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THE GOSPEL OF AFRANIUS

KIRILL YESKOV (& BOGDAN VEKLYCH)

Sacred history as a subject for detective investigation.



“Still Doubting”, J. G. Gregory

“Have mercy, what are you doing, Afranius, those must be temple seals!”

“The procurator needn’t bother himself with this question,” Afranius replied, closing the package.

“Do you really have all the seals?” Pilate asked, laughing.

“It can’t be otherwise, procurator,” Afranius replied very sternly, not laughing at all.

(M. Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*.)

Borges once remarked that “generation after generation people have retold only two stories: the story of a lost ship sailing the Mediterranean in quest of a long-sought isle, and the story of a God crucified on Calvary.” As for the latter, in a certain sense he is not quite right. The artistic and philosophical rethinking of the events that accompanied the execution of Jesus Christ became a sustained literary tradition only in the last century, when the Church largely lost the function of ideological supervision. This theme is usually present in the narrative in the form of side plots or “a novel within a novel” (which is the case for Bulgakov and Aitmatov), less often in the form of independent works (like in the case of Anatole France or Leonid Andreyev). The texts created within the framework of this tradition are very different - both in terms of their artistic level (from the immortal “Master” to Varshavsky’s derisive fantasy story “The Hysteresis Loop”) and in the degree of adherence to the Holy Scriptures and historical realities (from Dombrovsky’s very punctual [M. Dunaev in his article “The Truth That the Head Hurts” (Zlatoust, N1 1992:306-348), written from a consistently Christian position, simply blew the literary interpretations of the Gospel by Bulgakov, Aitmatov, and Tendryakov out of the water; the absence of Dombrovsky in this series seems to me very significant; not being an expert in church dogma, I always intuitively believed that Christ of Father Kutorga most of all corresponds if not to the letter then to the spirit of the Christian teaching] to the deliberate carelessness of the Strugatskys). In this last aspect it is worth comparing two well-known film masterpieces - *The Gospel of Matthew* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Needless to say, the versions of different authors differ most radically, and the Gospel characters become “homonyms” - consider Pilates of France and Bulgakov, Judases of Leonid Andreev and Dombrovsky, or Jesuses of Pasolini and Scorsese.

Nevertheless, within this tradition there is one common fundamental limitation: direct intervention of supernatural forces in the course

of events should not go beyond the “strange cloud that came to Jerusalem”. That is why such a key event for the Christian worldview as the bodily resurrection is always taken out of the scope of the narrative - even though many of the authors who addressed this topic were undoubtedly believers. And since I belong to a generation which was immeasurably more influenced by Bulgakov’s Jesus than by his official prototype, the problem of the resurrection, until very recently, did not arouse the slightest interest in me.

JOSH MCDOWELL’S ARGUMENT

However, some time ago I came across a book by McDowell, a well-known modern preacher [Josh McDowell, *Proofs of the Resurrection*, Slavic Gospel Press ed. Wheaton, IL, 1990, 203 pp. (original title: *The Resurrection Factor* by Josh McDowell, 1981)] who set himself a very extraordinary task: to prove the fact of the bodily resurrection of Jesus from a purely rational position. The scheme of McDowell’s constructions is as follows. Relying on the Gospel as a historical document and drawing on many other (religiously neutral) sources, he meticulously went through all conceivable possibilities for a non-supernatural explanation of the extraordinary events that followed the execution of Jesus Christ (first of all, the disappearance of the body from the tomb sealed and guarded by Roman soldiers). These hypotheses were classified by him as follows:

1. The tomb of Christ was not really empty.
 - 1.1. The actual burial place of Christ is not known to anyone; most likely, his body was thrown into the ditch along with the other executed (Ginsbert’s hypothesis).
 - 1.2. Tomb confusion: in reality the women who first discovered the “resurrection” came by mistake to someone else’s unoccupied tomb (Lake’s hypothesis).
 - 1.3. All the stories about the resurrection are legends that arose many years after the execution of Christ, having no real basis at all.
 - 1.4. The story of the resurrection is nothing more than an allegory: in fact, it is about a purely spiritual resurrection.
 - 1.5. All appearances of Christ are the result of individual and collective hallucinations.
2. The tomb of Christ was actually empty, but it emptied naturally.
 - 2.1. The body was stolen by the disciples.
 - 2.2. The body was moved and hidden by the authorities in order to prevent the possible machinations of those who were waiting for the

resurrection.

2.3. Christ did not die on the cross; he was taken down from it in a state of shock and then woke up and recovered.

2.4. “The Easter Conspiracy Hypothesis” by Shenfield. Jesus, believing in his God-chosenness, decided to create the appearance of the fulfillment of the prophecies about the Messiah. To this end, he arranged (with the help of Joseph of Arimathea) his own crucifixion; to imitate the death on the cross, he drank a drug instead of vinegar. According to the plan, he was then to be transferred to the tomb, from where after a while he would come out “resurrected”. The plot failed because a Roman soldier hit Christ with a spear and actually killed him. Then, however, Mary Magdalene and the disciples mistook an unknown young man for Christ, but Joseph (who knew the truth) did not even think to tell them about the mistake.

Having refuted, with varying degrees of persuasiveness, all the mentioned hypotheses, McDowell considered the space of logical possibilities to be exhausted and concluded: it is impossible to explain the disappearance of the body and the subsequent appearances of Christ from non-supernatural positions. Ergo - we are dealing with a direct intervention of God in earthly affairs.

It must be noted that an absolutely identical scheme for proving the fact of the resurrection of Christ was outlined as early as 1906 in B. I. Gladkov’s *Public Interpretation of the Gospel*, “intended for intelligent readers, but mainly for unbelievers, doubters, and vacillators”. This author also sequentially refutes “three possible objections to the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

1. The disciples of Jesus stole His body and told everyone that He had resurrected;
2. Jesus did not die on the cross but was buried as if he had died, then came to life and appeared to his disciples;
3. Jesus resurrected not in reality but only in the imagination of His disciples.”

Although formally Gladkov’s set of hypotheses is substantially poorer than McDowell’s, it covers the entire real variety of positions that are fundamentally irreducible to each other (for it is hardly worth arguing seriously, for example, with a version as full of internal incoherence as “the Easter conspiracy”).

I think that for any person familiar with the laws of logic the fundamental vulnerability of McDowell’s or Gladkov’s proof systems is quite obvious (see below); I emphasize that we are talking about the system as a whole and not about specific refutations. Thus the more I was surprised by the statements cited by McDowell that came

from a number of leading Western jurists, including Lord Darling and Lord Caldecote, the members of the English Supreme Court, and Lord Lyndhurst, the British Attorney General. Their verdict is that the available evidence would be quite sufficient to recognize the fact of the resurrection during a hypothetical trial. Professor Greenleaf, a long-time chair of the law faculty at Harvard, the author of a three-volume treatise on the law of evidence that has become a classic, even published a special monograph - *An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists, by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*.

