

CHAPTER FOUR

MIRACLE BIRTH

After a cool night camping out, the following morning, eager to end their extended trip, the young family started very early on their continued journey back home from Jerusalem.

As they traveled, memories continued to flood Maria's mind. They reminded her of how happy and content she was. Their lives had been full of hardships, full of danger, and full of love. In spite of everything she felt rich, not in material wealth, but in the love of her family and in the love of Jehovah. As the day wore on she began to reminisce back to their hasty wedding and to the early years of their marriage.

Yowceph had followed her to the hill country near Jerusalem, to the home of her cousin and dear friend, Elizabeth. His explanation of his recent encounter with the angel Gabriel had not surprised her. She had been delighted when he had urged, "I want us to be married right away, as soon as the arrangements can be made...I have inquired about temporary work in the area. I was assured that a person of my trade could easily find employment in Jerusalem, and in the surrounding area. Herod's never-ending building program makes available many carpenter positions. After the wedding, I will stay with relatives in Bethlehem, or rent a guest room near the work site. You may stay on with Elizabeth until time for us to return home. I am sure God would want us to wait to consummate our union until after the child is born. The angel said 'A virgin shall conceive and bear a son...' so, my dear one, even though we will be legally married, we will, in reality, remain espoused until after the child is born. You are to be a virgin at time of delivery.

Cousin Elizabeth will be overjoyed for you to stay with her a few more weeks. And, of course, I will have an opportunity to visit you often. For a time ignorant gossipers will be deterred from spreading unkind rumors."

Friends and relatives living in the area were hastily informed and invited to the wedding. It would be held in the beautiful, gold ornamented, white variegated, marble Temple. Preparations were made in haste.

On the Sabbath before the wedding Yowceph was called to the Torah. A special hymn was sung in his behalf, and he was given a special blessing. Yowceph and Maria exchanged their cherished wedding gifts. Then, during the evening, before retiring, Maria took her ceremonial ritual bridal bath.

They began their wedding day fasting. Maria, in a small room, waited to be led to her groom by hired musicians. Dressed in her flawless, white wedding gown, drawn snugly at the waist by Yowceph's

bridal gift, a golden link belt, she had never looked more radiant. Her long, silky, brown hair hung loosely beneath her veils.

In remembrance of Yacov and the marriage deception of Leah, she had purposely left her face uncovered, to allow the groom to view her adoring eyes before dropping the veils about her blushing face. The brightly lit inner court buzzed with cheery voices of men and women guests awaiting the arrival of the honored couple.

In the groom's room, attended by witnesses, Yowceph performed "the acquisition through a cloth", signifying the legal transaction of his responsibility to his bride.

Maria, surrounded by her women attendants, received Yowceph into her waiting room. He gently lowered her veils, and looked deeply into her sparkling brown eyes. Unable to hide an unexpected surge of emotion, he struggled to control his quivering voice as he spoke, "Oh, my sister! May your seed be blessed upon all the earth and grow into myriads."

The musicians began the ceremonial procession. Yowceph, wearing his delicately stitched and richly decorated garment, escorted by Zachariah, was followed by Maria and Elizabeth. The elderly priest and his swollen wife stood proudly beside the elegant couple as the marriage ceremony was completed by the attending priest.

The Rabbi raised the cup of wine, God's blessing was invoked upon Yowceph and Maria. "Blessings to you Most High God for the fruit of the vine, for creating the universe, for creating human beings and them in your image, that they may together create life. Blessed are you, Jehovah, for in your grace, you make Zion joyful through her children, and the groom and bride joyful. May you bring gladness to them as you brought gladness to your creatures in the Garden of Eden. Blessed are you, Jehovah, who is the source of all joy."

The "cup of salvation" was passed first to Yowceph, then Maria, signifying they would share the cup of life together from this day forward.

Immediately after the ceremony, Yowceph and Maria were led to a small, private, consummation room, their privacy ceremonially guarded by witnesses.

Maria smiled, recalling Yowceph's embarrassed expression as they had stood alone in the dimly lit room. He had quickly glanced about at the food-laden table and the brightly decorated couch. He nervously reached for the two small chairs positioned near the wooden table. He motioned for Maria to be seated. His face was slightly flushed, but his eyes twinkled with amusement as he managed a shy, knowing smile.

He said, "We know—as the custom is—the guests are laughingly being told we are now breaking our fast. And, my dear sweet bride...that is exactly what we shall do," he said as he offered her a cup and a small platter of fruit. "No one need know our secret...let them think what they may. There is more to our love, and to fulfillment of life, than gratification of physical desires. You are my most precious of gifts. Something so valuable is worth waiting for. What is a few months, when we have many rich years

to live? In our hearts our spirits have consummated our marriage.” Maria had melted into his open arms. She had released a soft sigh of wonderment as their happy tears mingled against moist cheeks.

