

The Bethlehem Caravansary

I remember that day so well. How could I forget it? It happened here, in this small town of Bethlehem in Judea, in buildings owned by myself and my husband, keepers of the Bethlehem Caravansary. The caravansary was built by my husband's family many generations ago, and strictly speaking is not actually in Bethlehem. It sits near the road leading from Egypt in the south to Jerusalem a good day's journey to



the north of us. It is not the busiest of roads. The busiest would be the coast road sweeping along the edge of the Mediterranean sea, but for merchants wanting to get to Jerusalem it can be the most direct. Over the generations, when business has been good, my husband's family have built stone walls around a cobbled yard, to replace an earlier wooden wall. Against one wall inside they have built stone stables, with rooms above, accessed by an external stone staircase to a balcony off which open the doors of the rooms. There are external stairs to the roof, which has a low parapet, where during the really hot nights the wealthy can sleep out under the starry sky or shaded by a canvas covering, suspended from poles. Wealthy merchants travelling with many beasts and servants can leave their animals in the stables along with their grooms, and have their servants wait on them as they sit relaxing on the balcony. Mind you we charge them a fair rate for that privilege.

If you are not so wealthy you can rent a wooden stable, against one of the other walls, and sleep with your donkey or ass. If you walk to our gates, you can pick a spot in the middle of the courtyard and light a fire, cook a meal and curl up on the cobbles, knowing that you are safe from brigands and wild beasts. Our men patrol the walls, and keep an eye on the fires, and make sure that no robbery takes place within the walls!

Now on this day that I remember so well, I had got to the point of telling my husband that if one more traveller came knocking on the door asking for room for himself, his family and his beasts of burden, I was going to scream. We had got more people within the walls than we had ever had before. Regular clients were complaining because we had asked them to double or triple up in their rooms, and we had had to reduce our prices accordingly. Not only did we have the usual merchants travelling north and south from Jerusalem and Egypt, but what seemed like the entire

population of the country within our walls, although in reality it was only members of our own tribe, of the house and lineage of King David. And why? All because the Roman Emperor wanted to take a census.

It was only a few weeks ago that a troupe of Roman soldiers had clattered their way into town and nailed up notifications around the town, of a census to be taken. That would have been bad enough, but the Roman Centurion in charge called the Elders of the town to a meeting, and set out what was going to happen. They came away from that meeting ashen faced and worried. For a day or two afterwards rumours spread around the town like wildfire until eventually the Rabbi and the Elders, who sit at the gates of the town, became so worried at the outrageous things that were being said, and the rising tempers of the young men who wanted to go and fight the Roman soldiers, that they summoned the whole town to the market place where they told us all what the Centurion had told them.

What we were told was that a census had been called across the Roman Empire. It happened regularly, and was not just to impose new taxes on us. Now that we were part of the Roman Empire, we were going to have to get used to these censuses taking place regularly. There were lots of growls at that point, but the Rabbi, who was speaking, let them ride. Everyone had already been outside the town and seen that the Roman soldiers were building themselves a marching camp just outside the town walls. They were digging themselves a ditch and throwing up an earthen rampart around themselves for a protection. Tents were being raised for them to sleep in, and a big tent was being raised just outside the marching camp. We knew from the notice that had been hammered up all over the town that when a Roman census was taken, each tribe was expected to gather at the central village or town of their tribal lands. For the tribe of Benjamin and the house of the great King David, Bethlehem was the designated tribal meeting place. All the members of the house of David would gather here on the designated day to be counted. That would be thousands of people. That silenced everyone. The whole town was asked to nominate people to work with the Elders to get the town ready. My husband and I were asked, because of our expertise in running the caravansary.

One of the first things we and the Elders did was to talk again to the centurion, to see how much help he could give us. He welcomed us to his tent, and gave us watered wine to drink while we discussed the issues we had. He made it very clear that his primary role was military, so he would guard the roads, protect the large number of people travelling, stop any rebellions happening and check on the safety of villages in his assigned area where limited numbers of people were left behind to look after the animals and those unable to travel. His men had set up the tent where the census takers would sit to record the answers to the census questions, and the soldiers would keep order among those waiting. After some persuading he allowed us a few soldiers to help keep water supplies running, as a lot was going to be needed for everyone

waiting for hours in the sun. We couldn't raise too much water from the town wells in advance as it would go off in the heat, so we would need lots of strong arms to keep raising water through the days.

