



ENCOUNTERS

WITH

JESUS

Number Four:

THE CENTURION'S TALE:

AUTHORITY

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A Roman centurion is posted to the lakeside town of Capernaum in Galilee and discovers more than he expected.

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It's a strange place, Galilee. No-one wants to come here. Everybody knows that the people are suspicious and stick to themselves. They look down on foreigners, calling us 'unclean'. Yet they themselves are uncivilized: it's hard to get a decent meal (try asking for pork or shellfish). They tie themselves up in knots with their myriad rules and regulations and they seem to hate us even more than the other provincial races do.

The Jews are the bane of the empire, always wheedling special dispensations: 'let us use our own money in the Temple'; 'don't uncover your standards in our streets'; 'accept that we won't give proper respect or worship to the divine emperors'; and so on—and Tiberias gives in! They're a quarrelsome lot too: quick to take offence; with brigands and freedom fighters in the hills who are impossible to find, let alone catch.

When I heard that I had been posted here my heart sank. I had been so proud to finally

have achieved the rank of centurion but to have my first posting to this backside of creation with only a small garrison of the Tetrarch's soldiers rather than a full century of Romans was really disappointing. Yet it is a start and I am determined to make the most of it.

The thought of transporting my household here had filled me with dread. Rome is so vibrant, with so much to do and so many friends to share time with. What on earth will we do in this barren god-forsaken land? Petunia and the children were similarly dismayed but there was nothing to be done so we packed up and left Rome to come here to this little town of Capernaum.

Our first impression was that we'd travelled back in time. The roads are not paved and the houses are small, arranged in blocks with pathways between them. Many of them are made of the local dark volcanic rock, arranged around courtyards paved with the same basalt. They are plastered inside and have external staircases, sometimes going to a second storey. The poorer people live in simpler houses made of mud and straw. Fewer than a thousand people live here—and this is one of the larger villages.

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Things, though, are rarely as bad as anticipation and first impressions suggest. It's actually rather pleasant here. The town is neat and clean and the people are not unfriendly. Its situation by the lake is a constant source of delight. My main role seems to be to train the local detachment of Antipas' troops and this seems to be going well. They are all 'Gentiles' as the locals call us but relations with the villagers seems reasonably easy as long as we don't step on their religious sensibilities.

Our own villa, on the edge of the village, somewhat in the Roman style, is comfortable enough and large enough to accommodate the whole household with ease. We brought our closest staff with us but most of the domestics have been recruited locally and Petunia has no complaints about them.

Capernaum may be small but it has some strategic importance. It stands on a busy trade route running from Damascus to the coast of the Mare Nostrum and on to Egypt. Because of this it is an excellent base for the collection of taxes. Sadly, it is also a focus for trouble makers and brigands, so there are many reasons for siting a garrison here.

It is my experience that if people are treated well they will behave well. It has worked in my other postings and seems to be working here. I have made it my business to meet regularly with the elders of the village and to try to understand their concerns and their culture. It is better to govern by consent than by fear—at least, that is what I believe.

The Tetrarch, Herod Antipas, seems to rule reasonably well and there is relatively little trouble here. Down south, in Judea, things are not so calm. The current Prefect, Pontius Pilate, appears to believe that to keep the Jews under control you have to take a different view. He seems to feel that you need to be cruel to rule—but Pilate is the one who's been reprimanded in writing by the Emperor himself, not Antipas! So I will continue in my own way until such time as force is necessary.

The elders here mostly speak Greek, after a fashion, though their rough accents can make them hard to understand at times. They have little Latin and mainly speak Aramaic, the Syrian language, though

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they worship in their own language, Hebrew. We get by, mainly in Greek, though I have picked up a fair understanding of Aramaic now.

The more I speak with them, the more I realise that they are not the pagan country bumpkins I had thought them to be. They are learned and thoughtful; heirs to a culture which is rich in wisdom. I find myself increasingly drawn to their ideas of god and holiness. I like the fact that their religion permeates every moment of their lives. For them there is no division between the divine and the daily—every moment is a moment in the presence of their god. Of course, the practice is not always—not often—so, but the ideal is there and it speaks to me. I find myself admiring them greatly.

Not that it's been easy getting to know them. There have certainly been some traps and pitfalls along the way. Early on, soon after I'd arrived, I invited a group of the leading men to come here to the villa for refreshments. When I asked them there was suddenly an awkward silence. They looked nervously at one another. Then one of them, Jacob, spoke, "I am sorry sir but I'm afraid that we won't be able to accept your kind invitation, though we know it is we
ll-meant."

"Why on earth not?" I demanded, unused to being turned down by the local population.

"Well sir, the thing is... it is against our law. We're awfully sorry, sir. We do hope you understand."

I certainly didn't understand, not then, but there seemed no point in pursuing the matter further. I assumed that it was probably because they were worried that the people would see them as collaborators. Silly, but it had happened before.

A few weeks later I tried again. "Let us all meet in the inn," I said, "I'll pay for all the food and drink and everyone can see that everything is above board. Indeed, anyone who wishes to can join us."

