

THE PEREGRINE'S ODYSSEY

EXCERPT

Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when His glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let no one among you be made to suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as an intriguer. But whoever is made to suffer as a Christian should not be ashamed but glorify God because of the name. For it is time for the judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, how will it end for those who fail to obey the gospel of God?

1 Peter, 4:12-16

To silence the rumors about the burning of Rome, Nero ordered the accusation of certain persons hated for their abominations, commonly called Christians. This name came to them from Chrestos who, under Tiberius, had been tortured by the procurator Pontius Pilate. For a time, this hateful superstition was repressed, then broke out anew, not only in Judea, cradle of the scourge, but in Rome, whither every kind of atrocity of infamy flows from all over the world. Those who confessed their faith were arrested; then, on their directions, a crowd of others, not so much for having set fire to the town as for their hatred of the human race.

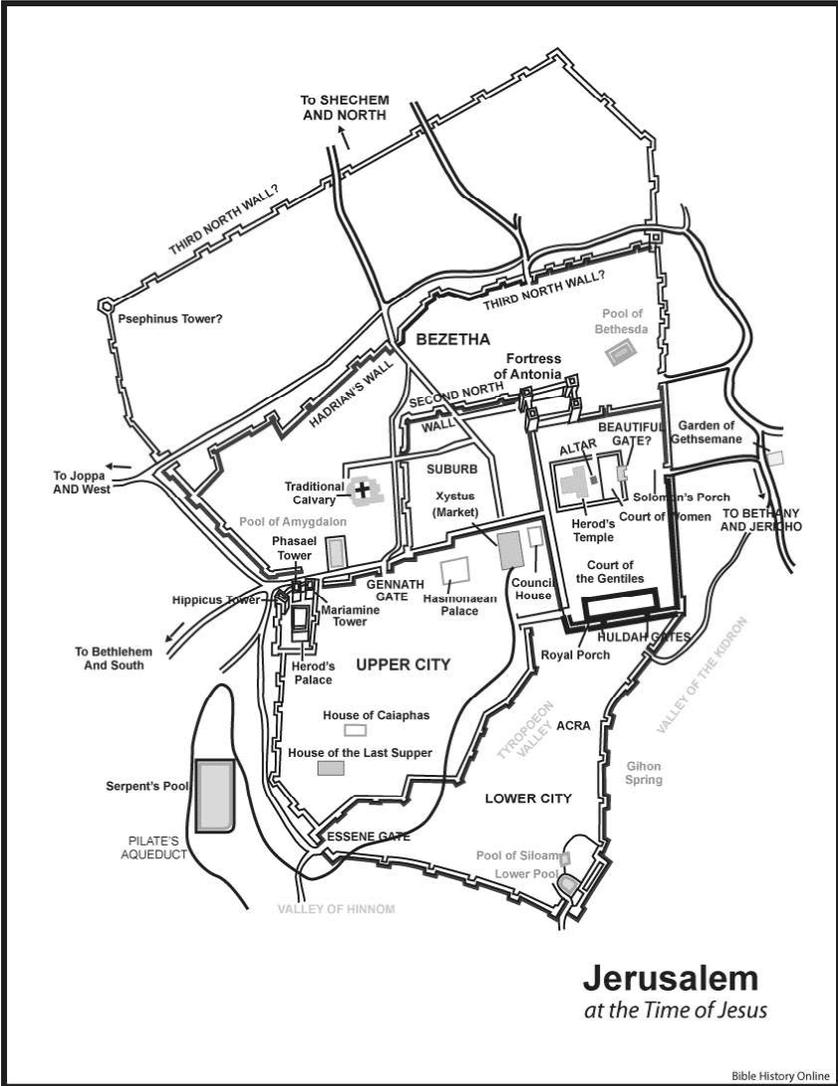
Tacitus, Annals: XV.44

Nero had the Christians tortured, a people addicted to a new and guilty superstition.

Suetonius, Lives of the Caesars, Nero XVI.3

# PROLOGUE

THREE HILLS



# I

## On Mount Olivet Jerusalem, May 30 AD

*Ignatius—watching and listening*

Young Ignatius woke with a start.

He had slept fitfully all night. Dreams of storms, caravans attacked by Arab brigands, his father wounded or killed.... His father had been away for months in Arabia and Egypt as far as Alexandria. He should return any week with the caravan from Petra. But no journey through the vast desert was safe from misfortune, whatever the cause. Ignatius worried. He always worried until his father was safely home. He missed his father.

