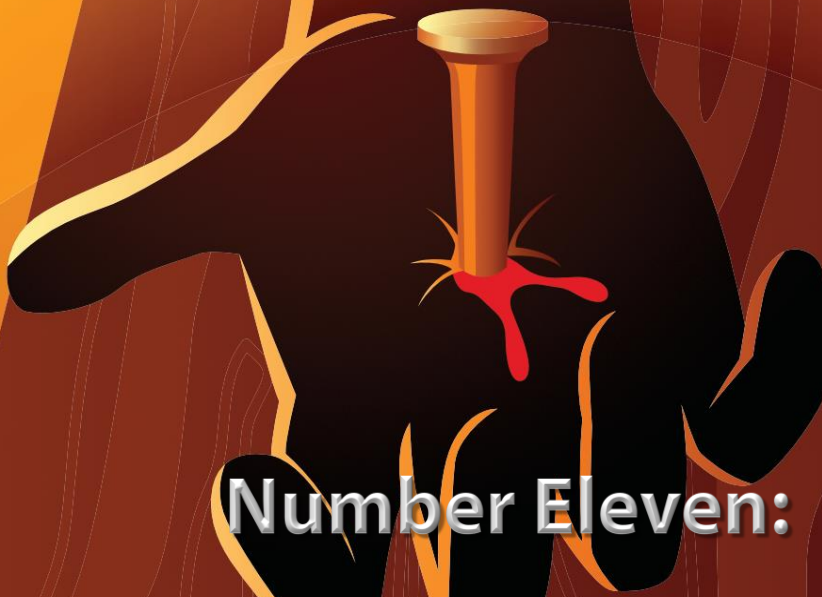


ENCOUNTERS

WITH

JESUS



Number Eleven:

THE CENTURION'S TALE

CRUCIFIXION DUTY

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

Crucifixion was the cruellest of ways to execute someone. It was designed to be literally excruciating in its pain and humiliating in providing shame and spectacle.

THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

Nobody likes crucifixion duty. Actually, that's not true. There are some who love it: revelling in the pain, the blood, the cries of suffering, the death. For them it is a sport, something to be savoured and enjoyed. So, yes, there are a few among us who *do* like crucifixion duty. I am not one of them. Whenever it is my turn, I make sure that I only select those who hate it; I will not have the savage pain-lovers on duty with me.

Tomorrow it is our turn again and my thoughts turn back to that time, two, maybe three, years ago when I was still in Capernaum beside the lake. A quieter posting than this one in Jerusalem, especially now, at the Passover season, when we must be on our highest level of alert to watch out for thieves and pickpockets in the crowds which fill the narrow streets during the days of the festival. And watch even more closely for subversives and trouble-makers: Zealots and Sicarii, wanting to foment uprising and breach the peace. They must be found and neutralised as soon as possible.

Tomorrow we are on crucifixion duty and that is why my mind goes back to Capernaum. There are three to die: two robbers and a man called Jesus. His crime seems unclear. Insurrection? Giving offence to the priests? Challenging the emperor? But it's the name which gets me thinking. Jesus—a common enough name it has to be said but I came across a Jesus once, back when I was stationed by the lake. A most remarkable man; a healer, a miracle worker. He healed my servant Aratus. Well, I'm pretty sure that he did, though it could have been a coincidence. I sent to this man Jesus and asked him to heal Aratus and then Aratus got better almost immediately.

I heard this Jesus speak once. He was very impressive. A beautiful gentle man but quite uncompromising. Could it really be him who is to die tomorrow?

I read the charge sheet more carefully. It seems that he claims to be 'King of the Jews' and 'Son of God'. Well, the second title belongs to Caesar and the first, well, that is Caesar's too, I guess; there's certainly been no other king of the Jews since Herod the 'Great' died. There's also some nonsense about destroying the Temple—this just doesn't hang together. Pilate clearly wasn't convinced either but he signed the

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

warrant anyway. Typical; line of least resistance. Mind his back and make sure Rome's happy. It doesn't really matter to me. I have a job to do no matter who this Jesus is and regardless of whether he did or did not do the things they accused him of. First thing tomorrow we take charge of the three of them and then we'll see.

