

“The best book I have read in years. A compelling read—I couldn’t put it down.”

Doug Sprunt, One Way Ministries

“The most gripping account of the crucifixion I have ever read.”

Wilf Wight, eastern Ontario district director,
Canadian Bible Society

“I was at the foot of the cross. I stepped inside the empty tomb. This book took me there.”

Robert DuBroy, cofounder of CHRI-FM, Ottawa, Ontario

“An awesome read: captivating, spellbinding, inspiring! Through the author’s masterful writing, the centurion stood out as a real and personable individual. . . . The book also helped me visualize Jesus, my Savior, and his person and work for the forgiveness of my sins, for my daily walk, and for the eternal life he has in store for all who believe.”

Cliff Kentel, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church,
Regina, Saskatchewan

“A readable and accurate novel about Jesus Christ’s last week on earth. David Kitz’s portrayal of the collision between pagan Rome and temple Judaism is completely plausible. And as a perfect antidote to the faux expertise of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, Kitz provides over a hundred endnotes and a handful of thumbnail biographies at the end of his book.”

Joe Woodard, *Calgary Herald*

“Story has a way of capturing our attention and enabling truth to move from head to heart. David Kitz creatively unpacks the events of Passion Week as seen through a Roman centurion’s eyes. Through vivid word pictures, we see the whip-sliced back of our Savior and hear the pounding of each nail that affixed him to the cross. We walk these last steps of Jesus’s earthly ministry, leading to his death, burial, and triumphant resurrection from the dead. Kitz better helps us to do as the apostle John encourages: ‘See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!’ (1 John 3:1).”

Dean Ridings, author of *The Pray! Prayer Journal* and communications director of Navigator Church Ministries

“This engaging, hard-hitting narrative is a distillation of Kitz’s study and prayer over fifty years as a pastor and educator, steeped in the wonder of this story. As a novelist, he reveals profound respect for the historical record through his characterization of Marcus Longinus, a Roman centurion who is unwillingly caught in the power struggles of the day. In contrast to the stench of these political machinations, the donkey-riding King emerges in the Roman world offering an entirely new way for humankind to be reborn. The Roman centurion is like us, caught between worlds. Who is king? Why? The Son of God shows unlimited compassion through healing the sick and feeding the hungry, and his purity catches the attention of the masses in a drama that still shakes the world, one aching, open, humble heart at a time.”

Dr. Darlene L. Witte-Townsend, former professor of education,
Johnson State College

“One of the most exceptional biblical fiction books I have ever read. I was struck by the everyday events and people affected by the dramatic climax of the cross, which Kitz presents on an equal level with Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. Extremely well documented historically and biblically, the narrative transports you back in time and evokes both grief and thanksgiving as you follow the soldier’s own emotional turmoil in grappling with the dramatic events of the darkest day in history. Like him you will be led to cry out in both despair and trust, ‘Surely this was the Son of God!’”

Heather Goodwin, former manager of the Baptist Bookroom,
New Brunswick

“David Kitz has written an intriguing book. Taking the point of view of the centurion who crucified Christ is new and fresh and gives the reader much to contemplate. Even though I knew the story, I felt compelled to read on to see how Kitz would unfold the drama. Excellently done!”

Tami Waring, Officers’ Christian Fellowship,
Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base

THE
SOLDIER
WHO
KILLED
A
KING



DAVID KITZ

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*Jesus did many other things as well. If every one
of them were written down, I suppose that even
the whole world would not have room for the
books that would be written.*

John 21:25

Foreword

WHAT WOULD IT have been like to live in the geopolitical center of the first-century world, when donkeys and camels were the cars and trucks, conversations over goblets of wine were the social media, and religious conflict influenced every facet of life? What would it have been like to live under the pagan, political domination of Roman tyranny, while also under the oppressive ritualistic control of hypocritical religious bigots? What would it have been like to live in the very week that this dark, confused world was invaded by heaven—a week when history shifted from BC to AD?

