

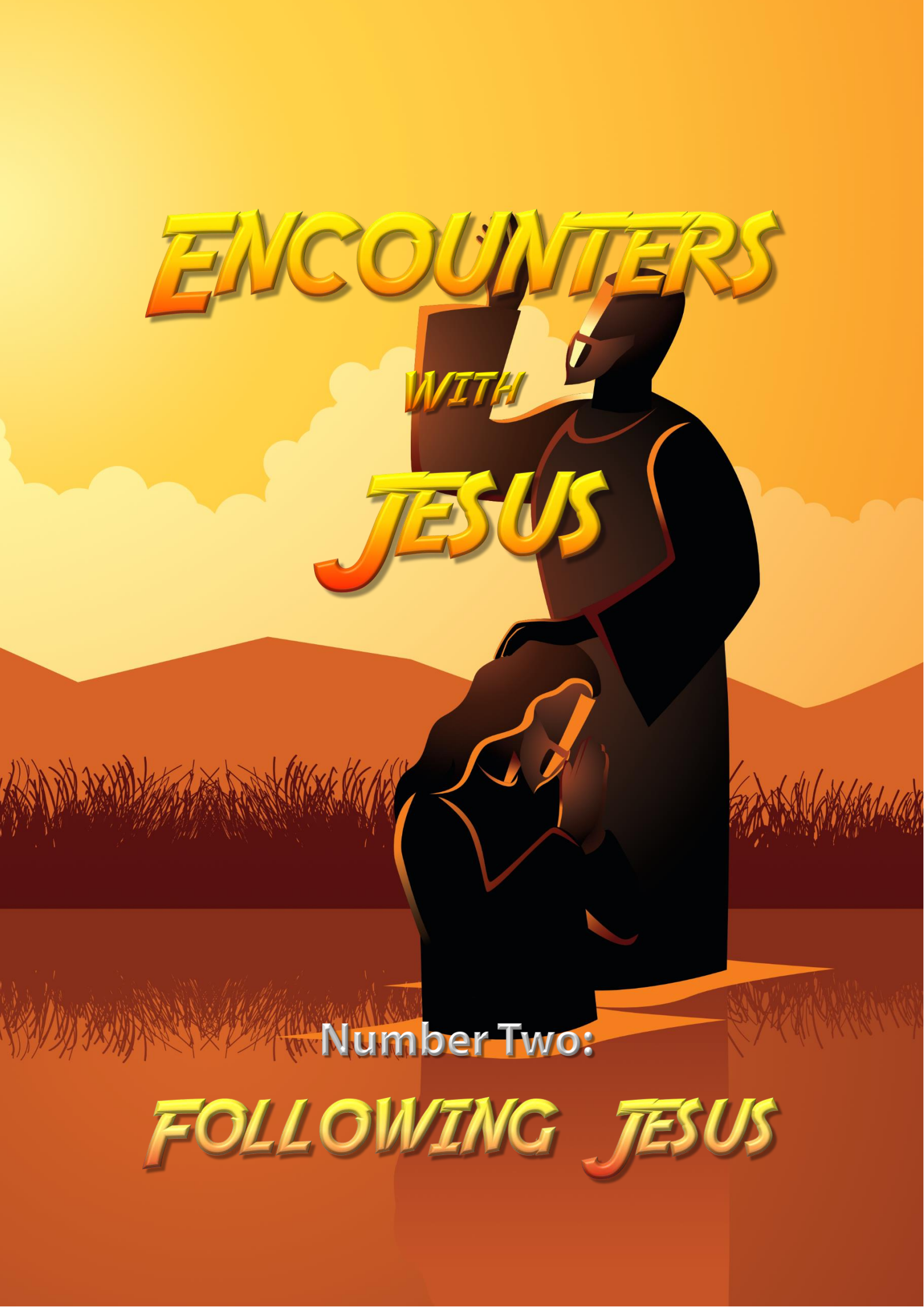
ENCOUNTERS

WITH

JESUS

Number Two:

FOLLOWING JESUS



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After Jesus had been baptised by John the Baptist, John encouraged his followers to get to know Jesus better. This is the story of Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter.

FOLLOWING JESUS

It's mid-afternoon; the best time of the day in many ways. The midday sun has lost its fierceness, the evening chill has not yet come. There's a quietness too. The boats are nearly all back, the nets laid out to dry and there is little noise from the riverside except the odd murmur of voices, the occasional shouted friendly rivalry as catches are compared and the gentle—today it's gentle—lapping of the water on the river bank.