I am aware, of course, that my Soviet ideas about Western justice are drawn mainly from Gardner's detectives. And yet... Try to imagine lawyer Perry Mason (or prosecutor Berger) trying to convince the jury that some incident was a result of supernatural forces - on the sole basis that he personally cannot offer a convincing version of what happened. Have you imagined this yet? I'm trying to - and I can't: my imagination is failing me...

When it comes to religion, like many of my colleagues in the natural sciences, I am not a believer; the fact that in the sphere of Reason there is no proof of the existence of God, and indeed cannot be, has always been an axiom for me. Having refused the honest Tertullian "I believe because it is absurd" and having personally desacralized the Gospel text, McDowell has deliberately entered a very risky game on the opponent's field. Unable to resist the temptation, I accepted his challenge; as one of my friends used to say:

"Don' touch it! But if ya did, don' blame me..."

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

First of all, we note that the rigor of the proof system used by McDowell is illusory. In terms of classical logic, it is an INDIRECT PROOF, in which "the truth of the thesis is established by showing the falsity of the opposite assumption". In the present case the falsity of the antithesis is not proved deductively but is concluded as an inductive generalization, which allows one to assume a case of incomplete induction (the so-called "hasty generalization").

Moving from the logical side of the problem to the content side, it should be emphasized that the sequential processing of alternatives used in the scheme under discussion is meaningful if - and only if - their set with exhaustive completeness covers the space of logical possibilities (which, in fact, is what McDowell insists on). Therefore, the following

is necessary and sufficient to refute the “Gladkov-McDowell scheme”. I have to offer at least one more (non-supernatural) hypothesis which would explain the complex of events related to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus more consistently than all the previously refuted ones [as a side note, that is approximately what was attempted (although without much success) by the “investigator for especially important cases” sent to Jerusalem by emperor Tiberius in the wonderful movie *The Inquiry* by Damiani - and by James Cameron with colleagues in *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* (also without much success; and the same comment can be likewise applied to, for example, *Toledot Yeshu*)].

Our task, therefore, is identical to the one which is solved in any classical (“English”) detective story, which is essentially putting together a puzzle. From a fixed number of pieces of given shapes (established facts), it is necessary to assemble a figure (a version) so that the fragments adjoin each other without gaps and every single one is used, including the most “uncomfortable” ones. I’ll repeat just in case: this version must be, first and foremost, “nothing more than” INTERNALLY CONSISTENT - which, along with other considerations, will then imply its ACTUAL TRUTH (up to unimportant secondary details), as we will see, but consistency and truth are not the exact same question (for example, the former is necessary for the latter - so, even if one is interested in nothing other than the actual historical truth, in any case it makes sense to first of all focus on the former).

This primary focus on internal consistency - refutation by showing that the opponent’s conclusions don’t follow from his own assumptions - allows us, in particular, to avoid discussing the historicity of Christ, the legitimacy of considering the canonical Gospels as historical documents, and related issues. It is ridiculous for an amateur to get into a tangle of problems on which experts - historians, archaeologists, philologists, linguists - have written an immense amount of literature [I can quite imagine the value of the insights of amateurs in the field of my own professional activity, paleontology, here this public regularly tries to make the scientific community happy with another theory of mass extinctions; and although some of these amateurs are recognized authorities in their areas of expertise (for example, in astrophysics), their constructions only induce gnashing of teeth and allergic rash in paleozoologists]. Furthermore, if these sources aren’t reliable, then there is nothing to do, the task at hand is trivially easy; thus, we will simply *assume* that they are reliable, and from now on proceed from that assumption. Moreover, we will later see that this assumption -

which is, of course, the opposite of what atheists usually assume - is probably in fact correct (!), and that therefore in this work we'll be studying actual history. (Sometimes - like here - the real truth, the proverbial "bottom of it", is not trivial to find! But, stay with me, and I'll show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.)

The authorship and chronology of the writing of the Gospels is accepted here in full accordance with the church canon; the problems of continuity of the four canonical texts with respect to the Logia of Matthew, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Proto-Gospel "Q" (from German "Quelle" - source) will not interest us. I will present the canvas of events mainly according to one of the classical versions that harmonizes all the New Testament texts with each other - *The Life of Jesus* by W. F. Farrar, written from a fully orthodox point of view.

In a number of points, however, the differences between the versions of different Evangelists seem to be quite fundamental; in these cases we cannot avoid discussing the source of these disagreements. Within the framework of our approach, the stories of Saints Matthew, Peter, Paul, and John, which formed the basis of the corresponding Gospels, can be viewed... well, let's say, as the testimony of four residents of a snow-covered Yorkshire estate in which a mysterious crime was committed by the will of Agatha Christie. In controversial and doubtful cases concerning the interpretation of texts or historical realities, it seems fair to me to give preference to the opinion of McDowell (if any was expressed).

Specifying the initial conditions, let's introduce one important limitation. In some of the non-supernatural hypotheses discussed by McDowell, Christ and his associates are assumed to be, simply put, either swindlers or idiots. And although I myself am indifferent to religion, and have a rather cold attitude towards the official Churches, I decidedly dislike these assumptions. After all, no matter what the Church Fathers say, everybody has their own Jesus. And even if mine is completely monstrous from the point of view of the orthodox dogma (as he bears all the "birthmarks" of liberal theology), he won't be a liar under any circumstances. In any case, both Christ and most of his companions were soon to give their lives for their beliefs, which in of itself should cause some elementary respect for them. [Just for clarity, the cases of outright bad faith do happen in such contexts; for example, according to Italian historian Sergio Luzzatto, popular and charismatic friar Padre Pio deliberately mutilated himself with carbolic acid to create the appearance of bearing the crucifixion wounds of Jesus. (Nor, of course, can anyone suggest - in view of Japanese kamikaze or Muslim terrorist suicide bombers - that because

someone is willing to give their life for something, that something is remotely right.) Nevertheless, we will - very reasonably! - assume that Jesus and the Apostles are trustworthy.] So, when looking through hypotheses to explain the various “knots” of events, we will proceed from the following: conscious deception on the part of Christ or the Apostles can be allowed only after all other possible explanations have been exhausted (“presumption of honesty”). Looking ahead, let me note that in the end there will be no such cases at all. With one caveat.

English Christian philosopher and publicist C. S. Lewis is known worldwide mainly as the author of instructive fairytales for children. In one of them a girl accidentally discovers a way to get into a magical land by passing through an antique wardrobe. The older brother and sister, having heard her stories about these visits, begin to fear for the sanity of their little sister and turn to the owner of the house, a professor, for advice:

“Logic!” said the Professor half to himself. “Why don’t they teach logic at these schools? There are only three possibilities. Either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth. You know she doesn’t tell lies and it is obvious that she is not mad. For the moment then and unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume that she is telling the truth.”

