

CHAPTER THREE

A DIRE PREDICTMENT

The cold, grey-white of winter filtered through Maria's window. She tugged at the warm covers, feeling the chill of winter's breath. She had slept very little; she was much too excited. Decisions and plans had to be made. She hardly knew where or how to start. She began the day by praying to the Father of her unborn son. She expressed how thankful she was for being chosen to bear his son. She humbly pleaded for divine guidance and wisdom. She ended with "I am only a lowly servant, yielding myself totally to your will."

She dressed and joined her mother in the warm, steamy kitchen. She immediately wanted to blurt out the whole story to her mother, but a newly-awakened, inner wisdom warned against speaking in haste. She enjoyed a warm, open relationship with her mother. She had always gone to her for comfort and advice.

She respected her mother's wise guidance and confident counseling.

Her parents were pious and strict, but kind and gentle people. They shared their country-men's concern about the alarming conditions and changes the Gentile nations were bringing about in their once prosperous land. They, like everyone else, were alarmed at the cruel crimes committed by King Herod. They detested his lack of interest in their religious traditions and freedoms. Heavy taxes, unemployment, and oppression was becoming an accepted way of life for most Jewish communities. Once wealthy merchants, land owners, and farmers now suffered loss of property and well established businesses. Unrest and robberies made traveling alone, or in small, unprotected groups, unsafe.

Decay and religious perversion among their population was steadily increasing. There were constant clashes, in and around Jerusalem, between hostile Jewish movements. Roman authorities could make visiting the holy city a fearful and dangerous experience.

In desperation, needing new hope, many were eagerly anticipating the coming Messiah; he was promised by many ancient prophets of God. Maria and her family were no different; they looked forward to his coming, also. Now, as she contemplated her situation, she faced the moment of reality. They would not readily accept her as the blessed virgin through whom would come the long-awaited and coveted Deliverer.

The more she dwelled on how to approach her mother, the more convinced she became it was going to be extremely difficult.

Even she was at times confused. It would not be easy to explain being visited by a heavenly messenger. They most assuredly would not believe she had been miraculously impregnated by the Eternal himself! Even to her, it seemed like a young girl's fantasy. How could she expect others to believe what had happened?

"I definitely need to draw on Jehovah's strength and guidance for whatever negative reactions I will have to deal with," she thought. "While this is a most fantastic blessing and wonder, it will no doubt bring to both myself and Yowceph unusual complications and perhaps even persecution. There will be many who will choose not to believe the truth. Some may scoff and ridicule my story, believing I have played the harlot."

Maria had delayed telling her family until she was confident of the right time. She passed the night praying earnestly for divine guidance. She decided her story should be revealed soon. By morning she had received enough courage and spiritual strength to accept rejection, ridicule, or whatever attitude she would be met with. It had been an exciting experience, but she had to present it to her parents in a believable manner. She hoped desperately for her parents' acceptance; she would need their support and encouragement in the following months.

The following Sabbath had dawned clear and sunny. Maria's spirits were high. Earlier, Maria and her family had attended religious services at the local synagogue. They had finished their afternoon meal and were spending the remainder of the day relaxing. Maria gathered the dishes, placing them in a large, earthen, washbowl, to be washed after sundown. She walked to the window and stood looking out over the sleeping garden, withered by the winter's chill.

The younger members of the family had gleefully accepted Aunt Salome's invitation to visit. They would be gone for the rest of the day. Maria was unaccustomed to the quiet house. Its walls usually held the echoes of chatter and activity. She was glad to be alone with her thoughts. Maria knew the time was right to confide in her parents. She breathed a thankful prayer, "Thank you, Eternal God. You have so graciously given me some much-needed privacy that I may confer with my parents, uninterrupted."

She entered the living quarters where her father was dozing in his favorite lounge, half listening to his wife's cheerful chatter. She turned to Maria, "Maria, my solemn child, you are so quiet lately. I hardly know you are on the place anymore," she accused.

"Yes, Mama, I know. Something very unusual has occupied my thoughts. I have been waiting for the right time to talk to you and Abba. I am blessed to have the two of you all to myself today. This is a perfect time for me to share a wonderful event with you."

Maria's father opened one heavy eye, shifted his weight, and gave out a loud yawn.

"What I have to tell you is going to be very difficult for me to explain, and for you to accept; I know this. I am prepared to be patient, to give you time to understand. But it is so tremendously exciting." She clasped her hands in a joyous gesture. "I have had a most wonderful, and yet, fearful thing happen to me." Her eyes glowed with excitement as she began. "A few nights ago, I was alone in my bedroom...I had gone to bed and was in the first stages of sleep. Suddenly I awoke, startled.

Within seconds I sensed the presence of someone, or something, in the room with me.”

