

From *LXX*
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X.

Asaph

“Uh,” I say. “Excuse me? Alexandria? Alexander the Great?”

“Sure,” Reb Eleazar says. “The conqueror of the world. You know, Alexander. Son of Philip of Macedonia.”

We’ve just stepped up onto dry Egyptian ground after crossing the Red Sea, and found this guy standing here, talking about places and people we’ve never heard of.

“What’s Macedonia?” I say.

“You must understand,” Reb Eleazar says. “Centuries have passed since you last walked the earth.”

Centuries? Could we have walked that long on the midbar? We have no way of telling.

“Much has changed since then,” he continues. “Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians. Most were killed outright. X tribes have ceased to exist. Only Judah and remnants of Binyamin survive. And they are scattered across the face of the earth. One community lives here in Egypt. And they are forgetting their Hebrew. The world now speaks Greek. Including most of our people. This is why I have called you: to translate our Writing into Greek.”

“Greek!” I say. “What are you talking about, nobody here speaks Greek.”

“You’ll find,” Reb Eleazar says with a sly smile, “that you are all now quite fluent in Greek. You have been reborn as Alexandrian Jews.”

I think about this for a moment. Then: “*Ge Zaboulon kai ge Nefthalim,*” I say, “*hodon thalassis, peran tou Iordanou, Galilaia ton ethnon ...*” It just pops out of my mouth. I’m so astonished I cover my lips with my hand, as if to prevent more from coming out. The quote’s from Isaiah: The land of Zaboulon, and the land of Naptali, by the lake, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations ... And it’s in *Greek*. I recognize the language as I speak it, for the first time in my life. In my ... well, whatever.

Somebody near me picks it up: “*ho laos ho kathemenos hen skotei fos eiden mega ...*” There the people who sat in darkness saw a great light ...

And, a kind of collective chill spreading through us, a third finishes it: “*kai tois kathemenois hen khora kai skia thanatou fos aneteilen autois.*” They sat in the region and shadow of death, and the light broke through upon them.

We all look at each other in silence for a while, a little creeped out. *This* was in the Prophets all this time? This stuff that just happened to us, beyond the Jordan?

Though something bothers me. I can’t quite put my finger on it. Something’s missing from the quote. It’s got something to do with the fact that the land of Zaboulon and the land of Naptali are quite obviously *not* beyond the Jordan. The original passage went differently. I left something out. Isaiah was saying something about the *Gentiles* seeing the light where before they were walking in darkness. The Gentile lands beyond the Jordan were going to be glorified or something. And this was to happen *after* the houses of Israel were brought into contempt.

Or something. I can’t pinpoint it. My mind isn’t working too well, I find.

“Uh, wait a second,” someone says. It breaks the spell. Everybody sort of shakes off the feeling of creepiness, comes to. Looks up. “Wait just a damn minute here. Did he say we’re *Jews*?”

General cries of dismay and disgust. Except of course from those of the house of Judah.

“Hey, that’s right! No way I’m a Jew. I’m a Binyaminite!”

“And I’m an Asherite!”

“I’m a Reubenite!”

“Yeah,” I say, taking a step toward Eleazar. “What *about* those tribes? There were VI from each tribe, right? There *had* to be. That was what my list said. You must have ordered it. You, the Caller. You decide who you want. VI from each tribe. Of course now we’re II short in Levi, but anyway, now you say the tribes don’t even fucking *exist*? We’re all *Jews*?”

“Stop,” Reb Eleazar says. “What do you mean, Levi’s II short?”

“The *aysh zerah*,” I say.

“What are you talking about?” Eleazar says. He looks pretty upset about this. “I specifically called up LXXII. And now you tell me there are only LXX? What in God’s name is going on here?”

“You tell me,” I shrug. “Maybe that’s the price you have to pay to make it across the midbar. You have to sacrifice II at the flaming mountain. I didn’t have any say in it. I just assumed whoever called us must have figured that in.”

“Okay. Okay. Okay, let me think,” Eleazar says. Even in the twilight you can see he’s shaken. Pretending not to be. “Okay, it’s fine. It’ll work. I guess. But all the preparations are for LXXII. We’ve got accommodations for LXXII, in XXXVI cells.”

“Cells?” somebody says. I think it’s Ornias. A Simeonite. No: a *Jew*. “We just walked all the way across the fucking midbar and you’re going to lock us up in *cells*?”

“That’s the plan,” Eleazar says. “If you don’t like it, you’re welcome to go back in the Sea.”

“I guess a cell’s okay,” Ornias says. “I guess I can live with that.”

