundreds of people who gathered daily by the Jordan all shared a conviction of hope and trust in a wild-looking young man, clad in camel-skin, who fearlessly stuck his neck out to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. As we stood queuing, we saw Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes in their magnificent

riding back and forth on horseback or in a carriage. They could not hide their concern or anger.

We reached the water. Rebecca was standing in front of me and I was holding Hannah in my arms. Hannah was quiet and kept looking back the whole time. It was as if she was afraid of the water and didn't want to see it, even though her face didn't look the least bit frightened. On the contrary. Not long after, I realised why she kept looking back. However, I had to concentrate so as not to fall, and we stepped into the water bit by bit until it was Rebecca's turn. One of Johannes's helpers asked for her parents' names, but she didn't answer. "It's all right, Rebecca," Johannes reassured her. And she surrendered herself to Johannes. "I baptise you, Rebecca, daughter of Aliza and Joah, as a new person." And she was immediately immersed and helped back up by Johannes's helpers. She wanted to ask Johannes something straight away, but he beat her to it: "Your parents were called Aliza and Joah. What is Hannah's father's name?" "Uri," she stammered, quickly rubbing her eyes dry so she could take hold of Hannah. "I baptise you, Hannah, daughter of Rebecca and Uri, as a new person." Hannah was startled, wept, and Rebecca quickly took her. I spontaneously told them my parents' names. "I baptise you, Mary Magdalene, daughter of Lott and Levi, as a new person." I rose from the water and felt strange. Then I waded slowly towards the bank, where Rebecca was waiting for me. We watched. The two men just behind me were to be baptised, but apparently there was something

There was a lot of back-and-forth chatter and confusion, as if John was refusing to baptise these people, but in the end he gave in. I was surprised, just like so many others on the bank, and, curious, I pricked up my ears.

"I baptise you, John, son of Salome and Zebedee, as a new person."

His friend followed, and I heard: "I baptise you, Jesus[46], son of Mary and Joseph and the Most High, as a new person."

I could not believe my eyes. Suddenly a dove descended and settled on the head of Jesus, the Messiah! Of course! And John, the grandson of Joseph and Mary! My joy knew no bounds and my thoughts immediately turned to Mary. Clouds suddenly parted and a voice resounded: "This is My Son, My beloved, in whom I am well pleased." And John the Baptist cried out as loud as he could so that everyone could hear: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and who does not baptise with water, but with the Holy Spirit." John asked Jesus to baptise him. "I baptise you, John, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, into a new life." All the people bowed their heads as Jesus and John came to the shore, and I too fell to my

[46] A man among men, yet of divine origin. In the apocryphal Gospels of the Ebionites and Hebrews from the first two centuries AD, the man Jesus was only confirmed as 'His Son' by His Father after John's baptism.

I knelt and bowed my head, and Rebecca followed my example. I saw a pair of feet come to a halt in the sand before me. “Mary Magdalene, rise!” Tears of joy prevented me from uttering a word, for no words could express what I felt. And still they cannot. It would detract from those most sacred moments of my life. Looking into his loving eyes was like speaking, and I knew that he knew what I was feeling and thinking. He merely nodded and said without words: ‘You will go to Nazareth and tell my mother what happened here?’ I nodded. John, who was five years older than Jesus, apparently still remembered me well and embraced me: ‘Where are your purple scarves?’ And I apologised, flustered as I was, searched for them nervously, and gave Jesus and John a scarf made of Elizabeth’s fabric. And so the two of them set off, and wherever they passed, people followed my gesture and knelt before the Messiah and John, his future most beloved apostle. In the town of Bethany, many people had by now heard the voice from the clouds and were hurrying towards the Jordan. John the Baptist continued baptising until late in the evening, by torchlight, until the very last person had come forward.

I waited for him whilst Rebecca and Hannah had long since gone to bed. I gave John a purple scarf as a parting gift, along with a message from his mother: “Do not be afraid of the purple!”, a farewell for ever, as it would soon turn out. On a hill

I saw the last of the Pharisees' spies watching and turning on their heels to report back to Jerusalem with great haste.

The next morning, I said goodbye to Rebecca and Hannah and gave each of them one of my last scarves. The purple butterflies flew off in all directions. We all put on a brave face, including Hannah and a silent Lem. Rebecca was overjoyed to have been given her parents' names, Alizah and Joah. "I finally have my parents' names, and maybe one day I'll be able to find them. And Ma Ma, I have one more question: the day before yesterday, just after we'd left, that strange man – was that Djibril?" I nodded. "And is Jesus the king from the story of the King's Child?" I replied: "Perhaps he is the king's child, or the gatekeeper? We don't know, but one day it will become clear to us."

I stroked Mr Lem once more and asked him to be careful. Hannah begged with outstretched arms for one last hug. Lem left quietly and Rebecca turned back: "You'll come and visit us, won't you?"

"Of course, darling!"

Mary

The news of the Messiah's baptism by John the Baptist sparked a storm of rumours filled with hope and doubt, but also with jealousy, resentment and even hatred. My thoughts turned above all to Elizabeth, Zechariah and Joseph. How terribly I missed them at that very moment. It felt as though I were the only person in the world who could not possibly doubt my son's mission.

But I was sorely mistaken. There was a knock at the door. Mary Magdalene! Without a word being spoken, I saw in her large eyes that I was not alone in my faith in my son and never would be. My heart warmed at her infectious laugh and we fell into each other's arms like young girls. We were, quite rightly, each other's gift from God. She was, and still is, the only person in my life to whom I sometimes dare to open my heart. And I still dare to speak for her and say that it is entirely mutual. Our joy quickly turned into a flood of tears and emotions as we shared our mutual experiences: Zacharias, Elizabeth, Joseph, the flight to Egypt, fourteen thousand children, Hannah, Jair, with the occasional bright spot: the three wise men, Rebecca with little Hannah, Gabriel, John the Baptist, and of course Mary Magdalene's long-drawn-out, amusing tale of Lem, the marvellous

donkey, it was heartening to hear how even some animals apparently remembered Eden. Mary Magdalene suddenly thought of something, searched for it and found it in her luggage. “I gave John the Baptist some of the myrrh, if you don’t mind?” she asked, and she handed the beautiful, precious gift back to me. “Of course not, but why?”

“When he baptised Jesus, the dove descended and a voice rang out from the clouds, I saw how spies on horseback watched with contempt and how some left in a hurry. After the murder of Zechariah, I no longer feel at ease there. I hope the myrrh protects John the Baptist. And he was very happy to have it.”

I immediately felt a shiver run through me and did not dare tell Mary Magdalene what I had sensed and learnt during my years in the Holy of Holies about the significance of myrrh, for myrrh was, after all, used to soothe both spiritual and physical pain or to embalm a dead body, and not so much to protect people. That was precisely the reason, as I now understand, why, as a young mother at the birth of Jesus, I instinctively entrusted the myrrh to her care. At the time, I was still afraid of myrrh, not strong enough and certainly not old enough to dare face it. And I still did not want to explain this to her because there was no point in worrying her. On the other hand, I could sincerely thank her for having kept it safe all that time when I was not yet able to, but at the same time I was overcome time and again

that heaviness when I saw the myrrh as a gift for my son.

I quickly changed the subject and asked her if she now knew anything more about where Jesus was staying. She replied that the last she had heard was that he had gone to the temple in Jerusalem, together with John and some of his followers. I hoped he would be home in time because we had received an invitation to a wedding in Cana of the Zealot [47] Simon and Rachel. But celebration or no celebration, the time for a mother's worries had clearly arrived. And it came much sooner than expected. Three days later, at dusk, I received another distinguished visitor: John, my dear stepson, stood at the door. John was actually my step-grandson, but as he was only a few years older than Jesus and had never known his mother, I regarded him as a son with the blessing of the blessed Joseph, just as he regarded me as his mother. Our flight to Egypt forged an unforgettable bond between us. Mary Magdalene and I were overjoyed to see him, and he seemed to be growing ever gentler and kinder than he had ever been. He was a treasure

[47] A 'zealot' is a fanatical advocate of a religious, political or ideological cause, who sometimes resorts to violence or extreme measures to spread his or her ideas. The term is originally derived from the historical Jewish group known as the Zealots, a rebellious movement that used violence to resist Roman rule.

of a young man, and our first question was: “And Jesus?”

“He’s still to come; he was only due to leave tomorrow, at least I hope so, because things were getting pretty heated in the temple in Jerusalem.” Mary Magdalene also immediately furrowed her brow and looked at me with instant concern. We sat down at the table: “But, but what happened then, John?”

“Nothing serious, mind you. We arrived in the courtyard of the temple and Jesus got angry, overturned the money-changers’ tables and drove out the pigeon sellers, goat herders and cattle traders. He shouted loudly: ‘Do not make my Father’s house a marketplace.’ And he was right. The merchants were both frightened and angry; they quickly packed up their things and left the courtyard, not without clearly showing their hatred. The Pharisees, too, looked at him with fury. I was a little shocked by Jesus’ actions; I had never seen him so furious.” That John, who knew Jesus better than anyone, said he had never seen him so angry, shocked me deeply. I think I turned pale with fear: my dear son, son of God, of a God who is Love, using violence? I could hardly believe it. What had happened to him?

As a child [48], he had once ‘cursed’ one of his Torah teachers, who fell to the ground foaming at the mouth. Love and violence never go hand in hand, do they? I thought he’d learnt his lesson then. I felt the ground slip from under my feet. Had I done something wrong in bringing him up?

Johannes

I was shocked to see my dear stepmother’s joy turn so suddenly into worry and, yes, even panic. I hurried over to her, embraced her, and caressed her gently as I heard her softly sobbing. “Perhaps it is

[48] The apocryphal Gospel of the Ebionites recounts how, at his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan, Jesus was ‘adopted’ by his Father, which could have signalled an official end to his sometimes ‘misguided’ use of his miraculous power. His subsequent outburst in the temple, however, was not of a miraculous nature, but of purely human physical aggression, something he would not repeat later, just as he also had to ‘unlearn’ his verbal aggression towards the whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23) and did not repeat it upon his arrest. Dialectics = arriving at a coherent synthesis through questions and answers. Jesus’ life story is a human and divine story founded on such a dialectical basis. His mother’s upbringing and education from the age of three in the temple was so special and unique that she herself did not even need to undergo such a learning process on a dialectical basis, which sometimes makes some of the actions during the learning process of the Son of the God of Love seem more difficult for us to understand and accept. Mary once again proves to have been of immense importance to the human and also divine aspects of his spiritual growth.

from exhaustion, and is the Son of God sometimes just a human being too. You are not to blame, my dear mother."

Mary Magdalene was also very worried. She too felt distraught. Their shared bewilderment startled me. I spoke to them both: "It is good that you are discussing this with him together. My brother is a very kind man, and the miracles he has performed along the way undeniably confirm that he is the Messiah. I suspect that is why he asked me to go to you, so that you would not hear it from strangers." However, I wasn't entirely sure if this was the right thing to do and now doubted whether I had done well to tell them this spontaneously. I had seriously underestimated their distress. I felt a little guilty, even though it was the truth and well-intentioned. What I was certain of was that I was utterly exhausted. The emotions of the last few weeks had been intense: not a moment's rest, constantly answering people's questions, bringing the sick to Jesus, urging people to be patient, listening to their questions, answering all their possible concerns as if I too were a Messiah. And now, seeing Mary and Mary Magdalene grieving was the last straw; my heart and my eyelids grew heavy, and I begged for a bed.

Mary

I heard how Mary Magdalene took the exhausted John to his bed. The most painful thing about my son's outburst in the temple was that I didn't understand it and that I lacked even the slightest insight to make sense of it. Yet I had taught him from a young age that when he had a row with a neighbour's boy, for example, who teased him about his ancient father, and he knocked this little boy unconscious, foaming at the mouth and convulsing, that such behaviour was unacceptable and that he had to understand that he was different from his playmates and that they had no father in heaven. But now I was very worried that he would be killed for it, just as Zacharias had been dealt with. It was Mary Magdalene who set me straight on this and made it clear to me that he had a mission as the Messiah and that we would never be able to grasp the depth of this mission unless he spoke to us about it himself. "I suspect that we will often not understand," Mary Magdalene concluded wisely, "and what we do not understand, we must neither approve nor disapprove of. We must wait until we can speak to him about it ourselves." I now felt an urgent need to be alone and went to my bedstead, and Mary Magdalene also withdrew to her room. We were all exhausted. I could not sleep; I had many questions but no answers.

Mary Magdalene

Jesus' outburst in the temple after his baptism astonished me deeply too. When he was baptised alongside us by John the Baptist, there was nothing to suggest that he would resort to violence in any way: the dove of peace that descended and rested upon him, his Father's voice from heaven affirming his lineage… I wondered what John the Baptist would think of this and whether he could understand it. I was very curious to meet Jesus here again in his home after so long and to speak to him about it. What I did believe with absolute certainty was that there must be a good explanation for it, for it could not be otherwise given all the miracles he had performed in healing the blind and the lame. I had every confidence in this and let it go, until I had been able to speak to him about it. While waiting, it seemed to me that the following morning would be a good time to take Maria's mind off things a little by telling her the story of the four papyrus scrolls of Zacharias containing the tale of the King's Child. I had committed the words to memory word for word whilst translating and, as if by a miracle, could recount every detail. Maria listened attentively. I ended with the gatekeeper who placed the child's soul like a key in the king's lap and opened his eyes with it, eyes that, gazing motionless into eternity, let their tears drift into the void, and behind which something was unfolding whose meaning and significance no human could fathom. I fell silent. I waited. It was surprising

to catch such a look in Mary's eyes too. I waited without expectation. It became clear to me that I wasn't ready yet, and certainly not for the story itself. I waited just as I had been waiting for months for the mystery in the fifth papyrus scroll to be unravelled, and I wondered whether Maria might already know about the fifth papyrus scroll through her close contact with Djibril. Maria looked just like a statue. In this instance, no answer was also an answer, and it felt as though it would be unspeakably painful. Realising that the lack of understanding stemmed from my own lack of maturity turned out, in hindsight, to be an important first step. It was indeed, and for the time being, far beyond my comprehension. The second step that would lead to insight was to love Maria immensely. The third step was to realise that I myself had not the slightest merit in acquiring that knowledge. And after three steps, I was not there yet.

John

I slept very restlessly and in my dream I relived an event from the past, when Jesus and I were still playful children. It was clearly no mere coincidence. I saw once again how angrily the young Jesus reacted to Annas's son and how he caused the young Ethan to wither like a bush. The boy's father was naturally angry, and Jesus undid the spell. I woke with a start, and however tired I was, I couldn't get back to sleep after that. The women had gone to bed by then, and the house was deathly quiet. Whereas five years ago

than Jesus, I now felt five or even ten years younger than him. He had far surpassed the maturity of a high priest. This thought completely shook my self-confidence. I had been so foolish as to tell Mary and Mary Magdalene immediately upon seeing them again about the commotion in the temple, and why on earth did I have to go into so many details about it? I felt sad because I had completely upset the women and made Mary so anxious. I had been foolish not to let Jesus tell them himself. I tossed and turned in bed all night, and whenever I fell asleep, I would jolt awake again straight away. I confess: I was guilty and I did not deserve the gift of sleep.

Mary

That night, I gazed into the night with my eyes closed. Open eyes in the night are like stars gazing into the blackness of the universe; closed eyes in the night, on the other hand, work in reverse and are like the universe gazing at millions of stars, never tiring of the sight. Closed eyes gazing into the night make you listen intently to your thoughts, free from all distraction. Your thoughts become stars, more and more of them, and set off on a journey of discovery, fascinated, safe, and it makes you ever more curious about the deeper questions of your life. One star caught my attention and taught me how important it was that Jesus

was both God and man in order to be recognised as the Son of God the Father. Suppose he commits no sin against love; then he is not human and is only God. Suppose he commits sins just like us; then he is not the Son of God. I could now fathom what happened in the temple and that it could not have been any other way: either he was not human, or he was not God.

The deeper you go, the deeper you want to go, and that night I visited fourteen thousand mother stars. One by one. Finally, the mother in Ashkelon revealed herself: “I am the mother of fourteen thousand children and have fourteen thousand names, but you, you are the mother of the son of all people.” The message was clear: my turn would come. I was number fourteen thousand and one, and I was at peace with it. I no longer needed to fear the pain that was to come. I knew no more enemies, for I loved every human being. I surrendered myself and from then on remained in the hand of our son’s father, and His will be done. I no longer needed to be afraid. It was a gift from God that John came to tell us this before we saw Jesus Himself, thus giving us time to prepare for His coming.

I was able to sleep.

Mary Magdalene

That morning, I couldn't get up at the first attempt: everything from yesterday was still swirling round in my head. My baptism in the Jordan, where I witnessed Jesus' baptism and how lovingly he spoke to me. And now this storm in my head with the question: how is that possible? How difficult must that have been for Mary? I thought I'd better get up quietly so as not to wake the others and prepare breakfast. I was half scared out of my wits. The table was already set and a calm Mary welcomed me and immediately poured my favourite tea… I observed her closely, but saw not the slightest disturbance, and this astonished me all the more. She was one step ahead of me, as if she had read my thoughts: "I received the answer last night, and Jesus will answer you himself. 'Would you like a little more tea?' And this was precisely what our friendship and love meant, for this answer would never have been enough for another mortal and would have aroused a feeling of lack of trust and love, but that was not the case between the two of us. I was glad that she was already reassured, and she was glad that I now knew that Jesus would explain it to me himself. And we began once again to tell each other about our experiences over all those years, and we became deeply engrossed in it together. Not long after, a crestfallen John with teary eyes joined us at our table. "Are you all right, lad?" Mary asked him. He blurted it out straight away: "I shouldn't have told you about what happened in the temple. I'm terribly sorry." Of course,

I left the answer to Mary, as she had already fully prepared it: “Do you remember Ashkelon? The woman of Ashkelon? You were there when the very young Jesus performed a deed that turned the entire cosmos upside down? He is the child of a human and of God. When he speaks to you about it, you must simultaneously recall the memory of the woman of Ashkelon whose breast he healed.” Mary stood up and gently stroked his hair: “You really ought to have a proper shave.” And we all burst out laughing.

John

You really had to take everything my mother said seriously, except for that bit about shaving. Laughing actually made everything easier because it creates goodwill and space for something more serious, and it reinforces the memory of the message for later. Just like now, in fact. I waited for the following night to try and recall all the details of the incident in Ashkelon. Because believe me, it was very difficult for a little eight-year-old lad to make head or tail of it. ‘You are the mother of all people’ – that stuck with me, and even then I thought it was a lovely compliment for her, but it wasn’t about a compliment at all… The following night, I was given just one more piece of the puzzle: the woman who had initially approached her aggressively apparently understood everything a few minutes later, showed her surprising respect and even became submissive when she said ‘you are

‘the mother of all people’, apparently including herself, then. That was all I could vaguely recall. I was so frightened at the time, and so preoccupied with my fear of the anger of the many people around us, that I hid behind the donkey, and from there I could only see everything in fragments. I only dared to come out when the crowd suddenly calmed down and bowed before her and Jesus, and then I took shelter once more behind Joseph’s cloak. The people withdrew apologetically and left the square deeply impressed. But what was it that had impressed them so much? Perhaps I forgot what I saw, or downplayed the significance of something, or I didn’t see it, or I didn’t hear the main event… That was really all I saw that evening, and it would be a long time before I saw the whole picture. One thing I did know: I would not ignore my mother’s advice: the woman from Ashkelon was apparently very dear to her. My mother, as I now realise after many years, wanted even then, in the presence of Mary Magdalene, to prepare both of us for the complete final picture of the puzzle.

The sun is already rising and now I’m off to shave!

Mary Magdalene

There was a certain tension in the house. But not just in the house: the little town of Nazareth was in an uproar, and his arrival would not go unnoticed. Especially our neighbours, who had known him well as a child, looked

I was eagerly awaiting Jesus' visit. And in my mind, I was constantly thinking about all the questions I needed to ask him. I wore my purple scarf from morning till night. One question was burning on my lips: whether he knew the fifth part of the story of the King's Child. One day, news reached us – very sad news: it turned out that John the Baptist had been arrested by Herod at the Pharisees' request and had ended up in prison. John and I panicked, whilst Mary surprised us by remaining calm. "Jesus' time has not yet come," she reassured us, but this statement did not bode well either. John and I regularly went out and sometimes visited the neighbours so that Mary could have a rest.

Mary

Mary Magdalene and John had only just gone to visit the neighbours when someone knocked at the door and I opened it. It was my beloved son. He was all alone. The hood of his cloak hid his face, so that he could pass through Nazareth undisturbed. I embraced him and whispered in his ear: "Thank God, my son. John and Mary Magdalene are visiting people in town. Sit down, I've still got tea in the pot on the hob. Your favourite tea. You look tired…"

I sat down next to him at the table and let him catch his breath for a moment whilst we couldn't take our eyes off each other. I

broke the silence and got straight to the point, throwing all my questions at him at once: “Isn’t it terribly difficult and confusing for you to be sometimes a son of God and sometimes a son of man? When do you react as a human being and when as God? Don’t you sometimes even startle yourself? I’m sorry that you’ve also inherited some of my temperament. Commotion in the temple is a human affair; aren’t you afraid that this makes it harder for people to understand the message from you and your Father? Can you really sense so quickly that there were only bad people there?” Jesus didn’t look at me with any real surprise. “You’re right, Mother, this shouldn’t have happened like this. It might not be the last[49] time something like this happens; I hope not, because it would be wrong all over again. But you’re right: that’s precisely why I have a Father as God and a mother as a human. It changes naturally, and so this is who I am, and I am neither of you alone. My father loves my mother just as my mother loves my father. To my knowledge, I have never wept as a child or an adult. I carry my tears within me. I am the opposite of Enoch, the Metatron. Just as he attained angelic status as a human, so I attained human status as the Son of God. Enoch and I give every person who dies a single tear. I was deeply shocked by the difference when, as a thirteen-year-old child, I visited the temple with you, and the human within me was wounded

[49] Matthew 23: a torrent of reproaches directed at the Pharisees

about it." I replied straight away: "I know full well how difficult it can be at times to control anger, and I too had to learn that from Djibril." He interrupted me: "My father forgave you that anger a long time ago; otherwise he would never have chosen you to be my mother, and I thank my father every night that you were allowed to be my mother."

"Is it all right, my son, if I'm proud of you, even though I've done nothing to deserve it? I think it's a purely human trait that I find hard to escape as a human being." He thought for a moment, smiled in anticipation, moved his chair very close to me and whispered in my ear: "I want to share a secret with my dear mother: I'm proud of you as my mother too, but my father mustn't know this." He looked at me with the sweetest, most mischievous eyes.

I replied: "I love your father very much, because he is my father too."

He continued: "I know that one of the other nights you dreamt of the woman from Ashkelon; I was standing next to you as a child then, and I know you're ready for it now: behold what a purely human mother is capable of. It was a long wait for my father until he found such a mother for me."

"I'm not worthy of such a thing, and it's partly thanks to Djibril who helped me."

“That is true, and because of that you helped me, so that I can now help the world.”

I immediately sensed where our conversation was heading at that moment and I no longer hesitated: “The story of the King’s Child seems like a prophecy, but the fifth papyrus scroll is missing. John the Baptist told Mary Magdalene that his mother Elizabeth had told him of the existence of this fifth scroll, but that it cannot be found.”

My son looked deep into my eyes, as if he were certain I would be able to bear the answer. He replied: “The King’s Child leaves the dungeon, but once above in the fallen world, he is crucified.”

I didn’t need to weep. Earlier in my dream, I had already been freed from all doubt, fear and anxiety, and now the significance of his coming for humanity was made clear to me. I realised that I had to follow his mission closely from a distance so that I could be with him when this dramatic moment arrived. I immediately thought of Mary Magdalene: “May I tell Mary Magdalene about this?”

“I shall tell her myself at the appropriate time, if you agree. After that, you can share it with one another.”

I nodded and continued: “The woman of Ashkelon told me, after you had healed her breast wound, that I am the mother of all people, but I say to you, my son, and thus

also your and my father: you are father and son of all people."

"It is the gatekeeper from the story who now speaks within you. And you, mother, I speak also in my father's name: you are blessed among all women and truly the mother of all people."

There was a moment of silence between us. Time seemed to stand still. He lowered his eyes and I suddenly saw a single, most rare tear roll down his cheek. He opened his eyes and spoke to me softly: "At this very moment, John the Baptist is being beheaded." I was startled, yet not startled; I kissed him on the forehead and whispered: "Go and rest on my bed for a while, my son, until Mary Magdalene and John come home later." He stood up and withdrew.

I felt just as strongly the need to be alone and made my way to the bench by my loom. I barely recognised myself. It was as if I had entered an unfamiliar new room in my mind and was standing there, marvelling at a completely new world. Suddenly, I was no longer the mother of a child, but found myself to be the mother of a plan of salvation for humanity, now and in the future. It had nothing to do with knowledge or reason either. On the contrary, only one feeling surfaced in this new room, and that was trust: have trust. I no longer needed to think. And it was precisely this thought that reminded me of a very dear memory; yes, thinking after all. I suddenly remembered that when I was still a child in

The Holy of Holies was there, when a clumsy maid entered the Holy of Holies; she was apparently new and did not know she was not allowed in there, and I entertained a single wicked thought. That very evening I met Djibril, though without bread, who addressed me with the exact same words I had had in mind for the maid: “Foolish man.” I almost fainted and could just about manage to say: “Truly, Djibril, I am a foolish man.” After all, I was the foolish one, not the servant. I suffered for days at first, only to learn from it for the rest of my life how to purify my thoughts. Even my son now, half-human, still had to learn, just as I had to learn from Djibril back then and still do, through trial and error. My dear Djibril, what could I have done without you? And I was suddenly startled: my God, that new room I had just spoken of bore a striking resemblance to the Holy of Holies where I had stayed for years!

The elon wires behind my back stirred, and it was no coincidence; I closed my eyes and the hymn with the song of sacrifice arose in my heart. I thanked my son’s Father for preparing me for what was to come.

Mary Magdalene

Evening fell. The neighbours were so happy to meet their little John of old and told many a story about his youth with Jesus, and about His

miraculous stories, of which they too had sometimes been witnesses. We said goodbye to them.

The front door was ajar. Johannes and I went in cautiously. Maria immediately put her index finger to her lips. She was wearing the purple scarf around her neck and gestured for us to join her at the kitchen table. There was now just one seat left, and Johannes and I looked at her. She simply nodded. My eyes widened! I stammered, “Jesus?”. Mary nodded. John and I were beside ourselves with joy, and Mary urged us to be calm. She spoke in a whisper: “Jesus is now resting in my bed. But I also have bad news: John the Baptist has been beheaded.” John, who had often travelled with John the Baptist to the many baptismal ceremonies in the Jordan, reacted in bewilderment and could barely hold back his tears. He clenched his eyes and mouth shut with all his might, but to no avail. His tears ran down his nose. I slowly stood up, gesturing to Mary that I would fetch his scarf too, and returned quickly to give it to John. He dried his tears with it. John explained that it was this very scarf that he had received from John the Baptist after I had given it to him. John explained that he had cut a piece from it and wrapped the small pouch containing the myrrh in it to keep it close to his heart. Mary and I shed our tears onto Mary’s scarf. We were all so sad that we did not notice Jesus suddenly appearing behind John’s shoulders and placing his hand on

He laid his head on his brother's shoulder and said, "Do not weep, my brother; the time will come when you shall meet him again." John immediately stood up and embraced his brother tenderly. Jesus gazed into the distance as though he were looking far into the future, and the only emotion that was unmistakably evident was love. But not a single tear. Mary told me the following day that he was holding his tears inside.

Jesus sat down on the fourth chair around the small table and took one end of each scarf in each hand; Mary, sitting opposite, did the same, and John and I also took the scarves between us in our hands. We formed a circle of purple. The silence did the rest. Purple and silence restored our balance and harmony between mind and emotion. What struck me then, in that silence, was how Mary had changed so profoundly in just one day, and also how much Jesus now resembled her in appearance. Jesus suddenly stood up, looked for his cloak and was already heading for the door. I… I couldn't stop myself. I rushed towards him: "Jesus, may I walk with you for a while?" He nodded and we walked out into the evening sun.

John

I was left behind with Maria. Neither of us had let go of the purple scarf. She looked at me: "Have you given any more thought to the woman from Ashkelon?" I nodded: "At first I was very afraid of the angry crowd. The only thing I can still remember was right at the end when the

The crowd suddenly fell silent when that woman said to you: 'You are the mother of all people.' And then she interrupted me abruptly: "And this will happen very soon." She looked at me intently to gauge whether I understood. "Do you mean that Jesus faces the same fate as John the Baptist?" She confirmed it with a brief nod. She was kind enough to move quickly on to her question, so that my thoughts wouldn't run wild until I burst into tears. "What I want to ask you, John: follow him everywhere, and help us to follow him on his way. Wait a moment." Then she stood up and went to her bedchamber, and she returned with a pouch of gold. "I received this from Melchior at Jesus' birth; buy food with it, but also two donkeys so that Mary Magdalene and I can follow him from a distance. If it suits you or others, you may also make use of this gold whenever you wish. A donkey for your group of apostles? You decide." She stood up immediately, came over to me and embraced me tenderly, as only a mother cares for a son, and whispered in my ear: "Everything will be alright."

I am well over a hundred years old as I write this, and I still think of these words every single day of my life, ever since she died in my home in Ephesus in the presence of God's angels. The angels wrapped her in the torn purple curtain of the temple that she had once woven as a young maiden, and carried her thus to

heaven. She was my mother and I was her son. Oh yes, it turned out all right, my dear mother.

“Where are you, Belial, my friend?” Jesus cried out loudly in the rocky mountains of the desert. “Fear not, Belial, I wish to speak with you. Or shall I address you as ‘Yahweh who slays men’?” Jesus expected no reply and continued immediately: “I have brought you a gift from my Father, something that may help you.” And Jesus held out his hand, upon which rested the very last unblemished apple. Jesus did not have to wait long before the ruler of the underworld appeared in a cavern and screamed: “What are you doing here in my kingdom? Eat your apple yourself! Millions of people have already bitten into your apple since I forced the story of Eden down their throats along with the apple. There is no turning back, my dear friend. Have you come to mock me a little?”

“No, I’ve come to tell you that my Father still loves you. Whatever you’ve done, He wants to grant you forgiveness. Keep this apple unharmed. That is why I bring this gift.”

“A bit late, isn’t it? Surely it can’t be your intention to come and taunt and provoke me even further? Can you already hear me singing the Trisagion again in the Holy of Holies? Holy, holy…” Belial was actually starting to retch. He continued: “Shall I tell you what you’ve come to do, novice? Listen carefully!

One: your Father apparently only just realises how my plan works and how the inequality between man and woman came about. Congratulations on that after so many centuries.

Two: you realise that it is irreversible. The inequality between men and women is now set in stone forever in laws and rules.

Three: you are part of a plan by your Father that seeks to rectify this.

Four: this plan of your Father comes too late and will only create more inequality between men and women and sow division among peoples, for which I am most grateful to your Father, for this step too, my dear friend, was planned by me in this way. ‘I was expecting you much, much sooner!’ he replied triumphantly, and, certain of victory, he continued: ‘I am giving you a gift, kind-hearted as I am: you will soon receive the most beautiful cross that exists.’ He could not get enough of it and could not hide his broad smile.

Jesus remained calm and serene: “My Father has always loved you; you were the light of the world. You can always return. My Father is forgiving. Lay down your weapons.”

Belial was gradually getting fed up: “What on earth are you doing here, you little brat? Don’t you have enough to do running round all those synagogues and healing people’s ailments and illnesses? Oh yes, I admit, it really does make a huge impression on people, but I

Do you promise that after your death, no one will believe in your miracles anymore? Or at the very least, will have serious doubts about them? And yes, I know that your Father can kill me, but I know just as well that he will never do so, just as he will not kill any of my disciples, for which we are sincerely grateful. In other words, my dearest friend, by not killing my devils, we kill without any resistance the people whom your Father does not wish to kill. Your Father is therefore an accomplice, dear friend, through culpable negligence, and that calls itself love! I call that hypocrisy, and I humbly beg you to carry on in this way. I am eternally indebted to you."

Jesus did not reply, and the less he said, the angrier Belial became. Jesus remained silent, knowing full well what he was doing. He offered himself to Belial as the ultimate lamb on the cross. Belial would not realise now, nor ever later, what an irreversible mistake he was making in his plan.

Jesus withdrew, and Belial, together with General Everyone, celebrated his victory over Jesus triumphantly deep within the earth.

Mary Magdalene

Summer was slowly approaching. The sun had no intention of setting just yet. We were sitting on the bank of the little river where Jesus and his friends used to love to play.

"Are you tired?" I asked, just to get the conversation started. His answer was very instructive, for it taught me straight away that I didn't need to beat about the bush. He got straight to the point.

"I have come to show humanity the right path to its Creator. Free humanity chose a path of evil, yet as free beings, they long to rediscover the way to their true Father. Free humanity is, in itself, a beautiful being, but in community, that freedom presents difficult challenges in living together in beauty. Difficult because two forces are at work: on the one hand, the human soul seeks a path upwards towards Rest[50] in Silence, towards the experience of the divine and of inner stability. On the other hand, there are four opposing forces within the human being: darkness, desire, ignorance and anger, which seek to keep the soul away from this peace. These four forces use false reasoning in the human mind to achieve this. The human being must free themselves from these

[50] From the Gospel of Mary Magdalene 15:1–17. Papyrus scrolls dating from around 120 AD and found in Nag Hammadi in 1946.

"Overcome these forces by seeing through these lines of reasoning and distancing oneself from them, thereby neutralising them. The counterforce of ignorance is the most cunning of the four. As long as a person does not accept that I [51]am constantly WITHIN them, Belial has free rein over the other three counterforces within that person. I am the person's alpha and their omega."

I was somewhat startled by this spontaneous outpouring, but at the same time I felt honoured: "Is love not enough, then, or does love only come naturally after the defeat of these opposing forces?"

"You said it: the Peace in Silence creates the space in your mind for an immeasurable love for every living and non-living being."

"Are you not afraid of ending up like John the Baptist?" I asked.

"My mother's answer to this will be easier for you to understand than mine, but ask her after I have left Nazareth."

He picked up a small stone and threw it into the water. "Look!" he said. "You can see how the flow of the water was disturbed only for a moment, and yet its effect will endure to the very farthest reaches of the sea. So it is with the soul of every human being: whatever disturbs it is

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[51] By 'I' here, he means 'I, who am love', but this can just as easily be generalised to 'every human being who has love'. After all, it cannot be that there was never any love before Jesus' coming.

‘What it disturbs is turmoil for ever; what it brings to rest remains rest for ever.’

“How beautiful that image is!” I said. “So our baptism in the Jordan is just as eternal.”

“Everything John the Baptist did is love for all eternity. Why should we still be afraid of death?”

“Do you think I should still ask your mother about death? Perhaps I’ll just frighten her, or perhaps not at all?”

“The answer lies at the end of your question. We’re going back, because you’re far too clever a pupil.” He laughed and was already standing up: “Are you coming? We’re going to see Mum before you get cleverer than me.” And he looked at me with mischievous eyes.

“Your smile is still just as infectious as it was when you were a baby,” I replied. He found it funny, but he answered rather seriously: “I smiled at you as a baby because I liked you back then.” On the way back, I kept trying to imagine whether a grown man could really remember what he thought as a baby—if he was even capable of thinking back then—and yet I believed his honest answer. My mind was too small for it, as it was for many of his statements, but my heart convinced me completely, especially when I remembered his father’s voice from heaven at his baptism in the Jordan: ‘He is truly the Son of God.’ How could I myself infallibly fathom the depth of all his deeds and words?

Was I overstepping the mark? I did feel a touch arrogant that evening, and perhaps a bit too curious, although I sensed that he, too, was enjoying my almost childlike openness and boldness – if you could still call it that at my age. Childlike? Well, it's still a lovely feeling… The last rays of the setting sun accompanied us home.

Mary

The next morning, John and Jesus made plans for the coming days. John was to go to the market in Magdala, where many merchants from all corners came to sell their wares and where, consequently, many pack animals were also for sale. At the same time, he could buy food, blankets, candles and oil. John set off for at least four days, and Jesus once again went out with Mary Magdalene to the river. For the time being, no one in our village had noticed that Jesus was at home. I withdrew behind my loom and gave thanks to my son's father. Whatever might happen, I was his handmaid and his will be done, now and always. I had started a new piece depicting the angel with a single tear. It is only much later that one understands why intuition is the most sensitive and accurate guide in one's life. My whole life was like a single teardrop falling from a great height, surrendering itself to the sea.

Mary Magdalene

Jesus and I arrived at the little river once more. The midday sun was shining again and promised all manner of good things. We had been given some food by Mary.

"All night long I kept thinking about the story of the King's Child on the papyrus scrolls of Zacharias.

John the Baptist told me that the fifth scroll is known only to one person and has yet to be written."
I said no more.
I was patient. It was enough for me simply to be here with him. Silence can sometimes be the perfect answer: creating space and allowing time for the person being asked, whilst the questioner learns to be patient. I remained silent and would accept the absence of an answer. He suddenly looked up at an eagle high in the sky, then gazed admiringly and peacefully at the nature around us. Everything was fine for me, and so it was fine for him too. He looked at me: "The story of The King's Child is not a story. It is a pity for humanity that it is not fantasy but reality. I have been sent by my heavenly Father to show humanity where things are going wrong in this old world, so as to offer the world a new beginning." He looked at me with the utmost tenderness, with such sincere compassion and concern for me, as if I were the very embodiment of humanity. It felt uncomfortable, for I felt small rather than chosen.
I asked him why the restoration had to come from the Jews. Were they the easiest or the most difficult pupils?
He didn't need to think twice: "Both: the Jews distinguished themselves from other peoples through their long years of forced slavery and exile

in mighty Egypt. For centuries they had lived longing for their lost land. They begged their Yahweh for deliverance from slavery and for restoration, even if that meant, first and foremost, material restoration alongside a yearning for freedom and self-government. Century after century, prophets proclaimed the promised land. It was my Father who decided, but even He had to wait."

I could follow his reasoning, but I did not understand why such a long wait was acceptable when a people had suffered so terribly for centuries, and I even felt anger rising within me because it also concerned my ancestors who had suffered: "But wait for what, Jesus?" I replied boldly.

He looked at me with gentle, understanding eyes, for he knew I would break with shame after his reply: "My Father had to wait for centuries… for a woman who could be a mother for my Father's plan of salvation for the new humanity."

I was mortified and burst into tears. I felt stupid, so cheeky, so naughty, so ugly, so naive, so… weak. It just poured out. I couldn't stop: with every new thought of my dear friend Mary, I began to weep, for minutes on end, until he embraced me to take away my sorrow and I buried my head against his heart and caught a glimpse of Elizabeth's purple veil. Blood and sea. It worked on me like a medicine, calmed me and brought me back to my senses. Jesus waited patiently until I was completely

calm: “Are you all right? Or would you perhaps like to rest at home?” he asked softly.
“Oh no, dear friend, please… I beg you: go on. I completely agree with your Father: Mary is a unique woman; I sometimes forget that because of her almost spontaneous, natural humility and gentleness. You’ve seen for yourself now that I can get angry with myself…” and I tried to smile through my sobs, but I couldn’t really manage it.
He smiled at me so comfortingly and sweetly that I could have eaten him up: “Please go on, Jesus, with your story of the King’s Child…”
He paused for a moment and asked me: “Who is the child on the sandy path who asks the old King: ‘What are you doing here, so far from your kingdom?’”
I started thinking about this at length, but I couldn’t think it through at all. So I just followed my gut and blurted it out without a second thought: “That was a child with the soul of a king.” I was surprised at myself and at the same time wondered if I was right.
“Correct. And how are newborns welcomed?”
I replied aloud, thinking: “I have never given birth myself, but I was a midwife’s assistant for a while at Euphrosyne: in the first few days after a first birth, a mother doesn’t always have it easy; she is tired from the long pushing and the painful contractions, but eventually, once breastfeeding is going well, you see the mother her child as the greatest treasure on earth

welcome. There are exceptions, of course—women who have been raped, for example. But one could still say that having a child is the most accessible and overwhelming love one can receive in life, or so I imagine. When I held you in my arms back then in Bethlehem, I was immediately filled with love myself. You were my king!"
Jesus looked at me: "You said it yourself: in the old world, most children are still born as kings even now, and so they are truly kings. And what happened to the father of King Prince?"
"He was a king too, but he wanted to acquire more knowledge and insight and even forgot the existence of his child. He sought wisdom and honour and loved to be worshipped." I still didn't understand where he was going with this, but I was very curious.
Jesus continued: "The moment the king realised his failure, the child vanished from the sandy path before his eyes after having levelled the sandcastle to the ground, and he understood that a child's love was more important to regain than all wisdom, honour, fame or wealth. The king suddenly realised that, because of his behaviour, he was no longer worthy of being called a king. The king who could rightly call himself a king was not he, but a king who remained a child until he died. The old man presented himself at the gate of his former kingdom, was no longer recognised, and was locked up in the dungeon. His son died as a

true king and gave his final command to the gatekeeper to bestow his soul as a key upon his errant father, as befits a true king of love to give love. The old gatekeeper gave this key to the old father in the dungeon, and the father immediately felt the love of the child blossoming anew within him and knew himself reborn as a wholly new king: a king in the dungeon who may indeed seem imprisoned, but love fills the entire cosmos. Love raises fallen humanity up, no matter how deep the pit in which they find themselves." I gasped for breath and looked into Jesus' eyes, which sparkled with delight as if he himself were that cosmos. I too felt inwardly joyful as a child, as if at that very moment I myself had been given such a key: "Please, stop for a moment…" I couldn't take any more; it was a poignant love story that moved me so deeply I had to gasp for breath. My eyes had no time to dry. I looked at him through my tears and saw a strange look, as if he were talking to someone. It calmed me: "Dear Jesus, may I try to put it into words myself to make sure I'm still with you?" He nodded.

"We are rightly welcomed like kings at our birth. Or no, we really are kings. To be able to die like kings, must we continue to cherish that child within us?"

“You’re right. I am now the child on the sandy path. More than that, I am the child within you, within every person. Later on in the story, I’ll be given a heavier burden.”

“I’d really love to be your child or your mother, but I don’t understand. Not again…” I said, somewhat shyly.