We left knowing that we were going to have to provide more food for more people than we had ever done so before. We thought that most people would bring some food with them like, fruits, olives, olive oil. A large number of the people we thought would be within a day or two's walk from Bethlehem, but there would still be substantial numbers who came from the farthest reaches of the country and beyond. We reckoned that people would start off with their own bread, which would last them two maybe three days before even dipping it in oil would not make it bearable to eat. Many would want to buy or barter for bread while they were here so that as well as what they ate here, they would have some to take for the start of their journey home again. Those who had brought their own flour would need to be able to cook their loaves in our communal ovens, and we would have to have people ready to direct people around the town to where the ovens were cooking so that they could buy bread, or cook in a free corner of the oven.

So our plan was, that the town potter was going to make a number of large pots which we could take to the census area and keep filled with water for the people waiting there, and could be placed in strategic places around the town. Replacements would be brought from the village wells as they became empty. Several of the men volunteered the use of their donkeys to carry the vessels to and from the well. Groups of women who regularly used the various wells around the town agreed to organise the raising of the water. Some would have their younger sons and daughters to help, others would have help from the soldiers. From now on every woman grinding flour for her daily bread, would grind double, and set aside half to be used when the visitors came. Of course everyone grumbled about that. It takes at least an hour to grind enough flour for a family meal, so having to do double each day would be a real chore for everyone. We also asked some of the merchants who regularly brought goods to the town to supply us with wood for the communal bread ovens, which we thought would probably be going most of the day and if we used only local supplies would drastically reduce what we had available afterwards. We would need some flour from the big mills in Jerusalem, again so as not to leave the town with nothing to live on until the next crop. We also got some barrels of salt fish to store, as we were not near to a supply of fresh fish, and we asked some of the shepherds roaming the area to supply some sheep and lambs for the wealthy who could afford them. All these things the town would have to pay for, and charge the people coming to the town. It went against our laws of hospitality, but there was nothing in Torah about Roman censuses!

We had no idea how many people would be coming to town, and even a rough guess made us all go white. Apart from feeding everyone, where were they all going to

sleep? Many of the townspeople had kinsmen, that they knew would be coming, who would of course sleep with them on the floor of the house, with the rest of the family, or on the roof, if the weather was good. We would take as many as we could in the caravansary, but we might well have to find other spaces in the town where people could sleep in safety. Someone jokingly laughed that we could always send people to the shepherds caves in the hills, if we ran out of space in the town.

So there I was on the day before the census, the caravansary was full to overflowing, I was ready to scream when there was yet another knock on the door. My husband, who was as near to breaking point as I, flung the door open, and firmly told the couple outside that we had no room. I was standing just behind him. Something made me look at the woman's face, and I noticed a look of pain come over it. She must have squeezed her husband's hand tighter as he turned to look down at her with such a look of concern on his face. I lowered my eyes from her face down her body, and realised with a shock that she was heavily pregnant, in which case, it looked as if the baby could be coming – now! I pushed past my husband and rushed to put an arm around her, as she dropped her arms to her rounded belly to rub where the pain was at its worse, and squatted down to ease the pain. As the contraction worked its way through her, I thought rapidly. The only, and I mean the only, place we had not yet put anyone was our own stables which were just inside the town gate. When the woman stood up again, I started to lead the couple towards the town, but the man stopped me and said that there was no use going into the town. He had knocked on every door he could find, and there was nowhere they could stay. He had only come to the caravansary, because he hoped that we would take pity on them, as he couldn't afford our fees, but neither could his wife give birth at the side of the road. As I urged them forwards again, I told him of my plan to take them to our stables. It was warm and sheltered, and the straw and hay would make a good bed. I would go and get one of our servants to bring a bucket of hot water and go myself and rouse the midwife to come and give a hand. As soon as I had left the midwife with the woman, whose name I had discovered was Mary, I rushed back to the caravansary to help my husband again.

I was just lying down to sleep the sleep of the completely exhausted, when a really bright light appeared over a field nearby. I looked out over the parapet of the roof I had nearly got to sleep on, but it seemed to have disappeared so I lay down again and instantly fell deeply asleep. I was so exhausted that I thought I had dreamed the light. I didn't dream the noisy drunken shepherds who came shouting and chattering and singing that they had seen angels and a baby. I knew about the baby, and was glad to hear it had been born safely. I didn't believe the angels bit. I slumped back onto my cloak as I heard the watchmen tell the shepherds to go away.

The next time I woke, there was bright sunlight streaming across the roof, and it was the day of the census. Leaving the caravansary in the hands of the servants, my

husband and I walked to the census tent to register with the Romans. The Elders had already made up lists of those that they thought should be registering in the town, and luckily my husband's name, as the head of our household was called early. The Censitores were sat in chairs, asking the questions, and having the scribes, the Censuales who were with them write down the answers. We were able to hear what other people were being asked so we had our answers sort of ready:

'What is your name and the name of your father?'