This gripping story offers its readers a front-row seat from which we can view the action. It's a hidden camera on the helmet of a primary witness of the history-altering drama when the Sovereign of the Universe, quietly riding a lowly donkey, overthrew the pomp and dominion of the most powerful kingdom this world had ever known. More than that, it's a look into the mind and heart of a man, not unlike you or me, who wrestled with the meaning and purpose of life.

As you read the thoughtful eyewitness account of Marcus Longinus, the Roman centurion, *the soldier who killed a king*, you'll feel his anxiety and anguish as well as exult in his ultimate answers because—despite the differences of time and culture—his story is our story.

DR. BARRY BUZZA
President Emeritus
Foursquare Gospel Church of Canada

Preface

YOU ARE ABOUT to set out on a journey through a pivotal week in human history—the week of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection. On this journey you will notice time and date entries at the head of each chapter. These act as road markers as you make your way through the week. Most historians and biblical scholars situate this epic drama during the Passover week of AD 30. If this is so, then we can pinpoint many events to within minutes of their occurrence.

You will be seeing this slice of history through the eyes of Marcus Longinus, the Roman centurion who oversaw the crucifixion of Jesus. At the foot of the cross, this man made this startling confession: “Surely he was the Son of God!” (Matt. 27:54).

This is a work of historical fiction. Like other works in this genre, there are points where imagination is essential in order to round out the characters and to fill in details missing from the historical record. However, every effort has been made to tell this story in a biblically accurate manner. Frequently, when the story narrative intersects with the biblical account, direct quotes from the Bible are used. These quotes appear in italics and are catalogued by chapter in the endnotes. Quotations are drawn from the New International Version except where noted.

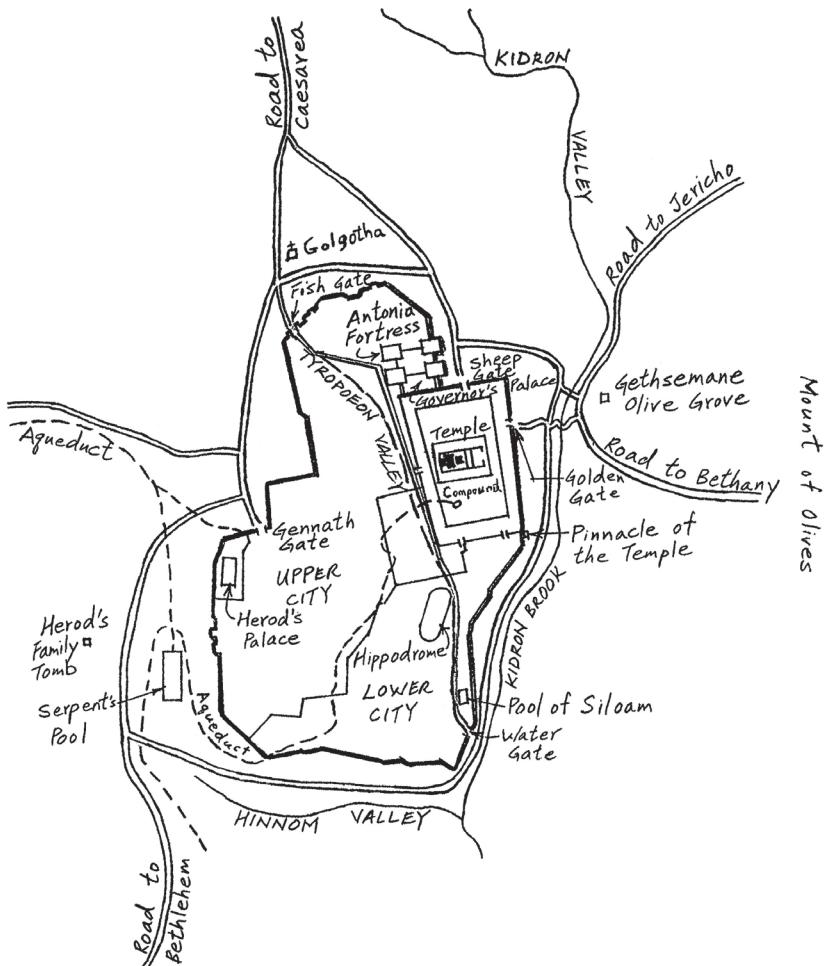
For navigational purposes, a map of first-century Jerusalem has been included.