It moved him, and he gave me some time. He asked if I was all right. I nodded yes, and he continued softly: “The fourth papyrus scroll ends with the end of the old world, with the ancient, purified king chained up in the dungeon, whilst up above, the world is in utter chaos under the leadership of a cunning sorcerer. But the masks are falling: the devilish sorcerer Belial rules the world, but the soul of the child within the imprisoned king remains intact. The battle is not lost. The fifth papyrus scroll tells the story of the ultimate battle between good and evil for the heart of every human being. Just as the devil already reigned above ground, so a child would truly come with a passion and love for the heart of every human being.”
I looked at him fearlessly, as if I could correct him: “Would there be? There might be? I know him! From the moment he was born. I saw how angels, a star and three wise men paid him homage; I know his mother; just the day before yesterday I was sitting with his brother at the neighbours’ talking about his miracles as a child; I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve it, but I love him dearly.” I looked him in the

eyes, but he quietly turned his gaze to the side, where a couple were washing their children across the river whilst they played, and he spoke almost shyly: “I love all people, Mary Magdalene.”

We both fell silent and watched the scene across the river together, captivated: the children playing together, the laughter, the silliness, seeing the parents happy; it was simple yet utterly precious.
Jesus, the child of the king in the new world, mused aloud: “Whoever does not become like a child will not enter the Kingdom of my Father, and that kingdom[52]of love is within you and is immortal, and acts as a mirror—honest and strict, but above all so loving that Belial no longer has any hold over events.”

I understood it completely now. Only with trust and love for my fellow human beings can I reach the sea, and once I reach the sea, I am like the sea. Just as Mary already is.

He stood up and held out his hand to me: “It’s getting late.” I hugged him briefly, just as a child hugs a parent. At that very moment, it began to rain softly. He raised his head to the sky and savoured the raindrops, stretching out his hands to catch them in both

[52] That ‘kingdom of love within us’ represents the divine grace that is potentially present in every human being and awaits us.

palm and stepped carefully into the river with the drops in his hands, offering them to the river and watching them on their journey to the infinite sea. I followed his example; deep emotion overwhelmed me and a tear mingled with the raindrops, and I felt that happiness and love may also cause a gentle pain. A gentle pain to make one feel that it remains a task and that man does not determine what the sea is or is not. It seemed to me no bad idea to discuss it with Maria, a drop of the sea.
"May I speak to your mother about all this?"
"Certainly, it's nothing new to her."

Everything that happened that afternoon was of such great simplicity, intensity and wisdom that it still gives me goosebumps, and that day by the little river marked a turning point in my life. Yet at the same time, I still cannot understand why I was suddenly overcome by a fear that instantly swept away all sense of calm. I could not keep it to myself, and my frightened eyes began to speak: "Zacharias was murdered, John the Baptist was murdered, do you feel no fear? I hope your father will at least spare you…" came the desperate plea. It was pure despair, and despair is rarely a good counsellor. "My Father kills neither man nor beast nor insect," came the stern reply, "only Belial kills. In the Old World, Yahweh appears to be a punishing and avenging god; my Father, on the other hand, gives only life and does not kill. On the contrary?

He suffers along with the suffering of mankind. The raindrops are also His tears."

"Forgive me, is that a silly question? For I do not know your Father. Is your Father not Yahweh, then?"

"My name, *Jesus,* means 'Yahweh who saves' and not 'Yahweh who kills'. The true Yahweh is the Father, the Son and the Spirit, but we are not the Yahweh inspired by Belial! I am the son of the Father and Mary. I restore life to the dead." He hammered this point home once more to ensure I could never doubt it again and looked at me intently.

"But are there two Yahwehs, then?" I was completely confused.

"There is a Belial who disguises himself as Yahweh. Many dishonest storytellers, and later writers too, guided by Belial, have been misusing the name of Yahweh ever since the very first creation story involving Adam and Eve. Belial's greatest triumph was to find, at a crucial moment for him, a suitable human male accomplice and influential leader on earth who manipulated this story amongst humanity in order to oppress women by henceforth burdening them with all the blame. Belial misused my Father's story of Eden. Belial's altered version spread like wildfire, particularly amongst an extremely vulnerable people in exile, where deeply disappointed, powerless men seized every opportunity to regain full dominion over women. In essence,

It was the man's jealousy of the woman's ability to bear children, whilst the man was treated as a slave by the Egyptians, felt deeply humiliated, and yet had to look up to the woman for that which no devil could rob her of: bringing new life into the world. Belial's aim was clear and deadly: the equality between man and woman in Eden had to be broken, and the man had to rule over the woman. She had to be submissive to her husband, for she was to blame for the fall of mankind from the false story of Eden and would remain to blame until the end of time. Belial added something that no human has since dared even to question: Cain had children without a wife. From then on, all of humanity would accept this unquestioningly, without a single doubt; indeed, they dared not challenge it because the story of Eden had become 'sacred'. It was a joke by Belial and was Belial at his best: laughing humanity in the face, unashamedly mocking its stupidity and getting away with it, gloriously, century after century. The manipulated story of Eden was immediately declared sacred by the first priests—male priests, of course—and women were merely allowed to bear children in the hope that there would be many boys among them. It was a celebration of hubris: the man lost his gentleness and the woman lost her voice. There were only a few prophets in the ancient world who warned humanity of the coming of a Saviour who

would deliver them from Belial's bondage, whilst Belial ensured that the exiled people believed it was all about their deliverance from physical slavery in Egypt. Even Moses, with the best of intentions, was blinded. Rest assured, Mary Magdalene, the Yahweh as He was presented to mankind by Belial is not my Father. My Father is Love and kills neither Egyptian nor Jew. My Father has the power to kill Belial, but true Love does not wish to act against true Love. On the contrary, my Father is still waiting for Belial, His lost son."

I was startled and delighted at the same time: I was a woman, and how often had I felt that my brothers took precedence in everything. Zacharias and Joseph were just in their dealings with women, but at the market it was often different: when a man arrived at a stall, he was always served first unless he himself gave me priority. The more beautiful you were, the easier it was. He looked at me with a smile and asked: "Why do you think I am not a daughter of my Father here on earth? As a woman, I would not be accepted as the Saviour and I would be stoned immediately."

I wondered: "Is that what you meant by the negative power of ignorance? That at this moment, not a single man or woman realises that the story of Eden has been falsified, and that the man bears just as much blame as the woman for their expulsion from Eden?"

“Exactly, neither man nor woman realises that the current story is untrue. Thus Belial’s triumph is complete. Belial disguised himself as a Yahweh of Love to make the woman a slave to her husband in the manipulated creation story of Eden. For thousands of years, the man has wallowed in innocence by eternally shifting the blame onto her conscience, thereby ruling over her. There is no greater danger than a religion that does not strive for pure love and the equality of one’s fellow human beings. Belial wanted to fundamentally mutilate my Father’s creation, and in that he succeeded.”
I was shaken to the core: “I see this as a terrible abuse of women, but also an abuse of God’s true love. It makes me very angry: so many centuries of misery, so much pain – this is true slavery!” “The way you’re reacting now is exactly wrong: anger doesn’t help you; on the contrary, it paralyses your love, and love is precisely the reason for your existence. You’re killing the most important thing within yourself. That, too, is part of Belial’s plan: that if the plan were to succeed, the woman would settle the score with the man. That is why my Father intervened in such a way that Belial’s plan would not succeed either, and equality between man and woman would be restored in a fair and pure manner. This ignorance must be filled with love and mutual respect.”

There was a moment of silence between us, and I needed time to let it all sink in. Jesus was right: ultimately

The man in question was, after all, just another victim who had never asked for this. On the other hand, it was only fair that the man should take steps to accept equality and his duties, and at the very least cease to behave as if he were superior or merely superficially equal. Jesus read my thoughts: “It is not the intention to pit woman against man. We must ensure at all costs that Belial cannot abuse these corrections again. The man must find the woman, and the woman must find the man, just as they lived in Eden as one unity.”

Still, it seemed to me that things were moving a bit too slowly in that case. “I would like to become a new person as soon as possible, just as you are, and just as John the Baptist is.” His eyes softened again: “You are already a new person, for you were baptised by John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, daughter of Lott and Levi: your name is written forever in the palm of my Father’s hand. You just need to shake off the old garment by gaining greater insight, and only then can you have your new garment fitted, step by step. But I tell you this now: you are on the right path, do not doubt, do not hesitate, do not be afraid, have faith and fall like a raindrop, passionately from high up in the clouds to a puddle, from a stream to a river; do not be afraid of the waterfalls, fall and rest for a moment in a lake, but do not doubt: travel on, for the reward is great, and let yourself be welcomed together with millions of drops like children into a sea of Peace

and Silence, so that we might all be one in the sea, and thus become like the sea."

It felt as though I was being baptised by him once more in a puddle. It didn't bother me that I was now merely in a puddle, for I was determined to become the sea. That led me, strangely enough, to my next question, and I no longer felt any fear of asking what might be silly questions.

"Where did that sudden surge of anger and despair come from within me just now, Jesus? Are those sins?" I asked, though no longer in despair, for I now felt that learning from failure could be extremely beneficial.

"Your question shows just how much progress you have already made, dear Mary Magdalene. Sins do not exist as long as you yourself make amends for your mistakes by acknowledging that you were wrong in your own eyes, and that you do not seek excuses outside yourself. I emphasise the word 'yourself'. The enemy lies within the human being and not outside them, just as I myself am within you, but more on that later. Evil does not exist as such. Sin is merely the denial of the good within yourself by yourself. Another person is not, or never is, responsible for it, and consequently you must not designate the other as your enemy or treat them as such. Love judges only itself and for itself, and not another. You are your own enemy only to yourself. A person of love sees love in every person and nothing else; they know no 'yes, but'. Accountability for actions that are against love does not exist and is of people, but not of

Love, just as my Father and now also my mother consist entirely of love. I am the Son, and as the Son, I too must learn. The miracles I am permitted to perform can only be done at a moment when I am one with my Father. I alone do not possess that power; apparently, I only receive it when all three of us are one: Father, Spirit and Son. I have learnt to sense whether, at that moment, I am capable of restoring a person's life or not, of healing people of their illnesses, of enabling the blind to see, and the lame to walk. The most important feeling in this regard is humility; I must be the servant of the Lord and not the Lord myself, just as my mother had to be a handmaid of the Lord. Just as my Father wishes to be a servant to every person who recognises him as Father.
Tomorrow I shall teach you about the four foundations of evil in every human being: anger, ignorance, darkness and desire; each with their false reasoning: think about them tonight in bed and try to unmask their false reasoning… You already know the most important things about ignorance. It is a learning process, but you will be alright. Cherish the night with your eyes closed and look with an open mind."
"I don't want to correct false reasoning with equally false reasoning; that frightens me. How do I break out of such a cycle?"

"Ask me and pray as follows: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, I do this in Your name, but please, correct me[53] if I am wrong.'"
I nodded, relieved.
We got home… and I went to bed very early to give Mary and Jesus the chance to speak to one another.
I closed my eyes and let his words echo in my head: anger, ignorance, darkness and desire; each with their false reasoning… and correct me when I am wrong…

Mary

I immediately noticed a difference between how Mary Magdalene left with Jesus in the morning and how she came in that evening. A sense of calm had come over her.
"Did you manage to speak to her about the fifth papyrus scroll?"
"I've told her the background to it and she's ready to hear it from you, but wait a little while until I've moved on with John. She's strong and can handle it. Tomorrow I'll set off with her again to teach her more. She's clever and eager to learn and has everything it takes to teach others herself later on. Am I leaving you too much on your own?"
"No, not at all. I'm not alone. Come and have a look at my loom…"

[53] This wisdom comes from the Orthodox Church.

My son exclaimed: “Enoch! Magnificent!” He kissed his fingertips and reverently touched the angel’s head… and immediately a single tear welled up from its right eye, which instantly dried into the woollen fabric, softening the colour. I bent down and kissed the tear. My son embraced me, cheek to cheek, and our hearts melted together. I closed my eyes and he closed his eyes. Time was kind to us and was in no hurry to begin a new day. Like two intertwined statues, we merged into one image of love. I carried him and he carried me, and neither of us grew weary. Nothing crossed my mind. We were one kingdom of love. The mother carried the child and the child carried the mother.
Only at the first light of dawn did we gently let go of each other and begin the day by drinking tea together. We felt no lack of sleep.

Mary Magdalene came in, and Jesus and I looked at each other immediately. I stood up and straight away prepared a cup of ginger tea for her. Not long after, both of them went out the door, and I sat down at my loom. The shuttle directed the warp threads into heavenly songs.

Mary Magdalene

My bed was a mess from all the tossing and turning. Yesterday was so lovely, too lovely to start a new day. Fear, the fear of failure, of losing everything again. I couldn't make head nor tail of my homework on the four powers. Suddenly, I had no grip on anything. The more I wanted to hold on to it, the more it slipped through my fingers. Yesterday I was absolutely certain that from then on I could never lose anything again, that my new life had begun. But it was fear that crept in: what if, in the coming days, Jesus were to continue his mission in the world and I could no longer ask him questions? Yesterday I had been allowed to behold the beauty of the world like a raindrop from the very top and, as I fell, to hear the wind singing its welcome song, deep within my mind. I was gently caught by a swaying honeysuckle leaf that gifted me its scent and let me glide softly downwards. There I was given a festive welcome in an incredibly cute little stream, where tiny insects felt as though they were in a lake. However much I might wish it, my soul could never be part of the divine sea.

I got up and sat down at the kitchen table, and it was as if I saw no one. I saw only two motionless, 'unknown' shadows in front of me. I remained in

no man's land and stared at a cup of tea. The certainty of yesterday seemed to have vanished. The only thing I was still certain of was that cup of tea standing there. I begged for tears, but they wouldn't come. Something inside me had built a dam, and I'd only managed to reach a trickle.
Jesus spoke softly to me in the presence of his mother: "Remember this for the rest of your life: I am within you; I am like a child within you. You reach the sea step by step; you learn step by step. Every time you fall, you must prepare for your next fall; in this way, your Nous[54]grows ever greater and your soul climbs ever higher on its path to my Father. Two steps forward, one step back, and so on. It requires courage time and again, Mary Magdalene. Every day a new beginning." And he picked up the cup of tea intended for me and handed it to me. I took a sip. His warm voice worked wonders. I took another sip, took a deep breath and closed my eyes: "I feel as though I am trapped in a physical body, and when I die, everything disappears. Can we, ordinary people, really become children of God like you

[54] The Gnostic (gnosis = knowledge through revelation) is a seeker whose *Nous* (the faculty of knowing) is convinced that he does not belong in this world but with God, yet whose soul (psyche) is simultaneously held back on the path to his divine destiny by four powers: ignorance, desire, anger and darkness. In the following paragraphs, I give a brief example of each power in the form of a question and answer between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. I shall begin with ignorance.

“Are you his son? It feels as though I can never become a child of God, just as you are a child of him.”
Jesus replied: “Think of the old king in the story of the King’s Child, how he had strayed far away and had to find his way back to rediscover the child within himself. Yet his child was always within him, just as I am always within you.”
I continued with my eyes closed and was glad I didn’t have to open them, for I was deeply ashamed of what followed: “I am jealous because I am not of divine descent like you. I envy you. It seems easier to me to be a god than a human. Why can’t we all be gods?” I felt ashamed during this outburst, but it was a choice: to be hypocritical or to be honest.
Jesus replied: “Jealousy is deadly to the love from which you were born and which lovingly awaits you. You are already of divine origin, Mary Magdalene. Love yourself, love your fellow human beings, love your heart and soul, for this love precedes you in the reunion with divine love. Every human being has everything within them to attain divine grace.”
I felt even more rebellious now: “I am angry, very angry, because at this moment I am receiving no proof or reassurance whatsoever that I have a soul capable of ascending to God. Is that what love is, to let a person struggle and suffer like this?”

Jesus replied: “Do not let your mind enslave you. The raindrop does not think, but falls. I am within you; follow me on the path to the Father. Have faith. I am the way and I stand here before you: use me, but use your anger only against your anger. Your anger serves only against your anger.” I was startled by the intensity of his words, from which I could sense an immense concern and love for me. I was moved by it and it felt like healing balm on an open wound. I continued: “I was just about to say that when I die, only darkness remains, which can show or teach my soul nothing more, if a soul even exists. That is what I wanted to say, but I already feel myself that this is not true, that this is a trap, for you are always within me, dead or alive.” I sobbed: “May I open my eyes, please?”
Jesus embraced me and held me close as he spoke softly into my ear: “Keep your eyes closed for a moment longer, Mary Magdalene. I want to teach you how to see without your eyes. You cannot see me now, but you know for certain that I am near you because you can feel me. You cannot help but feel me now. I will let go of you for a moment and take just one step back.” And he let me go and was silent for a moment. “You know for certain that I am still here, even though you cannot see me. Now think of a question without saying it out loud and wait with your eyes closed.” And he was silent and I sat there, still with my eyes closed. I could no longer hear anything around me, not even Mary. Was I even still in Mary’s house? It took a while. Oh yes, I was terribly curious to know how things were going with

Rebecca and Hannah. It went on and on, so I sat down on the floor for a moment, keeping my eyes closed. I waited. I thought I heard a door open and some shuffling, and I felt him come and sit beside me. “Open your eyes, Mary Magdalene. I’ve brought something for you.” I opened my eyes and had to get used to the light. I could still see Mary sitting at the table. He waited a moment and first showed me a long strand of Rebecca’s brown-black hair, then a lovely blonde strand from Hannah, and then, yes, a tuft of black hair. I threw my arms round his neck! I didn’t care whether he liked it or not. I was over the moon. Jesus and Mary had to laugh. “Has Rebecca met a man?”

“The man’s name is Samuel [55]and they are expecting a baby.” He waited a moment until I had calmed down a little and brought me back to the point: “Only if you have faith in me can I be the light for you in your darkness. I know your soul, and your soul will recognise me in the darkness, but cannot follow me without difficulty. It was only because you persisted in keeping your eyes closed in trust, as I asked you to, that I was able to answer your question. Darkness begs for trust so that it may become light. Every person knows the light of the sun, day and night. No one need doubt that. Spiritual darkness and light are no different. Trust in my love for humanity is the sun. Distrust in my love is the darkness. Darkness

[55] *Samuel* means ‘God has heard’.

conceals evil. Darkness is the least aggressive of the four opposing forces, but precisely because of that, it is the most difficult to discern. Darkness waits patiently for a night with a hidden moon. But you knew this already, from previous conversations, that I can read your thoughts, and yet you still did not take my word for it. One day you will be given the immensely difficult task of conveying all this to other seekers."

His gentle voice pierced the final darkness. My spiritual eyes opened and my raindrop fell into a river.

Maria stood up and asked softly, "Would you like some more tea?" She didn't wait for an answer and began pouring. "A little sugar? I've got something tasty too." Nothing seemed to have changed about her. I suddenly realised how much higher she stood spiritually than I did, and yet she remained so modest and kind towards me. Mary had lived like this since she was a child and mastered the four stumbling blocks without a second thought. What had I done to deserve being allowed to stay so close to them? I was already laughing to myself at this wrong, dark thought; I looked at Jesus and he winked back at me with a smile, 'I saw that'. After a while, Jesus stood up: 'Come, let's take a short walk through the village.' He embraced his mother and we left the house together. Mary walked after me for a moment, took hold of me and whispered: "Thank you for your love," and she turned back. I was rooted to the spot: can a person who is love itself in every way be any more humble? Much later

: true humility is the very essence of true love.

We passed the first neighbours and before we knew it, the whole neighbourhood had gathered around us. Jesus' fame was impossible to hide in Nazareth. We were bombarded with so many questions, and many people thought we were a couple, even though I looked quite a bit older than the man in his thirties; but in all honesty, I must admit that, as a man in my forties, I wasn't looking too bad either. It flattered my vanity, but I brushed it off with humour: "In Magdala, there lives a good quack."

Jesus and I simply carried on walking. We passed the house of Annas, who had since passed away, but his son Ethan now lived there with his wife and children. Ethan came out: "Hello Jesus, I want to apologise once again for what I did back then, wasting that precious water in my father's garden, and yes, it was quite a shock when you turned me into a bush. I still tell my children when they're naughty that I'll go and find you, but you're here now…" Suddenly, his four children came rushing out from behind him, giggling shyly. Jesus crouched down in front of them and they all jumped around his neck and onto his back at once, tugging at his arms and legs. There was tickling, laughter, ear-pulling, shouting, 'Ouch!', 'No!', pulling funny faces, 'Don't do that!', tugging at his beard, giggling. Ethan and I lay there, exhausted from the

Laughter: the king's son in the midst of a crisis! Jesus barely survived the attack, and Ethan embraced him: "This is my revenge for your bush, my dear friend." We carried on. Two lanes further on, he suddenly stopped at a house and looked up at the high roof. "This is where…" he began, but the door flew open: "Jesus! My dearest friend! What a surprise!" Nothing surprised me anymore. "Mary Magdalene, this is Zeno[56], one of my better friends," he winked ostentatiously at me. Zeno protested: "Better? 'Very best' friend, yes! I owe my life to him!" And Zeno immediately began to explain to me that as a child he had fallen from the roof and died, and that Jesus had brought him back to life whilst playing. Zeno looked at me and then back at Jesus: "Are you two getting married? I wish you both at least as much happiness as I have." And he was referring to his wife and his lovely children. Jesus replied: "I am married, if you like to put it that way, to every human being, Zeno. I love all people." Zeno knelt before him and asked him to bless his family. Zeno's children and wife followed his example, and Jesus laid his hand on each of their heads and called each by name. I watched, moved, and knelt before him as well. He then helped me to my feet and whispered: "Let's go to the river." His blessings, however, caused a chain reaction in the village: many people followed the

[56] Also taken from the same apocryphal writings.

An example from Zeno's family. It made a deep impression on me and greatly strengthened my faith: "He is truly the Son of God." Later I learnt how fond his neighbourhood was of him, but the rest of the town not at all; there they even wanted to drive him away because of statements he had made in the synagogue when he was younger. There is no 'prophet' in one's own country.

It took a while before we reached the river. Once there, the people showed respect by giving us some peace and quiet. We were alone again.

"May I ask you a question?" I thought that was the best question to start with, because my respect and love for him were growing by the day after everything I had already been able to see and learn.

He looked at me and nodded.

"We keep talking about the spirit, but what about the body? I am a woman; I was created to bear children. Suppose I don't have a child – have I failed?" "To answer this, we must return to the story of Eden. The version Belial presented was very cleverly constructed in that it reinforced the image of how Yahweh created woman as a separate entity from the man's flesh: on the one hand, it is a beautiful image of unity, equality and unbreakable mutual love; on the other hand, the man would then have to share responsibility for the woman's mistake and stand up for his wife, his equal, for a mistake between two equals is immediately a shared mistake. And

But the cunning Belial ensures precisely that does not happen in his version of my Father's story, for then the man could not continue to be portrayed as the victim of the woman's mistake in the centuries to come. As a result, the woman is doomed to endure her punishment, reproaches and oppression for all eternity, and is thus reduced to nothing more than a womb for bearing children. And then Belial sends himself upon them as a Yahweh in sheep's clothing and ruthlessly drives them out of the paradisiacal Eden—a God of love utterly unworthy of such an act—and thus Belial perpetuates the seemingly innocent man's role as victim for all eternity, as a consequence of his foolish wife's irreparable mistake, and so the man regards her as his property. So much for Belial's disastrous and twisted tale of Eden, which to this day is recorded as the divine story of Eden. The true divine story of Eden is quite different: Nature[57] in Eden is the pure root of the absolute good, where the Father generously shares his divine grace with his creation, but whatever man thinks he can create with it through adaptations, decrees, rules of honour and

[57] 'Nature with its pure root' is indeed mentioned by this very name in the Gospel of Mary Magdalene (EvMar 7, 5–8) and draws its source from the teachings of Marcus Aurelius' Stoicism and Platonism. In my personal view, it amounts to the same as the pure Eden from the first book of the trilogy, second chapter 'Eden' on page 23.
In short: Nature = Pure Love with which every human being is born.

Glory leads only to suffering or confusion. Nature itself will one day dissolve and correct this, returning it to its root, to its pure first beginning and purpose: crystal-clear love. Nature regards the mistakes made—whether consciously or unconsciously—against love as adultery and deceit. Sin does not exist in itself, but arises solely from this adultery or betrayal of the good. In the true divine Eden, there was no sin as long as Man and Woman were one in the pure root of Nature. All suffering and confusion stems from the anti-nature, caused by humankind itself. That is why I address humankind today: be of one heart, and mix that pure heart with nothing: no rules, no hierarchy[58] , no schemes, no self-love, no lust for power, no deceit, and sin shall not exist. I repeat your question: 'I am a woman; I was created to bear children. Suppose I do not have a child, have I then failed?' My answer: there is no rule that you must have children or must not have them. There is only one rule: love one another, regardless of gender." Jesus was silent and looked ahead

Nevertheless, I felt more connected to the faults he mentioned than to the good. Apparently, I was doing something wrong. Not because of him, but because of myself. I was

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[58] The word 'hierarchy' derives from the Greek word *hierarchia*, which literally means 'sacred order' or 'sacred rule'. It is composed of the Greek words *hieros* ('sacred') and *archein* ('to lead' or 'to rule'), which together denote a divine or sacred structure of power and authority. The key question is whether these two words are not a contradiction in terms.

Desperate inside, I fought against it, but couldn't shake it off. I scraped together every scrap of courage I could muster and began: "May I ask you one more question, a difficult one for me…"
"Of course, Mary Magdalene. Don't be afraid." It felt as though He already knew what I was going to ask. So I just blurted it out: "What?… What?…What am I to do about being in love? I am deeply in love with you. I think of you every second, I would like to be with you every moment, I cannot be without you, I want to kiss you, bear your child, I can no longer think clearly. I think any woman would fall in love with you. Is that then… is that then adultery of love? Is that self-love?"
I didn't dare look him in the eye; it was hard enough that He could see into my heart.
"Your love for me is sincere and is therefore love. Just as my love for you is sincere, but there is a great difference in nature between us. Your purely human nature is not like my divine nature. I shall try to explain it to you from the perspective of your nature: my Father remained concerned for his creatures and would not be Love himself if he did not offer fallen humanity a means of help; otherwise, all knowledge of love would vanish. He granted them the capacity to fall in love. The main characteristic of falling in love is its selfless, natural love that requires hardly any effort and seems to be eternally guaranteed. This blissful state between two free people demonstrates

a glimpse of the lost Eden. Amidst the many terrible wars between peoples, human infatuation often bears witness to the Edenic love of yore and remains a source of the urge to survive and overcome evil. Without infatuation, humanity could not and will not survive outside Eden. But – and there is a but – fallen humanity falls in love with another fallen human being, and whilst this is, of course, a rich gift, it is extremely rare for a person to be able to preserve this heavenly gift completely intact, because sooner or later it becomes a verb. Almost every infatuation sooner or later loses its self-evident nature and must, through trial and error, re-adapt to love; I would almost say 'reinvent' it, even though this word is incorrect, for love has never been absent. It is a direct aftershock of the fall of humankind in Eden, with which even the most severe earthquakes on earth cannot be compared. Only the man and woman of the couple in love who seek the cause of the loss of infatuation solely within themselves and not in their partner can survive their earthquake and still sustain their love."

He fell silent and I fell silent, and I suddenly felt calmer thanks to the insight I had gained. I rested my head on his shoulder and knew that I could do this now without asking, because I had by now learnt that he could read my thoughts, that I understood he had already given me all his love and I needed to expect nothing more. I received

At the same time, the following thought occurred to me: I receive all his love, but what could I possibly lose? What is the deepest sorrow a person can feel? He answered the question without my even having to ask it: “Grief over the death of a child.” I fell silent and remembered my three murdered little brothers. I was no longer overwhelmed by thoughts of a ‘longing for love’ or of ‘loss’, but began to experience a sense of peace, peace in the silence. It seemed as though I now felt love for him like an ancient woman with no further desire for children who had lived with him for years. I felt freed from my infatuation in exchange for a love for him that was no less pure. I looked back at him and in his gaze I saw a glimmer from which I understood that he could indeed read my thoughts. I no longer needed to ask him the next question verbatim, and I did not do so, but for the reader’s sake I have no choice but to write the question down here: “Jesus, can you read the thoughts of every person?” He replied that he could: “When people accept me inwardly as Christ or the Son of God, Belial is immediately absent and nothing stands in the way.”

He decided: “I shall now speak from my divine nature. I love all people; even when I perceive the devilish forces within the Pharisees, I love them because they are victims of a lack of insight into and knowledge of the four powers: anger, darkness, ignorance and desire. Oh yes, every person bears ultimate responsibility for this, but I have come to

to show them that they must not follow these evil forces, and to make it clear to them that every human being possesses within themselves the power to counteract these evil forces. If I am already able to love them as the Son of Man, as a son of man and God, how could my purely divine Father, who is Love, not himself feel love and compassion for all the descendants of the fallen Adam and Eve? I am sent by Him to be the Lamb for the Passover. That is my mission. Dear Mary Magdalene, do not try to understand this just yet: everything on earth has its time."

I didn't really have the slightest idea at the time what 'the lamb for the Passover feast' meant. I didn't know much about Jewish rituals. My father was a Zealot and my mother, brother and sisters were murdered by the Romans; I was the only one to survive. It was difficult, if not impossible, for me to like the Romans. I wanted to ask Jesus another question straight away, but he beat me to it again: "The difference between your nature and my divine nature is that I was not merely born of the descendants of the fallen Adam and Eve. My Father waited centuries for a woman as pure as Eve from Eden. For him, it was like waiting for a single drop from the sea. Romantic love passes me by, for I love all people equally. You could say that I am in love with all people, but no human can understand this. With you, I can speak openly about this, just as I could speak about it with my mother or with Joseph, may he rest in peace. But

‘When I meet people on the street, I must adapt and speak the language they understand. No one can hide their inner self from me, nor can they feign, and no one can know my inner self, except my Father.’ He gazed silently into the distance. However, I was startled by the words ‘unless my Father’. And why not his mother too? I thought, but I received no answer from him at that moment. It was only much later, beneath the cross, that I understood why: he wanted to spare us both, Mary and me. I accepted it at the time and did not press the matter further.

“That adaptation, as you just said, to the language of fallen humanity—could that also be expressed in actions? I am now thinking back to how we, Mary and I, were horrified when we heard that you had driven the merchants out of the temple. Was there something other than anger behind it? Can anger be an expression of love?”

“No, that cannot be and is impossible. It proves that I too am partly descended from fallen man, despite the fact that my mother walks a blameless path from which I can learn everything that is human. I can speak for my Father, for this was certainly not what my Father had in mind.”

For me, too, it has been a process of growth and adaptation in my dual role as a part of humanity within a part of God. I remember how, when I violently drove those merchants out, it caused me such pain inside – something I had never felt before as a human being. My spirit and body rebelled within me, showing no mercy towards myself. And rightly so. It reveals the true nature of my Father that He too, who suffers as I suffer, continues to love every fallen human being eternally. The miracles I am permitted to perform I can only do at a moment when I am one with my Father. I myself do not possess that power; apparently, it is only made available to me when my Father and I are both one in one and the same spirit. Since my childhood [60], through trial and error, I have learnt to sense whether, at that moment, I am capable of healing a person or even restoring their life, or not. The most important feeling in this regard is humility: I may be the Father's servant, just as my mother is the Father's handmaid. Or just as my Father wishes to be a servant to every person who gratefully acknowledges Him as their Father. Without the Father, I am nothing, and neither is man. Furthermore, I also

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[59] Despite the confusion this duality seems to create, it is precisely this quality that makes God both accessible and human, yet divine. It breathes life into our intuition and our longing to keep searching for Eden.

[60] Note how this seems to be in complete contradiction to, for example, the earlier story of Ethan and the bush in the apocryphal gospels. It is a fine example of how contradictory some miracles appear when one assumes that there was no evolution involving trial and error.

never beheld the Holy of Holies itself. And rightly so."

Evening fell quickly. The little birds sought out their roosts. And with the silence came a sense of peace. I reflected on the three days we had spent in such close company. We had both laid ourselves bare to one another. I had received an answer to everything. But one unresolved question continued to puzzle me, and just as I was about to ask it, Jesus paused, sat down, looked up at the sky and began to speak of it himself: "The King with the soul of a child returns to the world to save it, and will be crucified by mankind." I paused for a moment, though not out of surprise. His noble countenance in the golden light of the full moon betrayed his royal lineage. His admiring eyes gazed rapturously into the depths of the universe. I gently traced the lines of his face with my fingertips and professed my faith to him: "You who possess the power and strength of love and set yourself as an example to mankind that no man has the right to kill an enemy unless the enemy forces within myself—you who are within me—can never die." I gave him a single kiss on his forehead and needed no tears, for a parting between us could never be. It would have been the last profound conversation between us, even though Mary and I would continue to follow him from a distance.

We arrived home and there were three donkeys, packed and ready, standing by the house. John had arrived!

Mary

I was a bit taken aback, as I could hardly believe that John was already back. He laughed at my surprise: “Look, Mother, I’ve come back with three champions. Let me introduce them to you: Oz, Uz and Az. Thanks to God, I was able to buy them right at the start of my journey from a cattle dealer who was also on his way to Magdala, which meant I didn’t have to walk any further myself and I could regularly switch between the animals so that we arrived in Magdala quickly. Let me introduce them: this is Az; he’s not the fastest but certainly the sweetest, and he listens best to a kind woman—and that’s you, my dear mother. This is Oz, and he’s perfect for Mary Magdalene: he’s got a bit more spirit but is still quite docile. And Uz is the most stubborn but also the strongest, and so ideal as a pack animal for the food supplies for the other apostles, as you can see.” He wanted to hand me the remaining gold, but I refused: “Help the poor along the way, John.” A little later we were sitting at the table and Jesus and Mary Magdalene joined us. John gave an account of his journey to Magdala. Mary Magdalene asked one question after another: where exactly John had been, where he had slept, where he had eaten. They were all my children. And Djibril was there too, for I found

a loaf of bread by my loom this afternoon. Jesus was the first to rise and go to his bed.
What he did for Mary Magdalene during those three days, he did just as much for me, so that after his death I might have a true friend by my side who could understand me.
Without my two beloved sons, the house would seem empty tomorrow, but it would never be empty. Maria Magdalena and Djibril were still there.

Mary Magdalene

Now that I knew in the morning that I would be saying goodbye to John and Jesus, I wasn't overcome by a sense of heaviness; on the contrary: I fluttered about like a purple butterfly and could think of nothing better than to get up before dawn to prepare everything for breakfast and pack provisions for the journey, so that Mary would have nothing left to do and would have plenty of time to say goodbye to John and Jesus. I was happy to take the donkeys along, for they reminded me with gratitude of Lem, Hannah and Rebecca with her Samuel and the baby on the way. I had gathered their locks of hair together to keep them in a single pouch made of Elizabeth's purple fabric. I would take it with me everywhere, and every evening I would give the little bag a goodnight kiss, and I still do that today. I didn't necessarily need to see them again, for they were always with me. Everything was ready, the table was set, and I went outside to sit on the bench and enjoyed the sun rising gently and the birds' welcoming chorus.

A sense of peace had come over me since our conversations. The certainty that He could never be absent from me, and that I could always find Him within myself and always call upon Him, was a heavenly feeling. Getting to know the four powers that had to be fought in all their smallest facets was the key to love – love for your fellow human beings, but also love for yourself. And only then did I understand how I could never again get lost or fail to survive in the vastest desert. I no longer needed a stone temple, no rules or rituals, nor grand gestures, save for that one message: overcome the darkness, the anger, the desire and your ignorance in your deepest thoughts, and thus you will know no enemy more, and your soul will become a temple of love where God Himself dwells within you and where each of your fellow human beings who visit you will gladly linger.

I had received, and from now on it was a matter of giving.

Mary Magdalene

The day after Jesus and John had set off before dawn with the two donkeys, and Mary and I had waved them off, we sat alone at the table for the first time. Mary saw how deeply their departure had affected me, and I was surprised that it did not affect her in the same way. On the contrary, she served me as if I were her superior, but of course that was not the case: she seemed immensely happy with the change I had undergone after three days of conversations with Jesus. I could not bear to see it and threw myself at her feet on the floor. She gently pulled me to my feet and embraced me maternally. I whispered in her ear: “Tell me about your life, how did you become so strong?”

Mary

I whispered back: “You three days, I my whole life.” After all, in the Holy of Holies I had learnt how time became timeless and how, time and again, second by second, I caught a glimpse of eternity, which grew ever more eternal. I could not explain any more than that to her. I could only feel it myself, but could not put it into words for my fellow human being: every word for it is too weak, too insignificant. The only thing I could say was that she was on the right track, and that I said

I loved her too, even though this did not satisfy her hunger and seemed to her merely a word of comfort. My son was about to climb a mountain of immense difficulty, bearing the burden of all humanity on his shoulders, and before he set out, he wanted, like a concerned son, to entrust me with a dear friend who could empathise with my sorrow and truly share in my suffering. Mary Magdalene, alongside Djibril, as would later be proven, was, as it were, his parting gift to me, ensuring that his departure from earth could not possibly be felt by me as despair. My son had lifted a corner of the veil on the Father's entire plan of salvation, and I was given someone by my side who could understand that little bit just as well. I suddenly thought back to Dismas and Gestas, the two robbers during our flight to Egypt, the good and the bad, but what might the 'bad' Gestas not have experienced in his youth? At that moment, I myself could not make the connection between the two robbers and my musings about Mary Magdalene and myself. Perhaps the good and the bad robber were actually each other's best friends?

Mary Magdalene

I suddenly heard myself telling her my thoughts out loud: "Jesus told me quite calmly that he, the king's son, would be crucified." Mary merely nodded and I continued: "His brief statement felt to me like a strange matter of course. I reacted

Hardly, for it had become clear to me in recent days that he is within me, and that image can never be crucified; he can never die within me." I was astonished at myself. "On the other hand, I cannot deny that I am afraid to witness something so terrible." Mary came to me, embraced me and whispered: "You have given the answer to your own question. He cannot indeed die. Remember his miraculous birth, the three wise men. They were so convinced that they set out from so far away. Never forget to take the myrrh with you." It was as if, at that moment, we were forging a covenant for eternity, to go our separate ways after Jesus' resurrection to bear witness to the King's child who would never die. Just as the three wise men had travelled from afar to honour the child's birth and then went their separate ways, so too would Mary and I honour the child's death wherever we were in the world.
It seemed as though I was going to become an apostle of Jesus. The myrrh was ready.

Mary

As my son and John were leaving, John asked me how best to reach me when Mary Magdalene and I arrived, and where they could meet us. "Don't worry, John, we'll be there when the time comes," I said, and I gave him my blessing. Then I said goodbye to my son; I embraced him and he whispered to me: "Until

, mother of Ashkelon, soon it will be my turn." He let go of me and smiled gently to reassure me. I nodded and stroked his hair once more, then kissed him. I turned and joined Mary Magdalene, who was holding the donkey in check whilst John was securing the last of the luggage. A moment later, they set off.
Mary Magdalene and I watched them until they were out of sight.

Mary Magdalene

After that, it was quiet at the table. Everyone was processing the farewell in their own way. Mary withdrew to her loom and I pretended to be doing something, but in reality I was doing nothing. I didn't know what to do with myself. Until, without really realising it, I found myself clutching the little pouch containing the locks of hair from Hannah, Rebecca and Samuel. I looked at it. Mary looked at me from her room and came over to me: "Rebecca is due to give birth soon. Take the donkeys Oz and Az with you so they can both get to know you. Rebecca will need you. Go in peace; you have time, and trust in Gabriel. Don't look at me: it will do me good to be alone for a while, and Gabriel is watching over me. I'll give you some of the gold to take to Rebecca. And give my regards to Mr Lem too." She smiled. I looked at her gratefully and her suggestion lifted me out of my gloomy mood. I agreed and got everything ready for the journey to Ein Karem. The

next morning I set off with both donkeys, and my experience with Lem would come in handy. I didn't need to arrange a time with Mary for my return. We both knew that the angels would guide our intuition when the time was right.

Mary

The house was empty once more, but I never felt alone. The elon wires sang with joy and dispelled my worries. Whatever was about to happen, it was God's plan of salvation for humanity, so what was there for me to fear?
I sang the psalms and heard the prayers of Zechariah in my head, refreshing my memory clearly and distinctly, and I imagined myself once more in the Holy of Holies. I didn't even need to bake bread anymore. Djibril was never far away. Whatever storm might be coming my way, I was ready for it.
So be it.

Mary Magdalene

Oz and Az were saddled up and we set off. I knew the way like the back of my hand, by day and by night. I swapped the donkeys regularly so that I could get a feel for both of them and choose the easiest one—the least stubborn, in other words—for Mary. By the first evening it was clear: Az would be for Mary, and I congratulated him on his good choice. Oz stood there as if he understood everything and seemed disappointed and jealous. I whispered in his ear so that Az certainly couldn't hear: "Oz, you're my champion, but don't tell Az." Both were now content and were given time to help themselves to food on the grassy verge. Where it used to take me at least eight days on foot, I would now easily manage it in four days. Tomorrow evening! How I was looking forward to it!

Rebecca

That morning I found a loaf of bread at my door. I recognised it straight away. Mary Magdalene had told me about it, and it matched her description perfectly: the Greek letters *chi* and *ro* in the crust, symbolising the Saviour. I showed it to Samuel, my eyes wide with anticipation. I knew straight away what I would do with it; I lay down on the bed and placed the loaf on my heavily pregnant belly. Hannah and Samuel lay down beside me. "Our baby is blessed! Djibril is here

"I've been to the door. If only Mary Magdalene were here!" And the baby suddenly kicked violently. Hannah had to laugh because the bread was struggling to stay in place, and the three of us placed our hands on the bread and the baby settled down. My dear Samuel had heard all my wondrous stories, and for him this was the first time he had experienced something wondrous himself. Although that wasn't quite right—it was the second time—but the first time he couldn't believe it wasn't a coincidence.