After the ceremonies were completed, the celebration began.

The remainder of the day was spent in singing, dancing, and feasting.

Yowceph escorted Maria back to Zachariah and Elizabeth’s home. Normally, the celebration would have lasted a week.

However, since Yowceph and Maria were using the aged priest’s home, the celebration was shortened to three days.

At the end of the celebration Yowceph left for Jerusalem. Within days he secured work and temporary living quarters near Jerusalem. Each Sabbath he visited his bride. He was careful to demonstrate no more than the expected loving affection; nor did they share the same bed. During the week he stayed at his rented room and devoted himself to work. Each day he prayed to Jehovah for patience, wisdom, and the strength to stay within his will.

He knew the future held awesome responsibilities...

It seemed to both Elizabeth and Maria the following weeks were but a few days until baby John made his lusty appearance.

Maria was overjoyed that she was able to assist the midwife during his birth. She and Yowceph were able to attend the special Jewish ceremonial dedication and circumcision of baby John. They thrilled to the prophetic utterances of Zachariah as he regained his ability to speak.

The proud father, speaking by the power of the Holy Spirit, boldly foretold the future greatness of both his child and her unborn baby. Maria thrilled at the words of the old priest. He prophesied of many great and wonderful deeds these miracle babies would perform before God and their people. At the same time she was confused as to why a tinge of fear hovered over her happiness.

Three months from the time Maria had left her parent’s home in Nazareth she and Yowceph returned as husband and wife. Upon arriving back home they were pleasantly surprised; they were greeted with open arms. Yowceph’s, and Maria’s parents, eager to welcome their children home, had invited several relatives and friends to share the happy occasion. Yowceph and Maria were left breathless as they received hugs and kisses from their affectionate family. It was indeed wonderful to be home.

If Maria’s parents still questioned the “angel” story they were willing to give her and Yowceph the benefit of the doubt.

“It’s good to have you back, girl,” her father beamed, giving her a big, bear hug. After the traditional kisses and hugs he queried, “And Yowceph, my son...tell us the news from the holy city.”

Maria's mother, wiping tears of pleasurable excitement from her moist, lean face, gave her several quick kisses, refusing to let her out of sight. "The wedding...tell us all about the wedding, child. I know it was beautiful...how many girls from our humble country are blessed to be married in the Temple?"

"Yes, Mama. The wedding was wonderful. The musicians played marvelously. The Temple court was filled with relatives and friends; everything was just beautiful. I missed not having you there. Elizabeth and Zachariah were thrilled to be a part of our wedding. From the way they acted, you would think we were their very own children. We will have to show you our beautiful gifts—there are so many. And to have been so blessed to have the wedding in the very Temple of God was beyond our fondest expectations." Looking around at all the people, she said, "It is clear Uncle Joah relayed our message about our coming home. It is so wonderful to see so many of the family and old friends. Did he tell you Yowceph and I were blessed to see little Johnnan before we left? He is a wonderful baby. The child is exceptionally strong and healthy. Elizabeth and Zachariah are the proudest parents in Judea. For a very long while Zachariah could not speak. Now, he speaks...and speaks...and speaks..."

Yowceph laughed, "He speaks so much not even Elizabeth can out-talk him...I think he's trying to make up for lost time."

Maria continued, "Everyone tried to name the baby after his father. Elizabeth wasn't to be out-done; she insisted his name was Johanan. Up until then Zachariah had not been able to speak; as soon as he wrote 'His name is Johanan' he was able to speak again. Everyone was amazed that they named the child Johanan; no one in their family has that name."

Maria had everyone's attention as she related the events of the baby's birth. "They had a huge celebration; you should see all the gifts! It was a very joyous occasion; friends and relatives came from miles around. His mama and abba are as proud as peacocks. It was a very joyous occasion," she ended.

After the guests left, Maria and Yowceph explained their plans to their parents. Addressing Maria's parents first, Yowceph began, "It will be several months before our new house is completed. Maria is over three months pregnant, now. We intend to wait until after the child is born before we live together as man and wife. Of course, I shall provide for Maria's needs and pay whatever is required for her to stay here during the remainder of her pregnancy, if you will be so kind as to permit us to impose upon you. Receiving nods of agreement, he continued, "I will stay with my folks, spending most of my spare time finishing our house."