Voices below, rising from across the narrow street more the size of an alley, had jarred him from his restless sleep. In the stillness of early morning, the muffled voices sounded as if they were but an arm's length away. Kicking the tangled linen sheet aside, he shuffled to the window, squinting as he peered down at the house across the way. Three men huddled close, whispering. He recognized one he thought to be among a group of Galileans who came and went at odd times. He had watched them for weeks. Their furtive demeanor attracted his attention, his curiosity growing by the day.

It was not quite daybreak. The dark night sky was giving way to a violet haze that hinted at the rising sun. The early morning was cool this spring day of May. The days had been gradually warming and today held the promise of another lovely day in the Judean hills.

Ignatius and his cousin Ya'aqov would have much to do as the holy day of *Shavu'ot* (Pentecost) approached, little more than a week hence. Pilgrims were streaming into the city, most pitching tents outside the city walls. Their numbers were much smaller than last month during *Pesach* (the Passover). How great the crowds had been! Hundreds of thousands had come from all corners of the world—from his homeland of Syria and the provinces of

Asia, Greece, Egypt, Africa, Rome and Italia—for the greatest of the high holy days.

Ignatius had traveled to Jerusalem months earlier with his father from their home in Antioch. He had seen many great festivals as one would expect in the leading metropolis of the eastern empire, a city little less in grandeur than Rome or Alexandria. These pilgrims descended on Jerusalem, a small Palestinian city not on any major Roman highway. Faithful observant Jews came, Gentiles as well, merchants, tourists and the curious. The thousands of tents surrounding the city seemed like a vast field of multicolored mushrooms. At night their campfires lit up the countryside like stars fallen from the heavens. For a young boy it was a magical time.

Ignatius was having great fun with his cousin, one year older than his twelve. They explored the countryside, helped his Uncle Shimon at market (they too were a family of prosperous merchants), and stuffed himself with his aunt's cooking (his mother had died many years ago and how he missed a mother's cooking), all the while daydreaming of his father's journeys and adventures to exotic Alexandria and mysterious Petra. One day soon he hoped to go along.

#### *Recalling Passover Events*

In the days leading up to Pesach a dramatic incident captured young Ignatius' attention—a near riot and the trial and execution of a Galilean rabbi from Nazareth.

The rabbi, called Yeshua, and his Galilean followers came into the city that week of Pesach. Ya'aqov informed his cousin that the rabbi was hated by many of the Scribes and Pharisees of the Sanhedrin, especially by the high priest Caiaphas. The story was that for many years Yeshua had traveled throughout the country attracting many followers, and his preaching increasingly challenged the religious authorities. Their animosity grew more intense. Over the course of the week, the rabbi created disturbances in the precincts of the great temple, the holiest place in Israel and the entire world. On one occasion attacking some of the merchants, upsetting their market tables. Yeshua's enemies were outraged. But they had a solution to this dilemma. The key was a turncoat among the rabbi's followers.

Ignatius understood little of this beyond the undeniable hostility that existed between these Galilean Jews and the Jerusalem priests. His family was not deeply religious, observing little of the Law and its traditions.

Marcellus, his father, was a prosperous merchant. His lucrative trade in spices and luxuries consumed his days. Religious practice was secondary. And, Antioch was home to many religions—who could say which was true? So, Ignatius and his family were *Ame-Haaretz*. In the eyes of many they were no better than the Gentiles. They were *Syrian* Jews, definitely not “real” Jews.

On the eve of Pesach, an informer betrayed the rabbi’s whereabouts. The Nazarene was arrested, interrogated and condemned by the Sanhedrin. Later that night, Caiaphas brought him to Pontius Pilatus, the Roman procurator of Judea, seeking to have the blasphemous pretender executed. Pilatus had come from the governor’s palace at Caesarea. When in Jerusalem he resided at the Fortress Antonia, the Roman *praesidium* which abutted the Temple precincts. During these religious festivals, he brought additional legionaries to maintain order in the city. The Jews, especially those in Jerusalem, chafed under their Roman overlords, and with hundreds of thousands packed into the small city, keeping order was always the Roman’s greatest concern.