§§§§§§§§

It *is* the same Jesus. I can tell by his eyes; and I think he recognises me also. But he's in a bad way. He's been in the hands of the Prefect's guard, poor sod. Their reputation as the most inventively brutal bunch in the whole legion is well deserved and they've obviously had a field day with him.

The other two, having been in prison for some time, are in better condition—not good, but much better than him. He can hardly walk. I don't know how he'll carry the patibulum all the way up the hill. He's struggling already and we're still on level streets.

The lads clear a path, pushing the gawping sightseers out of the way. Those cross pieces are heavy and even the two robbers are faltering. But we get to the gates OK. Jesus has been staggering and taking ever-longer rest breaks. The lads urge him on. They try to be kind but there is a job to be done and it's all got to be done by this evening; tomorrow is the Sabbath and we can't have them dying on the Sabbath!

The crowds are still pressing in on us. There's more than usual; it must be Jesus they've come to see. Some are jeering at him, some are spitting! I won't have that: "No spitting!" I tell the lads. They try to stop it but it's impossible really. Mind you, they're not all against him. Some are weeping and calling out to God to save him. Oh, this one's going to be difficult; there could easily be trouble today.

"Watch those crowds carefully," I say to Adrianus, "smallest sign of trouble and you go in there and break it up—whatever force you need."

So we proceed, step by painful step, through the gate and out onto the slopes of the hill. It's slow but we seem to be making progress until Jesus stumbles and falls. The men go over to help him up, not roughly but not gently either. This has got to be done and we've all seen people trying to cling onto life as long as possible by feigning injury or

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

weakness. Not that that's the case here. No sooner is he up with the patibulum across his shoulders than he collapses again under its weight.

He's clearly not faking it; and after the beating Pilate's men gave him I'm not surprised that he can't go on. So I look around. Somehow we've got to get up that hill. One way or another these men *will* be crucified today. Then I see a great hulk of a man in the crowd. So I say to Adrianus, "See that big bloke there? Get him to carry the crosspiece—and don't take no for an answer."

Adrianus goes to the guy—I find out later that his name is Simon from Cyrene in Libya, up for the festival I suppose—and he tells him to carry Jesus' patibulum. He looks a bit scared but he lifts it easily enough and follows the other two, with Jesus limping along behind.

So we make our sorry way up the hill. At one point a crowd of women rush up to Jesus, weeping and wailing. The lads rush over to hustle them away but Jesus raises his hand and they become still. Even here, even now, he has this absolute sense of authority. "Don't weep for me, daughters of Jerusalem," he says, "weep for yourselves and your children and for the times of tribulation which are to come. Dark days are on the way and many will wish they had never been born." Then he turns his face towards the hill again and sets off after Simon and the others.

Eventually we get there. The orders are to nail them; they die quicker that way but the pain is much greater. So we nail them. Bang! Bang! Bang! Oh, how they scream out, those other two. But not him. He clamps his mouth and screws up his eyes but never a sound he makes; just takes it, accepts it, as if it is meant to be.

At last we come to the stipes, the upright stakes. The titulai are already in place. Two of them are standard: 'Robber', they say. But the third, the one on the central stake, is unusual to say the least. 'King of the Jews' it says, in Greek and Latin and Aramaic. "Is this a joke?" I ask Adrianus. "No, sir. Apparently it's a direct order from the Prefect himself." Still playing games, are you, Pilate? Well, perhaps it's less of a joke than you think.

I signal the men to haul them up until the cross pieces snap neatly into the recesses on the stakes. They are roped on of course, as well as the

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

nails, but it's still one of the most painful parts of the whole process. And now it's done and there is nothing left to do but wait.