Both parents heartily agreed to assist in whatever arrangements were proposed, even though they thought it a bit strange that Yowceph wanted the separation. Sensing their puzzlement, Yowceph later explained privately to his father-in-law, "You see...Maria and I have not come together as husband and wife yet. We have decided to wait until after the child is born, by then we will be able to move into our own house. Most people need not know we are still merely espoused.

Let them think these arrangements are suitable until the completion of our house."

The summer months found Yowceph and Maria very busy, happily working together, finishing their house. Maria especially loved helping Yowceph make beautiful, heavy, hardwood, hand-carved

furniture to grace their small, stone home. By fall, Maria, though large with child, was healthy and happy, eagerly looking forward to the birth of the child and their new family life. She found herself repeating her favorite wish, "I can hardly wait until everything is finished and we are settled in our own home."

"I wish I had more time to devote to it," Yowceph lamented. "The days are just not long enough. By the time I get finished working at the shop, or building for others, it seems there is little time left for me to devote to our own house. I had hoped we would be able to move into it soon after the baby is born.

Now that the fall holy days are fast approaching—and both of us having to be present for the census-taking in Bethlehem; I am afraid it will not be finished until after we return from Jerusalem. I wish you were not required to make the long trip at this particular time. The baby so near to his time, surely the long trip will be hard—even for one as strong and healthy as you, my spirited one."

Elizabeth frowned, "I was quite young, but I remember our families were compelled once before to go to Bethlehem to register. Not only will people be traveling to their places of birth to register, but many will also be traveling to Jerusalem for the Feasts. What will it be like, with all the extra people there? Will there not be an excessive amount of people? What do you remember about it, Yowceph? I find it difficult to recall."

"There is good reason you scarcely remember, my love."

Yowceph smiled. "That was fourteen years ago. I was just a lad, myself. A decree was first made by Cyrenius, Governor of Syria, for the purpose of taxation and for calling men into the armed services of the Roman government. We Jews are not the only ones to be inconvenienced by this decree. The whole Roman Empire; Spain, Gaul, Egypt, Syria and Palestine will all be involved," he explained. "Jerusalem and the surrounding cities will be terribly crowded, much more than when we normally go there for the Feast of Tabernacles. When there are so many people coming into Jerusalem at one time, it can be a very dangerous place. I am very concerned about your having to come along. I pray the trip will not be too difficult for you. I pray the Eternal will place his angels about us for protection. If we can make it to Bethlehem before the multitudes arrive—cousin Asa has an upper guest room available for rent—we best make plans to stay there. It seems we have no better choice."

"If we must, we must," Maria replied. "Do you not remember, my worrisome husband, that we women of Hebrew descent are exceptionally strong?" It was a statement rather than a question. "Carrying children and giving birth is one of our greatest talents. If we leave early, and take our time, Jehovah will watch over us and protect us. He will see that we make the trip without difficulty. I really don't relish the idea of being left behind, anyway," she reasoned. "I want you to be with me when the child is born, whether it is here at home, or in Jerusalem. I have great confidence everything will work out for the best."

The following weeks found Maria and Yowceph preparing for the over fifty mile trip to Jerusalem. Their neighborhood bustled with activity and excitement as the community made plans to travel to their respective birth places, where they would register. Many planned to stay additional time in observance of the fall festivals.

Hordes of people would be traveling the busy military and commercial routes throughout the hills and valleys of Judea.

They would travel from distant lands, by boat, by caravan, and by wagon. Some would come on horses, some on asses, and some on camels. Wealthy merchants would travel on well-bred stallions, or in fancy covered carts and carriages. Towns along the way would supply rented overnight accommodations for those who could afford the price.

As the first rays of morning sun peeked over the horizon, last minute preparations had been completed. Yowceph and Maria headed southward toward Jerusalem. Their parents and relatives would follow later. By leaving early, Maria would be able to stop and rest often along the way.

"It is comforting we share the route with so many friendly travelers. Knowing the rest of the family will eventually be along helps too. I wish you did not have to make this trip, your time to deliver being so near," Yowceph worried again. "If we average as much as twenty miles a day, we should arrive in Bethlehem within five days. When you tire, we will take time to rest by the wayside. We should be able to find lodging with relatives along the way."

Yowceph was not wealthy. He was able, however, to afford a large, two-wheel, wooden cart for Maria to ride in. He made it comfortable, padding the floor with soft skins over dry straw. The cart was drawn by a small, gentle, work mule. Yowceph led the way, sitting astride a larger riding mule. Tied to the cart, a small ass followed, carrying additional belongings. Maria took turns walking, or riding with Yowceph, when not snuggled among clothing and supplies in the cart.

