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Published in 1998 as *The Weeping Chamber* by Word Publishing under ISBN 0-8499-3703-5.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brouwer, Sigmund, date.

The weeping chamber / Sigmund Brouwer.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8423-8715-3 (sc)

I. Jesus Christ—Fiction. 2. Bible. N.T.—History of Biblical events—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3552.R6825W44 2003

813'.54—dc22

2003020556

Printed in the United States of America

08 07 06 05 04

8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PROLOGUE

I stand in the weeping chamber of my own tomb. I hear the dry wheezing of my old lungs. As I lean upon a cane for balance, my body shakes and trembles.

Behind me, the mouth of the tomb opens to the sunlight beyond. Despite the day's heat, here in the peculiar silence that fills any resting place for the dead, it is still cool. My cloak does not keep me warm, but I have given up on expecting my frail bones to hold any heat.

I stand in the weeping chamber of my own tomb.

It is not a large tomb. I purchased the rocky hillside decades ago and immediately hired stoneworkers to carve a narrow arched entrance the height of a man. Through this opening, the workers continued to hew into the hill, widening and clearing a space inside. When they finished, the tomb was as high as a man could reach and no more than seven steps in length or width.

They had measured me and chiseled into the rock inside the tomb a basin that would accommodate my body upon my eventual death. Beside it, they chiseled another measured space for Jaala, my wife. As was customary, the workers left the remaining graves rough and unfinished, waiting for our children to grow before determining the size of their resting places alongside ours. We prayed, as all parents do, that our children would outlive us

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by many years. It was a prayer that would not be answered in the manner we wished.

I stand in the weeping chamber of my own tomb.

After my death, mourners will work in this small area overlooking the graves, washing and anointing my body with oil and perfumes, wrapping me in the graveclothes made of long strips of linen, packing those linens with fragrant spices to take away the smell of death, and binding my head with a linen napkin.

I do not fear the thought of my death. Not after seventy years on this earth.

Nor do I stand in the tomb's weeping chamber to contemplate how eternity will sweep past my still body, leaving me behind to add to the dust of previous generations.

I stand in the weeping chamber because it is my yearly ritual.

While my wife approaches death, her grave remains empty. As, of course, does mine. Our daughter's grave is empty too, and I thank God she is in good health.

It is the fourth grave—far too tiny, the space hewn into the rock—that draws me into the tomb.

The expensive linen there has long since fallen into tattered strips; the body's odor has long since become a dry mustiness; the bones have long since collapsed into a small, sad pile that clearly shows my son died as a young boy.

He was my firstborn son. And the first dead.

I have mourned his horrible death for forty years. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

My dearest love,

‘Please do not abandon me. The only solace that I can find is the hope that you will mourn for the return that I cannot promise.

‘Thinking of you, I am unable to sleep. The prayer call of the priests’ silver trumpets has yet to mark the dawn, and I write by the light of an oil lamp, knowing this activity will not disturb my hosts.

‘First, I wish you to know that I arrived safely for ‘Passover, and I can report that Pascal and Seraphine are in good health. Now that my travel has ended, I have the luxury of applying markings to scroll. Far apart as we are, my intent is to begin each day of this week with you. I picture you listening to my letter and thus pretend we are in conversation. It aids me that I can imagine you reclining on your couch in our villa far above the harbor. I see your pretty head tilted sideways as you listen with your half frown of concentration. The sun casts a shadow across your face, and the ocean breeze plucks at your soft dark hair much more gently than my rough fingers were ever able. It is how I like to dream of you.

‘Does it surprise you that I now take such trouble with words? Me? Your stony-faced husband who deals so harshly with sailors and merchants? I have not hired a poet as you might suspect. No, the distance between us makes my heart ache with sentiment, and it is easier to be weak for you when you cannot see how I tremble.

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Last night, as I fell into troubled sleep, I could not escape thoughts of you: your soft singing as you brush your hair, your flashes of temper and immediate remorse. I remembered, too, our wedding—how you quivered with fear and anticipation and held me so tightly in our first moments alone that I thought my ribs would crack.

All I have are the thousands of memories with you since then. Simple memories. Watching you on the road from our balcony as you returned from the market with your arms laden. The perfume in your hair as we fell asleep together. The sight of you with a suckling child.

All of it. What we have lost in the present, I relive in the past.

Even on the road from Caesarea to Jerusalem, among the pilgrims on foot and riding wagons and mules, I found myself turning to you again and again in the crowd to share comments on the sights and sounds. You were not, of course, beside me, and on each occasion my heart grew heavier.

It is far worse, is it not, when you can only blame yourself for what is lost? when what you have lost becomes far sweeter because you will never have it again? Let us not fool ourselves. You no longer love me. That you are faithful, I have no doubt. But you do not love me.

I warn you now that in these letters I intend to pursue your hand with the same passion I did during our first days together. I want you to love me all over again.

Yet when I find the courage to tell you what I must, I wonder how you could ever offer that gift again. At the least, you will finally understand what has driven us apart. And why we will never be together again.

Until I find the courage, permit me these daily contemplations. Above all, think of my love for you.

