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Ben-Hur

A Tale of the Christ

by Lew Wallace



FREE SAMPLE: THE FIRST 3 CHAPTERS

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About this edition

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BOOK FIRST

CHAPTER I

Into the Desert



The Jebel es Zubleh is a mountain fifty miles and more in length, and so narrow that its tracery on the map gives it a likeness to a caterpillar crawling from the south to the north. Standing on its red-and-white cliffs, and looking off under the path of the rising sun, one sees only the Desert of Arabia, where the east winds, so hateful to vinegrowers of Jericho, have kept their playgrounds since the beginning. Its feet are well covered by sands tossed from the Euphrates, there to lie, for the mountain is a wall to the pasture-lands of Moab and Ammon on the west—lands which else had been of the desert a part.

The Arab has impressed his language upon everything south and east of Judea, so, in his tongue, the old Jebel is the parent of numberless wadies which, intersecting the Roman road—now a dim suggestion of what once it was, a dusty path for Syrian pilgrims to and from Mecca—run their furrows, deepening as they go, to pass

the torrents of the rainy season into the Jordan, or their last receptacle, the Dead Sea. Out of one of these wadies—or, more particularly, out of that one which rises at the extreme end of the Jebel, and, extending east of north, becomes at length the bed of the Jabbok River—a traveller passed, going to the table-lands of the desert. To this person the attention of the reader is first besought.

Judged by his appearance, he was quite forty-five years old. His beard, once of the deepest black, flowing broadly over his breast, was streaked with white. His face was brown as a parched coffee-berry, and so hidden by a red *kufiyeh* (as the kerchief of the head is at this day called by the children of the desert) as to be but in part visible. Now and then he raised his eyes, and they were large and dark. He was clad in the flowing garments so universal in the East; but their style may not be described more particularly, for he sat under a miniature tent, and rode a great white dromedary.

It may be doubted if the people of the West ever overcome the impression made upon them by the first view of a camel equipped and loaded for the desert. Custom, so fatal to other novelties, affects this feeling but little. At the end of long journeys with caravans, after years of residence with the Bedawin, the Western-born, wherever they may be, will stop and wait the passing of the stately brute. The charm is not in the figure, which not even love can make

beautiful; nor in the movement, the noiseless stepping, or the broad careen. As is the kindness of the sea to a ship, so that of the desert to its creature. It clothes him with all its mysteries; in such manner, too, that while we are looking at him we are thinking of them: therein is the wonder. The animal which now came out of the wady might well have claimed the customary homage. Its color and height; its breadth of foot; its bulk of body, not fat, but overlaid with muscle; its long, slender neck, of swanlike curvature; the head, wide between the eyes, and tapering to a muzzle which a lady's bracelet might have almost clasped; its motion, step long and elastic, tread sure and soundless—all certified its Syrian blood, old as the days of Cyrus, and absolutely priceless. There was the usual bridle, covering the forehead with scarlet fringe, and garnishing the throat with pendent brazen chains, each ending with a tinkling silver bell; but to the bridle there was neither rein for the rider nor strap for a driver. The furniture perched on the back was an invention which with any other people than of the East would have made the inventor renowned. It consisted of two wooden boxes, scarce four feet in length, balanced so that one hung at each side; the inner space, softly lined and carpeted, was arranged to allow the master to sit or lie half reclined; over it all was stretched a green awning. Broad back and breast straps, and girths, secured with

countless knots and ties, held the device in place. In such manner the ingenious sons of Cush had contrived to make comfortable the sunburnt ways of the wilderness, along which lay their duty as often as their pleasure.

When the dromedary lifted itself out of the last break of the wady, the traveller had passed the boundary of El Belka, the ancient Ammon. It was morning-time. Before him was the sun, half curtained in fleecy mist; before him also spread the desert; not the realm of drifting sands, which was farther on, but the region where the herbage began to dwarf; where the surface is strewn with boulders of granite, and gray and brown stones, interspersed with languishing acacias and tufts of camel-grass. The oak, bramble, and arbutus lay behind, as if they had come to a line, looked over into the well-less waste and crouched with fear.