§§§§§§§§

Time passes. People come. They are not much interested in the robbers but the presence of Jesus brings out the best and the worst in them. Some come to weep or to stand in solitary sadness, suffering vicariously with him. Others come to mock and jeer. Some try to throw things at him: rotten fruit, rotting carcasses, even stones. But my lads know my thoughts on this and mostly they disarm or dissuade those who would assault him. Mostly, but not always...

He bears it all, though: the words, the insults, the missiles—all without flinching. He looks down on them and us and his face seems full of concern—for us, not for himself. I move a bit closer to his cross and as I do so, he looks upwards.

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." I am astounded. He's praying, talking to his god, the LORD, the one who must not be named, and he's asking this god to forgive the people who are abusing him.

Not only that, he's asking his god to forgive those of us who are crucifying him. I have to do a double take. After all these years my Aramaic is pretty good. I've taken lessons, I've studied hard and, yes, that is what he said. There is no doubt in my mind, just awe and wonder. Could I have possibly said something like that if I'd been up there and he'd been one of those abusing me? As I think about it, I find myself longing to be able to answer 'yes' but I know that a stream of soldier's profanities would be much more likely. There is so much to ponder here. Even on the cross this man is turning my world upside down.

Actually, there's another thing: he said 'Abba'. He is calling the god who is so holy that he cannot be named, by the name that any child would use for a beloved father. Such intimacy! How is it possible to have such intimacy with a god—let alone the one that these people claim is the one true holy God? I wish I had that intimacy...

Some of the bystanders offer the dying men some wine and herbs to deaden the pain. It's a local custom—but no harm in it, I think. The two

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

on the left and the right drink it down eagerly but Jesus refuses. I don't think he wants the pain any more than they do but that stuff also deadens the mind and I think he needs to stay as alert as possible.

I notice that the lads have got their clothes. On the cross, of course, you're as naked as the day you were born. Just one more indignity—the more so for these Jews, for they are most particular about displaying their bodies. Prudish, I would have called it when I first left Rome for Capernaum but I've come to respect their modesty. It means that a crucifixion, so shameful in many ways, has one more dimension of shame for them—and a good deal of prurience for the spectators, too, I shouldn't wonder.

The custom is that the soldiers on duty can divvy up the men's clothes between them. The robbers haven't got much worth bothering about, but Jesus' clothes are surprisingly good. The coat in particular is all of a piece, woven as a whole by a good seamstress, clearly. The lads debate whether to cut it up and share it between them but in the end they decide to throw dice for it. Servinius wins, I think.

I gaze out over the crowds. More and more are coming as the sun rises in the sky. Oh! Here come the high priests in their elaborate robes, shielded by their Temple guards. Come to see 'justice done' I suppose. Myself, I'm not so sure it is justice...

Suddenly the lads rise and stand to attention. I turn around and salute in surprise. It is the Prefect, Pontius Pilate, himself. What is he doing here? He never comes to a crucifixion. The priests rush over to him. They are arguing about the titulus over Jesus. "Don't put, 'King of the Jews'. Put that 'He claimed to be King of the Jews'." But Pilate will have none of it. "What I have written, I have written." The priests back off. They know when they can influence him and when they cannot. The point is made; Pilate has done enough for this day. He surveys the scene, nods to me, "Carry on, centurion," then turns on his heel and walks with his escort back to the city.

The buzz of excitement in the crowd gradually dies away. But the priests aren't finished. They wind up the crowd again, encouraging them to mock and revile him. "You claim to save others," they cry, "if you really are the Messiah, save yourself." Others cry, "If you are God's

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

son, come down from the cross!" "King of the Jews, how do you like your throne?" "If you're the Son of God, let's see God deliver you!"

Jesus says nothing, just looks at them with patient eyes. I can't bear it. Outside I am all military correctness but inside I am a tumult of emotions. This is so unfair. Even if he had said and done the things they accused him of—and I do not believe that he has—he still doesn't deserve this level of hatred and vituperation. I've never known it like this before. After all, he's dying. Isn't that enough for them?