It is strange that Lewis’s professor [mirroring Lewis’s own trademark argument for the divine authority of Jesus, by the way - the so-called “Lewis’s trilemma” that Jesus was either “bad, mad, or God”; but even in theology, the authority of Jesus actually rests ultimately upon one and only one thing - his bodily resurrection - and if it didn’t happen, he has none, whatever else might be true (not Christianity) - as emphasized by St. Paul and agreed by any orthodox theologian] does not notice point-blank at least one more possibility - a good-faith misbelief of an honest and sane person. The sources of such misconceptions are very diverse. These can be, for example, various natural and physiological phenomena: from atmospheric optical effects (“flying saucers”) to oxygen starvation in high mountains, causing systemic hallucinations (“Bigfoot”, “Ghost Mountaineer”). Various biases, especially ones outside of one’s own control or understanding, can be the culprits (for example, if your parents are Christians, or Muslims, you can’t help but sincerely follow their religion, at least when you’re a child, just like you can’t help but speak their language, as your own most preferred language [the difference between these two things, however, is that while there are many languages to choose from, none inferior to the others as long as it’s fully functional, the

truth is one - either Jesus resurrected, or he didn't, it is exactly one of these two things, the same for everybody - it is simply not itself a matter of belief: blind men might argue whether the Moon exists or not, but the truth won't depend on what conclusion they come to, or whether they are even aware of the question; truth is not politically correct and does not respect anyone's preferences, no matter how strong: say, if there is a crocodile crawling up behind you - but you don't know that at all, or you don't believe your friends saying that, or you really wish not to be in this situation... - well, that doesn't remove the crocodile, it's still there and approaching - that's what objective truth means]). On the other hand, and what is more important in our case, any person can become a victim of a deliberate con job.

It is essential here that the organizer of a serious hoax must not only take care of credibility of the staging itself but must also ensure presence of eyewitnesses with precisely an impeccable reputation (since what good is the testimony of a fool or an inveterate liar). That's why all kinds of specialists in telepathy and psychokinesis always want famous scientists to participate in their experiments, at the same time being totally unwilling to perform their miracles in the presence of professional illusionists. And it is for this specific reason that the "presumption of honesty" which we accept does not already by itself imply the actual truth of the resurrection, which was reported to have happened by multiple trustworthy and honest eyewitnesses. (It would be strange if nothing *interesting* happened then - if so, then why did the religion start in the first place, and with such passion? - the yes-or-no question is whether there was something *miraculous*!)

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before turning to a direct analysis of the Gospel texts, it is nevertheless necessary to make a few remarks about the real historical context of events. In 6 A.D., after the death of King Herod the Great, Palestine lost the remnants of its independence and was occupied by the Romans; two of the four historical regions of Palestine, Judea and Samaria, began to be ruled by Roman procurators, directly appointed by the imperial administration. This caused a sharp rise in the national liberation movement; its ideology was largely formed by religious fundamentalists, the Pharisees, and the most organized force were the national radicals from the Zealot party.

The latter "agreed with the Pharisees on everything but possessed an unbridled love of freedom. [...] No death seemed terrible to them,

and no murder (even that of relatives and friends) could keep them from standing up for the principles of freedom” (Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*). It was the Zealots who made a decisive contribution to the kindling of the Jewish War, which began in 66 A.D. and eventually led the Jews to a complete national catastrophe. Wandering preachers have traditionally played a large role in shaping public opinion in Palestine. Historians know about a dozen prophets who preached at about the same time as Jesus Christ and John the Baptist and were comparable to them in popularity; almost all of them were executed by the Romans as potential leaders of a Jewish revolt. Nevertheless, in the years prior to the Jewish War, there were 12 such uprisings (not taking into account minor riots and terrorist attacks). The Romans reacted to these events in their usual manner: according to a story of Josephus, on one occasion they crucified two thousand people at once in Jerusalem.

The local church-state elite balanced between these two irreconcilable forces. Having initially arisen on the basis of one of the religious sects - the Sadducees, by the time described it had completely de-ideologized and was a party of pragmatists. For the sake of maintaining the status quo they were ready to cooperate with the Romans or with the Martians, and at the first opportunity to immediately turn into the leaders of the national liberation movement (as the communist nomenclature of the republics of the former USSR has done before our eyes).

And that, by the way, is what actually happened later. In the twentieth chapter of *The Jewish War* Josephus describes the election of a new - “revolutionary” - administration in the revolted Jerusalem; as the result of it, “unlimited power over the city” was secured by... unsinkable High Priest Canaan. Here is a comment on this chapter by Y. L. Chertok, the Russian publisher and translator of *The Jewish War*:

“The results of the elections were thus very unfavorable for the Zealots, despite the fact that after the victory over Cestius and the expulsion of the Romans from the country they attained a decisive predominance both in the capital and in the province. [...] Eleazar ben Simon, the defeater of Cestius, later the chief leader of the war, was completely bypassed in the elections; an even more powerful leader of the Zealots at that time, Eleazar ben Ananias, who gave the war the initial impetus [...], probably in order to remove him from Jerusalem, received command over a minor province - Idumea. INSTEAD, THE FRIENDS OF ROME, WHO HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN HIDING FROM THE PERSECUTION OF THE ZEALOTS, WERE ELEVATED TO THE MOST RESPONSIBLE POSTS IN

JERUSALEM AND GALILEE [emphasis mine - K. Y.]”

A familiar picture, isn't it?

These events, however, would take place a little later. At the time we are interested in, the Sadducean leadership found it more useful for itself to demonstrate loyalty to the “imperial center”. The unpopular regime, not unexpectedly, flooded the country with agents of the secret police. In the same *Antiquities of the Jews* Josephus writes that since the times of Herod the Great (a.k.a. the Bloody), tortures, executions, and “disappearances” of oppositionists have become a common practice:

“Many citizens, some of them openly, some of them secretly, were taken to the fortress of Hyrcania and tortured there to death. Spies were everywhere in the cities and villages, laying in wait for all sorts of gatherings.”

In response, the militants of the Zealot party, the Sicarii, launched a campaign of terror against the occupiers and local collaborators, the crowning achievement of which was the assassination of High Priest Jonathan. The Zealots had wide-branching conspiratorial structures, and their agents permeated all levels of the state apparatus. In addition, they often maintained contacts with gangs of bandits (or, if one prefers, guerrilla detachments), which literally swarmed the country. Some of these armed formations numbered up to several hundred people in their ranks; legendary field commander Eleazar, for example, terrorized the outskirts of Jerusalem for almost twenty years, outliving several procurators and high priests.