For the first two days, Maria enjoyed the trip, visiting relatives and friends along the way. But now, during the third day, she was beginning to feel unusually tired. Not wanting to worry Yowceph unnecessarily, she tried hard to hide her discomfort. By noon, though, she was much too uncomfortable to keep it from him. "I am afraid, Yowceph, I am not able to travel but a few miles today. My legs and back are giving me much pain.

I must rest more often," she confided.

Yowceph agreed. "I suspected you might have problems. I am surprised you have not complained sooner. We shall move at whatever speed is best for you, and stop for the night as early as you want. As we get closer to Jerusalem, it will become more difficult to find lodging. We may have to make camp along the way. When we find a suitable place, we will set up camp. I shall make you a comfortable bed in the cart and guard over you during the night."

The following day, as they got closer to Jerusalem, Yowceph found his predictions true. The roads were unusually crowded with people coming from every direction. It was difficult even to find a place to set up camp. And, it was impossible to find overnight lodging. They found themselves having to stop much earlier than they had planned. Already many from their home town had overtaken them and gone on ahead. In their last day of travel Yowceph's concern for Maria increased as they neared the bustling city of Jerusalem.

Maria's family had over-taken them earlier in the day, slowing their pace to travel with them.

Yowceph left Maria with her family, riding on ahead in hopes of finding a place in Jerusalem to spend the night before going on into Bethlehem. He planned to meet with them at a specified place later in the day. His hopes soon turned to disappointment as place after place turned him away. To his great dismay, he realized there was no available place in Jerusalem. Upon returning to Maria, he informed her and their family of his findings. "I found Jerusalem overflowing. The census-taking has brought people from everywhere. All of the usual places are full. The only thing left for us to do is to continue on the five miles to Bethlehem. If we hurry, we can be at cousin Asa's home before sunset," he urged.

"We will go along as far as Asa's with you. Perhaps he will have room for us all," Marie's father, Heli said. "If not, we will search for other accommodations."

Yowceph hastily led the way around Jerusalem, avoiding the congested areas, hoping Bethlehem would be less crowded. Soon Jerusalem, left behind, could hardly be seen in the distance.

Maria joined the women for a walk the last mile into Bethlehem. In spite of her persistent efforts, she found it increasingly difficult to keep up; she tried to ignore a strange cramping sensation. "I think I should try riding again," she told Yowceph. "I am experiencing unusual discomfort."

Yowceph stopped and helped her into the wagon. She began to experience a gradual increase in abdominal pressure. Not wanting to alarm her husband, she decided to wait as long as possible before telling him she suspected she was in the early stages of labor.

It came as no surprise to find Bethlehem almost as crowded as Jerusalem. They soon found cousin Asa's home, only to discover the guest rooms were already filled.

Asa greeted them warmly, "Welcome to our humble home, my cousins. It is a bit crowded, at the time. We are all in a state of confusion, trying to make room for everyone. I'm sorry, my dear Heli, and Yowceph," Asa apologized, "I am unable to rent you the upper guest rooms. I anticipated the present Gentile families would have vacated by now. They had no plans to stay beyond their registration. It seems there has been an unexpected delay. I'm sure they plan to leave very soon. All I have available at present is a storage room off the court, next to the downstairs entrance way. It is filled with animal food and other such things. We will get it cleaned out, and put a cot in it.

It's large enough to suffice for two people temporarily. I will remind the children to keep their pets outside until we have more room. There's really no need for the animals inside, anyway, it being so warm. But you know children...they get into a habit of allowing them in during the night." Glancing nervously at Maria's swollen body, Asa addressed Yowceph, "We must not have your lovely wife—seeing she is heavy with child—out on the ground. I am sure the women here can find suitable bedding and attend to your needs."

Maria's family proceeded to take their leave, eager to find alternative lodgings before nightfall.

Taking Yowceph by the arm, Maria gave her mother, Anna, a pleading look, "I don't want to add to the already stressful situation, Yowceph, but I surely am in the early stages of labor. I didn't want to say anything until I was sure. I really would like for Mama to stay with us until morning, if she would be so kind," she asked.

Cousin Asa smiled, "I'm sure that can be arranged, if Yowceph doesn't mind spending the night in the outer stables. We can fix him a comfortable bed from straw and skins. Your mama may have to share the night with the children's pets, if perchance they find their way inside. We will see that she is comfortable. The women will set up a cot for her outside your room."

Concerned for Maria, Anna turned to her husband. "Of course, Abba and the family can do quite well without me. Can't you, Abba? We shall join you at the census enrollment tomorrow, around the sixth hour," she promised. Dismissing her family with a wave of her fluttering hands, she left no question but that the subject was settled; she would stay.

The rest of the family nodded agreeably and left hurriedly so as not to waste valuable time.