We're standing together with John; not talking but spending time together companionably. There's been a change of tempo recently—ever since he baptised his cousin Jesus, in fact. I wasn't there when it happened but the stories, implications, hints, are that this was something very special and since then John has been quieter, more thoughtful, less outspoken. As if some great decision had been reached, a turning point. He's not usually easy to be with; passionate one moment, morose the next. But now he seems calmer. Resigned? Fulfilled? I don't know. John's interior world is always hard to grasp. So we stand in silence, watching, listening; enjoying the sun on our backs as the day declines.

Just then a man approaches. I vaguely recognise him—it's that Jesus, I think, John's cousin. People have been saying things about him, good things mainly, but I don't pay much attention to gossip. He and John catch each other's eye. John gives a nod of recognition; a bit curt perhaps, his eyes somehow veiled.

But Jesus beams all over his face and claps John on the arm. There is such energy in that gesture and such life in that smile—I find myself smiling and grinning at him even though I've never met him before. And he grins back: a deep, warm, knowing grin; intimate and personal, as if we'd known each other all our lives. There was an openness, a lack of any guile. This is a man I could be friends with, this is a man I could follow. This is a man I could love.

He walks on by and it is as if the sun has gone in. I want him to come back, to grasp my arm too, to speak to me. This is ridiculous; I'm like a love-sick schoolboy over someone I've only just met—and hardly met, at that.

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Then John speaks. “Look!” he says, “The Lamb of God.” But it’s not his words I hear first; it’s his tone: sad, wondering, regretful, proud—so much in those few words. For him it is an ending—and for me too. But for me, I realise, it is also a beginning. John is releasing me, encouraging me to move on. It is an act of selfless bravery—and I would expect no less from him. So, with those words, ‘The Lamb of God’, whirling in my ears, I set out after Jesus.

I stumble and hurry after him, trying to walk slowly and casually, so as not to make it obvious. He has got a little way ahead but I can still catch glimpses of him through the crowds. I am eager and diffident. I want him to know that I am following him and I don’t want him to spot me. So I dodge amongst the crowds as we approach the market. Some of the traders are beginning to pack up. There is noise and colour and the smell of spices in the sun. I am diverted by a lovely piece of dyed cloth, imported from some far-flung place in the Empire, its colours bright and glowing.

When I look up I’ve lost him. While I looked at the cloth I took my eyes off him and now I can’t see him. I scan the crowds anxiously. He’s tall; surely I should be able to spot him. Yes, there he is! No—someone similar but not with that same life-full gait. It’s no good; I can’t see him anywhere. Desolate and angry with myself I wonder what to do now. Go back to John? Keep looking? Give up and buy the piece of cloth as a souvenir of a lost moment? I remember other lost moments...

Then, just as I am about to turn and go, the crowd seems to part and there in the distance I see him striding along, still in no hurry but with that deep sense of purpose. I give a silent prayer of thanks to the LORD and set off after him.

I am getting closer now. We leave the market behind and move out onto open ground. There is no cover for me here and I feel exposed, vulnerable—embarrassed, actually. What am I doing here, chasing after this stranger? Have I got heatstroke? Some kind of temporary insanity? It’s not normal, what I am doing! He’s still a couple of hundred yards ahead; I can stop now, turn around and go home. No-one will know and I will be able to laugh it off tomorrow. But I don’t want to laugh it off tomorrow. I want to meet him. That’s why I’m here. I don’t care if I make a fool of myself—it won’t kill me (and anyway, no-one else will know).

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I hurry on, lengthening my stride. He doesn't walk fast, this Jesus, but he covers a lot of ground and I am in danger of losing him again. The ground is uneven now and I stumble—careful! If you sprain an ankle you'll never catch him.

Of course, I could call out, "Jesus! Jesus! Wait a minute; I'd like to speak with you please." But I'm too shy to do that; it would just be too embarrassing. My plan—if you can call it a plan—is just to catch him up and then, as if by co-incidence, smile politely and suddenly seem to recognise him: "Oh, hello, didn't I see you with my master, John earlier?" Or even better, for him to recognise me and start the conversation.

I am deep in this thought when I suddenly realise that he has stopped and is looking straight at me (straight through me, more likely!). His face is stern but there is the edge of a smile on his lips and around his eyes.

"What are you looking for?" he asks. Oh Hades! What a question. How shall I answer it?

'I'm looking for you'? (Direct but lacking subtlety.)

'I'm looking for purpose and meaning in my life'? (True, but not quite the thing for this moment.)

'Nothing. I just happened to be going this way'? (No point—we'd both know it was a lie.)

'I'm looking for love'? (Open to misunderstanding.)

I must say something, so I open my mouth and say, "Teacher, where do you live?" (What kind of a question is that?)

"Come and see," he answers.