The conflict between the upstart mashiach and the Sanhedrin came to a head that night, the Friday of Pesach. Caiaphas, along with many of the priests and elders and a large group of their followers, demanded that Pilatus condemn the Nazarene for treason—Yeshua was a false mashiach who claimed to be the “King of the Jews.” This, they argued, was undeniably treasonous to Caesar’s majesty, unquestionably a capital crime. Under intense pressure from the priests and their vociferous followers, Pilatus reluctantly consented. The city was in an uproar. With the holy Pesach mere hours away, the rabbi and two others were taken outside the city walls to Golgotha, the “hill of the skull,” and crucified.

Then there was the strange weather that afternoon—a sudden dark overcast, strong winds, and what was felt to be a minor earthquake. Earthquakes terrified Ignatius—Antioch experienced many. The earth shook, cracked open, buildings would break and collapse, the noise was dreadful... and just when you thought it might all be over the ground shook again. One might think all the daemons of Hades had loosed their anger on puny mortals. Ignatius did not like earthquakes.

Days after these extraordinary events, soldiers guarding the tomb of the dead rabbi inexplicably left their post. The tomb was found empty. As later reports would have it, the Nazarene’s followers had stolen the corpse. An incensed Pilatus had the entire guard detail executed for desertion.

Meanwhile, the priests and the palace guards were searching for the Nazarene’s followers. Caiaphas sought to eliminate the last vestiges of these

troublemakers. Syrian legionaries, particularly brutal because of their hatred of the Jews, patrolled the crowded city. There was an edginess that was palpable. Eventually, as the holy days passed, most of the pilgrims, tourists and merchants departed for their homelands. Jerusalem settled into a prosaic ordinariness. The followers of the dead rabbi lay low.

But Ignatius knew where they were...

### *Ignatius and Cousin Ya'aqov*

The house across from Uncle Shimon's that teased young Ignatius' imagination belonged to a family friendly to the executed rabbi. The rabbi was *mashiach* to some, wonder-worker, magician, faker to others, and troublemaker to most. His more zealous followers stayed here often. They had celebrated the Pesach Seder here the night the Nazarene was arrested. Now the Galileans found sanctuary here. What little talk there was in the neighborhood about them was guarded. No one wanted trouble with the authorities. That included Uncle Shimon.

This was a "well-to-do" neighborhood on one of the lower streets in the western quarter of the city. Not far away, higher up the hill, were the homes of the chief priests—Caiaphas and his father-in-law, Annas. The hunters and the hunted were not far separated. Though they were in other ways...

Ignatius noticed that the dead rabbi's followers would come and go in pairs or three's, never the entire group who were many dozens. He came to recognize quite a few.

Occasionally he would speak with one of the younger ones, Yochanan, who, it was said, was very close to the rabbi. Of all the Galileans, Yochanan was the friendliest to young Ignatius, as one closer to his age. He would smile and say hello whenever the two met. For Ignatius it went little further than a sheepish greeting. Ignatius' reticence stemmed from his natural shyness, but also due to common deference to adults. More than anything, he knew these Galileans remained in perilous standing with Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. Rumors persisted that the Galileans had stolen the rabbi's body to "prove" Yeshua's prophecy that he would come back to life. The rabbi still alive? Who could believe such nonsense? Ignatius had seen him crucified. No one survived that.

As Ignatius stared down at the men huddling around the entry porch, the sky slipped its velvet blanket and a pale, golden glow painted the eastern sky

over Mount Olivet.

The call of the morning watch echoed from the Temple ramparts, followed by long notes of silver trumpets heralding the first hour of a new day.

Soon the streets would be busy with the bustle of merchants opening their shops and women carrying water jugs to the fountains. Above all were the daily temple rites and sacrifices that spoke to the everlasting covenant between the One God and his Chosen People.

Suddenly, lost in his wonderings about the scene below, Ignatius felt arms grabbing, hugging him from behind.

“Ignatius, who are you spying on? What are you doing up so early? I’ve watched you at the window since dark. What’s going on?”

“Ya’aqov!” He twisted out of the arm-lock and hissed, “Let go... some of the Galileans are back. See? Look... there are two others, the one they call Ta’oma, the short, funny looking one, and Shimon-Kephas. He looks like a bear. I think he is their leader. I wonder what they are doing... if the temple guards see them...”

“None of our concern,” said his cousin. “Let’s get something to eat. Father said we have much to do today... more pilgrims and tourists coming for *Shavu’ot*, more business at the market.” He tugged at Ignatius. “*Come on...*”

Shrugging his cousin off, Ignatius turned back to the window. Another two had joined the others.