There is no doubt also that the territory of Syria and Palestine was a place of vigorous activity of the special forces of the Parthian kingdom, which at the time described was harshly and very efficiently counteracting the Roman “Drang nach Osten” [the role played in this “containment strategy” by the Parthian intelligence (which became, largely due to the personal efforts of King Mithridates, one of the best secret services in the history of the ancient world) is highlighted in *The Craft of Intelligence* by Allen Dulles, the founder and long-term chief of the CIA]. I hasten to say: I am not aware of any specific facts regarding the foreign support of the Jewish national liberation movement. It is unlikely, however, that such sophisticated politicians as the Parthians were ignorant of the fundamental tactical principle “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”.

In short, the real Palestine was, according to the modern KGB terminology, “a country with a complex intelligence and operational situation”, something like Lebanon or El Salvador of the 80s. It rather poorly corresponded to the idyllic picture that arises when

reading the Gospel: a country of shady olive groves, in which the main occupation of the population is edifying conversations and religious and philosophical disputes.

This historical digression was necessary for me primarily for one thing. When someone (including McDowell), speaking about Judea of that time, writes in passing “the authorities did this” or “the authorities were interested in that”, it is simply nonsense. There were two authorities (plus one more, illegal, although very influential), and their interests, sometimes coinciding in private matters, were on the whole completely different. On top of everything, the general instability of the situation clearly did not contribute to the monolithic nature of these authorities. Under these conditions the natural rivalry between groups or individuals within them could take the form of an open struggle, combining with the most unexpected and unnatural temporary alliances (“Whom are we going to be friends against today?”) [in this regard, cf. the disposition in the political leadership and intelligence services of the Nazi Germany, so colorfully reconstructed in *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, dear to the heart of every Soviet person]. One who might think that these are purely hypothetical constructions should be interested in Chertok’s comment on the twentieth chapter of *The Jewish War*:

“High priest Jonathan contributed to the appointment of Felix as the procurator, as a result of which he was hated by the Sicarii. On the other hand, Felix began to be weary of Jonathan, who repeatedly reproached him for his cruel and unjust actions, and wanted to get rid of him. To this end, he entered into an agreement with the Sicarii, who, despite being Felix’s enemies, nevertheless put their services at his disposal for the assassination of the high priest equally hated by them.”

Biblical scholars have long noted a strange fact: while speaking sharply against both the degenerated Sadducean elite and the dogmatic Pharisees, Jesus did not say a single word about the Zealots, whose activity was one of the most acute problems of that time. Considering that the Zealots enjoyed the greatest influence and authority in his native Galilee, English biblical scholar Brandon in his monographs *Jesus and the Zealots* and *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth* argued that Jesus, if he did not outright belong organizationally to this movement, was at least quite sympathetic towards it.

In any case, among the Apostles there was at least one Zealot - Simon (Luke 6:15), and in his book *Jesus and Caesar* German biblical scholar Kuhlmann substantiates the Zealot affiliation of three more Apostles - Peter, his brother Andrew, and Judas. Let me remind you of a telling

detail in this regard. When Christ, during the Last Supper, addresses the Apostles with an allegorical call to “sell your cloak and buy a sword”, they, having understood him literally, answer:

“Lord, behold, here are two swords” (Luke 22:38).

But Judea is not Texas, there was no free carrying of weapons there. Within the framework of the task before us, it is completely unnecessary to delve into speculations on the topic of the organizational relationship of Jesus with the national liberation movement. Something else is essential for us here. In the moments of social upheaval, any socially significant figure (a category to which Jesus undoubtedly belonged, along with the other prophets of that time), regardless of their own plans and desires, becomes a political figure. And that means - either an independent actor, or an object of manipulation by other forces.

THE PROCURATOR OF JUDEA

And now, it seems to me, it is the time to move on to the problem of Pilate. From everything that is known about him one can conclude that “the cruel fifth procurator of Judea, equestrian Pontius Pilate” was not exactly exceedingly cruel but rather completely heartless. What forced him to turn twice to the case of a certain impoverished preacher accused of lese-majesty, and instead of immediately executing him - as they say, “just for the sake of clarity”, just as a “sanitary measure” [like, for example, blasphemers and apostates are executed in hardcore Muslim countries without a second thought - as a simple “trash removal”, no biggie, like shooting a rabid dog] - to do almost everything possible to save him?

In an attempt to at least somehow explain Pilate’s strange favor, Matthew the Evangelist refers to an intercession of the procurator’s wife, who supposedly had a vision in a dream. Excuse me, what wife? Let’s suppose the procurator was really married, and, moreover, his wife’s opinion on state affairs meant something more to him than a door creak. But what was she doing in Jerusalem?

The problem is, the permanent residence of the procurators of Judea was in the seaside city of Caesarea, and Pilate came to Jerusalem only a few times a year, to control the collection of taxes and court proceedings (John 19:20). But, perhaps, she sent a messenger to her husband from the Caesarean residence? Alas, things don’t work out that way either: the trial took place in the morning, the wife “*now* has suffered greatly in a dream because of Him” (Matthew 27:19), and the distance from Caesarea to Jerusalem is about 120 kilometers as the

crow flies. Nevertheless, the rumor about the role of Pilate's wife in this matter (for it can be nothing but a rumor), which was faithfully reproduced by Matthew, is quite important. We should remember it.

As for Bulgakov's stunning reconstruction, in my opinion, it suffers from a single drawback: his Pilate is too human. Not in the sense of "too humane", but too prone to normal human feelings: curiosity, likes and dislikes, loneliness, and, of course, cowardice. In this sense, Dombrovsky's Pilate, a major responsible worker of the imperial nomenclature, looks much more plausible:

"So, the first reason for Pilate's hesitation was that he simply didn't want to execute anyone to please the Jews. But there was a second consideration. This time there were reasons of State. The thing is that Christ, or such a person as Christ, suited Pilate very much. Surprised? But everything is fairly simple. Pilate learned two things about the teachings of Christ. Firstly, this wandering preacher does not believe in a revolution, war, or coup; no, a person must remake himself from the inside and then everything will happen by itself. So, he's against rebellion. That's the first thing that suits Rome. Secondly, the only thing Jesus wants to destroy and destroys all the time is authority. The authority of the Sanhedrin, the authority of the Sadducees and Pharisees, and therefore, perhaps even imperceptibly to himself, the authority of Moses and the temple. And in the solidity and indisputability of all this lies the most terrible danger to the empire. This means that Rome needed just such a destroyer. [...] Now consider the state of the world at that time and reflect upon the following: didn't these commandments from the mouth of the Galilean suit Pilate? After all, it was he, the occupier, who was prescribed to pray for and love. And didn't Pilate, a statesman who knew the East and the country he was pacifying, understand that this is the very power which he must rely on?"