Your Simeon

CHAPTER TWO

Incense and silk. Scent and satin. Irresistible, at least to those who could afford it. Absently—a touch once trained is a touch that would not forget—I ran my hand over a roll of dark silk in the front corner of the market shop. My fingers traced a few flaws, but I said nothing.

Three women stood in front of me, their veiled heads bobbing as they simultaneously haggled prices with my cousin Pascal. I watched with as much amusement as I allowed myself in those days. The women had my sympathy. Their nostrils were filled with perfume, their grasping fists filled with draped silk and their husbands' purses of gold coins. Against Pascal's shrewdness, they stood little chance.

I waited patiently, knowing Pascal would allow them the small victory of an extended battle.

Although it was well past dawn, little sunlight reached Pascal's wares. The shading was deliberate. He did not want his colors to fade. As well, dimness added confusion to a shop cluttered with rolls of silk and purple cloth, giving the impression that Pascal's luxuries spilled endlessly and sloppily, waiting for a buyer to take advantage of his carelessness. While the first was true—Pascal did have wealth a king might envy—not a single thread of silk floated out the door without Pascal's knowledge and consent.

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When the women happily admitted defeat and walked past me with their armloads of wares, I turned so they could not see the angry burn scar that showed through my beard on the left side of my face. Their veils hid their eyes, but not their sight.

“Simeon,” my cousin Pascal said. “Did you sleep well?”

In the middle of his forties, he was fifteen years older than I. The night before, when I had arrived at his mansion in the upper city, I had seen him for the first time with his new wife. They made an interesting contrast. She—young and plump with golden-red hair, a ready smile, and plain clothing. He—old and thin and bald above a scraggly white beard, dressed in layers of luxury and chains of gold. Yet I had no reason to second-guess Pascal’s choice of wives; he had already outlived three and could be expected by now to know what he did and did not like in a woman.

“I slept well,” I said.

“That is a poor lie.” He gave me his toothy lion’s grin. “You do not look rested.”

I shrugged.

Pascal pointed to where I had been standing. “That roll of silk you examined . . .”

“Adequate quality,” I answered, “but merely adequate, despite its rich appearance. I think water has marked it.”

“Praise be to God that you do not choose to set up a shop opposite me here in Jerusalem.” Another toothy grin. “You are right, of course. Fools and camels and a sudden rainstorm. I paid a fraction of what it is worth. As you might guess, however, I will not take that into consideration when the wives of rich men—”

“Pascal, purchase everything I have,” I said bluntly.

My words stopped him flat, probably the first time I had seen him unable to immediately grasp a situation.

“My ships, my warehouses, my shops,” I said. “Everything.”

He recovered, his grin replaced by serious study. He knew me

well enough to understand I did not speak frivolously. He also knew me well enough not to ask for the reason behind my sudden offer.

“For a fair price, of course,” he said, not so subtly testing me.

“Perhaps less,” I answered. “I am far less concerned about the price than you might imagine.”

He studied me, looking past my appearance. “If it is not price, what, then, is your concern?” he finally asked.

“Honor,” I said. “That is why I decided to use Passover as an excuse to come to Jerusalem and approach you.”

Two women entered the shop. Pascal did not have the opportunity to ask more.

As for me, I was satisfied. I had planted the seed that would rapidly grow. By week’s end, I guessed, Pascal and I would come to terms.

I left him with his customers and wandered out to see the city.



This was not my first visit to the Holy City. I knew what I would find as the markets came to life over the next few hours.

The streets would be crowded with bazaars peopled with shoemakers, tailors, flax spinners, goldsmiths, wool combers, butchers, food inspectors, and diplomats. The air would be filled with the smell of fish, of incense, of ripe and rotting fruit, of the stench of leather being cured, tanned, and dyed. I would find food- and wineshops, where, if my appetite conquered my dull spirit, I could partake from a selection that varied from fried locusts to fresh fish to fruitcakes. Or I could be tempted by Judean or Galilean wines, or a wide range of foreign beers to break my recent vow to avoid drink.

If I were after excitement, I could have dodged thieves and prostitutes in the lower city, among the dark underground alleys

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where a man could lose his soul and life to any number of different seductions. Or I could have cheered at the horse races in the Hippodrome, or disappeared into a theater in pursuit of distraction, or lost myself in the hot fog of steam rooms that were as luxurious as any in Rome.

I knew, however, that no amount of activity would console me.

I chose instead to seek the countryside beyond the city, using as my guide the distant smoke of the temple sacrifices, which rippled dark above the altar like a curtain between earth and heaven.

CHAPTER THREE

I spent the remainder of the morning in the dusty groves above the Kidron Valley, on the western slope of the Mount of Olives. From there I could quietly survey all of Jerusalem. A few hours later, I returned to the main road and joined the pilgrims moving into the Holy City. I could not know then, of course, how I was about to become part of an inexorable avalanche of events about to destroy the single innocent man who stood resolutely in its path.