*I wonder*, thought Ignatius. The tiny group was quite excited, talking rapidly and waving arms energetically. *Good thing we are far from the temple and that it is so early*. Again thinking, if the temple guards should pass by and recognize them...

“Ignatius! Come eat.” That was Ya’aqov’s mother, Ruth, calling him. Ya’aqov had already scurried downstairs.

“Yes, aunt, coming...” Ignatius had just decided—why he could not say—he wanted to find out what these Galileans were up to.

### *Breakfast Gathering*

The custom of the Jewish people was two meals, one at mid-day and evening dinner. However, Shimon, Ya’aqov’s father, enjoyed his food, if measured by his rather large stomach which lifted his robe almost to mid-calf. So, a small meal was had to start the day. He gathered his little flock of children

to say morning prayers and to assign chores to the older ones.

All seven children and Ignatius were seated on two benches, a long table between. As the weather was mild, they gathered in the inner courtyard under an awning.

Uncle Shimon surveyed his flock, nodding with pleasure as he counted. “All my pigeons are here: Ya’aqov, Binyamin, Aharon, Leah, Miriam, little Ruth, Johanna... and our beloved cousin Ignatius.” He smiled affectionately at Ruth. These morning gatherings reminded him of the Psalm, *Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home; your children like olive plants around your table. Behold, thus is the man blessed...*

“Well, who speaks this morning for our family?”—Although he did know — “Leah?”

“It is my turn today, father.” A wide smile lit her round face. She loved to lead the morning prayer.

Everyone clasped hands and the slight olive-skinned girl with the lustrous dark hair began:

*Let us sing the souls in every name, And the Name in every soul.*

*Let us sing the soul in every name, And sacred name of every soul.*

*As we bless the source of life, so we are blessed.*

Then all joined in—father, mother and the children:

*You are Holy, Your Name is Holy,*

*And each day holy beings sing Hallel to Your Name.*

*Praised are You, Eternal, the Holy God. Amen*

As they sat Shimon clapped his hands and a young servant girl, Sara, brought trays of fruit, bread, goat’s milk and water.

“Thank you, Leah. Beautiful.”

“So... *Shavu’ot* comes soon and we have much to do. Girls, help your mother and Sara. Binyamin, Ya’aqov... Ignatius... you boys come to the market. You can help clean and organize the store. Be there no later than the third hour. I have business to attend to and will meet you then. And don’t be late! Much, much to do...”

Licking his fingers after making a third fig disappear, Shimon turned to his nephew.

“Ignatius, I expect your father’s return before the festival. A scout from the caravan arrived last night. They are only three days out. I hope you both will stay for the holy day. Your father should have a good deal of business here, and your return to Antioch all the more profitable. It would be a blessing to share the holy days with you both, considering he departed for

Alexandria before *Pesach*. We pray to make a good Jew of him yet!”

“I have missed him,” said Ignatius, “but I have enjoyed my time here with you. It has been exciting, so many pilgrims and all that has gone on...” He would not say it, but he would be glad to have his father safely back.

“Ignatius and I have become good friends,” Ya’aqov said. “He’s become a brother to me. He has even learned more of the Scriptures...”

“I may teach my father some Scripture and he will teach me business—a good trade!” laughed Ignatius.

The buzz of the table chatter continued throughout the morning meal. Finished, the little flock of “pigeons” flew off to begin their day.

“Remember, boys—at the third hour,” Shimon reminded. He patted a satisfied belly, picked up his skirts, kissed Ruth and departed.

“Ignatius,” said Ruth, “Sara will be very busy helping me this morning. Would you please take those two jugs and fetch some water? It would be so helpful.”

Ignatius glanced aside at Ya’aqov while agreeing, “Of course, Aunt. I will... right away.”

Ruth and Sara left the courtyard. Ya’aqov turned to his cousin. “Shall I come along? There are *two* jugs to fill. You might need help if you get... uh, diverted?” He smirked, thinking of Ignatius’ earlier window-watching.

“I can manage, and *if* I need help, I’ll ask Yochanan-Mark or one of his friends.”

