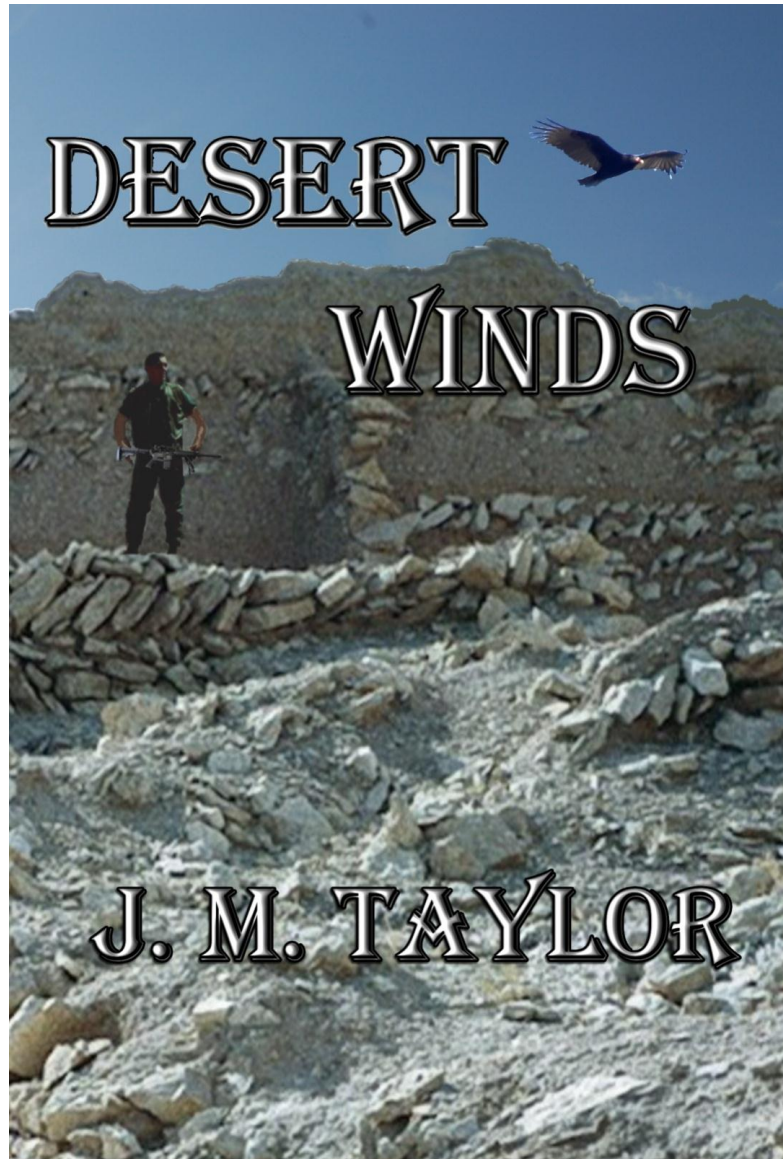


THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

J. M. TAYLOR



Here is how it all began...

K H R I S T O S

Y M J N R F L J T K H M W N X Y
Q N J X G J M N I Y M J L W J J S
B F Y J W Y M J B F D Y T Y M J
Q N E M Y Y M J B F D Y T
J A J U G F X Y N S L
H M W N X Y X T R T K L T I
F S I K F Y M J W X F A N T W
T K H F J X F W U M N Q N U U N
N S Y M J X M F I T B T K
Y M J R T Z S Y T K Y M J
R T X J X Q T A J T K L T I
R F S B T R F S F S I H M N Q I
F W J U W T H Q F D R J I Y T F Q Q



CHAPTER ONE

Galilee, 32 A. D.

Cyrus of Athena slowly shuffled up to Ajax.

Ajax paused, pestle and bowl of pigments in his hands, and bowed his head in respect before the old man as his father had taught him.

“You have a fine son, Telemond.”