Asa called for his bond man to make the room acceptable, and to assist Yowceph with his animals. Yowceph thanked the man and followed him inside a large, cool, cave-like cavity, which served the inn's stable needs. A small stall was quickly cleaned; the floor was covered with fresh hay and covered with thick burlap. The make-shift bedroom—near the entrance—was a good distance from the animals, allowing for a cool breeze to freshen the air.

After the evening meal, the household retired for the night, leaving Maria, Yowceph and Anna alone. A dim lamp burned inside the small room.

Anna was bustling around, helping Maria get settled in for the night. "I hope we can keep the animals out, least they keep you awake. It is a shame there is no door at the court entrance to keep them out. And with this feeding manger right here, they may wander in...anytime. Let's hope they have already had their fill for the night. At least there is a door to this room. You can at least have a small sibilance of privacy." She patted Maria's arm in a comforting gesture.

Yowceph rejoined the women. "Are you feeling alright, little mama?" he asked. "Shouldn't you be lying down, resting, saving your strength for the job ahead? Do you need anything more...what can I do to make your room more comfortable?"

Maria laughed at his anxiety. "Oh, Yowceph, I couldn't possibly relax just yet...I am too excited...within hours we shall have a tiny baby boy. A wonderful little prince. Already my arms ache to hold him. I feel fine; there's nothing for you to worry about. You know how strong and healthy I am. Mama will be here, and Asa's wife, Ada, who, as you know, is an experienced midwife. She has already agreed to assist in the delivery. You, my dearest, tired husband, have time for a much-needed rest. It will be quite a while before our little prince arrives. Mama will awaken you shortly. Now...go." She gently pushed him toward the entrance way.

Several hours later, Anna awoke to Maria's heavy, labored breathing. "I think it is time, Mama," Maria panted. "You may inform Ada. Bring Yowceph; I want to share this wonderful experience with him." Ada came running, ready for the job at hand, with hot water and cloths. Anna stood ready should she be needed to help.

Yowceph, filled with awe, supported his beloved wife. His thick, calloused fingers gently massaged her straining muscles.

In awe, he watched and thought, "How wonderful that I am witnessing this marvelous miracle, Jehovah's gift of life. What greater way could he show his love to us? How wonderful that he has designed the beloved wife to present this miracle to her husband. How doubly blessed are we to receive his own son, begotten by his holy spirit. What awesome responsibility is laid upon us."

Maria interrupted his thoughts, "Tell me again, Yowceph, about the night the angel visited you. Tell me how he looked and how you reacted. What did you feel when he told you about the birth of our son? Recite to me the words of the prophet Isaiah. Tell me about the virgin bearing a son who will rule the whole world."

Yowceph related the story over again, trying to include each detail. After telling the experience, he ended by quoting, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and we shall call his name Yeshua, and he shall be great among his people."

With one last, great push, Maria expelled a tiny red body, loudly demonstrating a strong and healthy set of lungs. Maria, having relaxed momentarily, raised herself to view the fruit of her labor. Immediately, the flailing child was handed to Yowceph.

Maria watched in wonder as her gentle husband carefully cleaned the squirming child with warmed olive oil. "Yes, we know, little Prince...this is not the royal welcome you deserve; none-the-less, we receive you with gladness and joy. And what a fine lad you are, too," he cooed. Anna produced a long swath of soft cloth. Yowceph cautiously wrapped the baby, and laid him at his mother's breast.

Anna, and Ada discretely left Yowceph with his small family. With love and tenderness shining in his misty blue eyes, he stood quiet and motionless. He felt an unspeakable wonder and awe, as he beheld mother and child.

Maria's long brown hair, moist with perspiration, clung to her smooth, flushed cheeks. Her dark, sparkling eyes, shining with pride, finally gave way to restful sleep. Studying the face of the new-born child, Yowceph thought, "He looks and sounds like any other helpless, dependent, newborn, Jewish baby. Yet, he is the very son of the Eternal, born for the rise and fall of many nations. His future is to establish a powerful government, and to eventually rule the entire world—with a rod of iron.

What must such a child as this require of us, his parents?" he wondered.

While Maria and child slept, Yowceph took straw and the soft cloths furnished by the women and fashioned a tiny bed in the feeding trough near Anna's cot.

Before leaving for his humble bedding, he gave one last survey of the small room, lowering the flame of the lamp, and adjusting the covers over the sleeping Maria. He left the care and watch of little Yeshua to the women.

Overwhelmed with expectation and excitement, Maria awoke to the aroma of food and beverage wafting through the partially opened door. For a moment she wondered where she was. Then it all came rushing back to her.