Samuel

I am the son of a wealthy merchant in Massilia[61] and I was sent on a mission by my father for the very first time, all on my own, with valuable goods for a merchant in Jericho. Jews were known for their trustworthy trade. After a long and dangerous sea voyage, I moored in the port of Ashdod and set off with a heavy cartload of goods, drawn by two buffaloes. Evening fell and, halfway to my destination, I came to a crossroads and, strangely enough, saw an old man on this lonely road who spontaneously addressed me: 'Where are you going, young man?' "To Jerusalem and then on to Jericho, good sir," I replied politely. "I don't mean to pry, but I suspect you're carrying valuable merchandise? In that case, I think you'd be best advised to turn right here. There's someone living there

[61] The present-day Marseille

who is richer than anyone in Jerusalem and will give you far more for your goods than anyone else. Have confidence, it is someone I know well. I was there just this morning. Just say that Djibril sent you." And he turned and vanished into the night. I hesitated at first, but my curiosity was greater than money. The full moon allowed me to continue my journey and follow the path the man had shown me. By morning, I spotted a small town in a valley and began to seriously doubt whether I'd made the right choice. I saw no palace or large warehouse. I saw only, in the distance along my path, a small house on top of a hill with a light burning, and I intended to knock there for advice. I felt myself getting quite angry, especially at myself, and felt betrayed by that 'good man'. I reached the little house, which was well-kept and cosy. I knocked. The door opened and a stunningly beautiful woman answered: "Welcome to the birthplace of John the Baptist."

Rebecca

I fell in love with his beautiful, dark, kind eyes at first sight. Neither of us could hide our feelings from the other for long, and our mutual smiles of pure happiness alone made us melt for one another. I suddenly became clumsy by the fire, and he was just as awkward when he was tying up his buffaloes. We both had to laugh at it and didn't know how to behave. Just then

Hannah suddenly came running up: “Oh! A daddy!” The ice couldn’t melt, because there had never been any ice to begin with.

Samuel

I was overwhelmed. First and foremost by this lovely woman and her adorable child, but I was also deeply moved to find myself here at the birthplace of John the Baptist. Upon my arrival in Ashdod, everyone was talking about just two people: John the Baptist and Jesus the Saviour. And I had no way of knowing whether Rebecca, here in this distant place, had already heard that John the Baptist had been beheaded. I was immediately very curious about the story of John the Baptist, but I was even more curious about Rebecca’s own story. This house exuded nothing but love, whereas in my father’s palace I had known only coldness. It was a gift. It was a godsend, and I learnt that very word that very night. She marvelled at the fact that I could understand and speak her language remarkably well. I told her that I had docked many times with my uncle in Haifa to trade in Magdala, and that I had now moored in the port of Ashdod because it was much closer to Jerusalem, so that I could travel on to Jericho.

Rebecca

Hannah had gone to bed by then, and we stayed at the table by the light of an oil lamp, sharing our life stories with one another.

We started out as strangers and became companions in pain and joy, in setbacks and happy events, and in this way grew ever closer to one another. Our differences and our mutual secrets were swept away like mist by the morning sun, making way for mutual warmth, security and respect such as neither of us had ever known before. At the break of dawn following that marvellous night, I told him it had been a godsend. He furrowed his brow. “Come on, I’ll explain it to you tomorrow. You go and sleep in my bed now. I’ll stay up: Hannah’s going to wake up. Don’t protest, my dear friend!” and I showed him to my bed. I stayed up for Hannah.

Samuel

I was in love. I fought against the awakening of my physical desires. I longed to kiss her, to make love to her. The way she had spoken of her youth, simply to tell the story and not at all to seek attention or pity. No, it was actually intended purely to extol the virtues of a certain Mary Magdalene. She too had met an old man on the ice who showed her the right path. And yes, that old man was right then and is right now. In Massilia they would declare me mad. And that is why I wanted to stay here: far away from my father’s money and the pursuit of profit. Her scent in her bed reminded me of the lavender in my distant

home country. I had never known such silence. I couldn't bear the thought of her sitting there alone on a chair, waiting for Hannah, so I stood up: "Rebecca, come and lie down next to me on your bed with our clothes on, so you can catch Hannah straight away." And so, a moment later, we lay side by side, perfectly still, and let the silence write our budding feelings for one another in our hearts with a soft quill pen. The next day I asked her about John the Baptist. I had to; I needed certainty and certainly didn't want to face the justified accusation that I had concealed such a thing. I had nothing to lose, and at the table I took the first step: "In the harbour of Ashdod, rumours were rife about John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, and it was not good news." She looked at me immediately with wide eyes; it was clear she didn't know yet, and I spoke softly: "John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod." She stood up abruptly and tried to run away, but I was quicker than her and pulled her close to me. She sobbed and wailed and surrendered herself to me. After a while, she sank back into her chair, and Hannah immediately crawled onto her lap: "Why is Mummy crying? Has Daddy hurt Mummy?" "No, darling, Daddy is very kind to Mummy." And Rebecca looked me in the eyes. I stroked her tear-stained cheek and stroked Hannah. And I, I wept softly at so much beauty on earth and whispered in her ear: "The old man was right. Oh yes, his name was Djibril, I forgot to tell you that."

Rebecca gathered her composure, strengthened by this: “Come, let us eat his bread together…” It felt like a wedding feast.

Rebecca

However little love I had seen between my parents, however many bitter fights to the point of bloodshed I had witnessed, however many blows I had received, I now stood there every day, dumbfounded at just how sweet and tender love between a man and a woman can be. Samuel began to make plans: to deliver the goods to Jerusalem and, with that money, buy a ploughshare and vines, all manner of seeds from grass to grain, plant tubers, fruit saplings, a saw and a machete, a hammer and a pickaxe, and a load of rope to grow grapes on the southern slopes below our house to make wine. The buffaloes would stay to plough and pull the cart. “My father won’t miss me; he’s always preferred my other brothers, and they’ll be glad they no longer have to share anything with me.” And he added, jokingly: “But I’ve chosen the finest and sweetest inheritance.” And then I had to run away laughing so as not to end up in bed: we often played this because Hannah was always so happy when she saw us so busy. “Quick, Ma Ma, faster!” and then Samuel pretended to be completely out of breath and winked at her. “Mum can run much faster than you, Dad!” Yet there were moments when Hannah wasn’t there that ‘Mum’ would happily let ‘Dad’ overtake her, and suddenly, though not unexpectedly,

My period didn't come, and my breasts became firmer again… Samuel beamed and Hannah was over the moon and went straight to tell Lem. And I… I missed Mary Magdalene, wishing I could share this joy with her.

Samuel

We were blissfully happy. The vineyard was coming along according to plan and I still had money in reserve. Hannah was gradually able to climb onto Lem from a tree stump on her own and already dared to take a short walk with him. I often thought of Lem's former master, John the Baptist, and his parents, and I was more than grateful to be able to grow up in this birthplace, where kind people had lived, and to become the progenitor of my own family. When I thought back to the bustling and ambitious Massilia, I only then realised what an oasis of peace and love I had been granted, with the sweetest of wives, who understood better than any other woman just how precious love truly is. It was wonderful to see our child grow and feel her movements when I could place my hands on her belly at night. And if Hannah was such a good child, how could this child possibly be bad? I was only worried about the birth; I didn't know how it worked. If only Mary Magdalene were here now.

Rebecca

Less than a week ago, something strange happened. I got up, looked in the mirror and saw a small patch missing from my hair. I called out to Samuel to see if I'd lost any hair at the back too, and as he looked at me, I noticed the same thing: a strand of black hair was missing. Hannah sensed our concern and came over to us, and sure enough, she was missing a lock of hair too. Hannah immediately ran outside and came back just as quickly: "Lem hasn't lost any hair!" We had to laugh about it; however strange it all seemed, there was no sign that anyone had stolen anything, and the hair thief wouldn't have been able to do much with our hair. Samuel placed his hand on my heavily pregnant belly: "Take it easy, darling. If anything happens, I'm never far away." And he set off for his vineyard-in-the-making.

Mary Magdalene

I'd just switched from the A-road to the B-road. It wasn't far now. I reached the turn-off to the right; another hour at this pace and I'd be there. My heart was racing with excitement; the many memories of this place overwhelmed me and I couldn't hold back my tears: Zacharias, Elizabeth, Hannah and an unknown Samuel, John the Baptist, Rebecca and little Hannah, the papyrus scrolls, Lem… they were my family. I urged Oz to slow down again; I was thoroughly enjoying this longing to meet them and it could suddenly

last longer: I wanted to relive every detail of the memories as much as possible; they were too precious not to relive them just as they had surprised me back then and enriched me, allowing me to become who I am today. Oh yes, Djibril, I certainly won't forget you. I heard a donkey braying in the distance. Lem! And Oz wouldn't let himself be restrained any longer…

Rebecca

I'd just been tidying up bit by bit: doing a little, sitting down for a moment, and so on. Hannah had been much calmer as a baby. The baby must be a boy, as full of life as his dad. Oops, that was a promise! My breath caught in my throat from the sudden pain. There was a knock at the door. I waited a moment for the pain to subside and opened the door. "My dear God! Mary Magdalene! Mother!" We fell into each other's arms. "You look so beautiful!" she whispered in my ear, but suddenly I felt a sharp cramp in my stomach again! I was startled and felt amniotic fluid running down my legs. My eyes and mouth were wide with panic!

Mary Magdalene

There was no time for pleasantries and I immediately realised what was about to happen: "It'll be alright, Rebecca, your waters have broken, that's perfectly normal, your baby's on the way. I'm here. I'll help you to your bed in a moment." I stoked the fire to heat some water. And suddenly Hannah was clinging to my skirt, looking up at me with a smile, not realising what was about to happen. I gave her a quick hug: "My darling, you

go

“Shall I go and get your dad?” She was already rushing off. The contractions were coming faster and faster, so I gave Rebecca a piece of wood to bite down on to cope with the pain. It was going quickly, apparently, which wasn’t unusual for a second birth, and there was the head already. I applied counter-pressure to the edges to prevent tearing, and slowly but surely the little nose made an appearance, and then it all happened quickly: “Push now, Rebecca! Now!” And the head popped out. The head turned willingly along with the shoulders and, hop! There appeared the little prince in all his glory. I placed the little man on her tummy and Rebecca stroked and soothed the wailing baby. I tied off the umbilical cord, waited for the placenta to detach so I could tie and cut the cord. Everything went as it should, and from a distance we could hear Hannah calling out and the voice of a worried father. They burst in together, and Samuel rushed straight to Rebecca, showering her with kisses and tears. “Look, my love, look: black hair and a little boy, a little Samuel!” Samuel included Hannah: “Look, Hannah, this is your little brother and you’re a big sister now.” I suddenly realised that such love would never be mine, but I was happier for them than for anyone else. I withdrew briefly to the kitchen to rinse the cloths and heard Rebecca from afar: “Dear Samuel, you may choose a name for your son.” I listened curiously, and it was just as well I wasn’t there. His answer was not long in coming. “Johannes, yes, I want to call him Johannes.”

‘I could mention it, but only if you’re happy with that. This was his birthplace, and he died for his beliefs. All of Israel is talking about him. It is an honour that our son was born in this house.’ This was too much for me: a stranger from a distant land, who could have come up with strange names and who, without much knowledge of our religion, could still show such respect… I needed a moment to catch my breath and went over to the donkeys. Lem had already met Oz and Az. I whispered into Lem’s long ear: “A new John has been born” and he began to bray with joy. Hannah came running over and threw her arms round me. “How big you’ve grown, my dear Hannah! Isn’t it lovely to have a little brother now?” “I’ve missed you, Ma Ma. I want to give you so many kisses…” and she started doing just that. “Stop, darling! You must make sure you’ve some left for your little brother later,” and she didn’t let go of her arms around me. I suddenly saw the spot where her lock of hair had been cut off. I kissed the spot, knowing that Jesus had touched it. I felt briefly to see if the little purple pouch with their locks was still in place, and it reassured me. We went back inside. Samuel rushed over to me.

Samuel

“Mary Magdalene, I don’t know how to thank you! Thanks to you, everything went smoothly. I am eternally grateful to you… Rebecca and Hannah have been longing to see you so much. I can’t believe you just happened to arrive just in time

came. This is a miracle, even though I'm not inclined to believe in miracles, but here in Massilia there are many seers, and they claim that people who think of one another often are somehow connected…" Rebecca intervened: "My dear, let it be; we stopped believing in coincidence long ago." I realised it would be best to let it all sink in for a moment. Little Johannes began to cry, and I thought it best to leave them alone for a while. I was confused, and conflicting feelings were vying for my attention. I had always found the Jews a strange people, but I could never have found a woman like Rebecca in Massilia. A son! Oh, I would never make the same mistakes as my father. My head was in a whirl. I desperately needed some fresh air.

Rebecca

At last we had some time to ourselves and were alone for a moment: "Mary Magdalene, Ma Ma, it's a miracle that you arrived just in time, and that was no coincidence. Weren't you startled by Samuel? He comes from Massilia and knows next to nothing of our customs." Mary Magdalene wasn't startled by him. She told how, in her hometown of Magdala, where large trade caravans arrived from far and wide, she had seen many strange merchants of all sorts.
Samuel is a kind and caring man, and actually I'm glad he doesn't know the Jewish traditions. Since my baptism in the Jordan and my meeting with John the Baptist

and Jesus himself, I have not felt the slightest need to conform to the ancient customs of Judaism. John touched me here in this house; he baptised me and gave me my parents' names, so that I finally became someone, and Jesus spoke to me after his baptism: to these two people I can entrust my life.
And I spoke to Mary Magdalene: "Today I am the happiest person on earth: my unbelieving husband and father of my son gave my son the name of John, with whom we were allowed to hear, here in this place, the final part of the story about the King's Child. I am twice as happy because my unbelieving husband Samuel does not think or act in an unbelieving way at all; he just doesn't know it yet, and is that really necessary?" John began to weep and my breasts responded immediately. Mary Magdalene helped me, and a moment later little John was feeding on the richest milk.

Mary Magdalene

What a rich woman Rebecca had become in this past year! No matter how much suffering a person may endure, a birth can make one forget all the misery in the world. I dare admit to myself that I sometimes miss motherhood. But when I then think: suppose I had to choose between bringing a child into the world myself or, bearing in mind my recent conversations with Jesus, knowing that Jesus himself lives within me every day, then I think the latter would win. When I think back to my parents, I have to admit as an adult

At my age, I struggle to picture what that was like. No matter how kind my mother was to me – and I barely knew my father – I can remember very little of it. Samuel also gives an example of this: it turns out he is leaving his homeland for good. I carry Jesus within me and cannot forget him; every action and thought is tested, and if I forget to test it against him, then sometimes, just seconds later, I feel grateful that I forgot. Yes, Samuel intrigued me and I would love to get to know him. But first Rebecca and Johannes now, and the curious Hannah, of course. Samuel couldn't resist popping round to take another look at this miracle and made it clear to me where I could always find him if anything came up. 'I'll be back later' was a phrase he'd utter every hour and would become a habit. Rebecca and I would laugh about it every time: 'There he is again!' He's a brilliant father! Over the next few days, Rebecca began asking more and more about my stay with Mary. She told me how hard she had cried when Samuel told her that John the Baptist had been beheaded, and she still found it difficult to bear when she thought back to the time he began reciting the fourth papyrus scroll from memory here. "Didn't he say there was a fifth papyrus scroll?" I'd expected this question, but secretly hoped to avoid it. No such luck. I sat down at the little table, Rebecca too, with little John at her breast. "You don't have to tell me, Ma Ma, it's all right," she said; apparently

by coming across that way through my silence. “I don’t know how to bring it up. I want to, but I don’t know how. Give me a bit more time. Is that alright with you?” She nodded firmly in agreement. Little Johannes suddenly started crying and I was startled by the coincidence. What did it mean? Did he want to help me so I wouldn’t have to say anything, or did he actually want to tell me that I had to speak? When he stopped crying, he looked at me and didn’t take his eyes off mine. “Look, Mum, how he’s looking at you, isn’t he a darling?” I knew what I had to do. “The fourth papyrus scroll ends with the king in the dungeon meeting the soul of his child and thus becoming the child once more. The gatekeeper helps him to leave his dungeon and to deliver the lost people in his kingdom from the evil sorcerer.” I had to pause for a moment. I saw Rebecca, her eyes full of hope, full of expectation for a happy ending to the story. Little Johannes turned to me again with his big eyes. “But the king with the soul of the child is himself killed by the people. And only in this way could the king of love, who died in love for humanity, show humanity true love. And he shows this by dwelling in our hearts.” There was silence, and little John now sought his mother’s eyes. “I’m sorry, dear Rebecca, that I have to tell you this.” Rebecca replied firmly: “All right, John first and Jesus later, but not without first saving us from the devil. I know the devil; I was even once one of his best pupils, but look: I was baptised

by John and Jesus knew me by name, and I received love not only in my heart, but also in my husband and this child."

Oh, how small and grateful I felt to be in the presence of this great lady.

One of the days after that, as we sat at the table – it was a lovely afternoon – we stayed and chatted for a while. Samuel had become so accustomed to my presence that we were already able to talk about more important matters than just 'what shall we eat today', and I was becoming increasingly curious about his life story, the city he came from, and which gods they worshipped. He was enthusiastic and asked for a piece of blank papyrus scroll. He took a pen and sketched out the entire route to Massilia. "First sail past Crete, then pass Sicily, and then head north past Rome, and a little further up the bend lies the city of Massilia. The distance? Can you imagine the distance from Ashdod to Crete? Well, you'd have to cover nearly four times that distance! With a full cargo, that's almost a month's sailing if you're lucky with the wind. I did that for many months, until I found the treasure here this year." He beamed. Rarely have I seen anyone speak with such happiness in their eyes. I asked him: "I suppose this great city is under Roman rule, but perhaps it also has its own religion?" Samuel had to laugh at these questions: "Name me a god and he is worshipped in Massilia: we know the Greek

gods, Celtic gods, Eastern gods such as Isis or Mithras, and of course the Roman gods. Something for everyone." He fell silent. He realised this was a sensitive subject. The obvious question would be: "What religion do you follow, Samuel?" I didn't dare ask it directly, but he answered the question spontaneously: "I hope so, but please don't hold it against me that I no longer believe in any god. If anything happens that seems strange or inexplicable at first glance, it's just coincidence. The only thing I still believe in is love, and I find that here with you all together: you are my gods." We all fell silent at the table and we truly felt his love for us. He was a wonderful person. After a short while, I replied: "You're a wonderful person, Samuel. But as for the coincidence, I can't help it and I wasn't planning on bringing it up or giving it to anyone because I love it so much. This little treasure has given me so much strength over the last few weeks, and without this seemingly worthless gift, I wouldn't even be here with you right now. But now that I've heard you and I really appreciate your honesty, I want to give this little treasure to you. It's not much, it seems utterly worthless, but would you like to be confronted with this coincidence, Samuel?" Samuel didn't need to think about it for long: "Dear Mary Magdalene, Rebecca has spoken so highly of you that I have every confidence you mean us well." Rebecca looked proudly at her husband and Hannah was very impressed by the serene atmosphere

at the table and paid not the slightest attention. I went to my luggage in my little room and took out the purple pouch: “This pouch contains a treasure of truth, and I myself received its contents not so long ago. I kept it in a scrap of the purple fabric that was lying here when I first came here. It has given me so much strength over the last few weeks. Rebecca will certainly recognise this fabric…” Rebecca nodded: “The fabric comes from here, from Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist.” “I give this pouch to you, Samuel. Go ahead and open it.”

Samuel opened it and three different strands of hair fell onto the table. “Mum, look, that’s my hair!” Hannah exclaimed. “And Mum and Dad’s too!” Samuel and Rebecca stood rooted to the spot: “How?” Samuel’s eyes widened and he shook his head: “How?” He looked at Rebecca: “How is that possible, darling?” Rebecca looked at him tenderly: “I don’t find it that difficult: for me, it’s a great gift and I hope you’ll make room for it in your heart, my love… Mum, how did you get hold of it? I still remember that morning clearly… we thought it was strange, but didn’t make much of it.”

“I had the great privilege of spending three days learning from Jesus. I was curious; I didn’t just believe everything. For instance, I couldn’t believe that Jesus is always present within me without my having to see him in the flesh. Then he told me to close my eyes. Barely five minutes later, I was allowed to open them again. And lo and behold: your locks of hair are lying here before you. The

That strand of black hair made my heart leap with joy: Rebecca has a husband! And he told me you were pregnant. So I hurried straight here. Without him, I would have arrived too late for your delivery. There's no such thing as coincidence, and do we always need to know how things work? We're not God and can't comprehend it with our minds. Our hearts can do more than our minds. Faith is nothing more than a tool to enable us to make our choices freely between good and evil, between love and hate." Rebecca added something surprising: "Believing in coincidence is a bit like being in love, a kind of blind trust in something or someone where you have no guarantees of success. Daring to follow your feelings, whereby that anxious feeling can grow, step by step, into ever greater trust and gradually requiring less and less courage." It was this intervention in particular from the enamoured Rebecca that completely won over the enamoured Samuel. Samuel took the pouch, filled it with the locks of hair, but looked at me. He went to fetch a knife from the kitchen cupboard, cut off a lock of my hair and added it to 'the family' as he called it, tied the pouch shut with the string and kissed it. Little Johannes saw that it was good. Rebecca beamed. And Hannah would never be able to forget this moment, even though she didn't quite understand it. We suddenly heard Lem braying. Samuel went straight outside to look and came back in with a tuft of Lem's hair, and as he put it into the pouch, he said: "Lem is still the donkey belonging to Elizabeth and John the Baptist, isn't he?"

Hannah, who now spent most of her time with Lem, ran over to Samuel and threw her arms round his legs: "You're the best dad." I sighed inwardly with heavenly bliss: how powerful love between people is!

The days passed and the weeks flew by even faster. I had to return to Mary. I felt a sense of unease come over me and was due to leave the very next morning. I could leave this family with a clear conscience. Samuel was working himself to the bone on his hillside, and the planting of the vines was due to take place very soon. Our final evening meal together began on a sombre note. Little John wouldn't stop crying. Hannah sat there looking dejected. Samuel was extremely nervous and Rebecca kept trying to calm little John down. I tried to break through the crying and addressed little John: "Little man, I'll tell you the story of the baby Jesus with the three wise men on big camels." And he fell silent and looked at me curiously. Rebecca placed little Johannes in my arms and I began to tell him how I sat at the front with Caspar on his camel and how we glided through the night in search of the little Jesus. I stood up and let him float around the table. Suddenly we saw a star and whizzed towards it. We arrived at the little house and found the little Jesus there… and little Johannes fell asleep from floating in the air, and I gently laid him back in Rebecca's arms. "Oh yes," I said, "now that I think of it: I have another present for you from Mary." I went to fetch it and came back: "This is for you from

‘Mary.’ They unwrapped the beautifully decorated papyrus and were astonished when they saw the solid lump of gold. ‘This is part of the gold that Melchior of Persia presented at the birth of Jesus. Mary insisted on giving this to you.’ Samuel, in particular, was taken aback: ‘I thought you were telling a fairy tale.’ “Dear Samuel, it really did happen: three wise astronomers on their camels—Caspar from Arabia, Melchior from Persia and Balthazar from Egypt—who met because all three had seen and followed the special star from their own lands. It had been foretold by Jewish prophets centuries ago. Don’t worry, Samuel: all in good time. It will be alright. We’ll see each other again.” The words ‘we’ll see each other again’ made me think back to those kind eyes of young Caspar. And I was so young back then too… How lovely it would be to see each other again someday? I pulled myself together; when I said ‘we’ll see each other again’ to Samuel, I could never have imagined how true those words would be.

The next day I left very early in the morning; only Rebecca was awake and helped me slip away quietly. She whispered in my ear: “Will you say hello to Mary and Jesus for me? Did you see Djibril again?” I replied in a whisper: “Turn around and look: can you see that old man over there in the distance, waving at us?” She smiled gratefully and waved back at him, and I set off in high spirits with Az and Oz.

Mary

Mary Magdalene had only been gone a week when a messenger with Uz, John's donkey, informed me that I had been invited to the third and final day of the wedding feast of a certain Simon the Zealot, in Cana. Jesus and some of his followers had also been invited. Since his baptism in the Jordan, several men had joined him, including his half-brothers John and James.

Kana was just five miles from Nazareth and was known for the houses built on the hillside with beautiful terraces. I went with the messenger. After I had washed my hands at length, John welcomed me to his table, whilst Jesus sat with his disciples. Jesus looked at me briefly and, with his eyes closed, bowed his head to me, and I returned his greeting with the same gesture of respect. I suddenly heard some servants behind me worrying that the wine was almost finished, even though the final celebration had only just begun. They were displeased because such a thing simply should not happen at a wedding feast. Jews are very good at fasting, but at a wedding feast all inhibitions are cast aside and there are no rules. It was the third and final day of the wedding feast and it was no wonder that the six large stone jars were almost empty. The groom, Simon, was not pleased with the shortage and was in a panic. Much followed

murmurs and commotion. I stood up, went over to my son and whispered in his ear: “Their wine has run out.” He looked at me tenderly: “Wife, what does this mean for me and for you?” My thoughts had always been an open book to him. It was as if my son had been waiting for me to ask him to make wine, even though he knew full well there was not enough, and he would have done it spontaneously even if I had not been there. He had already sensed what I was thinking, and he had waited until I asked, so that he could give me the credit for the fact that it was through my intervention that there was wine again. He wanted to give the credit to me and not to himself, knowing full well that credit would not appeal to me. That was what it meant to me, and to him it meant much more: I had shown faith in him to perform a miracle for the very first time in the presence of so many people he did not know personally. In this way, he honoured me in public to show that he held me in high esteem and that he placed himself beneath me. It was a mutual tribute with hardly any words, and not just for me, but for every woman in the world. Many of the men present looked on in astonishment, but did not dare to spoil the party. Many women felt deeply respected but remained humble so as not to offend the men.

I had already witnessed so many miracles and wonders, even before my son’s birth: how Elizabeth spoke of ‘the mother of the Lord’ even before my child was born, the three wise men from the East, the star, the miracles during our flight to Egypt. Then the miracles of

the infant Jesus himself whilst he was still in the neighbourhood: the clay doves, the resurrection of Zeno, too many to mention. Yet these miracles always took place within an extremely small circle, so that all the stories were subsequently cast into doubt and no one dared to believe them anymore. But this was a wedding feast with people from far and wide who suddenly drank wine after witnessing how my son turned water into this wine, and who, upon returning home, could not keep silent about what they had experienced, much to the annoyance of the Pharisees and even more so of the stricter Sadducees. Simon the Zealot himself was so impressed and grateful that, after the feast, he followed Jesus and became a faithful disciple of his.

Mary

It was a written law that any adult Jew over the age of thirty was free to share his insights on the texts of the Torah in any synagogue. This right could not be prohibited anywhere.

In every town or village where there was a synagogue, Jesus spoke, and his fame and the reports of his healings spread rapidly before him, drawing ever-larger crowds who came out of curiosity to hear the good news, and he healed those who placed their faith in him. To many he became a prophet, but in our own family he was by no means regarded as a prophet. I received visits from all sorts of relatives on Joseph's side. There was apparently a great deal of confusion within the extended family: only a few among them believed in Jesus' mission; the vast majority felt he was out of touch with reality and wanted to protect him from himself. They demanded that I go with them to convince him to stop all that fuss. In truth, their concern was not so much to protect him, but rather to ensure that their own family ties to him—a renegade—would not cause them to fall out of favour with the Pharisees, who held sway everywhere in the councils of synagogues and town councils. His half-sisters and half-brothers, some of whom were literally at the Pharisées' beck and call, suspected Jesus, on the Pharisées' instigation, of performing miracles by the power of the

the devil Belial. This weighed heavily on me, and I was forced to go with them to Capernaum, where he was staying temporarily. My presence was meant to help them convince my son. Had Joseph still been alive, he would have taken his staff and implored them to accept Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah. He would have begged his rebellious daughters and sons to repent. He would have torn at his beard in disappointment and pain. But Jesus himself needed no staff and addressed them in public. He asked his relatives bluntly: “Who are my brothers and who is my mother?” And he pointed to me and his disciples, but not to uncles, aunts, cousins or nieces. Only those who believed in him were his family. None of his brothers or sisters were family to him any longer, and almost everyone turned their backs on him out of fear of the Pharisees. For my son, spiritual kinship was more important than blood ties.

In any case, it was a pitch-black day. After that, I hardly ever had any visits from the family, and if anyone did come by, it was in the utmost secrecy. I was comforted by the knowledge that Joseph no longer had to go through this.
Jesus continued his travels through Galilee and via Samaria to Judea, as it were the capital of the Jews themselves. The Pharisees lay in wait everywhere, whilst more and more people faithfully followed him from town to town. The women among

They gathered in a separate group, so that they would be safer and could not be accused of promiscuity. Day by day, the net tightened around him. It was fortunate that our young neighbour Zeno was a market trader who, under that guise, would also travel to the towns where Jesus was due to speak, so that he could keep me personally informed or, if he could not notify me himself, send messengers to me. His reports became increasingly alarming. The Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem began, and Jesus had deliberately gone there without his disciples so as not to endanger them. He spoke very boldly in the temple, to the horror of most of the Pharisees. Zeno had followed him once again, but grew increasingly fearful of being exposed and seen as a disciple of Jesus. Many ordinary listeners became more and more convinced by his words and his miraculous deeds, so that the Pharisees did not dare to strike in the midst of the crowd to arrest him. Jesus did not hide from them and left the city just as he had come. Zeno reported back and wept that Jesus, who had given him back his life as a child, did not dare to stand by his side in public and bear witness for him. I comforted Zeno and was certain that Jesus would not want him to put himself and his family in danger either. I thanked him and emphasised how much I appreciated what he was doing now, and assured him that Jesus, too, greatly appreciated him keeping me informed.

Even though I knew it would end badly, that he too would suffer the same fate as John the Baptist, it still broke my mother's heart. I was alone for many days, and the memory of my earliest years in the Holy of Holies had taught me to stand firm in faith against despair. With my eyes closed, I searched for light in the darkness of the night and once again met the mother of Ashkelon: "I am the mother of fourteen thousand children and have fourteen thousand names, but you, you are the mother of all people."
Jibril was never far away.

Mary Magdalene

I was almost home, and my home was Nazareth. Oz and Az had got a taste of it and were seeing stars. I was excited and agitated: so many people on the road who kept talking about Jesus and how he'd dared to show himself in the synagogue in Jerusalem, and how they'd heard the Pharisees openly discussing amongst themselves how to arrest him, but hadn't quite dared yet because so many people saw him as the Messiah. I thought constantly of Mary and Jesus. My emotions ran the whole spectrum: on the one hand, laughter of pure joy at little John; in the middle, anxiety and concern for Mary and Jesus; and at the very other end, fighting back the tears at the certainty of Jesus' death.

I was struggling in a raging river, crashing against the boulders so that every metre I managed to get closer to the sea was excruciatingly painful. Darkness fell before my eyes. But worse was the darkness in my heart. I fought back: I am not ignorant! I feel no anger! I feel no desire! He is clearly present within me! I love every human being! And the river flowed into a lake, and I could now see the boulders clearly deep beneath me, and the peace within me returned until I stepped down from Az at Mary's house.

Mary

We fell into each other's arms and wept with joy. "Are you alright?" We asked each other the same question at the same moment and giggled like young girls. Mary Magdalene took the opportunity to introduce me to the donkeys: "Which one do you think will be yours: Oz or Az?" I had to laugh even before she finished speaking and chose the donkey with the longest ears, which turned out to be Az. "Exactly! You're a donkey connoisseur!" Laughing, we went inside. I made her favourite tea, and she brought her luggage in and found her bed, as always, waiting for her. A little later we were sitting at the table and I insisted that she give her report first; I really needed a story without any bad news, and her face already spoke volumes. Her beaming eyes managed to carry my thoughts away from the darkest thoughts I was dragging around in my mind. I saw it as a gift from my son and his father. I thought it was particularly wonderful that Samuel wanted a lock of the donkey's hair in the little pouch. We both concluded that we are a bit like donkeys ourselves, stubborn and headstrong at times. I remember it as if it were yesterday how our joy was suddenly disrupted: a knock at the door. Zeno! With the sad news that a good friend of ours, Lazarus, had died the day before. What a tragedy for his sisters Mary and Martha! When Jesus was twelve years old and spent three days in the temple in Jerusalem overwhelming the scribes with his clear knowledge, they too were among the listeners, and they told us

in detail how everything had unfolded and how they had taken Jesus in whilst awaiting our reunion. It was no coincidence; it was simply meant to be. Lazarus acted as a father to him then, and I had no doubt that Jesus would say goodbye to him.

Mary Magdalene

Bethany was a little closer than Ein Karem and offered a slightly easier route for the donkeys, following the Jordan River up to the heights of Jerusalem. Zeno said he'd heard that Jesus was also coming there to say goodbye to his friend. That evening, I immediately made sure to provide extra feed for the donkeys. Mary prepared food parcels, and we were to set off at the crack of dawn. Mary had very few friends, and we had got to know Martha, Mary and Lazarus when she was pregnant with Jesus and we went to visit the pregnant Elizabeth in Ein Karem. We had taken a wrong turn and arrived in Bethany towards evening, and we knocked on the door of the first house we came across. Lazarus opened the door and we were welcomed with open arms. When we returned to Nazareth, we took the same route back to thank them once more, and we stayed there for a whole day then too. The sisters were a bit older than us, but Lazarus was at least ten years older than the sisters and must have passed away by now at a blessed old age. I had brought the last piece of purple fabric from Elizabeth to give to Lazarus

We set off early in the morning. The sun was reluctant to emerge from its bed and hid in shame behind a blanket of fleecy clouds. It didn't bother Oz and Az in the slightest, for by now they followed the road to the Jordan blindly. They were strong animals that commanded respect. They were in the prime of their lives. I walked in front, for Oz always wanted to be first, and that suited Mary just fine as it meant she could keep a better eye on the many small obstacles in the way. There was no need to rush to say our goodbyes. After all, it was customary for Lazarus to be buried quickly in one of the many caves because of the warm spring weather. We spent the first night in the village of Enon in Samaria, on the Jordan. The following night we spent the night at an inn on the Jordan, on the border with Judea. The following day we approached Jericho and from a hilltop we could see a large crowd in the distance. We had to find a way past them. From the top of a mountain I saw a man addressing the crowd. I turned to Mary with a questioning look. She too nodded in agreement and I sent Oz over to them. As we made our way there, people continued to pour in. When we could hear Jesus' voice, we stopped and let the others go first. I recognised some of the apostles from Cana, and Simon the Zealot signalled to John that we were there. John looked pleasantly surprised and gestured that he would come over to us. A moment later he was standing with us and asked: "How did you know there was a gathering here? "

And he whispered straight away: “Some Pharisees have arrived on horseback behind you; stay where you are but don’t speak too loudly.” Mary told him that we were on our way to Lazarus’s funeral in Bethany. Then John looked at us with joyful eyes: “Then I have excellent news for you; Jesus raised him from the dead three days after his death. He is alive! Mary and Martha are overjoyed, and please give them our regards once more. Are you staying here tonight or travelling on?” I replied that we would certainly be moving on, but for now we would like to listen to Jesus for a while. John spoke quietly: “Be careful…” He was referring once again to the Pharisees and scribes behind us and left us unobtrusively, taking a long detour to return to his fellow brothers.

Jesus

“You have heard that it was said: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you: if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well; and if anyone wants to take you to court and take your undergarment, give him your outer garment as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go two with him. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.
You have heard that it was said, ‘You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’

But I say to you: ‘Love your enemies and bless those who curse you; do good to those who hate you; and pray for those who insult you and persecute you, so that you may be children of the Father who is in heaven, for He causes His sun to rise on the wicked and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

Mary Magdalene

There was a great outcry behind us, and some Pharisees could not resist shouting: “If you want to pass, you’re always welcome!” Many Pharisees had a tax collector in the family and were able to benefit from the shenanigans. I veiled my face and turned towards them discreetly. Some were sitting on their horses or had entrusted their horses to proud young men. All of them wore their robes with their prayer straps and long fringes with tassels attached to the four corners of their garments, intended as a constant reminder of God’s commandments. What struck me was that the hostile language of most among them was clearly not shared by some of them; indeed, they even discreetly distanced themselves from the large group. Two of them caught my attention even more because of their downcast eyes, full of reverence for Jesus’ message, and because they dared to nod in affirmation

. I only got to know them later: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

Jesus

“When you give alms to a person in need, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be given in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you openly. Do not judge, so that you may not be judged, for with the judgement with which you judge, you yourselves will be judged, and with the measure with which you measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?
Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye’, when there is a log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly enough to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

Mary Magdalene
The commotion and jeering behind our backs grew louder: “And you don’t judge? Hypocrite! Speak for yourself! We shall judge you just as you judge us. He who laughs last laughs best, you fool.”

It was terrifying. Mary and I didn't dare move.

Jesus

"Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it; but the gate that leads to life is narrow, and the road that leads to life is narrow, and few are those who find it."

Mary Magdalene

They laughed at him: "We're going to close your gate, dear friend! You don't need to go anywhere anymore! Don't make things difficult for yourself. We'll be happy to help you!"
It was terrifying, but at the same time it was surprising for us to hear Jesus speak in such a lecturing manner. I saw a Jesus who was nothing like the Jesus by the river. It could not be a coincidence that we had ended up here now. He spoke a completely different language that I had not yet heard from him. Stern, even harsh, yet I always sensed his concern for humanity in his words. It was not anger, not ignorance, not darkness, not lust. It was more than concern; it was a deep anxiety, or even a cry of distress, urging mankind to turn back and put on new clothes. At the same time, it was distressing to hear how, behind our backs, they were openly plotting how to kill him. How terrible this must have been for Mary!

And she seemed to have read my thoughts and spoke to me softly, face to face: “Let us go, Mary Magdalene. This does not make me happy. I do not recognise my Son like this, even though he speaks the truth. But I understand him all too well. After all, he suffers from what he himself must say; he speaks sternly, and perhaps even too sternly, but someone must stand up against evil. I know him: deep down, he weeps for the erring human being and begs every person to turn their gaze towards love, and not towards the night that obscures beauty. It is moving to see that crowd and how he brings hope into their hearts, and yet he suffers because of it. Even when he brands the Pharisees as hypocrites and the tax collectors as deceivers, he suffers from these words because he knows how they themselves suffer under the yoke of evil. He wants to open their tombs and call them to resurrection into a new beginning, a new life. He knows that he can only do this by paying the ultimate price himself. I thank his Father that I have been able to understand this to some extent from the very first days of his birth, when I was offered the gift of myrrh. As magnificent and loving as creation was when it was first made, so painful is it to witness the decline of humanity. Before us stand men in tears and women with children at their breasts who worship him, inspired by his strictness for their own good and cherishing hope for a better world for their child. Whilst behind our backs, raging men are running amok, openly plotting to my

“to kill his son. My dear friend, come, let us go and find Lazarus and celebrate life instead of death.” We turned gently, and I suddenly found myself looking into the eyes of the ‘good’ Pharisees, who bowed their heads softly and unobtrusively before us.

I had never before known Mary to confide such a long outpouring to me. It spoke of her own sorrow and pain at that moment. To stand amidst the great crowd of simple people, all coming in rapture to listen to her son, and at the same time amongst people who were merely waiting for the right moment to kill him… it meant comfort but also anxious concern. I have no children myself, and it hurts so much just to think about it. Throughout the journey to Ein Karem, I brooded, and my heart grew heavier and heavier. It felt as though I had tumbled down a great waterfall and had still not reached the surface to catch my breath. I fervently hoped to be able to speak to Jesus in person just one more time.

By evening we reached Bethany.

Happiness, love and gratitude opened the door for us, and they also had other names: Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Their experience of that one day with Jesus, when he raised their brother from the dead, was so profound and had such a contagious effect that we were able to put aside the painful emotions we had felt during the Sermon on the Mount. Mary and Martha were euphoric, but it was Lazarus who saw something in Mary that none of us saw. He stood up and asked Mary if he might show her the rock-hewn tomb from which he had risen. She nodded gratefully in agreement, and Lazarus, still stiff, struggled to his feet, took his staff, handed her one of the two torches, and together they set off into the night.

Mary

The cave lay at the very bottom of a hill, not far from their house. We arrived at the cave and crouched down to enter. Once inside, we could stand upright, and on the left-hand side of the cave was a low table made of flat stones. Lazaros lay down carefully on the stone table and said nothing. “What’s going through your mind, Lazaros?” I asked him softly.

“Thanks to your son, I am still here, and without you, your son would never have been here, and for that I want to thank you especially,” he said, somewhat awkwardly.

“Can you tell me why you specifically asked me to see this cave?” I asked, for I did not yet understand why it was important to see this cave.
“I don’t know, Mary. Something told me I had to show you this place: a place where I lay dead for just three days. I feel very grateful every time I visit this place, at least once a day. I never want to forget this place, just as I never want to forget my gratitude to Jesus and to you.”
“What happened when you died? Do you remember anything from when you were dead?”
“No, I don’t remember anything from those three days. People told me later that my body had already begun to decompose and they wrapped me completely in strips of linen. Besides, I still have clear traces of cadaverous spots.” He still looked completely bewildered by what had happened to him. He sat down, apparently recalling how he had been raised from the dead, and looked at me: “First I heard a soft voice whispering to me: ‘Lazarus, get up and walk!’ and not long after that, again, but louder: ‘Lazarus, get up and walk!’ and I did as the voice asked.”
And Lazarus looked at me, and the mystery was still hidden in his eyes. I helped him to his feet. “Shall we go back, my good friend? The torches are beginning to go out, and it’s getting harder to breathe here.”
On the way back that night, the whole thing gradually became clear to me. Djibril! I thanked him with all my mother’s heart! This gift was far greater than a

loaf of bread. Djibril was preparing me for the death and the resurrection of my Son. The resurrection of Lazarus served as a source of comfort for all those whom Jesus loved. “Have faith, Mary, mother of the Son of God!” That was his message. It strengthened my unshakeable faith even further, and I gave thanks to the Father of my Son.

Mary Magdalene

When I saw Mary enter, I saw once again that strong woman from Ashkelon, the mother of fourteen thousand children. Whatever the Pharisees might do to her son, they might kill him as a human being, but not as the Son of God.
I have never felt more love for this incredibly strong and incredibly gentle woman than I did then, in the presence of Lazarus, brought back to life.
It was an evening when, as we both went to sleep, we did not speak a word to one another, but our eyes met and our hearts filled with deep affection and respect, one for the other and the other for the one. One.

Mary

The next day I sought a moment to speak to Mary Magdalene alone, and in the early afternoon we had a little time so that I could show her Lazarus’s tomb.

