

THE EVANGELISTS

1992

By ALINA MUNGIU PIPPIDI

'The Evangelists' was awarded the Prize for the Romanian Best Play of the Year in 1993 by the Romanian Union of Theaters (UNITER), but protests from Orthodox Church and Christian groups prevented its staging until 2005 in Romania, when it was finally staged by French director Benoit Vitse. The ensuing scandal provoked by Romanian churches and the attempt to close down the performance by the Iasi Municipal Council reached BBC, Le Monde and other international media in the winter of 2005-2006. The current translation is a new English translation. The play was also translated into French and Hungarian.

Translated by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Sally Blair

2006

CHARACTERS

CHERINTOS

Professor of philosophy; middle-aged; the product of a life of philosophical meditation and much self-indulgence; rather charming

HELENA

Cherintos' lover; a strong-minded, intelligent woman; she has the self-confidence of the upper classes; as a lover, she makes her choices

THE APOSTLE PAUL

Old, rather grim, but strong and sharp-witted; no apparent imagination, no sense of humor; a "rational" day dreamer and utopian; although he can be charming when persuading people, he remains a cold person nevertheless

THE APOSTLE PETER

Weak, confused, sentimental; as in the Gospels

THE NARRATOR (JESUS)

Could be any age; his voice is a little too soft, so one needs to be very attentive to hear him; sometimes he tries to intervene but others speak so loudly that he just gives up; he's more confident when he talks to Helena and particularly shy in front of Paul; somewhat handicapped, although it would be difficult to state exactly what's wrong; he resembles Dostoevsky's Prince Mischkin

MATTHEW (also Pilate of Pontius)

LUKE (also Judas)

MARK (also CAIPHAS)

JOHN

These four are Cherintos' students. They are young, not very well differentiated yet; they behave more as a gang than as separate individuals. John, who is also Cherintos' lover, is the most imaginative and soft, the kind of sexually ambiguous character young Alcibiade must have been; Luke is talented and careless; Mark is good-natured and has a sort of boyish charm. All are playful. They are, in a word, students.

(Voice from off-stage)

In the years before Christ, Antioch was a city in Asia Minor, inhabited by Greeks as well as many others, and ruled by the Roman Empire. Antioch was famous for its temple of Diana, its trade, and its brothels. It was also famous for philosophy. The academy of the philosopher Cherintos, where young students were enrolled to study, was among the most reputed, both for the quality of its teaching and the dissolute life of its scholars.

(Flute playing, dance sounds, splashes.)

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(The central yard of the Academy. Students run around merrily. Somebody plays the flute. A pool is in the middle. Helena has one leg in the pool and the other in the hands of a student.)

HELENA

I wish you wouldn't play so loudly, Matthew. Luke, this is not dancing, my boy! You are about as gracious as a cow. Mark, I don't know what will become of you as a philosopher, but you do have a light touch. None of my slaves at the temple can match your pedicure.

MARK

You should try my massage when we're done with the pedicure! That's my real talent, I assure you. Here comes John.

(Door slams.)

JOHN *(in a panic)*
Master is coming!

(Agitation. Music stops)

MARK

Damn it! I was just finishing her feet! Delay him for a couple of minutes, will you?

JOHN

If only your family knew how you are taking advantage of this Academy—doing slave's work.

MARK

You idiot! Nothing a man can do for a woman is slave's work.

JOHN

Does anybody know the topic of today's seminar?

MATTHEW

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Not a clue. I missed yesterday. Luke, any idea?

LUKE

Who, me? Try Mark. Here comes Master.

MARK

(A loud splash as he releases Helena's leg into the pool)
I'll finish your pedicure later.

(Unusual stillness as CHERINTOS enters. He draws near)

CHERINTOS

So quiet? What are you guys up to? *(They laugh)* So, what is the theme of our seminar today?

JOHN

I wrote it down somewhere, I know I did...

MATTHEW

Wasn't it from Heraclites, Master?

LUKE

Not again? We already covered that.

CHERINTOS

Really, Luke? And I thought John was the only one who read anything around here.
Helena, my dear, why do you keep your legs in the pool? It's rather cold today.

HELENA

Mark was just doing my pedicure, dear!

CHERINTOS

Indeed! Don't let me stop you, dear boy! This would have been our last seminar anyway.

HELENA

And why is that?

CHERINTOS

It seems that no usurer in Antioch considers it a personal honor to lend to me anymore. On the contrary, some of them look pretty intent on getting paid back. If I can't settle my debts by noontime tomorrow, I'll have to choose between prison and the Daphne woods.

JOHN

And shut down the Academy?

CHERINTOS

What else can I do? We're bankrupt.

MARK

Maybe something will come through at the last minute. What, doesn't anyone in Syria need a eulogy, a financial report, or a denouncement to the Emperor anymore? Zeus! Antioch cannot afford to lose a writer like you, Master.

CHERINTOS

You students can enlist in another Academy.

MATTHEW

Come on, Master! You know us better than that!

CHERINTOS

Just think about it. If we can't find the money...

HELENA *(slowly)*

Maybe it's better not to find the money, Cherintos.

CHERINTOS

Helena! You wouldn't want me to abandon my kids, would you?

HELENA

Maybe it's for the better. Let them leave before they become too much like you.

CHERINTOS

Not again! Spare me this rigmarole, my dear.

HELENA

Yes, again. We never really get to the point, do we?

CHERINTOS

My dear, "the point" is what I do for a living. I'm a philosopher, after all. That's why I'd rather concern myself with other things in my spare time. *(He kisses her.)*

HELENA

Oh, leave me alone. You know very well what I'm talking about.

CHERINTOS

You think we should to leave this place. And where would we go?

HELENA

To Athens, to the Academy. They have already invited you several times.

CHERINTOS

Oh, come on! Not to that bunch of snobs!

HELENA

But it's a prestigious place. Your Academy is a joke by comparison.

CHERINTOS

That doesn't bother me. Tragedies begin when people start taking themselves too seriously.

HELENA

Cherintos! How can you waste your talents like this! Why not go to the King of the Parts! You know he wants you to be his advisor!

CHERINTOS

My dear, what kind of nonsense is this? You want me to turn my intellectual abilities against Civilization? Only for a taste of power? You know I get no pleasure out of power.

HELENA

What kind of civilization makes exceptional men like you get so bored with life?

CHERINTOS

The best possible one. I can't understand this desire of yours to leave the most pleasurable city in the world.

HELENA

Oh, I've had enough of this town of prostitutes and usurers. I wish we lived somewhere where the people were less sophisticated, where the desert has no borders, where you feel the sun and the rain directly on your skin, and the world seems vast and strange.

CHERINTOS

I thought you were happy here.

HELENA

Just satisfied, now and then.

CHERINTOS

What more can a mortal ask?

HELENA

You're squandering yourself. Nobody profits from your wisdom and culture, and you keep increasing your drug dose every day. A time will come when you won't wake up from your artificial dreams anymore.

CHERINTOS

And what's wrong with that?

HELENA

This is what I'm afraid of. You'll leave me to grow old by myself!

LUKE

Someone to see you, Master.

CHERINTOS

Not right now, please. I'm not in the mood for visitors.

LUKE

Maybe you should be. He could be a customer.

CHERINTOS

Does he look rich, at least?

LUKE

He has a slave or a servant attending him.

CHERINTOS

Well then, send him in. Let's give him a try.

(Footsteps. The door opens. PAUL enters with the NARRATOR.)

PAUL

Greetings to the greatest sophist on earth!

CHERINTOS

Thank you... This is somewhat exaggerated. But you have the advantage of me, sir.

PAUL

I am Paul of Taurus, Roman citizen.

CHERINTOS

And this is Helena, a priestess of Artemis.

HELENA *(matter-of-factly)*

What can we do for you, sir?

PAUL

Master Cherintos was recommended to me by a man named Lucius Maro. I believe you wrote his love letters for awhile.

CHERINTOS

Oh, that Lucius. Indeed, I remember him. Well, did he finally get the woman?

PAUL

They got married, yes.

CHERINTOS

Another professional setback! Luke, didn't I tell you not to overdo it at the time?

HELENA

Why don't you just let this man speak, dear. He doesn't strike me as someone who is interested in love letters.

PAUL

Indeed not. I must say, I was impressed with your style. I wonder if you'd do something similar for me. I am aware of your financial difficulties, and I am willing to pay your debts and provide you with sufficient funds to keep this Academy going for at least another year.

CHERINTOS *(lightly)*

Really? For this kind of funding, I could write a better *Iliad*!

PAUL

Well, this is not far from what I want you to write. It's a sort of *Iliad* I need. In fact, I want an Apology concerning the life and death of a Jewish prophet.

CHERINTOS

Both Jewish and a prophet? Well, boys, what do you say?

MARK

Anything that helps, Master!

PAUL

I am very concerned with quality. It may seem strange to you at first, but I'd like each of your disciples to write a separate version, each in his own words, guided by the basic story this man will narrate. This man here is the Narrator.

CHERINTOS

My pleasure. So you want different versions of a unique story?

PAUL

That's right. And we'll choose the best one at the end.

CHERINTOS

But you see I have only four disciples left. You can't imagine the competition among philosophers nowadays.

PAUL

Four will do.

JOHN

Could we get more details about the story, Master?

PAUL

I take it we have a deal then?

CHERINTOS

I'm your man. Why don't we all sit, and maybe Helena will order tea for us.

THE NARRATOR

(The first time we hear him, he sounds soft and awkward, as though speaking in his sleep)

It's about a man in Nazareth who died at the age of 33.

CHERINTOS

Who was he?

JOHN

Was he rich?

LUKE

Handsome?

MATTHEW
Smart?

MARK
Brave?

THE NARRATOR
Oh, none of these things, really. He was... an average man, like me. Tall like me, ugly like me, poor like me.

JOHN
That's good. We'll take you as our model then.

LUKE
Any other characters?

THE NARRATOR
A woman.

MATTHEW
His lover, I presume.

THE NARRATOR
No, a woman who... A prostitute.

JOHN
Sounds like fun. Wasn't this supposed to be a religious story?

CHERINTOS
John, be still. Describe this woman.

THE NARRATOR
Like a saint. Still, a prostitute. Beautiful. Like this woman here.