Having blurted out my question I stop, confused and disoriented. Why did I ask where he is staying? That's not what I really want to know! Once again I have evaded the real point because of cowardice. Or stupidity or fear. How can I rescue this situation? Jesus just stands there, a smile breaking—oh so slowly breaking—over his face. "Come and see," he says again. He turns and then waits for me to catch him up.

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It wasn't far, No, it was a long way. Actually, I have no idea how far it was. Time spent in his presence doesn't seem the same as ordinary time. We walked and we talked; well, he talked, mainly, and I listened. He seemed so alive, so in tune with the world around us. "Look at that hawk," he says, pointing up to a dark speck in the sky. "Imagine what he sees as he looks down on us. All the good and all the evil. But to him it is all the same. He doesn't care. Now imagine our heavenly Father looking down and seeing what the hawk sees but even more clearly. He does care and it breaks his heart when he sees the pain and the deceit and the cheating and the injustice." Suddenly he is very serious. "It breaks my heart, too," he says and we walk on in silence for a while.

But the silence doesn't last long. He can't seem to help noticing things and delighting in them—and always relating them to God. He sees a tiny nest in a hedgerow; I would have walked past it without a glance. We stop and stand for minutes, not moving, not speaking; just waiting. And then, reassured, the birds start flying in, bringing food for the nestlings. Back and forth they fly, a seemingly endless task. At length we move on.

"Do you see what care and love they bestow on their young?" asks Jesus excitedly. "Can you just imagine how much more our heavenly Father cares for us? Wonderful! Amazing! I never fail to be astounded by the greatness of His love!"

I feel elated to be with him; and a little ashamed too. He has such breadth of heart and mine seems mean and narrow in comparison. But he doesn't seem to notice—doesn't seem to mind, anyway. He treats me as an equal, as an old friend whom he has known forever. I begin to realise that I could never drag him down to my level but that possibly, just possibly, he could raise me up to his.

I am almost disappointed when we arrive at the house where he is staying. Walking with Jesus has been such fun! It has been filled with energy and noise and silence and reflection and tenderness and humour. I have never known a companion like him—and now I am to enter his house.

It's a bit of a let-down, actually. Which is stupid—what did I expect? That this extraordinary man would live in an extraordinary house? But no—for in a way he is extraordinary exactly in his ordinariness; his rootedness in everyday things. He sees the divine in the commonplace

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that—holiness in the mundane details. Of course his house is a house like any other; what else could it be?

We touch the mezuzah as we go in. It is cool inside, surprisingly light. It smells of freshly baked bread and freshly-washed linen with a hint of last night's fire still lingering. It is a homely smell, welcoming and unostentatious.

I look around the room. It is—cluttered? No, it is full of things: stones, mosses, scraps of coloured cloth, beads and so on. Every niche and quite a lot of the floor is covered with objects. But there is no clutter, just a calm simplicity. This has been done by someone with a sensitive and gracious eye.

Jesus speaks: "Welcome. You must make yourself at home here. My home is your home." And he really means it. No empty ritual words, these, but a full and fulsome invitation to share. I nod and smile mutely, a bit overcome.

"There's not much to eat, I'm afraid. Joanna, who looks after me while I am staying here, is away this afternoon seeing her parents in their village. But she'll have baked some bread and I expect we can find some cheese and olives and fruit; maybe some other things. We'll not starve." He smiles, as if at some private joke.

I've still said nothing since we entered the house. "Oh, that will be fine," I gabble and he smiles again at me, a warm and sunny smile as if trying to dissolve away my awkwardness. I can't help but return the smile, feeling a stiffness inside me gradually relaxing and dissipating. I find myself releasing a pent-up breath I hadn't known I'd been holding and I give a little laugh—half at myself for being so uptight and half for joy at the pleasure of the moment.

We sit down at the table in an easy silence, savouring the moment. Suddenly, he becomes serious again and repeats his question: "What are you looking for?"

There's no way to prevaricate this time, so I start to tell him: the words stumbling out of my lips as I hear myself say things I didn't even know were in my heart. I tell him that I want a way of life which is true and honest; that I want a religion which reaches out to ordinary people and touches them with the hand of God. A religion free from empty rules but strict in the things of God. I want a world free from war or hunger even though I know that my own comfort has been bought by both. I

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tell him that I know I'm not perfect and never will be but that I want a religion of perfection which embraces and enfolds those who are imperfect.

He smiles and he listens and he nods and he laughs at my incoherence as all this just gushes out of my mouth and I have no idea where it all came from or even what some of it means but in this moment it is suddenly very important—and he honours that.