And now there was an end of path or road. More than ever the camel seemed insensibly driven; it lengthened and quickened its pace, its head pointed straight towards the horizon; through the wide nostrils it drank the wind in great draughts. The litter swayed, and rose and fell like a boat in the waves. Dried leaves in occasional beds rustled underfoot. Sometimes a perfume like absinthe sweetened all the air. Lark and chat and rock-swallow leaped to wing, and white partridges ran whistling and clucking out of the

way. More rarely a fox or a hyena quickened his gallop, to study the intruders at a safe distance. Off to the right rose the hills of the Jebel, the pearl-gray veil resting upon them changing momentarily into a purple which the sun would make matchless a little later. Over their highest peaks a vulture sailed on broad wings into widening circles. But of all these things the tenant under the green tent saw nothing, or, at least, made no sign of recognition. His eyes were fixed and dreamy. The going of the man, like that of the animal, was as one being led.

For two hours the dromedary swung forward, keeping the trot steadily and the line due east. In that time the traveller never changed his position, nor looked to the right or left. On the desert, distance is not measured by miles or leagues, but by the *saat*, or hour, and the *manzil*, or halt: three and a half leagues fill the former, fifteen or twenty-five the latter; but they are the rates for the common camel. A carrier of the genuine Syrian stock can make three leagues easily. At full speed he overtakes the ordinary winds. As one of the results of the rapid advance, the face of the landscape underwent a change. The Jebel stretched along the western horizon, like a pale-blue ribbon. A *tell*, or hummock of clay and cemented sand, arose here and there. Now and then basaltic stones lifted their round crowns, outposts of the mountain against the forces of the

plain; all else, however, was sand, sometimes smooth as the beaten beach, then heaped in rolling ridges; here chopped waves, there long swells. So, too, the condition of the atmosphere changed. The sun, high risen, had drunk his fill of dew and mist, and warmed the breeze that kissed the wanderer under the awning; far and near he was tinting the earth with faint milk-whiteness, and shimmering all the sky.

Two hours more passed without rest or deviation from the course. Vegetation entirely ceased. The sand, so crusted on the surface that it broke into rattling flakes at every step, held undisputed sway. The Jebel was out of view, and there was no landmark visible. The shadow that before followed had now shifted to the north, and was keeping even race with the objects which cast it; and as there was no sign of halting, the conduct of the traveller became each moment more strange.

No one, be it remembered, seeks the desert for a pleasure-ground. Life and business traverse it by paths along which the bones of things dead are strewn as so many blazons. Such are the roads from well to well, from pasture to pasture. The heart of the most veteran sheik beats quicker when he finds himself alone in the pathless tracts. So the man with whom we are dealing could not have been in search of pleasure; neither was his manner that of a

fugitive; not once did he look behind him. In such situations fear and curiosity are the most common sensations; he was not moved by them. When men are lonely, they stoop to any companionship; the dog becomes a comrade, the horse a friend, and it is no shame to shower them with caresses and speeches of love. The camel received no such token, not a touch, not a word.

Exactly at noon the dromedary, of its own will, stopped, and uttered the cry or moan, peculiarly piteous, by which its kind always protest against an overload, and sometimes crave attention and rest. The master thereupon bestirred himself, waking, as it were, from sleep. He threw the curtains of the *houdah* up, looked at the sun, surveyed the country on every side long and carefully, as if to identify an appointed place. Satisfied with the inspection, he drew a deep breath and nodded, much as to say, "At last, at last!" A moment after, he crossed his hands upon his breast, bowed his head, and prayed silently. The pious duty done, he prepared to dismount. From his throat proceeded the sound heard doubtless by the favorite camels of Job—*Ikh! ikh!*—the signal to kneel. Slowly the animal obeyed, grunting the while. The rider then put his foot upon the slender neck, and stepped upon the sand.

CHAPTER II

Meeting of the Wise Men



The man as now revealed was of admirable proportions, not so tall as powerful. Loosening the silken rope which held the kufiyeh on his head, he brushed the fringed folds back until his face was bare—a strong face, almost negro in color; yet the low, broad forehead, aquiline nose, the outer corners of the eyes turned slightly upward, the hair profuse, straight, harsh, of metallic lustre, and falling to the shoulder in many plaits, were signs of origin impossible to disguise. So looked the Pharaohs and the later Ptolemies; so looked Mizraim, father of the Egyptian race. He wore the *kamis*, a white cotton shirt tight-sleeved, open in front, extending to the ankles and embroidered down the collar and breast, over which was thrown a brown woollen cloak, now, as in all probability it was then, called the *aba*, an outer garment with long skirt and short sleeves, lined inside with stuff of mixed cotton and silk, edged all round with a margin of clouded yellow. His feet were protected by sandals,

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attached by thongs of soft leather. A sash held the kamis to his waist. What was very noticeable, considering he was alone, and that the desert was the haunt of leopards and lions, and men quite as wild, he carried no arms, not even the crooked stick used for guiding camels; wherefore we may at least infer his errand peaceful, and that he was either uncommonly bold or under extraordinary protection.