Ajax could barely understand the old man’s words. Cyrus’ breath held a hint of mint, faint disguise for the illness that even Ajax could smell, the aroma of an old man, dying inside. Ajax slowly looked up as Cyrus took Ajax’s chin in his hand and peered at him through rheumy eyes. Ajax trembled in the grip of the old soldier, but returned his gaze as Cyrus sat on a stone bench.

“Child, aren’t you pleased I brought you and Telemond to build my final place of rest?” Cyrus waved across the valley toward the distant Sea of Galilee and the narrow band of water that others of the valley called the River Jordan, and north toward the town of Caesar Philippi. “I, my father, and his father, have protected and cared for this valley and its people since our ancestors first rode as soldiers in Alexander’s army. You know of Alexander, King of Greece and conqueror of the world, don’t you, boy?” Cyrus held his scared arms up for the boy to see. “I have fought many battles with these old arms, but I am missing the greatest victory of all, a son.” He reached out and patted Ajax on his shoulder, fingers light as bird feathers. “You be a good son for your father. You are his pride. I see it in your eyes, as well as his.”

Truly, Ajax knew his father was proud of him, even though he sometimes moved a little slowly on his crutches. Ajax had worked hard in preparing Telemond’s brushes and pigments. Eyes on the floor, he smiled, proud their work pleased their benefactor.

The engraved marble sepulcher had been complete for several days. Now Telemond worked when the light was clear on a landscape scene on the wall of the crypt, smoothing and cleaning an expanse of

limestone while Ajax prepared the pigments for the fresco. Telemond had first sketched in the line of mountains between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean coastal city of Tyr, adding the rich greens of the Lebanon cedars and graceful date palms laden with fruit.

Ajax had carefully mixed the powders and today even added a few of the careful brush strokes under Telemond's supervision.

Cyrus stared at the evolving scene, then slowly climbed to his feet and shuffled back to the cave mouth. He paused, turned at the entrance. "You have done well, Telemond, you and the boy, well worth the expense of bringing you across the sea." He ran his hand over the smooth marble and waved at the fresco on the wall. "I will never be away from my beloved valley, even in death. The trees, the snow on the mountain, it is very peaceful."

Cyrus and Ajax worked for the remainder of the afternoon until a murmur of voices interrupted their solitude.

"Who is that speaking outside, son?" asked Telemond. They were almost finished for the day, and Telemond had begun cleaning his brushes.

When Ajax looked outside he saw a crowd, drawn by a strong voice speaking on the flowered terrace. He and Telemond joined the throng gathered to hear the man from Nazareth, the one they called the Messiah, the anointed one. Ajax sat with his father into the evening, long after the light had fallen too low to work inside the cave, listening to the gentle words of the man his disciples declared both a prophet and a healer.

Speaking in the Aramaic tongue of the valley, the Messiah spoke in parables, stories about devotion and compassion. He approached Ajax, who, while afraid, was drawn by the kind words about forgiveness and love of others. Others gathered around when the Messiah asked if Ajax understood faith. When Ajax replied that he did not know, the Messiah placed his hands on Ajax's head and in a soft voice told the crippled boy that with faith he could be strong.

And Ajax stood...and walked. Telemond propped his son's crutch inside the crypt, but Ajax never had to use it again.

Inspired by the healing of his son, Telemond worked the next day adding several figures to the fresco on the plastered wall of the crypt.

CHAPTER TWO

A cavern below Mount Hermon, 42 A. D.

Ajax took a deep breath and forced himself to continue down the narrow passageway, trembling at the silent darkness, almost faint with relief when he emerged through the waterfall.

In the years since his father crafted Cyrus' sepulcher, Ajax had married Persephone, one of Cyrus' granddaughters and, like Ajax, a Christian. The Roman feared a rebellion by the Christians, and solved their problem with more crucifixions of the men and selling the women and children into slavery. Weeping, Persephone had told him a fortnight before of the murder of her mother and aunts at the hands of the Romans when they refused to accept the bonds of slavery. With Persephone safely hidden with relatives in a small village in the Bekáa Valley, Ajax returned to the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Working from the inside where he would be hidden from the wandering shepherds, Ajax carefully sealed the entrance to Cyrus' crypt and Telemond's greatest masterpiece and crept out through the fissure leading to the waterfall.