Anna handed her a small, soft bundle. With anxious arms, she reached for her child, and held him close to her bosom. Her chest heaved with suppressed emotion; she felt tears streaming down her flushed cheeks. She wished he would wake up. The moment she had longed for was here. Her arms were filled; the hunger for her child was satisfied. "How wonderfully blessed I am," she thought. "The God of our fathers has given us the most precious gift he owns—His very own son! How proud He must be as He looks down upon such perfection." She uncovered the tiny, red face. To her delight, he moved; tiny arms stretched beneath the loose blanket. She giggled as he tried to open one eye. "It's about time you wake up, you little sleepy-head." She placed him beside her, and closely examined his every flawless feature. She caressed his strong flailing arms, his sturdy little fingers, and his perfectly formed, wrinkled, red body. She loosed the cloth, releasing two tiny, perfectly formed, vigorously thrashing legs.

Aware only of the miracle before her, she did not hear the busy footsteps or the chatter of voices, nor the laughter of children outside her door. The door opened. Yowceph quietly entered the small, cramped room, carrying a tray of tempting, hot food. "What a lovely sight I beheld when I glanced into the room early this morning. Your face was that of a woman who has accomplished a great goal, who has performed a great feat...and indeed you have, my love. You deserve to be rewarded. Here, I have brought you a well-deserved, tasty breakfast. It will help to restore the energy you used giving me a son. I made our little Prince his own bed of softest down in the animal's manger.

It will be easier for you to attend him from there," he explained.

The aroma from the steaming food made Maria aware of her gnawing, empty tummy; she was indeed very hungry. She accepted the offering. "It was so kind of you to do this, my husband.

The food looks and smells delicious. I have never had such royal treatment. I fear you will spoil me with such kindness. She hesitated a moment, then with a impish smile added, "I am too tired to resist just now."

A lusty wail reminded them of the new arrival. Yowceph lifted the squirming bundle. "Our vigorous little Prince has picked a beautiful day to enter into our troubled world, though, I am afraid he didn't pick the most elegant setting. I would have had him born in a palace, but, alas, it was not in my power.

Cousin Asa tells me there will not be another room available until some have finished their business of registering for the census. We may have to use these arrangements for another day."

He turned his attention to the lusty bundle. "I would cry, too, if I had just arrived in a world such as this. I hear there was more rioting and killing in the streets of Jerusalem last night. This world is not a

very happy place to arrive into. I know you crave the warmth of your mama, but you will have to wait; she has needs, too, you know.” He took the child out of the room and closed the door, leaving Maria to enjoy her breakfast.

When Yowceph returned for the tray, Maria thought he looked unusually tired. She thought, “He has had very little sleep since we left home.” She patted the cot. “Come, sit beside me for awhile,” she invited. “Don’t be worried about where we will stay...God will provide for us.”

“I have been inquiring. Soon the crowds will thin, leaving only those of us who will be staying for the festivals. Then we will rent a more suitable place, perhaps a small apartment, for the duration of our stay. I shall search for a place worthy of my beautiful queen and our special little Prince,” he promised.

“In the meantime—I must take your mama to find her family. Everyone wants to get registered before the holy days begin. I will find my parents, and register along with them. Of course, I am also anxious to tell them about our new arrival. There will be time for you to go later. For now—you are to get plenty of rest, dear little mother.”

Anna, beaming with grandmotherly pride, kissed Maria and informed her she was leaving. She took one last look at her sleeping grandson. “Jehovah has blessed us with great loving kindness. He has given us our first precious grandchild. He will bring us great joy. I can hardly wait to tell the rest of the family,” she beamed.

While Yowceph was gone Maria took a short nap. By noon the household became a noisy, bustling, parade of women, children and pets.

The hot autumn sun beamed down onto the thirsty, dry city of Bethlehem. The cramped, feed room became unbearably warm. Ada had sitting furniture brought and placed around the foyer allowing Maria to escape the small, stuffy room. The vestibule was filled with people coming and going; everyone wanted to see the baby. Maria didn’t dare leave him alone; the children couldn’t keep their hands off him.

She took advantage of a quiet lull to bathe her baby. After his bath she tucked him into his soft, straw bed, hoping for a chance to relax; it had been a long morning. The house had emptied; most everyone had seen the baby. A pet lamb and the family goat had wandered in hoping for some attention. The children were nowhere to be seen. It was much cooler here in the building than outside, so Maria let the animals stay. They settled nearby for a nap. She covered herself with a thin sheet and laid down on a wooden bench beside the baby’s make-shift crib. She dozed into a semi-conscious, blissful state of sleepiness. Within minutes she was awakened by one of the guest.