HELENA (*embarrassed*)
Thank you.

MARK
And their names were?

THE NARRATOR
His name was Jesus. And hers was Mary Magdalene.

JOHN
Were they in love?

HELENA
John, darling, I wish you'd behave.

CHERINTOS
No, this point must be made clear. Were they in love or not?

THE NARRATOR

If so, they were unaware of it.

CHERINTOS

Well, then. Any other characters?

THE NARRATOR

Judas, the traitor.

LUKE

The bad guy at last! A real bastard, right?

PAUL

Goes without saying.

THE NARRATOR

I wouldn't say so. He was a brave man, a member of a secret organization that fought the Roman rulers in Palestine...

JOHN

Oh, so this is about politics, then?

PAUL

Go on with the other characters.

THE NARRATOR

There is also a great priest, Caiphas.

MATTHEW

Description, please!

PAUL

A villain.

THE NARRATOR

Well, no. A man who couldn't see beyond the fate of his people.

LUKE

And what lies beyond the fate of one's people?

PAUL

The fate of every people.

CHERINTOS

It does? Looks like we're beginning to catch on. Are there any other important characters?

THE NARRATOR

Yes. The Roman officer, Pilate. Powerful and intolerant towards the enemies of Rome.

JOHN

We get the picture. Now... about our man. He was a prophet, you say. And what did he do? Did he perform miracles, or what?

THE NARRATOR
He taught people.

CHERINTOS
Is that all?

THE NARRATOR
Isn't that enough?

CHERINTOS (*Looks hesitantly at Paul*)
For a story? Not really.

PAUL
Well then, the rest is up to you.

JOHN
The wonders, you mean?

CHERINTOS
The miracles. Proceed!

JOHN
Let him bring the rain!

MARK
And chase the demons!

MATTHEW
And cure the sick!

MARK
And bring the dead back to life!

PAUL
But above all, he must walk on water. Because it is written in the Jewish Holy Book that
He who comes will walk on water.

JOHN
So, Narrator, did your man walk on water?

THE NARRATOR (*sadly, after some thought*)
No, he did not.

JOHN
I must go now. I will catch up with you boys later to hear the ending. Can I get my
stuff?

PAUL

The way the story begins is crucial. The readers must understand from the very beginning that this is no ordinary preacher, but one who truly speaks the Word of God.

JONH (*as he prepares to leave*)

Here it is! Finally!

LUKE

That was fast. You have a beginning for the story?

JOHN

What? No, I've found the subject of our seminar. I knew I'd written it down. It was here all along.

MARK

Let's see. "In the beginning was the Word..."

MATTHEW

I told you it was from Heraclites!

(Laughter. CHERINTOS enters.)

CHERINTOS
What's all this noise?

PAUL *(angrily)*
I can't get along with your disciples.

CHERINTOS
Is this the way to treat a client? Shame on you!

JOHN
It's not fair. We're doing our best.

CHERINTOS
All right. Tell me what the problem is. We'll fix everything.

JOHN
Master, our main character is the son of a god.

PAUL
Of God!

CHERINTOS
So what's the problem?

JOHN
No, that's not the problem. In the *Iliad* there are plenty of sons of gods, and Sarpedon is even Zeus's son. The real trouble is, this god didn't know the mother of our...prophet.

CHERINTOS
But how did it happen then?

MATTHEW
Actually, God showed himself in a dream...

LUKE
...Of her husband's!

CHERINTOS
Oh, she was married?

(Moaning from the Narrator)

PAUL *(exasperated)*
Mary was married to Joseph, who was a descendent of David. For it is written in the Jewish Holy Book that the Savior will be a descendent of the House of David. The Lord's

Angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife..."

CHERINTOS

But why did the Angel visit the husband? I don't understand this either.

PAUL

The husband is the head of the family, isn't he?

CHERINTOS

The woman who gives birth to the son of God is more important than her mortal husband, I think.

THE NARRATOR

The Lord must show himself to the husband, don't you see? Otherwise, what would the husband think, seeing his wife pregnant?

MATTHEW

He would think the child is his. What's the big deal?

THE NARRATOR (*sadly*)

But what if the child didn't look like him at all? The neighbors would start to gossip. Or what if the husband was away from home for awhile? Or, what if...

JOHN

...she was unfaithful before....

THE NARRATOR (*cries*)

That's not true!

MATTHEW

Calm down! We're not talking about your mother after all.

PAUL

So you see the Lord must show himself to the husband and not to the woman.

CHERINTOS

It looks that way, indeed.

JOHN

But this just can't be! Any male—whether human, animal or god—must know the woman in order to conceive a child. Zeus took the shape of a bull with Europe. Any God who wants to know a mortal woman must take material shape in order to have her.

CHERINTOS

Compelling argument.

JOHN

I'm not through yet, Master!

CHERINTOS

No, but you'd better be.

JOHN (*offended*)

A little logic doesn't do any harm, even in stories about gods. The Narrator has told us that Jesus is a descendent of David through Joseph, his mother's husband. But the child is not Joseph's son, but the Lord's! So either he is the Lord's son and therefore not descended from David, or he is Joseph's son, and therefore not the son of God.

THE NARRATOR

The boy is right. What's the sense of insisting on him being a descendent of David? The important thing is that he is the Lord's son!

PAUL

What are you talking about? You want us to lose the community of Judaea? No Hebrew will accept a Savior who is not a descendent of David.

CHERINTOS

Make up your mind.

PAUL

There is nothing to decide. Our people expect the Messiah to descend from David. If God Himself comes down from heaven but is not related to David, He will lose all credibility.

CHERINTOS

I see your point. What we need here is a precedent.... We're saved! I have thought of a precedent!

JOHN

If you can solve this one, Master, then I...

CHERINTOS

We have a precedent, I tell you: Theseus. He was the beloved son of both his father, Aegeus, and the god Poseidon. He proved it by retrieving Minos's ring from the sea. What I suggest is to leave this matter ambiguous. If we leave some mystery, we'll be far more convincing. The readers' imaginations will do the rest.

(All applaud)

JOHN

Well, it's kind of misleading, isn't it? But rather good.

PAUL

I see you deserve your reputation, Master!

MARK

What if I skip this birth entirely, Master?

PAUL

Something must be said, because people who knew Jesus and his brothers still live in Nazareth, and their testimony should support our own.

CHERINTOS

When he was born, was there a general understanding that he was...special? Or did they believe that he was only Joseph's son?

THE NARRATOR

They thought he was...

PAUL (*interrupts him*)

What do you think would be more convincing?

CHERINTOS

The birth of a chosen man is usually announced by all kinds of signs and miracles.

PAUL (*reflective*)

This is quite right. The Pharaoh knew when Moses would be born, so he ordered all children born on that day to be killed.

MATTHEW

Great! Can I use this for my story if I adjust it a little, Master?

CHERINTOS

Yes, the scene is rather impressive. (*To PAUL*) Who reigned in Judaea when Jesus was born?

PAUL

Herod.

CHERINTOS

And what kind of a king was he?

PAUL

Well, he killed his whole family...

MATTHEW

Perfect! If he slaughtered his whole family, a few more slain children cannot damage his reputation further. May I write about the slaughter of children, Master?

CHERINTOS

Suit yourself.

JOHN

Our problems are not over yet, Master.

CHERINTOS

You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?

JOHN

No! But he (*points his finger at the NARRATOR*) tells me that Jesus was born in Nazareth. It seems he really was born there. Lots of people still remember this. But he (*shows PAUL*) pretends that Jesus only lived in Nazareth with his family, having been born in another town, and a pretty distant one at that. In short, he wants me to move the pregnant woman to another town just to give birth, and then bring her back home again. This makes absolutely no sense to me.

PAUL

It is written in the Holy Book that the ruler of Israel will be born in little Bethlehem. This is why the Savior cannot be born anywhere else.

CHERINTOS

Otherwise the Hebrews won't believe he's the One.

PAUL

Now you've got it.

JOHN

What good is history for a people that already knows everything in advance?

PAUL

God sent the Prophets before Him, and they came to predict His will on earth.

JOHN

And His will never changes? Your God is not allowed to change his mind? He's supposed to be almighty, isn't He?

CHERINTOS

John, let me have a word with you. (*He brings JOHN to the front of the stage*). Let's make something clear. Who ordered this work?

JOHN

Paul did. But....

CHERINTOS

And who's paying for it?

JOHN

Paul is. But...

CHERINTOS

Then understand that the truth belongs to Paul and no one else. If he tells you the birth took place in Rome or even in Gods' Olympus, this is what you should write, and your talents must be used to convey this in the most convincing manner.

JOHN (*sadly*)

I get it, Master.

CHERINTOS
It was about time.

JOHN
Master, was it always so humiliating to be a writer?

CHERINTOS (*surprised*)
Always, John. Although there is some satisfaction in it, too.

JOHN
Such as?

CHERINTOS
A great deal of talent is needed to create lies capable of becoming more plausible than the truth. Try looking at this from a different angle, son. Who will know in a hundred years what the truth is? History is what is written, and not what happened.

JOHN
But isn't there an art to truth, Master?

CHERINTOS
What's the use in competing with the gods? They created the world, and the world is real. So what is left for us? King Herod, like all kings, competed with the gods to create reality. What good was that? In a thousand years, nothing will be remembered about Herod, or maybe just that he ordered the slaughter of children, which is untrue. Isn't it more important to write about Herod than to be Herod himself?

JOHN
You may be right after all.

CHERINTOS
Go on, run and write the birth scene! (*JOHN joins the others. During the past few minutes, the NARRATOR has withdrawn to a corner and is crying softly. To PAUL*)
What's wrong with your man now?

PAUL
Frankly, he's a little soft in the head. But I cannot do without him. He witnessed the whole thing and I didn't. He was deeply shaken at the time, and I suppose these memories trouble him still. (*While PAUL is speaking, MATTHEW comes with his text; CHERINTOS reads it and makes some corrections.*)

CHERINTOS
I see. (*To MATTHEW*) As great as ever at stories. I wish you were as great at Aristotle...

MATTHEW
Come now, Master!

CHERINTOS (*gives back the paper to MATTHEW*)

He who finishes is free for the rest of the day. It seems we gave birth properly in the end.