Exhausted after his all-night task, Ajax looked back at the curtain of water, green as it tumbled down over moss-covered rocks and sparkled in the morning sun. He felt certain the cavern entrance and tortuous journey through the underworld to reach the tomb would remain hidden from the Romans and the wandering shepherds of the valley.

"Lorus," he said to his own son after many more years passed. "I grow old and can wait no longer." Ajax had feared this day because Lorus had never shared his devotion to the memory of the Messiah. "I must pass a sacred secret to you." Ajax told his son of his own miraculous healing and of the cave containing Telemond's fresco, guarded by the body of dear Cyrus.

Lorus was a Jew and had never accepted the old stories of the mysterious Messiah. But he dearly loved his father, and listened intently to Ajax's story of the miracle, his healing on the mountainside. At

Ajax's urging, Lorus traveled to the waterfall, found the entrance and, bundle of tapers in hand, made his way through the damp passageway to the tomb to see the fresco for himself. He returned from the cavern to confess to his father that upon seeing the holy fresco, he had knelt and wept, and now believed. So inspired was he by the revelations, Lorus was determined to commemorate the fresco's existence for others, but was afraid to expose his family to the dangers.

Christian artisans of the time had become adept at encryption and symbology; the most famous of which was the simple fish. Engraved on tombstones across the span of Roman rule, the simple sign of the fish identified a faithful Christian to other Christians, a symbol largely unrecognized, or at least ignored, by their prosecutors. Lorus described the path to the fresco, first in his native Aramaic, then transcribed to Greek, the language of his grandfather. It was a simple message.

“The Image of Christ lies behind the green water, the way to the light, the way to everlasting Christ, Son of God and father, savior of Caesar Philippi. In the shadow of the mount of Moses, love of God, man, woman and child are proclaimed to all.”

Fearful of the Roman council ruling the valley, Lorus then encrypted the Greek words, substituting letter for letter following a simple substitution pattern. He selected a fine-grained slab of marble and spent an entire day polishing the slab until he could see his own face reflected in the stone. Then with a fine chisel he carefully engraved the encrypted words, polishing each facet of each letter, a silent memorial to his grandfather and the Messiah in hopes that one day the world would be safe for Christians to pray by the tomb. At the very bottom of the tablet he carefully engraved the symbol of the fish, the fine lines a hint to the words encrypted on the tablet.

Over the following years this holy relic was known as the Image of Christ, and was placed in a place of honor in the home of the eldest son. In the years of peace, when the Romans embraced Christianity, the family treasured it as a symbol of their devotion. In times of threat, it was carefully hidden away. During one of those times its meaning was lost to the family and the polished slab became just another piece of rock.

CHAPTER THREE

Damascus, 254 A. D.

The polished bit of marble lay in the corner of a distant cousin's house, so distant they considered themselves unrelated to the Greeks of the valley. Uncovered by Libby, the industrious wife of Petronius the grower of fruits, she installed the tablet in her kitchen the first year of her marriage. Covered with flour dust it lay unrecognized, engraved side down, as a base for rolling out bread and other tasks as children came and grew.

"Peatrie, leave the knife alone. You will cut yourself."

Despite the handicap of a badly stunted leg, Peatrie was a curious child. Libby watched her examine the pottery maker's pattern on a mug, set it back on the broad table, then slide her fingers along the flour dust. She picked up a corner of the tablet and peered at the underside. "Mother, what do the letters say?" she asked, running her fingers along the angular marks engraved in the marble.

More questions. "Ask your father," replied Libby. "Atronus studied with the priests in the temple; he understands the letters."

"Ah, my sweet girl, never you mind. It is just Greek gibberish," Atronus responded as he rinsed a pile of fresh dates, preparing them for the market. "The Greeks, even the ones in the village, they all believe they were the rulers of the world."