With that said, and your seat belts fastened, I invite you to settle in for an amazing journey.

DAVID KITZ



Jerusalem AD 30





Four in the afternoon, Sunday, April 2, AD 30

IT WAS NEVER like this before.

I have been posted in Jerusalem for ten years now, but in all that time I had never seen a Passover crowd like this.

It wasn't the numbers. I had seen that before.

The Passover pilgrims always come plodding into the city in reverent caravans. Some of them chant psalms. Others are silent, looking bone-weary as they trudge, like fretful herdsmen with children in tow. Undoubtedly, many are relieved that their holy city is finally in view.

But this year it was different. There was this man—at the center of the whole procession. There had never been a central figure before. Every movement within that huge throng seemed focused on him.

Squinting in a futile attempt to get a better view, I gave Claudio a backhanded slap to the shoulder and demanded, “What are they doing?”

“They’re climbing the trees, sir.”

“I can see that!” I snapped. “But what are they doing?”

“They seem to be tearing off the palm branches, sir.”

“What is going on here?” I said it more to myself than to any of the men standing near me. An uncomfortable feeling crept into me as the procession advanced.

“They don’t usually do this?” Claudio questioned.

“No . . . They’ve never done this before.” There was worry in my voice.

Claudio had been recently assigned to this place, the festering arm-pit of the empire, and I was at a loss to explain what was happening before us. We were standing on the wall above the gate of Jerusalem, and

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less than a half mile away, we could see the jubilant pilgrims surging toward us in alarming numbers.

“They’re laying the palm branches on the road in front of that man—the man on the donkey.”

Until Claudius said it, I hadn’t noticed the donkey. Its small size and the frenzy of activity round about must have obscured this detail in the picture before me. What an odd way for this man to come. I could make no sense of it.

“They’re throwing down their cloaks before him.”

The sweat-glistened bodies of several men were clearly visible. Outer garments were being cast down before this man as a sign of homage. At the same time the rhythmic chanting of their voices became more distinct.

What were they singing? Could I pick up the words?

“*Hosanna to the Son of David!*”

“*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*”

“*Hosanna in the highest heaven!*”

That’s when it hit me like a barbarian’s club. I realized what I was witnessing. It was a triumphal entry—the entry of a king.

It was the words. The words they were now boisterously shouting. He was their Messiah. The Son of David! The one they were waiting for! The one who would rid them of the Romans. He would set up his glorious Jewish kingdom, here, in Jerusalem! This is what I had been warned about since the day I first set foot on this cursed Judean soil.

And we, I and my men and the garrison in the city, were all that stood in their way.

This crowd of thousands was sweeping down the Mount of Olives into the Kidron Valley and then on toward us. They advanced like a huge human wave about to collide with the rock-hewn palisades on which we stood.

Would they sweep us away?

My initial curiosity had grown into worry. Now, in an instant, my worry turned to alarm. Instinctively, everything within me shouted, “Stand! Resist! Be a Roman!”

We had soldiers posted all about the city, especially along the pilgrim route. My own hundred men were among the first to be deployed. During Jewish feasts like this, we made certain we were highly visible. I dreaded what might happen if this crowd ran wild. Rioting could erupt, and with an impassioned throng such as this, riots have a way of quickly turning deadly.

For several moments a debate raged in my mind. Should I order the gate closed to keep this rabble with their pretender king out of the city? Or should I let everything proceed—let it proceed as though somehow we hadn't taken note of what was going on?