(He leaves with PAUL)

PAUL *(leaving, confidentially to the NARRATOR)*
Take good care what you say. You talk too much!

MATTHEW *(dressing to leave, on the way out, to the NARRATOR)*
Don't be sad, man. We gave him a birth like no mortal has had before!

THE NARRATOR *(crying)*
It was an ordinary birth...just ordinary.

MATTHEW *(grabs his arm)*
I'll take you to the best tavern in Antioch!

MARK
I'm in no mood to write about this damn birth.

LUKE
Me neither. I'll finish up in two lines, and then we can go and play.

MARK *(dressing)*
John, are you coming?

(They leave. JOHN goes on writing. HELENA enters.)

HELENA
Listen, have you seen...

JOHN
Sssh! I'm just having God mate with a married virgin.

HELENA
Well, excuse me!

(CHERINTOS, JOHN, THE NARRATOR. In the pool, CHERINTOS caresses JOHN, who sits on the edge, dressed only in a sheet.)

CHERINTOS

He's closer to my heart than all my disciples.

THE NARRATOR

I like him, too. He looks very much like the disciple who remained with Jesus on Mount Olive after everyone else had left.

JOHN *(attentive)*

But there was no one with him on Mount Olive.

CHERINTOS *(absent minded)*

How would you know?

JOHN

He told me himself, yesterday.

THE NARRATOR

I forgot to tell you about him. But he was there.

JOHN

If someone was there, why did Jesus say that everyone had abandoned him?

THE NARRATOR

He simply forgot about him.

CHERINTOS

I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't care. *(He drinks)*

THE NARRATOR *(obviously improvising)*

In fact...Jesus didn't know about him, didn't see him. The disciple was somewhat far away...sleeping...covered only with a sheet. Jesus considered himself alone, that's why he expressed his doubts so strongly.

JOHN

All right, so what was his name, then?

THE NARRATOR

Well... *(He hesitates)*

JOHN

Anyway, how would you know? You weren't there. Nobody was there. Or maybe you're the disciple?

THE NARRATOR

No, it wasn't me. He told me about this afterwards.

JOHN

You don't say! Yesterday there was no one around, and you were telling me calmly how Jesus talked to himself, until I asked you how you knew about this? Since there was no one to hear him, all this must be pure invention. And now, a day later, you have already found a witness.

THE NARRATOR

It's just that I forgot about him. You should put him in the story now that I have remembered.

JOHN

Yeah, right...And what did he do when the soldiers came?

THE NARRATOR

Who, the disciple? Why, he ran away, of course.

JOHN

Of course. Was it so simple? Nobody grabbed his sheet?

THE NARRATOR

Indeed they tried... and ... (*JOHN rises, CHERINTOS tries to hold him by grabbing his sheet, which slips away*) They were left with it in their hands...while he...he was slender and quick... (*JOHN runs to get his clothes*)... He vanished like a ghost.

HELENA

(*Enters. As she walks by, JOHN tries to embrace her.*) Oh, stop it, please! And put some clothes on, will you?

CHERINTOS

Oh, my.

HELENA

I want to speak with you.

CHERINTOS

Are you angry with me?

HELENA

Emotions are running high in this house lately. I want a sensible talk with you.

CHERINTOS

When was I not sensible, my love? And concerning John...

HELENA

You've become so stupid lately. What do I care about John? You completely miss the point, darling!

CHERINTOS

Right, everybody out! This seems serious. What's wrong, dear?

HELENA

I'm worried about your work.

CHERINTOS

Why should you be? We're very well paid... The boys are having fun writing...You also agreed, at the beginning, didn't you?

HELENA

Yes, but unlike you, I picked up some information on Paul.

CHERINTOS

What information? He has the money to pay. I've seen it with my own eyes.

HELENA

My dear, do you know what you've been writing?

CHERINTOS

The exaggerated story of one of the thousands of Jewish prophets who unnerved the Roman rulers and ended up on the cross.

HELENA

It's not that simple, you know. Our city's Jewish community is large but very homogenous. It wasn't hard to find something out about Paul. He has quite a reputation. This is not his first visit to Antioch.

CHERINTOS

So what's wrong with that?

HELENA

He's a fanatic who tries to convert people to his new sect. They say he murdered people in Jerusalem. In Corinth, the authorities had to lock him up.

CHERINTOS

What for?

HELENA

He didn't plead only for his prophet, but he attacked other religions. He asked people to stop praying to their gods. And not only the Jews, Cherintos! A lot of people follow him because he's cunning: he tells the poor that they will inherit the realm of God and the rich that they can keep this one. And he claims that the Crucified One was the son of the Lord and that he'll return at the end of the world for the Final Judgment.

CHERINTOS

Our world abounds in such legends. Why should I feel responsible for this one?

HELENA

Because what your boys are writing in fun will become the Holy Book of this new religion! For each word that John scribbles down, the fanatics will cut off heads and crucify people.

CHERINTOS

This is really too much of an exaggeration. I know Paul's sermons; some of them are included in our work. And I suspected all along that what we are writing is the Holy Book

of a failed prophet. But you must understand that Paul and I cannot create a Holy Book on our own.

HELENA

Why not? What else is needed?

CHERINTOS

Quite a lot. The staging. The heroic act. The miracle or the sacrifice. And then you need the organization to promote this: the priests and the temples. But above all you need money. I have already heard of this sect of yours, Helena, but it's a sect of the poor. The only successful religions are those embraced by the rich.

HELENA

What about your debts? How could the poor pay for them?

CHERINTOS

I'll bet the whole community gathered money to pay my honorarium. If I were a man of honor, or at least an authentic stoic, I would refuse it.

HELENA

Don't fool yourself. All Antochia's poor combined don't have that kind of money. The gold comes from the first rich men who bought into this, the first to realize that, ultimately, this will yield a considerable profit. How many prophets do you know who have ordered their Apologies from famous Masters? Such legends are usually passed along by word of mouth, or are written down by hermits or famished monks. Don't you realize this is just the beginning of an offensive?

(Pause)

CHERINTOS

You're a wise woman, Helena.

HELENA

You used to be wise, too, Cherintos, but unfortunately you lost your sense of danger somewhere along the way. As for me, I felt threatened, so I started to think.

CHERINTOS

All right, my dear. Suppose you're right somehow. What do you think I can do about this?

HELENA

Inform the authorities. All this is a threat to Roman Law.

CHERINTOS

Oh, is it? And since when do I give a damn about Roman law? I'm a Greek, so I have no particular reason to be overly fond of our Roman rulers. They may be necessary, especially here in the Orient, but I cannot contribute voluntarily to the Roman order, and especially not as an informant. If I don't pay my debts, I risk only to be arrested, and I can find refuge in the Daphne woods where asylum is granted. But if news gets out that I turned someone in to the Romans, I'll be stabbed to death on my first night, either in prison or the woods.

HELENA

So denunciation doesn't work. Just give up Paul's commission, then.

CHERINTOS

And what about my debts?

HELENA

I'll find the money somehow.

CHERINTOS

How? The priestess will become a prostitute again?

HELENA

All the other priestesses are doing this for the Goddess. Why can't I do it for us?

CHERINTOS

You're free to love whomever you choose, but I won't let you do this for my material needs. Not for Diana, either.

HELENA

Oh, my darling. But we must find a way out of this.

CHERINTOS

I may not be a soldier or a statesman, but I do have some professional honor. I practically gave my word when I accepted this commission, Helena.

HELENA

But you couldn't have known...

CHERINTOS

Right. Well, I'll talk to Paul, and we'll clarify all this.

HELENA (*discouraged*)

He will lie to you, my dear!

CHERINTOS

Who do you think is a better liar: a Greek sophist or a Jewish prophet? Quite a match, isn't it?

THE NARRATOR

And then Jesus said to Judas...He said..."What thou doest, do quickly".

MATTHEW

Wait. What is this?

LUKE

What's what?

MATTHEW

Pay attention to this line, please. So Jesus is supposed to have said this to Judas?

JOHN

That's right.

MATTHEW

And what did Judas say in return?

THE NARRATOR

Nothing.

MATTHEW

Nothing. Just like that?

THE NARRATOR

Nothing, yes. Why?

MATTHEW

Because it's stupid, that's why. If I were Judas, I couldn't just pretend not to hear.

JOHN

And what would you say?

MATTHEW

What would I say?

JOHN

Yes, what would you say?

MATTHEW

I would say... Let's see... "What do you mean? What's this all about?"

LUKE

Not bad at all.

JOHN

Better yet: "Are you speaking to me, Lord? You mean me?"

LUKE

Or how about: "What am I supposed to do quickly, Lord? I can't seem to remember."

MARK

Oh, come on, boys! We'll never finish this way.

JOHN

And then Jesus would say...would say...What would Jesus say?

THE NARRATOR

Hey, wait a minute...

LUKE

Jesus would have to be more specific.

JOHN

In order to be more specific, he would really need to know something.

MARK

But how could he possibly have known...Only if...

MATTHEW

Aha. You're getting closer.

JOHN

Who else was there when Jesus talked to Judas?

THE NARRATOR

No one. It was a private conversation.

JOHN

Here's the problem. How could Jesus possibly have known what Judas had in mind?

THE NARRATOR

How did he know everything else? He was a visionary.

LUKE

Fair enough. Let's admit it was intuition. But what about Judas, why doesn't he respond?

MATTHEW

Yes, it's not plausible. Judas had no reason to be silent when accused, unless...

LUKE

...Unless he had already told Jesus himself.

JOHN

My point precisely.

THE NARRATOR

But he hadn't.

LUKE

You have no way of knowing that. If he had, he would have told Jesus when they were alone.

JOHN

Because if he hadn't, their discussion would have been completely different.

MATTHEW (*as Jesus, to LUKE*)

What thou doest, do quickly.

LUKE (*as Judas*)

What? What do you mean by this?

MATTHEW (*as Jesus*)

You know very well what I mean.

LUKE (*as Judas*)

No, how could I?

MATTHEW (*as Jesus*)

You know damn well, traitor.

LUKE (*as Judas*)

Traitor? Me?

MATTHEW (*as Jesus*)

Yes, you.

LUKE (*as Judas*)

That's your gratitude after all I renounced to follow you?