Once more I got the awkward shuffling and averted eyes. Once more it was Jacob who spoke, "I'm truly sorry sir, but that won't be possible."

"Is it because it's the inn? If so, choose another place."

"No sir, it's not the inn."

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“Is it the money? You don’t want me to pay for you? If it’s a matter of pride then let’s split the cost or each pay his own way.”

“No sir, it’s not the money.”

“Then, what?”

“It’s against our law, sir. That’s all I can say.” And with that they begged permission to leave and I still didn’t know what was going on.

It was my slave Aratus who told me: “Oh, didn’t you know sir? It’s us; it’s you sir, begging your pardon. These Jews believe that anyone who isn’t one of them is ‘unclean’ and might pollute them. That’s why they won’t come into your house sir, or break bread with you: if they do, they’ll be ritually unclean and have to go down to Jerusalem and get cleansed by the priests.”

I was stunned! I had no idea. It all made sense now; why they were so embarrassed. But how dare they? I am not unclean. We Romans are the cleanest, most hygienic people on earth! I bathe every day—you have to in this infernal heat. That’s much more than they do. If anyone’s unclean, it’s not me.

Once more it was Aratus who helped me understand. It became clear that this wasn’t about the body alone but about the whole person. Their god had given them a long list of instructions that would enable them to get right with him. Eating with me or coming under my roof risked them falling out with this god and that they would not do.

Even though I was still angry, a part of me admired their commitment. This was no religion of convenience to be taken up or put down as the fancy took you. This was the real thing—certainly very different from Rome, where social convention and popular fashion ruled in religion as in everything else.

So I determined to learn more. I asked the elders if they would teach me something of their ways and they did. They gave me a copy of their holy book, translated into Greek, and they explained it to me. I shared some of this with Petunia and the children; and with Aratus too for he was a bright boy and seemed to have a natural understanding of the Jews and the way they thought—a way of looking at the world which was very different from the Greek view I had been brought up with.

One day Aratus came to me. “Master, may I speak?”

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“Of course.”

“It’s about the Jews here in Capernaum, Master. They have a sadness.”

“A sadness?”

“Yes, Master. You know that they meet together to pray and read their holy books on the seventh day of the week? Well, in some other villages they have a special meeting place but here in Capernaum they have nowhere. They have to squeeze into one of the bigger houses but none is really big enough.”

‘Let them come here,’ was my first thought. ‘There is plenty of room here.’ But of course, they would not come here. How could they?

‘I know! I will build them a meeting place. Yes, it will be expensive but I can afford it and maybe it will help me find favour with their god, because of all of the gods I have known and heard of, he seems most likely to be the one true God and I would like to have him think well of me.’

Time passed and I gradually learned more of this Jewish god; a god so holy that they do not even speak his name. Instead they call him ‘LORD’ and I started to do the same as I learned more about him. He is, I learned, the one god; indivisible and all-powerful. He alone made the whole cosmos and he alone is pure and perfect. He hates evil, injustice, selfishness, greed and blasphemy and has given his laws so that his people may live in the right way.

I do not know if all this is true but increasingly I wish it to be so. Petunia jokes and says that I talk like a Jew now! But that doesn’t feel such a bad thing actually. Of course, I will never forget that I am a centurion of the Imperial Roman Army and that my duty and loyalty is to the Emperor and the safe and peaceful running of the Empire.

So, I need to know exactly what is going on in this part of the world. I have eyes and ears amongst the common people and for a few denarii they keep me informed of the latest gossip or give me news of the latest rabble rouser, or prophet, or messiah—anyone, in fact, who may threaten the Pax Romana.

One of these, a man called Jesus, is mentioned by several of my informants. He comes from Nazareth, a small village a few miles away but actually lives here in Capernaum. He’s causing quite a stir. He says

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things which upset some of the elders though the common people seem to love him. I don't think he poses any threat to us at the moment but he does seem to challenge some of the stricter ways that the elders interpret the law contained in their holy books.

Apparently he says that the LORD's love is more important than anything else and that we must love one another without exception. The thing that gets the crowds excited, though, is that this Jesus is a healer. If even half the stories I've heard are true then he must be the most remarkable man I've ever come across. Actually, if even one tenth of the stories are true...

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It turns out that he *is* the most remarkable man I've ever come across. I went to hear him, dressed like a native and blending into the crowd (it's good to know whether my informants are playing straight with me). For a start, he's absolutely mesmerising as a speaker though there's nothing to him. None of the great Roman orators would give him a second glance. He has no fancy words, no great rhetorical structures. Instead he tells stories of everyday things: sheep, fish, farming and so on. But out of these come the most amazing insights about god and what he calls god's kingdom.

Everything I've been learning from the elders suddenly comes to life as Jesus speaks. He has an authority, a vitality, a passion—and yet a deep humility and sense of humour. I want to know this man more; I want to follow his way. For the first time I actually regret that I am not a Jew, not free just to throw it all aside and bask in the lightness of his incredible personality—no, not personality, *personhood*. Everything about him is real, honest, true and I am enthralled.

