

SECOND THURSDAY (morning)

CHAPTER 25: THE ROMAN CAVE

"When [the Roman Emperor] Nero was informed [of the Jewish Revolt] ... he was deliberating ... who might ... punish the Jews ... and ... prevent the same distemper from seizing upon the neighboring nations also. He found no one but Vespasian equal to the task...." (Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, Book 3, Chapter 1)

I was awakened by Shai crouching next to me. The sun was breaking over the horizon. The nearby hills cast their long shadows, teasing my memory with the moments of magical radiance from the evening before.

"I am going to search for the Roman Cave. It is near somewhere. When I return, we'll pack the camels and go there for breakfast. I should not be gone for more than an hour."

I grunted in acknowledgment.

Shai moved quietly up the *wadi*, Pesiah and Chalah romping at his side. The camels, still tied from the night, paused from their browsing and craned their necks, their eyes following him. In a few moments he and the goats disappeared around a bend. The camels turned their necks toward me, to see if I might follow. I gave no such sign. Their concern quieted, they returned to their browsing. I looked toward Vered. Tresses of raven hair peaked from the top of her sleeping bag.

I propped myself on an elbow to survey our surroundings. We lay in a flat *wadi* 8 to 10 feet deep and twice as wide. Ten miles or more to the east, the mountains of Edom spread below the rising sun. Immediately to our west, tiers of red sandstone rose one on the other, blazing in the morning light. Three quarters of a mile distant, they merged into the wall of the Arava, its rim towering 1,500 feet above us.

The upper 5 to 6 feet of the *wadi* wall were red, like the sandstone formations. The lower 3 to 4 feet were tawny brown, scoured by the silt-laden runoff, which each year surged down from the Negev Plateau.

Pouring water from my canteen, I wet my *kafiah* to wipe the night's grit and dried sweat

from my face, arms, and torso. As was now my habit, I used less than half a cup. After donning shirt and pants, and packing my personal gear, I lounged in the shadow of the *wadi's* south wall and slowly sipped from my canteen. Vered stirred. We bade each other good morning. I turned my back to allow her to dress.

Nearby bleating announced Shai's return. He had been gone less than half an hour. As he and the goats rounded the bend, a broad smile creased his face.

"The cave is only 10 minutes away. We passed within 10 meters of it last night!"

"*Ensha'Allah*," I replied.

We both laughed.

As Shai and I packed the camels, I mused over how close we had been to the cave—10 meters, 33 feet—and yet had failed to find it. It was only a place to camp. Missing it meant little. However, if it had been a well or cistern and we had exhausted our water, the situation could have been terrifyingly different.

We moved up the *wadi*. In places its floor was almost as smooth as a paved road—a sign that the surface on which we traveled was harder than the strata that had eroded from above it.

The cave opened into the south wall of the *wadi*. Its entrance was level with the *wadi* floor. Its roof reached 8 to 10 feet high. It was as much as 15 to 20 feet across and 50 to 60 feet long. At the opposite end, streaming light revealed an upper entrance 4 to 5 feet higher than where we stood. This opened to the area through which we had wandered the night before. Runoff draining from that area had formed the cave.

We tied down the camels and carried water, food, and cooking gear into the cave. The remnants left from millennia of habitation were obvious. To the left, just within the entrance, courses of carefully laid rectangular stones placed on a chest-high ledge protected what had been a storage area. Deeper within the cave, smoke-blackened stones formed what was once a raised hearth. Cut over it, were several wall niches—likely for keeping kitchen utensils or possibly votive objects. Alluvial rubble layered the floor, establishing that archaeologists had never dug. Closer inspection revealed three carvings on the wall near the upper entrance.

What I, at first, thought was a gangling ostrich, fluttering its stubby wings, on closer study became a Roman eagle. The ravages of time had split part of one leg from the wall. Except for a section next to its body, its arching neck topped by a scrawny head was, at first, indiscernible.

A Greek inscription was carved nearby. Its neat block letters dated it from the late period of the Second Temple or shortly thereafter. By that time, Greek had become the common language of the Near East, used by educated Jews and Romans, alike. I regretted my ineptness with the language and inability to decipher it.