“There is a large group of men coming in this direction, and your husband, Yowceph, seems to be leading them here.”

Maria quickly looked out. Yes, that was Yowceph. And behind him was a long procession of people. She heard Yowceph ask the group to wait outside. Finding Maria, he breathlessly informed her, “We have several men and interested people who have followed me here to see our son.”

She hastily made herself presentable and waited for Yowceph's introduction. He ushered the strangers into the crowded entrance way. Motioning to Maria and the small manger, he addressed the crowd. "This is my wife, Maria and our son, who arrived only hours ago." Turning to Maria, he explained, "These men are shepherds. They have a very strange story to tell. They found me on the way. And, they have requested to see our child." Maria acknowledged their presence and shyly moved into the background.

The men introduced themselves. Then their spokesman explained, "We have been asking all over the city, hoping to find a babe in a manger. We were out in the fields, tending our flocks, when just above us appeared a large band of brilliantly glowing beings. We had never seen anything like that before.

Even though we have heard of angels from our youth, yet, it was a frightening experience! We were speechless as this wonder unfolded before our astonished eyes. Then from this host of singing, angelic beings one appeared before us and spoke. His appearance was that of a man, yet his body and clothing illuminated a radiant glow. His strong voice was amazingly deep, echoing resounding musical vibrations. Maria smiled as she glanced at Yowceph, remembering the profound effect Gabriel's voice had had on them.

The visitor continued, "After we finally got hold of ourselves, this fellow assured us we were in no danger. He told us not to be afraid. He said, 'We have come to bring you the greatest news of all time. This very night, in Bethlehem, the Savior, Christ the Lord is born. He shall bring great joy to many peoples. This is the sign to help you find him. He will be wrapped in soft cloths, lying in a manger.' A great band of singers began singing and praising God; we were overwhelmed.

After they vanished into the heavens, we decided we had to come find this extraordinary child."

The proud mother lifted her sleeping child from his warm manger-bed, evoking a weak cry of protest. She handed him to the enraptured shepherd for all to see. Excited, the men began talking among themselves, interrupting each other, each telling their own version of the incident. Guests and curious neighbors, attracted by the commotion, gathered around, stretching their necks in an effort to glimpse the center of attention.

Tactfully, Yowceph ushered the crowd outside. He waved them on as the men slowly made their way through the questioning throng.

The enthusiastic visitors continued spreading their ecstatic rendition of the previous night's experience throughout the country, saying, "We found the babe the angel described. He is the child we have all been waiting for. He will grow up to fulfill the promises of God; he is our long-awaited Deliverer.

We thank God that we have seen him with our very own eyes."

When the news spread, Maria received many visiting ladies, displaying kind, paternal generosity, showering the newborn baby with many delicately hand-sewn garments. Miraculously, within hours, Yowceph received several offers of lodging for his small family.

Yowceph moved Maria and the little prince into a comfortable, rented apartment. "God has truly blessed us, dear wife. In the midst of all these people, he has supplied us a place to lodge for as long as we choose. We will stay here for the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Last Great Day, and during the time required for your ceremonial purification rites.

Is it not interesting...we shall be able to have our little Prince circumcised and dedicated, in the very Temple of Jehovah.

In the meantime, there is ample work available for me. We shall be able to extend our stay for that long, without discomfort. By then you and the child will be much stronger for the trip back home."

Maria was full of expectations. "Yes, and we will be able to visit with Elizabeth and Zachariah again. They will be overjoyed when they see our little one. I can hardly wait to see little Johanan again."

Eight days later the child was circumcised and given the name Yeshua (English Jesus).

The census-taking was completed; Jerusalem and surrounding towns had given way to festival keepers.

The holy days had come and gone. The crowds diminished, leaving the small town of Bethlehem to return to its normal, quieter condition.

When Yeshua was forty days old, Maria took a sacrificial offering of two young pigeons and went to the Temple for her purification ritual and to present the child to Jehovah.

Entering the Temple court, a familiar, aged man worked his way through the crowd, inquiring, "Where is the new-born King that I may see him?"

The old man's wrinkled face beamed with happy expectation when he found the young family. He introduced himself, "I am Simeon, a servant of the Most High God. I have longed for many years for this day, to see the consolation of Israel. The holy spirit revealed to me that I would see the child before my death." Strong, zealous determination shone in his twinkling, gray eyes as he stretched forth feeble arms to hold the promised Messiah. He gazed adorably upon the startled child. Then with sudden, miraculous strength, he held Yeshua out in his frail, outstretched arms and proclaimed in a strong, worshipful voice, "Glory and praises to you, Eternal God, for you have let me see your salvation, which you have sent for the glory of your people Israel and a light to the Gentile world. And now, God of my fathers, I am content to die in peace, for you have kept your holy word."

