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I, Silvio Romanus, Met Jesus

EMERY STOOPS

Sternly, my commander announced that I, Silvio Romanus, had been promoted to the rank of centurion, in Legion XVI assigned to Judea with headquarters in Jerusalem.

I never planned to enter the Roman army. My plan was to continue growing grapes and melons on my parents' hillside farm, helping to support my three sisters and two brothers. We worked hard, from dawn until dark. Our muscles were hard and strong.

It was nearly noon one day when Commander Tileron rode his large, black horse through our front gate with about 20 young men following. He asked for all young men, ages 13 through 30 to come forth. While my father protested, and my mother cried, my younger brother, Toni—just past 18—and I at 20, had to step forth. Commander took us all for a short period of training in the handling of spears, swords, and shields.

Then we were sent to the Gallic Wars to fight wild German tribes on both sides of the Rhine River. Toni and I tried to be good soldiers.

In the first month, fighting was fierce and constant, but Toni and I had learned to defend ourselves well. It was early dawn one morning, when soft fingers of light were erasing stars from the blackboard of night, that Toni picked up his sword and shield and wandered about 40 steps from where I had buckled on my own armor with sword in hand.

He was ambushed by three savages with ragged clothes, long filthy hair, and captured swords. Before I could reach my brother, one wild German struck from behind. Toni was gone! Even as he fell, I arrived and face-to-face slew them all. From that time on, I fought fiercely, seeking revenge, and led in the front of every attack. Maybe that is why today, Caesar's decree named me a centurion to command 100 soldiers.

We brought back to Rome many prisoners from the Gallic Wars. Those who would obey, we sold as

slaves. Those who were fierce and wild, we crucified on long lines of crosses along the Appian Way. It had been my assignment to help nail the condemned prisoners to crosses.

Before I left for Judea, Commander Tileron let me stay two weeks with my family on the farm. Neighbors bowed to me, *Centurion Silvio Romanus*. I was proud of my new title, and I was glad to be on my way to Jerusalem where I heard that the Jews were troublemakers but not wild warriors like the Germans.

At Jerusalem, we were welcomed by Pontius Pilate and told that the Jews hated Rome and wanted their own state. Some radical Jews wanted war against Rome, but more sensible leaders believed a great Messiah would come and set them free.

Between the times when my soldiers and I were assigned to crucify criminals, I had some chances to listen to Jewish Pharisees and other leaders. They rejected our Roman gods and quarreled among themselves about a Jehovah as their *one* God. My family never talked much about Roman gods, but much more about grapes. Somehow, the one God idea seemed to make sense, but it did not seem worth quarreling about.

After a few months, in the 47th year of Octavion Augustus, we were sent to Capernaum to crucify some criminals. On the way, we saw great crowds following a leader in the hills of Galilee. I assigned some of my legionnaires to keep order and to watch for rebellion against Rome. But the leader they called Jesus, never mentioned Rome. He smiled at me, at *me*, a Roman soldier! And he told his followers to treat us like they wanted us to treat them. On another day, he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." And then he added, "Blessed ..." and named other groups who showed kindness and love, like the love I felt for my family members back on the farm.

My job was to crucify and to kill. This man talked about a God who loved like my father and mother loved me. But the Jewish Pharisees hated him, and they hated Rome. This man! Who was he? How could I understand him? Was I blessed because I was sent to keep peace in Judea? Or was I cursed because I crucified criminals? I was confused.

Back at Jerusalem, the Pharisees, scribes, and a man named Saul were asking about the Galilean—Jesus—so they could destroy him. I said nothing. Why? He was not a thief, a criminal, not an enemy of Rome. Instead he healed a leper. I wanted him to bring back my brother Toni. He seemed to be telling me that war was bad. Yet we Romans had to rule, to keep peace. What could I do about this one God idea, about this Jesus in Galilee?

Things were quiet in Jerusalem. No one was rising against Rome. Then someone reported confusion at the Jewish Temple. They said that the Galilean had come down to Jerusalem, preaching against the Pharisees. He had no sword, so he was no concern of mine.

Two days later, a dispatch came, “To Silvio Romanus, centurion, crucify criminals at Golgotha.”

I took six of my soldiers and ordered them to nail the three criminals to crosses with nails through the wrists. I had seen too many criminals poorly nailed through the hands, which would tear away. I told my soldiers they could cast lots for the criminals’ clothes.

Crucifying criminals was routine, and I paid little attention as my men nailed them to crosses. But just before the sixth hour of watch, I heard one of the criminals cry to the center one, asking for help and mercy. Then I recognized HIM, *the Galilean*. No. It could not be! This Jesus? This Jesus who taught love instead of war—this Jesus whose *one* God loved us like a father.

I moved closer. I feared he would recognize me. His face glowed like a halo of light, and he said to his god, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” Did he mean me? Then it seemed like his God reached out with one great hand and shook the earth until we fell to the ground. With the other great hand over the sun, it ceased to shine. Shaking in the darkness, I felt as if a huge lantern

lit all my past as it floated by, and a burning desire to believe in this Jesus filled my total being. This was not just a crucifixion like the others; something divine was happening. I suddenly wanted to love as Jesus had loved, and I felt euphoria that attached me to him and his one father God.

As the ninth hour approached, I drew near in the darkness as he prayed, yielding up his spirit to his God. Then his glowing face fell to his chest and he was gone—gone like my brother Toni at the Rhine.

I, Silvio Romanus, a toughened Roman centurion was crying ... I was dying with him. Then I said within myself, “Truly ...” No, let me say it to my soldiers. “Truly this man—surely, surely, this man is the Son of God!”

EMERY STOOPS

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