Atronus' frowned when the dates spilled through a hole in the old wicker basket used to carry the dates to the market. His frown immediately turned to a smile at Peatrie's giggle. "Now all that is left of the Greek empire are shopkeepers and evil-faced statues at the temple. I don't much like the proud ones who think they are still kings. Just wealthy they are, not wise." He peered at the basket and held out his hand. "Give me that piece of Greek stone." Atronus took the tablet from Peatrie and used it to plug the hole in the basket. "Now these Greek words are of great value." Atronus laughed at his joke and layered

the dates with palm leaves, filling the basket to the brim. "Come. Help me take the fruit to the market." He handed Peatrie a small bag of figs, shouldered the basket and led the way to the town square.

Libby stood with her hands on her hips, shaking her head as she watched them walk side-by-side toward the town market, Peatrie limping as she carried the sack over her shoulder, her tiny hand engulfed by her father's. Libby would willingly give up the old stone to see her daughter and husband laughing together.

On the edge of town an Arab trader leading a string of mules stopped Atronus and Peatrie. After a few minutes of haggling, the trader strapped the date-filled basket on a complaining mule for the long trip to the Jordan River and eventually across the harsh Sinai. The trip took several weeks and the trader consumed many of the dates before the trader reached the mouth of the Nile River, enroute to the frankincense fields of the lower Arabia peninsula. The flour-coated marble tablet lay un-noticed under the dates until the trader emptied the basket in a produce stall in the Cairo market. There the tablet clattered to the hard-packed ground, the stone an unexpected weight in the bottom of the basket.

An old man pounced on the tablet and ran before the trader could do more than yell. Safe back in his warren of twisted alleys, the old man polished the marble tablet with his sleeve and a bit of spit. He laid it on a straw mat together with fragments of stone carved with strange symbols, birds and people with heads of animals, other oddities stolen from the graves around the Pyramids. He called out to anyone who passed to buy his collection, "Save an old man from starvation. Buy these precious stones. Healing, wealth will be yours, only if you take a stone for your home. Good luck can be bought here," he sang out, singsong in his call.

Origenes Adamantius, a Christian philosopher, often strolled through the market. This day he paused at the old man's mat, inspected the odd pieces of rock, then bought the tablet for a single small coin, curious about the nonsensical words. He was a scholar, well versed in Greek and other languages, but the letters engraved on the tablet were clearly a secret message of some sort. Adamantius studied the tablet for several days.

“Ha,” he finally exclaimed. “So simple, I should not wasted my coin or my time. But what do the words refer to, I wonder?” he mused. “Green water, a mountain.” But one word was clear.

He scratched the letters over their encrypted counterparts across the top of the tablet.

“K...H...R...I...S...T...O...S.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Cairo Museum, Egypt, 347 A. D.

Philo's back was tired. So much rubbish, all treated as treasures by the scholars. Heavy carved obelisks and ancient busts of people long dead lined the corridors of the Cairo Museum. Days like this, Philo was more than willing to set it all by the desert road and let the sands cover the stone as it had done for centuries, blowing up from the Sahara to the great sphinx and pyramids overlooking the Nile at Giza. Anthanasius, the Greek patriarch of Alexandria, had collected this great pile from shopkeepers, grave robbers and thieves all across Egypt. Now it was up to Philo to sort, clean, polish and evaluate the pieces scattered across the chamber of antiquities. He was so tired. He wiped the sweat from his brow and inspected both sides of the tablet. Simple marble, one side was defaced by angular engraved letters in the style of the old Greeks, like many of the pieces rescued and sent to Alexandria.

"Garbage." He spit on his sleeve and rubbed it across the slab of marble. No where could he see a sign of the hieroglyphs carved into the graves and great cities build by the rulers of the Old Kingdom. "Worthless," he muttered and threw the tablet onto a growing pile of rubble. He had no interest in garbled Greek inscriptions when so many magnificent Egyptian treasures had yet to be understood and protected from the Romans and others who came to Egypt only for treasure. The summer was too hot, the desert breeze filled with pestilence.

The tablet, unnoticed and unwanted, gathered the dust of centuries as empires waxed and waned, floods washed away the wicked, looters carried away the magnificent pieces and famines starved the innocent.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cairo, 621 A. D.