She now had her parent’s undivided attention. Her voice quivered with emotion. A lump of fear swelled in her throat as she began telling her shocking story. Then, with unexpected confidence, she described, in minute detail, what had happened.

Her father raised himself to a sitting position. Sitting on the edge of his lounge, his eyes widened with disbelief; he listened intently.

Seeing an impatient scowl color his face, Maria reminded them of the prophetic writings in the scriptures concerning a holy child to be born of a virgin. “And...as you know, he is to be born of one who is descended from the line of king David. Does not our family meets that requirement?” she asked.

She waited quietly for their reaction. Her father had risen from his lounge and was angrily pacing back and forth across the room. Her mother walked across the room and stood motionless, looking out into the distance. Neither parent had uttered a word.

Suddenly her father’s angry figure loomed threateningly, inches above her. “How can you expect us to believe such a preposterous story? Did you not know we would stand by you in time of trouble? There’s no need for you to make up such a ridiculous fantasy, girl. Tell me who the father is—I’ll see that he does right by you!” he thundered. Maria rose calmly from her chair, and crossed the room to the window. She was surprised to find her mother by her side. Taking her by the hands, her mother attempted a brave effort to soothe the harsh words, “Maria, my daughter, if Yowceph is the father, you must hasten the wedding date. No one need know,” she pleaded.

“But, Mama, I have told you, Yowceph is not the father; I am still a virgin. Yowceph knows nothing of what I have told you.

I truly am the virgin the prophet Isaiah writes about. The child I carry is the promised Messiah. Jehovah has heard and answered the prayers of our peoples. He has sent our Deliverer, the Anointed One. My unborn child...your grandson, is the one who is to become a great king, ruling our nation in love, peace, and justice. He will put down the cruel oppressors, heal the blind and deaf, and comfort the poor. Our people will no longer have to suffer the injustices from the likes of our present rulers.

Herod and his horrible acts of crime will be history. Our peoples will be ruled by a righteous and loving king. He will establish a perfect government. Our nation will be restored to its rightful heritage.”

Maria’s father’s disbelief had changed to irritable frustration. He scowled down at her, “Enough, girl! Is it not enough you have shamed yourself—and us? How can you claim to be so holy—bringing Jehovah God into your disgraceful situation?” he demanded.

Maria cautiously returned to the comfort of her cushioned settee. Tears of disappointment glistened on her smooth, brown cheeks. She dared not answer while her distraught father displayed such hostile emotions.

He continued, “What a profound lie you have concocted, girl!

Do you really expect us—and our friends and relatives—to believe such a scandalous tale? Without a doubt, they will laugh us to scorn!” He stomped out of the room, leaving her alone with her mother.

Sighing deeply, her mother sank heavily into a chair. “Are you sure you are with child, daughter? It has been such a short time since this so-called conception has taken place. Is it possible you just had an unusually vivid dream? Are you overly tired with plans for the wedding? Perhaps the hard work of planning and preparing for the wedding has been more than you can handle. I know you love Yowceph; he will make you a fine husband. He is a hard-working man. He takes his responsibilities very serious. I am sure he will be pleased to marry you right away. You must tell him you carry his child,” she pleaded.

“Oh, Mama...please believe me. It truly did happen just as I have said. I cannot deny what I saw and heard. I know it’s hard for you to accept this; it would be hard for anyone. It seems incredible to me, too. If someone came to me with the same story, I’m sure I would have similar doubts. It is an amazing occurrence. And, yes, Mama, Yowceph is an honorable and kind man. If the child was truly his, I have no doubt he would do the right thing by me. But, he truly is not the father of the child I carry; he will know that. I intend to tell him I am with child, as soon as possible. But, I must tell him the truth. I can only pray he believes me...will still accept me as his wife,” she replied. “I am so very sorry I have upset you and Abba. I am sure you will understand in time, and you will eventually know I am telling the truth—then, you, too, will share my joy.”

Maria could still hear her mother’s soft voice and her father’s outbursts, long after she had excused herself, retiring to her small room. “They will soon accept this,” she thought. “I know they both love me and want what is best for me. Father is loud and stormy, but his big heart is as soft as a newborn kitten’s fur.”

Sleep would not come; Maria’s thoughts were filled with Yowceph, hoping his attitude would not be the same as those of her parents. “Please...I pray...God of our fathers...cause Yowceph to understand and believe. You have chosen me...a lowly maiden to bear your son. Now...let my dearly loved espoused show me favor. Let him not turn against me because of this great miracle you have performed in me.”

She prayed into the night, finally falling into a restful sleep, trusting Jehovah to bring about the best possible results.

Throughout the following day, Maria refused to dwell on her disappointment of the previous evening. She greeted her parents in her usual loving way, conducting herself as if nothing had happened to upset their normal routine.