"Stand! Ready for orders!" I shouted above the swelling din. The sentinels on the wall snapped to attention.

I hastily scanned the crowd for any sign of weapons, any hint of armed treachery. To my surprise, I saw none. They were paying no attention to us. Everyone was caught up with hailing this man, the man on the donkey.

The front edges of the crowd reached the first platoon of eight men I had positioned by the roadside about four hundred yards before the gate. But they ignored them, sweeping past the clump of soldiers without so much as creating a ripple, like a swift-flowing stream around a stone.

At that moment I knew it made no sense to lower the gate. It would only enrage this crowd that was already fully aroused and moving as one.

Let them come. We'll handle them and their king inside the city.

Their king. On a donkey. I could only shake my head in disbelief.

I had watched many a triumphal entry while growing up in Rome, and the conquering hero always rode a gallant warhorse. And as a boy, I too had dreams of personal glory. But a donkey? It could only happen here, I thought with an incredulous grin.

I could see him clearly now. Donkey or not, he had the look of a man who knew exactly what he was doing. Those about him might not know or understand, but he knew. He had a destination in mind, a purpose. You could see it on his face.

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“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

There was something else different about him. At the time I didn't know what it was. I couldn't put it into words for a long time. I think I noticed it because I had watched all those other men come into Rome in their triumphal processions. They were conquerors, but still they were hollow men, feeding off the adulation of the crowd, thirsting but never satisfied. You could see them vainly drink it in, hoping it would somehow fill the empty soul.

This donkey-riding king wasn't drinking from the crowd. I somehow sensed he was full already, and what he had within must have come from a different source.

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Just at that moment a strange feeling seemed to rise within me. Maybe it was the joy of the crowd. I had expected anger. Maybe it was the children waving palm branches or the spontaneity of the singing? I don't know. For one moment it all seemed to come together. It seemed right somehow. Like heaven and earth had finally, for a moment, come into agreement—an agreement that had never been achieved before.

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

He was much closer now.

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

He was now within the shadow of the gate.

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

At that moment he looked up. For an instant our eyes met. Then I heard a voice—clearly heard a voice say, “I have a future for you.”

I was confused.

I turned to Claudius and said, “What did you mean by that?”

“What did I mean by what?” He had a blank look on his face.

“By what you said about—about the future?”

“I didn't say anything about the future, sir. I didn't say anything.”

I was totally baffled. Was I hearing voices? This whole thing was making no sense, no sense at all. Passover pilgrims weren't supposed to come into the city this way. We had a revolutionary on the loose—riding a donkey. And now I was hearing things?

I rubbed the sweat from my forehead, hoping for some clarity to emerge.

I had a hundred men whose lives were in danger from this Jewish Messiah and his horde of followers. That was what mattered.

By this time the donkey man had passed under the gate and was heading in the direction of the temple in the heart of the city.

I signaled for Claudius to follow as I raced down the stairs of the gatehouse. I emerged onto the street and grabbed the first two-legged bit of Jewish scum I saw. Pressing him against the stone wall, I demanded, "Who is that man?" I pointed at the retreating figure on the donkey.

The poor wretch was in shock and seemed quite unable to get out a word.

Claudius reached for his sword.

"Je-Jesus of Nazareth," he stammered and then quickly added, "the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

I loosened my grip.

Then in a voice loud enough for all near to hear, I announced, "Well, there is one thing I do know. We're going to have to keep an eye on that man."

2



One in the morning, Monday, April 3

SLEEP WAS IMPOSSIBLE. The events of the day kept playing through my mind.

He worried me. Donkey man. The donkey king. Jesus of Nazareth.

He could have turned that mob against us. They were in his hands. Why didn't he act?

Maybe it was the women and children in the crowd? Maybe it was a lack of weapons?

He must be waiting for his support to build. He obviously had his supporters from Galilee with him. Maybe he felt he needed to build his base of support here in Jerusalem before he attacked us.

I rolled over. The room felt unusually hot for a spring evening.