We sat down together in the cave on the low table while the sun shone in. I didn't want to deny her the comfort I'd received from Djibril the night before. "Yesterday, after I came out here with Lazarus, I received a message from Djibril. We two are the only ones with whom Jesus spoke about his impending death. Lazarus has lain dead on this stone for three days." I looked at her to see if she understood, but I didn't give her time to feel stupid: "Lazarus was raised on the third day by Jesus through the power of the Father. And if Jesus himself is raised from the dead, then no Jew can say that this happened through the power of Belial. Thus the Father himself provides the ultimate proof that Jesus is his Son and that Jesus' miraculous power comes from the Father, just as Jesus never glorified himself." I looked at Mary Magdalene once more, and her mouth and eyes fell open in amazement. "But of course! The Son of the Father too will be raised on the third day by the Father!" We fell into each other's arms and wept tears of joy and comfort. Our joy and comfort became invincible.

Mary Magdalene

Lying in bed, I also thought back to the conversation by the river when Jesus told me: "The miracles I am able to perform, I can only do at a moment when I am one with my Father. I do not have that power myself; apparently, I receive it only through

“I know when my Father and I are one in the same spirit. Since childhood, through trial and error, I have learnt to sense whether I am capable at that moment of healing a person, or even of restoring their life, or not. The most important feeling in this regard is humility, for it does not come from me, but from my Father.”

The journey had presented us with every extreme we could never have imagined, and it would do us both good to rest a little. I made her a suggestion: “What do you think of this? Ein Karem is only a day’s journey from here if we leave very early. The little house belonging to the neighbours of the late Zacharias and Elisabeth is still empty, and meeting Samuel and Rebecca’s children is a breath of fresh air. Mary’s face lit up, and we would be setting off again the very next morning. We asked Mary, Martha and Lazarus if they didn’t mind, and they were happy for us to have a chance to rest somewhere. That very evening we said goodbye to Lazarus, so that he could rest the following morning. At the first crow of the cock, Maria and Martha got up with us. They helped us with food and had a welcome surprise ready, especially for Samuel. When we left, I immediately thought: we are leaving Eden. Thank you, Lord, for your hospitality and your message.”

Maria

Whilst Mary Magdalene was outside saddling the donkeys, Martha and Mary came to me to say goodbye. They asked for my blessing, and I was deeply moved by their request. They called me ‘the Mother of God’. I was taken aback for a moment, but I could not in any way say that it was not true. I was only human, I was just a mother like all mothers, I was just a helpless creature trying to do good; I felt no different from them; I was just as undeserving and deserving as they were; I did not understand why these women had not been chosen, who would surely have done better than I; and that I too often doubted, and yet, yet, despite all this, I could not possibly deny that I was the mother of the Son of God. The only thing I knew for certain was that I myself was no god and yes: that I was the mother of His Son. Mary and Martha had quickly gone to fetch something: one of the long swaddling clothes soaked in the corpse’s fluids that Lazarus had been wearing at his resurrection. “Have a smell of it,” said Martha. I did as she asked, and it did not smell at all of corpse fluids but of jasmine blossom. “We really haven’t washed it,” they added. Now I understood why Mary and Martha had addressed me as the ‘mother of God’: they too had intuitively made the connection with what they believed was about to happen. I would need swaddling cloths, but I needn’t be afraid of them. I accepted the swaddling cloth with gratitude and

I felt just as blessed by them as I might have been to them.

Mary Magdalene came in laughing: “Messrs Oz and Az would like to leave! Lem is expecting them!” We couldn’t help but laugh. Off to Ein Karem!

Spring was now in full swing.

North of Jerusalem lay an important east-west trade route, from Joppa on the Mediterranean coast to Jericho and on through the desert to Syria. This main road ran right past the northern gate of Jerusalem. The section of the trade route between Joppa and Jerusalem wound its way through the surrounding hills. A river meandered nimbly between them, providing refreshment for the trade caravans.

One day, at the first crow of the cock, a man set off from Arimathea with a horse and cart laden with furniture of all sizes, heading for the great east-west road leading to the market in Jerusalem. Not far from the northern gate of Jerusalem, he had to stop to relieve himself. He climbed over the first barren hill he came across and looked for a spot. Then he stood up and only then noticed, right down below in a clearing in the green valley, an immense tree in all its might and splendour. Even further down in the valley, a little river babbled. The man was a carpenter and furniture maker. He was rich. He was also a

a respected Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin[62]. But what nobody knew was that he was one of the very first disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. His name was Joseph. He simply couldn't get enough of that tree. It intrigued him, and although he was an expert on wood, he couldn't identify the species from a distance. It looked to him like an apple tree in terms of proportions, but at this time of year they were all in bloom, certainly in the warm valleys. He descended further into the valley and found, in the middle of the grassland, the mighty tree with a trunk of unparalleled girth. He immediately examined the leaves and, sure enough, it was an apple tree. He found the tree beautiful; simply looking at it made him inexplicably happy and dispelled all his worries. It surprised the connoisseur that the tree bore no blossom in spring, and he thought he understood that it might be because all its energy was needed to keep the wood alive. He could not have known then how much truth there was in this thought. He estimated the tree to be centuries old, but did not dare to venture a guess, nor did he consider it important. The more he was impressed by it, the firmer his resolve became to buy the property with the tree. Then he could be sure

[62] Sanhedrin: the highest council and court of the Jews during the post-exilic period, led by the high priests Annas and Caiaphas and possessing religious, civil and criminal jurisdiction.

that no one would dream of cutting down this magnificent tree.

From the top of the barren hill, he took in the surroundings and oriented himself towards the nearest hill, which was shaped like a skull and was therefore also called Golgotha[63]. He continued his journey to the market in Jerusalem, filled with wonder.
After selling the cupboard, table and chairs, he hurried to the temple entrance, where there was an office for property deeds. Even though they knew he was rich, they asked only a nominal sum for what was recorded as the 'blood field', and no one could tell him why that place had been given such a name. Potential buyers backed out precisely because of the terrifying name, for superstition was not alien to many people. Joseph was happy to pay the sum. Whenever he was delivering timber or furniture to customers via the trade route, he would stop briefly by the roadside to admire the tree from the top of the hill. One day, after it had rained heavily, he stopped as usual, left his horse and cart in the care of an apprentice, and went to admire the tree up close. On his way down, due to the heavy rain of the previous days, he had to choose a different route and found an opening in the rock face right at the foot of the hill. He called out and heard an echo that confirmed

[63] Golgotha means 'Place of the Skull'.

that it must be a cave. He had no torch with him and decided to return later.

Joseph

In the Sanhedrin, I had only one friend whom I could trust completely. I told him about the blood-stained field with the immense apple tree and the hole in the rock face that might even conceal a cave, and asked him if he would like to come along to investigate. Nicodemus agreed immediately. We were of the same age and we too had witnessed the Sermon on the Mount amongst the Pharisees, but we did not join in the mockery of the majority of Pharisees. On the contrary, we were both ashamed on their behalf, but we did not dare to lay down our robes before the High Priest for fear of arousing suspicion. We felt terribly ashamed of ourselves because of our cowardly behaviour towards that courageous man, who knew full well what was constantly being plotted against him and that he could never escape it. He did nothing but perform miracles and never anything for himself. On the contrary, Nicodemus had once gone to seek out Jesus in the dead of night and had had a long conversation with him. He was still impressed by the gentleness with which Jesus spoke, without the slightest reproach and concerned only for every creature.

Nicodemus

My friend Joseph spoke so enthusiastically about the blood-soaked field with the enormous apple tree bearing no apples and the chance discovery of an opening in the rock face that it frankly surprised me. After all, this was not his usual manner. Of the two of us, he was actually the more level-headed and realistic one, whilst I often tended to exaggerate or get it completely wrong. I was sometimes too quick to get excited and found it easier to colour outside the lines. Sometimes this got me into trouble, but my daring encounter with Jesus as a member of the Sanhedrin was the best decision I ever made. Jesus took no offence at my scribal robes; on the contrary, he knew perfectly well what risk I was taking. And I took him at his word: “God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through the Father.” Jesus was the Saviour, the Messiah, the Ark of the Covenant in person, of whom Moses had already spoken; there can be no doubt about it. Joseph and I decided to keep a low profile within the Sanhedrin until we might one day be able to do something to support Jesus’ plan of salvation. And this would happen sooner than we could have imagined.

Joseph and I made our way to the blood field with pickaxes and torches. We set to work straight away. The rock face proved easier to break open than we had expected. Once the opening was large enough, we lit the torches and crawled inside. We were immediately greeted by the scent of apple blossom. We were standing on the ground

nailed: it was as if the fruitless tree had preserved its blossom in the cave. “How wonderful it must be to be buried in this scent,” suggested Jozef, and we decided to turn it into a rock tomb for whichever of us died first. We examined the cave meticulously and found traces of pottery and sleeping places around hearths with charcoal remains. People had lived here. Joseph drew my attention to two twigs, from which dried blossoms still gave off a pungent scent. We gave the twigs a place of honour in the cave where they could not be damaged. We also searched for traces of blood that might explain the name ‘blood field’, but these were nowhere to be found. In the days that followed, we worked feverishly to finish preparing our burial chamber, not because we feared we would die soon, but simply to enjoy that wonderful scent, for we wondered whether it would linger now that the cave entrance was fully open. Miraculously, it seemed as though the rock face had been imbued with it for centuries and the cave itself was delighted to welcome new inhabitants. The sun’s rays streamed generously into the cave, and after a day of stone-cutting, a little path led us to the river lower down in the valley, bringing us coolness and refreshment. Not much further upstream was a beautiful gorge. Birds chirped, little rabbits looked at us in surprise and paid no further heed to our presence. The red crown anemone stood proudly on the banks. The

lychee trees with their crimson blossoms and the pomegranate trees with their red-orange blossoms vied with one another for the title of the most beautiful.
Before we left, we said goodbye to the mighty apple tree. It made us feel quiet and humble.

In short, we felt as though we were in Eden.

Mary Magdalene

Once we set off along our old route to Ein Karem, Oz knew the way better than I did. The weather was on our side and the road was smooth and dry. I could close my eyes now and then on this long stretch. Oz's steady pace stirred memories within me. I thought back to how, as a young woman, I had been held upright by Caspar's strong arms as I rode at the front on the camel during that wondrous night with the star right before us. And I turned to Mary and cried out: "It reminds me of how I was on my way to you and the little Jesus in Bethlehem." I didn't understand where this had suddenly come from; it was just a sudden thought. Mary didn't reply either. Perhaps it had something to do with the myrrh I always carried with me, wherever I went. Hopefully it was a sign of good things to come.

We stopped, we ate, we carried on, we stopped, we ate, we carried on. Oz and Az were still keeping up the pace well, as if they could already hear their friend Lem bellowing from afar. The sunset was extraordinarily beautiful and lay right in front of us on our final mile. Just one last bend and we could indeed hear Lem bellowing. I craned my neck to look ahead, but what I saw still gives me the shivers. Rebecca had run outside at the sound of Lem's bellowing, saw us coming and screamed in fear and helplessness: "Mum, Mum!" and

She ran towards us: “Mum, Mum, what a relief! Hannah! Hannah!” and she couldn’t get another word out through her tears. I jumped off Oz and held her. Crying, she clung to me and, in fits and starts, the words came out: “Hannah, wound on her leg… had a fever for days… in pain, can’t eat or drink anything… unconscious… she’s going to die…” and then she completely broke down. I supported her. Meanwhile, Samuel, with dark circles under his eyes and pale with exhaustion, had also come out and took her from me. I hurried inside with Maria to see if there was anything we could do. Little Johannes was crying with excitement. Hannah’s room was darkened; only an oil lamp shone on her white, dying face. The fever seemed to be subsiding, but that was a bad sign, the beginning of the body’s surrender to the spirit. I examined her lower leg and the putrid smell was unbearable. I looked Maria in the eyes and understood that I had to take a step back. I turned my attention to Rebecca and Samuel. I told them who Mary was, whilst she rummaged through her travel bag and found the bandages she had received from Martha and Mary. She immediately began to cleanse Hannah’s ravaged leg with water, before bandaging it with the cloth she had received from Martha. The stench vanished instantly, giving way to the scent of jasmine blossom. Instantly, Rebecca and Samuel regained hope and considered this a miracle in itself. For the sceptical Samuel in particular, this was incomprehensible, and the

once again stirred up feelings and insights within him that his mind would never again deny. Rebecca threw her arms round Mary's neck and I heard her whisper: "You are the mother of the king's child, you are my mother. I am eternally grateful to you." Day and night we took turns watching over Hannah; the fever stayed away and Hannah's breathing and complexion returned to normal. We rinsed the nappies twice a day, and the wound on her leg actually began to heal little by little. We were able to give her water, goat's milk and honey using damp cloths in her mouth. She slowly began to suck on them, until on the third day she opened her eyes, saw me and whispered in a weak voice: "Ma Ma", before drifting back into a deep sleep.

Maria

All our attention was rightly focused on Hannah. It shifted my worries about my son to that little girl in the cottage where I once stood belly to belly with Elizabeth, and where Zacharias was filled with great gratitude and even greater humility at being able to receive such happiness at his age. Lazarus's swaddling clothes had healed Hannah and meant once again that I need not fear what might happen to my son.

But fear can be fought or suppressed, though never eradicated. It is a feeling with a hundred heads that you must strike off one by one. I can say that my

My son, through Hannah, helped me to put my worries aside for a few days with the miracle of the nappies – nappies that were already laid out for my son too. I, who thought I didn't need any help myself, now had to laugh at my own foolishness. My son and his Father cared for me ceaselessly. It wasn't the other way round. Nothing surprised me anymore, and my trust in his mission grew stronger by the day. My name was 'Drop of the Sea' and in the sea I would remain. The more I loved my son, the more I loved every human being. My motherhood knew no bounds. It seemed to become a nature without autumn or winter.

Together with Mary Magdalene, I moved into the little house of the former owners, Jair and Hannah. Mary Magdalene's account of Jair's death and Hannah's suicide struck me deeply and felt very real: the bed in which they both died, the grave with the purple flowers where they lay together, both indirect victims of Herod's infanticide. I asked Mary Magdalene to leave me alone with them for a moment.

I stood alone before their

grave. I opened my heart.

I wept fourteen thousand tears and caught them in my hands.

I closed my eyes.

“Djibril, where are you?” I turned round at once because I knew he was standing behind me.

“Will you convey these tears for Jair and Hannah to my son’s father?”

I felt Djibril take the tears from my hands and I turned back towards the grave.

I opened my eyes.

Man cannot touch the angel, but the angel can touch man. And once again, it was no coincidence that I was allowed to feel human suffering so closely, so that I might bear my own future suffering at my son’s death more easily. And perhaps, I thought, my future suffering would even be less heavy than the suffering that Jair bore personally, both mentally and physically, or the suffering of Hannah, who suffered greatly from her powerlessness to watch, day and night, as her beloved Jair suffered for days on end. I already knew then who I was: the mother of all people, but it had not yet fully dawned on me that I would one day, like Hannah, stand very close by in the suffering of every human being. During the few days we stayed in Ein Karem, with Mary Magdalene’s consent, I remained all alone in Jair and Hannah’s little house, and only occasionally did I visit little Hannah. Staying in this little house was, at this point in my life, exactly what I needed and what gave me strength. This

little house embodied my life's mission. It was here that my crusade as a mother for humanity began.

Mary Magdalene

I was standing outside talking to Samuel about Hannah's miraculous healing. Samuel was completely bewildered: "There can't possibly be so many coincidences, Mary Magdalene? No one in Massilia would believe me, and yet it's true… How can we ever thank you?"

"You mustn't thank us, Samuel, but Jesus, the son of Mary."

I visited Mary from time to time and noticed a change in her that I still cannot describe to this day. She stood closer, yet also much further away. I'm not expressing myself clearly: she stood closer, yet also much higher. That's not quite right either: she stood higher, yet also much closer. Yes, that's how it seemed: with hardly any words, closer, closer to the heart of man. It didn't seem that way, because it was intensely palpable. Words cannot describe it.

And

…

And

…

It leaves you

speechless. Audibly

silent.

Rebecca

By the fifth day, Hannah was already able to eat more solid food and could keep her eyes open a little longer. “Mum?” I couldn’t quite tell which of us she meant, because now that Mary Magdalene was there, there were suddenly two Mums. Mary Magdalene and I assumed that whoever heard it was the mum she wanted to hear.

“Yes, darling?”

“Am I going to die?”

“No, darling.” I had to swallow hard.

“Is that woman with the nappies still here?” Her eyes lit up for a moment. “I want to give her a kiss.” But speaking itself was already too tiring, with the difference that she drifted off to dreamland with a smile on her face. I asked Mary Magdalene to take over for a moment, as I was going to visit Mary to thank her on Hannah’s behalf. Mary Magdalene looked at me with concern: “Are you all right?”

“No, I don’t know what to say, but I have to say something. It’s all a jumble in my head.”

“Follow your heart and have no fear,” said Ma Ma, trying to help me, but it didn’t help. Or so I thought.

As I made my way to Maria, I realised how my mind had gone completely blank because of the terrible fear of losing Hannah. Now that she was on the mend, I should have been looking ahead again, but I could no longer see the way forward. I had lost my

lost my faith in life, or no: I had lost my faith in love. I could lose Hannah at any moment, or Johannes or Samuel. How could I still believe in a God of love? My previous dissolute life seemed easier and safer; back then I had nothing and therefore had nothing to lose. Why did I want to go to Maria? Oh yes, to ask for a kiss for Hannah. My legs were trembling with weakness, with uncertainty, afraid of saying something wrong, of saying something stupid, something… No, it was pure emptiness.

I stood at her door. I

don't know for how

long.

I stared at my feet. Suddenly, one thought occurred to me: the stranger who had shown me the way to Mary Magdalene back then. Had I not trusted him blindly, I would never, never, never… never have been standing here. I knocked and hoped she wouldn't open the door.

Maria

"Come in, Rebecca. I saw you coming and I've got some fresh mint tea ready for you." She hesitated.
"Hannah will be all right." Rebecca nodded awkwardly. "And you'll be all right too." And she began to sob, and everything inside her burst forth like a thundercloud emptying itself in a single second. She sought comfort in my arms, and her pain hurt me terribly too—a pain that taught me to deal with someone else's pain

. It was as if I was taking on her pain, for the softer she became, the more I could feel her pain. Feeling pain is not pleasant, but feeling that you can take it on from someone else is itself a balm for the pain you feel. I thanked Djibril for sending her to me.

I received a reply from Djibril quite quickly on how to deal with this: “You know, dear Rebecca, I’ve brought a special swaddle for you too.” She looked at me in surprise, and after what she’d seen with Lazaros’s swaddle, she was immediately filled with hope. I stood behind her and gently wrapped both my arms around her belly. “Look, when my arms wrap around you and my fingers intertwine to form a single whole, they create a unity that completely envelops you like a single swaddle of love. And then I say: ‘Hail, Rebecca, the Lord is with you.’” I looked at her from the side until I could see in her eyes that she understood it that way too. “But… there is one condition: I would also like to be part of your swaddling cloth, Rebecca…” and I let her go. Rebecca understood what I was getting at. She turned round and, in turn, wrapped her arms around me, clasped her hands behind my back and whispered to me: “Hail, Mary, the Lord is with thee.” “And then, dear Rebecca, I shall whisper in your heart: ‘Hail, Rebecca, the Lord is with thee too.’ Now I stand here close to you, but whenever I am no longer here and you are sad or in pain or need help, open your arms and clasp your hands together, and greet me, and I will gladly comfort you with my swaddling clothes.” As I explained this to her, she looked

Djibril looked at both of us from outside the window. I gently let her go and promised her: “I’ll come and give Hannah a kiss tomorrow.”

Rebecca left the little house of pain, freed from pain. Later it dawned on me how I had received my ‘training’ from Djibril in that little house, and how that little house of pain would take on the dimensions of the world of pain, and I would need an immense number of nappies, which I was also provided with through no merit of my own. Every human heart was a gift of love to me. I thanked my son’s father for such generosity. And to this day, I have never understood what I did to deserve it.

Mary Magdalene

Rebecca came back from Maria’s looking visibly relieved. She threw her arms round me and laughed with relief: “Maria gave me a nappy.” And she turned away because she liked the fact that she knew something I didn’t yet know. That cheerful little game went on all day long and brought so much joy into the house that even Samuel could smile again, and little Johannes could smile again too, as the tension melted away. Hannah also started smiling again when she woke up now and then and saw a happy mum. It wasn’t until the next morning that Rebecca told me what had happened in the little house of pain,

while she held me with both arms, just as she had learnt from Mary. During the day, Samuel came to see me. “Mary Magdalene, do you still understand what’s happening here? Would you like to talk to me later? I need to talk about Lem too; I’m worried about Lem. Something’s wrong. I’m free this afternoon.”
In the meantime, I went to see the donkeys, as I was very worried about Lem. He was standing quietly with Oz and Az. They were behaving surprisingly submissively and were giving him the best food. Lem didn’t seem ill, but he was now very old for a donkey. He was at least forty years old. I waited until after midday to speak to Samuel about it.

Samuel

Rebecca seemed as good as new. I kept asking what had happened. But she just kept repeating: “I can’t tell you yet, darling. I hardly understand myself what has happened to me. Give me time until I understand it better myself. I can tell you, though, that I went to see Mary and she reassured me. I now know that Hannah will certainly recover.” Of course, I didn’t understand a thing, but I’d learnt by now that not much ordinary happened in this family, but always something good. So the best way for me to respond was to hold her close and give her a kiss, and she suddenly cried out, “Ouch, your nappy’s hurting me.” She burst out laughing as I stood there staring at her in surprise. Nappy???

Hannah woke up to the commotion and watched the squabbling with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. Rebecca stopped immediately and asked if I shouldn't speak to Mary Magdalene about Lem.
I found Mary Magdalene with the donkeys earlier than planned and was curious to know what she thought of it.

"I'm not really worried, Samuel, but I have a hunch about what's going on. Lem is ancient for a donkey and seems worn out to me; he's tired of life, but he's always been loyal and won't make a decision of his own without permission. I'm going to ask him." I nodded in agreement, though I didn't think her analysis made any sense, as if an animal could reason like a human. She began listing names in his ear. 'Zacharias?' and she waited a moment, nothing, and so it went on: 'John?' nothing, 'Rebecca?' nothing, 'Hannah?' nothing, 'Samuel?' nothing, 'Elizabeth?' and suddenly he began to bray loudly. Mary Magdalene stroked him and life returned to Lem. Mary Magdalene looked at me: "It seems logical to me that he wants to die in the place where Elizabeth died, on Mount Hebron. I may be wrong, but we must give him his freedom. We must take his yoke from him so that he can go his final way to die as a free donkey and not as a beast of burden, there where his most important task once lay. How would we feel ourselves, Samuel?" And yes, it wasn't exactly as if, it was what she wanted to say: "You don't have to believe me, Samuel." I had to reluctantly admit to myself that Lem

He reacted as if he understood our language, for you could see joy in his eyes. Oz and Az also sensed something strange happening, but clearly didn't understand it. Mary Magdalene spoke into Lem's ear again: "Leave tonight, Lem; you know the way like no other, and by tomorrow morning you'll be well out of people's reach. I'll take your testimony from you, and I'll ask Rebecca to say goodbye to you."

I did my best to believe that Lem understood, and when I looked at it that way, it really did seem, I mean it, as though he understood her. I laughed at myself: where on earth have I ended up? And I answered the question for myself: "In something wonderful, my dear Samuel!" But at the same time I felt a little sad when I thought of my father and brothers back in Massilia: if only they could 'learn' to live like this too.

I went straight to Rebecca and told her the sad news. After so much joy at Hannah's recovery, there was suddenly another setback, but she immediately accepted it for Lem's sake and insisted that Hannah be allowed to say goodbye too, however weak she was. I fetched Hannah and wrapped her snugly in a blanket, and so we all said goodbye to a loyal friend. Lem had a special soft spot for Hannah, and now that he saw her eyes open, he seemed reassured; he sniffed her and stroked her cheek very tenderly with his muzzle. It tickled Hannah and she began to laugh, and so did we. "Bye, Lem," Hannah said, and we left everything to Mary Magdalene and

went back inside. The next morning, it turned out that Lem had indeed set off on his final journey. I was already starting to find it somewhat routine and a matter of course. Oz and Az stood there looking rather dejected. I wiped away a tear and knew what I had to do: buy a donkey for Hannah today at the market in Ein Karem.

There was so much I'd wanted to ask Mary Magdalene, but I'd put it off. That's how I reasoned at the time, but everything was about to come to a head.

Mary

I went once more to the grave of Jair and Hannah and stroked the purple spring flowers that lay like a blanket over their grave. It reminded me of the purple curtain I had to weave for the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem when I had only just been assigned to Joseph. I worked on it for months, and over the years the purple coloured my soul from within, becoming purer and purer, bringing me peace of mind between thought and action and balance between spirit and emotions. I regularly wore the purple shawl from when I sat at the table in Bethlehem with my son, John and Mary Magdalene, and we were united with one another, come what may. And that event was drawing ever closer. The mother of Ashkelon within me was never far away, and I wondered where the fourteen thousand souls were now? The

It was a profound question I asked myself, one that called for a profound answer, and that answer came to me at the same time: have faith; the souls of the dead dwell in their faith. To be honest, I couldn't imagine anyone having doubts about that, and yet I had seen and heard that mistrust many times before, and I thought, for example, of the terrible remarks made by the Pharisees behind my back whilst Jesus was speaking on the mountain. Yes, I admit, it frightened me for a single second, but in that very same second I immediately felt pity for them because of what they were throwing away, and I wanted so much to embrace and comfort them for their ignorance. Just as I could now have offered comfort to Jair and Hannah in their ignorance of their actions, so that their purple would be coloured in pure gold by the sunlight.

It was only after Jesus' death and resurrection that I understood that what I took for granted in myself was absolutely not the case for my fellow human beings. And this was what I myself learnt and understood after his resurrection: that I was even more, more broadly, and indeed boundlessly open to offering comfort to every person, fallen or not.

I immediately went to give a little kiss to sweet little Hannah.

It began to rain softly.

Samuel

As I made my way to the market on Oz's back, my thoughts drifted back to my childhood and youth. My father was heartbroken over my mother, who bled to death at my birth and died in his arms. He couldn't bring himself to love me afterwards either; even though he suffered from this himself, he simply couldn't manage it. I even suspect that, in the long run, he suffered more from the fact that he couldn't love me than from his wife's death. Grief from the past fades more easily than regret in the present. My three brothers were the apples of his eye and didn't welcome the little one into their midst either. My mother's eldest sister took me under her wing. My father wasn't a bad man and was very grateful to her for trying to give me what he couldn't. I had no mother and, after all, I had no father either. Materially, I wanted for nothing and I went to a small school, made friends there, but the older we got, the harder it became for me because of their jealousy of my wealthy background. I took out all my frustrations on everyone I loved: my stepmother, my father and my brothers. I was out of control: often drunk, often fighting, and I sought out physical pain so as not to have to feel the inner pain. My father had become a major merchant and could find only one solution, and that was to send me to

sending one of his ships to distant trading regions, with the port of Sidon in Phoenicia as its main stop: unloading goods from Massilia and buying up Eastern wares, then making a stopover in Ashdod, Judea, and finally selling everything in Massilia. It was not a bad arrangement, for the old captain became like a second father to me and was truly fond of me. As I grew older, I became increasingly estranged from my family. I always enjoyed setting out from Massilia onto the open sea, but whenever I had to return home from Ashdod in Judea or Sidon in Phoenicia, it was time and again with sadness and against my will. The sea had become my home. When I was allowed to set sail once more for the port of Ashdod in Judea, bad news awaited me: my old captain had died suddenly and a new captain was waiting for me. From the very first moment, we didn't get on. He was only a few years older than me and I found it hard to be treated like a novice. According to him, everything I had learnt in the years before was wrong and everything now had to be done differently; I could do nothing right in his eyes. It was a blessing that I found love here in Ein Karem, and Mary Magdalene was truly a second mother to me and Rebecca.
Ein Karem came into view.

The market in Ein Karem is on the outskirts of the town, and even from a distance I could see there was quite a commotion. People weren't so much looking at the goods on sale as gathering in small groups. I made my way to the animal market. I

I saw oxen, horses, geese, chickens and donkeys. An old man with just one donkey caught my eye, and I suspected he was short of money. He was selling a young female donkey, and the animal itself seemed to take a liking to me. Oz was also very interested in her and behaved more than courteously. We quickly agreed on the price and, whilst I was paying the old man, I asked curiously what was going on with all those people who were arguing so heatedly with one another. “Jesus of Nazareth was arrested yesterday by the Pharisees after he was welcomed into Jerusalem on a donkey like a king by a crowd of people just like you and me. This was the last straw for the Jewish authorities in the capital. He is due to appear before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem the day after tomorrow. People are arguing amongst themselves; some are for him, others against. All I can say is that, in my opinion, that man did nothing wrong, and I only dare say this to you because you are of foreign blood and won’t find this so important.” He suddenly looked at me fearfully: “I hope not, do I?” I reassured him and paid him a little extra. My heart was pounding. I would be returning home with bad news. I left the town calmly at first, but once out of sight I urged Oz to walk faster.

Mary Magdalene

I saw Samuel returning in the distance with a young donkey beside him. I waved enthusiastically at him, but he

didn't wave back. The closer he got, the more I could see how distressed he was, and that he was even on the verge of tears. He called out from a distance: "Jesus has been arrested!" I walked towards him and halfway there we both stopped. "Mary Magdalene, Jesus is to appear before the Sanhedrin the day after tomorrow! He has been arrested!" I turned around immediately to bring Mary the bad news. Not a minute later, I was sitting at her table. We looked at each other and our eyes told each other what we had known for a long time: the King's child was going to die.

Mary stood up. "Mary Magdalene, we're going to pack up straight away and set off for Jerusalem." I nodded, and she put her words into action. Samuel and Rebecca helped as much as they could. Everyone kept their spirits up. Everything went quickly, yet without haste. I made sure we had food for the journey. Samuel looked after Oz and Az and packed the luggage. Rebecca was the first to say goodbye to Mary, embracing her with both arms and fingers: "Hail, Mary, the Lord is with you." Mary embraced her with a smile. Samuel awkwardly followed suit and thanked her for looking after his family so well. Hannah received a kiss and Mary laid her hand on little John's head. Rebecca's eyes told me everything. She could not utter another word without weeping. We embraced each other. "What must come will come, and what comes is good. Be strong. We shall meet again." Samuel whispered to me: "I had

so much I still wanted to ask you, but we'll do that later." "Thank you for everything."

And so Maria and I set off for Jerusalem. Oz and Az were well-rested and we made good progress. There was a chance we might still arrive in Jerusalem in time. We discussed only the bare essentials along the way and didn't want to make things any harder for each other than they already were.

Joseph of Arimathea

Nicodemus and I had been working on the blood field for a whole week and the cave was finally as good as ready. The pleasant scent remained intense. It began to rain gently and the approaching clouds from across the sea did not bode well. By evening, all hell broke loose. It was pouring with rain, and thunder and lightning were playing a game with each other. We watched, spellbound, from the cave through a curtain of rain towards the field of blood. Even in this sheltered valley, the wind was tearing leaves and thick branches from the trees. We had never seen such a spectacle before. Suddenly, a flash of light filled the entire valley and, within the same second, a massive bolt of lightning struck the apple tree, followed by a whirlwind that lifted it up and knocked it over like a twig. The ground shook, trembled, cracked. We no longer dared to stay in the cave, fearing another earthquake might follow. We were soaked through and trembling more from fear than from the cold, and we clung to one another. Speaking to one another became impossible amid the roar of rain and wind. The world was coming to an end. It was as if the wrath of God had struck us. We fell to our knees and prayed for forgiveness and help. The wind died down, the rain eased, the clouds parted and a full moon lit up the valley. We dared to lift our heads again. We let out a simultaneous cry of

Fear: four figures stood around us. Clad in white, surrounded by a bright glow. “Fear not, Joseph and Nicodemus. The Lord is with you. This is not the end of the world, but the beginning of the new world.” We could not believe our eyes at the sight of the four angelic figures. We dared not speak and could not speak, speechless in the face of such simple beauty and tranquillity after the storm.
“We are Raphael, Djibril, Enoch and myself, Michael. Joseph, whilst you were away, the Romans asked your disciple Philip to make a cross for the Saviour. But there is only one kind of wood worthy of being borne by Christ, and that is the wood of the tree of good and evil in Eden, which is steeped in all the tears of mankind since the fall of Adam and Eve. The wood is not inhumanly heavy, but above all hard. No man can work it. To this end, we were sent by the Father. Go in peace, and we shall see to the cross. Philip will let you know when you can come and fetch the cross.”

Nicodemus and I struggled to our feet and steadied each other, for our heads were spinning. We bowed before such beauty and left the field of blood in awe. We passed the fallen tree, and the angels were already busy freeing the trunk from the root stump. As we did so, Nicodemus was struck by the distressing thought that Jesus had apparently already

and had therefore possibly already been sentenced to death. We were sad, but at the same time grateful to be able to take part in the plan of salvation for humanity, and we immediately agreed that we would bury Jesus in the rock-hewn tomb on the field of blood. We left the horse and cart behind—something we would never normally do—but used the two-hour walk to talk and recover from our emotions.

Mary Magdalene

Mary and I arrived in Jerusalem and saw a crowd of people rushing about. Without knowing what was going on, we blindly followed the crowd and ended up at Pontius Pilate's official residence. There, by chance, we saw John in one of the adjoining houses, looking out from the roof of a terraced house towards the praetorium, where Pilate was due to appear in public. I jumped off Oz and handed the reins to Mary. I was going to fetch John and pushed my way through the crowd to the house where John had already spotted me and had come down himself. "Where's Mary?" he asked.
"She's waiting a little further on by the donkeys." "All right, I'll come with you."
We fought our way back through the crowd. Mary was glad to see John, but John found it difficult to have to tell her the painful news. "I don't know how to tell you this, mother. Jesus was arrested last night in Gethsemane and has

since been handed over by Caiaphas to Pilate to be put to death. But Pilate is still undecided and, because it is the day before Passover, he will leave it to the people's choice: Barabbas or Jesus. But countless Pharisees have, in the meantime, organised themselves well and prepared. It looks bad." Mary remained admirably strong.

Joseph

Nicodemus and I approached the northern city gate of Jerusalem, with Golgotha to our left. The Romans were already busy preparing the path to the Place of the Skull, where, as was customary, a crucifixion was to take place. It gave me goosebumps. How can one human being do such a thing to another? How much hatred must one harbour to do that? How can you go on living with that yourself? What God can you invoke then? How twisted and warped must your conscience be for that? Why? …….Why? A crowd of people was pushing to enter the gate. Nicodemus suddenly nudged me: “Look, there!” and he pointed with his finger: “Simon Peter and Simon the Zealot! And look there, on the other side: Matthew and Andrew! I don’t know the others very well and have never seen them up close… Apparently, they don’t dare to go in as a group.” We joined the crowd on our way to Pilate’s praetorium. Meanwhile, we heard from people who knew more about it how Caiaphas was determined to kill Jesus, even though he had no right under Jewish law to sentence people to death, let alone to kill them. It was the day before Passover, and on that day Pontius Pilate, as was his annual custom, would grant freedom to one person sentenced to death. Pilate knew how sensitive the Sanhedrin was about Jesus. Caiaphas was a master strategist who Pilate

drifted perfectly into the corner, though Pilate had hoped that by flogging Jesus first and then presenting him to the crowd alongside Barabbas, the rebellious leader of the Zealots, the people would still choose to release Jesus. The Pharisees, however, had prepared well and were scattered amongst the crowd across the entire square. We were still waiting in our work clothes in front of the praetorium, where a fellow Pharisee in full regalia spotted us. He squeezed his way over to us and greeted us with apparent warmth, but his true intention became clear a few minutes later. Pilate appeared with the two condemned men: Barabbas, physically unscathed, with a triumphant and defiant look, and the scourged Jesus, wearing a crown of thorns and a purple robe, a bloodstained tunic, and a sign around his neck reading 'King of the Jews'. Pilate called out to the crowd: "Here is your king!" Many Pharisees in full regalia immediately began shouting at the top of their voices: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" and many ordinary people dared not do anything but shout along with them. Our colleague too shouted fanatically, but Nicodemus and I remained completely silent. Most people followed our example and not that of the barbarian and fool beside us. The colleague glanced back and to the side and grew increasingly quiet until he fell completely silent, for he suddenly felt unsafe. He put his neutral hood over his head, so that his fellow brothers could not find him in the crowd to demand an explanation for his silence. The people of good will closed ranks and ensured

that he could not possibly slip away to try his luck elsewhere, and he no longer dared to move or express any joy at Pilate's verdict. Afterwards, we realised how we had been saved by the people around us who silenced the man: afterwards, he did not dare to accuse us or even contradict us in the Sanhedrin. Pilate, meanwhile, washed his hands in innocence: 'I find absolutely no fault in this man.' And the passionate, heartless and inflammatory cries of the Pharisees began anew; Pilate gave in, and Caiaphas took Christ from him with his executioners.

The verdict hit us hard, even though we had been prepared by the four angels. The angels had dispelled any remaining doubt we had that Jesus was the Messiah. The square was gradually emptying, and suddenly I saw one of my young servants looking for me. "Master, your horse and cart are waiting at the north gate, loaded with a cross." He looked very unhappy and I asked what was wrong. He said: "I don't like the fact that you're going to make and sell crosses." "Philip, it's not what you think. I'm not making a cross, nor am I selling one. This cross was made by God's angels, and they have asked me to transport it." I wasn't lying. He looked surprised, but Nicodemus and I were even more surprised by his reply: "Jesus has given my father back to me. My father was a rejected leper and he healed him. Never will the Jews have a king greater than Jesus. I dare not

“Don’t tell my father what’s happening here.” Such grown-up language for a twelve-year-old boy! He added: “May I please go home? I can’t bear to watch this, and I want to be there for my father when he finds out.” “Of course, Philippus, and help your parents for as long as necessary.” Nicodemus looked at me: “Many Pharisees could learn a thing or two from your disciple and do not have such wisdom and understanding of the love of Christ. Do you mind if I go home for a moment and tell my wife the news?” And we parted, heavy-hearted. I went back to the north gate, where the horse and cart stood with the cross beneath the canvas. I touched it: it vibrated incessantly; the wood seemed alive, as if it could keep the victim alive… The wood was polished and as smooth as a mirror, not a scratch or splinter to hurt oneself on. However, I could not find the sign I had been asked for, bearing the inscription ‘INRI’. I gestured to a Roman and explained to him that this was the cross for the Nazarene, and that I had forgotten something and would go and fetch it quickly. I unhitched my horse from the cart and galloped off to the field of blood.

I arrived and climbed the hill with some difficulty. Right at the very top, I looked down and saw no trace of the tree of yesteryear; only in the middle did I see a single angel sitting by the tree’s stump. As I carefully made my way down, I saw him feeling the rings. I heard the wind whispering names into my ears, strange names: “Kenaz, Korach, Gatam, Amalek, Korah,

Seïr, Lotan, Sobal, Sibon, Dison, Eser, Disan, Chori, Hemam, Timna, Alwan, Manachat, Ebal, Sefo, Onam, Akan, Us, Aran, Bela." I had approached him to within fifteen cubits [64] and recognised Enoch as the only angel remaining. I could now clearly see how, with every slight movement of his index finger on a wedding ring, he associated a name with it and called out that name aloud, each time a single tear falling from his eyes onto the field of blood. I stood respectfully and listened for a while with my eyes closed: "Seba, Obal, Abimael, Ofir, Chawila, Jobab, Eber, Peleg, Reü, Serug, Nachor, Terach, Abram, Sarai, Haran, Lot, Milka, Jiska…" It was no wonder that the wood of the cross held life and pain within it and quivered.

I looked around. All the remains of the tree of good and evil—roots, leaves, branches, splinters, sawdust—had vanished, save for one small piece: it lay within Enoch's reach. Could I bring myself to make him take his finger off the spot where it now rested? Step by step, I drew nearer. "Tebach, Gacham, Tachas, Maäka, Jisbak, Suach, Seba, Dedan, Efa, Efer, Chanok, Abida, Eldaä, Sochar, Nebajot, Kedar, Abdeël, Mibsam, Misma, Duma…" The sign came within reach; I bent down and Enoch continued reading intently: "Arjok, Birsa, Tidal, Sunab, Semeber, Bera, Melchisidek, Amer, Eskol, Mamre, Eliëzer, Hagar, Seraphim, Ishmael, Isaac, Abimelech, Pikol, Milka, Nahor, Us…" I knelt beside

[64] 15 cubits is 10 metres.

him, touched the plaque marked INRI and waited politely. He continued: “Tebach, Gacham, Tachas, Maäka, Efron, Laban, Ketura, Zimran, Joksan, Medan, Midjan, Jisbak, Suach, Seba, Dedan, Efa,” He stopped suddenly, held his finger where he had been and spoke with kind eyes, looking straight into mine: “Joseph, Mamre, Eliezer, Bechur, Nicodemus, Japka, Ishmael, Isaac, Philip, Simon, Alexander, Rufus, Abila.” Without moving his finger, and whilst uttering my name and those of my wife and children, of Nicodemus and the disciple Philip, he shed a single tear for each. I must admit that the names Simon, Alexander, Rufus and Abila meant absolutely nothing to me. Then he nodded respectfully for me to take the board away, looked again at his finger to see where he had left off, and continued: “Jisbak, Massa, Chadad, Tema, Jetur, Nafis, Kedema, Esau, Jacob, Jehudit, Basemat, Rachel, Leah, Zilpah, Bilhah, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun…”

I retreated, my legs feeling unsteady, dazed by so much beauty, and emotionally overwhelmed as I spoke the names of my wife, daughter and son. I glanced back briefly and saw how other angels had rolled the stone away from the cave. There was no longer any doubt: this place was destined for this purpose, and here we would give Jesus his final resting place. I hurried back with the sign.

Mary

Mary Magdalene stood beside me. John had found it very difficult when his childhood friend and brother Jesus fell into the hands of the Pharisees, even though he knew this would one day happen. All the people were rushing to Golgotha. Many out of curiosity, many out of schadenfreude, many out of sympathy for him, many who doubted because he did not defend himself whilst they had heard so much of the miracles he performed, but only a few fully realised who he truly was. I could not blame the people. The most important part of the fifth papyrus scroll of the King's Child was yet to come: his resurrection after death. What others had to try to believe, I did not have to try. For me, it was like my pregnancy: something you cannot possibly deny. It was a gift to have Mary Magdalene by my side, for she too knew no doubt, and we both knew, as we sat in Lazarus's tomb, that one day we would sit in my son's empty tomb. Yet my son's suffering, both spiritual and physical, was not to be underestimated. I could only overcome my powerlessness through faith. My whole life, from my acceptance as a three-year-old child in the temple until now, had been one long journey, paved with deeply rooted stones, which had dried up swamps, bridged rivers and prepared me for what was now happening. And even now I would not stumble over high steps or be

stopped by the deepest waters of the sea. Just as I would have climbed the steep hill of Golgotha and, if need be, paved the way. Nothing could stop me.
So be it.