Yowceph had been invited to partake of the evening meal, which she prepared with great care. She silently rehearsed over and over the words she would use to disclose her astounding experience. Ordinarily she would be eagerly anticipating his visit. Today a sense of dread plagued her as she struggled to prepare herself mentally and emotionally. All morning she had silently prayed Yowceph would understand.

Her parents went about their activities quietly, avoiding another confrontation with her. When Yowceph arrived, as the guest of honor, he was given special attention by the entire family. Conversation was almost normal, except for the quietness of her father. He normally carried the bulk of the conversation when guests were present. Her younger sister and brothers were happy to monopolize the conversation. Maria's mother tried hard to act as if everything was the same.

Later, the family discretely left the main parlor allowing Maria and Yowceph time for privacy. They talked of the weather, his work, the problems of their world. She always felt excited when Yowceph talked about the house he was building for them. She was especially thankful she would not have to live with his family after their marriage. Many newly married couples were not so blessed. Maria deliberately guided him away from the subject of their approaching wedding. While they talked, she guardedly observed the gentle, thin, man who was to become her husband.

His thick, sandy hair fell over a long forehead, a hint of grey showing at the temples. His sun-tanned face revealed small squint lines at the corners of light blue eyes, shaded by sun-bleached brows and lashes. He was not a handsome man, but Maria viewed him through the eyes of love, unaware of his homeliness. He was soft-spoken, a serious man who had disciplined himself to hard work. By trade he was a well-known carpenter whose excellent work was in demand throughout the land of Judea. His large, square, calloused, and scarred hands extended below slightly stooped, strong, shoulders. He would be a good husband. A surge of love swelled in her heart for this kind, gentle man.

Maria breathed a silent prayer and found the courage to begin, "Yowceph, I have something I must tell you before we make further wedding plans. I have told no one of what I am about to tell you... accept my parents. Because of the uniqueness of this subject they are having a difficult time believing me. I will understand if you, also, have difficulty; it is an incredibly shocking revelation. I have prayed that Jehovah will open your understanding. Please...let me tell you the whole story before you say anything.

"What I am going to tell you is of great importance, not only to you and me, but to our whole nation. Before I begin, I want you to know...I still want to be your wife. My feelings for you have not changed, and I hope after I finish, you will feel the same way...I can't remember when I have ever not wanted to be your wife. My fondest dreams have been to marry you. I hope to have your children, and spend the rest of my life being the best wife and mother possible. Making you and our children happy will be one of my life-long goals. I have prayed that Jehovah will help you to know I speak the truth."

Taking one last, long look at Yowceph's puzzled expression, she caught her breath and proceeded to relate the details of the eventful night. When she had finished speaking, she crossed the room from Yowceph, patiently waiting for his response.

Yowceph's big knuckles were granite-white as he unconsciously gripped the chair frame beneath his taunt body. Stunned at her words, his face paled. A suffocating lump stuck in his throat, threatening to block his labored breathing. He was a man of few words. It was especially difficult for him to express himself when he was so emotionally affected. His temples throbbed with pain; he struggled to collect his thoughts.

Although their future marriage had been arranged by their parents, none-the-less, he had loved Maria since she was a child.

Being related to the family, he had often participated in the activities of her family. He had waited patiently for her to mature to marriageable age.

Looking back, he fondly remembered her as an active youngster, engaging in vigorous games with her younger brothers and sister and their many cousins. He could still see her as though it were only yesterday. He loved watching her long, silky, brown hair blowing in the wind, swirling around her cheerful, smiling face. Her musical laughter cheered the darkest of moods, making the world around her a happier place. She wasn't considered pretty by those who appreciated the dainty or delicate appearance. But she had an inward beauty that radiated a warm and loving nature. Her charm had won the hearts of all who knew her.

"Everyone loves and respects Maria for her honesty, her strong exemplary character, and her warmth," he thought. "She is always willing to help, to share, and to give of herself. She is fiercely loyal to those whom she loves. But...for her to expect me to believe this ridiculous tale is unbelievably absurd. This is so unlike her..."

He really wanted to believe her, but the story was so obviously fabricated. Of course he knew of the ancient writings about the coming Messiah. And, he, as well as many others, wanted to believe the time was near for the long-awaited prophetic appearance of The Deliverer. His mind raced with doubts. "But...Maria is just a plain, ordinary, little Jewish girl who has never traveled farther than Jerusalem. Even though her parents have taken special pains to educate her, she has never received a formal education. She has never received recognition for even one small accomplishment.

"Surely," he reasoned, "when Messiah comes, it will not be done in secret. It will be heralded from the heavens by an angelic host, announcing the good news with blasting trumpets. Jehovah would hardly choose one so lowly as little Maria to mother the divine, great and powerful Jehovah-child...Could it be she has become temporarily infatuated with another man...and in a moment of weakness has slept with him? I cannot imagine her making up this preposterous story, though."