As I listen, one of the taunts they hurl at him raises something in my mind: 'If you really are the Son of God...' That's how he talks to his god, isn't it? As his father, his 'abba'. Perhaps he really does think he's the son of god, just like the emperor does—'and with more reason,' says an inner voice which I quickly have to suppress; there's treason lying that way. So my thoughts go round and round and the crowd gets ever more raucous.

Even my men start to join in but I'm not having that! I remind them that they are Imperial soldiers on duty, not part of a mob. That snaps them out of it. But the contagion reaches the robbers. One of them turns his head to Jesus and shouts at him—except it's more of a croak than a shout with his throat so dry in brightening sun.

"Hey, you! If you're the Messiah, save yourself and us!" It's not a request, it's a jeer. He's just venting his pain and fear on the nearest soft target. Just what I'd expect from such a lowlife. Except, to my surprise, the other one speaks up. "Be quiet! Have you no respect for God? You and me, we deserve to be here but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he turns to Jesus and says, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

At first I thought he was taking the piss too but no, he was serious. Jesus knows it too, for he smiles at him with eyes full of love and compassion. "Today," he says, "you will be with me in paradise."

'Oh my,' I think, 'What a promise. What a beautiful thing to say, even if it isn't true. Mind you, suppose that it is true? He seems so certain, this Jesus. He might be dying on a cross but he still seems very much in control of everything. What if he does have a kingdom; what if he does know about paradise and who will be there?'

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

Suddenly I want him to make me that same promise. Madness! I don't know what's got into me. I am an Imperial Roman soldier, a commanding officer and I am here to do my duty not get maudlin about one more dying man. Although that's the thing—he's not just one more dying man. He's different. I sensed it before in Capernaum and everything that is happening this day is reinforcing that. This is no ordinary death.

The sun grows higher and hotter in the cloudless sky. It is sweltering in this uniform but I am used to it. For these poor devils hanging here it is much worse. I look up at them and pity them, no matter what they have done. It's a cruel death this, and meant to be so: painful, lingering and humiliating. There is no dignity on the cross as you empty your bowels and bladder where you hang, letting it all run down your legs. For a people with such a mind for cleanliness this is indignity indeed.

I can see that they are weakening. Breathing is becoming more difficult; the pain of pulling themselves up so that they can open their airways ever harder to bear. But strength ebbs slowly; it can take days for the stronger ones to die. We would normally be relieved long before the end but not today. Today it will be finished one way or the other and our orders are to see it through.

I take a long look at Jesus. He is weaker than the others—was treated worse than them to start with, and he seems to be fading fast. But while his body is failing him, his spirit seems unquenched so far. His eyes still look around, bright and eager, seeking out the spectators and, well, loving them, I suppose. It seems preposterous but that is what it feels like. He looks to me sometimes and when he does my soul dances. Something happens, something is transmitted; like the shock you get when you rub a piece of amber. It's not painful, though, it's soothing, healing, it's loving—there's no other word for it. Despite his torment there is a smile in his eye, a smile of infinite depth and I am drawn in.

Hold on to yourself, man! You're sounding like a lovesick schoolboy. Get a grip and do your duty. Yes, I will. I will do my duty as I always do but that doesn't change the truth of what is happening here today.

It is quieter now. The priests have had their say and they've left, taking most of the crowds with them now that the fun is over. A crucifixion

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

isn't much of a spectacle really. Nothing much happens except a few cries and curses from time to time. They can't move much—that's the point—and so there really isn't much to see.

A few people have stayed. I notice, in particular, a small group of women, standing with a solitary man. One of the women is older. She seems especially distressed. I wonder if she's his mother, perhaps? How dreadful that must be: to see your own son dying before your eyes, especially in this way. She must be in agonies of grief, full of 'if only...'; 'how can this be...'. I feel for her. And it seems that I am not the only one. Jesus is looking at her too with a strange expression on his face, tender and yet commanding.