“Justin,” the curator lay the gold mask aside and called out from the Room of Gold. “Please find something to stop the outer door from banging. I can’t work with all that noise.” The curator grumbled at the heat and returned to brushing the layers of dust from the gold mask.

Justin, a minor clerk in the Cairo antiquities building, picked through a pile of tablets and bits of carved stone, throwing each aside until he felt the slab of smooth marble. He had helped catalogue antiquities many years, enough to recognize the angular grooves forming the Greek letters. But he did not understand the words. Justine set the tablet aside and selected a rough square of stone taken from one of the lesser pyramids to prop open the door. A cool evening breeze blew across the room, bringing the damp air from the Nile, a welcome relief from the desert winds out of the west.

Toward the end of the long midsummer day Justine took the marble slab to an scholar on the other side of the building who, after a few moments of study pointed out the symbol of the fish and told Justine the tablet appeared to be a Christian relic, of no value to their studies of Egyptian Kingdoms past.

“Trash,” he said. “The Greeks, the Romans, their glory was only a pimple compared to the greatness of Egypt, even now. Go to the docks and listen. Sailors tell of lands across the Mediterranean invaded by barbarians from the wilderness, unworthy of scholarly interest. The important people of Rome and Athens, Caesar, Alexander and their like, are all are dead and forgotten, their armies defeated and palaces decimated. Even the great temples of Alexandria have been swallowed by the sea.”

Justine, somehow intrigued by the old tablet, carried the piece to his home in the Nazlet el Simman quarter in the south of Cairo. His modest home stood on a slight rise where each morning the rising sun highlighted the Sphinx’s aristocratic face watching over the Nile. Justine had prayed to the old gods, but they had not answered. His eldest son had died of the fevers, and Justine’s wages were barely enough to buy food for a his wife and their daughters.

When he arrived home the light of the late afternoon sun still shown brightly into Justine's home. Before his evening meal he plastered the tablet into the entranceway at the exact spot where the long shadow from the tallest of the three pyramids fell. Over the following years, for one week each midsummer, only for an instant each day the tablet reflected the very last of the sun's rays. Whenever the sun glinted from the polished marble Justine closed his eyes and prayed on his knees in front of the tablet.

Perhaps the God of the Christians had listened. In the coming years his youngest daughter bore Justine's grandchildren.

He was happy.

CHAPTER SIX

Nazlet el Simman, Cairo, Egypt 808 A. D.

“Mosul. Dig that profane stone from the old wall. The mullah must not see a Christian relic in my home when he visits tonight.”

Akmed seemed alarmed that he had forgotten the tablet, the Greek word “KHRISTOS” clearly scratched into the marble for a scholar like himself to recognize. Over the years Akmed had scrubbed at the words, but in the afternoon light anyone who understood Greek could clearly read the inscription. And then there was the fish. Blessed be to Allah, Akmed had no idea what other blasphemes were described by the Satanic words.

A new window allowing the breeze from the Nile to flow unimpeded through the home, a stone wall around the rear court; superficial changes had left the old mud and limestone dwelling much the same since the long forgotten Justine’s death. However, following the spread of the Words of Mohammed out of Arabia and across the southern Mediterranean, the culture and basic beliefs of the community had changed dramatically.

Mosul held himself calm, swallowing back his rage as Akmed rapped him across the shoulder with his cane. He bowed his head before his master. Religion had not meant much to Akmed before, but his festering hate of Akmed and Islam grew with each day.

“Get on with it, man. I want the wall smooth before darkness and the cleric arrives.” Akmed left to join his three wives, leaving Mosul to dig out the shiny marble tablet with its Greek letters.

Mosul hammered at the mud, loosening the straw and clay until he finally could pry out the tablet, leaving the marble no longer a finished rectangle but a ragged slab with chipped edges. A Coptic from the Christian quarter of Cairo on the east bank of the Nile, Mosul chafed under his Islamic master. Partially to spite Akmed, Mosul secreted the tablet under his sleeping mat, a pillow for his head when he thought

late at night about the legends of the Jews' flight from Egypt, and his own quest to escape. Summer passed and the next February Mosul took advantage of the wet winds to slip away. He walked to the Nile, then upstream toward the sprawling old city of Cairo and on to the docks where he found work as a stevedore. He slept in the bales of cotton at night after listening to the curious talk of the sailors. Their tales intrigued Mosul, stories from so many different lands and people.