'How old are you?'

'Do you have a wife and children? What are their names?'

'What kind of property do you own? What is its value?'

'How much land do you own and how many crops does it produce? What is the value of them?'

'How many slaves do you have? And how many servants?'

'What do you think is your worth?'

All of this my husband had to answer, and then swear that the information he had given was correct. We were told that all this information would be taken to Rome and collated there. When the census was complete, a copy would be kept in the Temple of the Nymphs, in Rome for use by the Emperor.

As we were leaving the tent, I noticed the husband of Mary standing nearby, so I went up to him to enquire about his wife and child. His face just lit up, and he told us that Mary was doing well, and that it was a little boy they had called Jesus. We congratulated him, and would have moved on, but he stopped us with one hand, and started to apologise for the noise made by the shepherds. I had forgotten them. What was the bit about the angels, I asked him, as I remembered? He looked embarrassed and said that they told them that they had been in their fields minding their sheep, when the heavens seemed to open and a choir of angels sang 'Glory to God in the highest, and, Peace to his people on earth.' Then the angels told them that a baby had been born in Bethlehem, who was God's son. So they had left their sheep, to come and find him. They had been so overjoyed that they had wanted to tell everyone there and then. I remembered that bit. I also vaguely remembered the bright light. I didn't want to be rude to this man, but I couldn't really believe that the son of God had been born in Bethlehem in my stable.

I was so busy for the next two or three days, as the majority of our visitors set off back home, with supplies of bread and water to keep them going. I didn't have time to go and check up on Mary, Joseph and Jesus. When I did, I was smitten with the lovely woman and her adorable baby. All babies are cute, but there was something about this one. I still wasn't sure about the son of God bit, until a few weeks later, when a group of travellers from Arabia knocked on our door asking for a room and stabling for their camels. They then asked me whether I knew of a baby having been

born in the town a few weeks ago. Something made me ask them why. They told me that they had been on the road for many months, following a star, to find a baby who would be king. I knew then that they were talking about Mary and Jesus, still in our stable, just waiting for them both to be strong enough to manage the week long walk back home to Nazareth. I sent the travellers on their way to the stable, their arms loaded with gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. When they came back they told us that they had laid their gifts before the baby, Jesus, and had spent a long time talking with Mary and Joseph. Early the next morning Mary and Joseph stopped by the caravansary as they were on their way. They thanked us, and left us some of the gold, as payment for their stay.

All these things happened when Quirinius was governor of Syria, and had just been put in charge of the new Roman Province of Judea. He could not have known the many bitter things that would come out of, what was for the Romans, a regular event. The first bitter thing was for us in Bethlehem. Herod sent soldiers to find the baby born to be king, having learnt about him from the Arabians. Many of the townspeople who had heard the shepherds and seen the exotic travellers told the soldiers that the family had left to go home, and were no longer in Bethlehem, but the soldiers chose not to believe them, and took revenge by killing all the baby boys in the town aged under two years. It has scarred the people, and the town, and left us all with a hatred of Herod. The second thing was that one Judas of Gamala became zealous to draw the people to revolt because of the census, among other things. Some of our young men who has shouted against the census, and seen their siblings killed, did join his zealot movement which started a series of violent wars which brought much destruction on our people.

I don't know what to think about Jesus of Nazareth. When he was born the angels sang for joy, and I believe what the shepherds told us about the angels, many times over the years, even though they are not usually the most reliable of witnesses. There was something about them that had changed, through what they had seen. Bethlehem's Rabbi's had told us over the years, that the Messiah would come to save his people, but the first thing that happened to us was that a lot of our sons were killed instead of him. That is not saving us. It was only a little over three years ago that we began to hear stories of the Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, how he was preaching about the kingdom of God, performing miracles and healing the sick. The more stories I heard, the more I began to believe that this was the same Jesus I had seen born here in Bethlehem, all those years ago. Jesus is not such a common name. Then I heard of his triumphal entry in to Jerusalem, the king being welcomed to his capital city, and there it was, the promise to save our people. I waited with bated breath to see what would happen next. But this was followed by the dreadful news that he had been arrested and crucified. How could this happen to a man sent by God? What had gone wrong with God's plan? Were we ever going to be saved? Then there was the

news that he had been seen again, alive, or resurrected, and I really didn't know what to make of that. The final piece of news that came flying to Bethlehem, along with the merchants, was that this Jesus had ascended into heaven, and that something had happened to his followers, who were now preaching the good news of Jesus all over the country. I look forward to one of them coming here to Bethlehem, so that I can find out what all this means, and whether God's chosen people are going to be saved as he has promised, and to tell them about his birth in my stable here in Bethlehem.