Mary Magdalene

I was stunned by the sight of the scourged man in a purple robe, crowned with thorns as 'King of the Jews' and reviled, rejected, and mocked by a frenzied crowd. The man I loved. The man who loved all people. The king's child on his way to show us the path to his and our Father. How could anyone not love this man? The purple robe reminds me of how the four of us sat at Mary's kitchen table when John the Baptist was beheaded and we bound ourselves together with the purple scarf. It was a preparation for what is happening now; I understand that now. It was no coincidence that John and Mary, too, clutched this piece of purple in their hands. It was our sign of faith in life and not in death. Jesus' death killed death, but not life.
Oh yes! I was standing at the edge of a massive waterfall overlooking the sea, and I jumped without the slightest hesitation.

John

Jesus was jeered at, spat on and mocked by an incited crowd as he made his way through the city towards the North Gate. There, at the foot of Golgotha, the cross awaited him. A

A certain Joseph of Arimathea wanted to help Jesus carry the cross, but the Romans stopped him and he disappeared from view. Behind him followed two criminals, bent under the same burden. Golgotha, the place of the skull, was a dreadful hill to climb: it began with a ridge that gradually grew steeper, then suddenly gave way to the final, even steeper section of the forehead of the skull, ending at the horizontal crown. The jeering and shouts of bloodthirsty people completed the inferno. Behind him followed two notorious robbers, who suffered the same fate. I steadily followed my brother's Way of the Cross upwards, together with Mary and Mary Magdalene. It was the first time I had seen them both weeping. Every time Jesus fell, the two women clung to one another so as not to fall themselves from grief. It was heart-rending. I myself have consciously suppressed many memories of it; otherwise, I would have lost my faith in humanity forever. I focused on my brother's mission for humanity, and that is where all my attention went. I could not do what the women could: when I later looked back on it with them, they confirmed that they felt pity not only for Jesus, but also for the executioners, the soldiers and the incited crowd who knew no better and certainly did not understand why Jesus gave his life for them and for humanity. "A Saviour makes no distinction as to whom he saves," Mary explained. "Forgive them, for they know not what they do," he had

Jesus even said to his mother. Oh yes, afterwards I felt very small in the presence of my mother and Mary Magdalene. Women of immense strength. Yet they didn't hold it against me; quite the opposite. It was a life lesson I would never forget and would always pass on.

Joseph

Nicodemus and I had discussed the previous evening what we had to do. Nicodemus would follow the Way of the Cross and I would go to Pilate as quickly as possible before anyone else from the Sanhedrin did so. I strongly insisted that we ask not only for Jesus' body, but also for permission to take possession of the cross. This cross had acquired immense symbolic value after I had seen Enoch at work.

I made my way to Pilate's chambers. Pilate knew me personally from when I had gone to ask for a favour on behalf of the Sanhedrin, and that conversation had been very cordial and conducted with mutual respect. When I reported to him today, he was even glad to see me. He simply could not understand why the Pharisees were reacting so fanatically whilst they were releasing a notorious murderer like Barabbas. He was still deeply shaken by the fact that he bore responsibility for Jesus' death, for a man in whom he saw not the slightest evil. On the contrary, indeed, he had gathered that from many accounts. The

It was a relief to me too that we thought and felt the same way about Jesus, and I made it clear that I wouldn't have acted any differently had I been in his place. It suddenly created an opportunity for us to make amends together, and I asked him if I might take Jesus' body, along with the cross, before the Sabbath began and, under the escort of Roman soldiers, transport it to the tomb on the Field of Blood, and if a few soldiers could guard the tomb for a week. He thought it was an excellent idea, but couldn't understand why Caiaphas had also asked for the tomb to be guarded for a week. I explained to him that Christ had said on several occasions that he would rise from the dead on the third day, and so it was important for both believers and non-believers that a neutral party could bear witness to this. He understood and did indeed think it was important that there should be no further unrest. His final question was: "And you, Joseph? Which side are you on?" I told him about my friend Nicodemus, who had secretly visited Jesus one night, and how loving this man was and all the miracles he had performed. "And why that cross? It's just wood, isn't it?" "Many believers will see it as an important symbol, sir," I replied. I couldn't say any more about it; there wasn't time to go into it in greater depth. "I give you my full permission, Joseph." And it wasn't just me who was relieved, but Pilate even more so, if that were possible. Pilate gave me a parchment bearing his seal as a safe-conduct for Nicodemus and me.

No Pharisee would dare stop us now. For Pilate, this was a rectification of what he had done by allowing Caiaphas to manipulate him. Woe betide anyone who would dare to kill us now. This parchment would protect both our lives from murder. There was so much hatred within the Sanhedrin itself, and Pilate felt so much hatred for the Sanhedrin. As I left Pilate, I showed the parchment to the centurion. He was delighted with it and immediately sent some soldiers to accompany me.

SIMON, THE CROSS-BEARER

In the early morning when Jesus was arrested on the Mount of Olives, this news spread like wildfire from Judea to Samaria, Galilee, Perea, even to the Decapolis west of the Jordan, and I hurried to pay my respects to this man who had healed my son.

People say that I was forced by the Romans to help carry Jesus' cross. This is not true at all.

My entire Jewish family hails from distant Cyrene [65], a thriving city on the Mediterranean. A major persecution of the Jews forced my distant ancestors to flee, and my parents settled in Sychar in Samaria. I have two sons, Rufus and Alexander. The youngest, Alexander, was born blind, and once he was old enough, he insisted on begging so that he could contribute something to our family. We were not well off. It happened on a Sabbath when Jesus [66]happened to pass by Alexander with his disciples, and Alexander asked for alms. He heard his disciples ask him: "Rabbi, who sinned, he or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replied: "He has not sinned, nor have his parents." After Jesus had said this, He spat on the ground, made mud with the saliva and smeared it

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[65] The present-day Shahhat in north-eastern Libya (North Africa) on the Mediterranean Sea

[66] Gospel of John 9:1–38

mud on Alexander's eyes, and He said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." Alexander did as he was told. He returned able to see and shouted his thanks across the whole square. All the neighbours were startled by this miracle, especially as it had happened on the Sabbath, and asked him, "Where is the man who healed you?" Alexander could not have known. The neighbours were uneasy and took Alexander to the Pharisees. The Pharisees asked him how he had come to see. And he told them: "Jesus put mud on my eyes, I washed myself and now I can see." Some of the Pharisees said: "This man is not from God, for He does not observe the Sabbath." Others said, "How can a sinful man perform such signs?" There was division among them. The Jews did not believe that Alexander had ever been blind and could now see, until they summoned my wife and me. And they asked us, "Is this your son, of whom you say he was born blind? How then can he now see?' And we answered and said, 'We know that this is our son and that he was born blind; but how he can now see, we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. He is of age and can speak for himself.' My wife and I were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed amongst themselves that if anyone confessed Jesus to be the Christ, he would be expelled from the synagogue. Then they called Alexander back a second time and said to him, 'Give glory to God; we know that this man whom you seem to have healed is a sinner.'

Alexander replied without hesitation: “Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that I was blind and now I can see.” And they said to him again, “What then did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?” He replied, “I have already told you, but you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you perhaps also wish to become His disciples?” Then they reviled Alexander and cast him out of the synagogue. A short while later, Jesus heard that they had cast him out of the synagogue, and when He had found Alexander, He asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of God?” Alexander replied, “And who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?” And Jesus said to him, “You see Him, and He who speaks to you, that is He.” And he said, “I believe, Lord!” And Alexander worshipped Him. And our family and many of our neighbours worshipped Jesus because of this unprecedented blessing. Our family was cast out of the synagogue by the Pharisees, but that did not bother us; on the contrary, most of the village who had known Alexander when he was blind did not turn their backs on us, whatever the Pharisees might say. When I heard that He had been arrested, I had no doubts, and I arrived at the north gate just in time as Jesus carried the cross on His shoulders amidst a jeering crowd kept at a distance by the Romans. I pushed and shoved my way fearlessly through the frenzied Pharisees and the whipped-up crowd until all I could see before me were the Romans behind Jesus. The crowd was

They were in a frenzy, and the Pharisees were delighted: “Look at that! He could heal others, but apparently he cannot save himself. Behold our Messiah!” And they literally spat at him as soon as they saw a gap between the soldiers. I looked up at the dreadful Golgotha: “My God! What weakened and tortured man could manage such a thing?” I knew what I had to do. Under no circumstances would I give up my place just behind the soldiers. The thought of Alexander gave me strength and courage. I had already made eye contact with the captain of the soldiers and nodded respectfully. I was not young, but my muscular arms told him enough. It was clear that the captain would have preferred to lead the released Barabbas, who had killed a host of his soldiers, to the cross. He clearly despised the Pharisees. When one of them tried to hit Jesus with stones, he reacted alertly and pulled their beards in a humiliating manner so that the jeering bystanders got the message.

I followed the Way of the Cross up the hill and when Jesus fell for the third time, the centurion sought my gaze and nodded. The two soldiers in front of me each stepped aside and I was allowed to help Jesus carry the cross. I took as much of the weight of the cross as I could and stood as close to him as possible, so that the executioner could no longer strike him with his scourge without hitting me. It was terrible to see the crown of thorns from so close up, like a helmet of congealed blood. I tried to shield Jesus with my body when I saw

how some onlookers were ready to spit on him or even strike him. My God of Love, if I could come even closer to you, I would, and forgive me my sins. Suddenly I heard him murmur a single word with great effort, a single name: “Alexander”. I could no longer hold back my tears. The centurion came up to me, looking concerned, and asked if I was all right. I nodded. Later, Joseph of Arimathea told me that it was the same centurion who had been present at Jesus’ arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and who had witnessed how Jesus healed a servant’s severed ear.

We reached the top of Golgotha with great difficulty. The soldiers took Jesus from me. I couldn’t go on any longer. I could no longer bear to watch the end and turned away from the terrible scene behind me. John caught me a little way down the mountain; I did not know him then. He put his arm around my shoulders and when the hammering began, we cringed together. It was a god who was a man and a man who was a god whom they were nailing to the cross. The women stood at the same level, and they too turned their backs on the cross and wept passionately whilst trying to keep each other upright. It took at least another hour before the two other bandits were also crucified and the three crosses were erected. In the middle of the day, the sun was suddenly overshadowed by menacing dark thunderclouds, as if vengeance were to be taken, and the many onlookers fled like frightened hares

the place where the skull lay. A few Romans remained to guard the spot. I told John the story of Alexander in fits and starts, and he took hold of me and whispered in my ear: “I was there when Alexander could see, Simon. And know this, dear Simon of Cyrene, you are blessed for expressing your gratitude here, not only with words, but above all with your deeds, which bear witness to great courage.”

We said our goodbyes. As I passed the women, one of them came up to me and thanked me for what I had done… for her son. I made my way down the mountain.

When I was halfway down the mountain, it suddenly became pitch black and I was addressed by two men: ‘We saw you at work and are extremely grateful to you, but our work is not yet done and we could use your help…’ We put on our hoods, for rain and lightning were at times raging furiously. Night fell before he did. It didn’t surprise us. And I turned around in blind trust and went back up the mountain with them. They told me their story along the way. And only after I had told Alexander’s story did Joseph startle and ask: ‘Do you happen to have a son called Rufus? And your wife, is her name Abila?” Then it was my turn to be taken aback: “Yes, of course, how do you know that?” Joseph explained where it came from, and immediately the ice between us was broken and these men dared to reveal their identities: two ‘good’ Pharisees, and they

told me their names, Joseph and Nicodemus. I was absolutely delighted to be able to help them.

As we approached the summit, we saw three people standing beneath the cross: two women and a man. I recognised only John and the mother, who thanked me. Nicodemus told me the name of the other woman: Mary Magdalene. Joseph paused briefly to explain their plan: the horse and cart were waiting at the foot of the hill; Jesus was to be carried, along with the cross, to the Field of Blood. The three of us would manage to get the horse and cart up to the top before the Sabbath began, as soon as the sun rose. Roman soldiers would escort and protect us, and they showed me the parchment bearing Pilate's seal. I felt more than honoured.

Mary Magdalene

The Romans had carried out their execution, and the three victims hung on the nails of the cross, with the 'King of the Jews' in the middle. That was by no means accurate, for he was a king for all people, not for Jews alone. Mary, John and I made our way to Jesus' cross. It was midday, and even the sun seemed to shy away from the terrible spectacle. Even though it was only 20 cubits [67]away, it felt like our own Way of the Cross towards him. Every step was one too many. It was terrible to see how the three bodies, sagging under the weight, struggled to breathe. The thick nails driven through the carpal and tarsal bones… The groaning. At the slightest breath, however small, the wrists and feet moved. If they were not screaming in pain, it was because they had no breath left to do so. The two criminals beside Jesus were very muscular, which would only prolong their agony. Mary held her head high; she looked intently at the two robbers and seemed to recognise them. She asked me for the myrrh I had with me.

[67] 14 metres

Maria

I recognised them as the robbers Dismas and Gestas from our flight to Egypt. They recognised me too. Gestas spoke insolently to Jesus: “If you are God, then take us down from here. What are you waiting for?” Dismas replied: “We deserve this, Gestas, but he is love incarnate for the world, now and in the future.” And my son replied to Dismas: “Today I shall welcome you into my kingdom.” Gestas was suffering terribly; his two large feet, in particular, were already splitting open. They had used three nails; it must have been truly excruciating. I took the myrrh[68] with its anaesthetic properties and gently rubbed it into his ankles. The brute Gestas could not believe that he was already feeling less pain. “Forgive me, woman,” he said, and I bowed my head before him. Then I used the myrrh on Dismas and finally on my son. My son spoke to us in a broken voice: “Woman, behold your son.” And to John he said: “Brother, behold your mother.” John took my hand and we both bowed our heads. I spoke again to my son: “Convey my thanks to your Father for His trust.” This no longer registered with him; he could take no more and said: “I am thirsty.” A Roman showed his kindness and dipped a sponge on a hyssop stalk into sour wine mixed with myrrh and brought it to Jesus’ mouth. My son drank from it and, with a final effort, suddenly cried out:

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[68] Myrrh is known both as a local anaesthetic and as a general anaesthetic when dissolved in wine.

“It is finished.” And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Lightning struck the temple in Jerusalem and the thunder shook the temple walls. I too bowed my head and said: “It is finished…” This applied to both of us. My head was spinning and I sought support from John, who held me close. No matter how many tears welled up, I would not let them fall, for my Son and I had fulfilled our mission as the Father had willed. However terribly painful it was, it was right, for it was the will of our Father. The crucifixion of my Son was terrible to behold, but one thing was at least as painful: how some incited parents watched with their children and regarded all this as a spectacle. They let their laughing and boisterous children run wild, jeering at my Son and throwing stones at him. What would ever become of these children? What had their parents experienced in their own youth to allow such behaviour from their children? I thought back to my son’s words as they crucified him: “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do” [69]; they were perhaps the most important words for humanity, both during and after their lives, that my son ever spoke. If the Son said this and asked his Father, then these words could only have come from the Father himself, for they are both one. The clouds parted briefly to let the sun bid farewell

[69] This statement calls the entire Last Judgement into question.

from Him who was the light of the world and would always remain the light. I was but a drop of the sea that the sea had been allowed to bring forth.
John insisted on staying with him in Jerusalem, and I felt it was my duty as his mother to be there for him too when he asked for it. From then on, John always addressed me as ‘mother’. This offered me comfort, and I felt anything but childless when I thought back to the words of the mother in Ashkelon. I was now entitled to be the mother of all people.

Mary Magdalene
The man who loved all people despite their imperfections died in full awareness as the King’s Child. I could now add the fifth papyrus scroll, and it need only consist of a single line, a single sentence: “The King’s Child comes into each of us.” I was deeply saddened, yet at the same time grateful that he had taken me into his confidence to prepare me for this moment. Oh yes, he spoke the truth: “I am in You.” It felt stronger than ever. To him, anger was a misguided form of concern and had to be avoided at all costs. Ignorance invited us to keep searching for Him within ourselves with full awareness. Desire called for spreading love, not for receiving it. Darkness was there so that we might become the light ourselves.

I could feel no anger towards the people responsible for his crucifixion. I was also

I was not unaware of this event, for he had informed me and prepared me for it. And whoever believes in him immediately puts to death every desire, jealousy or envy, so that one may pass on his message of true selfless love. And darkness and error were already dispelled from our very first contact. For he is not dead, because he is in me, forever. He emphasised this. I need not seek him, for he is always there. He need not come, because he is always there. I cannot find outside myself what I carry within me. And what I carry within me has eternal life as a naked, pure love, stripped of rules, punishments and laws, as a new and accessible Eden where the tree of good and evil is replaced by a wooden cross purified by tears, planed and stripped of all evil.

John

My brother's death after so many childhood memories, after so many miracles and healings of people. The heavens closed in mourning and black, wild clouds collided. Jerusalem trembled on the foundations of an ancient faith.

At the very moment Jesus breathed his last, a fierce flash of lightning struck the temple in Jerusalem with full force, where Caiaphas was triumphantly leading the service when, before everyone's eyes, the purple curtain that Mary had made suddenly tore in two between the two cherubim. As a result, the Ark of the

The sight of Moses' stone tablets struck fear into all those present, and many of them began to doubt whether they had, after all, killed the Messiah. Even Caiaphas found it difficult to stand his ground against them. He immediately ordered the temple gates closed and forbade anyone present from leaving until they could reach a unanimous decision on the matter. Heated discussions broke out. Not long afterwards, spies reported that the traitors Joseph and Nicodemus, together with someone else, had removed the body and the cross from Golgotha, under heavy guard by Roman soldiers with a warrant from Pilate. Then everyone heard Caiaphas grinding his teeth in pent-up rage and helplessness, and a rebellion immediately threatened to break out among their ranks. Caiaphas placated them by stating that the third day after Christ's death was the crucial one, and he promised that, should Jesus rise again, he would relinquish his presidency. Tempers calmed, but Caiaphas's position was weakened from that moment on. It was not until just after sunrise, as the Sabbath began, that the Pharisees dared to come out, fearful of the reaction of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. After all, many ordinary people already regretted having allowed themselves to be so stirred up and were ashamed, deeply ashamed of their behaviour towards a man who had never hurt a fly, who, on the contrary, healed people or even raised them from the dead. They did not realise that Jesus would forgive them for this if they

asked for it. A thought of forgiveness is forgiven, for He is not dead; on the contrary: He awaits every person within the person themselves, just as He had promised me in private: “I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you. The world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me, for I live and you will live. On that day you will know that I am in My Father and you in Me and I in you.”

Joseph

Even though all three of us were exhausted, and the Romans who were protecting and helping us were too, nobody complained. Together with Nicodemus, I had carried Jesus down on a litter, and Simon of Cyrene, together with a sympathetic Roman, had taken the cross upon himself as far as halfway up Calvary; we hadn't been able to get any further with the horse and cart. Now that the Sabbath was about to begin at first light, there was not a Pharisee to be seen anywhere. In the distance, we did see two men following us, clearly spies sent by Caiaphas, but that did not matter. The Roman centurion insisted on accompanying us on our journey by horse and cart to the field of blood. He was deeply moved by everything he had witnessed since Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Are you all right, sir?" I asked with concern. "I saw how Jesus reattached someone's ear as if it were nothing, and a few years ago I met an old rabbi [70]who told me that your forefather Adam was buried on Golgotha, the place of the skull, and that there

[70] Source: John Chrysostom. "Some say that Adam died and was buried on Golgotha, and that Jesus was killed at the site of his grave. Adam was restored to life by the drops of blood that fell upon his skull."

“A Saviour would come whose blood would fall upon his skull and bring Adam back to life.” He paused for a moment, and Nicodemus and I looked at each other in surprise, but it was Simon who replied decisively: “Jesus has restored the sight of my son, who was born blind, sir. He is truly the one for whom mankind has been waiting. He will rise on the third day.” The centurion replied with a shrug: “We shall see.”

We arrived at the field of blood, rolled the stone aside, and the apple blossom greeted us. We laid Jesus to rest on the flat stone, anointed his body with fragrant herbs, wrapped it in bandages, and placed a sweat cloth on his head. The cave was then sealed. Afterwards, Nicodemus went with Simon to fetch the cross, whilst I searched for the exact spot where the apple tree had once stood and where Enoch had painstakingly gathered all the tears of humanity for two days. We erected the cross perfectly upright and draped Mary’s purple shawl over both arms of the cross. It felt as though, from the tree of good and evil, the evil wood bearing the sins of mankind had been scraped away by the angels, leaving only a core of the good wood of pure love in the shape of a cross from the trunk.

The first rays of the rising sun dispelled the dark clouds above the valley. Simon, Nicodemus and I kissed the three places where the nails had been driven into Jesus’ body and stood in silence. The centurion came to tell us that he would leave three soldiers for three

to guard the tomb. We thanked him for his understanding and humanity, and he patted us on the shoulders and left. We set off not long after, and I invited Nicodemus and Simon to spend the night at my home in Arimathea. We were all in need of rest, and Arimathea was a safe haven to escape Caiaphas's vengeance.

Mary

The tension in Jerusalem was palpable. Everyone was talking about nothing but the third day. People were joking, speculating, but above all mocking the Pharisees, who were leading the pack. Rumours were circulating in the city that Jesus was the son of a legionnaire who had even been given a name; his father was said to be called Panthera. I was jeered at and openly humiliated. I dared to show my face less and less, and John and all the other apostles kept a low profile in the city. But I couldn't resist; before dawn, I set off with Mary Magdalene on Az and Oz to the Field of Blood to visit the tomb, and we would stay there until midday. The Romans were friendly towards us, but they certainly made a mess of things. It was as if they were on holiday; the wine flowed freely and they laughed at the Pharisees' behaviour. They were mimicking them, but towards the two of us they behaved with respect: after all, every person has a mother, and in Rome there was great respect for motherhood. Mary Magdalene withdrew

back to the cross, for she felt drawn to it. I understood perfectly why: for her, the cross now represented the throne of the king's child, a throne that would never again be empty and would become the symbol of the crucified child for centuries to come. As for myself, that first morning I went to the little river deeper in the valley to seek some peace and quiet, far from the clamour of the soldiers. I had a premonition, incidentally, of who I would meet there. It was a wonderfully beautiful spot with a history stretching back centuries. I sat down and looked at the water; I looked at the imposing gorge a little way upstream; I looked at the magnificent boulders in the water, and one boulder caught my full attention.
"Hail Mary," came the voice, not entirely unexpectedly, from behind me, and I didn't need to turn around.

"Hail, Djibril."

"You have looked well, new Eve."

I stood up quietly without looking back, waded into the ice-cold river, took the stone in question in my hands and carried it back to the bank. I sat down. The stone felt warm and vibrated gently, and I pressed it against my heart. The event took me back to the first woman, Eve, in Eden, and I smiled gratefully because Djibril had spoken to me in such a way and made his message so clear to me: my son was alive.

“Thank you, Djibril,” I said. And I kissed the stone and placed it back in the same spot. I returned to the tomb and stood beside Mary Magdalene by the cross and spoke to her: “Do not be sad, Mary Magdalene, he is alive and tomorrow you will see him.”

I left feeling reassured, and joy filled my heart. And I prayed for all people, old and young, and especially for those who had reviled me and hurled ugly words at me, for they knew not what they were doing.
We arrived home safely.

Enough is enough! More than enough!
I have waited long enough. No one can accuse me of lacking patience. My vengeance is unstoppable, and my finest general, Everyone, is already itching to get started. “My dear Everyone, the task is simple but of the utmost importance. Make sure that on the evening of the second day, there is plenty of wine and the finest food available for the guards. Before an angel rolls away the heavy stone from the tomb the following day, the soldiers present will already be in a deep sleep. So deep that they cannot remember who was there or who left. Make sure there are twice as many empty wine bottles, so that every visitor will think they were dead drunk. Thus, the discussions about the resurrection of Jesus will forever get bogged down in a he-said-she-said story, of word against word, of faith against unbelief.”

General Everyone thought it was a brilliant plan and carried it out perfectly.

THE TREE OF GOODNESS

The Father addressed the Powers and Forces in the Holy of Holies: “Today My Son shall rise from the dead.”

“Raphael and Enoch, you shall carry the cross to the Holy of Holies and place it at the very top, higher than the seraphim, as the tree of pure goodness, stripped of all evil.”

“Jibril, you take the unblemished apple from the Throne Chariot and place it at the foot of the cross.”

“Michael, you guard the entrance to the rock-hewn tomb, so that no devilish power may enter whilst awaiting.”

“Then we must wait until My Son and His Mother enter the Holy of Holies.”

And so it came to pass.

Mary Magdalene

It was very early and still dark when I got up on the third day. I hadn't slept a wink. I thought I would be alone, but I hadn't reckoned with Mary. She had already made tea and poured my cup. "Are you coming?" I asked.

She shook her head: "I'll be going with John and Simon Peter later."

"Aren't you very curious then?" I didn't understand a thing.

"He's already up," she said, looking at me with a blissful expression. "I've prepared some food for you, and Oz, Uz and Az have already eaten." "May I be so bold as to say what I'm thinking?" I asked, looking at her intently.

She beat me to it: "My dear friend, I can't hide anything from you either. I met Djibril by the little river yesterday."

I remained silent and asked no further questions; I didn't need to know what had been said or done. I simply smiled at her, as a sign that I was happy for her after all the pain of the last few days. If she wanted to tell me, she would do so of her own accord. But there are simply some messages that take time to be fully understood, and her whole demeanour felt that way. My smile was the best answer, and a smile from her

was the most beautiful and complete answer for each other.
I was already opening the door to leave when John came in yawning, whilst Simon Peter was apparently still asleep. I couldn't wait for them and set off with Oz, the fastest of the three, and picked up the pace.

John

I sat down at the table.
"Did you sleep well, son?" Maria asked me with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.
"I was awake a lot, Mother. There's a lot going round in my head. It's a right mess. It's giving me a headache." And she came and stood behind me and gave me a kiss: "Is that better, my son?"
Oh yes, it was better, but I was utterly astonished by her optimism that morning. It wasn't certain that Jesus would rise. Simon Peter also came and sat down at the table, and two worried people looked at each other with the same doubtful eyes.
"Mother, are you quite sure you're not going to the field of blood today?" I tried again. "I went yesterday and gave my son my regards." Peter and I looked at each other with even wider eyes. "Peter, feel free to take Az." With this reply, she made it clear to us that further insistence or questions on the matter were unnecessary. Neither of us understood a thing. How could she be so sure?

A short while later, we were on our way

with Uz and Az. Mary Magdalene

The sun had only just risen and as I drew nearer, I saw the soldiers, exhausted, sleeping off their drunkenness amongst the empty wine bottles. I deliberately made a lot of noise in the hope that they would wake up and I could ask them if anything had happened, but nothing worked. I hurried to the cave. The large stone had been rolled away and I looked inside: Jesus' body had vanished! The bandages and the sweat cloth were still there, but his body was nowhere to be seen. I cried out his name at the top of my voice. I begged aloud for him to show himself, but only had my words echoed back from the valley.

I didn't know what to make of it and hurried home with Oz to tell John and Peter. I ran into them and told them that 'they' had taken Jesus away and that he was nowhere to be found. "What about the soldiers?" they asked straight away. "They're lying in the grass, dead drunk." And I went back to the cave with them to see if there was anything they could do. John and Peter examined the cave, just as bewildered and disheartened as I was: the sweat cloth lay in a heap in one corner and the bandages in another. They rushed off to tell Mary, but I wanted to wait to hear the story of the drunken Romans, in the hope that they knew more. I had also gone to look by the little river, but there too

I found not the slightest trace. After that, I returned to the cave to rest for a while; I went inside and was startled. Two angels dressed in white were waiting for me and asked: “Woman, why are you weeping?” I had to recover from the shock for a moment, but at the same time I immediately felt reassured and hopeful. “They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where,” I said. My eyes still stung from crying.
A man’s voice behind me also asked me: “Woman, why are you weeping?” It was apparently the gardener. “I am looking for the king’s child, and his name is Jesus of Nazareth. They have taken my Lord away, and perhaps you know where I can find him?” I turned to face him. “Mary Magdalene,” he said softly.

“Rabbi! My teacher!” I replied, relieved, and I fell to my knees and stretched out my hands to touch him, to feel if what I saw was really true.
“Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and tell them: ‘Tonight I will meet you in Jerusalem.’ Only later will I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”
And he turned around, and the two angels went with him and made their way to the cross and took it with them. One of the angels looked at me, holding Mary’s purple shawl in his hand, laid it down respectfully

and nodded to me. I nodded respectfully in return and understood the message.
I hurried to Jerusalem to tell Mary and the disciples the good news. Everyone was delighted and overjoyed by the news.
That very evening, he appeared to all his disciples, except Thomas.
Mary kept somewhat aloof and enjoyed watching their happy faces from a distance. I sat down beside her and only then did she tell me about Djibril by the river. She knew she could only tell this to one person who would believe her.
John's little house in Jerusalem was very cramped, and now that John was taking his role as 'son of his mother Mary' more seriously than before, and with six other disciples staying there, I thought it best to return to Ein Karem. I spoke to Mary about it.

We later learnt that the three soldiers were severely punished by Pilate for their behaviour, but mainly because it had played into Caiaphas's hands. He continued to spread the word in the city that his apostles had stolen Jesus's body and made it disappear, and that the soldiers were in on the plot. Caiaphas believed it himself, and the whole Sanhedrin breathed a sigh of relief, with the exception of the renegade absentees Joseph and Nicodemus.

Mary

Mary Magdalene's message that it was time to leave came as no surprise. Not to her, and not to me. The chapter of the child Jesus and the adult Jesus on earth had come to a close, and from now on, both of us, together with the apostles, were given a new mission to spread Jesus' message to humanity. We were bound to one another by a vast history of indelible events, profound conversations, joy and sorrow that we had shared, and which did not need to be repeated over and over again between us in further words, but which now had to be proclaimed to people everywhere in the world.

Our paths would not part, for we both knew only one path, and that was the very same path. It was moving to see how Mary Magdalene said goodbye to me: when the angels had taken the cross away from the field of blood, one of them looked at her and left my purple scarf behind for her. Mary Magdalene returned it to me when we parted, though it was only half of it. But what was so remarkable was that she had not cut the scarf in half crosswise, but lengthwise along its entire length. She now wrapped one half of the scarf around my neck and then did the same with the other half around her own neck, which gave us both a sense of twinning, and so she left with Oz, and I walked after her for a moment and gave her Az, for Hannah. Without words, without tears, just joy at what we

had received from and through one another. We never saw each other again in this life, but thought of one another every day. For us, purple also signified union, not separation. That my son had chosen her over John and Peter to appear to her after his death on the cross, as the first human being, was of great significance, a significance that caused much controversy in a society where women were subordinate. It was to Mary Magdalene's credit that she never, ever weighed this up herself. Much later, I heard from John, who had also known her from a young age, how much resistance she had to overcome to hold her own in the face of the jealousy, misunderstanding and underestimation of some of the apostles.
Not so long ago, I received the only letter she ever sent me after all those long years from a foreign land, in which she alluded to 'our' twinhood: "I am eternally grateful to you for our love and trust in us, and for the love and lessons of our son."

This did not surprise me: I, too, love 'us'.

Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven on the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem and was reunited with his Father.

Seraphim, cherubim, all the powers and forces, together with the archangels and all the angels, sang the Trisagion: “Holy is the new Adam, and holy is the new Eve, who return to the Father.”

The new Adam took his place to the right of the cross, awaiting Mary’s assumption into the Holy of Holies to take her place to the left of the cross.

As soon as Mary too took her place beside the cross, higher than the seraphim, the cross transformed into a new tree of everlasting goodness, and no human could refuse the welcome gift of an unblemished apple. Whatever mistakes he might have made, he was invited to take his place at the long table beneath the tree of the new Eden.

Love casts neither the first nor the last stone.

THE GOSPEL OF MARY MAGDALENE

INTRODUCTION

Caiaphas unleashed his fury and imposed a reign of terror in Jerusalem. Pilate did not intervene and largely kept a low profile out of fear of the failure of the three Roman guards at the tomb. He had gradually had enough of the Jews, of all Jews, as long as they paid their taxes, and the cunning Caiaphas made sure of that.

The early years were rather turbulent for the apostles, and it was a struggle to organise themselves and come to an agreement as a united body. In every village or town where Jesus had once performed miracles, spoken in a synagogue or performed an act of love, the people felt the need to mourn together and then organise themselves into small, secret meetings in order to keep the flame alive. From there, people were sent to places where they had heard an apostle had appeared. Whenever an apostle left a group, he would tell them which village or town he was heading for. In this way, the number of couriers grew steadily, and gradually the apostles' speeches were also written down, with letters circulating from group to group. John and Mary had fled to Ephesus fairly quickly, only to return to Jerusalem, where Mary visited the tomb of

visited her son, much to the annoyance of the Pharisees and especially the Sadducees, who even attempted to kill her. But the pilgrims who surrounded her in great numbers day after day protected her. In the end, there proved to be no other way to escape the Pharisees' vengeance than to flee once more to Ephesus. Simon Peter had his hands full and, in the meantime, received help from a certain Paul, who joined the apostles and visited many new regions and cities. Joseph of Arimathea [71]in particular was on the Pharisees' blacklist, and set off for distant lands to proclaim the story of the Messiah, leaving writings behind. The extensive network of couriers provided a foundation upon which Christianity could take root, despite the many terrible persecutions by Romans and Jews. However, there was no stopping it. Many apostles wrote down their experiences: Thomas, James, Luke, Mark, Matthew, the Ebionites, the Egyptians, Paul, Peter… Only men?

One woman was an exception, a woman whom Jesus loved from the very beginning and whom He also loved, and who was the first to bear witness to His resurrection: Mary Magdalene.

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[71] Joseph of Arimathea ended up in England. Nicodemus died in Jerusalem.

I was on my way to Ein Karem, together with Oz and Az. My heart was torn: I had chosen my family over the mission to proclaim Jesus' message. Or so it seemed to me. It felt like a cowardly retreat, even a betrayal, until I was halfway there and suddenly a dove alighted, right in front of us on the road. Oz and Az came to an abrupt halt and pricked up their long ears. The dove stared at me motionless. I urged Oz to carry on so that the dove would fly away, but Oz did not move. A distant memory stirred within me. I had seen this scene before. I dismounted, yet the pigeon still did not stir and continued to stare intently at me. I crouched down before him; suddenly, he was no longer a pigeon to me, but Djibril. "Show me, Djibril, which path should I take?"

I thought I had to wait for his reply, but it was actually the other way round, as I later realised. It was Djibril who was waiting for my reply, and that reply took time to remind me of what Jesus had impressed upon my heart by the river: "I am in you." Only at this thought did Djibril soar upwards towards Ein Karem. And I called after him at the top of my voice: "He is in me, Djibril! He is my everything!" And I plunged from a mountain lake deeper down again towards a figurative island, called Ein Karem. Jesus is my everything and there is nothing greater than Him. A weight fell from me and my spirits lifted. After all the tensions

Over the past few weeks, I've been able to enjoy being on my own again, feeling safe far from the dangers of Jerusalem, and brimming with joy at the thought of seeing the little family I consider my own once more. The evening sun was cloaked in crimson and purple, and from a distance I could see smoke rising from the chimney. It felt like coming home.

I knocked. I heard some noise, followed by a bit of fumbling with the door pull, and I could guess straight away who was responsible. Rebecca's voice was trying to calm her toddler down, but Hannah beat her to it and opened the door. "Mum!" she cried cheerfully and flew into my arms. Rebecca was already looking for Samuel, and little Johannes woke up and started crying, but that couldn't spoil the joy. I couldn't get Hannah to let go of me until she suddenly spotted Az, and then she didn't notice me for the first hour. Rebecca took the crying Johannes out of his cot and handed him to me. I was surprised that he didn't cry even more because of me; on the contrary, he stopped crying and started laughing… Rebecca laughed at this: "Mum can stay and live here, can't she, Hannah?" It turned out to be a pointless question, because Hannah was too busy with Az. Samuel came in and he too rushed over to me and addressed me for the first time as 'Mum'. I looked at him and he looked me in the eyes too, and it was as if he sensed and understood that I had come to Ein Karem mainly for him. And that was indeed the case…

Rebecca immediately made room for me at the table. A glass of fresh spring water did me good. So much had happened, and Rebecca and Samuel were very curious and even more concerned about the future. Caiaphas, Pilate, Joseph of Arimathea, the field of blood, the rock-hewn tomb, the tree of good and evil from which the cross would rise, Golgotha, the crucifixion, Mary and John beneath the cross, Jesus' resurrection, my encounter with Jesus, Jerusalem in turmoil and the start of the persecution of those who worshipped Jesus, Mary and Joseph's flight to Ephesus, Peter as leader and the new apostle Paul who was thrown from his horse. I could have kept talking. It was mainly Samuel who occasionally interrupted me for further explanation and didn't leave the table for a minute, whilst Rebecca regularly went to check on the children. My dear Samuel! How much of myself I recognised in him! We both have a heart that is slow to open and surrender at first, until it bursts open completely and then gives itself fully, knowing no way back. A heart of all or nothing. He kept asking questions and concluded sadly: "How terrible for my hometown of Massilia, and that my father and brothers and sister know nothing of this."" Rebecca tried to comfort him and said: "Nothing is stopping us from going there, is it?" And she embraced his head and looked at me: "Look, Mum, this is my angel and I'll follow him wherever he goes." And she sealed her promise with a kiss. Samuel was moved and looked at me: "What do you think, Mum?" I

She didn't have to think twice: "Your father has ships and will be delighted to see you again, and it will be safer there for the children's future. And if you're all right with it, I'll travel with you." Samuel and Rebecca lit up. "Of course, Mum!" Samuel exclaimed. "We'll look after you properly…"
"Do bear in mind, Samuel, that I wish to live on my own and would love to visit to help you and the children, but do not forget that I have a mission to fulfil. Every person has the right to hear the story of Jesus the Saviour." Hannah came in: "Where have you all been?" And the three of us sprang up at once, and I settled into the little house of the late Jair and Hannah, and Hannah, proud as a peacock, was allowed to carry my luggage with Az, whilst Oz watched on jealously.

Samuel

This land, my wife, my children, my new mother and their faith had given me and taught me so much that I felt it was my duty to offer this to my homeland. As soon as I had pruned the vines, I would set off for the port of Ashdod to make contact with a merchant captain who was my father's friend. Day after day, my homesickness for my homeland grew, and I looked forward to seeing my family and the friends of yesteryear again.

A DISTINGUISHED VISITOR

Life went on as usual in Rebecca's cottage and in Mary Magdalene's. Samuel had by now set off for Ashdod to gather information for the crossing to Massilia. Hannah and Az learned to trust each other implicitly, and Hannah was honest enough to spoil Oz just as much by occasionally stealing a carrot from Samuel's bountiful garden. When Rebecca called her to account, she showed her the large scar on her leg and said that carrots were good for healing. In short, she was still a child, but by no means stupid: reminding Rebecca of her near-death experience instantly made all punishment melt away like snow in the sun. Not nice, but certainly clever.
Summer arrived. One day, late in the afternoon, Hannah ran excitedly to Mary Magdalene's cottage: "Mum, come and look, two horses!"

Mary Magdalene

I dropped everything and hurried outside: two riders were approaching on their steaming horses. I recognised Peter immediately, but the other was a complete stranger to me. I waved to them and Peter recognised me too; they passed Rebecca's cottage on their left and came straight towards me. They had ridden all night under a full moon and a 'kind man' had shown them the right way at a difficult and important crossroads

pointed out. Hannah immediately gave the horses fresh spring water to drink, and they soon accepted her. Peter introduced his friend: “This is Paul; he joined us not long ago and is a great help, for he knows Roman customs and the language like no other. By the way, John and Mary send their regards, and they were keen to visit you.” I welcomed Paul and offered them a meal of fresh vegetables from Samuel’s garden and freshly baked bread. It was mainly Peter who asked me questions; for instance, he immediately asked why I had fled to Ein Karem and not stayed with Mary in Jerusalem. I tried to explain to him that I had followed my instincts, but I could see in his eyes that he found that a rather weak argument. I then told him about the dove on the way that had confirmed my intuition by flying ahead of me, but that too seemed hardly credible to him. I continued in a gentle tone: “To me, that dove is the same, Peter, as Jesus reattaching a severed ear.” And then he lowered his eyes: “Forgive me, Mary Magdalene. I am very tired from the journey.” And his tone softened for the rest of our conversation.

Paul then took control of the conversation and briefly recounted his story: how, as Saul, in a less than honourable past life, he had handed over many believers to the Pharisees, thereby bringing about their deaths, until he was struck down from his horse by a flash of lightning on the road to Damascus

and was called to account and struck blind by God, and how, after three days of reflection and repentance, he was able to see again through the laying on of hands by Ananias, and thus, as the new man Paul, wished to devote the rest of his life to the service of God's Son. After a sleepless night, the wholesome meal caused the two men to be overcome by exhaustion, and I offered them my bed so they could rest. It gave me time to reflect, for nothing happens without a reason. Peter, the apostle who had always been with Jesus and had witnessed many miracles, and alongside him Paul, someone who had never met Jesus in the flesh, and there, between the two of them, stood I as a woman. Why had they come to visit me, 'merely' a woman? Out of anger, ignorance, darkness or desire? Or did they perhaps themselves also experience that Jesus was within them at every moment? Whatever the reason, this was a significant event and I could only be grateful. I had nothing to lose; on the contrary, I might possibly learn something from them. I went to find Rebecca and tell her of this distinguished visit. The horses had plenty to eat and drink; Hannah couldn't take her eyes off these magnificent animals, whilst Az watched on jealously. I found Rebecca at home, breastfeeding Johannes. "I'm producing less and less milk," she said, though she was worrying for no reason. "That's how it's meant to be, Rebecca, it's normal. Wasn't it the same with Hannah? Switching to solid food bit by bit," I heard myself say, as if I knew all about it! I,

who had never had a baby suckling at my breast! Rebecca apparently thought the same thing; she stood up, laughing, and pushed Johannes into my arms: “Why don’t you have a go with your breasts?” We both burst out laughing, and even Johannes had to laugh and cackle at those two silly women. These were unforgettable moments of love and happiness, which years later could still bring a smile to my face during difficult times.