He calls out to her, "Woman!" she lifts her head to him and gives him a smile full of tears and in that moment I am sure that, yes, this is his mother. "Woman," he says, "this...", and he looks towards the man standing with them, "...is your son." Then he says to the man, "This is your mother." The man moves to her and puts his arm around her as she buries her face in his cloak and sobs without restraint.

She must be a widow, I realise and Jesus has just made sure that she will be taken care of. Even now, in his terrible state, he cares more for others than himself. He is always giving; giving his concern, his compassion, his practical arranging, his love. There seems no end to it.

If he gives so much, from where does he receive? The answer is obvious: he receives from his god, the one he calls Abba. Despite myself I find myself drawn, with him, into making a great 'yes!' in response to this. This god, this LORD, this 'father': is this the one true God? I am wanting to say yes, and it is this Jesus who is leading me this way.

The sun is approaching its zenith. The heat is unbearable. I am feeling a little sorry for myself until I remember how much worse it is for them. Not just the heat and the pain and the stink of your own excrement but the flies as well: buzzing round your sores and your shit; lapping at your congealed blood; in your eyes, your nose, your mouth. You can't flick them away; you could blow but breath is too precious and hard to come by to waste on flies. So, they learn to accept it as just one more thing about dying this way, yet one more indignity.

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

It's funny, I've done this duty countless times but I've never noticed it in such detail before; certainly never been moved like this before. It must be him, his influence on me. See—I said he was in control!

I look up from my musing and notice dark clouds on the horizon, rolling in from the west. A strange thing on such a previously clear day but not unheard of. The clouds continue to gather until by noon the whole sky is covered. It's all happened remarkably quickly, with very little wind to bring them here with so much haste. I know that I am especially sensitive today but, although I am not normally a superstitious man—certainly nothing like my dear Petunia—I begin to wonder if there might not be something preternatural about this darkening of the sky. It is as if the heavens themselves disapprove of this man's death. I half expect it to weep raindrops of lament upon this sorry scene; but of course it doesn't. That would turn this tragedy into farce.

The darkness is, though, a blessing for the dying, and for us. The temperature drops and the harsh sunlight is dimmed and diffused. Midday it might be but it has actually become quite pleasant for us though nothing is pleasant for them. As the hours tick on so their life ebbs away. It's often difficult to tell how far they are gone, though it's clear that Jesus is a long way ahead of the other two.

He's sunk into a kind of quietness now, not looking around as much as he had. A sense of stillness fills the air. The coming of the cloud has deadened the sound somehow and everything seems to have dampened down. Even the sounds of the city below seem muted. The women who'd come with him are still there but their grief is silent now—all cried out, I guess. So we all watch and wait, and for the first time ever this waiting seems like a vigil; a sacred duty. It feels like a privilege and I am somehow humbled to be in the presence of this great man.

It continues like this until about the middle of the afternoon. Nothing much happens except the occasional groans and cries from the crosses and a few interested spectators who come, gawp, and then depart. It's all got very routine and I am, not nodding off, but going into a little reverie when suddenly Jesus tenses his body, raises his head and cries out, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" Then he slumps back down, his head bowed once more.

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

The sparse crowd immediately breaks into chattering speculation. "What did he say?" "Something about Elijah?" "He's calling for Elijah to come and save him?" I can't believe it; I can't believe that they, Jews that they are, do not understand and that I, the Gentile outsider, should know just what he said. It's from one of their psalms. I know it in the Greek but my Aramaic is good enough to get the opening line: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

What a cry! My heart is torn in pieces. What a thing has come to pass when such a mighty man of God has been abandoned by that same God. What desolation he must be feeling to utter such a reproach to the one he calls Father.

Is that it? Has he finally admitted that it was all in vain; that his life, his faith, his trust, was just a delusion? 'No! Do not let it be so. Do not give up,' I urge him silently. Please keep the faith; don't let it end like this. And my eyes are stinging wet with tears. I blink them away and look up at him. He opens his eyes, looks back at me and what I see is not despair but triumph. He has conquered. I don't know how I know this and I don't know what it means but something has happened, something cosmic; and as he looks down with his steady open gaze I feel a part of it too. I am different now, the whole world is different now and I have been a witness.