Not until later would I understand more, learning portions of it from those prominent in religious and political circles who welcomed me because of my wealth. Many of the other participants—servants and scribes, women and soldiers—later recounted their witness to His followers. Eventually, when combined with what the followers themselves had seen, this entire story would become clear to me; I lean heavily on their accounts—admitting some speculation at their motives—for what I was unable to see myself.

And what I could not see that morning began on the other side of the hill.



To be more accurate, the events began in Bethphage, which lay on the eastern side of the Mount of Olives. Some considered

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Bethphage distinct from Jerusalem, for the deep Kidron Valley separated it from the city proper. Others—despite the valley between—considered Bethphage an extension of the city, and during Passover and the days before, the scattered collection of buildings that made up the hamlet were filled with festive pilgrims who could not find room to stay in Jerusalem.

Bethphage is connected to Jerusalem by a caravan road that crosses the bottom of the Kidron Valley and passes by olive groves as it climbs the Mount of Olives. After the road reaches the top, it dips through Bethphage, then continues on a gentle descent into Bethany, a half mile away. From there, the caravan road reaches to Jericho and beyond.

Little traffic, however, followed the road away from Jerusalem at this time of year. Instead, patriarch pilgrims jammed the road destined for the Holy City. The bickering of pilgrims with mothers-in-law, camels, donkeys, chickens, children, and other stubborn beasts irritated by long days of travel provided amusement for the residents of Bethphage who sat beside their homes and watched the parade.

The crowds were at their most entertaining, for so near to Passover, people were impatient to reach the Holy City for purification in the temple. Furthermore, the warming weather had called out the idle travelers fortunate enough to have already secured lodging. The sky was weak blue in the high altitude, painted with wisps of clouds. A slight breeze kept the day from becoming hot, yet the sun had enough strength to banish all thoughts of winter.

Among the traffic, two men approaching Bethphage gave little cause for notice until they began to untie a young donkey haltered to a post near its mother in front of an inn.

Peter—redheaded and red-bearded—wore the rough clothing of a fisherman, with a sword strapped to his side and the per-

petual scowl of suspicion common to laborers who understand no way to make money except with their hands. The other, John, taller with thinning brown hair, walked with a staff.

Fumbling with the rope at the donkey's side, Peter and John tried to ignore the hostile stares from a group of men nearby. The older men sat on chairs, surveying the road in dignified disdain; the younger men stood behind them with their arms crossed, trying to appear equally important to passersby.

"You!" the tallest of the younger observers challenged, stepping toward Peter and John. "Red and stubby! Mind giving an explanation?"

Mutters of support came from the others.

Peter said nothing.

"You!" the man repeated. "Are you deaf? Touched in the head?"

Peter straightened, his hands still on the halter rope. "I can hear you with no difficulty. As for my head, there is nothing wrong—"

"Ho-ho," the man laughed. He was bulky with the natural advantages of an athletic body, but his substantial belly showed he took his prowess for granted. "But a few words and I can tell you're from the north. All they grow are simpletons up there."

He paused, looking to his companions for support. Their grins were all the encouragement he needed. "So tell me, country boy," the man continued. "What are you doing?"

The tendons at the side of Peter's neck strained as he tried to control his temper. "This is a rope," Peter said slowly. "The rope is attached to the donkey. My fingers are upon the rope. As my fingers pull apart the knot, the rope becomes untied. Once I untie the rope, the animal will be free. It is a simple concept. Surely even the dimmest of minds can—"

"Peace, Peter," John interrupted him. "Remember our in-

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structions.” John turned and spoke directly to the gathered men, recalling how he had been instructed. “Our Lord needs this donkey. He will send it back shortly.”

Peter’s chest rose and fell visibly as he took in and let out a deep breath.

“Tell me,” one of the older men said, speaking to John before a fight could erupt, “this Lord of yours. Would He happen to be the prophet from Nazareth?”

“None other,” John replied.

The group’s silence became a silence of respect.

“We have heard rumors of His arrival. Will He pass by soon?”

John nodded.

The old man thought for several seconds. “The story about a dead man, Lazarus of Bethany. Were you there?”

John nodded again.

“Was it as described?” the man asked. “A man raised from his tomb?”

“Words do not do it justice,” Peter said stoutly. “I smelled the stench of death from the tomb. And from the darkness he came, called out by our Lord.”

The observers whispered among themselves.

“Silence,” the old man barked. To John and Peter he spoke more quietly. He knew there could be no harm and possibly great gain in extending a favor to a famous worker of miracles. “Take the animal.”

Both disciples led the donkey toward Bethany, where the teacher had already begun leading a procession on foot.

As soon as Peter and John turned a corner in the road, the young men at the inn scattered to spread the news in all directions. They took proud ownership in the arrival of the miracle man of Nazareth by being the first to have knowledge of His coming to Bethphage from Bethany on His way to the Holy City.

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This news reached me as I walked among the pilgrims on my return to Jerusalem, news that stirred me from thoughts of despair and aroused a little curiosity from my depths of self-pity.

As for the old men, after the departure of the two disciples, they merely waited by the side of the road. They had long since learned that much of life arrived with or without their efforts.