Finally I stop, breathless, all talked out, drained. He pauses and then with a big grin on his face he says, "Well, it looks like you've come to the right place, then." I smile in response and drop my gaze and half nod. Because, yes it does look like that and I'm not sure what to make of it all.

But Jesus is suddenly full of life and energy again. He bounds up. "I'm hungry. You must be too. Let's see what we can find to eat." With that he's off to the kitchen area and I have no choice but to follow along in his wake.

Jesus is already busy. "Here, take these platters and knives. Put them on the table. Yes, that's right. Now you should find cheese in the pot over there. No, not that one, the one next to it. Yes, that's it. No, bring the whole piece; we might be hungrier than we think. OK, I've got olives and oil and there's apples already on the table. Excellent. Are we all OK now?"

I am breathless after this bravura performance. It's like a whirlwind has swept through the house. Suddenly we are sitting down and the table is full of good things—as if by magic! Then, just as suddenly, the mood changes.

Jesus takes the bread; pauses; raises it a hand's breadth above the table; then he waits—and the moment stretches out; the ordinary has become extraordinary. Finally he says the words, "Blessed are you, LORD our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." Then he looks at me, grins, breaks the bread and gives me a huge hunk. "Eat up, plenty more if we need it."

This is what is so engaging and disconcerting with Jesus—it's as if the human and the heavenly have come together in this place and this time—well, in this man, I suppose. I've never known anything like it.

We eat then, in silence mainly but with grins and lip smacking and "Mmm"s of approval—from Jesus really; I'm a bit more restrained (my

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first thought was 'refined' but I realised that was more about me than him).

As I watch him eating, I come to realise that Jesus is never half-hearted. Whatever he does, he does fully; totally engaged in the moment. It is authentic and genuine, without reservation. I can see how he could really upset people who like to use words like 'refined'!

After the meal we clear up together. He washes, I dry. By now it is getting late and we light the lamps. Jesus says that he always ends his day with a time of prayer and I'm welcome to join him if I'd like to. Of course I do and so we pray together. Well, actually, it's mainly Jesus who prays, I just stumble out a few words from time to time.

He prays in a way I've never heard before. It takes a bit of getting used to. For a start, he calls God, 'Dadda', which seems downright blasphemous—except from him it doesn't; it just seems somehow natural and right. His prayer is like a conversation, as if God Almighty himself were sitting right there in the room with us! No religious words or phrases but it's serious; there's nothing casual or jokey about it. It's that mixture of sacred and secular again. At the end of our prayer time I feel like I've never prayed so deeply or fully before.

Jesus suggests we go up to the upper floor and get some sleep "Lots to do tomorrow," he says. I sleep well; a deep sleep with lots of dreams but nothing to trouble me and none that I remember when I awake. I rise as the sunrise bursts upon the house. Jesus isn't there but as I dress he comes back in with his prayer mat.

He offers me some breakfast but I decline. I need to get back to sort out my affairs. "I'll be moving on in a few days," says Jesus. "I'll be going back up to Galilee and travelling around the country. There's work I have to do, good news to share, people to minister to. Come along if you'd like. If you're interested meet me here tomorrow morning."

And do you know what? I think I might just do that...

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NOTES

John's account of this encounter with Jesus tells us that two of his disciples followed Jesus, one of whom was Andrew the brother of Simon Peter, the other unnamed. I have taken a liberty with the story by having only one narrator (presumably Andrew) follow Jesus.

This story is based on *John 1:35-39*. John the Baptist, a relative of Jesus, has been baptising in the river Jordan. The evangelist, John, tells us that John was baptising at 'Bethany across the Jordan' (*John 1:28*). As is often the case, we do not know exactly where that was. Tradition suggests that the place is what is now known as *Al-Maghtas* in the Wadi Kharrar in the Kingdom of Jordan. This has now been added to the UNESCO World Heritage list. Carl Laney, in a 1977 doctoral thesis has surveyed all the suggested sites and comes down in favour of the Hajlah ford in the Wadi Kharrar.

This was not the only place where John the Baptist worked. We later learn that he also baptised at somewhere known as *Aenon, near Salim* on the west side of the Jordan (*John 3:23*). Once again we don't know where this was. 'Aenon' means 'springs' so presumably it was somewhere with plentiful water.

We do not know where Jesus was staying, though it must have been fairly close by. John tells us that Jesus went back to Galilee the following day; though he was to return to Bethany across the Jordan later in his ministry (*John 10:40*).

REFERENCE

Laney, J. Carl 1977, "The Identification of Bethany Beyond the Jordan" in *Selective Geographical Problems in the Life of Christ*, PhD thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary. Available at:

https://www.bibleplaces.com/Identification_of_Bethany_Beyond_the_Jordan_by_J_Carl_Laney.pdf

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