Maria, sensing Yowceph's deep and troubled emotions, left him to his thoughts. She found her sewing basket and the unfinished garment. She tried hard to concentrate on the needle as she stitched the beautiful mantle she planned to present to him as a wedding gift.

Yowceph, hardly aware of her presence, continued struggling with his turbulent doubts. "How can I possibly believe she is pregnant and still a virgin? Most incredible of all, how can I accept her claim the Eternal Jehovah himself impregnated her?"

This is too much to ask of any man. If she had confessed to a sin of weakness, or even if she had been raped, I could believe her. If she would only be honest, and confess her sin, perhaps, with Jehovah's help, I could forgive her. How can I accept this shameful insult and her insistence I believe such an evident lie?

How could I ever trust her with this kind of deception between us?"

Yowceph rose to his full height, and slowly walked over to Maria. "I am truly sorry, Maria. I need time to think this through. I want desperately to believe you. It would indeed be wonderful if what you have told me actually as it happened. As you suspected, I am having difficulty accepting it. I will not do or say anything that will cause you shame. I promise I shall pray earnestly before I give you my decision. We shall talk about it again, soon." He collected his cape. "I shall take my leave now. Say 'good evening' to your parents for me, won't you? I am sure they will understand why I am finding it difficult to be sociable. Of course, I will not disclose your secret to anyone."

He reached down trembling hands, gently raising Maria to her feet. He took her small hands in his and clasp them his chest.

They stood looking into each other's eyes, searching for comfort, resisting the desire to embrace. With an unusually tender gesture, he lovingly wiped the flowing tears from her wet cheeks.

"We must both pray about this, Maria." He then turned and walked out of her sight.

She stood motionless, watching him leave, painfully struggling to control unfamiliar, surging emotions. Never before had she felt so lonely and rejected. Her heart heavy with pain, she escaped to the privacy of her bedroom where she sank heavily to the floor, sobbing. She turned her face upward, and raised her hands and voice to Jehovah. "Oh, Eternal God of my fathers," she cried, "look upon your humble servant. See my anguish and my pain. My desire is to do your bidding. Give me the wisdom. Give me strength to conduct myself pleasing to you. My trust and my faith is in you. I know you sent your messenger to me, announcing the wonderful news of the birth of your son.

You have impregnated me by the power of your holy spirit. I now carry the promised Deliverer in my body. You have honored me above all women. Give me, I pray, a right attitude. Help me to accept this role with joy and thanksgiving," she pleaded.

As she agonized in prayer, her voice grew weak; her eyes became swollen and red. Suddenly, her tears ran dry; the great load lifted. The pressure of pain vanished. A surge of joy bathed her spirit. She knew it was time to stop dwelling on her disappointments. It was time to stop feeling sorry for herself, and to look forward to the glorious time ahead. It was time to rejoice in the love of the Great Jehovah of Israel.

The angel's words of the wonderful miracle in her Cousin Elizabeth's life kept running through Maria's thoughts.

"Elizabeth is the warmest and most understanding woman I have ever known," she thought.

"She, too, is experiencing a supernatural time, being six months pregnant in her old age. She, of all people, will understand and know I am the chosen virgin, carrying the very son of Jehovah. If only I could go to her...We could share this heavenly experience together. I could assist and serve her during her last difficult months.

And...just being with someone who understands what is happening in my life will be glorious.

We surely can be a blessing to each other. I will speak with my parents about visiting her soon.

I can hardly wait to get started. I will miss Yowceph, but, surely, he will not object to my going.

He may even be relieved.”

When Maria approached her parents and expressed her strong desire to visit Elizabeth, her father was skeptical. “You can run away, girl, but you will only delay the consequence of your folly,” he warned. “The sooner you deal with your problem, the better. You had best get the father of this child to make a commitment as soon as you can, instead of running off, avoiding the issue.”

Maria hid her hurt. “I have talked to Yowceph, Abba. I know he and I will still be married. We love each other and want to spend the rest of our lives together. He just needs a little time to understand what is happening. We are both praying for Jehovah’s blessing and approval of our union. When you hear that cousin Elizabeth, also, was visited by the angel Gabriel—the same angel that visited me—you will know that we both carry sons that are destined for greatness. I could not know that Elizabeth is pregnant, had not the angel told me. I would not, of my own powers, know these things. Yet, within a few months, you shall know I speak the truth. Elizabeth, never being able to conceive, has yearned for many years for a child. Now, as a result of the miracle Jehovah has performed in her life, she is six months into her pregnancy.”

Maria’s mother gave her husband a sympathetic look. “I think it may be good for Maria to get away for awhile. Perhaps Elizabeth’s and Zachariah’s mature, sensible influence will be helpful. It may just be what she needs to help her make some sane decisions concerning this unusual situation.”