One blustery day a whisper across the docks warned of a wave of clerics coming the next morning to cleanse the workers of their sins. That night Mosul sailed for distant shores, away from persecution by the followers of Mohammed.

Mosul carried the tablet with him wherever he traveled, his only material connection to Christianity as he sailed the North African littoral, following the old Phoenician routes. Along the Libyan coast he was taken by the fever and left by his shipmates at the Christian basilica at Leptis Magna, where Brother Jules cared for him until he died.

A practical man, Brother Jules discovered the tablet as he searched through poor Mosul's effects. Jules labored over the unfamiliar words, pouring over old scrolls as he laboriously tried to translate the encrypted and unfamiliar Greek to the Latin with which he was familiar. Several years passed before his understanding of Greek and the secrets of encryption allowed him to recognize the connection between the scratched name of Christ and the engraved words.

Inspired by his discovery and to escape the influence of the Arabs, Brother Jules shipped aboard one of the many trading vessels bound for Constantinople, with the intent of returning the tablet to the town identified in the encrypted words. Caesar Philippi had become a thriving seaport on the Palestinian coast south of Mount Hermon, built in the first year after the birth of Christ. Brother Jules braved rough winter seas and coastal pirates to reach the outer edges of the Syrian empire with barely his life, robes and the sacred fragment of stone. He died in the humble monastery at Caesarea Palistinae, satisfied he had returned the tablet to its land of origin. The tablet lay untouched in a side alcove, one of a very few holy relics watched over by the impoverished monks isolated in the land of the Muslims.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Berry, France, May, 1096 A. D.

Miriam turned from the window. The aroma of the May roses heavy in the evening air, teased by the buzzing insects to spread their petals and release their sweet aroma into the evening. “Jacques, must you go? My lord, please stay, oh please,” she pleaded with her husband, already knowing the young nobleman had decided to join Pope Urban’s call to the holy crusade.

Men of high and low standing had congregated around the town all spring, gathering horses and arms. Jacques had watched from afar until this very week when finally he joined the men of the province at the cathedral. Unable to hold back his feelings, Jacques had left Miriam’s side to answered the call to arms issued by Peter of Amiens, full of fiery rhetoric after his recent return from the Holy Lands.

Jacques took her trembling hand in his. “My dear Miriam. The heathens have defiled Jerusalem, our holy city. You know I cannot stay here in France while others sacrifice so much. Even my love for you is overwhelmed by my duty.”

She turned to the bedside table where she brought forth a finely carved wooden cross from beneath a scarf. “Carry this token with you, along with my love and devotion.” Miriam held out the cross, candlelight glinting from the figure of Jesus worn smooth from years of prayer. “I suspected you would lead, not follow, the quest in the name of our holy Lord Jesus. I love you; I know your mind. Go, my dearest, with my undying affection.”

“My darling.” Jacques shook his head, “This cross was your mother’s...” He paused, at a loss for words, fighting back tears. “... your grandmother’s. How can you part with it?” He held the cross gently, the wood still warm from his wife’s soft touch.

“It is not as precious to me as your return.” She smiled in the soft candlelight. “Others demand you fight for the Church. Your only charge from me is to carry the cross. That way I know you will return, by

the very grace of God safe back to my arms.” She took the cross from his hand and placed it in a box, glittering with inlay filaments of gold and silver, and offered it back to her husband. “Let this box protect the cross as you keep yourself well. I will wait for you to embrace me again.” A hint of perfume rose from the wood, a reminder of its previous use by Miriam to hold her scents.

“The box is beautiful, my dear, a fitting vessel for the cross. I will hold both as precious, a symbol of my love of God and you.” He held the box to the light. “The word. What does it say?” he asked, illiterate as most men of his day who were not of the church nor artisans.

“You travel on a quest for the Son of God, so I asked the Greek in the marketplace to place His name on the box.”