Peter

That afternoon I dreamt that I entered a cave with a torch and met my shadow there. We began to talk to one another and wondered which of us was the real one. My shadow and I both thought we were the real one: we thought the same thoughts, we moved in the same way, and we both thought the same thing at the same moment. We had no secrets from one another and, after a short walk, parted ways as brothers. Outside the cave, the sun shone with full force into my unaccustomed eyes and I made out a figure in the blinding light. I was convinced that it was my shadow that had followed me into the light. The figure spoke to me: “I am within you”, and yes, I could believe that immediately, and I replied: “Yes, you are always within me, just as I am within you.” I was briefly distracted by a pigeon that landed at my feet and I wanted to catch it, but the pigeon was quicker than me. I turned back quickly, but the figure had vanished and I felt

Suddenly lonely, even though I knew for certain that I wasn't alone. I woke with a start and staggered, still half-asleep, towards the living area, where Paul and Mary Magdalene were already talking to each other about the brutal persecution of the Christians in which he himself had once, with great regret, taken part. They fell silent suddenly and looked at me: "Are you all right, Peter? You look troubled."
I explained that I'd had a strange dream and that it left me with mixed feelings – a sense of joy and loss. It was Paul, but even more so Mary Magdalene, who suddenly took a keen interest in my dream, and both urged me to tell them about it. I took a sip of tea and recounted my dream in full detail. Paul didn't understand a thing, and Mary Magdalene understood everything, as it turned out later. Immediately after my last sentence, she had a question ready for me: "Who do you think that figure outside the cave was?" I replied: "It was my shadow that had followed me outside. I was one with it and it felt safe, peaceful and harmonious." I looked deep into Mary Magdalene's eyes and could see that she held a different opinion. She shook her head gently.

Mary Magdalene: "That figure in the sunlight wasn't your shadow; it was Jesus. During our conversations in Nazareth by the river, he impressed upon me that he is within each of us: 'I am in you.' Your dream is much more than a dream. Your dream is a priceless message, not just for you, but for all of humanity."

Peter: “John told me something similar too, but on the other hand, Jesus did instruct me to take the lead.”

Mary Magdalene: “That is not contradictory at all: your most important task is to make it clear to people that He is within each of us. That requires blind trust in His love, not earthly rules or laws. Love has no need of laws and asks only that you place your free human heart at the service of your fellow human beings. Where could He be closer than by being present in each of us every second? You cannot take anything away from that. The responsibility for our love for every fellow human being lies with each of us, but the ultimate responsibility lies with every person who accepts or rejects your love, and never with Him. Just as He did: He gave Himself to us and is within us, but He does not blame those who ignore His love. We must strive to embody the example He has given in every human being for every fellow human being.”

Peter: “Why then did he never tell me that in so many words when he gave me the task of tending his lambs? Paul and I have our hands full organising his kingdom here on earth: arranging secret meetings , giving lectures ,

writing letters and having them secretly delivered by couriers from city to city. Is that really so unnecessary?"

Mary Magdalene: "No, certainly not, but the message you give to the people must be correct, just as he told John literally: 'I am in You.' And he also spoke of the four primal forces within us that fight against this: anger, darkness, desire and ignorance. What more needs to happen for you to accept this, Peter? Jesus and His Father are the source of all life: the Father created the life of all things, and the Son gave His life to every human being and now lives on in each of us. You don't have to believe me, Peter, but at least believe John if you don't believe me. Jesus is counting on it. Think carefully!" I waited a moment and continued, extremely cautiously and softly out of great concern for his sense of honour, barely audibly: "And beware of pride and jealousy, Peter."

Paul

The word was out: pride. Peter turned pale and bit his lip. I had been listening in the background the whole time; it was the first time I'd heard Mary Magdalene speak, and after just five minutes I was already deeply impressed by her fervour. With every statement she made, I became more curious about what else Jesus had told her. It was clear that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had had some very deep conversations together

and I could easily imagine how Jesus, too, would have been happy to speak with her because of her intelligence, eagerness to learn, honest self-awareness and openness. She was an open book and, in response to my question, spoke of the four evil forces within us: anger, darkness, desire and ignorance. And that word 'ignorance' in particular hit Peter and me hard. Were we, then, stupid? Or were we so terribly off the mark? And it was precisely that word 'ignorance' that she used to describe how Peter and I were feeling: "What is it that I do not know, Lord?" She now repeated to Peter and me the answer she herself had once received from Jesus: "The realisation that I am within you; I do not let you go, but you forget to know Me within yourselves." And Mary Magdalene then summed it up even more succinctly: 'He is the love within each of us, and yes, we often forget to be loving.' I was knocked off my horse all over again. It sounds very conceited, but I recognised myself partly in her: going for it, whatever the cost. It did not surprise me at all that Mary Magdalene was the first person to have been allowed to meet the risen Lord, and there was no doubt about that. She told the apostles that He had told her to let the apostles know that He would appear to them that very evening, and that is exactly what happened. There could be not the slightest doubt about it: she had been the first to meet the risen Christ. That meant a great deal, even though she herself did not use this argument at all as a lever to force credibility upon Peter in this conversation. She

On the contrary, she argued that Peter should also seek guidance from John – something few would do who considered themselves to be absolutely right. And when she gently warned Peter against pride and jealousy, this truly came across as a well-founded and more than justified concern. And that applied just as much to me: I felt small in the presence of a woman who presented herself as more humble than I could ever manage. Peter wrestled once more with the question: "Why then did He never tell me that in so many words when He gave me the task?" I knew why Mary Magdalene did not wish to answer this; after all, as a woman, she could not do so without betraying her humility. The answer to the question of why it had to be a man was that the society in which we lived was still one led solely by men, and it would be impossible for a woman to convince men… besides, this conversation with her was already very difficult for Peter to accept. And I must be honest, I found it difficult at first too. Apparently, there is so much that we men do not realise. Peter and I often revisited this encounter later, together or separately, and I realise far too late that I offered Mary Magdalene and all women too few opportunities. We did nothing but make rules and laws, excluded women from the most important governing bodies, and felt superior to them. We started from the wrong premise.

We should have listened to John and Mary Magdalene right from the start.

Mary Magdalene

It remained difficult not to hurt their feelings. I was surprised that Peter apparently had never got to know the other Jesus in personal conversations, something for which I could not blame him in the slightest. Why did Jesus not speak to men as He could speak to me? I do not know, yet there must have been an important reason for this, or at least a practical one. I want at least to be able to understand it[72] in order to do justice to Jesus' message and to grasp the whole context. Jesus revealed both sides of himself to them and to me—the human and the divine—that much was clear. But apparently, he explained the 'back sides' of these only to Mary, John and me: what their nature, their peculiarities, their sources, and the intertwining of their 'back sides' with their 'front sides' meant in practice, causing them to behave in ways that sometimes seemed contradictory, and thus

[72] The simple reason: women were always regarded as inferior in those days, and Jesus needed strong women such as Mary and Mary Magdalene to give women a voice. The millennia of male arrogance compelled Him to take this into account; the inequality between men and women was a hundred times greater then than it is now. For Mary Magdalene, this was incomprehensible, for she was the very opposite and stood for gender equality. In other words, her sensational written gospel would never have stood the test, neither then nor now.

led to misunderstandings, for example regarding the role of the human gender, which, although our current discussion was conducted very respectfully, unfortunately changed or resolved nothing for the future.

Peter

I went to look at the horses. Just like that. I needed some fresh air. But neither the horses nor the fresh air could stop the turmoil in my head. I screamed it from within: "Why have you sent us here, my Lord? To learn from your beloved what you did not teach us? My head is bursting, my heart is in doubt, my faith is wavering. Let lightning strike me down and deliver me from this task. I am weak. I'm sorry. What am I doing here, Lord? I feel that there is something I don't know, but I don't know what it is. I'm going mad!"

I was literally pacing up and down when I suddenly saw a young woman coming towards me, holding a baby in her arms and leading a little girl by the hand. Johannes had already told me a bit about a young family who lived there.
She called out from a distance: "I'm sorry I can't let you stay the night in John the Baptist's house, but you're always welcome." I hurried over to her. She continued: "Perhaps you'd be interested in the papyrus scrolls belonging to Zechariah, John the Baptist's father? I don't know if Mary Magdalene has mentioned them. Oh yes, I'm Rebecca and this is Hannah and this

“The young man’s name is John, because he was born in the house of John the Baptist.” It was a most welcome invitation; I had thought Mary Magdalene was staying at John the Baptist’s house, but that turned out to be a mistake. On the way to her little cottage, Rebecca told me how she had ended up here in such a miraculous way and chattered on whilst making tea. She only fell silent when she took her first sip of tea. I enjoyed being there and hardly having to speak myself. She began to tell me about Samuel, that he was the son of a wealthy merchant in Massilia and that they were going to leave together with Mary Magdalene because Samuel was determined to preach the story of Jesus of Nazareth in Massilia too. Hannah came to stand beside us and I suddenly noticed that ugly scar on her leg and asked her where it came from. Rebecca told the whole story of Mary and the miraculous bandages that healed her, and she ended her story with: “I learnt something from Mary; actually, it is more accurate to say that I received a gift from her: she taught me that whenever I am in pain or sorrow, I should wrap my arms around her body in my mind and clasp my fingers together, as if I were thus placing a swaddling cloth of love around her presence, and then welcome her with the words: ‘Hail Mary, the Lord is with thee’ and then she would reply from far away: ‘Hail Rebecca, the Lord is with thee.’” Rebecca sprang to her feet and wanted to demonstrate it to me… I had to stand up and she wrapped both her arms around me, clasped

She placed her fingers behind my back and pressed herself against me, and spoke softly: “Hail, Peter, the Lord is within you.” And I wrapped my arms around her, clasped my hands, and replied: “Hail, Rebecca, the Lord is within you.”
I could not stop a tear from welling up in my eyes; I was not moved, but rather taken aback by the way that young woman, barely more than a girl, addressed me with such words and made my heart blossom. It seemed as though Zacharias and Elizabeth, whom I had known, were looking at me and encouraging me to leave my fear of failure and despair behind.

“Oh yes,” Rebecca quickly brought me back to the point, “the four papyrus scrolls of Zechariah? Even John the Baptist knew the scrolls by heart.” I nodded eagerly in agreement and she immediately dived under the bed and pulled the scrolls out. “This is the first scroll and this one contains the vocabulary and grammar.” I examined the first scroll with great curiosity. Greek was my second mother tongue, so I didn’t need the vocabulary and grammar. I told her, speaking in Greek, that I knew this vocabulary and language well, and ended with ‘ευχαριστώ πολύ’ or ‘thank you very much’. She laughed and replied with ‘γκρέγκενταν’ or ‘you’re welcome’. The ice between us was now completely broken. Greek was, after all, my second language because my mother was of Greek descent. Within half an hour I had read the four scrolls and even reread certain passages. What a beautiful

A fairy tale, but with such a sad ending: the king who finds redemption in a dungeon by rediscovering the child within himself, yet remains imprisoned. I handed the scrolls back to Rebecca. “A beautiful story, Rebecca, but such a sad ending… Take good care of the scrolls.” But she replied: “There is a fifth scroll, and only Mary and Mary Magdalene know the ending.” Hannah came clinging to her skirts and John was getting hungry, so we said our goodbyes.
I left, very curious about Mary Magdalene and the fifth papyrus scroll.

Paul

Mary Magdalene was very disappointed when Peter made an excuse to go and ‘check on the horses’. I immediately reassured her: ‘He carries a heavy burden on his shoulders and he isn’t used to dealing with a woman, and certainly not with a woman who knew Jesus better than he did. I struggle with that too, because my mother was the most submissive woman I have ever known. My father was the boss. Among the Jews, and in all the surrounding countries I have visited, the man is the boss. It’s a pity that Jesus himself never spoke of this in public or to his apostles, even though it was clear that in his dealings he was very respectful towards women. Many women loved him for that reason. It is terrible to say, and worse still, I am mortified by my own past: I have driven more women to their deaths than men. Forgive me! Women were

more steadfast in their faith, and few men held out during the sometimes horrific torture. I am deeply ashamed to say this. Once I was there when a woman I had captured, who was nursing her baby, took her baby with her into the fire. I keep thinking back to it, like when we arrived here and I saw that young woman with her baby in her arms waving to us; it pains me every time… And yet Jesus has forgiven me. Can you forgive me for this, Mary Magdalene?"

Mary Magdalene: "I don't need to forgive you, Paul, because it has already been forgiven. I do believe, however, that through my conversations with Jesus, I too could endure any form of torture and death and forgive my torturer with the same words as Jesus: 'Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do.' Just as you now know what you did not know then. It is brave of you to confess this to a woman, and that does you credit, for few men would be able to bring themselves to say such a thing. I hope Peter learns this too…" A silence followed. I should never have said that last bit; I must not judge another; I must say this to Peter himself. I don't think it registered with Paul; he still seemed paralysed by the thought of that young woman with the baby in the fire. I felt sorry for him and admired him at the same time: admitting this to a woman was something that scarcely existed in this community. Paul remained

staring out of the window. He felt guilty. What had he gone through in his youth? I thought back to my own childhood, when I had seen my mother and three little brothers slaughtered by the Romans in retaliation after my father, a Zealot, had already been killed in battle. It has shaped my life and taught me one important thing: that the message of Jesus is of inestimable importance to this world in order to save it from further calamity. And Paul, right here before me, was proof of how that could be. This thought made me rise and go to him to take him in my arms and comfort him like a mother, like Mary at the foot of the cross, and Paul wept like a child who has overcome the shame of his tears. He clung to me desperately and his pain pierced deep into my heart, and I too could not hold back my tears and comforted him: "Jesus is in both of us, Paul. Get up and walk, Paul!" And the paralysed man stood up and spoke through his tears: "I can walk!" We both laughed with joy, wiped away our tears, and I poured him another cup of tea.

I immediately changed the subject. "I'm leaving soon with Rebecca and Samuel and the children for Massilia to speak about Jesus. You're always welcome to visit, but don't be alarmed: I treat you as an equal, just as Jesus treated me as equal to a man. So make no distinction, and certainly make no distinction, rules or laws regarding a person's gender. Divine knowledge is shared by both men and women, and what one

What one of us knows, the other can complement with what they know. Treat me as a man and I will treat you as a woman, and in this way we are both equal and of equal worth in love. And if practical arrangements need to be made around this, then that equality remains rooted and guaranteed in that love, and we rise above the squabbling over the differences between men and women. Then laws and rules, once again—and I cannot emphasise this enough—become completely superfluous as such. Jesus, who dwells in you and in me, is not concerned with our gender. Jesus' message is universal. Oh yes, I have been in love with him. My love was sincere and I told him about it."

Paul replied: "Thank you for being so open. May I ask how he responded to this?"

"He told me that his love for me was equally sincere, but that our love differed in nature: I live according to human nature, and he lives according to both divine and human nature. Human nature regards infatuation as a vital driving force for human survival, whereas for him, divine love completely overshadows human infatuation and renders it almost irrelevant. Divine love loves every creature selflessly, something we can scarcely imagine."

Paulus nodded. Who could know better than someone who was forgiven after driving a woman and child to their deaths in a fire? And was he guilty? I asked him how his childhood had been. He was taken aback by this question,

as if I already knew the answer. He hesitated for a moment and didn't dare look me in the eye: "My father was a brute and my mother was no better, because I was their unwanted child. I was a burden. Do you mind if I don't answer the rest of your question?"

I saw the reeds snapping before my eyes. The very thought of his helpless childhood pained me; how much worse must it be for this guilty adult, who had to go through life with a distorted view of love. "Of course not, Paulus," I said, and I waited until he could lift his head after this overwhelming sense of shame. I felt terribly sorry for him and tried to soothe the wound: "Guilt that causes pain is the beginning of healing, but at the same time it's good that you understand that your parents, too, have probably been through terrible things." It didn't seem to sink in. Not yet.
"I can never forgive myself," he said softly, for his voice kept breaking with deep shame. "Why is it so hard to forgive ourselves, dear Paulus?"
Paulus paused for a moment, but then he looked at me helplessly and couldn't bring himself to answer. It spoke volumes: even in his old age, he was no further along than when he was a child. I continued: "I feel that we cannot forgive ourselves because we so rarely manage to forgive our fellow human beings for their mistakes.

Have you forgiven your parents in the deepest sense of the word?"

He looked at me in surprise and humbly shook his head. I continued my argument: "I believe this is the essence of the Fall of Man: the man of Eden still feels entitled not to forgive the woman, ever, which allows him to continue to act superior and to punish her for centuries, and through this he feels 'better and more'. Or rather, he thinks he is better and knows more. Jesus came to show mankind that he forgives both man and woman, and to convey this message: love is universal and has nothing to do with gender, and even less with oppression, contempt or retribution. Jesus is the same in every man and woman, and his coming must be a turning point in the history of humanity after the Fall of Eden, after the separation of man and woman. He expects us to forgive our fellow human beings, whatever they may have done, so that we may destroy our own guilt and grant ourselves access to love once more: a new Eden. And the Son of God on earth set us the example."

There was silence. He seemed speechless but not hurt. On the contrary, I even saw hope in his eyes.

I confess: it is a huge and almost impossible task to make this clear to a fellow human being. Had I not loved Jesus personally and intimately, it would have taken me centuries to

. I sensed that I was a messenger of Jesus, even though I considered myself deeply unworthy of this task. I still wonder why He did not entrust this directly to someone else, to Peter for example, rather than to two women? Wouldn't that have been more efficient? I can only find one feeble explanation for it: a woman who carries and gives birth to a child is already closer to the mystery of love, and I, who have not experienced that and never will, stand somewhat between man and woman in this whole event. What Mary experienced is of a far greater order and seems to me unfathomable to any mortal. Mary stands alone among human beings as one whose human nature is gradually transforming into a divine nature that can accomplish more for humanity behind the scenes than in the foreground. I am thinking, for example, of the help she offered to Rebecca.
Paul's mood gradually brightened. I looked out of the window and saw Peter coming. I let him in, and a moment later, at the table, his joyful, sparkling eyes turned into words.

Peter

"Rebecca! Her story about Mary! How Mary taught her to pray! She showed me how, and I followed her example, and felt a sense of peace come over me! 'Hail Mary, the Lord is with thee…' Paul, we must write a letter to our Christian communities about this!"

Paul

And Peter demonstrated it to us. I simply couldn't understand why Peter could now accept 'the Lord is within you' when he had previously questioned Mary Magdalene's earlier account. Mary Magdalene looked at me instead of him, and she too did not understand the change of heart. I felt it was my duty to point this out to Peter. "Peter, surely you heard Rebecca clearly: 'the Lord is within you'? Peter was startled for a moment, looked at me, then at Mary Magdalene.

Peter

I paused to think for a moment and sat down. There were only two possibilities: 'in you' or 'with you'. I understood Paul's message straight away: 'with you' is less controversial than 'in you', and I repeated it once more: "Hail Mary, the Lord is with you. 'With you' is much broader and easier to imagine." And I added: "On my responsibility!"

Paul

My friend didn't understand it at all, and I was afraid he would lose his temper again. Mary Magdalene came out with a hammer blow, though it wasn't meant that way: "Peter, are you higher than the Mother of God herself?" and this was the last straw. Peter'd had enough: "Did Jesus appoint you as guardian of His church? He gave the task to me, not to

you, and He obviously had good reasons for that. Do you sometimes doubt Him?" Mary Magdalene replied: "We are both human, after all, and we can both make mistakes. Ask Mary herself, for it is, in essence, very important."
Peter's tone softened and he proposed a compromise: "We'll use 'with you' for the time being, until we hear back from Mary." And Mary Magdalene agreed for the sake of harmony, glancing at me as she did so. I simply nodded. Mary Magdalene went over to Rebecca.

Mary Magdalene

I fled outside: all four forces were fighting within me against love. But I fought back fiercely.
Anger? Be angry at your anger. Calm down and forgive.
Ignorance? Know that you do not know everything.
Desire? Be humble and grateful for all you have ever received.
Darkness? Stop this fight and laugh at yourself.
And by the time I reached Rebecca, everything was as it had been before. I had regained my inner peace.

Peter

I was furious because I was being treated like a fool. I cannot deny that I was jealous because she apparently had a much closer relationship with Jesus and because she, and not I, was the first to witness Jesus' resurrection. I simply could not put any of this into perspective.

What bothered me even more was that I felt Paul believed her rather than me. I had to fight the urge not to argue with Paul, and the result was a cold war between us. I felt absolutely awful inside. And the worse I felt, the more I resented Mary Magdalene for having pushed me into this corner. A little respect wouldn't have gone amiss. It's easy to talk from the sidelines. No matter how much Paul tried to be kind to me, it backfired as long as he didn't openly take my side, but no: he chose to agree with her, at least in part. How could I stop this budding hatred towards Mary Magdalene? "To me, that dove is the same, Peter, as Jesus reattaching a severed ear." How dare she? Lord, help me if you please! Why then did you choose me instead of Mary Magdalene? It's throbbing in my head. I've nowhere to turn. And just now, at this very moment, Paul comes along and casually tells me he's going for a little walk! I'd expect something different from a friend. Now I'm sitting here alone. Oh yes, I can see him walking towards Rebecca and Mary Magdalene's cottage; what a lovely friend I have… I can certainly count on that! Go and persecute some more Christians, man, your work isn't done yet! Cook them to a crisp! I had lost control and no longer recognised myself. Until suddenly a dove alighted by the window and stared intently at me. At that moment, I broke down. I fell to the ground and curled up in shame and pain: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,

"Have mercy on me, a sinner [73]," and I kept repeating this phrase for hours so that nothing else could intrude on my mind, and I truly felt grace descending into my heart. I received grace for what I had begged for. Paul came in and we embraced each other like brothers and asked each other for forgiveness. The sky cleared.

A little later, Mary Magdalene came to see if there was anything else she could do for us, and I replied immediately: "Certainly." And I embraced her too, and asked her for forgiveness. A glimmer in her eyes made me understand why Jesus loved her so much, and it prompted me to say: "The Lord is in you." And she replied: "Forgive me for my haste, and I pray for His strength in your task." I thanked her and then asked: "I have read the four papyrus scrolls of Zacharias, but Rebecca told me there is a fifth scroll. Can you tell me anything about it?" She nodded, and we both sat down at the table with Paul.

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[73] This is the most important prayer still handed down to us from the Orthodox monasteries, where for a full two hours in the dark, with only a dim light on the icons of Christ and Mary, it is recited aloud in turn by alternating nuns and monks. There is a more significant variation on this simple phrase that is used individually. Suppose you truly hate someone named Paul; then the spiritual father advises you to pray as follows: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, through the holy prayers of Paul, have mercy on me, a sinner." If you repeat this to yourself with great concentration for days and even weeks, in between your daily activities, the feelings of hatred will gradually fade away and you will experience this liberation as fundamental for the rest of your life.

Paul

I had never heard of the four papyrus scrolls before. Mary Magdalene first explained in broad terms where the text came from, told us a little about Zechariah and Elizabeth, and how John the Baptist knew the fourth scroll by heart, after which she asked Peter to recount the story as it was still fresh in his mind. Meanwhile, she made some fresh tea and set out some dry biscuits with raisins on the table. Peter became deeply absorbed in the story, and it was marvellous how much detail he could recall. He concluded: "The gatekeeper then took the small ebony box and laid it to rest in the lap of the stranger who no longer remembered, and the stranger opened the box. As if the touch of the contents were a key, the stranger's sorrowful eyes suddenly opened. When the gatekeeper looked into their dark depths, it was as if he were struck down by the sight of the Child's soul. 'My King!' he said. He fell to his knees weeping and placed the crown upon the old King's head."

Peter and I, our eyes once again glistening with emotion, watched as Mary Magdalene stared motionless out of the window. Peter and I immediately began speculating aloud amongst ourselves as to what the story might mean. We let our imaginations run wild, all the more so because Rebecca had told him that a fifth papyrus scroll existed and that John the Baptist himself had also alluded to this fifth scroll.

Peter immediately asked Mary Magdalene what else was written on the fifth papyrus scroll.

Mary Magdalene
I turned to them both and asked, “What do you think happened next?” They thought for a moment and began to search for an answer amongst themselves and with one another.

Peter: “The sorcerer is the symbol of the world gone mad.”
Paul: “He is the devil who is only bent on power and mischief and wants to dominate mankind.”
Peter: “He creates chaos and is afraid that the King will return.”
Paul: “The child is now within the father. And… And vice versa: the father within the child.”
Peter: “Exactly, it is remarkable how this corresponds to Jesus and the Father to whom He constantly refers.”
Paul: “And the gatekeeper, who is that?”
Peter: “The gatekeeper? Well… he strikes me as a sort of envoy, a messenger from on high. What do you think, Paul?”
Paul: “I heard that when John the Baptist baptised Jesus in the Jordan, a dove gently alighted on Jesus’ shoulder… it must be something like that.”
Peter: “Not at all impossible, indeed, and after all we’ve been through, we shouldn’t be surprised that ancient papyrus scrolls foreshadow a scenario presented to us from on high to

once again confirm that Jesus is the King's child. Just as, incidentally, the star at his birth is hard to believe, yet it happened. But what, then, might be written in the fifth papyrus scroll? What is its purpose?"

Peter immediately looked at me questioningly. I had, of course, expected this and already had my answer ready: "The fifth papyrus scroll, dear Peter, was intended first and foremost to prepare Mary, his mother, for the worst. He told her word for word what would happen to him: the King's child would return to the world to save humanity from all dark and loveless powers and forces. He told her literally that he would be crucified so that she could prepare herself for it. How could love incarnate not be loving towards his mother? The fifth scroll is not a papyrus scroll, but is the entire story of Jesus' life that we are to proclaim to the world. The fifth scroll tells us how death was overcome. The fifth scroll is an endless book in which every person is given a leading role and has a free choice between choosing spiritual death or eternal love."

Suddenly, it fell silent in Jair and Hannah's little house. I thought it wise not to mention myself as the source, but to refer only to Mary. I had already realised how difficult it was for men to accept that I had been entrusted with more by Jesus than they had. It was hard enough for them to understand that, after

his death. It remained quiet and I apologised; I left them alone for a moment, as Rebecca needed me at this time of day to wash the children and put them to bed.

Peter

Paul looked at me with wide eyes, which was understandable, for he had seen or heard very little of all the miracles that we, the apostles, had witnessed over the past two years.
Now we both understood why Mary had insisted on visiting Mary Magdalene. We stood speechless, finishing our tea in silence, eating a few pieces of fruit and then retiring for the night. Early the next morning, at the crack of dawn, we would return to Jerusalem. We had arrived with empty suitcases and were leaving Ein Karem heavily laden with precious goods. I thought back to my first encounter with Jesus, who had seen me fishing with empty nets and advised me to cast my nets on the other side, where they were bursting with fish. And now it was Mary who, in turn, had urged me to seek out Mary Magdalene… so be it.

SAMUEL AND THE HARBOUR MASTER

The port of Ashdod hadn't changed in the slightest since I'd left it years ago. I walked up onto the quay to see if, by any chance, one of my father's ships was moored there. It would have been a huge coincidence, but Ashdod is not Ein Karem. Immediately, I thought back gratefully to all the little miracles I had experienced there. I decided to go to the harbour master's cottage and could see from a distance that his door was open. Old Caleb [74]had been harbour master for years, and in his early days he had been a good friend of my father's. When I was struggling so much with myself, he was always there for me, ready to help. I suddenly saw him appear in the doorway. He looked at me uncertainly and didn't take his eyes off me until I saw his face light up and he came towards me, limping with his walking stick, full of joy. He called out from afar: "Samuel! Thank God!" When he embraced me, he whispered that everyone thought I was dead: "You have risen from the dead, my son!" He did indeed regard me as a son at the time because he had no children of his own. I replied cheerfully: "I know of only one person who can rise from the dead." And he immediately looked around to see if anyone had overheard. Reassured, he said softly: "Christ is risen!" I had heard from Mary

[74] *Caleb* means 'loving, wholehearted'.

Magdalene taught me how to reply in a joyful voice: “He is truly risen!” He was startled again and once more looked around to see if anyone had heard. I still didn’t understand it at the time. A little later, we were sitting inside his little house with the door closed, and he began to pour some delicious Arabic tea. I thanked him: “It’s been so long since I’ve been able to drink this. Does this tea come from Sidon in Phoenicia?” “No, this comes from the lowlands of Hermon. Of course, this tea arrived here on your father’s ships from Sidon.”

He came and sat down at my table: “Everyone really thought something terrible had happened to you and that you were dead. You left here with a precious cargo bound for Jericho and we haven’t heard a word from you since; your brothers keep asking about you, and your father is twice as sad, it seems, because he didn’t treat you with enough fatherly love and also because he never got the chance to make amends. And before you ask: oh yes, he’s still alive and he’d be absolutely delighted if you were to visit him.” Caleb poured some more tea and had one more thing to say: “Your eldest brother Boaz [75] — that’s a different matter altogether; you’ll have to be careful with him. He’s cursed you in every possible way, from ‘lazy’ to ‘freeloader’ to ‘thief’, because he had to take your place in the first year and he’d only just got married. I don’t need to explain it to you; you’ve had plenty of run-ins with him since your childhood

[75] *Boaz* means ‘strong’.

‘You were lucky to have been strong from a young age. The first time you moored here, everyone thought: what’s that young lad doing here? Until they saw you at work; you didn’t even have the beginnings of a beard, but your arms had muscles that were quite a sight for the young women.’ I interrupted him straight away: “And that young lad, Caleb, now has a wife and two little ones.” He nearly fell off his chair and shouted: “Congratulations, Samuel, tell me everything!” And I told him from the moment a stranger had directed me, in the twilight at the crossroads, to take the turn-off to Ein Karem, and for Caleb that was reason enough to sit on the edge of his seat so as not to miss a single detail. Rebecca, Hannah, Mary Magdalene, the birth of John in the birthplace of John the Baptist, the healing of Hannah by Mary. Caleb couldn’t get enough of it. Night had already fallen by the time I’d finished telling my story.

Caleb had been listening intently and keeping quiet the whole time. I was taken aback when he spoke: “You are a godsend, Samuel.” I was taken aback: “What do you mean by that, Caleb?” “What you have been able to learn first-hand from Mary Magdalene and Mary, who knew Jesus so closely and raised him, and that I am now able to hear your story. I am a Christian, baptised by John the Baptist. Since the resurrection of Jesus, we have been gathering here in Ashdod every week with all the baptised Christians in the strictest secrecy. I realise that you lived so isolated in Ein Karem that you had no need to fear

. But here in Ashdod, the Pharisees fear that Christianity might spread further from here, around the world, via other ports and countries." Tears suddenly welled up in Caleb's eyes.

"What happened, Caleb?" At first he shook his head and shrugged as if nothing had happened, but that suddenly made him cry even harder, and the words came out in fits and starts: "Less than a month ago… a woman from our group was stoned to death here in the market square… I admit it: I'm afraid, and she… was a heroine." The sobbing gradually subsided until it fell completely silent, and he stared out of the window as if he were still expecting someone. The evening sun cast faint shadows across his wrinkles. I was no longer there for him, and it seemed as though he were speaking to someone else. It commanded deep respect from me and I bowed my head before such subdued grief. Then it burst out: "The woman who was stoned was my youngest sister, Adina [76]. She looked after me." A flood of tears overwhelmed Caleb, who began to howl like a wounded wolf, desperately fighting against the pain. Only then did I see a bloodstained woman's dress hanging in a corner of his room. I felt fear and horror, and felt tears welling up myself; we tried to help each other stop crying, but it only seemed to get worse, until finally, exhausted and vacant, with dry, empty eyes, we stared at nothing but the thin air, the

[76] *Adina* means 'gentle'.

incomprehensible. It fell deathly silent, just as time itself stood still. I thought back to the story of the King's Child, how the child Jesus died on the cross, and how many of Jesus' children would suffer a similar fate for the sake of love? I thanked Jesus for His example when He showed me what risks I could expect in Massilia, for my children first and foremost, and for Rebecca and Mary Magdalene secondly. The sun went down.

"Come," said Caleb, "I'll show you your bed." He led the way and opened the door to the room: "I can't give you any other place than this. This is… this was Adina's room. I'm sorry I'm not coming in with you; it's still too painful." I asked no further questions. He quickly closed the door behind me.

I had never felt so strange and uncomfortable, and, exhausted but respectful, I lay down on the bed of a martyr. I thanked Caleb and Adina because, strange as it was, I was allowed to share their pain, stripped of self-importance and self-love. It put things into perspective and soothed the pain of missing Rebecca, knowing that she was waiting for me and would whisper the right words to me, only now realising how important she was in my life. I filled her absence with images of her eyes looking at me, and her eyes showed me our children Hannah and Johannes, and I imagined that if Johannes were later to do what I had done with my

Father… I couldn't bear to think about it, and I promised myself I'd make things right with my father and definitely talk to Mary Magdalene about it and… and… I fell asleep.

Before dawn the next morning, we made clear arrangements. I would return to Ein Karem with Caleb's horse and cart for the move, with Oz bringing up the rear. Caleb estimated that within three to four weeks a ship from Father would dock from Sidon, and then travel on to Massilia with the goods from Phoenicia. Caleb promised he would keep the ship in the harbour until we arrived. He particularly wanted to speak to Mary Magdalene and let me know that she might then address their Christian group. I assured him that Mary Magdalene would do so. I finally saw a smile appear on his face and the old man embraced me as if I were his son: "Take care, lad." And I set off with horse and cart, leaving Uz behind.

Caleb made me grow up in a single day. Before, it was Rebecca who took care of everything in Ein Karem, but from now on she wouldn't have to face it all alone. I longed to see her again and, during the journey home, I let all the memories of my youth come flooding back; it amazed me how I could now put problems into perspective, and they seemed more solvable to me. I looked forward to sorting things out and was only worried about how Boaz would react. I

tried to put myself in his shoes and could already understand the justified reproaches directed at me. I didn't feel quite as saintly as I had before either. I was confident of one thing: I'm not on my own.

Rebecca

I missed Samuel, but I wasn't alone. I could tell from Mary Magdalene that she missed him too. And Hannah didn't know what to do with herself without her dad: "Mum, when's Dad coming back?" Mary Magdalene and I laughed about it and wondered out loud whether we really missed Samuel or whether it was just Hannah's whingeing that made us miss him… even though we both knew full well which option was the right one: I longed for him passionately, and he would be scared to death of what he'd experience on that first night back in bed together, and he'd beg to be allowed to return to Ashdod immediately! Oh yes, I was sure it was mutual. So I managed perfectly well to keep the smile on my face. I could feel he was on his way. And Hannah came clinging to my skirt once again: "Mum, when's Daddy coming back?"

Mary Magdalene

The silence following the visit of Peter and Paul did me good, and tending Samuel's garden in his absence was a blessing of tranquillity; it brought me face to face with how the minutest forms of insect life gave me a glimpse into the wonder of Eden.

No human being is capable of moving, like the little worker ant, carrying a load three times its own weight, over distances of several metres, or even vertically, up or down. I did my very best not to kill any of them with my clumsy feet. Suddenly it struck me: I had been wrong; there was one person who could do just that, and much more besides, one person who could carry the whole of humanity on his shoulders and lift them up to his Father's house. I felt I was travelling in the company of this man, stopping now and then at a little lake; sometimes I was lifted up again to plunge blissfully and gently from a great height into another river. I was on my way and nothing would stop us because He is in me… Rebecca asked me recently: "How is it that you are not sad after everything you have experienced so closely with Jesus on the cross? If I only think of Samuel, that something might happen to him and I would never see him again, my life would no longer have any meaning." And so I told her about Jesus' lesson regarding the drop and the sea. And she replied, quite surprisingly for such a young woman: "Fortunately, we don't need rain for that," and she let her tears flow freely. I immediately followed her example, whilst we laughed with joy at the depth of friendship between us.
Hannah came storming in: "Mum, Mum, a horse!"

We dropped everything and rushed outside. A black frizzy-haired horse was already waving at us from afar, and Rebecca ran

towards him whilst I held Hannah back: she was still a bit too young to see a couple in love making out. “Come on, Hannah, let’s go and find something tasty for your dad! He’ll be really hungry. Let’s have a look in the garden first to see if there are any nice grapes left…” I reckoned it would be a while before that couple came inside.

Samuel came in and Rebecca immediately introduced him to Johannes: “Little bear, how big you’ve grown in just one month!” and Johannes giggled with delight. The table was already set and only needed one more plate. Hannah had already climbed onto a chair to grab Samuel wherever she could. I would look after the horse so that the little family could catch their breath. Oz and Az no longer looked up in wonder at a horse. Apparently, they didn’t think much of a horse at all.

A little later, we were all sitting at the table and I let Rebecca and Samuel get on with it. I revelled in their happiness. After the initial outburst of joy, Samuel’s tone gradually shifted to one of seriousness, and then to something even more serious. It turned out that Samuel had been very impressed by Caleb. Rebecca had to help him: “What’s happened, darling? You suddenly sound so sad.” Samuel replied: “Caleb would like Mary Magdalene to address their Christian community,” and he paused for a moment, “but in secret.” Rebecca looked at me with a furrowed brow that simply meant she didn’t understand. But I thought

immediately returning to the story of Saul. “I’d be happy to do that, Samuel; I understand why it must be done in secret. Christ has risen from the dead, and yet all the dark forces are still at work to undermine his message of love. While you were away, Peter and Paul came to visit. Paul told me about his dark past: a terrible past for which he feels immense pain and regret.” I looked Samuel in the eyes. He looked at little Hannah and his Rebecca and shook his head sadly: “Why is everything so complicated? Why is it so difficult to hold on to love,” and he clenched his hands together so tightly his fingers turned white, “to hold on to it?” It was both despair and love at the same time and seemed touching, but it wasn’t. The feeling pointed painfully to an underlying lack, a lack of a source of life. I used my open, flat palm and stroked his cheek with it: “Because love is giving, Samuel. And what you give, you sometimes lose. And then you have to search to find it. Jesus taught me to seek the source of love. It is only from the very beginning of the source that you can become the sea. And Jesus is both the source and the sea. Seek him, ask him, find him. He is in each of us.” And I was still stroking his cheek: “Your family can be a hand like this.” I gently pulled his two clenched hands apart and took one of them, stroked my cheek with his hand and let go of it, and Samuel continued to stroke my cheek very softly and gently and closed his eyes, and with

With his other hand, he reached for Rebecca's cheek and gently, tenderly stroked both our cheeks. Even Hannah fell silent, looking as if spellbound, and began spontaneously to stroke Samuel's cheek. And I stroked Hannah's cheek, and Hannah, with her other hand, now also stroked Rebecca, who gently placed her hand on little Johannes's head, and so the circle was complete. A circle of hands giving love because each hand felt free to seek, and only in this way did they find and feel one another as one. "Only in this way is love held fast, dear Samuel." I waited until Samuel let his hands rest. "This was the first lesson; the second lesson requires practice: we must do the same with our loving thoughts towards one another as our hands did, and you will find that these will then automatically guide your actions as well." I waited a moment and could barely hide my smile as I decided what to do next, a broad grin on my face. "And holding on to love, Samuel, there's no better place to do it than in your bed. And I think I'd best go and say hello to the donkeys now, and I'll take Hannah with me: come on, darling." This was followed by a burst of laughter. And suddenly Oz and Az, who had come to look out of the window, began to bray as if they'd understood everything.

Looking back now, I realise that I never actually laughed or felt any sense of humour during my conversations with Jesus. His divine nature made this human trait unnecessary, both for him and for me in his presence. I never once felt the absence of humour

moment during our conversations. I thought back to what he said about being in love, something he had no need to know. It must be something like this: humour was a gift to human nature to put into perspective and compensate for a necessary facet of both love and misfortune, particularly its indispensable seriousness, by giving it breathing space—or perhaps even room to survive—through humour. After an hour or so, I saw Samuel enter the olive grove below my cottage. I wanted to speak to him alone for a moment.

Samuel

I retreated into the olive grove to let it all sink in.
Was it possible to rebuild such a circle of love with my brothers, sister and father? Over the past few years, I'd thought that was impossible, but now I had to give this possibility another chance. Especially since Mary Magdalene could offer me guidance. And in any case, I had been given two great helpers who could open even the coldest of hearts: Hannah and John, under the capable guidance of Rebecca with her life experience, compared to which my own life seemed nothing but a life of luxury.
I spoke aloud: "Where are you within me, Jesus? Teach me to find you, for I am deaf and blind. How do I open my eyes? How do I learn to hear? Is it with understanding? How? Do not spare me. Do I even deserve all this? I am nothing compared to Caleb. Tell me when I must die for you, and I will do so."

“It. Better today than tomorrow.” And I collapsed. Mary Magdalene’s voice behind me startled me suddenly: “You’re forgetting your heart, Samuel! Everyone has their own character, Samuel, and that character is guided by both mind and heart, but everyone was also given a seed that must and will sprout only after birth, provided that both heart and mind are open to it. And that seed is Jesus, and as your heart and mind enter into dialogue with Jesus, that seed blossoms into a flower of joy that gives off a fragrance, and everyone around you shares in this joy. But, there is a but: tears can also be a source of joy and are often stronger than joy without tears. When I stood with Mary at the foot of the cross of the dead Jesus, we wept nine tears of happiness and just one tear of sorrow. One tear for his death. But nine tears of indescribable gratitude, knowing that his mission was accomplished and that he would rise again. And your prayer with tears from just now is a prayer that is heard, just as your thoughts were already focused on the good: how can I make things right with my family? And you will find, one day, that this prayer will be rewarded with deeds. The difficulty and task now is that you maintain your trust, hope and faith, for no one knows exactly when your prayer will be answered. Even Jesus, during all His trials in Gethsemane, had to wait and continue to trust in His Father.”

Mary Magdalene placed her hand briefly on my shoulder: “Are you all right? Isn’t it all a bit too much?” I nodded gratefully to say no and followed her. Yes, that was what I would continue to do for the rest of my life: follow her.

That night I couldn’t and didn’t want to sleep. I told Rebecca everything and added that I would learn all of Mary Magdalene’s words by heart so that I would be sure to remember them and pass them on to my children later. Half asleep, she whispered to me that she wouldn’t wake me up in the morning and would let me sleep through the night. I repeated everything quietly, softly, aloud, over and over and over again with my dear Rebecca in my arms, until I surrendered to a dream of angels taking a stoned woman into their midst.