The traveller's limbs were numb, for the ride had been long and wearisome; so he rubbed his hands and stamped his feet, and walked round the faithful servant, whose lustrous eyes were closing in calm content with the cud he had already found. Often, while making the circuit, he paused, and, shading his eyes with his hands, examined the desert to the extremest verge of vision; and always, when the survey was ended, his face clouded with disappointment, slight, but enough to advise a shrewd spectator that he was there expecting company, if not by appointment; at the same time, the spectator would have been conscious of a sharpening of the curiosity to learn what the business could be that required transaction in a place so far from civilized abode.

However disappointed, there could be little doubt of the stranger's confidence in the coming of the expected company. In token thereof, he went first to the litter, and, from the cot or box

opposite the one he had occupied in coming, produced a sponge and a small gurglet of water, with which he washed the eyes, face, and nostrils of the camel; that done, from the same depository he drew a circular cloth, red-and white-striped, a bundle of rods, and a stout cane. The latter, after some manipulation, proved to be a cunning device of lesser joints, one within another, which, when united together, formed a centre pole higher than his head. When the pole was planted, and the rods set around it, he spread the cloth over them, and was literally at home—a home much smaller than the habitations of emir and sheik, yet their counterpart in all other respects. From the litter again he brought a carpet or square rug, and covered the floor of the tent on the side from the sun. That done, he went out, and once more, and with greater care and more eager eyes, swept the encircling country. Except a distant jackal, galloping across the plain, and an eagle flying towards the Gulf of Akaba, the waste below, like the blue above it, was lifeless.

He turned to the camel, saying low, and in a tongue strange to the desert, “We are far from home, O racer with the swiftest winds—we are far from home, but God is with us. Let us be patient.”

Then he took some beans from a pocket in the saddle, and put them in a bag made to hang below the animal’s nose; and when he saw the relish with which the good servant took to the food, he

turned and again scanned the world of sand, dim with the glow of the vertical sun.

“They will come,” he said, calmly. “He that led me is leading them. I will make ready.”

From the pouches which lined the interior of the cot, and from a willow basket which was part of its furniture, he brought forth materials for a meal: platters close-woven of the fibres of palms; wine in small gurglets of skin; mutton dried and smoked; stoneless shami, or Syrian pomegranates; dates of El Shelebi, wondrous rich and grown in the nakhil, or palm orchards, of Central Arabia; cheese, like David’s “slices of milk;” and leavened bread from the city bakery—all which he carried and set upon the carpet under the tent. As the final preparation, about the provisions he laid three pieces of silk cloth, used among refined people of the East to cover the knees of guests while at table—a circumstance significant of the number of persons who were to partake of his entertainment—the number he was awaiting.

All was now ready. He stepped out: lo! in the east a dark speck on the face of the desert. He stood as if rooted to the ground; his eyes dilated; his flesh crept chilly, as if touched by something supernatural. The speck grew; became large as a hand; at length assumed defined proportions. A little later, full into view swung a

duplication of his own dromedary, tall and white, and bearing a houdah, the travelling litter of Hindostan. Then the Egyptian crossed his hands upon his breast, and looked to heaven.

“God only is great!” he exclaimed, his eyes full of tears, his soul in awe.

The stranger drew nigh—at last stopped. Then he, too, seemed just waking. He beheld the kneeling camel, the tent, and the man standing prayerfully at the door. He crossed his hands, bent his head, and prayed silently; after which, in a little while, he stepped from his camel’s neck to the sand, and advanced towards the Egyptian, as did the Egyptian towards him. A moment they looked at each other; then they embraced—that is, each threw his right arm over the other’s shoulder, and the left round the side, placing his chin first upon the left, then upon the right breast.

“Peace be with thee, O servant of the true God!” the stranger said.

“And to thee, O brother of the true faith!—to thee peace and welcome,” the Egyptian replied, with fervor.