Bewildered at the old man's words Maria and Yowceph watched in amazement, wondering what was to happen next. He fixed his gaze upon Maria; his happy smile faded. Discernment and deep sadness showed on his lined face. "I pray God will be with you both, and bless and guide you throughout your days. Your child will be responsible for the fall and rising again of many in Israel. Many shall turn against him, indeed, the whole world will reject and hate him. Eventually, he will usher in a wonderful world for those who, with great joy, accept his message. And they, through their obedience to his teachings, will be given positions to rule with him in his glorious kingdom."

The old man's pale, gray eyes glistened with tears. "You, dear lady, will suffer pain and agony as though you were pierced by a sword thrust brutally through your very being. Nevertheless, it must be so, that the plan will materialize and be fulfilled. The innermost thoughts of mankind will be revealed."

The aged prophetess, Anna, a widow for many years, who spent all of her time serving in the temple, fasting and praying, sat quietly. She listened patiently until Simeon finished speaking. Then, gently taking Yehua from the old prophet's arms, she confirmed the words of Simeon, giving praises to God and relating prophetic utterances to those present at the meeting.

Several weeks had passed since Yowceph had arrived in Bethlehem with his tired, expectant, young bride. The young family prepared to return home. Pondering the past events, Yowceph voiced his thoughts to Maria, "God truly has watched over us, blessing us with protection in this troubled time. He blessed us with the birth of a wonderful son. He supplied our lodging, our material needs, and protected us from dangers and harmful men. He has appeared to us in dreams and directed our ways. He is to be greatly praised; blessed be His holy name."

Maria nodded, "Yes...in such a short time, so much has happened. It is so wonderful being in this great land, keeping the holy days at the beautiful Temple. How thrilling it was being visited by so many wonderful people, and hearing God's prophets speak such inspiring words concerning our child. I can hardly believe all this has happened to us. This has been an unusual and memorable experience for us both, one we shall never forget."

Maria's voice softened; she brushed a tear with the back of her hand. "I am so glad we were able to visit with Elizabeth and Zachariah. Little John has surely changed their life. They are so full of youthful happiness and delight. None would ever suspect they are in their old age...they have grown years younger in their joy as proud parents. Without a doubt, John is a fine, strong, healthy son. I was so pleased Elizabeth and I were able to visit with each other...to share the thrills of motherhood and the many things we have in common." She touched Yowceph's face gently and smiled. "I must admit, though, I am most anxious to return to Nazareth and begin our family life."

Yowceph, too, was anxious to return home. "Now that the fall months are almost over, the chill of winter will soon descend upon us. We must return home soon. Traveling so many miles with a wee one will be tedious enough. In cool, rainy weather, it could be precarious, indeed," he mused.

Maria's soft, brown eyes twinkled with appreciation. "I know it has not been easy, you have waited a long time to consummate our marriage. Your loving patience has far surpassed my expectation. With Jehovah's help, I will be the best wife and mother in all of Judea!" she promised.

Shortly after their return to Nazareth, Yowceph and Maria settled into their newly constructed home, with their tiny son.

They determined to begin a normal Jewish family life. Though they had married many months previously, they had patiently waited to begin their life as husband and wife. At last...they felt as any other newly married Jewish couple. They spent many evenings talking and sharing, getting acquainted,

learning many intimate things young lovers learn about each other, adjusting to each other's likes and dislikes.

Maria loved her new role of wife and mother. She loved the newness of their house, the lovely hand-carved furniture Yowceph had spent many hours perfecting. She loved the beautiful decorations and the cool, comfortable colors of the new stone walls. Just thinking of Yowceph made her heart swell with love and appreciation. She prayed to Jehovah every day that He would help her be the very best wife and mother she could possibly be, giving thanks for her many blessings. She took great pleasure in preparing wholesome, appetizing meals, keeping their new house sparkling clean, and caring for and playing with little Yeshua.

She enjoyed visiting family and friends and receiving the many guests who came to see the miracle child. The highlight of her day began when Yowceph arrived home. He often was weary from a long day of hard labor at his flourishing carpentry business. After the evening meal, they relaxed and played with their little bundle of joy. After putting the child down for the night, they discussed the events of their respective day's activities before they eagerly devoted themselves to their ritualistic studying of the ancient writings. They were especially interested in prophetic scriptures—those they were convinced involved them—knowing the writings predicted many things relating to their time period, and their special, God-sent child. “What wonderful things the future must hold for us,” they pondered.

End of chapter four. Edited 6/2013