After a lengthy discussion, it was decided Maria would embark on the three day trip with her uncle Joah and his wife, Ruth. He was combining business with pleasure. They would be traveling the eighty-five mile trip with several other family members traveling to Jerusalem to observe the winter festival, Feast of Dedication. This celebration was not strictly religious, nor was it a festival commanded by God. It had been instituted by Judas Maccabaeus over a hundred years ago in commemoration of the reconstruction of the Temple. Because of limited finances, and because of perilous times, few people from Nazareth attended this festival.

Maria secretly gave thanks to Jehovah. “It is no mere coincidence that uncle Joah has found it necessary to go to Jerusalem on a business trip at this opportune time,” she thought. “And I may also be privileged to attend the Feast of Lights with Elizabeth and Zachariah while I am there.”

The following day Maria met with Yowceph to tell him of her decision to visit Elizabeth. “I am very saddened you still have not accepted the truth about the child I carry. After your last visit— when you left me—I was overcome by grief. I thought my heart would surely explode. And, I know, you, too, must have felt great pain, thinking I had betrayed you. Dear Yowceph, I have not betrayed you. You will soon be freed of the pains of indecision. I have received assurance from the Eternal Jehovah that you will be shown the truth. In the meantime, I have a burning desire to visit with Elizabeth and Zachariah. The angel told me—even though she is past childbearing age—she is great with child. Her son—also a miracle from Jehovah, seeing she has been barren all of her life—is predicted to prepare the way for

Messiah. Both our sons are prophesied to be chosen of Jehovah to perform great wonders," she explained with joyous enthusiasm.

She left Yowceph with a sad look on his face. It was clear to Maria he still was hurting. She wished she could ease his pain. "I have confidence he will know the truth soon. In the meantime," she lectured herself, "I must trust in Jehovah, and be patient."

Traveling along the route to Elizabeth's home, life took on a new and wonderful meaning for Maria. She never looked nor felt so well. Whether nestled among heavy sheep skins, riding in a heavy wooden wagon, or walking along the dry, rocky roads. She filled the air with songs of thanksgiving and joy, singing psalms and praises as she went.

From the earliest memories of her childhood, she had loved the outdoors. She gloried in the crisp coolness of clear winter days, and the beauty of the distant, stately mountains. This was not her first time to pass this way. Her family had traveled this route many times, going to Jerusalem in observance of the holy days. This trip was very different. She was on an exciting journey, filled with a different anticipation and exhilaration. It was extremely difficult for her not to share her wonderful news with those she traveled with. She knew if she revealed her secret, they would look upon her with shocked disbelief or veiled pity. They would think she was just a silly young girl with an over-active imagination.

Maria squealed with delight when uncle Joah informed her, "It is time for us to pull away from the caravan, my child. We are only a short distance from the road that leads to the home of Zachariah in the hill country. I will escort you there, but I have no time to linger; I must be in Jerusalem before dark."

As they neared the home of Elizabeth and Zachariah, Maria's excitement grew with each step. She sighted the house, and began running toward it. Within minutes she found herself bursting through the entrance doors, calling, "Elizabeth...Elizabeth...It is me, Maria. Where are you?"

Elizabeth's swollen body emerged, her short arms outstretched in a warm greeting. The two women held each other in a loving embrace. Elizabeth, holding Maria at arm's length, laughed as she wept tears of joy. Then a strange, wonderful thing happened; she was filled with the spirit of Jehovah. In a strong, exuberant voice she exclaimed, "My spirit overflows with gladness. Even the child within my body is thrashing about with gladness at the visit of the mother of our Lord. What have I done to deserve such blessings? You have honored me greatly with your visit. You are greatly to be praised for your faith. You did not doubt Jehovah's messenger when he revealed to you that you were the one whom he chose to bring about the fulfillment of the coming Messiah!"

Overwhelmed with Elizabeth's warm, loving acceptance, Maria's excitement matched that of her aged cousin. Words of joyous praise spilled from her lips. "I, too, rejoice over this miracle...The Eternal Jehovah has seen my lowliness and has exalted me beyond my wildest imaginations. For throughout all generations I shall be held in high esteem. The great and powerful Jehovah has done this for me. His mercy and love is shown to those who fear to displease him, from generation to generation. He scatters the proud and haughty and tears thrones from under the mighty, giving power and honor to the lowly.

He feeds the hungry and sends the rich away empty. He has kept his promise to rescue his people Israel as he promised our father Abraham!”

Time flew as Maria and Elizabeth spent many happy hours sharing their unique experiences and relating how the same angel, Gabriel, had been sent from Jehovah to predict the birth and future of their unborn sons.

The explanation of why the aged priest, Zachariah, could not speak was especially interesting and wonderful to hear.