I was most drawn to the third carving—the eroded image of what appeared to be an arched doorway with a palm tree at either side. The date palm, always found near water, was a symbol of ancient Judea and its abundance. It was one of the motifs inscribed on the walls, doors, and pillars of the Jerusalem Temple.

From 66 to 70 CE Judea rose in the First Revolt against Rome. The Emperor Nero dispatched Vespasian and his legions to re-impose Rome's rule. Following Nero's suicide in 68 CE, and a less than two-year interregnum of three failed pretenders, Vespasian ascended the throne in late CE 69.

Titus, Vespasian's son, followed his father as commander of the legions, reconquered Jerusalem, and destroyed the Second Temple. The revolt collapsed. The Jewish state dissolved.

The last remnants of Jewish resistance fought on from Masada, a mountain fortress that today still dominates the southwestern reaches of the Dead Sea. Masada's defenders withstood siege until 74 CE. In the face of the final Roman assault, they committed mass-suicide rather than fall captive.

To commemorate crushing the revolt, Vespasian issued a series of coins, beginning in 70 CE. The obverse of the coins bears his bust. The reverse depicts the palm tree. A victorious Roman soldier stands beside it. A weeping Jewess grieves beneath. The words *Judaea Capta*, "Judea Captive," encircle the field. For Jews, this was perhaps the palm's most poignant portrayal.

Sixty years later, from 132 to 135 CE, Judea rose again in the Second Revolt against Rome. Led by Simeon Bar Kochba (or Bar Kosiba), this uprising ended yet more disastrously than the first, with utter despoiling of the land. Those who survived the Roman sword were sold into slavery or driven into the Diaspora. The few who remained were barred from Jerusalem. For the first time since its conquest by David 1,100 years before, Jerusalem became a completely Gentile city.

Bar Kochba aspired to restore the Jewish state, the Temple, and the Temple rituals. This aspiration was portrayed on coins of the Second Revolt, which, in addition to the palm and other

symbols of the Temple, featured four pillars supporting a lintel and an arched device framed by the inner pillars. The device represented the entrance to the Holy of Holies of the Temple and the Ark of the Covenant housed within.

My heart beat with excitement, as I wondered if the eroded carving before me depicted this. I scrutinized the marks, looking straight on and then from right and left angles. Even allowing for two millennia of deterioration, I could distinguish but two vertical lines—and nothing between them. In disappointment, I concluded that whatever the carving symbolized, it was not the Temple.

My mind wandered back to the Roman columns that guarded Wadi Shacharut and the shards of Nabatean pottery at the Roman structure in the Ovdah Valley below. These evidenced that before Bar Kochba Roman power had penetrated throughout the Negev. Indeed, with the conquest of the Nabateans, Rome extended its power into the Arabian Peninsula, itself.

Later I would meet and correspond with Professor Robert R. Stieglitz, Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literature, Rutgers University. In common with Dr. Beno Rothenberg, who beginning in 1959 first surveyed and, in part, excavated the Timna area, Prof. Stieglitz would translate the inscription as the four names, "Eutyichis, Aremos [or, in Rothenberg's translation, Aurelius], Theon, and Zanthios." Each name was chiseled in a different hand, probably at a different time. What I had perceived as an arched doorway with a palm at either side, Stieglitz interpreted as the facade of a shrine flanked by trees, and likely a non-Jewish funerary convention.

Rothenberg suggested that the names were those of miners who died at the locale and were buried in tumuli nearby. He dated the site to the Byzantine rather than Roman era, based on a cross carved into one of the nearby tunnels, and hypothesized that the miners were Christian prisoners.

Perhaps. However, an attribution to the Byzantine era is inconsistent with his own findings in the cave. In his surface survey, Rothenberg reported only Roman, not Byzantine, shards. And, not to be forgotten, major mining throughout the area took place during Roman, not Byzantine, times.

Shai's call broke my concentration. "You study that like a rabbi studies the Talmud. Come, eat bread. Then, we will take water and explore the mines. Vered will stay here in the cave."