I remember more of that psalm. It had struck me that it could have been describing something like crucifixion so I had read it especially carefully. What really made an impression, though, was that after all the description of suffering there is rescue and the psalm ends in praise: praise to the God who has not abandoned the writer after all.

I look up again and see that his great effort, whatever it was, has been almost too great for Jesus. He speaks again but this time his voice is parched and croaking, "I thirst!" Someone runs to get one of the sponges on sticks they have here, soaked in some of the rough red wine that they rightly call 'vinegar', and hands it up to him.

He drinks mightily and then once again tenses his body, raises his head and shouts, "It is finished!" Then, more gently, looking up to heaven, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." With a great rattle of breath his whole body slumps down against the ropes and he is gone.

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

After the shout, a silence. Never have I heard a silence so deep and so profound. How long it lasted I do not know but eventually it is broken by the anguished scream of his mother: "No...!" It brings us all back into the present. I am desolate. Even the lads are really touched in a way I've never seen before. One or two actually have tears in their eyes—which is just as well for I cannot stop my own.

As I stand here sobbing, I feel the need to say something; something truthful, something from the heart.

"Truly," I say, "this was the Son of God."

And the lads nod. They know it too.

NOTES

I have taken the liberty of assuming that the centurion on duty when Jesus died is the same man who was stationed in Capernaum and whose servant Jesus healed. There is nothing in the Bible to support this. My only defence is that it helps to give some background which makes the centurion's final statement seem more plausible and more grounded in his experience. So, although not probable, it's not impossible that they were the same.

The Roman cross was made of two parts: the *stipes*, which was an upright stake fixed in the ground and the *patibulum*, the cross piece which was lashed or nailed to the stipes. In addition there was often a *titulus*, a notice which stated the nature of the crime committed.

Crucifixion was a particularly cruel form of execution, mainly used for those who rebelled against the empire. After the slaves' revolt led by Spartacus in 71 BC, 6000 people were crucified, their crosses placed along the Appian way from Capua to Rome.

There seems to have been no set form of cross or method of crucifixion; it was up to the 'ingenuity' of the executioner.

The Roman philosopher Seneca the Younger, a contemporary of Jesus, wrote in about 40 AD, "I see crosses there, not just of one kind but made in many different ways: some have their victims with head down to the ground; some impale their private parts; others stretch out their arms on the beam."

In the same piece of writing Seneca also adds:

"Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away in pain dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed, swelling with ugly weals on shoulders and chest, and drawing the breath of life amid long-drawn-out agony? He would have many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross."

Seneca, *Dialogue 6 (De Consolatione ad Marciam)*

The cry, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani' is a Greek transliteration of the beginning of psalm 22 (there is some debate as to whether Jesus

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THE CENTURION'S TALE—CRUCIFIXION DUTY

spoke it in Hebrew or Aramaic—they are similar) and in English means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The psalm describes the desolation of the writer: “All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads” (verse 7); “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast” (verse 14); “they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots” (verse 18); and much more.

But it ends with words of faith: “You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.” (verses 23-24)

‘Son of God’ was a term used only once in the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament), to refer to a diving being, probably an angel, who joined the three Jews in the burning fiery furnace (Daniel 3:25). In the New Testament Jesus is referred to as the Son of God on a number of occasions. Interestingly, this was also a title which the Roman emperor used of himself.

In 42 BC, Julius Caesar was formally deified as ‘the divine Julius’. His adopted son, Octavian (better known as Augustus) thus became known as *divi filius* (son of the god). Tiberius, his successor, who was the emperor at the time of Jesus’ death, took Augustus’ title to himself, as did other Caesars after him.

www.encounterswithjesus.net
encounterswithjesus1@gmail.com