I resolved to repeat the following sentence to myself every day, in good times and bad: “Your task is to keep your trust, hope and faith, for no one knows exactly when your prayer will be answered. Even Jesus, during all His trials, had to wait and continue to trust in His Father”. It was this patience, in particular, that later proved to be my salvation.

Rebecca

Before dawn, Samuel and I were already busy packing, and we let Mary Magdalene sleep in a little longer. Samuel insisted that we didn't need to lug any furniture along. But mattresses and blankets would certainly be extremely useful on board the ship.

It felt as though we were burying our youth; we were all still so young. Even Oz and Az sensed what was about to happen and were unusually quiet. They were each given a heavy load to carry, filled with all manner of goods. The cart carried small household goods, bedding, clothing, Samuel's work tools, provisions for the journey for both people and animals, water and, of course, the case containing the papyrus scrolls and writing materials. Two sleeping places were prepared for John and Hannah during the journey, but just as easily for Samuel or Mary Magdalene or myself; we would take turns.

Mary Magdalene

I woke up and saw through the window that Samuel and Rebecca were already hard at work. I felt the need for a cup of tea to give all the events in this house an unforgettable place in my memory, and that began immediately with remembering Jair and Hannah. I took my cup of tea to their graves and sat down.

The sun did me good and reminded me how much Hannah used to love sitting here with a cup of tea. Hannah's farewell letter and her very last words came to mind: "Out of gratitude for what you did for Jair and because you managed to find the poppy, that is why, dearest and best friend I have ever had, I am now leaving with joy to be with my Jair. May your God bless you, Your Hannah" Oh yes, Hannah, and may Jesus and his Father welcome you both into Their kingdom, for you both too have carried a cross to the place of the skull. And that gave me the idea to make two simple crosses. I immediately started gathering wood and rope. The result wasn't all that great, but there wasn't enough time for that, and I planted them as best I could on both their graves. I sat down there again for a moment and looked. And what I saw brought me back to the foot of Jesus' cross, and I begged him to have mercy on Jair and Hannah, for what they did at the end of their lives was neither anger, nor darkness, nor desire. And if it was still ignorance, then it was due to an involuntary lack of knowledge, because they had never been able to get to know Jesus and His message and were merely buried under terrible pain, physical in Jair's case and spiritual in Hannah's. The crosses felt fair and just to me. But who was I to judge that? I hoped that Jesus and His Father would accept these crosses and not take them as arrogant behaviour on my part. I would never

know. I stood up and began packing the few belongings I had, and Rebecca popped in to see how far I'd got. Before we left, I looked out of the window one last time at the graves and called out: "Quick, Rebecca, come and look! A pigeon by Jair and Hannah's grave – look how it's bringing palm fronds and laying them on top of both crosses!" The dove then looked at us with a fixed gaze and gave us plenty of time to etch this moment into our memories forever. It nodded briefly and flew away again.

I was able to leave this precious place with a peaceful heart.

Thank you, Djibril, and farewell, Ein Karem, for all your wonders and hospitality towards seekers of good will!

Samuel

"What shall we call the little horse, Hannah? You can choose…" The answer came straight away: "Little Brownie!" she exclaimed.
"Right then, Little Brown! Off we go." Together with Hannah, sitting on the driver's seat of the cart, I turned it into a song. The two of us were in charge. And Rebecca and Mary Magdalene had to listen to us! I'm wrong: Hannah was in charge. But it wasn't long before the boss fell asleep, was taken off the driver's seat and put to bed. A rudderless cart guided by a sleeping princess! But the queen came to comfort me on the driver's seat and I thought of the richest king on earth, and that king was me.

It would take at least four days with this small caravan, with Oz and Az bringing up the rear. On the first day, head south until just past Bethlehem, take the first major junction on the right towards the west, and spend the night there. On the second day, continue westwards from there to Beth-Shemesh and spend the night there. On the third day, still heading westwards to Timnah. And on the fourth day, from there westwards once more to Ashdod.

I knew the road like the back of my hand in both directions; the third day would be the hardest due to narrow sections and hilly terrain. Oncoming traffic was sometimes a problem there, but we were hopeful, for I sensed an extra passenger close by.

We set off at first light, and by late afternoon, when Mary Magdalene had heard that we were about to pass through Bethlehem, she fell silent. She withdrew a little, and Rebecca and I thought she was tired and let her rest beside Hannah. Rebecca took her place beside me with John at her breast. We pressed on. The road was dry, the cart tracks were smooth, we avoided the stones, and Bruintje Bruin was the very picture of calm.

Mary Magdalene
Bethlehem! And there I lay, my arm wrapped around Hannah to cushion the jolts for her in a cart that resembled a giant, moving manger. And when the road levelled out again, it felt as though I were sitting up front with Caspar on a swaying camel. I saw the star again in my mind's eye. I closed my eyes and was able to retrieve the details of that time from the holiest and most secure chamber of my memory. A chamber that I could not open myself, but which was guarded by my guardian angel, and he had a name: Djibril. And Djibril opened this chamber for me. Details from so long ago played out before me once more and roused me from the daily grind

of everyday life. Dear Caspar, I wondered how he was getting on. The cart came to a halt and the compartment was closed. Samuel thought I was asleep and quietly told me that we had reached a spring and that we would water the animals, stretch our legs and have something to eat. Samuel helped me dismount and, of course, I recognised the spring from long ago where I had met the three wise men. The horse and the donkeys were fed and watered first; Rebecca looked after the children, and I gathered some food for everyone. When we were ready, I told Rebecca and Samuel what I had experienced here and exactly where the star could be seen. Samuel exclaimed enthusiastically: “That’s the direction we’ll be heading in now; who knows, we might pass that little house where Mary stayed with Jesus. The road runs alongside the town, not through it. It’s possible… Look, Mary Magdalene, there in the distance between those two little hills runs the road we must follow towards Beth-Sémes.” It didn’t surprise me at all. There are no coincidences. We would pass Jesus’s birthplace by evening. We set off again: Samuel and Hannah on the driver’s seat with Bruintje Bruin right at the front, and Hannah singing away. Rebecca with little John and I in the sleeping quarters. “You told me about it once, Ma Ma. How do you feel now?” I didn’t have to think about it: “I am, as it were, encountering the very beginning of my relationship with Jesus all over again. I am starting a new chapter in my life and that will begin anew in that little house. I don’t know how, but it will be alright.”

I looked up and stretched out my hands: “It’s a shame it’s not raining right now.” Rebecca looked at me in disbelief, her playful eyes furrowed, and I could already see her thinking: who on earth asks for rain? And our little procession moved on. I winked at her with a smile, and she made a failed attempt to wink back, and we both laughed ourselves silly. And she just kept practising…. The eye that wasn’t supposed to blink was doing better than the other. Hannah woke up and she started too…. And that ended in an urgent stop for the three ‘girls’ to have a wee.

Samuel

Mary Magdalene sat next to me on the driver’s seat afterwards, and we had only just left the town of Bethlehem behind us. A final orange-red sun was preparing to set before our eyes. Mary Magdalene recognised from afar the solitary, remote cottage where the baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph had stayed. I stayed behind to watch over the cart with the animals, Hannah and John, whilst Rebecca and Mary Magdalene made their way to the cottage.

Mary Magdalene

We knocked. A young woman opened the door.

“Excuse us, but might I speak to your father?”

“I’m sorry, but my father passed away last year. Can I help you?”

“Please excuse the disturbance. I can hear your baby crying. Good evening,” and we were already turning to leave.

“Wait a moment! Are you by any chance Mary

Magdalene?” I was taken aback for a moment:

“Yes, indeed, and this is Rebecca.”

“Three or four weeks ago, a man came knocking here with the same request. He had dark skin, a grey beard and dark brown eyes, and he asked me to deliver a parcel to Mary Magdalene. He told me his name – a strange name for these parts: Caspar of Arabia, he introduced himself. My father had told me the story of Jesus and the three wise men. ‘Just a moment, I’ll fetch the parcel in a minute…’

Her little one was still crying. We took the parcel and thanked her so she could quickly tend to her child. Rebecca was completely rooted to the spot. I actually had to give her a gentle nudge. She couldn’t get a word out.

Rebecca

It was as if it were perfectly normal for Ma Ma. She even said to me, before I’d even asked anything: “It’s not unusual. Caspar is looking for me. He was the youngest of the three wise men and I was sitting right at the front with him on his

camel. I know what's in the parcel, but we'll wait until later when the children are asleep."

I wouldn't be surprised if Caspar had fallen in love with the lovely Ma Ma, and love often moves mountains. And what woman wouldn't like that? Caspar wouldn't be far from here, would he? I was delighted for both of them with all my heart. I was, of course, terribly curious about that parcel, but she was absolutely right: Samuel had to be there too, because he was also very curious about the outcome of our short trip. Samuel had apparently found a side spring a short distance from here where we could easily spend the night. The animals were fed and watered, and we washed Hannah and ourselves in a stream. We'd hidden the parcel from Hannah, otherwise she wouldn't have wanted to sleep. Evening fell, night began. The three of us sat by a crackling fire. Mary Magdalene spoke up: "I'd told you about Caspar the Arab before, hadn't I? Or at least to you, Rebecca?" I nodded and Samuel immediately said I'd told him too. Mary Magdalene then went to fetch the parcel and came back to sit by the cosy fire: "Caspar's gift lies not so much in this parcel, but rather in his gesture, his journey, his search and, yes, call it what you will: the gift lies in his love, just as his love lies in this gift. In this, he teaches us a great lesson: he proves that true love is patient. He proves that love is not so much a quality, but rather a verb: 'love is to be long-suffering'.

Caspar is searching for me, even though he found me a long time ago. Is it infatuation? No, absolutely not; it is a thousand times more than that. That night, together, we experienced something that transcended ordinary love: it was divine love on a holy night. Caspar is not looking for me as a human being or a woman; no, he is looking for someone with whom he can share this sacred love once more, someone who has experienced it just as he has, who knows what he has been through and who believes him unconditionally when he speaks of it. Anyone who has ever experienced divine love is, for the rest of their life, lonely amongst people who have not experienced it, for someone who has not experienced it cannot possibly fathom its depth. I have not known that loneliness until now, for I was privileged by the presence of Jesus himself, and Mary and John. And now that I am leaving them all, I can already feel how alone I am amongst people, except in part with you. When Caspar seeks me out, it is not about me as a woman but about what binds us together for eternity. It is love that has nothing to do with starting a family. Old Melchior and Balthazar will no doubt be dead, and he remains the sole witness in those distant lands. He did not leave Arabia to find me, but he wanted to find Jesus and be able to speak to him. Now that is no longer possible, he seeks me. I would do the same in his place. Tomorrow, before we leave, I shall give the woman at the cottage a letter in which I write to him that I am travelling to Massilia via

Ashdod. Caspar will keep looking for me and finding me. It simply can't be any other way. And now let's open the parcel." Ma Ma handed the parcel to me. I'd been looking forward to it all evening, eager to know what was inside, and now, after her explanation, this material gift seemed superfluous to me: I'd already received her lesson as the ultimate, intimate gift, even though I couldn't quite grasp it, but her word was irrefutable to me and I didn't need to doubt it. I opened the parcel and there, too, I was quickly put in my place. Material? It was literally a heavenly gift: the scent wafted up even before I had removed the first piece of papyrus. Samuel immediately placed a small piece of the contents carefully on a coal from the fire and delicious incense made its way to heaven with a scent that could only make you happy. 'Yes, Rebecca, material things? You still have a lot to learn, and you need to learn to slow down a bit in your decisions,' I said to myself for the hundredth time. Mum read my mind: 'It'll be alright, Rebecca.' She didn't dare give me a wink anymore!

Mary Magdalene

That morning I was awake before dawn and the silence did me good. I got up quietly so as not to wake anyone and went straight back to the house where Jesus was born to leave my letter for Caspar there, then returned. I went to the stream to freshen up and then gathered some wood by the roadside to light a fire so I could make some tea. Suddenly, in the distance, I saw two people approaching us on foot, or so it seemed. The closer they came, the clearer I could see that they were a man and a woman, each holding a child by the hand, and a little later I saw the luggage they were dragging along. This was not normal, and I decided to go out to meet them and ask if there was anything I could do to help. The closer I got to them, the better I could assess their pitiful condition. The woman seemed dizzy and was stumbling rather than walking; the children had their eyes closed, were being practically dragged along, and were falling over at every turn. The man was the only one who still had a little strength left, but even that wouldn't last long. I hurried over to them.

Fear and horror were written all over their faces; I didn't know what they were afraid of, but it was clear: they were fleeing from something. I asked the man what was going on, but I could see that he was even afraid of me. "Don't be afraid. I'll help you. I've got a fire going and I've got food and

“Here’s some drink for you so you can rest for a while.” It was the woman who agreed straight away, and without asking her husband, she leaned her head on my shoulder. She dropped all the luggage, and I took her little son’s hand to support him; the man followed us willingly with their little daughter. They didn’t sit down by the fire; they collapsed beside it and lay there on their backs. The youngest daughter seemed to have fainted, or perhaps she was fast asleep; it worried me. I’d brought a jar of honey with me for the party, but this took absolute priority. I put the honey in the tea, gave them a sip one by one, and so I was easily occupied for half an hour. The father and son were already recovering slightly, but the mother and daughter lagged behind. The father thanked me. Their belongings were pitifully meagre. It was not normal to leave the house like this during the night, if indeed they had ever had a home. I reheated the leftovers from last night’s meal and gave the father and son something to eat, whilst continuing to pass the honey tea to the mother and daughter. The mother opened her eyes and I was startled, for I saw death and despair in her eyes. I went to fetch another blanket for both children. The father emptied both bags onto the floor, but he couldn’t find what he was looking for and sighed. I asked cautiously if something had happened, but he looked at me imploringly, as if begging me not to ask any questions. The fear in his eyes was horrifying, as if he had seen death. It turned out afterwards that it was far worse than death. Rebecca was awake

and had probably been watching me for a while, and she came over to the fire as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. She spoke very kindly to the man and woman, introduced herself, and then praised her Ma Ma, but these people weren't interested. "Can I help, Ma Ma? I've brought a surprise with me and now is the right moment." If there was one woman who could sense these people perfectly, it was Rebecca, who had been through so much herself in her youth. Show no pity, but act with love. Let people retain their dignity. Give them the chance to speak when they're ready. Don't create expectations. I'd learnt a lot from her back then. But Rebecca, too, hit a brick wall today when she spoke to the woman, and that threw her off balance. The woman crumpled at her reaction. No one understood what was going on: not the man, nor myself. Rebecca quickly got up and went to the donkeys: she was running away. I followed her: "What's wrong, Rebecca?" "I recognise myself, Ma Ma, the apathy, the meaninglessness of life, begging for death, she feels filthy and dirty, she is… she was… raped and yesterday was the full moon." I held her close and she pressed her mouth hard against my shoulder to stifle her cries. I thought for a moment. "My dear Rebecca, then you are the best example of how to survive something like this and how to love that child. Think of Hannah, such a darling child. Take a moment and I already know you'll do the right thing. I once was

"A foundling for you: you made me a mother, and now you've found a foundling too, so it's your turn to be a mother to her. You can do it." She looked up and nodded, and we returned to the fire. Her husband had just gone down to the stream with the two children to freshen up. The woman was still curled up like a foetus by the fire. All alone.

Rebecca

Strengthened by Ma Ma, I went back to the woman and bent over her. I began to whisper. "I am Rebecca; I never knew my parents. I grew up amidst violence and was raped when I was fourteen. I had a daughter, Hannah. By a great stroke of luck, I ended up with Mary Magdalene, and this has completely changed my life. My greatest treasure on earth are the children I have borne, whoever their fathers may be. They become what we make of them through our example. If you hate this unborn child, you will also teach your two children to hate." Her eyes opened and she opened her heart a little: "I was raped by a Pharisee in front of my husband and children. I feel nothing but hatred; I hope I can lose the child or do it myself… whatever it takes…"

It was as if I could hear myself speaking back then. "What's your name?"

"I feel like nobody. The name of my body is Amana[77] , but the meaning of my name no longer resides in this shell. I feel only vengeance. My children and husband were forced to watch: 'filthy Christians', that's what they called us. After the Pharisee, there were two other men who used me. My hatred is stronger than my tears. No matter how kind my husband is, I can no longer bear his touch. Death is the only solution, and that way my husband can build a new life." She turned away from me, and I recognised this all too well. I did not lose heart.

"You just spoke of 'Christians'—have you been baptised?"

The question apparently triggered something positive.

"Yes, indeed, and John the Baptist gave me the name 'Amana' in the River Jordan." I suddenly saw a glimmer of light in the darkness of her eyes: her name still moved her, albeit very slightly. She no longer looked away from me as she spoke, and we made eye contact once more.

"What's your husband's name?"

"Younes; we were baptised together by John the Baptist. If only I were with John the Baptist now!"

"Younes means 'dove', doesn't it? Together, you are a dove of peace. How did that feel back then in the Jordan?"

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[77] *Amana* means 'peace'.

“We truly became a dove of peace together at that moment. Nothing could separate us and nothing would ever be able to separate us…” And then she broke down as if the Jordan itself were immersing her once more to help her rediscover her roots of love. She kicked, she lashed out, she wailed, she begged, she screamed, she fought against a beast, she scratched at stones with her nails. But the Jordan brought her back into the hands of John the Baptist, and he spoke her name: “Amana”, and she regained her name. And her tears were gratefully carried away into the Jordan. Exhausted, she collapsed with her head in my lap and fell into a deep sleep. I hummed a lullaby and saw her children and Younes approaching. I signalled for them to be quiet and to sit around her. Younes could not believe his eyes: she was sleeping with a smile on her face, and he looked at me with relief. I gave him a thumbs-up and he replied with relief, placing his hand on his heart. I gestured to Younes to swap places so that she could sleep with her head in his lap. He nodded eagerly in agreement, happy to be able to touch her again. The first step towards recovery had been taken, but many more steps would have to follow. How lucky I had been back then to end up in Ein Karem… I went straight to Mary Magdalene and the donkeys. I had a proposal.

Mary Magdalene

From a distance, I saw the change in the woman’s demeanour, how Rebecca had drawn closer to her, and from

the woman's violent movements, I knew immediately that we could not leave her alone tomorrow or even in the days to come. Meanwhile, Samuel was busy unloading the donkeys, for it was clear to him too, after the woman had raged so terribly: "Mary Magdalene, we cannot simply leave them to their fate. Something terrible must have happened." He got no further than that, even though we were clearly thinking the same thing. "Indeed, Samuel, something terrible has happened and we will help them. We'll stay here for the time being." Rebecca joined us and made sure that Younes and the children couldn't see her. She immediately sought out Samuel's arms and began to weep softly: "Amana was brutally raped by a Pharisee and two other men whilst Younes had to watch with the children. They had to leave their home. Full moon… They were baptised by John the Baptist. I… found the strength thanks to our dear Hannah." And her voice faltered. It had been so long since I'd cried myself, but now I had no defence left and I sought support from both of them, and so the three of us clung to one another like a bunch of grapes on the vine of Jesus after a storm. Oh yes, I felt him within us. Hannah woke from her afternoon nap and life went on. "What do you think, Hannah, fancy some pineapple?" "And for the other children too… may I give it to them?" Samuel picked her up: "What do you think, sweetheart, shall we go for a little walk with Oz and Az and the other children later?"

I don't need to describe it: Hannah is awake and life must go on, and she has no choice in how to conduct herself.

Rebecca

I had recovered a little. Pineapple is a wonderful fruit and a miracle cure: I suggested to Mary Magdalene that Hannah and I should go round to Younes, Amana and the children with the pineapple. She had wanted to suggest it to me herself and was glad that I did. Yes, from whom else would I have learnt all the subtleties of human nature? I kissed her and whispered in her ear: "My Ma Ma."

We went to Amana and Younes with the plate. Amana had woken up and seemed a bit perkier. I offered the plate to her first and she looked at me with grateful eyes as she took a piece. "What are the children's names?" I asked as I continued with the dish, and it was Amana herself who answered me: "My son's name is Tobi[78] and my youngest daughter's name is Tirza[79] ." Then I came to Younes and he was so grateful that he almost dropped the dish. "May I sit with you and Hannah, Amana?" I asked, whilst Hannah had already plonked herself down to everyone's amusement. "Oops, we've got no choice now: Hannah has decided. Hannah is the

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[78] *Tobi* means 'God is good'.

[79] *Tirza* means 'pleasant'.

“She is Samuel and my daughter and Johannes’s little sister,” I introduced Hannah, and I watched Amana’s reaction. She nodded and understood what I meant. Younes apparently didn’t quite get it: the recent ‘full moon’ seemed to have passed him by, overshadowed by fear, grief, shame, two crying children, a raped wife, exhaustion and, above all, towering worries about the future. These people absolutely deserved a second chance. I would speak to Samuel and Mary Magdalene about it later.

Mary Magdalene
We discussed it and weren’t sure which way it would go. “Perhaps the people at the cottage could give us some advice or help?” Rebecca wondered. Samuel thought this was a brilliant idea, and I set off immediately. We needed help and I would find it there: the woman was so kind and, thanks to the stories of her late father, would perfectly understand what it meant to be a Christian in these times of persecution. Her husband came to open the door, looked at me kindly and asked me to come in. His wife was busy breastfeeding their child and would be with us in a moment. In their living area hung a large wooden star: “From my late father-in-law; he told the same story every year, but it was also a wonderful story. We have kept the cradle in which Jesus lay, and our little daughter has also lain in it…”

“I suppose you were baptised as Christians?”

“My wife has, and our little daughter too, but I have to be careful with my family. My father is a rabbi here at the synagogue in Bethlehem and is caught between two fires. Here in Bethlehem, all the newborns were slaughtered. That trauma still hasn’t been processed. We were just glad we didn’t have a boy who needed to be circumcised. That would have been a very difficult decision. I’m going to check on my wife now …”

A moment later, the three of us were together: “Can I help you in any way?” she asked kindly. I told her the story of our unexpected guests, and I could see how deeply she empathised with the terrible situation Younes and Amana had found themselves in. The woman rushed to the kitchen and had to vomit. Her husband heard the noise and went to help her. Both returned looking deathly pale and began to speak: “My wife’s name is Elyana [80] and I am Benjamin [81] ; even my father would help you, and I’m proud of that.” This was followed by a pleasant conversation between people of good will who kept in mind that if they themselves were in trouble, they too would want to be helped. Before I left, Elyana showed me the place where Jesus and Mary had stayed, with the manger of yesteryear still containing the same little sheets and blankets. I was drawn to it and kissed the little pillow.

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[80] *Elyana* means ‘God has answered’.
[81] *Benjamin* means ‘son of my right hand’.

“Caspar did exactly the same,” Benjamin remarked respectfully. I set off to break the news to Younes and Amana. I had barely started when Benjamin caught up with me: “My father has a donkey cart that hasn’t been used for years, if that helps? And I’ll sort out some fruit as well.” “Brilliant idea, Benjamin, I was just wondering where I might find something like that. You’re a wonderful person, Benjamin, and may the God of love bless your family too.”

I returned and saw Samuel already coming back with the three children on Az, full of joy. Rebecca was sitting with Johannes at the breast with Amana and Younes, and Amana seemed to take the presence of the suckling Johannes in her stride. Not far from them, a dove sat watching motionless; I recognised her colourful markings all too well. Thank you, Djibril.

Samuel helped the three kings, Hannah, Tobi and Tirza, dismount, and they flew to their mum and dad to tell their story.

Samuel

There is nothing more beautiful than seeing a child smiling happily. And when Mary Magdalene smiles, she too resembles a child, and this thought made me smile: four children, then! She came over to me, visibly relieved. “Good news?” I asked her.

“Definitely, very good news. We need to discuss this together. I suggest we entrust Oz and Az to Younes and Amana so they have the chance to build a new life. I wanted to ask you first and then put it to Rebecca as well. It will be difficult for Hannah.”

I thought for a moment… “I could try taking Hannah for a ride on Bruintje Bruin as a distraction and say that donkeys are for little children and horses are for big children. Something like that?” Mary Magdalene nodded and smiled, but continued: “I forgot to mention the good news: the people from the house where the manger is will provide a donkey cart and some fruit as well. They’re lovely people, Elyana and Benjamin…”

This left me completely speechless and I couldn’t utter a word. I raised my finger to the sky, looked up and bowed my head in awe of the power of love. Rebecca had just arrived and I told her what Mary Magdalene had just said, and she too was overwhelmed. “I don’t know what I’m still crying about anymore,” she laughed, wiping away her tears. Both women agreed that I should tell Younes. The sooner he saw a way out, the better for all of them. I didn’t waste any time and wanted to go and see him, but Mary Magdalene stopped me just in time: “There’s one more thing, and perhaps even more important. What do you think: are both cottages in Ein Karem empty?”

“Of course!” Rebecca and I exclaimed in unison. Rebecca was particularly delighted: “There’s no better place in the world than John the Baptist’s cottage for a woman who’s been raped; I speak from experience.” And everyone agreed with her. I asked Rebecca to break the news to them together; Mary Magdalene would keep the children occupied for a while. A little later, the four of us were sitting together: “Younes and Amana, we can help you.” And we began to lay out our plans, watching their faces light up with enthusiasm at this new opportunity in their lives. The birthplace of John the Baptist was very important to Amana at this tragic moment in her life, especially as a fellow sufferer like Rebecca had flourished there and she cherished the quiet hope of following that example. Younes, for his part, was eager to tend the vineyard, the vegetable garden and the olive grove. Everything was secluded, and there was no sign of persecution of Christians there for the time being. It was a paradise for the children. As we recounted the events in Ein Karem, Amana could no longer hide her hope, which turned into a contagious enthusiasm that made everyone present happy. Younes took hold of his wife and kissed her tenderly. I didn’t think that was a bad idea… “Don’t overdo it, Samuel,” said my dear wife, as it were pleading, knowing full well that she would then receive a second kiss. Amana and Younes didn’t think that was a bad idea either.

Mary Magdalene

The next morning, the donkey cart arrived, pulled by the donkey named Benjamin, laden with delicious fruit and some extra clothes for Amana. It said a lot about Elyana and Benjamin: a woman who had been raped longs for new clothes to help her forget the old ones more easily. Younes helped his wife to the stream to help her wash and get dressed. I gave Benjamin a good chunk of the incense we'd received from Caspar, 'so that he would always remember our gratitude'. A little later, Benjamin saw Amana returning from the stream in her new dress. He left us all alone and walked over to her. Whilst everyone admired the donkey cart, I watched Benjamin and Amana curiously. They spoke to each other, not a monologue, but a dialogue. It was moving to see how tenderly and understandingly Benjamin behaved, as if, as the son of a Pharisee, he were taking the burden of the offender upon his shoulders, whilst Amana's demeanour bore witness to loving forgiveness. Right at the end, I saw Amana nod 'yes' and both of them came to join us.
A short while after Benjamin had left, and whilst Samuel was practising with the donkey cart, Oz, Younes and the children, Amana came over to me herself: "Mary Magdalene? Benjamin just asked me if I'd like to have the cradle of the baby Jesus, and I agreed. There is still love in the world. With the manger of Jesus in the birthplace of John the Baptist

“A child is already blessed.” I asked her to sit down beside me and told her about my conversations with Jesus by the river, how Jesus emphasised that we should not make rules and laws, because rules and laws always carry with them a judgement of right or wrong, of good or evil. “Jesus is within you and within me and is a reality that completely transcends a simplistic understanding of rules. Who is to say that your abuser was not himself once victimised by an abuser far worse than himself and, for example, abused as a child by his own father? Pray for the strength to forgive your abuser and your pain will disappear. I learnt a special prayer from Simon Peter. It goes like this: every time you take your child in your arms or lay them in the manger of Jesus, say the following words to yourself: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, through the holy prayers of my rapist, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ And hatred turns to love, even love for your rapist who left you with a precious child. Do not be afraid; this takes time and perseverance. The first few times, your stomach will turn. You will struggle to utter these words and cannot mean them; they taste sour and bitter, and you will not want to repeat them, but persevere! The more often you repeat these words, the easier they become to say and the gentler you yourself become, and the more you even begin to feel understanding for the perpetrator’s unresolved pain, for an unharmed, loving person cannot commit such a crime. I myself was abused after my mother and my three brothers were

murdered by the Romans. I was the eldest child and a kind Roman took me away; I was thirteen years old, and he raped me, albeit in a gentle manner. It cannot be compared to the brutality you had to endure, but what made it difficult for me was that I was all alone in the world. Until I met the high priest Zacharias in Jerusalem, who taught me a similar prayer, for Jesus had not even been born yet. And dear Amana, Zacharias and Anna were the parents of John the Baptist, and it is in their little house that you will be staying. And suppose you do not succeed in forgiving your enemy; do not be discouraged, and do not judge yourself, just as no one, no human being, has the right to judge you. There are no laws and no rules. Only the mirror within ourselves will and must call us to account." There was a moment's silence. It remained silent for a long time, and suddenly Amana replied: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, through the holy prayers of my rapist, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Amana

I repeated it a second time: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, through the holy prayers of my rapist, have mercy on me, a sinner." And a third time and a fourth time and again and again and again and again, and indeed, for a second I felt the beginnings of control over something that seemed impossible to erase. And just as I thought I was gaining control, I lost it and

I had to start all over again, and again and again and again… until I felt something of forgiveness once more, yes, that was the right word: forgiveness for the perpetrators. But not a minute later, it was hatred all over again. But now I found a way out towards ‘life’ rather than towards ‘death’.

Mary Magdalene’s tear-filled eyes gave me hope. The laughing children on the donkey cart also helped me get back on my feet and shake off my filth. There is life after death! But less than five seconds later, I sank back down when I saw before me once more the terrible, sarcastic eyes of my rapist, who was revelling in the sight of my weeping children watching. What had Mary Magdalene said again? Persevere! I began to repeat the Jesus prayer once more and, yes, things improved slightly for a moment. Through the holy prayers? That was the hardest part of the prayer: my rapist holy? Oh, my dear God, what are you doing to me? What have I done to you? Forgive me for not trusting you just like that. I responded quickly: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, through the holy prayers of my rapist, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Oh yes, Lord, I trust in you again. And so I learnt to get back up every time I fell, and I did it instinctively, like a reflex. Hundreds of times a day. Gradually, through my forgiveness of them, I felt that I too hoped and prayed that Jesus would forgive my rapists, for they know not what they do. The day my child was born and I looked into her eyes, all the pain stopped. I even felt pity for her biological father and forgave my

the rapist again. I thanked him not only for the child, but also for what I had learnt, which I could now pass on to my own children, just as Mary Magdalene had taught me: to break the cycle of evil. My greatest gift of all was that Younes let go of all his hatred for the three rapists and chose the name ‘Mary Magdalene’ for our daughter. We were rich

Samuel

Rebecca and Amana took all the children for a stroll along the stream so that Younes and I could quietly adjust all the saddle straps, the ‘rear’ straps and the harness belonging to a donkey cart to fit Oz, the stronger of the two donkeys. Az would have to carry the two children plus some light luggage; we still had to work that out. It might just as well be that Amana would be better off riding Az. Hannah was holding up well, against all expectations. Younes wasn’t really there in spirit. He told me he’d slept badly.

Once everything had been adjusted and after taking Oz for a test drive in the donkey cart, the hardest part seemed to be over. I started gathering all the tools into my toolbox, but a knife was missing. I checked everything again, searched through the grass, but found nothing. “Younes, have you seen my knife by any chance?” He shook his head. I looked him straight in the eye; he clearly wasn’t used to lying. “Younes, have you seen my knife by any chance?” I asked him again, sympathetically. He lowered his eyes and took the knife out of his pocket. “I’m sorry, Samuel,” he stammered, and his eyes filled with tears. He sank to his knees, covering his face with his hands in shame. I sat down in front of him and took him in my arms, and he wrapped his arms around my neck and, still weeping, began to explain his plight: “I have my wife and

I can't protect my children; I feel like a coward. If only I'd had a knife back then, I could at least have killed one of the three rapists. From now on, I'll always carry a knife with me. It won't happen to me again. Better dead than a coward. What sort of example am I now to my children and wife? It won't happen again, I'm sure of it…" He jumped up and started punching the cart wheel with his fist. Oz stirred immediately; brake or no brake, he pulled his cart several metres further. I lunged at Younes and held him in a headlock. He roared and screamed in frustration. The tension in his muscles eased and I let him go bit by bit. "I understand you, Younes, I wouldn't know what to do either if something like that happened to Rebecca right before my eyes. I don't blame you for anything; on the contrary, I propose the following: I'll give you the knife on condition that you speak to Mary Magdalene about it first. Agreed?" Younes calmed down and wiped away his tears: "Agreed. I'll talk to Mary Magdalene about it." He stood up and went to meet Mary Magdalene. I suddenly thought back to how Caleb, although the situation might seem very different, hadn't said a word about revenge. Everyone was constantly worried about Amana, but everyone seemed to have forgotten Younes. And what about the children? I don't know.

Mary Magdalene

I had only just set off to thank Benjamin and Elyana once more when I heard a roar

and immediately turned back. Younes! I saw Younes walking towards me with red-rimmed eyes, and he spontaneously began to tell me how he had tried to steal a knife from Samuel so he could protect his family if everything were to happen again. He told me this without any emotion of regret, which shocked me and even frightened me. I took him by the arm and we walked back to our campsite together in silence: “We’ll have a cup of tea together.” He calmed down, but a kind of panic arose within me, a conflict. On the one hand, I thought it was normal to protect your family with a knife at the risk of your own life; on the other hand, I knew for certain that Jesus would advocate a completely different solution. But which one? And how?

We arrived at the camp and I made a cup of tea for both of us. It took a very long time to get the fire going and put the tea on, but then I had to sit down with him. I spoke to him: “There is an answer hidden deep within me, dear Younes, but I cannot find it straight away. I have had many conversations with Jesus and I need to recall all these conversations in my mind. I need a little time for this. The night will bring counsel. I’ll be sure to let you know. By tomorrow I’ll know for certain. Is that all right with you?”

Younes

I was fine with that. I was not judged by Samuel nor by Mary Magdalene. I felt that both of them

I understood, which was a huge relief in itself. I'd certainly made one major mistake: stealing the knife. I could just as easily have asked Samuel for the knife to protect my family, and he would have shown at least as much understanding as he has now. I'm still reeling from the shock, because I've lost my faith in humanity. Perhaps Mary Magdalene can help me, even though I don't believe in her. I'm sorry to admit it, but lying is certainly not the solution. Will this ever be all right? I'm stuck. I'm moving towards those scoundrels myself. Taking revenge seems more than justified to me and it would help my wife. But no one can help me. I have to do this alone.

Mary Magdalene

Evening fell and the night was supposed to bring a solution, but that's where it all went wrong. I'd got off to a bad start: Younes's trauma suddenly seemed harder to resolve than Amana's. And my brilliant mind would sort it out: what are the differences then, Mary Magdalene? I'd spent at least an hour on it and had come to the following conclusions.
Male pride is usually very strong in a man and, combined with physical helplessness, is experienced by the man as a painful defeat that must be avenged.

The woman, on the other hand, suffers terrible shame, abuse and physical helplessness in the face of the

perpetrator's physical superiority, causing her to regard her shame and responsibility as less of a shortcoming.

In short: a man present feels partly responsible for what took place, whilst the woman is a pure victim and cannot blame herself for anything. The woman is generally less intent on revenge and forgives herself more easily; the man, on the other hand, hardly forgives anyone, neither the perpetrator nor himself. The presence of children makes everything twice as hard. It's a brilliant analysis, but what now, clever Mary Magdalene? I didn't get any closer to a solution. On the contrary, I moved further away from a non-violent solution.

Dear Jesus… Help me, I can't do this alone. Where is Djibril? Where should I start? I can't see a way forward!

And suddenly I had a short-circuit, like a flash in my brain. And I spoke to myself angrily: "My dear but also foolish Mary Magdalene, you're behaving just as blindly as Younes! Open your eyes, your ears, your heart, look around you. Do you think that this is how you help people to be happy? You, you arrogant wretch! You're acting like a blind person whilst you're squeezing your own eyes shut and then just whingeing! I acted like an ignoramus, I extinguished the light, I craved the honour of 'she who can solve everything', only against the anger did I make no mistake. And the anger

The guilt I now felt towards myself was already the first step towards the only right solution.

I behaved just as ignorantly as Younes! I was just as blind as Younes, and so I was at least twice as wrong as Younes, for I had once been taught by Jesus himself.

Forgive me, Lord! There are essentially no differences between men and women. We make the same mistakes: You are in me, just as You are in Younes and Amana, no more, no less. We are all equals before You.

My very last thought was the only correct one: You are in me, not I am in me. I must follow You and not the other way round. The heart must speak, not the mind. My eyes were now allowed to close. I fell asleep, reassured.

Younes
What a miserable night! I was tossed about, but always ended up with feelings of revenge. I had not the slightest desire to speak to Mary Magdalene. I would make sure I got out of there in good time. It was all pointless. I ought to be able to find a bigger knife somewhere.

Mary Magdalene
I was up early. Younes was still asleep, whilst Amana and the children were already up. No matter how much Amana asked them to be quiet for Daddy, the children were laughing heartily and playing, and

all hell broke loose when Hannah joined in. The fact that Younes didn't wake up meant a lot and was not surprising. I used the time to consult with Rebecca and Samuel, and I suggested that we travel on to Ashdod the following day. They both agreed, and Samuel suggested we give Younes and Amana plenty of blankets and other household goods, as there were hardly any in Ein Karem and we could easily buy new things in Ashdod with the money we still had. I agreed wholeheartedly. Before I left, I asked Samuel if I could borrow his knife, and I asked Rebecca to bring Jesus's manger here, together with Elyana or Benjamin.

Amana

I went to see Mary Magdalene.

"Mary Magdalene, I'm worried about Younes. Would you be so kind as to speak to him? He's shutting me out, and it's already so hard not to feel dirty and filthy. The Jesus Prayer helps me wonderfully to forgive the perpetrators little by little, but Younes is my husband, not a perpetrator, and I'm afraid I'll start blaming him for everything because rejection from him might hurt me more than a… I don't want to say the word anymore. I'm sorry."

Mary Magdalene took hold of me and whispered softly: "I agreed with him yesterday that he would speak to me as soon as he wakes up, and I am praying for him in the same way

“Just as you pray for your rapists. Have faith; everything will be alright for your family.” I nodded and sobbed softly, for there was hope. “I love you, Mary Magdalene, and I hope I can become as good a mother as you are to us.” She gave me another kiss and I left. I returned and Younes had woken up… and I had to use all my powers of persuasion to get him to go to Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene

I was patient and used the time to recall my three-day training course back in Bethlehem, and one thing now stood out: “One day you will be given the difficult task of teaching this to other people.” And that difficulty apparently began, first and foremost, with myself. Jesus’ teaching revolved around trust: “Trust in my love is the sun, the light, for mankind; distrust in my love is darkness for mankind.”
Oh yes, after my struggle last night, I was now basking in the sun, literally and figuratively. I saw Younes walking towards me.

“Did you manage to sleep, Younes?”

“Actually, I don’t feel like coming round. It’s completely pointless. I’m sorry. It’s stronger than me. I want to kill at least one of those bastards. How can

I have children with Amana now? We were hoping for it. But that's not possible either."

"Why?"

"But don't you get it? Haven't you ever been with a man?

"I was just raped when I was thirteen, that's all."

"Then surely you should be able to understand us?" came the reply, bluntly angry, cold and sharp.

"May I ask a difficult question? Which one of you was actually raped? And who, then, is the primary victim? Do you understand your wife? Because her reaction is the complete opposite of yours. She is open to a whole new life, whilst you are seeking death: physical death for the perpetrators and spiritual death for yourself, into which you will drag your children and wife as well. You were baptised as a Christian and Christ is already dead for you, but not for your wife. I'm going to pour some tea. Arabic tea with honey – would you like some?"

He nodded awkwardly.

I saw him thinking, and his fierceness had already subsided a little. I waited until he had taken a sip. I continued: "What have you been through since you arrived here, Younes? Your meeting with Rebecca,

Samuel, Hannah and John, Benjamin with the donkey cart, the prospect of two little houses in Ein Karem, two donkeys as a gift, your wife is slowly recovering and can even smile sometimes, your children are getting their lives back on track and getting on well with Hannah—who do you think, Younes, who do you think gave you all that? All just coincidence? Wait, I can see them arriving now, look, there by the donkeys. Elyana has just spontaneously come to give your dear wife the manger of Jesus: look how your wife is beaming with gratitude!" It did move him, but it seemed against his will, as if he had imposed a strict ban on himself from feeling happy again.

"How much more do you need to get before you see it? Isn't it enough, Mr Never Enough?

You haven't lost your wife, Younes! She doesn't want to lose you, even though you're doing everything you can to lose her.

Here is the knife that lies between us. Use it and you'll lose everything: yourself, and that's the least of it, but also your children and your wife.

Do you want to turn your children into people who have also learnt to seek revenge, following your example? For many generations to come? If that is what you choose, here is the knife. Don't wait!

Do you want to do to your children what you have done to yourself? If so, here is the knife. You don't need to steal it again.

Look into a pool of water and you will see your friend Belial. He is waiting for you. He agrees with you completely. Go!

You must choose now: either you return to Beth-Shemesh tomorrow with this knife, or you leave for Ein Karem tomorrow without it.

With what you could learn now, you can in turn help people instead of killing them."

This was not anger on my part, nor despair; it was simply sincere concern for someone standing on the edge of a precipice, deciding whether or not to jump. And… I might also call it love.

I stood up and made to go and thank Elyana.

Younes suddenly threw his arms round my neck and sobbed: "Forgive me, forgive me, thank you, thank you for your patience." I opened my arms, equally overcome with tears of joy: "Come here, my son. I love you. Ask Amana about the Jesus Prayer; she'll teach it to you. What shall we do with the knife?"

"I'll hand it over to Samuel straight away, but what if…" He dared only whisper it quietly in my ear and hesitated for a moment: "It was a full moon… What if Amana is pregnant now? Will you hold it against me if I can't live with that? How are you supposed to live with that?" I let

let go of him for a moment and saw eyes that had lost their defiance, ready to accept any help or support.