Maybe it just wasn't his time. He was a man with a purpose. I could see that. Of course that was it. He was working according to some plan, some script I could only guess at.

What was his next move?

The deep rhythmic breathing of my wife told me she was fast asleep. Zelda knew none of my worries. It was best that way. Our two young sons were also sleeping, in the adjoining room. Let them dream on.

But by the gods, it's hard to sleep when you feel your life is threatened.

I had doubled my men on duty for the nightly foot patrol through the city and put an additional man on as house guard. Maybe that idiot Arius wouldn't fall asleep if he had some company. I could faintly hear feet shuffling in the courtyard from time to time, so I knew they were on duty.

At least I knew our would-be Messiah wasn't in the city. As the sun was setting, I had watched him leave by the same gate by which he had arrived triumphant an hour earlier. Word on the street had it that he was going to spend the night with friends in Bethany. So an overnight coup was not in the works.

Then there was Claudius to worry about, my sister's son. I was so pleased when he first arrived from Antioch. I remembered him as a curly-haired boy back in Rome, but when he stepped off that galleon, I was looking at a man. I didn't even recognize him at that moment, though now I can see he has my sister's eyes.

Yes, there was Claudius. What had he stepped into if this thing erupted?

Hell-bent zealots. I hated them.

I could feel my body tense as the pictures raced through my mind.

There was Andreas, one of my lead men, dumped like a sack of refuse. I found him lying on the blood-drenched cobblestones. His throat was cut.

Then there was young Hermes, pinned to a wall by his own spear. His entrails were hanging to the ground.

Terrorists! Bloody terrorists! That's what they were. And there was no telling when they would strike. The incident last month was still fresh in my mind. Barabbas the Zealot, the ringleader, would pay for this!

These were isolated, random attacks by a few fanatics. For us Romans, the constant threat of terror was demoralizing. Each incident marshaled its own set of fears. But this prophet, this Jesus, with thousands adoring him and singing his praise, what could he do? Anything seemed possible. He put all of Jerusalem in a stir today. And this was only the first day of Passover Week. There was no doubt in my mind that we were in for a killer week, and it would be us or them.

I rolled over. My pillow was wet with sweat.

Then there was Flavio.

All this wouldn't leave me so fuming frustrated if it weren't for the leadership crisis. Late in the day, when Renaldo and I reported all we had seen to Flavio—our tribune, our commanding officer—he was drunk.

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Drunk again. So here we were on the cusp of a mass rebellion, and our commander was so intoxicated he couldn't draw his sword to butter his own bread.

I threw back the flimsy cover, quietly pulled on a tunic, and slipped out the door.

Standing on the balcony, I could see the two guards start at my sudden appearance above them. One quickly moved to the street gate, anticipating a rebuke.

The still night air was refreshing as I drew in several long breaths. I reached for the balcony rail to anchor me in the darkness. It was a clear moonlit night. The stars were glorious.

I just needed time to think. All was quiet except for the incessant chirping of crickets.

I needed a plan.

How long I stood there I have no idea. Then it started to come. Slowly at first, and then my mind raced along.

I groped my way forward till I reached the stairs. Then, with the assurance of familiarity, I hurried down them. Beneath the stairs was a storage closet. The hinges creaked as I opened the crude door. I stooped to enter, turned a sharp left, and with fumbling hands reached for a small wooden trunk I knew should be on a shelf straight ahead of me at chest height. I smiled into the blackness as my fingers fell on a well-worn handle. I shifted the trunk's weight onto my hip and ducked back out the door. Moving out of the shadows, I set my trophy down in the center of the courtyard.

Arius shuffled toward me from the gate and in whispered tones asked, "Sir, do you need my help?"

I waved him off.

The clasps gave way before me, and the tight lid squeaked open. I pulled out the robe and held it up to the starlight. I did the same with the carefully folded prayer shawl. The pungent cedar smell of the chest had permeated the fabric. The scent revived me. I hastily stuffed both back into the trunk and carried the treasure up to my chamber.