“Your fascination with those Galileans might get you into trouble, maybe us as well. The priests might not be very understanding, should you be caught or seen with them. And then, what would father do? What might happen to him? You should think of these things. Father is an Ancient, a member of the Sanhedrin, and a respected merchant. Such a thing would be an embarrassment at least. Many of the priests would not be so forgiving if they believed we had something to do with those troublesome Galileans... They had that rabbi crucified for blasphemy, remember?”

“I’m just going to get water...” Ignatius looked at his cousin with feigned innocence. An idea was forming, one he kept to himself.

As it happened, Ignatius’ curiosity about the “troublesome” Galileans was satisfied... somewhat...

### *Curiosity Satisfied?*

Ignatius and his cousin were nearly inseparable over the past months.

Ya'aqov had taken him under wing as they explored Jerusalem and the countryside. Today their tether was broken. Ruth had chores for Ya'aqov at home. So, Ignatius set off down the Street of Sycamores, lugging the first jug to the fountain by the pool of Siloam. As he left the house, two of the Galileans, Ta'oma and Yochanan, were sitting on a bench deep in conversation. Yochanan looked up and greeted Ignatius as he passed by. Returning a short while later, a third man, who Ignatius did not recognize, had joined Ta'oma and Yochanan. "We should leave soon" he heard one say. Not wanting to miss anything that the Galileans might do, he rushed inside leaving the jug near the kitchen. "I am off again," he called out, grabbed the second jug and rushed back to peer out the door. Seeing Yochanan and four others walking off toward Siloam, Ignatius followed.

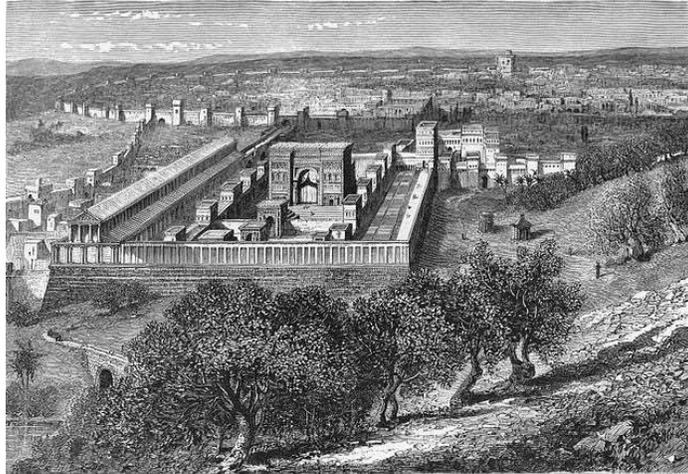
Near the pool was the Fountain Gate, one of the exits to the Hinnom Valley which formed the southern border of Jerusalem. Outside the gate the small Galilean band turned left on a cart path that skirted the Valley of Kidron in the shadow of the long, towering eastern city wall. A stream flowed down this valley fed by the spring rains. Come summer it would be dry, but now it flowed gently, bubbling over the rocky ground with the last of the season's rain. Ignatius remained a discreet distance behind his quarry. The men had stopped talking and pulled scarves up to their faces so as not to be recognized by any palace guards they might encounter. They continued along this path, crossing the brook and then along the lower slope of Mount Olivet until they came to the gethsemane, an olive press.

Here they were in the shade of the olive trees, numerous along this part of the mountain. The Galileans had walked this path countless times, perhaps today remembering the last time they walked it with their rabbi on that fateful night of *Pesach*. The sun was climbing higher over Olivet. In the cloudless azure sky, its rays washed the upper wall of the temple platform, walls that soared over one hundred feet above the Kidron.

There was a steady stream of pilgrims making their way along this path towards the city gates. Ignatius wormed his way through or around them, oblivious to the empty jug he still carried. He was fixated, wanting, somehow needing, to discover what these Galileans were about.

At the gethsemane they were joined by another small group of their fellow Galileans, another six or seven led by the one called Kephaz. They stopped briefly, embracing one another with greetings of obvious joy, though Ignatius was at enough of a distance to see but not to hear. This larger group crossed to the Bethany Road which curled up the slopes of

Olivet. Ignatius was, he hoped, shielded by the occasional groups of travelers coming down from Bethany.



As they climbed close to the crest of the mountain Ignatius still had them in sight, while keeping, he believed, a safe distance behind. He took a quick glance back over his shoulder and looked down at the holy city of Jerusalem. They were well above the walls of the city. The towering sandstone walls, the white alabaster marbles of the temple and its massive golden doors gleamed brightly in the morning sun. It was blinding if you stared too long.

