

Joanna bat (daughter of) Judith

Luke 8:2-3 “and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities— Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for Him from their substance.”

I feel very privileged to be able to walk through these halls and gardens every day. Even though they are not mine, I have lived here most of my life, and in some way they feel like mine. My father was a groom to King Herod, and my mother, Judith was a personal servant to Queen Mariamne the favourite wife of the king. I was married to Chuza, the King's steward when I was 14 years old.

Chuza is not a fellow countryman. He first came to my country in the retinue of three sages; wise religious men of his country, Persia. They travelled for years, following a star which they believed would lead them to a great and powerful king. They found a great and powerful king when they arrived at this palace and were granted audience with King Herod. Chuza

frequently tells me that when they arrived at the palace they were completely overawed. Riding up the road towards it, on their camels, all they could see to begin with were walls of between 13 and 16 feet high, depending on the contours of the land, creating a flat platform on the top of the hill that is about 1,000 feet by 183 feet. Rising above the platform, they saw the palace built out of huge white marble blocks which have been so cleverly fitted together that they look as seamless as when they were still in the quarry. It is surrounded by a wall of the same white marble, some of which they could see forms part of the protective wall on this corner of the city.



Rising above the palace on the North side there are three towers, to protect the king, or the city, depending on where the enemy is coming from. These could also be a place of refuge if there were to be a rebellion against the King. The Phasael Tower stands 145 feet high and is named after King Herod's brother. The Hippicus Tower, named after his great friend stands 132 feet high, and the Mariamne Tower, the smallest at only 74 feet high is named after his wife. This is accounted to be the most beautiful of the towers.

Coming in through the gates Chuza, the Sages and the rest of the retinue entered a courtyard with a beautiful garden that was wonderfully green and lush after the dry dust of the city and landscape they had just ridden through. When they dismounted from their camels, they were led through a portico into the great banqueting hall of one of the two living quarters, which are in two wings named after Agrippa and Caesar, placed north and south of the beautiful garden. Chuza remembers being completely overawed by the number of doors he passed, for King Herod build his palace so that he could entertain on a great scale. Where most people in the country live in just one room, sharing it with whatever animals they own. In his palace King Herod could sleep a hundred guests in each wing. They would expect to be overawed by the beauty and variety of the stone and wood of the palace, its fine decorations and rich fabrics. They would drink out of vessels of silver and gold, and admire the size of the roof timbers, and decorations on the pillars of the porticoes. Chuza was certainly overwhelmed by what he saw. This all belonged to a great and powerful king.

While the sages were in audience with the King, Chuza was allowed to wander through the gardens, where he remembers the green everywhere, as he wandered along long paths through groves of trees, where the citrus were laden with fruit ready to be picked. There were canals with water running through them, for decoration and for watering the plants and there were cisterns with bronze fountains from which water flowed back into the canals. For a young boy on his first journey away from home it was a completely memorable experience. When he left, he vowed that he would return again one day.

By time the sages returned to their own land, Chuza was determined to learn all that he could from them so that he could travel and earn himself a living. He travelled for many years listening and learning as he went, and eventually found himself in Rome, where he met Herod Antipas and his brothers, Archelaus and Philip, who were there being educated. They were much of an age, but Chuza said that he felt so much older as he told the many stories to tell of his travels, and his adventures. He and Herod Antipas became great friends, and when Herod Antipas was confirmed as Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea he asked Chuza to return with him to Jerusalem and run the palace as his steward. Chuza jumped at the idea.

You might think that living in a place like this is all that one could want from life. I have beautiful surroundings, I can listen to the wisest of men speak, and admire the beauty of the most beautiful women in the world. We have plenty of food, and don't have to struggle to raise the crops and store them. We don't have the Roman tax collectors coming round and taking part of our hard earned crops as taxes to send off to be eaten by the people of Rome. We don't eat off gold and silver plates, but we handle them every day.

There is of course always something rotten in such a place, and in this palace it is fear. King Herod, the father, was not a nice man. He was constantly suspicious of people, and feared rebellion more than anything. He liked people to think that he was Jewish through and through, but he was an Edomite, a tribe that converted to Judaism, rather than being one of the twelve tribes of Israel. He was a politician through and through, who made all the right moves. He had the backing of Rome throughout his life, but was so brutal with the people that the Sanhedrin was moved to complain about him, but to no effect. He tried to win the people over by building huge buildings, including this palace, and the one at Massada. Most importantly he rebuilt the Temple, and although it quietened the voices against him, they never really went away. He taxed the people heavily to do all his building work, which caused a lot of problems, and various rebellions broke out against his reign. As he got older, he became more paranoid, and began to see plots even when there were none. When he began executing some of his sons, and then had Mariamne, his favourite wife, dragged away and killed, we knew that no one was safe. It was impressed upon me as a child that at all costs, I must be as invisible as possible in the palace.

His son Herod Antipas, and Chuza's friend, is not his father, but when we began to have children, I felt a constant fear for their safety. Chuza was convinced that we would all be safe with Antipas, but the fear was always with me. Then we began to hear stories of a new preacher and healer who was gathering huge groups of people around him when he was preaching. He was a Rabbi from Nazareth in Galilee, a place which was always inclined to rebel, and I worried that Antipas was going to move against him. I heard whispers in the market place that this Jesus was coming near to Jerusalem, and I was determined to keep well away, but Chuza wanted to go and hear him speak, and wanted me to come with him, for the last part of the story of his first journey to Jerusalem with the Sages was that they found their king, not the powerful man in a palace, but a baby in a manger in a stable. They knew that Herod had sent his soldiers to kill all the baby boys in the town of Bethlehem after they had left via another route back to their homeland. There had been much talk on the way home about whether the special family had managed to get out, and return to their home town of Nazareth before the soldiers arrived. Here now was a man of Nazareth preaching about Yahweh, drawing men to him, maybe this was the baby Chuza had been to visit more than 30 years ago.

On that first encounter, we spent a long time listening to what Jesus had to say. When he finished talking to the crowds gathered around him, we went to talk to him. His close followers didn't really want to let us near him. They knew who Chuza is, and didn't really trust him, but Jesus called us forward, and we spent hours, long into the evening, eating, drinking and talking. From Chuza, Jesus and his disciples learned of the story of the travels of the Sages; and from Jesus we learned about Yahweh, who knows us and loves us and protects us. For both of us that evening was both a beginning and an end. For Chuza it was finally an end to a journey he had made thirty years before, for here before him was the man born to be king. For me it was the beginning of a journey of discovery of the joy of being a Jew, and of loving Yahweh whom we had followed for generations time out of mind. For the first time in my life the load of fear was lifted from me, and I felt free from the cares of palace life. When the fires died down, and Chuza and I had time to talk on our own, we agreed that he would return to the Palace to carry on his work there, but that I would remain with Jesus of Nazareth, learning all that I could, so that I could return to Chuza and our children and teach them all that I could about Yahweh.