“Look at Hannah, look at Rebecca, but look especially at Samuel: he is not Hannah’s real father. What you are seeing here as an example before your eyes has been given to you by God today because He knows how difficult it is for you. It is no coincidence, Younes, that we have met here in this place. One day, Amana and you will pass on this manger of Jesus, which you are now receiving from Jesus Himself, to parents who find themselves in a similarly difficult position. There is even a greater example for you than Samuel, and that is Joseph, who adopted Jesus, relying solely on the word of Zechariah, who was the chief rabbi in Jerusalem at the time and in whose little house you will be living. Old Joseph was laughed at and mocked because many, if not everyone, did not believe that Mary was the bearer of the Son of God. You know, my dear Younes, you are blessed, and what has saved you through this storm is your openness and honesty. Come, they are waiting for us!”

A moment later, Samuel accepted the knife with a smile of relief and gave Younes a hearty pat on the shoulder.

Amana noticed how relieved Younes was and that he could smile again, and she hurried towards him, clinging to him, kissing him until they were both in tears. She pulled him along

to the nursery, where Rebecca and all the children were standing in awe.

I stood watching the whole scene from a short distance away and thought back to the time when, as a young woman, I listened to Jesus' words on the banks of the little river in Bethlehem: "Be of one heart, and do not mix that pure heart with anything: no rules, no hierarchy, no anger, no desire, no darkness, no ignorance. Love one another, be one, regardless of gender or nature. One day you will be given the difficult task of teaching this to other people." Through Younes, I now learnt for myself what 'difficult' meant: to remain humble myself. And I could express but one wish: stay close to me, Lord, take me completely. Hold me fast and correct me sternly if I stray. So be it.

Rebecca

The next morning it was all hands on deck. Samuel and Younes helped each other harness Bruintje Bruin and then load the donkey cart to bursting with Oz, much to Younes's gratitude, and they kept just one spot free for Tobi. Az was given only a small load of provisions, as Amana would be sitting on it alongside Tirza. Younes would walk or sometimes take turns with Amana.
Hannah was allowed to sit on Bruintje Bruin's back all morning, and so she already felt like a big girl and the loss of Oz and Az weighed a little less heavily on her.

Our large cart suddenly gave us much more space now that we had given a significant portion of our household goods to Younes and Amana. Samuel was confident that once we reached Ashdod, we would want for nothing.

I saw Mary Magdalene looking very melancholic. “What do you think, Ma Ma?” She looked at me with a smile: “I wonder where Caspar is hanging about… but he’ll find me.”

“Is Mum in love?” I teased her. She laughed: “I’ve only ever been in love with one person, and that was Jesus.”

“And?”

“He loved all people. But he could be angry with the Pharisees out of love, just as you might be angry with Hannah out of deep concern and forgive her immediately. He saw the person of love in every failing human being. He would even forgive Belial if he asked for it. His parable of the prodigal son was just as much about the lost angel.”

Mary Magdalene

Elyana and Benjamin, with their little baby, came to see us off, and it felt strange to realise that this was a farewell ‘for good’. Hannah dismounted from Bruintje Bruin to say goodbye to Oz and Az one last time, and their quiet sadness seemed mutual. Rebecca had gently explained to her that Oz and Az couldn’t possibly come on the boat and that it was better for them to be in safe hands with Tobi and Tirza.

Tobi and Tirza promised her they would look after them well. I had been talking to Elyana the whole time, right up until the moment of the farewell. It was strange how, in just three days, we seemed to have grown so close. We left behind friends for life, and Hannah sat right at the back of the cart next to Rebecca, waving to her friends as they grew smaller and smaller, until, after the first bend, the farewell bid farewell to the farewell. She headed for Ein Karem, we headed for Beth-Sémes.

Samuel

We trudged on. The road was easily passable. The sun was our friend.
Strong Browny Brown walked in rhythm for hours along the flat road. There were plenty of water sources along the way. Hardly any oncoming traffic. And we were already almost halfway to Ashdod.
Towards evening, we saw Beth-Sémes appear in the distance.
Everything was going smoothly until I spotted a small group of people standing on the road in the distance. Something had clearly happened. As we drew nearer, I saw that they were all men, each holding a stick, and that a Pharisee in full regalia was standing amongst them. I quickly consulted with Mary Magdalene and asked her to let me do the talking, as I still look like a foreigner with my jet-black, frizzy hair. When the Pharisee came towards me, I began before he could even say a word

I could say in my mother tongue, Koine[82]Greek, a whole explanation, in which I made sure to repeat the word ‘Ashdod’ several times, and I made sure he didn’t understand a word of it. I deliberately mixed it with Celtic so that it became completely unintelligible, and I pretended not to understand him. I just kept answering ‘Ashdod’. The poor man gave up and let us continue on our way. The grim men with long beards stepped aside. It was frightening; even Hannah instinctively sensed the threat emanating from them. I didn’t dare think about what Younes and Amana had been through… In Massilia, my family would be safe.

We decided to set up camp by the roadside immediately after Beth-Sémes and, after all the stress, tried to enjoy the evening by the fire. The animals could get some extra rest that way. Everything went smoothly. In short: so far, everyone was happy.

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[82] In Jesus’ time, in the Greek colony of Massilia (now Marseille), people spoke Greek, more specifically a dialect of Koine (colloquial) Greek. This was the lingua franca of the Hellenistic world, to which Massilia also belonged. On the other hand, as an important trading city, other languages were also spoken in Massilia, such as Celtic, as the city was situated in an area inhabited by Celtic tribes.

The next morning we set off again for the penultimate stop: Thimnat.

Mary Magdalene

Samuel didn't step out of character, and for the rest of the day he spoke Koine Greek to us, which wasn't a bad way to prepare for what lay ahead in Massilia. And he was a good teacher! Hannah, in particular, enjoyed mimicking the sounds, and the harder we laughed at her pronunciation, the more she loved it. She even started teaching Johannes. The hours flew by and we reached Thimnat, where yet another crowd was waiting for us. We had already been practising certain phrases in Koine Greek amongst ourselves and joined in with Samuel's game. We no longer showed the slightest fear, remained polite, and they let us through without the slightest problem and rightly wished us a safe journey, but we pretended not to understand that properly. Nor had they asked us once whether or not we were Christians. Well, 'pretending' seemed understandable in this very precarious situation, and yet I now wondered whether this could also be labelled a lie, or deceit, or a lack of faith in Jesus. Ignorance? No, it was a matter of respect for our lives, and we ourselves were no threat to anyone's life. Darkness? There was not the slightest

Anger? Lust? We certainly didn't feel any better than them. Rage? Not at all; it was more like fear. In other words, it wasn't a lie, nor deceit, nor a lack of faith. At the same time, I found it hard to imagine how Paul could ever have been such a fierce leader of such a gang. The good thing was that none of us had to lie, thanks to Samuel: we were apparently going to Ashdod, and afterwards we could all laugh about how cleverly he'd managed to pull it off. We carried on until night fell. We were exhausted. Bruintje Bruin was pampered by Hannah. Samuel pampered Hannah. Rebecca pampered Samuel and her breast pampered Johannes. And I was pampered by my memories of my conversations with Jesus. We all fell asleep in no time.

The next day we would reach Ashdod.

ASHDOD

Mary Magdalene

We approached Ashdod in the afternoon and, once again, we were met by a group of men armed with sticks and clubs. In this port town, Koine Greek was not unknown, and Samuel was able to explain to them perfectly clearly that he was the son of Joachim of Massilia, whose ships had been a household name throughout Ashdod for years, and whilst Samuel was giving his explanation, a man with a goatee approached me cautiously. As he traced the sign of the cross on the floor of the cart with his finger, he whispered: “Are you not Mary Magdalene?” I nodded and he nodded respectfully in return, turned round and began to shout loudly that we might pass. And suppose he had asked me if I was Mary Magdalene and hadn’t made the sign of the cross, I am now certain I would have given the same answer. I would have revealed myself.
A little less than an hour later, we reached the harbour.

Samuel
Caleb had apparently already been informed, for he was waiting for us nervously. It was a warm and heartfelt welcome. The first thing he called out from afar was: “There’s a boat ready!” He stroked his horse and clambered somewhat awkwardly onto the cart after he had welcomed each of us personally, and showed us the way

Samuel. I could still hear Samuel asking, “Still at the same quay, Caleb?” “No, a bit further on because I didn’t know when you’d arrive. The captain knows you and you know him, but I’m not telling you who it is…” and he gave me an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

A moment later, I spotted the boat and my love for the sea came flooding back. I stopped Bruintje Bruin, couldn’t contain myself, and eagerly jumped aboard to meet the captain. I knocked on the captain’s cabin door and it opened. I froze: Boaz! It was mutual: neither of us moved a muscle and we stared at each other motionless. His hatred was written all over his face: the corners of his mouth turned down, piercing eyes, emotionless, not a muscle twitching. Did we still exist for one another? Caleb had warned me. Boaz spoke curtly and monotonously: “Who are you, sir? Do we know each other? We’re setting sail tomorrow. Get everything ready.” And he slammed the door in my face. I returned to shore and Caleb looked at me with great concern and whispered to me: “He won’t be leaving tomorrow: a storm is coming. He just wants to tease you. He was furious because I made him wait for you. Just as he was about to leave Sidon, he happened to learn from the captain of another ship belonging to your father, which had just docked, that his little son is very ill. And now with bad weather on the way, well, it’s understandable, of course, but still, you could have spoken instead of

snapping at someone. But it'll be all right, Samuel." Caleb looked at me with concern: "Keep your cool, my boy, and everything will be fine." Mary Magdalene had heard everything, and Caleb asked her: "Would it be possible for you to address our Christian community this evening? It's not certain what Boaz will decide tomorrow." Mary Magdalene nodded in agreement.

Caleb helped me load our luggage onto the ship, and a little later Hannah said goodbye to Bruintje Bruin. I showed the women, young and old, round the boat, and we passed the captain's cabin. With a nervous heart, I knocked to introduce them to my brother. He opened the door and immediately sat back down at his table without even looking up. "Brother, I'd like to introduce you to my family: Mary Magdalene, mother of Rebecca and grandmother of Hannah and John. We would like to thank you in advance for allowing us to travel with you. We are sorry to hear that your little son is apparently ill, and whatever the case may be, we shall depart at your command." There was silence; we seemed to have vanished, and even cheerful Hannah fell silent and looked fearfully at this greying man who bore only a slight resemblance to me.

My brother barely looked up and remained silent, and after a while we slipped away one by one. I stayed, the last to leave: "I'm sorry once again, brother, and I can explain everything to you; I've made mistakes, I was rightly, or no, often a good-for-nothing in your eyes. But since I've been on my own

“I’ve managed to do some good things too, thanks to your example. I hope and pray that everything will be alright with your little boy. I hope we can talk soon. In the meantime, I wish you a good night’s sleep.” And I didn’t wait for a reply; I closed the door gently.

Mary Magdalene

Caleb was to come and fetch me as soon as the sun had set and it was less dangerous to hold gatherings amongst Christians.
I was, however, completely thrown off balance by Samuel's brother and found it incredibly difficult not to slap him round the ears. Anger was certainly not the right frame of mind in which to talk about the love of Jesus afterwards. It was Samuel who calmed me down by talking about his past mistakes, for which his older brother had often had to pay the price and take the blame because Boaz had, so to speak, not kept a close enough eye on his youngest brother. My anger gave way to understanding and even respect, allowing calm and peace to take hold of me once more.

Caleb came to pick up Rebecca and me; Samuel would look after the children. The meeting was held in a different place each time, and the location would only be revealed one day in advance. The fear was great, but the determination was greater.

We arrived. The turnout surprised me: people of all ages, from babies at their mothers' breasts to elderly people who could barely walk, and everyone stared at me as if I myself were a Jesus . My

expectations placed on me were high. I began: “Welcome. Expect nothing from me, expect only what I learnt from Jesus. I will try to act more as an interpreter of Jesus than as a speaker.” I briefly recounted my life story, moving quickly on to my three days’ training in Nazareth and concluding with my encounter with Jesus after his death. It seemed as though even the babies were listening. Before opening the floor for questions, I concluded by honouring Adina and drawing a parallel with Saul, who became Paul, and who was still weighed down by his bloody past, and I called on everyone to forgive.

A woman stood up to continue leading the meeting: “Would everyone with a question for Mary Magdalene please stand up?”

Six people stood up. The rule was that the eldest among them was allowed to ask his or her question first. Once the question had been asked, the other questioners could sit down and stand up again after the answer, at which point the eldest among them could ask his or her question. It was a simple system that ran smoothly and caused no annoyance. It had the advantage that some questioners had already received the answer after the previous questioner’s question had been answered, which also allowed the speaker to better gauge how long or how deeply he could answer questions from others that had not yet been addressed.

The eldest questioner was a man: “You spoke of the four opposing forces: anger, desire, darkness and ignorance. But what we have seen with Adina arouses fear in us. Is fear not also such an opposing force?” And the man sat down.

“You are touching on a complex subject. Fear teaches us caution for the good, but also breeds cruelty for the worse. It is a story with two sides. On the one hand, fear is negatively associated with darkness and ignorance. On the other hand, fear can offer positive help in overcoming anger and desire.

Circumstances determine which side. If you are in doubt, speak to Jesus within yourself: “Please, Lord, correct me if I am wrong.” It neutralises the fear of making the wrong choice. His name alone reassures you and frees you from the fear of failure, and leads much more often and more easily to the right choice. Or pray as follows: “Keep me in your wounds[83] , Lord, where no devil dares to approach you.”

The second questioner was an elderly woman: “You say that Jesus spoke of Him being within us. I find that hard to imagine. Who am I then?”

“He is within us, but does not impose Himself. We are born into freedom, and He humbles Himself within each of us. We

[83] The Wisdom of the Present Pope Leo IV

no longer need to seek Him; He always answers, often through chance occurrences or through feelings of comfort or love from your fellow human being, or your child, or your spouse, or your friend, or as in this group today. Or a dove, for example: I once stood with my donkey at what would turn out to be a crucial crossroads in my life, and I literally did not know which of three paths to take to reach Ein Karem: a dove alighted, motionless and fearlessly looking at me, and I thought: Lord, show me the way. I am lost. The dove flew up and something told me to follow her, and that is how I reached Ein Karem. Is this a miracle? No, you cannot know this, but neither can you know that it is not a miracle or a gift from Him for your trust, in which humility is the power behind coincidence. Mary still lives according to such evidence, whilst at first I thought it was pure coincidence to believe in it. I was present at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan and a dove descended upon his shoulder. Do you know this story? Is it coincidence? We know better now. Mary taught me how to deal with 'coincidence': she summed it up as follows: 'Do not pass it on as a miracle, but do not deny it either. Keep it quietly and gratefully hidden within yourself. If you shout it from the rooftops, you undermine this gift by thinking you deserved it and you lose more than you gained, but worse still is when you deny this precious gift, for that is not only a pity, but

‘…and pride, as if you know better than the generous giver[84].’

To return now to your question: who am I, then? The answer is: I am not ‘I’ but I am ‘we’: I and He who is in me, we are we.”

I excused myself briefly to go outside. So much attention made me feel somewhat anxious. I had never given a talk before and I was very afraid that the talk would make me proud instead of teaching me humility. I needed a moment to speak to Jesus in my heart: “Jesus, please stop me if I say the wrong things or if my pride takes hold.” I felt like ‘we’ again and went back inside, reassured.

The third questioner was a middle-aged woman: “My husband and I sometimes struggle with the idea of equality between men and women. I mean: he finds it particularly difficult to adapt to this. And for me, it’s difficult to behave that way, because I never saw it like that with my parents and our whole society is structured as if a woman possesses no intelligence and must simply listen to the man. I have a lovely husband, but it sometimes seems as though we lack unity

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[84] Wisdom from the Orthodox Church: Archimandrite Sophrony: “Don’t accept, don’t ignore.”

“more forms by introducing the change of equality.”

It was a courageous and very pertinent question, and I, having never lived with a man, was perhaps even more impressed by her courage in raising this in a room where many married couples were present.

“As for you and your husband: you can only learn equality by falling together and rising again together in love for one another, by making mistakes together and correcting them together: that is what will bind you even more closely than before. It’s a struggle at first, I can well imagine, but it will only succeed if you are both willing to restore the relationship of the first man and woman in Eden. As for society: the old spirit must be replaced with a new spirit. The proof is here tonight: men and women are equal, for I am delighted to note that of the six questioners who have stood up, three are women and three are men. And that is how it should be in everything: equality between men and women. Turning the old into the new requires trial and error, requires searching and feeling our way, and building mutual trust that men and women wish the best for one another. That is my wish for you.” Many couples secretly sought each other’s hands, some without hesitation, some rather shyly, some even raising each other’s hands high in the air.

The fourth person to ask a question was a middle-aged man: “Ever since one of our own, Adina, was stoned to death, there has been a great deal of fear amongst us: who will be next? We have heard that Christian women have been raped in some towns. You are about to flee, but we cannot do so. I do not blame you, but we have whole families to support here and running away is not an option. Yet it seems easy for you to talk about Jesus with the certainty that you can leave this religious war behind.” I was glad of this question, as it gave me the chance to explain my plan: “I’m glad I can and may answer this. Rebecca is my adopted daughter and is the wife of Samuel, originally from Massilia, a city founded by the Greeks with Celtic roots. Together they have two children, Hannah and John. No one in Massilia has ever heard of Jesus, and the people know only Greek, Celtic and, to a lesser extent, Roman gods. In the next few days, we will set off for Massilia on a boat belonging to Samuel’s father. They speak a Greek dialect there, peppered with Celtic words. None of this is a coincidence; it is my duty to speak there about our Saviour. I do not know how I will be received. I will undoubtedly speak there about Christ just as I do here. Do I feel fear? Yes, I feel fear, but my trust and faith in Jesus are greater than my fear. I ask you to pray for me just as I will remember you.” The

The questioner apologised even though there was no need to, and I thanked him because it allowed me to clarify things for everyone present.

The fifth questioner was a courageous young woman, and her question concerned my infatuation with Jesus: “I am currently very much in love with a boy, but it strikes me from your story that infatuation isn’t really to be trusted; does that still have anything to do with true love? Were you able to put that aside so easily and simply love Jesus without thinking about him day and night?”

“It is true that I fell deeply in love with Him, and on the one hand that was difficult for me when He replied: ‘I love all people’, but on the other hand this was the only right and best answer that could put my infatuation into perspective. Infatuation is something that does not last, as many people here know, but is a stepping stone to a deeper and more mature, yet at the same time more settled, love. It would be lovely if we could all, women as well as men, fall in love with Jesus and then become part of His divine love, built on rock and not on sand. Infatuation is an indispensable part of the world and something that Belial would most like to destroy. Jesus himself bore both natures within him: the human nature through Mary and the divine nature through the Father. And what I imagine, but in this speak I only for myself, is that

infatuation comes closer to divine love than human love. In this, we differ completely from Him.

For us humans, infatuation is focused on one person; for Him, 'infatuation' – if you can still call it that – is focused on all people. This statement of mine is not correct, but neither is it entirely incorrect. "I love all people." Who among us here can say this?

There are rumours going round that we have had sexual relations, but I can testify that He showed not the slightest sexual inclination: "I love all people." His mission is not to father children, but to make us all children of His Father. May I ask the married couples if they are still as much in love as they were in their early years? I see many couples now chuckling and shaking their heads, yet at the same time seeking each other's hand… yes, that is love. Being in love is an important starting point and requires two free people to mature together over time, through trial and error."

Suddenly there was a sense of rivalry in the large room, and it turned into a giggly competition to see who loved their partner the most.

I scanned the room for the sixth questioner: a young man with a question that was remarkably perceptive for his age. He stood up and everyone fell silent: "You said that Jesus insisted on not making rules and not establishing a hierarchy. But I don't quite understand this… 'no rule'

Isn't that a rule as well? 'No hierarchy' seems to me to be a rule in itself, doesn't it?"

I was delighted and, given his young age, surprised that a young man should make such an important observation; fortunately, I wasn't caught off guard, as I had already given the matter a great deal of thought myself: "Jesus means that He is within us and that His relationship with every person is a unique one to which no external, general rules can be applied. After all, every person is unique: each of us is already so different physically, but each also experiences a unique life journey through good and bad, in easy and difficult circumstances. It is therefore impossible to draw up spiritual rules that apply to all people and impose things that are at odds with the nature of your life journey. Such rules sometimes, not to say often, do more harm than good. Rules stifle spontaneity. He is within us, and our conversations with Him within us are unique; we must learn to trust in that. Each of us learns and feels how we can live lovingly after we overcome the four great opposing forces—darkness, desire, anger and ignorance—day by day. Every person is and remains unique, just as our relationship with Him remains unique. Every person receives unique help from Him in the form of intuition or so-called coincidences, which I mentioned earlier, or even explicit events, on the absolute condition that we make love for our fellow human beings our central goal. And we can only muster love for our fellow human beings

if we also see ourselves as a gift from Him who is within us. A hierarchical structure with general rules and obligations imposed from above, however well-intentioned, tends to make this process counterproductive and turns people, willingly or unwillingly, into cogs in the machine and subjects. A hierarchical structure invariably becomes hopelessly entangled in its own web and leads to insurmountable division, which in turn prompts even more rules. And that is precisely what He does not want: He wants to meet, help and embrace us as spontaneous, unique individuals. He does not want His children to be slaves to a structure, but children of one Father, the Father. The amalgam of the many facets of love within each of us is just as diverse as the amalgam of the evil forces within us, and is different for every one of us. And for that, He must be able to dwell WITHIN each of us and guide us, and not from outside us. But we must let Him in. This is what I wish for all of you." I felt I had to stop, but I could have carried on like that. It had gone quiet. Many eyes were glistening. I took the time to look at the people one by one; many discreetly made the sign of the cross, others bowed their heads, yet others looked up ecstatically, some shed a tear of emotion, others sought my eyes too, and I returned their gaze. It remained silent. I nodded to the young man, my eyes asking if this answer was sufficient. He nodded in agreement and sat down.

I concluded the evening: “Speak to Him within yourself, for He is within each of you. He always answers. Even silence can be an answer if He feels that silence can help you to encounter Him more easily. Do not feel compelled, but invited. Be wary of the four counterforces in sheep’s clothing, but love Jesus. Everyone is free to remember Adina and all the other martyrs, just as everyone is free to pray for our enemies, for they know not what they do. Only love shows the right way.”

Caleb was deeply moved and grateful. Rebecca came quietly up to me and whispered in my ear: “My Ma Ma.”

It remained very quiet on Caleb’s cart on the way to the boat.

Samuel

I couldn't get enough of Rebecca's account of Mary Magdalene's lecture, and then it was my turn to tell her if I'd heard any news about my brother's plans. Yes, I'd gone for a little evening stroll with Hannah along the quay as the sun was setting whilst Johannes slept, and bumped into a local fisherman who told me that Boaz had had a row with his only remaining helmsman, who'd had enough of sailing under him and told him that Boaz was furious because he couldn't set sail straight away due to my arrival, as his little son might die. In other words, Boaz needed me in order to be able to leave, which apparently made him doubly furious out of a sense of powerlessness. That fisherman added that a storm was clearly on the way and that he certainly wouldn't be setting sail tomorrow. I immediately returned to the boat and asked Boaz to discuss the matter. He snapped that he would rather perish with his entire family to meet his young son in the afterlife than wait here helplessly to give my family a better chance of survival. "I'm leaving tomorrow, alone or not: I'm leaving! I've wasted enough time because of you!"

Rebecca turned pale with fear when I told her, and went to see if Mary Magdalene had finished putting the children to bed. A moment later, I was sitting in private

with both women. When I repeated everything once more, Mary Magdalene stood up and said: “Tomorrow at first light I shall rise and speak with Boaz. Leave us alone: in the meantime, pay a visit to Caleb with the little ones; that will please him. Stay calm and love your brother. I am going to sleep now.”

Mary Magdalene
It had been an incredibly tough day, from morning till night. This morning, when we first met, I could have given Boaz a slap in the face, yet now I was already starting to think quite differently, given all that the man had had to endure and still was enduring. It’s never wise to judge too quickly. I reflected on my inner struggles, for simply thinking them through often helps me overcome them. With one exception today: I was still somewhat in the dark about Boaz’s background, but knowing that you don’t know something is the only way to seek the answer. Oh yes, Lord, you are within me. I don’t need a stone temple to meet or find you. My body is your temple, completely pure from the moment of my birth, but since then I have had to sweep it every day to drive away all opposing forces. And I fell asleep with a busy broom in my mind.

Boaz
Life is a living hell. Everything is turning against me. What have I done to you, God who doesn’t even exist? Take me instead of my little boy: he’s not to blame. Take me! It’s

not fair: my brother, the eternal good-for-nothing, the freeloader, the lucky bloke who gets everything without lifting a finger, a beautiful and lovely wife: how does he do it? With smooth talk, that's how I've known him all my life: he can sell himself to anyone, but taking responsibility – that's for someone else. And now my little boy, only three years old and apparently dying, and no one knows of what, and here I am, tied to the quay wall with a mooring rope. Storm or no storm, I'll break free; I want to be with my wife and child.

Mary Magdalene

The storm had already made its presence felt clearly last night: the waves in the sheltered harbour grew ever higher and crashed rhythmically against the wooden hull with a great clamour, like a war drum.
I knocked on the captain's cabin door in the morning. I had resolved not to bring up Jesus and to speak of him only if he asked about it himself. I knocked again and called his name: "Boaz?" He opened the door.

"I'm worried about you."

"I'm not a child. You'd do better to worry about that big child walking around up here on deck."

"I've heard that you want to set sail whilst the cumulus clouds are rushing in from the south-west and we have to sail south-west towards Massilia."

“We’re being pushed backwards instead of forwards. If we don’t sink… Staying put is the only way not to waste any more time, isn’t it?”

“I don’t care. My son has already died because of you, and I’ll meet him up there. You’re free to leave the boat whenever you like.”

I remained silent.

Was this jealousy, crude and boorish, surly, stubborn, rude? It seemed that way, but it wasn’t. No, it was helplessness.

I stayed put; this man needed help and had to be protected from himself. Deep down, he hoped someone could save him, for he had already given up on himself. If I were to get up now, it would be the end of the road for him, with no turning back. I thought of his wife, his child. It could go on for days: I would stay put. Simply being there was the only remedy that might still help. I remained silent, and this silence was the only thing that could bring peace to his distraught mind. Hunger, thirst, sleep – they would pass me by; I was receiving help from above. It became a mental battle: one of us had to break, and it may sound arrogant to say that I knew who would win, and it was neither him nor me, but the power of Jesus within me.

Hours passed, the storm raged like mad above our heads, and we could hear Samuel and Rebecca on deck

Running back and forth and frantically calling out to each other to bring more ropes, we heard Rebecca shouting at Hannah to stay below deck. A little later, we heard Hannah shouting at Rebecca that something was wrong with Johannes. We heard Hannah crying hysterically. All I did was look Boaz in the eyes, not accusingly, for I was no less to blame, but I had faith. I saw Boaz's grim face gradually change from sullen to concerned at Hannah's cries: the father in him awoke and he leapt up to go and help. Samuel was struggling with a loose mainsail; Rebecca tried to help but dared not let go, both so as not to lose Samuel and to protect the sail from tearing, for then the departure would certainly be impossible. Boaz rushed over to Rebecca so she could assist Hannah. Meanwhile, I found Johannes on the wooden floor: his basket had been overturned and he lay lifeless on the ground with a nasty open wound on his head. Hannah stamped her feet in helplessness in the pool of blood. Rebecca looked at me whilst trying to calm Hannah: "Is he dead?" I shook my head: "He's unconscious, but he has a head wound. I'll stay here with Hannah and Johannes. Don't say anything to Samuel for now; he needs to be able to concentrate or he'll cause accidents." The boat slammed against the quay wall once more with a thud, causing everything to rattle. Caleb, primarily concerned for the children, appeared out of nowhere with a horse and cart in the

The rain was lashing down when he came to fetch us. I took my first-aid kit with me. Samuel didn't even get a chance to say a word; another sail on the aft deck had also come loose and was starting to tear. A large tear meant days of delay. Boaz didn't dare look at us. The two brothers stayed behind. Rebecca clung to Johannes, pale with fear of the worst. Hannah hid herself in my heavy, soaked cloak. "Help us, Jesus! Whatever You do, Lord, I have faith. I still want to become the sea, even though I do not know all its powers or its reasons, but I trust in You."

Mary Magdalene

The next day, the storm had subsided. Johannes was still breathing; that was all that could be said. It looked like a deep sleep. But without food? How long could a baby possibly last like that? I had wrapped his little head, with the open wound, in the same Lazarus bandages I'd used on Hannah, but I wasn't reassured; I'd expected at least a small sign of life. His pupils still reacted to light, but that was all. Rebecca didn't leave him alone for a second, however exhausted she was. She lay with Hannah on Adina's bed, with Johannes between them. It was admirable that she didn't blame Boaz, but the storm, even though she knew better. Caleb had gone to the boat to fetch Samuel. What if Johannes made it through? Would he be left with any lasting effects? And worse still, what if Johannes died? We had to wait and see how Samuel would react. Whatever the outcome, I could not possibly blame God and continued to trust in a happy ending, whatever 'happy' might mean.

Caleb

What a blow for Rebecca and Samuel! I no longer believe Johannes will survive this: it is taking him too long to open his eyes. He has long since passed the point of hunger and is seeking his way to heaven, where the heavenly light

is still a little while away. May Adina be waiting for him and welcome Johannes with her heart of gold, to be a comfort to Rebecca, Samuel and Hannah. The boat came into view and I saw the two men sitting on the foredeck. I feared that yesterday's storm was nothing compared to what I now had to tell them. They knew something had happened, but didn't know what. At first glance, they didn't seem to be arguing with each other. Samuel called out from a distance: "Is everything alright?" I didn't answer straight away; after all, I had no news to shout from the rooftops. I drew closer and the fear in Samuel's eyes made him speak more softly: "Tell me everything's alright. Is it something to do with the children?" I had to grit my teeth: "Yes, it's not good; Johannes's basket fell during the storm. He's still unconscious and has a large wound on his head, and he's lost a lot of blood. He's not eating, not drinking, won't wake up, looks deathly pale. I'm sorry to have to tell you this." I saw Boaz standing behind Samuel, who immediately disappeared from view. I climbed aboard as quickly as I could and Samuel fled into my arms. "Come on, lad, Rebecca and Hannah need you badly right now." Boaz was nowhere to be seen.

The journey home was one of those memories I would never forget: sitting next to the old man was a young man possessing a wisdom and maturity that the old man had never attained at that age, serene and without the slightest hint of resentment towards his brother. Samuel remained silent, staring straight ahead. We could already see Mary Magdalene from a distance

came out to meet us. She gestured, ‘Come quickly!’ and a moment later we were all standing by Johannes’s deathbed. Tears streamed down Samuel’s face, and he picked up his little son, looked up and murmured: “We are all children of the King. Were You so close all this time, Lord? You could have taken me, but Your will be done. Johannes is in good hands.” He kissed Johannes’s forehead gently. Then he placed Johannes back in the arms of Rebecca and Hannah and sat down beside them on Adina’s bed. Time and space ceased to exist, giving absolute priority to their love for one another and their willingness to bear each other’s pain. I recognised that pain from not so long ago. For the first time since Adina’s death, I sat down in her chair in the farthest corner of her room and asked her to look after little Johannes. The thought comforted me. Mary Magdalene came to take a look and gestured to me. This old man quietly left the room: “Caleb, we must not forget Boaz.” And a little while later, we set off together for the boat.

Mary Magdalene

Boaz was busy repairing the tear in the stern sail. He hadn’t noticed us; it seemed as though he had a thousand things on his mind and his eyes couldn’t find the mental space to look any wider than a needle through a tear. I went over to him: “Boaz, can I have a word with you? It’s

“It’s important.” He startled, nodded in agreement and immediately dropped everything, as if he already sensed why I’d come. A moment later, we were sitting on the bench on the foredeck: “Bad news, Johannes has died.” He froze and buried his face in his hands as if ashamed. He looked away from me towards the vast sea and shook his head: “It’s my fault.” He still didn’t dare look at me. I waited. He was wrestling with himself, shaking his head constantly as if to get something out, and stammered: “My son should have died, not Samuel’s son. I deserve that, not him. I can’t even cry for his little boy. I don’t feel human anymore, and yet I’m behaving as if I’m the only father on earth. Look at me!” He turned towards me. “I can’t cry!” And the dam burst instantly. He fell to his knees and crawled towards me, sobbing, burying his face in my lap: “God who does not exist, what have I done? And if You do exist, why did You not take my son? How am I supposed to live with this?” He still did not dare to show his face, and quietly I took his head in my hands so that I could look at him.

“Nothing is lost, Boaz. Your tears are diamonds; cherish them, and share them with your brother, Rebecca and Hannah. Your brother is not hateful at all. On the contrary, he realises that he has wronged you too. Honour John’s death by putting your own self-love to rest. Let go. Do not harbour self-reproach when, upon your arrival in Massilia, you take your own little son alive into your arms. Samuel and Rebecca will

grant you that. Have faith in the good. Come with us; Caleb will take you to Samuel and Rebecca; they need your support and hold nothing against you."

The sea's final throes lapped against the ship's side and had given birth to a child of God by taking another child. I suddenly remembered that, in his cabin at the very end of our pointless conversation, I had prayed to myself: "Whatever You do, Lord, I have faith. I still want to become the sea, even though I do not know all its powers or its why, but I retain my faith." And now I understand this better myself: trust does not by definition imply a promise that everything must go smoothly, for it is not uncommon for something good to emerge from something that was unforeseeable and that could not have been resolved in any other way than with the saddest of tears.

I helped Boaz to his feet and he followed us with slow steps.

Boaz

I was too shy to look at Caleb, even though he didn't pass the slightest judgement through his facial expressions or behaviour.
I was afraid, despite Mary Magdalene's kind words, of having to look Rebecca and Samuel in the eye. Afraid of seeing little Johannes dead after I had refused to see him alive when I was with Rebecca

brutally rejected her and her child. Fear of an angry glare or of hearing Hannah's cries. I had no story left, and yet I felt once more like a human being with feelings I had lost long ago. I looked back on my life and saw only a trail of destruction involving my father, my wife and my brothers. I faced the most difficult task of my life so far: facing Samuel and Rebecca. If I could see how their God could make them forgiving, then that God must also be able to forgive me, and this God was most certainly a God of love and more than worth following. But I couldn't believe it yet. I had to experience it first, for I was still half-blind. Caleb showed me the way to the door of Adina's room. I heard Hannah weeping. I heard Rebecca weeping. I stood at the door, hoping the weeping would stop for a moment before I went in. Meanwhile, I searched for words; the weeping seemed to subside; I took the door-knob in my hand, but someone beat me to it. Face to face with Samuel. He noticed my hesitation, but embraced me brotherly and whispered to me: "We are each half responsible, brother. I ask your forgiveness for my part." "And I ask your forgiveness for my part." And I pulled him close to me, whilst once again I could not hold back my tears. He loosened his grip and led me to Rebecca, and Rebecca too stood up to embrace me: "Welcome, Boaz, to pay tribute to the

‘Little Johannes, his life has not been in vain if two brothers are reunited because of it. Thank you for that; it is a great comfort.’ For Hannah, it was simple: she didn’t let go of her little brother’s hand. I stroked her hair for a moment, and that was enough for her. It was all very confronting; it could just as easily have been that my wife was sitting at our little boy’s deathbed at that very moment. A few years later, after I had got to know Mary Magdalene better and had often spoken with her about the opposing forces, it became clear to me what had driven me when anger had taken hold of me, and how things could have been different, and how little Johannes might still have been alive. It was very noble of Samuel to want to take a large part of the blame upon himself, but this was unjustified. I am eternally grateful to Samuel. My little son did not die and is still alive. My son and Samuel have since become close friends, and that will soothe my wound until the day I die. Little Johannes, that little boy, had reunited us both and helped me to survive from then on as a loving person.

Samuel

Two days later we were able to set sail, and the first thing we had to do was entrust Johannes to the sea. Mary Magdalene had withdrawn to her cabin to prepare herself. Not that she wouldn’t let anyone in—on the contrary, everyone was welcome—but everyone sensed that she preferred to be alone. Although

Rebecca kept telling me, after visiting her briefly, that she wasn't alone, and Rebecca knew her Ma Ma better than anyone. A birth brings parents close together; the death of your child makes your bond even stronger[85] .

Mary Magdalene

It had touched me deeply when Samuel, who had never met Jesus in person, held his little son and said to Jesus: "Were you always this close, Lord? We are all children of the King." In my experience, this proved once again that we are all children of the King and that He cannot be any closer to us than He already is. But there was much more to be gleaned from it.

I felt the need to be alone for a moment at the foot of this waterfall before I could continue my journey as a raindrop. I regularly burned some of Caspar's incense in a small pot; I looked for my old purple scarf and, by chance, found the piece of papyrus scroll from The Child of the King containing the passage in which the king's child died and left his soul in a wooden box. And there I sat, waiting within myself, with the basket containing little Johannes beside me, the little prince who died. And I felt like the gatekeeper who would soon entrust the child to the sea. The sea for which I myself longed so

[85] Unfortunately, this is not possible for every couple and, on the contrary, is sometimes the cause of a separation.

strive for. And yet I felt that I was missing something much bigger in the story.

It took time. Germination takes time, and I took my time. These were the first signs of a volcano about to erupt.

At that moment, I was keenly aware of the great privilege I had enjoyed in knowing Jesus intimately from childhood to adulthood, which makes it easier for me to call upon Him than for anyone who has not been able to meet Him as a human being. I thought I was among the 'chosen ones' and that millions of people, unlike Mary, John, his stepbrother and myself, for example, would never be able to feel or believe what we had experienced first-hand. And yet… and yet Samuel, who had never seen Jesus in the flesh, was apparently able to perceive this so intensely: "Were you always so close, Lord?" without ever having personally experienced anything like my intimate encounters with Jesus!!! This was a revelation in itself that blew me away, which took me completely by surprise and at the same time made me immensely happy and gave me the certainty that all the people who believe in him after Jesus' death could become the old gatekeeper from generation to generation. It offered an eternal perspective following Jesus' coming. Just as his spirit would continue to dwell and be carried through a chain of gatekeepers.

Gatekeepers who wait, anticipate, encounter and bear witness like beacons at sea.

And there I sat, holding the long, half-purple scarf in my hand, and only now did I realise what I would use it for. It was that very scarf which Jesus had held at the table in Nazareth with Mary, John, Mary and me, like a chain, and into which I would now wrap little John for his journey across the sea. Rebecca, who had seen Jesus in the Jordan, came to see me for a moment; I told her about the scarf and asked if she could agree to my plan: “Of course, Ma Ma, John is a child of the King. Samuel will certainly approve of this.” A little later, Samuel came to ask me to also give the original papyrus scrolls of the Child of the King to little John as a tribute to his life. A little later, Hannah also brought a heart-shaped shell she had found on the beach, and finally, Boaz made a little box with John’s name carved into it. But what moved me most of all was Caleb, who came round with an old little doll of Adina’s to keep little Johannes company on his journey. Rebecca threw her arms round Caleb’s neck and the two of them comforted each other over their loss.

We were due to leave two days later, just before midday.

We set off and, to our surprise, a large group of people led by Caleb came to see us off serenely

Waving them off and offering encouragement. I immediately recognised the people asking the questions among them, and yes, it was heartening to have their support. The chance of my returning was virtually non-existent. All my attention was now focused on Rebecca: she was still holding up bravely, but now that the sea breeze was set to pick up, the reeds would have a hard time of it. I spoke from experience as an orphan. No human being can be replaced by another.

And so it came to pass: once we could no longer see the coast, we entrusted Johannes to the good care of the sea.

It was for the best.

Years passed. It helped Mary Magdalene that Samuel came from an important family in Massilia. After years of living and speaking consistently, she found she needed to speak less and less herself. After all, her behaviour and example said it all. Rebecca and Samuel also became the old gatekeepers in the story of the King's Child, and later Hannah would succeed them, just as many old gatekeepers would rise up all over the world.

What Mary Magdalene had built up in Massilia [86]was incredible, and the whole of Massilia knew and praised her for setting such an example. Many stories were circulating, and people admired her simplicity and wisdom. Over the past year, Rebecca had been worried about Ma Ma and, towards the end of her life, had brought her out of her cave to look after her in her own home, alongside Samuel and the children.

One morning, Mary Magdalene did not get out of bed. Rebecca was very worried.

"Ma Ma, are you going to die?"

[86] She spent years in a cave in Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume in southern France, 65 kilometres from Marseille. In the crypt of the basilica in Vézelay there is still a small reliquary whose contents are attributed to Mary Magdalene.

“I can’t die yet, because I’m expecting someone. Would you mind fetching my purple sash for me?”

Rebecca found the sash and helped her wrap it around her neck. “Samuel just told me you have an important visitor. May I let him in?”

“Of course, darling, and stay with us.”

A moment later, Caspar entered, dressed as the King of Arabia of yesteryear.

“At last we meet again, my dear Caspar. You’re a bit older than me, but how do you manage to look so young?”

“Because on that wonderful night, with you in my arms on my camel, I became bound to you forever, and I still love you. I’ve brought a little gift with me; I’ll open it myself – it’s not really a surprise, look… a little pouch of incense, the very same incense I gave to the baby Jesus back then, which I’ve kept so I could give it to you. Let me help you with your sash. But in the meantime, tell me a little about your life; I hear from many people that you do so much good for them.”

Mary Magdalene didn’t have to think long and looked at him with sparkling eyes.

“I do nothing myself, dear friend; I am acted upon, just as I was welcomed

and was loved in his divine cocoon,

from which I was allowed to slowly

emerge,

and then, under my own steam, flitting up and

down like a purple butterfly,

to soar into his universe of love.

We are all children of God, dear Caspar, and His

throne is never empty again.

How wonderful to be able to die like this with you by my side, dear friend. To die in order to live forever. Light the incense and give me a kiss, will you?"

Caspar lit the incense, waited a moment until a faintly spicy and sweet scent filled the room, and gently kissed her.

At the same moment, a

purple[87] butterfly fluttered into the room. Caspar held out his hand and the butterfly landed gently in his palm.

He stood up, made his way carefully to the open window and held his hand high into the open air.

"Fly, my love!"

He watched her for a long time until she disappeared

from view, though never from his heart.

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[87] The colour purple symbolises trusting your intuition. Einstein said: "The intuitive mind is a gift and the rational mind is its servant." The word 'gift' truly refers to a 'present', just as the intuitive Mary Magdalene was a gift to humanity.