“All right,” Eleazar says. “We’ve still got a ways to walk. This ain’t Alexandria, yet.”

“You mean we’ve got to walk some *more*?” someone moans.

“You didn’t bring a bus or anything?” I say.

“A what?” Eleazar says. He looks puzzled.

“A bus, you know,” I says. “Like a big car.”

“You’re delirious,” Eleazar says. “From being dead, most likely.”

“You, uh,” my tribesman (well, ex-tribesman) Zachariah says, stepping up, “you mean to say you don’t know what a *bus* is?” We’re all looking at Eleazar in some amazement.

Somebody else mimics driving a bus, makes a bus noise with his lips. “Brrm brrm.”

“Seats,” yet another helpful soul says. “Lots of seats. All the way back. Enough room for all of us.”

“Well,” someone else says, “maybe two buses.”

“Okay, maybe two, yeah. If they were regular-sized buses.”

“Right. That’s what I meant, regular-sized buses.”

“If you had a really big bus you could fit all of us on.”

“Sure, I’m not disputing that. I just meant a regular-sized bus would hold maybe XL, XLV people. Not LXX.”

“Oh, agreed.”

Eleazar clearly has no earthly clue what we’re talking about. He looks sort of cross. His eyes flicker from face to face, looking for some sign that we’re having him on. Our earnestness clearly bothers him. Are we insane?

And you know, maybe we are. I personally have no idea where I learned all this stuff I now clearly know about buses. I’ve never seen one, I think. And yet clearly I have. I think everybody must have assumed what I assumed, that Alexandrian Jews drove buses. You know, here in the future. When we were reborn as Alexandrian Jews, we inherited a knowledge of Greek and a knowledge of buses. But Reb Eleazar knows nothing about the buses. So maybe it is some sort of midbar insanity.

“I don’t know,” Reb Eleazar says finally, “from buses. All I know is that we’re walking to Alexandria. Let’s go.”

“That’s another thing,” somebody says.

“What now?” Reb Eleazar says.

“Why are we way the hell down here on the Red Sea? I mean, if you were taking us to Thebes or something it might have made sense for us to come down here, across the Red Sea. But Alexandria is up on the Mediterranean coast. Wouldn't it have made more sense for us to just skirt the coastline down from Gaza? Or just take a fucking *boat* for Chrissake?”

“Not only that,” another says, “but why on earth would anybody in his right mind, living in Jerusalem and planning a trip to Alexandria, head *east*? To *Gilgal*? Your thinking traveler heads *south* toward Bethlehem or *west* toward Joppa. Am I right on this? I mean, it stands to reason, doesn't it? But no. Not us. We head east to Gilgal, and across the Jordan into Moab. Then *all* the stinking way around the Salt Sea. Come on, man! Look at a map!”

“Well,” I say, “be fair now, we *were* dead.”

“Okay, so we were dead, so what! Does that mean we have to go the long way around? Couldn't G-d have opened the Mediterranean for us to walk straight from Gaza to Alexandria? I mean, not the whole Mediterranean, of course. Just a straight shot. It couldn't have been more than about CCL miles, that way.”

“You've read the Bible,” I say. “You know the road to Egypt for any member of the house of Jakob leads through the midbar. Especially dead ones! You've *got* to cross the Jordan, and the desert, and then the Red Sea. It doesn't matter how it looks on the map. It's the way it's *done*.”

“Done, my ass,” the guy says. “I mean, seriously, isn't that precisely the problem with the world these days? Right there? Isn't that *it*? Everybody's always bound by precedents, by conventions, by norms, rules, traditions. You can never try anything *new*. Oh, no. That's out of the question. That's *unthinkable*. That's not the way it's *done*.”

“Enough!” Reb Eleazar shouts. “Enough with the quarreling over nothing already! We're walking to Alexandria and that's that!”

“Walk across the midbar, walk across Egypt, then get locked up in a cell,” the guy next to me mutters under his breath. “That's the Lord for you all right.”

“This is *chofesh*,” my ex-tribesman Zachariah says to the II or III of us near him. “This is freedom all right. This is the freedom we earned by walking our legs off in the dark. Eating all that rubbery bread. We get to walk walk walk and then sit behind bars.”

“All right, all right,” Reb Eleazar says. “I get the idea already. Now move out.”

“Can't we at least spend the night here?” somebody calls out. “Get a good night's rest before we walk to Alexandria? Maybe grab some dinner, slap a pretty girl on the ass?”

“No dinner! No pretty girls! Move!”

Grumbling, dragging our feet, we move.
Welcome to Egypt. Boy, I tell ya.