At one point he catches my eye and gives me a little smile; a knowing little smile it seems to me, as if he sees through my disguise and knows me for who I really am. Disturbed, I scuttle off home; back to the safety of the villa and my Roman robes.

It was just a few days after that encounter that Aratus falls ill. He has always been my favourite. I think of him as servant rather than slave; companion rather than servant; counsellor rather than companion. Aratus has an earthy wisdom which has proved invaluable to me on

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more than one occasion. He is a key part of my *domus*, my domestic family, and I feel a deep responsibility towards him.

His illness started with a fever, his abdomen swelled and became really painful, and then he started to bleed from his mouth and nose. Our physician can do nothing for him, nor can the local doctors. In desperation I think of the healer, Jesus of Nazareth.

I do not dare go to him myself but I call for some of the elders to meet with me. I entreat them to go to Jesus and beg him to come to Aratus. "Tell him whatever you need to, just get him to come. He needn't come inside; we'll bring Aratus out to him." They go willingly and I stay at home waiting with Aratus and the family. As I wait, I find myself praying, not to Jupiter or Aesculapius or the Emperor but to the LORD, the god of the Jews, the god of Jesus.

"Heal my servant, LORD," I pray. "Give your servant Jesus the will and the power to make him whole again." Suddenly I am answered. I am filled with a conviction that Jesus can and will heal him. I have never experienced anything like this before. Immediately I begin to question. I'm overtired. It's the anxiety. I'm just feeling what I want to feel... I push the thoughts aside. This is real; this is different from anything I've ever known before and I am going to accept it at face value.

I realise that I do not need Jesus to come here. Just as I am under authority so is he; though his authority comes not from Rome but the LORD. I do not need to make him come to a gentile house and minister to a gentile slave; though I have no doubt that he would do so without any thought for his own cleanness or uncleanness. His power—his god's power—is such that if he desires, he can heal Aratus no matter where he is. So I send some servants to tell Jesus that he does not need to come. "Tell him that I understand authority," I say. "Tell him that he has only to speak the word and my servant will be healed. This I believe and this I know."

The waiting is hard. Having been so confident in my words to Jesus I am now becoming hesitant again. Such over-enthusiastic certainties can quickly become hollow as time erodes them. Aratus coughs again and I listen. This sounds different. I look at him; there is no blood this time. 'Is this it?' I hardly dare to ask myself. He opens his eyes and blinks

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at me. “Master, may I have a drink, and something to eat?” I am so grateful that I serve him myself.

By the time the servants come back it is clear that Aratus really is on the mend. He was a dead man for certain—I’ve been around death often enough to know it when I see it—and this is surely a miracle. This Jesus is something else. He’s going to change the world; and heaven protect anyone or anything that gets in the way.

“Master,” say the servants, “the teacher, Jesus, he was astonished at your faith. He said he had not found such faith in all Israel!” I do not know what to think. That we have Aratus back is enough. That the teacher should say such things about me, a Gentile, makes me feel proud and humble both at once. I have been touched by greatness and I do not think I will ever be the same again.

NOTES

The Bible contains two accounts of these events, by Matthew and by Luke. Matthew's version can be found in his chapter eight, verses one to thirteen. I have followed Luke's account, which has a little more detail. It can be found in his chapter seven, verses one to ten.

For more on Capernaum at the time of Jesus, David Padfield (2017) offers a useful introduction.

The *Mare Nostrum* (literally, "our sea") mentioned by the centurion was the Roman name for what we know as The Mediterranean Sea.

Estimates of the size of Capernaum in Jesus' time vary quite widely. I have gone for a figure somewhat above the middle of the range.

After the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC the Roman territory of Judea, over which he had ruled, was split between three of his sons. Antipas was named by the Romans as Tetrarch of Galilee (west of the river Jordan) and Perea (on the east side of the Jordan). According to Jensen (2007 and 2012) the reign of Antipas was relatively peaceful. Professor FF Bruce (1963) also writes about Antipas and his colourful career.

Pontius Pilate was the fifth prefect of the Roman province of Judaea, serving under Emperor Tiberius from about 26 AD to 36 AD. He is best known for presiding over the trial of Jesus but other sources indicate that he was a harsh and difficult man. The Jewish writer Philo describes him as, "naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness." He also refers to his "vindictiveness and furious temper."

Josephus tells of a number of times when Pilate upset the Jewish population and Philo tells us of an occasion when Pilate set up gold-coated shields in Herod's Palace in Jerusalem. The Jews protested by writing to the Emperor Tiberius. Tiberius responded, "with a host of reproaches and rebukes for his audacious violation of precedent..."

Jupiter was the Roman name for the chief of the gods, the one whom the Greeks called Zeus. Aesculapius was the god of medicine. The Emperor himself was considered to be divine.

Niko Huttenhan (2014) suggests that centurions had a general role in law enforcement in the community.

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For another take on this story, see Gary Burge (2015).

For more of the centurion's tale, see numbers 11 and 13.

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