Jacques traced the inlaid gold letters, KHRISTOS, intertwined with tiny leaping silver fish. “The box and its cross shall never leave my side.”

The mass of men, retainers and servants and camp-followers traveled across Europe and into Palistinae, only to be met with equal determination by the Turks. They fought on the very soil where Jesus walked, where the Muslims sought to desecrate all that was holy in the name of Allah and Mohammed.

October winds blew hot from the distant deserts as Jacques cantered his bloodied charger, urging the wounded horse toward the shadow of the cross. Jacques slid from his saddle, stumbled to the foot of the steps and lay his head on the cool stone, thinking of Miriam. Peace at last, he thought as the horse moved to the hillside and, ignoring its own wounds, began cropping the dry grass. The rhythmic sound reminded Jacques of home, his farmlands stretching to the horizon.

“Hello,” a voice called from the stone battlements overhead.

“Miriam,” he replied, thinking he had returned to his France and his beloved wife.

The monks carried him inside the monastery of Caesarea Palestinae, but he died before the night was out, to be buried in the catacombs beneath the chapel alongside the bones of a long-dead traveler. After a quiet prayer, Brother Peter honored the knight’s memory by hanging his cross on the wall of the sanctuary

and propped the empty box on the ledge beside an ancient tablet left by a traveler long before the Crusades.

Brother Francis picked up the aromatic box, puzzled that the box would have the same Greek letters inlaid into its surface as the stone tablet. “Brother Peter, may I use this box for the tablet? They both are blessed with the name of our Lord and Savior.”

Given permission, he was chagrined when he realized the tablet was too long to fit in the box.

Handy with tools, Brother Francis first carefully etched a line across the bottom of the marble and broke off the bottom section with the symbol of the fish, leaving the words intact. He started to toss the segment with the fish in the trash, then stopped, aghast at what he had almost done. Instead of throwing it away, he slipped the fragment of rock into a fold in his robes, his own personal talisman. Now the tablet with the indecipherable words fit tightly in the inlaid box. He searched out several bands of copper and hammered them securely around the box. Thus sealed, the box sat for generations on the simple altar of the monastery, their single bit of treasure.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the Damascus-Baghdad Road, 1917 A. D.

“Off your bloody arses,” roared the Sergeant Major, and the bone-weary company struggled to their feet in the cool shade of the ruins. Until recently battered by an artillery attack, the ruins had once been a small monastery, a remnant of the disrupted flow of Christianity from Jerusalem across the world. “Don’t let that bloody lot beat us to Damascus. We ain’t gonna sleep all day while them buggers take all the glory, now are we?”

With a groan the British soldiers climbed to their feet. In the distance dark-robed Bedouins led by Lawrence trotted toward the sun, a great globe rising over of the distant hills. Shots echoed from the mountains as the Bedouins caught up with the retreating Germans and Turks.

Corporal Paddy O’Roark dusted off a wooden box and held it up to the morning rays of the sun to admire the gilt inlay. It was heavy with an engraved stone inside.

Private John Matthews leaned on his rifle waiting for his mate to get his gear settled, using any excuse to hang back a bit. “So now, Paddy. Since you’re Catholic, you can just steal anything you want from a monastery without a bit of a worry God won’t strike you dead?”

“Sot out, mate.” O’Roark threw the broken bits of an old wooden cross back into the rubble and stuffed the inlaid box into his haversack. “You bloody Protestants ain’t got no true feeling for what’s holy in this world. If I leave this bit of Christianity here in these old rocks the heathens will steal it, sure as we stand here in God’s glory. Now see here, you just leave it to me. I’ll see the box gets to someone who can take care of it, by God.”

“Oh, yes. Like you took care of Willie’s Remington when that sniper smashed up his arm.” Matthews looked at O’Roark’s rifle with envy, shiny new in comparison to his battered Lee-Enfield.