Elizabeth explained, “My loving husband has been humbled for not believing the angel’s message. If he had only listened and kept his doubts to himself, perhaps he would be able to tell his story without such difficulty. But, alas, no! He had to question the angel’s words when he promised us a son. Now, he will have to wait until the child is born before his speech is restored.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I’m not so sure I would have received the news any differently. Indeed, it was difficult for me to believe that after all these years we two old prunes would have such a blessing enter our lives. Be it as it may, Jehovah is a merciful father who is patient with us in our weaknesses.”

Maria said, “The angel did not tell me all the details, when he visited me. He did, however, tell me you were six months pregnant. Isn’t it wonderful! Jehovah has visited the three of us in a most unusual way. Most holy and righteous is our Jehovah God.”

Several days later, Maria was busily cleaning the upper bedroom chambers. Startled, she was interrupted by Elizabeth’s excited call. “Maria...Maria... Come quick. I think you have a visitor.”

After storing her cleaning tools, Maria came running. “I’m here...is it Yowceph...tell me...is it Yowceph?”

“Well...just you calm down, girl... I didn’t get a good look at his face—he just now took his animals off to the stables.

From what I could see, he was taller than most and quite striking. From what you have told me, I think it might just be your Yowceph.” She giggled as she clasped and unclasped her short fingers in excitement.

“Oh...I knew he would come, Elizabeth...I just knew it! The God of our fathers has visited him; he has come to me,” Maria breathed. “I must refresh and put on my best dress.” She ran from the room.

Zachariah had greeted his countryman with warm gestures of pleasure. He silently assisted with the care of the animals before leading Yowceph into the well-kept house. Elizabeth, flushed with pleasure, greeted their familiar, distant cousin. She politely excused herself, returning with a huge tray loaded with tempting refreshments. Yowceph was led into a small alcove where large clay bowls and warmed pitchers of water were furnished that he may freshen himself after his long, swift journey.

When Yowceph reappeared Zachariah guided his guest toward the dining area, where Elizabeth had placed a large tray of food.

After seeing to Yowceph's comforts and inviting him to the food, Zechariah obediently followed his beckoning wife, leaving Yowceph alone.

Minutes later, hearing a wispy sound of rustling cloth, Yowceph watched as Maria gracefully descended the narrow, stone steps. Her long, silky hair, bound in a bright, colorful scarf, hung loosely down her lissome, straight back. Her large, brown eyes shone with merriment as she greeted Yowceph.

"Yowceph, I am truly overjoyed to see you. I trust you are in good health and your journey here was without troubles. You must be very tired from the trip. May I get you another cup of wine?"

With the formalities completed, the couple, oblivious to anyone or anything, found themselves totally submerged in deep conversation. Their attitudes were noticeably different than their last encounter. Yowceph's face radiated serene happiness; his blue eyes twinkled with pleasure.

His soft voice shook with emotion as he spoke. "I have come to ask if you will still be my wife, dear Maria. First, I want to humbly apologize for the way I responded when you told me about your pregnancy. I allowed vanity and pride to blind me to the truth. I couldn't bear the thoughts of another man fathering your child. I beg your forgiveness. I can only hope you are kind and merciful enough to forgive me." He paused. "Can you forgive me, dear Maria?"

Not waiting for her answer, he rushed on, "If you can...I desperately want us to get married right away. I know I made a fool of myself. My unfounded suspicions and my rejection of you was most cruel. Jehovah has shown me how blessed I am, if only you will consent to be my wife."

Maria could hardly believe her ears. To hear such endearing words made her ever so happy, at the same time, just a bit uncomfortable. Seeking a moment of composure she lowered her head as a rush of heat turned her smooth cheeks a delicate pink. "I must not lose control of my emotions—it is silly to cry like a small child every time I am overjoyed," she reminded herself.

She calmly lifted her head, and with moist eyes boldly searched the face of the man she loved. She gave him a warm, encouraging smile. Her white, slightly imperfect teeth shone through a wide, generous mouth. "Of course, my dearest Yowceph. You must know that is what I have been praying for; I have never wanted it any other way. Tell me, what has happened to bring about this drastic change in your attitude?" she asked.

A remorseful smile flickered across Yowceph's face. "After you left, I began to pray more earnestly. I am afraid I interpreted Jehovah's silence as an indication that your story was not as you had presented it. I am truly ashamed to admit it; I had almost decided the best course of action was for us to call off our marriage. Of course, I had no intention of betraying your secret or of openly condemning you. You have good reason to abhor such nefarious reasoning. My only excuse is...I was hurt and confused, thinking only of my pride. I must be honest; I really do not deserve the love of a woman as wonderful and pure as you. I pray you, and Jehovah, will forgive my lack of faith.