I gave such a lengthy quotation only because these considerations, which frankly lie on the surface, are usually paradoxically overlooked. The problem, apparently, is that when it comes to the attitude of the Roman authorities to early Christianity, Nero's lamps of people smeared with resin and other equally striking episodes are immediately recalled. All this is true, but we are talking about a different era and a different region, and politics, according to Churchill's well-known saying, sometimes puts very unusual partners in one bed.

One can dispute the assessment of early Christianity as a peace-loving doctrine as much as one likes, quoting "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34) and other equally remarkable passages from the Holy Scriptures. The fact, however, remains a fact:

thirty years later Christians from the first communities indeed did not take part in the uprising and the Jewish war, for which they were expelled by their compatriots to Transjordan with the stigma of collaborators. So, if Pilate was really guided by the aforementioned state considerations in his attempts to save Jesus, then he undoubtedly hit the bullseye. As for some long-term consequences, the procurator - by God! - had worries which were more important than someone's future headache.

This is all about why he *tried* to save Jesus. But why *didn't* he succeed? Why, having said "A" (it doesn't matter why - for the reasons of State, in defiance of the hated Sanhedrin, or simply out of a noble whim), did he not go all the way and use the entire gigantic scope of his powers? The standard answer, "he was worried that the locals would signal the Boss", does not seem very convincing. By that time, all the relations with the local authorities had already been completely soured; one delation more or one delation less - what difference would it really make?

Moreover, such an experienced administrator as Pilate could not have been unaware that a delation as such is never the true reason for organizational conclusions; it can only be used as a formal pretense if your fate is already decided anyway. Furthermore, the procurator already committed his misdeed at the very moment when he *attempted* to shield the "state criminal"; whether this attempt was successful or not, from the point of view of the totalitarian regime of Tiberius (if the case had come to trial), is of secondary importance. Therefore, since we take serious state considerations to be the driving force behind Pilate's actions, we will look at his "full astern" from this angle as well. Let's pay attention here to one very significant circumstance, which for some reason remains persistently unnoticed (or deliberately ignored) by Bible commentators. It is a well-known fact that the Christian tradition does its best to whitewash Pilate (in the Coptic and Ethiopian Churches he is even canonized as a saint), placing all the blame for the tragic death of Christ on the Jews. However, in addition to Pilate's two acquittals, there was another one - by the tetrarch (king) of Galilee, Herod Antipas; this circumstance - within the framework of traditional ideas - is altogether outrageous. Let me explain. The claims to the Jewish throne, officially incriminated to Jesus ("Are you the king of the Jews?") above all affected the interests of Herod as a representative of the not quite legitimate Idumean dynasty, and not the Sanhedrin at all. However, the Sanhedrin stubbornly insists on the death penalty, while Herod - just like Pilate - does not notice, point-blank, anything to object to in the actions of

Jesus. And this is the same Herod who can be accused of anything but some “idiotic kindness of heart”: the dish with the head of John the Baptist is a quite sufficient confirmation of this.

And in general, not a single ruler, being of sound mind and disposing memory, would deliberately prevent the execution of some dubious prophet - maybe a madman, maybe a rebel. As on a similar occasion the khan from *The Enchanted Prince* by L. Solovyov said to his vizier: “Since he’s been captured and is in prison, why not cut his head off just in case? I don’t see any reasons for abstention! Mutiny isn’t your Peshawar sorcery or some such, jokes are out of place here!”

The reasoning of Christian commentators such as “The innocence of Christ was so obvious that even such a cruel and depraved person as Herod did not approve the verdict of the Sanhedrin” is patently utter childish babble; for one thing, the real guilt or innocence does not even matter in such situations. Herod could only refuse to perform the PRECAUTION glorified by the aforementioned khan under certain pressure, the source of which is quite obvious. Thus, Pilate’s efforts to save Jesus must have been even more serious and thorough than what follows from the Gospel texts directly.

Herod’s position (independent or forced - it doesn’t really matter), usually ignored as an unimportant detail, in fact, radically changes the picture of the alignment of forces. The stern and honest Roman official, alone opposing the Jews, monolithic in their religious fanaticism, disappears. Instead, there appear two holders of supreme power, both Roman and Jewish, who are pestered with stupid complaints by one of Jewish public organizations. Let me remind you that the Sanhedrin did not perform the functions of a criminal tribunal, only of a purely religious one, and the case with which it turned to Pilate did not fall within its competence in any way. The Sanhedrin had every legal right to recognize Christ as a blasphemer or a heretic and on this basis to sentence him to *stoning*, presenting its - religious - sentence for a purely formal affirmation to the procurator [precisely to stoning - the method of execution that was prescribed for the crimes against the Faith; a few years later High Priest Ananus would sentence James the Brother of the Lord to stoning, and he would do this without even informing the Roman procurator (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XX, 9:1)]. Instead, heretic Jesus, with a completely incomprehensible persistence, was being “imputed politics” and was demanded from Pilate to be crucified as a state criminal - a candidate to the Jewish throne. As a result, the Sanhedrin, which did not have sufficient authority from the beginning, in its confrontation with the secular authorities (in the persons of Pilate and Herod) took

a legally indefensible position. And right at this moment, when the opponent does not seem to have a single even lousiest ace up his sleeve, Pilate suddenly and inexplicably capitulates. What's the matter?

And it is that 23 not much less sophisticated representatives of the top of the Jewish hierarchy also understood the essence of the teachings of Christ and the threat coming from further growth of the popularity of the young prophet - both to the temple of the Mosaic faith and to them personally. And having realized that, they made a paradoxical but, as it turned out, spot-on move: they arrested Jesus and turned to Pilate with a flagrantly illegal demand - to execute him as a political criminal. As a result, a magnificent "chess fork" arises: either the hated competitor will be eliminated by the hands of the Romans, or the procurator will release him, thereby confirming that notorious preacher Jesus is a Roman "agent of influence" and turning him into a political corpse.

There are good reasons to believe that the second option seemed to the Sanhedrin both more desirable and more likely. Let me remind you that if the only goal of the high priests was to get the head of Christ, then it would be much easier for them to use the trouble-free option of the religious sentence. In any case, Pilate's sanction for the execution of the "King of the Jews" clearly took them by surprise, like a man theatrically asking for dismissal and then really getting fired.