O’Roark wiped a bit of dust from the sight. “This here piece of fine machinery needs a proper soldier like me to treat it proper. You’re a grand Englishman, so you carry that fine old piece of English iron you better get slung over your bloody shoulder. Made in Eddystone, you tell me, in America? Right good English place that sounds.” Gear finally settled, O’Roark led his mate out of the stone ruins and picked up the pace set by the Sergeant Major. “Hah! You might as well be carrying one of them old Spanish flintlocks the heathens wave over their heads.” He grinned at Matthews, sweeping his hand around in a wide curve. “Barrel’s so damn crooked I’ll call you forward the next time we have to shoot around corners, I will.”

O’Roark was true to his word, at least about the box. Like many of the Irish Catholic volunteers with the British army, he cursed with his mates but prayed before each battle. But today he couldn’t shake it off; he had a bad feeling as they marched across the desert toward Baghdad.

“Get after them boogers,” yelled the Sergeant Major, waving them up the steep road, and O’Roark and his squad scrambled after the desperate Germans. A bullet slapped the rock and O’Roark returned fire at a blur of dusty gray. His target staggered, then toppled over the side of the gray granite cliff.

“This bloody Remington, it do shoot nice, eh, John,” crowed O’Roark.

“Don’t stop to brag now, O’Roark. Only one left of this bunch,” yelled the Sergeant Major. “Up there.” He pointed up a steep road. “You two kill the bastard, then join us back at the foot of the mountain.” He waved O’Roark and Matthews after the German.

O’Roark scraped against the side of the mountain, away from the dizzying drop to the ravine below. He grinned at Matthews, crouched in a crevice in the rock. “Come on mate, our chance to be a hero.” O’Roark led the way on up the steep climb. At the end of the road the German was gone, his rifle abandoned by a heavy wooden door set back into a narrow arched opening. The sun washed across a Christian cross carved into the keystone over the door.

O’Roark stopped in front of the door. “The booger has run into a monastery.”

“You being the good Catholic, you roust the bastard,” said Matthews.

O’Roark beat on the door and threatened the wrath of the mighty Imperial Army.

A voice called out from overhead.

O’Roark took a step back and stared up at a hooded figure looking down from a narrow window.

“Open the damned door,” he yelled, shaking his rifle at the monk.

“What a good Christian you are, mate.” Matthews grinned at O’Roark. “Get on with it or we’ll miss tea.”

The monk adamantly refused to let O’Roark in until he left his rifle outside with Matthews. Once inside, O’Roark felt strangely at peace as the monk led him to the chapel where he knelt beside the trembling Boche. After they both took the blessing of the priest, O’Roark left the inlaid box in the hands of the German and returned to rescue his Remington from Matthews.

“Come on, you bloody Protestant,” he yelled, waking his mate from a solid nap in the shade. “The German sod, he ain’t no soldier no more, he’s a right monk, he is, robes and all. Here.” O’Roark jerked his Remington from Matthews grip and tossed the Englishman the German’s Mauser. “Go shoot yourself in the foot with this.”

They trudged down the narrow road toward the road below, arguing the merits of the Remington and the Mauser until they once again joined the British column and their Arab allies chasing the fleeing remnants of the German-Turkish armies on toward Baghdad.

O’Roark should have taken the oath with the German.

A week later on the muddy bank of the Tigris a round ball fired from one of the ancient flintlocks struck Paddy O’Roark smack in the middle of the forehead.

John Matthews rummaged through his pal’s gear, then spat in disgust when he discovered the inlaid box was missing from Paddy’s haversack. He threw away the Mauser, figured it for bad luck, and took the Remington.

Back at the monastery in the Sinjar mountains, the heavy box with its golden leaping fish was carefully placed in a niche to gather dust and await the quest of another true believer.

The final destination of the Image of Christ can be found in Desert Winds, a modern story of strife and redemption.



J. M. Taylor - somewhere in the Saudi desert in the early '90s.

Taylor is also the author of the award-winning thrillers, GULF WINDS, MISSING STICKS and LOST KEY.

Combining his experiences as a paratrooper, nuclear weapons specialist and operations research analyst with travels in the Far and Middle East, Europe and the States, he packs a ton of adventure into action-filled page-turners.

Read more about Taylor and his books at <http://johnmtaylor.com>.