MATTHEW (*as Jesus*)

You only followed me in order to betray me!

LUKE (*as Judas*)

This is so unfair. You're sick with suspicion.

MATTHEW (*as Jesus*)

I see hate has relaxed your tongue. At last you are speaking your mind.

LUKE (*as Judas*)

You're so good at healing others. You should have started with yourself.

JOHN

What is this blasphemy? Is this the way to talk to our Master, Judas?

LUKE (*as Judas*)

Stay out of this. You don't know what he accused me of.

MATTHEW (*as Jesus*)

Tell him if you dare. Tell him.

JOHN *(to Matthew as Jesus)*
What should he tell me? *(To Judas)* What's going on?

LUKE *(as Judas)*
He claims I'm a traitor. Me. And for what reason, I ask?

JOHN
But whom did you betray? And to whom?

LUKE *(as Judas)*
I have no idea. And he doesn't, either. He claims I'll do this in the future. I'm accused of something I'll do in the future!

(CHERINTOS enters.)

CHERINTOS
Hey, quiet down! Narrator, if the boys get too naughty, just let me know.

THE NARRATOR
They're playing. They're just children.

JOHN
All right, so we are playing. But what should we write now?

LUKE
Yes, do tell us.

JOHN
Master, if I can...

CHERINTOS
I'm not in the mood right now.

JOHN
But just a moment...

CHERINTOS
Did Paul come back?

THE NARRATOR
Yes, awhile ago.

CHERINTOS
All right. Please let him know that I need to speak with him. And students,, get lost for now. Tomorrow, no matter what, we're holding our seminar as usual!

MATTHEW
Oh! What a nuisance!

(They leave. CHERINTOS sits. PAUL enters)

Paul

Did you send for me? Has something happened?

CHERINTOS

Yes, something happened. I am beginning to have doubts.

PAUL

Oh, is that all? Well, I should have thought that doubts are your daily business, aren't they?

CHERINTOS

Let's leave sophistry behind. This time I'm talking about a very specific doubt.

PAUL

I'm listening.

CHERINTOS

I would like some form of guarantee that the work we are doing for you won't be used for ...conquest.

PAUL

That's it?

CHERINTOS

That's about it, yes.

PAUL

And I thought you wise. How then can you ask me something so absurd? But of course it's an instrument of conquest. Did you doubt it for a minute? I don't see how you could have missed this.

CHERINTOS

I was told that you killed people.

PAUL

What man hasn't killed for what he believes?

CHERINTOS

Well, I for one.

PAUL

That's why you're crippled, despite your wisdom, Cherintos.

CHERINTOS

It might be. But I am not going to listen to an eulogy for murder.

PAUL

But who makes an eulogy for murder?

CHERINTOS

Weren't you about to do just that?

PAUL

Not at all. Murder's a sin, it's true, but sometimes it is necessary, and no real man can avoid it.

CHERINTOS

I could understand killing for pleasure, but killing for necessity terrifies me.

PAUL

You're wise, Cherintos, but your wisdom works only for you.

CHERINTOS

Wisdom for the herd is wisdom no longer.

PAUL

Pretty harsh for an intellectual. For the herd, only the Roman legions are left?

CHERINTOS

The Roman order. I may resent Rome sometimes, but I admit we need it. If I only consider how dirty Antioch would be without the Romans, I realize how necessary Rome is.

PAUL

The order I'm interested in would make men better, Cherintos. Antioch isn't cleaner because its inhabitants are less messy. It's because they're compelled to clean the city since the Romans came.

CHERINTOS

What you seek doesn't even exist.

PAUL

It does, in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

CHERINTOS

You want to replace an external order based on the state, with an internal order based on human conscience alone? This can never be!

PAUL

It already exists. And you have helped me create it.

CHERINTOS (*scared*)

Please, I cannot be made responsible for this! All I did was universalize some doubtful parables!

PAUL

Whatever you say.

CHERINTOS

Such an order isn't necessary anyway. For the herd, the Roman order is the best there is.

PAUL

I don't deny some of the virtues of the Roman order. However, it's not enough just to conquer countries, leaving garrisons behind and appointing governors.

CHERINTOS

What else could you conquer?

PAUL

Souls.

CHERINTOS

Souls?

PAUL

Yes. People must comply with my order willingly. They should be brought to give everything for it, even their lives.

CHERINTOS

Cut it out, will you? I've never heard anything so terrifying in my whole adult life.

PAUL

Only when this is done will the realm of God exist on earth.

CHERINTOS

There are people who will never accept this realm of yours, Paul.

PAUL

Yes, people like you. They must support us at all costs, however.

CHERINTOS

Or you'll destroy them.

PAUL

Quite so.

CHERINTOS

Charming frankness. In other words, no one will be allowed to keep his freedom.

PAUL

What good is freedom anyway? It's not freedom people want from religion, but the promise of eternal life.

CHERINTOS

But I don't want to live forever. I'm bored already.

PAUL

The majority doesn't think like you. Why shouldn't we give them what they want? Peace for their souls isn't worth the loss of an unbearable freedom?

CHERINTOS

I see. But why you? How did this come to you? There are so many ways to spend a life, and they all seem more entertaining than trying to reform human nature.

PAUL

It was not a choice, really. The Lord told me that this is what I must do with my life.

CHERINTOS

I should have guessed. Tell me the story of your life, Paul. It must be a fascinating one.

PAUL

I used to be an orthodox Hebrew, and I killed Jesus' disciples in the name of Moses' Law.

CHERINTOS

Impressive start.

PAUL

I had just finished off those in Jerusalem and was on my way to Judea to start all over when Jesus the Crucified appeared before me. He spoke to me and said: Paul, you are killing in the name of a dead law. Your nation was great a thousand years ago, but ever since its vigor has been wasted on a lost cause. Come, join my Law, which speaks not only to the Hebrews, but to all nations of the world.

CHERINTOS

A compelling offer for an ambitious man like yourself.

PAUL

Sublime. Of course, I accepted it at once.

CHERINTOS

But doomed to fail. Your order is a supernatural one, and I don't believe anything supernatural can prevail.

PAUL

That's where you're mistaken, wise one. Man is supernatural, not natural. Of all animals, man alone was created in the image of God, and so the order that man will impose on earth will not be human, but divine.

CHERINTOS

God cannot exist besides nature, and a God to go against nature is just nonsense.

PAUL

I know. But it must exist, because it's the only God we need.

CHERINTOS

So you ask me to regress intellectually by hundreds of years for a promise of eternal life?

PAUL

That's right.

CHERINTOS

Only the ignorant will follow you.

PAUL

Maybe the whole world will return to ignorance one day and seek shelter in my arms.

CHERINTOS

In a world full of libraries, how can you nourish such a hope?

PAUL

Libraries can burn. Have you forgotten Alexandria?

CHERINTOS

There are so many gods. Why should people pick yours?

PAUL

All gods fell to the Roman legions. People feel abandoned. They need Jesus.

CHERINTOS

You mean, they need Paul and his New World Order.

PAUL

Both.

CHERINTOS

Well! And how has it worked so far?

PAUL

Marvelously. This is why I need these books. Lots of people who know nothing of Jesus and his story come to join us, and I don't have time to speak to all. When these books are copied and start to circulate, our teachings will spread...

CHERINTOS

Like an epidemic.

PAUL

Like a good epidemic, curing people of sin and the fear of dying.

CHERINTOS

Fear and sin are ten times better than a totalitarian order.

PAUL

Speak for yourself.

CHERINTOS

I bet on the Roman order and against you.

PAUL

I accept the challenge, but you'll lose, you know. Rome itself will impose the faith in Jesus of Nazareth.

CHERINTOS

Why should it?

PAUL

Because sooner or later they'll realize you can't govern in the name of reason. Reason results in the atrophy of instincts. A world ruled by philosophers would commit suicide after only two generations.

CHERINTOS

There you're quite right.

PAUL

I am.

CHERINTOS

But you forget that it's in my power to win my bet instantly, Paul.

PAUL

How's that?

CHERINTOS

By handing you over to the Roman authorities.

PAUL

You'll never do such a thing. You're an inborn spectator. You won't interfere in the game... Although I'd be delighted if you joined me. I could use your skills.

CHERINTOS

Thanks for the offer, but I'm not interested.

PAUL

Why not? Of all the games you've been offered, doesn't this one have the highest stakes?

CHERINTOS

It's not the size of the stakes that matters, but the pleasure one takes in the game.

PAUL

And you can't feel it?

CHERINTOS

Indeed not.

PAUL

Well, that's unfortunate, Cherintos. You are maimed.

CHERINTOS

Let's not change the subject. We were discussing your chances of success. If I don't hand you over, somebody else will.

PAUL

If this happens, my sect will become richer, with another martyr to its ranks. And somebody else will take my place. Maybe even one of your disciples, Cherintos, because my idea is very seductive.

CHERINTOS

It may be as you say. But why should I collaborate?

PAUL

Come on, be sensible. Do you honestly think I couldn't find somebody else to complete your job?

CHERINTOS

For this kind of money, I'm sure you could.

PAUL

So why don't you allow your sophistication to contribute to my work of seduction? Finish my book...Give me my chance...

CHERINTOS

All right, then, let it be. I don't know why, but for the past twenty years I keep reaching the conclusion that no action is worth taking.

5

(THE NARRATOR, PAUL, THE DISCIPLES, working. Enters HELENA)

HELENA

Is Cherintos here?

JOHN

No, he left awhile ago.

HELENA

All right. Tell him I dropped by, and ask him to come to my place tonight.

PAUL

But don't you wish to wait for him, lovely Helena? I don't think he'll be much longer now. Sit, and I'll keep you company while the students work.

HELENA

No, thanks.

PAUL *(strained)*

I don't know how I could have upset you so, Helena...

HELENA

Who, you? You're wrong to think your presence here touches me in any way.

PAUL

Is that so? Then why did you inquire about me in the Jewish community and try to persuade your lover to give up my commission?

HELENA

Your politeness is affected, preacher. You despise and hate women.

PAUL

Where did you get this idea?

HELENA

Do you think I'm blind? In the beginning, I thought your ugliness was to blame. But I've seen ugly men before, and some of them were charming lovers.