...The procurator realized that he had lost: any further struggle for Jesus had lost its meaning. It was possible, of course, to simply pardon the Galilean - and thus kiss him sweet goodbye as a political figure - but *that* would have been pure capitulation. By contrast, it was still possible to try to extract some benefit from the death of the popular prophet (since benefit in this case is anything detrimental to the Sanhedrin). And now, pointedly washing his hands of it (literally), Pilate - absolutely not forced to do so by anyone! - hands Jesus over to the soldiers for torture, and then demonstrates to the people: the Sanhedrin is to blame. From now on, the Sanhedrin will be to blame for everything, even the bile that the Roman soldiers would serve to Christ instead of a narcotic drink (Matthew 27:34). It must be admitted that in the end, having lost a piece, Pilate won the initiative and, to a certain extent, equalized the game. The stubbornness and inventiveness of this ruthless chess player do indeed command respect, but what the guide for his canonization could be, I must confess, is a mystery to me. [Besides, shouldn't a Christian saint (who didn't die earlier than Jesus) at least be a Christian?.. Or at the very very least, you know, not be *the guy who tortured and killed Jesus*?! (Talk about loose standards!) However, to be fair, the torture of Jesus

(partially-)before presenting him for pardon (see below; note that only John's Gospel preserves this important order of events, in Mark and Matthew this bit looks decidedly more meaningless - except for one other possibility, discussed later), with the point being inducing some extra pity in the crowd (note that even according to John this presentation was for the second time, after the first one didn't work), can be most consistently interpreted as yet another Pilate's effort to save him.]

Still, didn't Pilate have at least a theoretical possibility to save Jesus without exposing him as a Roman project? Yes, he did - and he did not fail to try to use it. "On Passover it was the governor's custom to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd" (Matthew 27:15); indeed, if Jesus had been chosen by the crowd in the square, then the procurator could have released him without problems, because there would be no "Roman trace" visible here. Miracles, however, do not happen: the crowd, of course, chose bar Abbas (which means "son of a father" in Aramaic, "bar" being equivalent to Hebrew "ben" - that is, probably meaning someone whose father is unknown, such as a son of a prostitute - could this by any chance translate from ancient Aramaic slang as "S. O. B."?) - it would be strange if the Sanhedrin showed sloppiness and did not take care of the proper preparation of the "voice of the people". This completely natural and predictable "people's choice" nevertheless looks like a complete surprise for Pilate. He repeats his petition three times, enters into useless and humiliating bickering with the crowd - in short, he completely loses face.

So, the *natural* development of events seems to have taken the procurator by surprise. If this is the case, it is logical to assume that there was some factor unknown to us (but known to the procurator) which was supposed to disrupt this natural development - and yet it didn't. And if so, what was it, and also, why did it not work?

CALVARY. THE FIRST WARNING TO MCDOWELL

Here we must start with a theoretical digression, one of those that I try my best to avoid. Deep, fundamental differences between the narratives of John, on the one hand, and the Synoptic Evangelists, on the other hand, are well-known ("There are actually not four Gospels but three and one."). And, probably, Merezhkovsky is right - "The dispute about John is the greatest mystery of Christianity, and perhaps even the mystery of Christ himself." Nevertheless, to me - a non-religious and thus theologically completely virginal person - the

coexistence of these two versions, fundamentally irreducible to each other, seems quite normal and natural.

It may seem strange, but I find myself prepared for such a perception precisely by my professional practice. The thing is that in the natural sciences, knowledge is fundamentally reductive. Therefore, as a rule any long-term coexistence of alternative concepts indicates that they are in fact complementary and simply reduce the studied reality to its different aspects. So, in my perception, the opposition of John with the Synoptics is not fundamentally different from, for example, the relationship between the wave and corpuscular theories of light, which describe a single object in different ways and only when paired with each other give an adequate idea of it. I will again allow myself to quote Merezhkovsky's apologia *Jesus the Unknown*:

"Correctly - maybe even more correctly than the Synoptics - John guesses what Jesus *wanted*. What he *did*, we learn from Mark, what he *said* - from Matthew; what he *felt* - from Luke; and what he *wanted* - from John, and, of course, the most primary, the most genuine is in this - in the will." [emphasized by D. M.]

But this is all fine and wonderful at the general, conceptual level; within the framework of the task before us, when it is the specific details of the events that are important, the situation changes. We will continue to often encounter the fact that some of the colorful episodes described in detail by John are completely absent from the narratives of the Synoptics and vice versa - this is normal. The scene at Calvary, however, is unique in this sense: here the versions of John and the Synoptics are pitted against one another "crossing swords", contradicting each other literally in everything. And since my constructions are based on complete trust in all the facts (although by no means always in their interpretations) reported by *any* Evangelist, I find myself in a rather difficult situation, from which there is no obvious way out [one can, however, put forward the following hypothesis: the three Synoptic Gospels are real memoirs, while the Gospel of John was written many years later on their basis ... well, let's say, as a historical novel in which the truth and artistic fiction form an indissoluble unity, and the second reality, being created by the hand of a genius (or a God-inspired person - as one likes), separated itself, as it should, from its historical foundation and became absolutely self-sufficient; I must confess that accepting such an assumption (permitting disavowal of some of John's testimonies) would greatly facilitate my life; alas! - the initial conditions of the problem I am solving (including the equality of the four canonical texts) are defined rigidly and are not subject to revision; besides, the distinctness of this Gospel makes sense if it

indeed had its own “channel of information”, previously underutilized]. The discrepancies begin with a characteristic “trifle”. John confidently testifies: “Carrying His own cross, He went out to the place of the Skull which in Aramaic is called Golgotha” (John 19:17). By contrast, the Synoptics unanimously assert that a certain Simon of Cyrene carried the cross of the Lord, moreover, they provide some quite checkable biographical data about this person - “the father of Alexander and Rufus” (for example, Mark 15:21). Here one can no longer soar to the specificity of the “Word-Logos” or get away with casuistry like “both are right but each in their own way”; one must answer honestly - who got it wrong?

I once happened to hear the following purely philological argument in favor of the documentariness of the Gospel texts. It was about a well-known episode:

“At about three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Some of those standing there, having heard this, said, ‘He’s calling Elijah.’ Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Him to drink. And the rest said, ‘Wait, let’s see if Elijah comes to rescue him.’” (Matthew 27:46-49).

Now, since (if I understood this all correctly) such a literary device as deciphering the motivations of side characters through uncommented direct speech arose only within the framework of the European psychological novel in the nineteenth century, we are dealing with a stenographically exact record of an eyewitness. Maybe because I am not a philologist myself, all this sounds quite convincing to me. Note, however, that we are talking here specifically about the narration of the Synoptics - dry as an official report, and therefore especially sad. It is here that, betrayed and abandoned by all, perishes the Man, who does not at all resemble the characters from the *Lives of the Saints*, forged from chromium-molybdenum steel.