"For the first few days I tried to drown my thoughts in hard work. I constantly found myself staring off into space; I couldn't keep my mind off of you, Maria. I was having difficulty just performing my daily

responsibilities. I lay awake every night, praying. I couldn't sleep...I couldn't eat...I didn't want to talk to anyone...I couldn't get an answer from Jehovah...I couldn't decide what to do. Then, just a few nights ago, I had the strangest experience. In the darkness of my room, I had a dream. Yet I was still awake. Just as you had described a man—or an angel—in radiant, white clothing appeared to me. His voice was deep and frightful, almost musical. His tones seemed to vibrate the walls surrounding me. I was frightened speechless. Then he said to me, 'Son of David, don't be afraid to take Maria as your wife. She has done nothing wrong against you. It is as she told you. She is indeed pregnant by the Holy Spirit, as told by the prophet, 'Listen, a virgin shall conceive a child, a son who shall be called Immanuel, meaning God is with us.' You shall name this child 'Yeshua'. The child Maria carries in her body is destined for greatness, a Savior of His people.' Then he disappeared, leaving me stunned and ashamed."

Overcome with gratitude and uncontrolled emotion, Maria wept unashamedly. "The Eternal Jehovah has heard our prayers, blessed be his name! He has approved you, Yowceph, for my beloved husband, and also for the role of earthly father to his son. He has doubly blessed me, giving me a wonderful son and a wonderful husband," she exclaimed. "Oh, my dear Yowceph, how gracious is our Jehovah."

Yowceph reached across the small table and gently brushed away the tears from her beaming, flushed face. Grasping her slender hands in his he continued. "I went to your parents, and explained all of this to them before I left. Your Mama was so excited; I thought she was going to smother your poor Abba in hugs and kisses. You should have seen him; his face was ruby red with embarrassment. But, he, too, could not conceal his pleasure. I explained my plans to them; if you would still have me. If the Eternal gives His blessing, we shall be married in the Temple at Jerusalem. Your Mama sent all of your wedding garments and gifts. They send their blessings and love. Your family was disappointed that they were not going to be able to attend our wedding. Their request is that Zachariah and Elizabeth take their place beside us."

Maria burst out with excitement, "Zachariah...Elizabeth.

Come quickly. We have wonderful news. Yowceph and I are going to be married right away."

The elderly couple—lovingly holding to each other's arms—slowly reappeared. Their lined faces glowed with anticipation.

"Yowceph has brought our wedding garments and our presents. We are going to be married in the beautiful Temple. Isn't that wonderful? Mama and Abba have requested you take their places beside us," Maria informed them.

Elizabeth rushed to Maria, taking her in her soft, short arms. "It will indeed be a day to remember, my children. I know I speak for Zachariah as well as myself when I say, "We are overjoyed for you, and honored to be so blessed."

Zachariah was busy with pen and paper, determined to master his communication problem and share in the conversation.

Yowceph read the good wishes and happy congratulations from Zachariah's notes, then turned to Elizabeth in concern, and asked, "I have known our cousin Zachariah for many years, yet I have never known him to be without words. Has he come down with an ailment?"

Zachariah shook his head furiously, waving his arms as he motioned for them to sit with him while he wrote.

Amused, Elizabeth answered, "No, I am pleased to say, he is in the best of health, as he will tell you. I will not deny him the good pleasure of telling his story—though it may take him awhile. I must say, though, he has overcome his unpredicted handicap remarkably well. He has little trouble getting his argument won, in spite of his unusual predicament. At first he found it hard to swallow his wounded pride and humble himself enough to admit to others what had happened to bring about his embarrassing inconvenience. However, after he told it a few times, he began to enjoy the attention he received. While he'd never admit it, I think he even finds it a mite pleasurable, now that he has gotten used to it. The fact is, he demands more time now than he did when he could talk. Don't let him deceive you...he loves to tell about what happened. He's told it so many times. To keep from having to rewrite so much, he keeps and uses past writings to speed his method of retelling the story."

Elizabeth was a jovial, talkative person by nature. It was easy to see she had captured the full store of humor and was delighted at the opportunity to make the best of what could have been a bad situation. "He gets a mite miffed with me at times—when I won't give him a chance to have the last word.

He's learned to write a lot faster; I must attest to that," she giggled.

With masterful adeptness, using signs, motions, and previous writings, Zachariah related his unique experience once again. In an attempt to get even, he started out by playfully chiding his adoring wife. "One would think my virtuous, witty wife was unaffected by all of this, to witness her shamelessness. Hey?

Her smugness is unbearable, now that she's the size of a young cow. She's got to learn she's not the only woman in the world who has ever conceived a child."