The new-comer was tall and gaunt, with lean face, sunken eyes, white hair and beard, and a complexion between the hue of cinnamon and bronze. He, too, was unarmed. His costume was Hindostani; over the skull-cap a shawl was wound in great folds, forming a turban; his body garments were in the style of the

Egyptian's, except that the aba was shorter, exposing wide flowing breeches gathered at the ankles. In place of sandals, his feet were clad in half-slippers of red leather, pointed at the toes. Save the slippers, the costume from head to foot was of white linen. The air of the man was high, stately, severe. Visvamitra, the greatest of the ascetic heroes of the Iliad of the East, had in him a perfect representative. He might have been called a Life drenched with the wisdom of Brahma—Devotion Incarnate. Only in his eyes was there proof of humanity; when he lifted his face from the Egyptian's breast, they were glistening with tears.

"God only is great!" he exclaimed, when the embrace was finished.

"And blessed are they that serve him!" the Egyptian answered, wondering at the paraphrase of his own exclamation. "But let us wait," he added, "let us wait; for see, the other comes yonder!"

They looked to the north, where, already plain to view, a third camel, of the whiteness of the others, came careening like a ship. They waited, standing together—waited until the new-comer arrived, dismounted, and advanced towards them.

"Peace to you, O my brother!" he said, while embracing the Hindoo.

And the Hindoo answered, "God's will be done!"

The last comer was all unlike his friends: his frame was slighter; his complexion white; a mass of waving light hair was a perfect crown for his small but beautiful head; the warmth of his dark-blue eyes certified a delicate mind, and a cordial, brave nature. He was bareheaded and unarmed. Under the folds of the Tyrian blanket which he wore with unconscious grace appeared a tunic, short-sleeved and low-necked, gathered to the waist by a band, and reaching nearly to the knee; leaving the neck, arms, and legs bare. Sandals guarded his feet. Fifty years, probably more, had spent themselves upon him, with no other effect, apparently, than to tinge his demeanor with gravity and temper his words with forethought. The physical organization and the brightness of soul were untouched. No need to tell the student from what kindred he was sprung; if he came not himself from the groves of Athene', his ancestry did.

When his arms fell from the Egyptian, the latter said, with a tremulous voice, "The Spirit brought me first; wherefore I know myself chosen to be the servant of my brethren. The tent is set, and the bread is ready for the breaking. Let me perform my office."

Taking each by the hand, he led them within, and removed their sandals and washed their feet, and he poured water upon their hands, and dried them with napkins.

Then, when he had laved his own hands, he said, “Let us take care of ourselves, brethren, as our service requires, and eat, that we may be strong for what remains of the day’s duty. While we eat, we will each learn who the others are, and whence they come, and how they are called.”

He took them to the repast, and seated them so that they faced each other. Simultaneously their heads bent forward, their hands crossed upon their breasts, and, speaking together, they said aloud this simple grace:

“Father of all—God!—what we have here is of thee; take our thanks and bless us, that we may continue to do thy will.”

With the last word they raised their eyes, and looked at each other in wonder. Each had spoken in a language never before heard by the others; yet each understood perfectly what was said. Their souls thrilled with divine emotion; for by the miracle they recognized the Divine Presence.

CHAPTER III

The Athenian Speaks—Faith



To speak in the style of the period, the meeting just described took place in the year of Rome 747. The month was December, and winter reigned over all the regions east of the Mediterranean. Such as ride upon the desert in this season go not far until smitten with a keen appetite. The company under the little tent were not exceptions to the rule. They were hungry, and ate heartily; and, after the wine, they talked.

“To a wayfarer in a strange land nothing is so sweet as to hear his name on the tongue of a friend,” said the Egyptian, who assumed to be president of the repast. “Before us lie many days of companionship. It is time we knew each other. So, if it be agreeable, he who came last shall be first to speak.”

Then, slowly at first, like one watchful of himself, the Greek began:

“What I have to tell, my brethren, is so strange that I hardly know where to begin or what I may with propriety speak. I do not yet understand myself. The most I am sure of is that I am doing a Master’s will, and that the service is a constant ecstasy. When I think of the purpose I am sent to fulfil, there is in me a joy so inexpressible that I know the will is God’s.”

The good man paused, unable to proceed, while the others, in sympathy with his feelings, dropped their gaze.