PAUL

How can you know what kind of lover I am?

HELENA

Enough to see what kind of man you are. You're not a good man, preacher. You're not even a man. You're afraid of women because we don't let ourselves get caught so easily in your net. We're not so drawn to abstractions as men. Stupid as we are, we think no cause is worth the lives of our boys and men! Women are really dangerous, don't you think, Apostle Paul?

PAUL

Not all women. But women like you, yes. Despite that, your lover didn't listen to you.

HELENA

He didn't. But this doesn't mean you've won for good!

PAUL

But it doesn't mean that a woman will stop me either.

JOHN

Helena! We need you.

HELENA

Write your story without me.

JOHN

Come on! Pity our poor inspiration!

HELENA

Leave me alone.

THE NARRATOR (*comes to her, gently*)

Please come.

JOHN

Go on, Narrator.

THE NARRATOR
Where was I?

MATTHEW (*reading*)
"And the Scribes and the Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery and they set her in the midst, and said unto him..."

LUKE
"Moses in the Law has commanded us that such should be stoned, but what sayest thou?"

(CHERINTOS enters and stops at the entrance, listening)

THE NARRATOR
"He who is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her."

(HELENA laughs)

PAUL
This is not true! It's blasphemy!

THE NARRATOR
Woman, has no man condemned thee?

HELENA
No man.

THE NARRATOR
Nor do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.

(The disciples applaud. PAUL is furious)

HELENA (*releasing her hair*)
But I don't want to leave.

PAUL
Forgive the woman, and she'll sin again.

THE NARRATOR
What can we do? It's her choice.

PAUL
Hers? A woman is not allowed to choose anything. It is the man who chooses for her.

THE NARRATOR
Who gave birth to you, Paul, a man or a woman? No, we should be humble in front of a woman. The words of a man are nothing compared to the infinite world she carries in her belly...

JOHN
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What was her name?

THE NARRATOR

Her name was Mary Magdalene.

(HELENA comes to him; on her knees she starts kissing his feet, not in a humble but a sexy way)

HELENA

You speak so nicely of women, Narrator, better than any man I've heard before.

JOHN

And was that all? Didn't they meet again?

THE NARRATOR

They did, twice. Once, shortly before his death...when she wiped his feet with her hair...
(HELENA does so) and his disciples got angry...

PAUL

You don't seriously consider putting this stuff into the story...there's no truth in it!

THE NARRATOR

Oh, yes, every word is true! And he looked at her and knew he was given only one incarnation, and he wanted so much to know her.

(During this line, the disciples start leaving quietly, one by one. The Narrator slowly embraces HELENA. PAUL grabs him)

PAUL

No! I can't allow this whore to triumph!

CHERINTOS *(grabs PAUL)*

Apologize to the lady!

PAUL

Don't hold your breath.

CHERINTOS *(pushes Paul violently)*

You want me to ask my slaves to whip you? Ask for pardon!

HELENA

There is no need, really...

PAUL *(defeated)*

Forgive me. You all forgive me. Anger blinded me.

JOHN

I think he has abstained for too long, Master.

CHERINTOS

Forever. Gods protect us from the lust he has accumulated! *(To Paul)* Leave!

(PAUL leaves. CHERINTOS also starts for the exit, taking John with him. HELENA has a first impulse to run after him. She calls)

HELENA
My love!

CHERINTOS *(not looking back, while The NARRATOR stops HELENA, starts embracing her again)* Have fun!

6

(The disciples, writing)

MATTHEW *(enters with LUKE)*
Hey!

JOHN
It's almost evening!

LUKE
I'm not inspired when I have to wake up early. Couldn't you just summarize what the Narrator told you this morning?

JOHN
Why don't you go ask him?

LUKE
You're so self-righteous today. All right, Mark will tell us then.

JOHN
Mark will tell you nothing. Until now you have mainly copied his work instead of doing your own.

MARK
That's all right. I don't mind.

JOHN
Don't let him off so easy, man.

LUKE
I think you envy my talent. Otherwise, why are you such a prig all of a sudden?

(CHERINTOS enters with PAUL)

CHERINTOS
Hi, kids. But where is your Narrator?

JOHN

He's in the garden with Helena, Master.

PAUL

You allow her to humiliate you like this in your own house?

CHERINTOS

You begin to take yourself too seriously, preacher.

PAUL

I do? Confess you created this woman, as Adam made Eve. If she's different from other women, this is your doing. You talked to her, you read to her, you gave her a man's mind—and all this just to let her to go to bed with the first one who comes by?

CHERINTOS

It's amazing how well you handle the new world order and how much a simple woman can confuse things for you. But maybe it's all too natural. After all, the order you dream of is so damn masculine. There's not a touch of feminine about it.

PAUL

Isn't it enough we're compelled to live in this Orient, which is so unbearably feminine?

CHERINTOS

You want a piece of advice? Don't go against nature when you can avoid it, if you want to succeed!

PAUL

And what should I do then?

CHERINTOS

Well, your Narrator showed you the way. Attract women instead of persecuting them.

PAUL

And give them such importance?

CHERINTOS

It's God who gave them their importance, not you. They are at least half of the potential converts to your religion, and the more reliable ones at that. Men may light the eternal fire, but women keep it burning.

PAUL

You may be right, you know. I'll have to think about it.

(THE NARRATOR comes in with HELENA)

JOHN

Is everybody here now? I have a surprise for you all!

HELENA

Behave yourself, Cupid!

JOHN

Who wants to see me walk on water?

CHERINTOS

What did you invent now?

JOHN *(steps on the edge of the pool)*

Only a miracle. Attention, everybody! One, two, three! *(He crosses the pool)*

ALL

Great! Look at that!

JOHN

It's very simple, you see. All I did was put a few stones under the water's surface.

(Laughs)

THE NARRATOR (to PAUL)

This is why miracles should be forbidden. They can be turned into parody so easily...

CHERINTOS

All right, we've played enough. We were supposed to revise our papers today. Everyone ready?

(HELENA, leaving, kisses CHERINTOS)

PAUL *(to the NARRATOR)*

Did you see that, you damn fool?

THE NARRATOR

Stop attacking her!

CHERINTOS *(reading the students' papers)*

Could you people be a little quieter? I'm not very pleased with the crucifixion scene.

None of you makes me really see it, not even you, Luke! It's much too impersonal.

Details give life to stories, and this scene lacks any significant details.

JOHN

Because we didn't have any, Master! None of the disciples went with Jesus on his last road, so nobody witnessed his last moments. Even his corpse was buried by an unknown man. In fact, that's why we don't have any first-hand account of this.

CHERINTOS

But how could this have happened?

THE NARRATOR

Fear of the Romans scared them away...

CHERINTOS

Maybe so. But this cannot be left this way. What kind of eulogy is this? *(reading)* And what is this? The Roman governor offered to exchange the prisoner for another one condemned to death?

MARK
So we're told, Master.

CHERINTOS
Well, we live in a Roman world, remember? Nobody will believe that the Roman authorities would grant such rights—and arbitrary ones, at that—to their subjects. The Jews are not privileged. I gave you the freedom to invent, but please invent only plausible stuff! *(He edits furiously)* And on the cross He shouldn't sound so depressed! He must comfort his companions instead... After all, He's the son of God, death is unimportant to Him... He must say something to restore their confidence in Him. Something like...I don't know...Fear not...my Father will take care of you...bring you back to life...take you to Olympus...something like that...

JOHN
Fear not! Tonight thou shalt be with me in Paradise!

PAUL
Beautiful!

THE NARRATOR
People shouldn't be tempted with promises of eternal life.

CHERINTOS
Make up your minds, will you? *(Reading)* "Suppose you that I am come to bring peace on earth? Nay, but rather division." He actually said that? Not peace, but the sword? This is quite illogical. We are not dealing with a warrior, but a martyr. Did you inspire this line, Paul? It's rather your style.

THE NARRATOR
I don't know where this line came from. I never said such a thing, and it's alien to Jesus's spirit.

CHERINTOS
Well, I guessed as much, didn't I?

PAUL
Jesus said it all right. *(To CHERINTOS)* It may be illogical, but I need this line.

CHERINTOS *(indifferent)*
Please.

THE NARRATOR
I don't accept this. This is against Jesus' teachings. He never said anything like that.

PAUL
You forget, that's all. Keep your mouth shut, will you?

THE NARRATOR *(losing control completely)*
I never said such a thing! Never! I came to bring peace, not war! All mortal emperors have swords. I bring forgiveness!

(CHERINTOS goes on with the reading and pays no attention to this. John rises to his feet excitedly and comes closer to the NARRATOR)

JOHN
You never said such a thing?

THE NARRATOR
Never!

JOHN
Master!

CHERINTOS
What?

JOHN *(takes Narrator's hand and brings him before CHERINTOS)*
Allow me to introduce to you Jesus of Nazareth, our main character.

CHERINTOS *(absent-minded, without raising his eyes from his papers)*
Nice to meet you.

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HELENA
I knew!

CHERINTOS
What did you know?

HELENA
That he's special. Women feel things like that.

CHERINTOS
You felt his divine nature during intercourse?

HELENA
That's not funny, dear!

CHERINTOS
Sorry. I guess I was just curious.

HELENA
Well, the answer is no. His touch is almost ethereal. He is incapable as a lover, but fascinating as a person.

CHERINTOS
What do you find so fascinating? I never even notice if he's in the room or not.

HELENA
You're right. When people are around, he seems so insignificant. But when you're with him alone, he has something unique, a depth maybe, a kind of purity...

CHERINTOS

Purity? He's been lying to us for more than three weeks with no sign of uneasiness.

HELENA

You're right. But it's difficult to think of him as a liar, isn't it? Anyway, what's going to happen to your commission, Cherintos?

CHERINTOS

I have absolutely no idea. In fact Paul is the one who hired me; I have nothing to do with this other fellow. But I asked them to reach an agreement to decide where we go from here. We were almost finished, but I assume we'll do some rewriting now. I knew all this stuff was wrong! There's no point for a Roman governor to be kinder to a Jew than the Jewish priests would be. And the cross is the punishment for the enemies of the Emperor, not of Moses' Law. This story wasn't holding together anyway. *(JESUS enters)*
Attention, your Savior's coming. *(He tries to leave)*

JESUS

Stay, please!