Suddenly the Galileans broke away from the road and angled northwards along the crest. From the opposite direction, off towards Bethany, another small group, men and women, joined the larger group. Ignatius guessed they were now about thirty to forty in all. As they walked along the upper heights of Olivet, pine, olive and cypress trees gave way to more open spaces—rolling mounds covered by the green grasses and wildflowers of spring. The sun emblazoned the greens, yellows and lavenders of the meadow. It was stunningly beautiful. The young sweet-smelling fields of flowers gave off a heady perfume. Ignatius breathed deeply. It was intoxicating, heavenly.

Empty jug in hand, time completely lost to him, Ignatius continued to follow, now maybe a few hundred feet away from Galileans. The group proceeded down a slight depression. As he approached the top of the rise, he could look down at them. He stopped. If he continued on, he would quickly find himself in the midst of them. He knelt by a small outcropping

of stone. It was a convenient spot to watch whatever this gathering, now stopped in the hollow, was about.

There was a slight breeze which was pleasantly cool. The climb up the mountain had been warm in the morning sun. Ignatius set his jug down and watched from behind the outcrop which was higher than his height standing. The breeze wafted the sweet perfume of the wildflowers and grasses. If he was not so taken with the group below it would be nice to lie back against the shade of the boulder and drift away with the morning. He closed his eyes for an instant...

That reverie quickly ended. Ignatius blinked and noticed a man, a tall man, in a bright white robe standing on the opposite rise, looking down at the men and women who stood below in the hollow. He could see the man clearly. They were somewhat at the same level. The man raised his right hand in a gesture of greeting and smiled at his audience. They all looked up at him. It was apparent he was the one they came to see. But where he had come from Ignatius could not tell.

Ignatius was transfixed. Partly obscured by the outcropping, he remained kneeling and leaned slightly to his left to better see the entire scene, and hopefully not to be seen. Not that he shouldn't be here. After all, any number of shepherds could be about. But none were. They were in a world of their own. Ignatius had a fleeting thought that if Yochanan saw him, or any of the others, he might be chased off, an unwelcome intruder.

But everyone in that gathering was intent, enraptured by the man above.

There was a stillness, a quiet blanket of expectation. The white-robed man began to speak, his voice carrying down the hill and across the natural amphitheater.

“Children, I have...”

He looked across at Ignatius—he had seen him despite his rocky shield. Ignatius' heart pounded. The man smiled and continued speaking. Ignatius was mesmerized. The intense brown eyes of the stranger seemed to bore in on him. A stranger? Who was he?

Ignatius, held nearly breathless by his penetrating gaze, suddenly thought back to the horrific crucifixions that day of *Pesach*, the two pathetic criminals and the sad-looking rabbi, beaten and bloodied. Surely this man had not been one of the three as the Galileans claimed. It could not be. His mind must be playing tricks on him. Was this man some kind of magician that could suggest such thoughts in the minds of others? He shook his head as if trying to break a spell.

He could hear some of what the man was saying though little of it made any sense.

Snatches of words floated across the divide: "... you will receive power... you will be my witnesses..."

The man raised both arms, palms outstretched towards his audience, his robe whiter than white against the crystal blue sky. The crowd remained quiet, totally absorbed while he had been speaking.

Then the most amazing thing happened. Ignatius, not quite believing or understanding what he was seeing, would often recall this day in later years. A small low cloud passed over the crest where the man stood, obscuring him but an instant; and then the cloud was carried away by the breeze. The man was gone.

Two other men, similarly garbed in white robes, had appeared. They walked down the slight slope from where the man had been speaking, and after briefly addressing the small assembly, turned, went back up and over the rise and were gone.

Ignatius now stood and watched as the crowd broke up into smaller bands, excitedly conversing with one another.

Ignatius just stood, watching, wondering. The young Galilean Yochanan and a few others walked close by. Yochanan looked at Ignatius and smiled.

"Well, my young friend, did you see what you came to see?" He chuckled, started to walk on with his friends, then turned, laughing and said, "Don't forget your water jug." And he and the others started their journey down from Olivet.

Ignatius returned home with his water, suffered a scolding from his aunt for his tardiness, dodged Ya'aqov's persistent questions about the Galileans, and was reunited with his father a few days later. They spent *Shavu'ot* in Jerusalem; and soon after father and son returned to Antioch.

He never saw the Galileans again.