“Far to the west of this,” he began again, “there is a land which may never be forgotten; if only because the world is too much its debtor, and because the indebtedness is for things that bring to men their purest pleasures. I will say nothing of the arts, nothing of philosophy, of eloquence, of poetry, of war: O my brethren, hers is the glory which must shine forever in perfected letters, by which He we go to find and proclaim will be made known to all the earth. The land I speak of is Greece. I am Gaspar, son of Cleanthes the Athenian.

“My people,” he continued, “were given wholly to study, and from them I derived the same passion. It happens that two of our philosophers, the very greatest of the many, teach, one the doctrine of a Soul in every man, and its Immortality; the other the doctrine of One God, infinitely just. From the multitude of subjects about

which the schools were disputing, I separated them, as alone worth the labor of solution; for I thought there was a relation between God and the soul as yet unknown. On this theme the mind can reason to a point, a dead, impassable wall; arrived there, all that remains is to stand and cry aloud for help. So I did; but no voice came to me over the wall. In despair, I tore myself from the cities and the schools.”

At these words a grave smile of approval lighted the gaunt face of the Hindoo.

“In the northern part of my country—in Thessaly,” the Greek proceeded to say, “there is a mountain famous as the home of the gods, where Theus, whom my countrymen believe supreme, has his abode; Olympus is its name. Thither I betook myself. I found a cave in a hill where the mountain, coming from the west, bends to the southeast; there I dwelt, giving myself up to meditation—no, I gave myself up to waiting for what every breath was a prayer—for revelation. Believing in God, invisible yet supreme, I also believed it possible so to yearn for him with all my soul that he would take compassion and give me answer.”

“And he did—he did!” exclaimed the Hindoo, lifting his hands from the silken cloth upon his lap.

“Hear me, brethren,” said the Greek, calming himself with an effort. “The door of my hermitage looks over an arm of the sea, over

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the Thermaic Gulf. One day I saw a man flung overboard from a ship sailing by. He swam ashore. I received and took care of him. He was a Jew, learned in the history and laws of his people; and from him I came to know that the God of my prayers did indeed exist; and had been for ages their lawmaker, ruler, and king. What was that but the Revelation I dreamed of? My faith had not been fruitless; God answered me!”

“As he does all who cry to him with such faith,” said the Hindoo.

“But, alas!” the Egyptian added, “how few are there wise enough to know when he answers them!”

“That was not all,” the Greek continued. “The man so sent to me told me more. He said the prophets who, in the ages which followed the first revelation, walked and talked with God, declared he would come again. He gave me the names of the prophets, and from the sacred books quoted their very language. He told me, further, that the second coming was at hand—was looked for momentarily in Jerusalem.”

The Greek paused, and the brightness of his countenance faded.

“It is true,” he said, after a little—“it is true the man told me that as God and the revelation of which he spoke had been for the Jews alone, so it would be again. He that was to come should be King of the Jews. ‘Had he nothing for the rest of the world?’ I asked. ‘No,’

was the answer, given in a proud voice—‘No, we are his chosen people.’ The answer did not crush my hope. Why should such a God limit his love and benefaction to one land, and, as it were, to one family? I set my heart upon knowing. At last I broke through the man’s pride, and found that his fathers had been merely chosen servants to keep the Truth alive, that the world might at last know it and be saved. When the Jew was gone, and I was alone again, I chastened my soul with a new prayer—that I might be permitted to see the King when he was come, and worship him. One night I sat by the door of my cave trying to get nearer the mysteries of my existence, knowing which is to know God; suddenly, on the sea below me, or rather in the darkness that covered its face, I saw a star begin to burn; slowly it arose and drew nigh, and stood over the hill and above my door, so that its light shone full upon me. I fell down, and slept, and in my dream I heard a voice say:

“O Gaspar! Thy faith hath conquered! Blessed art thou! With two others, come from the uttermost parts of the earth, thou shalt see Him that is promised, and be a witness for him, and the occasion of testimony in his behalf. In the morning arise, and go meet them, and keep trust in the Spirit that shall guide thee.’

“And in the morning I awoke with the Spirit as a light within me surpassing that of the sun. I put off my hermit’s garb, and dressed

myself as of old. From a hiding-place I took the treasure which I had brought from the city. A ship went sailing past. I hailed it, was taken aboard, and landed at Antioch. There I bought the camel and his furniture. Through the gardens and orchards that enamel the banks of the Orontes, I journeyed to Emesa, Damascus, Bostra, and Philadelphia; thence hither. And so, O brethren, you have my story. Let me now listen to you.”