CHERINTOS

As you wish.

JESUS

Forgive me, Helena, for not telling you the truth...

HELENA

When we made love, I didn't care if you were the son of God or not.

JESUS *(blushing)*

It doesn't matter. What matters is that both of you forgive me...You have to understand me...I was so alone! My own brother James was doubting me...I had to learn to keep to myself...

HELENA

Why were people doubting you?

JESUS

They wanted only one thing from me: miracles. Nobody wanted to listen to what I had to say...

CHERINTOS

Very unpleasant indeed. Here in the Orient, everybody's crazy about miracles, while doctrines don't arouse the slightest interest. After all, it's so hot outside! But a good, solid miracle, this wakes people up! Especially if it's a quick and obvious one.

JESUS

I'm sick of miracles. I would have wanted to awaken in their souls the desire to be better people...But I saw nothing like this in their eyes, only grotesque curiosity... And I was supposed to die for these people... Was my death going to make them better? It was obvious that it wasn't. The sacrifice would have been useless, the incarnation a failure...

CHERINTOS

So you gave it up. That was wise.

JESUS (crying)

Everyone just wanted to use me. Even my disciples. They all knew Judas was a member of an underground association opposed to the Romans. I was the only one who didn't know anything.

CHERINTOS

Did they arrest you, at least?

JESUS

Yes, that part is true.

CHERINTOS

And were you tried before a Jewish court?

JESUS

Caiphas refused to see me, even though he had ordered the arrest. The only person I saw was Pilate.

CHERINTOS

But nothing that you said or did could have offended the Roman authorities.

JESUS

That was his judgment, too. So he just released me.

CHERINTOS

And what did you do?

JESUS

At first, I ran. Then I realized my disciples would forget about me, so I came back.

CHERINTOS

Yes, I suppose it's better to ensure your own posterity, whenever possible. What next?

JESUS

I found out that a man named Paul was persecuting my few believers. So I stopped him on the road to Damascus and talked to him.

CHERINTOS

As Jesus the resurrected?

JESUS

No, just as Jesus.

CHERINTOS

I'm very curious as to how you persuaded him.

JESUS

It wasn't difficult at all. God had already chosen him. All I did was tell him.

CHERINTOS

I see. I had suspected as much (*PAUL enters*) Oh, here you are. I thought you a fool, but not a liar. What do we do now? We finish the story of a non-existent Savior?

JESUS

What do you mean, non-existent? I exist, touch me! Only I didn't die on the cross. But if I had, who would have believed in me?

CHERINTOS

As I understand it, the world was supposed to have become different by your sacrifice, friend. No sacrifice, no difference, right?

PAUL

Your Book will make this difference.

HELENA

So I was right. This is premeditated mystification.

JESUS

You don't see sacrifice enough? What about John the Baptist, who predicted my coming? Wasn't he slain by Herod? And Teona and his followers, and the Just, weren't they all crucified? And even after my coming, didn't Paul stone Stephen, my first martyr, to death?

HELENA

We're talking about your sacrifice, not theirs!

PAUL

Can't you see he's right? We've had enough sacrifices. Something else is needed to make them worthwhile.

HELENA

And what is that?

PAUL

Organization.

HELENA

Oh, not again!

CHERINTOS

I can't talk with you people. You confuse everything. Jesus' sacrifice matters because Jesus is God. One more mortal martyr doesn't matter, I agree. But the world is resurrected when a god dies.

JESUS

My simple coming gave meaning to all sacrifices before me...

PAUL

All the other martyrs were insufficiently known. We'll make this one well known, and this will make the difference.

HELENA

Even if this one isn't a martyr at all. *(During the conversation she gradually comes closer to CHERINTOS)*

JESUS

Helena! You felt I was different from all other mortals! You must believe in me, martyr or not. I'm still the Lord's son.

CHERINTOS *(to PAUL)*

You don't believe this, do you?

PAUL

What matters is that others believe.

HELENA *(to Jesus)*

How could you associate yourself with such an unscrupulous man?

JESUS *(desperate)*

I've been trying to calm his anger and reduce his intolerance...

HELENA

But what attracts you to him?

Jesus

Strength! Without that, my Church would not have been born at all.

CHERINTOS

Your church will take after him, not you. Are you satisfied with that, Son of the Lord?

PAUL

God's Kingdom is not for today. And until that distant day, people will need God less than His church.

(JESUS starts crying)

CHERINTOS

Oh, come now! Your dramas begin to bore me. Please stop arguing and decide what is to be done.

PAUL

It's no big deal. You just resume your work without changes.

JESUS

Cut out that line about the sword!

(PAUL signals CHERINTOS not to mind JESUS)

CHERINTOS

All right. Boys! *(The disciples enter)* We go on without changes. Back to work.

(JESUS is crying.)

CHERINTOS *(to PAUL)*

A weak God, easy to manipulate. Good choice.

JOHN *(to Jesus)*

Who was crucified instead of you?

CHERINTOS

Hey, I don't think that matters anymore...

JESUS

Barrabas. He was their target from the beginning...

JOHN

And how did it happen?

JESUS

How should I know? I only know what Judas told me. As for the rest...

JOHN

We can imagine the rest.

8

(The disciples, acting. Jesus plays his own part. Everybody else is "the public.")

JUDAS

I ran as soon as I heard. Is it true they caught Barrabas?

CAIPHAS

Unfortunately, it is true, Judas. They got him last night.

JUDAS

He won't reveal anything about the rest of us, I'm sure.

CAIPHAS

I'm sure he won't, as well. But that's not my main concern right now...

JUDAS

And what is?

CAIPHAS

The organization is falling apart. People are starting to be afraid, and despair corrupts even the most courageous. All are turning against me. People say, here's Caiphas, who bought his position but proves unable to protect one of our own against the Romans.

JUDAS

But what can you do?

CAIPHAS

That's what I'm wondering. We're not ready for an uprising yet.

JUDAS

Let's help him escape!

CAIPHAS

I've already tried that. But he's guarded by the soldiers who just arrived from Rome. The last man who tried to bribe them was immediately imprisoned.

JUDAS

These newcomers! They do their best to ruin our local customs!

CAIPHAS

Well, there's no point in trying again. We must try another way to force them to release Barrabas, as we did with Jonathan last year.

JUDAS

But for Jonathan, we had to offer them a criminal wanted in six provinces!

CAIPHAS

That's what we need to try again. Instead of Barrabas, let's offer them a more valuable enemy of the Empire!

JUDAS

I offer to turn myself in his place!

CAIPHAS

You? You're practically an unknown, and we don't have enough time to create a really bad reputation for you. By the way, how's your prophet doing? Does he still claim he's the Messiah?

JUDAS

He does, my lord. He says He's the Son of God who has come back to earth to save us by His death...

CAIPHAS

That's how you can always tell amateurs. They only want to play the main parts...

JUDAS

He may be a fool, but he's kind.

CAIPHAS

You call that kind? I heard he raised his voice in the temple today and predicted the end of my power.

JUDAS

I was there, and it wasn't like that. Things were greatly exaggerated.

CHERINTOS

Does he attract a lot of attention?

JUDAS

In a way. A lot of people come, hoping to see something extraordinary, but most of them leave quite disappointed.

CAIPHAS

And what does he say about this?

JUDAS

He says that people will fully understand Him only after He has died for them.

CAIPHAS

And how does he plan to do this?

JUDAS

Do what?

CAIPHAS

Die for the people.

JUDAS

I have no idea. But I'm watching him closely, as you instructed me to.

CAIPHAS

I wonder how we can persuade the Romans that this Jesus of yours is a major threat to the Empire...

JUDAS

What? You want to turn him over to the Romans?

CAIPHAS

In exchange for Barrabas.

JUDAS

But I don't know if he'll want to do this.

CAIPHAS

Well, why not? He's looking for a way to give his life, and we're looking for a life to save Barrabas. We don't even have to tell him.

JUDAS

You mean, send him to his death without even letting him know?

CAIPHAS

Didn't you say he wants it?

JUDAS

I did, but it may be just a figure of speech. One can never be too sure about this.

CAIPHAS

It's better that one man dies for his people than that the people perish as a whole.

JUDAS

You're right.

CAIPHAS

The main thing is to make Pilot see Jesus as a dangerous man.

(Pause. Then we hear PILATE)

PILATE

Bring in the prophet arrested by CAIPHAS.

(JESUS advances)

PILATE

So you're Jesus. People have been coming in here all morning to tell me what a big threat to the Empire you are. You don't look very threatening to me. Are you the King of the Jews?

JESUS

Who, me?

PILATE

Who else? Don't you play the fool with me, man! Are you, or are you not the King of the Jews?

JESUS

Thou sayest that I am a king.

PILATE

But you don't.

JESUS

No.

PILATE

But many witnesses claim to have heard you say this.

JESUS

They are wrong.

PILATE

The Jews claim you rose against Caesar. Did you do such a thing?

JESUS

Why should I? The Lord is the Lord, and Caesar is Caesar.

PILATE
And who are you?

JESUS
I am the Son of the Lord.

PILATE
I see. And the King of the Jews, are you not?

JESUS (*impatiently*)
My kingdom is not of this world. I'm not interested in earthly kingdoms...

PILATE
Then why are you here in Jerusalem?

JESUS
I came to you.

PILATE
To me? What for?

JESUS
To crucify me.

PILATE
You want me to crucify you? What for?

JESUS
So I can go back to my Father.

PILATE
And the only way for you to accomplish this is for me to crucify you?

JESUS
Fear not, your guilt will be forgiven on Judgment Day!

PILATE
My guilt? What guilt?

JESUS
For having crucified an innocent.

PILATE
You're damn sure I'm going to crucify you, aren't you?

JESUS
You'll have to!

PILATE
Why?

JESUS

So that I can return to my Father!

PILATE (*exploding*)

I'm not here to crucify everyone who's in the mood for it! I have no obligation towards you, and I only crucify those I choose! (*More moderate*) And who are also enemies of Rome, of course.

JESUS

Don't get angry!

PILATE

Don't you tell me what to do, you fool! Get out of here!

(*Pause*)

CAIPHAS

Why did you send him back to me?