For what was left of the night, I slept.

3



Six in the morning, Monday, April 3

THE FIRST STREAKS of dawn were just beginning to spread across the eastern sky when I left the house with the trunk tucked under my arm. In moments I was at Renaldo's gate. The gatekeeper immediately recognized me and granted entry.

Renaldo was a fellow centurion and a trusted friend. Our wives spent untold hours together, since our cramped Roman villas were joined one to another. For Zelda, female companionship of a Roman kind was hard to find in this outpost of the empire, so our wives found in each other a kinship that might never have flourished back home.

In the dim light I caught sight of a familiar toga-clad figure seated on the steps, stroking the head of a large dog. At the sound of my footsteps, Keeper swung free from his master and bounded about me in two great circles with his tail wagging furiously.

"He's such a great watchdog," I said in mock admiration. In fact, I knew he would be just that if a stranger entered.

"You're off to an early start," Renaldo offered as he rose, straightened, and we clasped forearms.

"Yes, well, it's not a regular week."

"No, it's not a regular week," he agreed, then shook his head. "What a show that was yesterday. Holy Jupiter! I thought we were history. That dog on the donkey could have had us trampled and served up as Pass-over lamb. That was too close. Way too close!"

"Don't I know it." I nodded my full agreement.

"We have to do something. This Jewish prophet is too dangerous."

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“That’s why I came over. I have a plan. It came to me last night.”

“What about Flavio?” Renaldo resumed stroking Keeper. The dog’s silky ears twitched beneath his gentle hand.

“Forget Flavio. He’ll be drunk for the rest of the week. Herod’s coming down about midweek. There’ll be a big wine-swilling bash for the upper crust. He’ll sober up just long enough so he can bow and scrape for Pilate at the right moment. Forget him. We have to save our own hides.”

“All right. So what’s this plan?”

“It’s not some great master scheme, but I do have a few ideas.”

“Yes, get on with it,” he said with obvious interest.

“Well, the way I see it, we have way too little information about whatever is going on here. If there’s some Passover plot being hatched, we need to be the first to know about it. Not like yesterday. I don’t like surprises. Especially Jewish Messiah surprises.”

Renaldo scowled in agreement.

“So why the trunk?” he asked.

I had set it down after our greeting, and now it was Keeper, sniffing about it, that brought it to Renaldo’s attention.

“This is one way I can get some information.”

I opened the trunk and pulled out several items of clothing, among them a Jewish prayer shawl and several phylacteries. Holding one of the fringed garments to myself, I announced, “Today I am Benjamin. Benjamin from Alexandria, and I’ve come to celebrate the Passover here, in the holy city, Jerusalem.”

All this was done with a thick Aramaic accent and a mock reverence that left Renaldo slapping his thigh in laughter.

“Marcus, Marcus! Only you could pull this off!” Then he added in a more thoughtful tone, “I could look in on some of our usual sources. They’re bound to know a thing or two about this donkey man.”

“Now you’re thinking.” With a glance to the eastern sky, I added, “Look, we don’t have much time. The sun’s almost up. All my men know their assigned duties, so if you could just look in on them at the barracks, that would be great. I should be back in uniform by noon, and I could meet you there to discuss what we’ve found.”

“No problem . . . Benjamin!” he said, shaking his head and grinning, no doubt contemplating the sight of me in religious garb.

I began to place the clothing back in the trunk, and then I turned to my friend.

“Oh, by the way, Renaldo, could you check in on Cladius at the Golden Gate? I expect our visiting prophet will be coming back into town by the same way today. Cladius might need a hand.”

“No problem, Marcus.” And then he added in a more serious tone, “Now, you be careful.”

“Yes, well,” I said, sighing, “I think we’ve all got to be careful.”

I swung the trunk up under my arm. With a quick wave of my free hand, I said, “I’m off for an appointment with Jesus of Nazareth.”