With a teasing, tender grin, the old man dismissed his beaming wife; his face became serious. "Do you young people know how long this woman and I have prayed for a child? Elizabeth thought our inability to parent a child was her personal disgrace. I could not convince her she was over-reacting; she was ashamed before the world. Daily, I vowed my love; she was enough for me. I thanked Jehovah for a good and loving wife, even though she may never have a child. But...she wanted a child! Together, we have often prayed for a child. Be that as it may, Jehovah never saw fit to bless us in our youthful years. I, for one, had given up—especially after my loving wife passed the age of childbearing."

The old priest waited patiently for Yowceph to nod understanding. "As you know, I am of the priesthood, and when my turn comes, I must serve at the Temple. A little more than six months ago—in the summer months—I was to burn incense on the altar. While attending my service, I was surprised by the appearance of a most unusual being. He did seem in the image of a man. This fellow introduced

himself as Gabriel. He told me he was sent to me as a messenger from the Most High Jehovah. I am an old man—I do not get excited easily, nor do I get frightened often. But..., this fellow’s speech, his appearance, and his manner was like nothing I had ever seen before. I stood there shaking like an olive leaf in a wind storm.

“Then he told me, ‘don’t be afraid Zachariah, I mean you no harm.’ Well, that was easy for him to say! Then while I stand there with my mouth hanging open, he proceeds to tell me, ‘I stand in the presence of Jehovah who has sent me to tell you your prayers have been heard. Your wife will become pregnant very soon and will have a son. You are to name him Johanan. He will be a very special person who will bring great happiness to many people. He must not drink wine or strong drink. Before he is even born, he will be filled with Jehovah’s Holy Spirit. His mission will be to bring many in Israel back to their God. He will reconcile estranged parents and children. He will prepare a people to accept Jehovah’s son.’ Well...now...you can understand how difficult this was for me to believe, can’t you?”

Yowceph nodded agreement. “I reminded this fellow both my sweet wife and I were well along in years; besides this, my wife has been barren all of her life. ‘How am I to know this?’ I asked him. After further discussion about this miracle child, this fellow became somewhat displeased with me. He, no doubt, perceived I felt this was an outlandish prediction. Well...I’m a sensible man...after all! It didn’t take me long to figure out—if this fellow had anything to do with it—I was in trouble.

Sure enough...just before he vanished, he pronounced me speechless; it was punishment for my lack of faith. I was so dumfounded, I just sat there for a long time—trying to get my bearings back.

When I tried to talk I sounded like a winded camel. I felt even dumber. Just as he’d predicted, all I could do was grunt and make some senseless noises; I couldn’t get a word out! Well...I must say...about that time I began to believe. Here I was...couldn’t speak a word and I knew I had to go outside—sooner or later—where all those people were. What was I going to tell them? Even more important, how was I going to tell them? It’s no secret; not being able to talk isn’t something you can keep quiet about for very long. Hey?” Zachariah gave an amused, twisted grin, watching the three faces for a response to what he considered a clever use of words.

Yowceph and Maria rewarded him with broad smiles; Elizabeth merely raised her eyebrows. She lowered her head to hide her amusement. She had learned long ago it was not always wise to encourage him. She turned down the corners of her small, round lips pretending not to enjoy the humor of her husband.

“Be that as it may, I was thankful when I remembered he did promise my speech would return when the child was born,” Zachariah relayed. “I have not been able to speak since. I finally got away from the crowd of questioning people. When I reached home, I had to explain it all over again to Elizabeth. I think she suspected me of emptying the wineskin on the way home. It didn’t take her long to accept it as true, though. This woman wants a baby so badly, she would believe anything. She had not been so excited since our wedding day! The woman wore me out with her constant chatter about what our friends and relatives would say when we told them we were going to have a baby.

And—as if I didn't already know it—she kept repeating the story of Sarah and Isaac. 'If Jehovah could open the womb of a ninety-year-old Sarah, can he not do the same today?' Of course, in a short time...we had no reason for doubts; the evidence was plain for anyone to see.

“Needless to say, we are astonished and overflowing with happiness that we have been esteemed worthy to receive such an unexpected blessing.”

Patting the aged Elizabeth's extending abdomen, he gave her a private wink. “Mama was not without her difficulties the first few months. She was afraid people would accuse her of being demented—claiming to be with child at her age. She wouldn't get out of the house for the first five months. She hated answering what she called „insensitive“ questions.” With a chuckle, he scanned the faces around him.

Encouraged by their interest, he continued writing. “She has no trouble convincing anyone that she's pregnant now. She carries a child of enormous strength and size! From all the thrashing around he does, I'd say he is extremely eager to make his grand entrance into this old, troubled world.”

Maria was jolted back to the present. For several hours she had been deeply engrossed in her favorite memories. She smiled as she remembered and relived the joyous occasion. These had been precious memories that she had enjoyed telling and sharing over and over again throughout the past twelve years. The day was drawing to a close; for now she would have to put her memories away. Soon the three of them would be occupied with overnight arrangements.

End of chapter three Edited 6/2013