PILATE

Because I couldn't find any guilt in him. He's just a harmless fool.

CAIPHAS

He fooled only you.

PILATE

Ever since I came to this country, everybody's been competing to prove that I'm an idiot. (*Shouts*) Do I look like an idiot?

CAIPHAS

I can hear, there's no point in shouting at me.

PILATE

I've been thinking, why all this sudden concern of the Jews for the security of the Empire? This rush to turn in one of your own men to the Roman authorities is most unusual.

CAIPHAS

We'd rather have the Roman order than endless internal fighting among the Jews. You forgot that Judaea was handed over to the Romans by a Jew.

PILATE

A true patriotic gesture, worthy of a Jew.

CAIPHAS

It would be wiser for a representative of Rome not to insult the Jewish people in front of its high priest.

PILATE

So I guess only concern for Rome's fate has triggered this last-minute visit of yours.

CAIPHAS

I won't lie to you. I'm also concerned about my people. This man is confusing them.

PILATE

So suit yourself, cut off his head or burn him, whatever you want. But the cross is only for the enemies of Rome, and I'm not here to wash your dishes for you.

CAIPHAS

It's not only Jesus I came to talk to you about.

PILATE

Oh? Well, it's about time you got to the point, CAIPHAS.

CAIPHAS

If you don't release Barrabas, the people will rise up!

PILATE

And if I release him, he'll lead the uprising!

CAIPHAS

He won't. It's a promise.

PILATE

You really think I'm an idiot, don't you?

CAIPHAS

Crucify Jesus, and people will glorify the Roman law. Crucify Barrabas, and the Jews will curse the Empire.

PILATE

They do it anyway. Besides, the prophet did nothing against Rome, whereas Barrabas was caught in the act.

CAIPHAS

I know my people and their caprices. If you continue to refuse me, I'll have to do this in some other way...

PILATE

Such as?

CAIPHAS

I'll write to Rome!

PILATE

You'll write what exactly?

CAIPHAS

That you allow enemies of Rome to escape without punishment.

PILATE

If you imagine Rome will ask me to release Barrabas, you're a fool. All you can achieve this way is to have two executions instead of one.

CAIPHAS

If you execute Barrabas, ten like him will rise instead!

PILATE

Oh, so you do threaten me!

CAIPHAS

No... It's just an opinion...

PILATE

Then allow me to comfort you. No one knows your Barrabas in Jerusalem. This may be true in the North where he comes from, but here he's practically an unknown.

CAIPHAS

His reputation is great, even if people have never met him, Pilate!

PILATE

They have never met him, so they have no idea what he looks like? Ha-ha! Thanks, CAIPHAS, you have just given me the perfect solution. Indeed, you render valuable services to the Roman empire!

CAIPHAS

What do you mean?

PILATE

I'll execute one and say it's the other!

CAIPHAS

What?

PILATE (*exulting*)

I'll crucify Barrabas, but say it's Jesus!

CAIPHAS

This is crazy. Someone may know one from the other.

PILATE

I'll keep the crowd far away from the cross. This way they won't notice the difference.

CAIPHAS

What about the corpse? His disciples will want the corpse.

PILATE

I'll order it stolen and burned.

CAIPHAS

This cannot be! He told them he'll resurrect! They may believe he did!

PILATE

Oh, is that what he told them? So then it's just my luck, isn't it?

(Pause)

CAIPHAS

My plans failed completely. Barrabas is lost.

JUDAS

And Jesus? What's going to happen to him?

CAIPHAS

He's here, the Romans sent him back. But... Pilate will order Barrabas' corpse stolen...
Do you understand?

JUDAS

My God! They'll think Jesus resurrected!

CAIPHAS

Pilate kills an enemy and strikes at our religion with just one blow. We cannot let this
happen!

JUDAS

But how? Let's release Jesus! Everybody will see he's alive!

CAIPHAS

Release him after I've paid witnesses to testify against him? I can't...He's a worse enemy
of ours now than before...

JUDAS

So where does this leave us?

CAIPHAS

Take this money and pay the jailor to kill him. Then we'll send the corpse to the disciples
and ruin Pilate's plan.

JUDAS *(alone)*

No, I can't do this... This would be going too far... Bring in the prisoner who was sent
back by the Romans... Here you are! You have to disappear, and fast. The Romans will
crucify Barrabas and say it was you. If you don't leave right away, you'll endanger the
lives of many people and even the fate of Judaea! Take this money and disappear
without telling anyone!

JESUS

I'll be back one day.

JUDAS

No! Don't ever come back!

Jesus (*kisses him on the mouth, leaving*)
I'll be back for Judgment Day!

(Pause)

HELENA

But you came back a lot sooner!

CHERINTOS (*to JOHN*)

I enjoyed that. Although it's just another version. Did you catch everything?

JOHN

A version closer to the truth, Master.

PAUL

(in anger, overturning the tables)

You'll write nothing of this! Everything stays as it was!

HELENA

No! It can't be!

CHERINTOS

No need for violence. You're paying for it. Go on with the story as he says, kids!

(HELENA runs outside)

JOHN

Where were we before this started?

LUKE

We were on the cross.

MARK

Yes...on the cross.

JOHN (*to PAUL*)

What an outburst! You have quite a temper!

LUKE

I'm rewriting from before his arrest, as Master said.

CHERINTOS

You do that.

JOHN

You mean from the temple scene?

LUKE

Approximately.

JOHN

Oh, parables and more parables. No one will be able to stand this story. Too boring.

CHERINTOS
What else do you want?

JOHN
Action. If Jesus, for instance, instead of just talking, turned some tables upside down, as Paul did a minute ago. It would be far more convincing...

JESUS
People shouldn't be persuaded by violence, John!

PAUL
If you think it's more convincing, nothing prevents you from writing it that way.

JOHN
I don't know. Were there any tables at the Temple?

PAUL
Of course, there were lots of merchants around.

CHERINTOS
All right, everybody back to work!

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(The disciples, writing. Steps of HELENA as she enters)

JOHN
Oh, here's Helena. I was afraid she had left us for good.

MARK
This couldn't happen. Who else would do her nails?

LUKE
Play for her?

MATTHEW
Dance for her?

JOHN
Mary Magdalene! Jesus was just telling us about her.

HELENA
You went to see her after the so-called crucifixion?

JESUS
I did.

HELENA
Why?

JESUS
I didn't want her to mourn my death. It would have been so cruel.

HELENA

Weren't you afraid she'd tell the others?

JESUS

No. Her love was the kind that needs no proof.

HELENA

Unlike mine, right?

JESUS

No, Helena. What you gave me was unique. It shall be written that the only person who pitied the Savior with some love was a woman.

JOHN

Of course. I can write it myself, right now.

HELENA

Don't be impertinent, John.

LUKE

Relax, everybody! Let's go on with the story. So he resurrected...

HELENA

And for what? To let someone like Paul use you?

JESUS

It's too early to tell who is using whom...

HELENA

Oh, leave me alone... Everything is such a lie...

JESUS

Sometimes you have to lie to people in order to save them. A lie out of love will be forgiven.

JOHN

Doesn't this create a dangerous precedent?

HELENA

Love existed even before you came, you know.

JESUS

I bring the certainty that God's love for His creation is still unexhausted.

(CHERINTOS enters)

CHERINTOS

Are you working?

JOHN

No, Master, Jesus is lecturing us.

CHERINTOS
About what?

JOHN
About love...

CHERINTOS
Really? One becomes a theorist on this subject only when its practice has been disappointing.

JESUS
You can mock me all you want, Cherintos. I love you, too.

CHERINTOS
And everything which belongs to me, right? The woman and the boy both...We have similar tastes...

JESUS
You're a lucky man, Cherintos! You are deeply loved, perhaps because you don't care to be.

CHERINTOS
I don't know what you mean by that.

JESUS
You're capable of feeling, Cherintos, but only the kind a solitary man can have.

CHERINTOS
Each man is unique, different from all others.

JESUS
Yes, and your love is the love of a man who enjoys solitude. The love that will save the world is different. It will leave behind forever all individual solitudes, as God Himself left His when He created Man.

CHERINTOS
I see. Another religion which will push the individual into rank.

HELENA (*closer to CHERINTOS*)
Not even for a love like that was it worth lying.

JESUS
Helena, don't leave me!

HELENA
We loved each other, that's fact. But you don't know how to love.

JESUS (*scared*)
Me? I don't know how to love?

CHERINTOS

Helena, drop it. It's not worth it!

HELENA

Why? He can learn. Let him know.

JESUS

If I could only show myself to you as I once was...

CHERINTOS

Yes, you're a bit too modest for a god. .

JESUS

This could not have been otherwise. I came here to live and die as a simple man.

CHERINTOS

Well, it's not as easy as it seems, is it?

JESUS (*almost crying*)

Helena, please don't leave me!

HELENA

Enough! Leave me alone.

CHERINTOS

Yes, the game is over.

JESUS

You too want miracles, don't you? Confess to that!

CHERINTOS

Loss is human, you know. You must learn to bear it with dignity.

JESUS

But I must prove I know how to love. Through her, to the rest of the world! Love must carry on...

CHERINTOS

It will, don't worry. A love engineered by him (*he points to Paul*)

JESUS

I needed him! Without him the word of God would never have reached beyond the walls of Jerusalem!

CHERINTOS

But with him, a different word came out...

MARK

Somebody's here to see you, Paul. He looks Jewish and a foreigner.

PAUL

Did he mention a name?

MARK (*indifferently*)
Yes, the name is Peter, I think.

(Frightened breath of Jesus.)

CHERINTOS
Well, what are you waiting for? Ask him in! And let's get back to work. We must finish today!

10

(Door opens. Steps are heard.)

PETER (*shy at first*)
Paul. You live here?

PAUL
Yes. The house belongs to a friend of mine.

PETER
Out of all the houses in Antioch, you picked the most lavish to live in.

PAUL
Still bitter and envious, like a wretched old woman. I recognize you fully.

PETER
And you no longer bother pretending. Your hatred is finally unconcealed.

PAUL
Yours tired me too much to hide mine anymore. What do you want, anyway?

PETER
Strange rumors have reached us.

PAUL
What rumors? That I carried the word of the Lord across three continents? That people are running to our religion like lost sheep to the herd? These rumors trouble your sleep back in Jerusalem, yours and James?