Of course, you will not find these words in the Gospel of John. Instead, you will find, for example, a quotation from the Jewish Holy Scripture, which Roman soldiers reproduce by heart at ease (John 19:24), otherwise what if those around them might accidentally not notice the fact that they are not just playing dice with the clothes of the executed at stake, but are also fulfilling an ancient prophecy? [By the way, it is quite clear that many “facts” about Jesus recorded in the Gospels, such as for example his birth in Bethlehem, were born purely out of the belief that he must fulfill the messianic prophecies. And yet, it is *obvious* that Jesus wasn’t the Jewish Messiah - he didn’t help or

“shepherd” the Jews in any sense, then or later! No, not even from the theological point of view - as Jews aren’t Christians, he’s not helping them with soul salvation or morally shepherding them either. The way this obvious inconsistency is resolved by Christians is by saying that he *will* be the Messiah, later, in his second coming... It’s just like those legally required asterisks in the end of fancy ads, leading to a footnote explaining in tiny script that things are actually not so fancy!] There is also an exalted conversation that a person dying in most severe torments conducts with his mother and “beloved disciple”, that is, John, standing near the cross (John 19:26-27) [the medical aspects of the execution by crucifixion were described in detail by McDowell; it is usually believed that death occurs from the pain shock combined with the dehydration of the body and a heat stroke, but in reality this is not entirely true; a few hours after being crucified, a pulmonary edema develops due to a difficulty in ventilation, and the immediate cause of death is asphyxia; because of this, the crucified cannot conduct any coherent lengthy conversations].

Stop! But the Synoptics have neither Our Lady nor a disciple in sight. There are only Galilean women that had followed Christ everywhere - Mary Magdalene, James’s Mary, and Salome, and even they do not stand near the cross but look *from afar* (Mark 15:40; Matthew 27:55). How could it happen that all the Synoptics unanimously did not notice such a “minor detail” as Apostle John and Queen of Heaven *standing by the cross*? And here, quite inopportunistly, the vision of the Bald Mountain that visited Bulgakov’s Ivan Bezdomny pops up in the memory - “and this mountain was cordoned off by a double cordon”; not much of an authority, of course - and yet... Frankly, I’m at a loss as to what can be done here - should I perhaps just accept the above interpretation of Merezhkovsky with depressing directness and conclude that Jesus only *wanted* his mother and beloved disciple to be near him?..

Here’s what I’m driving at. Acting here as the counterintelligence officer Philip from Hemingway’s *The Fifth Column*, who “believes nothing he hears, and almost nothing he sees”, I, of course, couldn’t help but ask myself also the following question. The man crucified between two thieves on the fifteenth day of the spring month of Nisan - was he really the same one who entered Jerusalem earlier under the cries of “hosanna”? If the conversation with the mother and disciple reported by John really took place, then yes, undoubtedly [well, unless somehow it wasn’t the same cross at the same time as for the Synoptics... what is the source of the discrepancy in John’s (19:14) and Mark’s (15:25) timing? - could John have thought backwards from

the time of what he saw in person? - just to put it out there: what if we're dealing with *two* crucifixions, *Minority Report* style, one a show for the public ending in an actual death - see below - and one to convince Jesus himself, later drugged and left to wake up in a tomb, that he was killed and then resurrected - as he possibly expected he would?]. But if nothing happened on Calvary beyond what the Synoptics described with such scrupulousness, I'm sorry but it could be anyone hanging off the middle cross - perhaps a bandit like the other two, or maybe a zealot partisan. [Note, before we move on, that this option is also nicely compatible with Islam! In case you didn't know, the most standard Muslim version of the events is that it was - unbeknownst to most - captured *Judas* hanging off the middle cross, getting hoisted by his own petard, in perfect satisfaction of justice. Why? Because God is great, the greatest (you've certainly heard this fundamental principle before - that's what "*Allahu akbar!*" means), and wouldn't let His grand prophet and Messiah down, especially in such a pathetic and pointless way. The Islamic doctrine does, however, absorb the killing of great prophet Yahya ibn Zakariya, that is, John the Baptist, who Muslims revere as much as Christians do - but the death of Jesus on the cross is explicitly denied by Quran.]

It suffices to assume, for example, that for the sake of their own interests the Roman authorities wished to strengthen the position of the sect led by Jesus, and he entered into a deal with them ("the ends justify the means") - and there will be practically no unknowns left in the whole story of resurrection. Then, by the way, the role of the episode with the dressing of Jesus in a purple robe (a military cloak) becomes clear - after the trial, but before the flagellation and ascent to Calvary (for example, Mark 15:7-20). After the flagellation, another person was dressed up in the clothes taken from Jesus - the one who was to take the place on the middle cross.

Personally, I am not only not going to defend this version but also to seriously analyze it - because this would require rejection of the "presumption of honesty", which is obligatory for me (according to the conditions of the problem). But I have a right to this uncommented dismissal, while McDowell does not. And since he was completely seriously engaged in the refutation of the "Easter conspiracy" hypothesis, which doesn't add up at all and in which Christ and Joseph of Arimathea cheat four-handedly like a pair of card sharps, he was simply obliged to consider the rather obvious "Uncrucified Christ" hypothesis.

At the same time, I do not want at all to say that McDowell's position in this direction would be indefensible. He could probably refer to the

high priests who visited the place of execution (Matthew 27:41) or to the conversation with a repentant outlaw:

“Truly I tell you, now you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

The proponent of the hypothesis could, in turn, object: the face of the man on the cross could be distorted beyond reliable recognition; the high priests probably did not come close to the cross, while the head of the crucified (if the crucifixion is happening not on the canvases of the classicists but in real life) droops face down; the organizers of the staging must have taken care of increasing the resemblance of the persons involved; no one could hear the conversation with the bandit except for the legionnaires, and the value of their “testimony” is easy to understand, etc. In short, both sides have a lot of space for maneuvers here.

The point, however, is not in these details; even if McDowell manages to refute the “Uncrucified Christ” hypothesis convincingly enough, his position will not become less unenviable. After all, he based his *proof system* on the fact that he had studied (and refuted) *all* non-supernatural options - and now there is suddenly such an incident... It’s just a small illustration to the simple truth that the space of logical possibilities is fundamentally inexhaustible, and nothing can be done about this.

So McDowell’s dreadnought seems to have run into a floating mine before it even left the harbor. And although the efforts of the team may perhaps help keep the ship on the move (and going forward in strict accordance with our initial assumptions, the testimony of John about him and Jesus’s mother standing next to the cross will be accepted as true - with the Synoptics, for some incomprehensible reason, not knowing about this - and the security somehow allowing it [pertaining to the former and the time discrepancy, perhaps this is all explained if we assume that John arrived at the place much later than the others because he had been busy comforting Jesus’s mom, and protecting her from the sight of the process of execution?.. - he does seem to have arrived in her company, so it’s a possible guess!]), its utility as a combat unit from now on will be quite nominal. And yet, much more serious surprises await Captain McDowell in this campaign...

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Here we need to return to the very beginning of the public ministry of Jesus Christ, when fate brought him together with the last of

the great Old Testament-style prophets, John the Baptist. The forerunner of the Lord (“He who follows me is stronger than I am”), who considered himself “unworthy to untie the strap of His shoes”, John was the first to recognize the divine essence of Jesus:

“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the World.”