PETER
Yes, you could say that. Our community was informed that you are baptizing uncircumcised men.

PAUL
Belief in Jesus should not hinge on an incision.

PETER
We've also heard that you allow the converted to eat impure meat...

PAUL

The only meat you can find in Greek cities is from sacrificed animals at the temples.
Should people fast forever because of a supply problem?

PETER

You always scorn the holiest aspects of our religion!

PAUL

These aren't those. You people have an obsession with flesh, either it's animal or man!
Apart from it, you understand nothing!

PETER

How can you say such a thing?

PAUL

And how's our dear community in Jerusalem? How many are you today? The same as
last year, or some have passed the threshold to eternal life by now?

PETER

You're conceited because of the many conversions you have achieved. But there's no
point to it. Your conversions are built on a misunderstanding. You don't persuade people
to join our religion, you seduce them! When their excitement is gone, what will they
have left?

PAUL

The certainty of feeling protected.

PETER

That's not enough.

PAUL

Peter, be honest! Do you think James's strict observance will make Christianity triumph?
If I thought so, I'd follow James myself tomorrow!

PETER

We don't need to triumph, but to survive.

PAUL

Our Master didn't think so, Peter!

PETER

Our Master? You never even knew him!

PAUL

You forget He revealed himself to me on the road to Damascus?

PETER

So you claim, but where is the evidence? Any impostor has a bag of ready-made stories
like that one.

PAUL

The Church of Jerusalem accepted the truth of my meeting with Jesus when it conferred
on me the official right to baptize in His name!

PETER

Well, we had no choice at the time; you were strangling us with both hands. You've been so afraid we'd change our minds that you've never returned to Jerusalem since.

PAUL

You were on my side then, Peter.

PETER

I was seduced by your skillful words.

PAUL

Not by my words alone, but by the thousands of converted who stood behind me!

PETER

Converted to what? Your religion is not the same as ours. An open religion will each moment be a different one!

PAUL

When Christianity closes its doors, it will start to decay.

PETER

And until then you make it swallow local customs and superstitions like some insatiable monster!

PAUL

How else to attract and conquer new souls?

PETER

I see we can't understand each other, Paul. James is right. I opposed his decision out of loyalty towards you, but now I see his decision was right.

PAUL

What decision? What are you talking about?

PETER

The Church has decided that your teachings are heretical, and that you are an impostor. Your right to baptize and preach in the name of Jesus is revoked. This will be made known to every Christian community.

PAUL

But you can't do this!

PETER

Who can stop us?

PAUL

You can't ruin what I've worked so hard to build over the past fifty years!

PETER

Oh, yes, we can. You were never one of us. Who gave you the right to speak in Jesus' name?

JESUS
I did!

PETER (*scared*) Who is this man? Where did he come from?

JESUS
Don't you recognize Him who was denied by you, Peter?

PETER
My Lord! (*He falls to his knees*)
Haven't you forgiven me yet?

JESUS
Why should I, when I see you rising against my Kingdom? It is I who chose Paul! Go tell that to my brother James!

PETER
Don't leave, My Lord... Let me look at you longer... You've grown old...

JESUS
Go tell my brother James that everything relating to my life on earth should be in one Book to be spread around the world... Paul here is taking charge of that.

PETER (*doubtful*)
But how can he do this, Lord? He was not with us those days, how can he possibly know about you?

JESUS (*angry*)
So you doubt me again, Paul! Your denial of me knows no bounds! You deserve only to lose me again!

(Jesus walks to the pool and crosses the water as John did earlier. Peter throws himself to the ground.)

PETER
Oh, God, forgive me! Pity sinful Peter, Lord! Come back! Forgive poor Peter who needs to see in order to believe!

(Jesus leaves.)

PAUL
You can rise now... There, the Lord has left us after you proved your unfaithfulness again, Peter...

PETER (*crying*)
He looked older and heavier... but the water still held him...

PAUL

How could you be so weak? The Lord had entrusted his sheep to you! But you yielded to James and forced me to step in!

PETER

It's not my fault! They didn't follow me, they followed James!

PAUL

James doesn't even believe his brother was the Messiah. Can't you see, Peter, that the Jews have covered almost all trace of His earthly journey? Can't you see that the Gentiles are our only hope?

PETER

This is true. You are right, Paul.

PAUL

Go and tell James what you saw and heard here. And don't let him rise against His will again!

PETER

Pray for me, Paul. For God loves you better than He loves me.

(He leaves. CHERINTOS enters)

CHERINTOS

I just saw your guest. Was he leaving for good?

PAUL

Yes, we've pretty much settled everything.

CHERINTOS

Believe it or not, we're ready, too. Our work is almost completed. I'm correcting the papers now, and we'll be finished by sunset today.

PAUL

This is wonderful news. We must celebrate. Please allow me organize a supper tonight and invite everybody.

CHERINTOS

I'm in no mood for parties, but maybe the kids will enjoy it.

PAUL

Honor me with your presence! Also invite lovely Helena. I hope she'll forgive an old monk.

CHERINTOS

All right. I'll let everyone know.

11

(Flute and party sounds. A noisy Last Supper. Everyone seems a little drunk already.)

LUKE

66

I don't understand why Master has not yet come down yet ... John! John!

JOHN
Stop yelling, I'm right here...

LUKE
Where's Master?

JOHN
Upstairs. He smoked those herbs again and wants no company.

LUKE
Go fetch him.

MATTHEW
Yes, get him down here! We're having so much fun!

HELENA (*shouting*)
Cherintos! Come down here!

JOHN
Be quiet! Leave him alone.

MARK
Yes, leave him alone. We're having plenty of fun on our own. You'd better fill my cup,
Luke! You owe me that. You copied everything from me!

LUKE
Who cares? I did a better job than you in the end.

PAUL
You all did a great job! Let's toast together with another cup for you.

MATTHEW (*drunk*)
Drink with me, Narrator! You tell such nice stories!

MARK (*drunk*)
Don't be sad, Savior! The Jews don't deserve you.

JOHN
What I can't figure out is... If this story is so damn complicated, why tell it at all? We
could make it more convincing if we invented the whole thing from scratch.

LUKE
Don't start on that. It doesn't matter anymore!

JOHN
No, but you were right. It would have been better without the birth.

PAUL
Drink this cup with me, Helena! Now I'm leaving and your life will return to normal.
Forgive me for the trouble.

HELENA

No, I don't want to drink with you...

PAUL

Jesus, you ask her...

JESUS

Be kind, forgive him!

HELENA

All right, then.

PAUL

All of us! Let's toast together. *(He pours into their cups)*. Let's drink to your Academy! You are all so talented, I couldn't have dreamed to find a better Academy! Let's drink to that! VIVAT ACADEMIA!

ALL

VIVAT ACADEMIA!

(They drink)

LUKE

Oh, it burns!

(Loud groans as everyone falls to the ground, except PAUL and JESUS.)

JESUS *(terrified)*

They are all down! Luke! Matthew! John! What's wrong with them?

PAUL

Something must be wrong with the wine.

JESUS

With the wine?

PAUL

Get your things. We're leaving right away!

JESUS

Helena can't be dead, too! My love! Answer me!

PAUL

Can't you hear me? We must leave, and fast... Leave that corpse alone...

JESUS

Did you poison them?

PAUL

What else could I do? I couldn't allow them to go around telling how the Book was written, could I?

JESUS

So it's all over. My coming adds up to this dreadful sin...

PAUL

Hurry! We must clear out before anybody comes!

JESUS

Who cares? Don't you realize it's over, man? I'll confess everything myself!

PAUL

No, you won't!

(He pulls out a dagger.)

JESUS

You would kill even me!

PAUL

Yes, I will, if you don't come to your senses and keep your mouth shut!

JESUS

But what are you without me, man? A worm! I am your Lord!

PAUL

You're wrong. My Lord is in the Book by now, and for Him you were only a pretext.
Make up your mind. Are you coming or not?

JESUS

Where do you want us to go? What good are my teachings if they left you as you were, a criminal?

PAUL

Drop it, it's time to go!

JESUS

(turns his back on him)

The only road for us now is the road of repentance.

PAUL

If that's your wish...!

(Paul stabs Jesus in the back. Jesus groans and falls. Enter CHERINTOS)

CHERINTOS

What's going on? Why this infernal noise?

PAUL

I've been waiting for you, Master.

CHERINTOS *(walks over and takes John's body into his arms)*

John! Forgive me, my boy! Forgive your Master for not being able to take better care of you! *(He spots Helena's body.)* Helena! What a massacre! *(He sees Jesus.)* What, don't tell me you killed your God, too!

PAUL

I had to. These crimes scared him so much that he wanted to reveal everything.

CHERINTOS

What a scrupulous, unreliable God. Anyway, he was more trouble than help to you lately.

PAUL

That's right. I'll see to his interests better than he would himself.

CHERINTOS

Right. I see you collected your books. So what are you waiting for, preacher? Finish your job!

PAUL

What do you mean?

CHERINTOS

Our conversation has reached an impasse. Time to put an end to it.

PAUL

You mean, kill you? The only man who has ever understood me?

CHERINTOS

You can't ask me to survive after everybody I love is dead due to my indolence?

PAUL

Oh, yes, I ask you that! I need your mind, Cherintos. Leave your sterile philosophy behind and help me change the world!

CHERINTOS

I have no desire to do that.

PAUL

Mine is enough for both.

CHERINTOS

So, what else is new? Are you going to kill me or not? You have no idea how tired I am of conversation!

PAUL

I don't want to, I won't kill you, Cherintos. Think how terribly alone I would feel after that!

CHERINTOS

So I have to do this by myself as well. Where did you put the poison? In the wine?

(He takes a cup from the table.)

PAUL

Don't!

(CHERINTOS drinks. He falls)

What a waste... Anyway...God can't stop because of a man... no matter how wise he is...

(Paul gathers up the books and leaves. The door slams. Silence. Then, with the knife still in his back, Jesus rises and comes front stage, walking perfectly normally and not seeming to mind the knife at all. He kneels near Helena's body and takes her in his arms.)

JESUS

Helena! Fear not! Tonight thou shalt be with me in Paradise!

(End)