A furious castigator of ecclesiastical and secular rulers (“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”), he paid with his life for exposing the lawlessness and depravity in which Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee, was mired. At first glance, this character (by the way, his historicity is beyond doubt) has decidedly nothing mysterious about him whatsoever. Let us, however, carefully and impartially analyze John’s relationships - first, with Jesus, and, second, with the authorities (especially with Herod Antipas).

The (only) meeting of Jesus with John took place on the Jordan River, in the waters of which the prophet baptized the crowds of people who flocked to him. Jesus, among others, asked for baptism;

“But John held Him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?’” (Matthew 3:14).

During the ritual, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove (visible, however, only to the Baptist). All four Evangelists describe the baptism of Jesus almost identically, but after that significant discrepancies between the Synoptics and John begin, as usual.

According to the version of John the Evangelist, the next day John the Baptist gave Jesus two of his novitiates - Andrew and another one, not named, who then became his first disciples. Later, Jesus with the community formed around him returned to Galilee, where he performed the first miracles. He then undertook his first Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem; here he drove out the money changers from the Temple for the first time, and one night he also had a conversation with Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin.

“After this Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he lived with them and baptized. Now John was also baptizing at Aenon near Salim [...] THIS WAS BEFORE JOHN WAS PUT IN PRISON” (John 3:22-24).

Let’s remember the last phrase - it is very important. Since more people now come to Jesus than to John to be baptized, disciples of the latter express dissatisfaction with the success of the “competitor”. John reproaches them for this jealousy, likening Jesus to a bridegroom and himself to his best man at a wedding, who should not envy his friend but rejoice for him (“He must become greater; I must become less” - John 3:30). After this, any mention of the Baptist disappears

from the Gospel of John.

Let us now return to the phrase “this was before John was put in prison”. It looks like before writing his Gospel John had read at least one Synoptic Gospel (which had all appeared earlier than his) and, at least here, directly attempted to correct it as to how things really were. Because if one is to believe the Synoptics, Jesus left for the desert immediately after his baptism (for prayers and overcoming temptations), and that’s where the news of John’s arrest found him (Matthew 4:12, Mark 1:14). *After* this message he went to Galilee and only *there* found - among the fishermen of the Lake of Gennesaret - his first students, Andrew and Simon. The importance of this seemingly minor detail - when exactly the Baptist was arrested - becomes clear from the further story of the Synoptics.

Matthew and Luke then tell about the so-called “Embassy from John the Baptist” - having heard about the miracles performed by Jesus, the prophet sends two of his disciples to him to find out:

“Are you the One Who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” And Jesus replied: ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see - the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.’” (Matthew 11:3-5).

When the disciples of John left, Jesus utters a panegyric to the Forerunner:

“Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist [...] And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.” (Matthew 11:11-14).

This episode, if you think about it, contradicts the entire previous narrative. The *Forerunner* not only continues his activity in parallel with the Lamb of God who has *already come* into this world, but, in any case, if you have some reason to believe that the Messiah has arrived (and didn’t he already conclude that long before?), you should at least go see for yourself instead of sending an inspection composed of disciples. The Synoptics, however, have a ready answer to such a question: the Baptist did not come himself just because at that time he was in prison (Matthew 2:11), where he ended up almost immediately after the baptism of Jesus.

But John objects to them: nothing of the kind, the Baptist remained at large for a very long time and worked in the field of baptism side by side with Jesus. Having understood the true meaning of this episode much better than the Synoptics, the Evangelist seems to have deliberately excluded it from the narrative. For it is quite clear from it that the Forerunner, at best, doubted whether Jesus was really

the One who was to “baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire”; by the way, the Synoptics are silent about the reaction of the Baptist to the report of his messengers. And if so, what is the value of everything uttered by the Baptist during their personal meeting (“Lamb of God”, “should you be baptized by me”) and of the divine sign in the form of a dove, given personally to John? Let me also note here that the whole scene of baptism (as well as the subsequent “instruction of John about Christ” - John 3:22-36) is based on what is called “hearsay evidence” in jurisprudence - recall that the baptism happened before Jesus even had any disciples, including the future Gospel narrators.

If one is unbiased in the analysis of everything said (let alone done) by John, they will inevitably come to a baffling conclusion: the Forerunner never recognized - clearly and unequivocally - in his distant relative (according to Luke) the One who “following him will be stronger than he is”. Some statements of the Baptist about Jesus (for example, “and no one accepts his testimony” - John 3:32) force Christian commentators to make lamentatious comments along the lines of “the Evangelist did not quite accurately convey the thought of the prophet”... Some episodes can be simply read differently than is customary. For example, here is how Gladkov describes the baptism scene:

“Recognizing that John was sent from God to baptize, Jesus, as a Man, having previously fulfilled all the commandments of the Lord, begins his ministry by fulfilling the last Old Testament commandment, just announced by God through John. AS A SINLESS MAN, HE DID NOT NEED REPENTANCE, AND THEREFORE DIRECTLY DEMANDED BAPTISM FROM JOHN. John immediately realized that this was not an ordinary man standing before him, and therefore said, ‘I need to be baptized by You, do You come to me?’”

Here is how I imagine this going down. To a most authoritative prophet, leaving the Pharisees and Sadducees in awe and instructing huge crowds of people, comes a young man unknown to anyone. He then declares that because he is sinless, he only needs baptism (or something equally provocative, from anyone else’s point of view). John, completely amazed at the young man’s impudence, spreads his hands with feigned humility:

“Then you’re at a wrong place, fella - because in such a case, *I* should get baptized by you, not vice versa!”

Zing! The spectators are delighted: John got him real good!

Christian commentators often assert that John himself directed to Jesus the crowds of people who came to him; this, however, is in no way confirmed by the Gospel texts. It is possible that some of

the members of John's community went to Jesus (who himself also experienced departure of many disciples later - a normal occurrence), however, this transition was clearly not of any organized or mass character. The version of John the Evangelist that the Baptist himself "gifted" the first disciples to Jesus, as we remember, is unanimously refuted by the Synoptics. Here is a most characteristic detail: after the execution of John, his disciples came to inform Christ about this (Matthew 14:12), but none of them joined the community led by him! The desire of John's disciples to stay close to the Teacher, especially during difficult times, when he was in prison, can only command respect. However, now John was gone; it seems quite natural to join the one whose forerunner their beloved teacher considered himself to be (as the Evangelists are convincing us). Nothing of the kind, however, occurs. The Johannites (Mandaeans), by the way, are still around (!) and to this day retain their isolation from Christians (even though they were - incorrectly - called "Saint John Christians" by some European travellers), existing in the form of one of ancient sects or minor religions. Thus, we can just ask them directly! And it turns out that they have their own Holy Scripture, which recognizes John the Baptist as the greatest prophet and religious figure ever and in which Jesus (together with his lengthy interaction with John and baptism [of which John is reluctant, but, curiously, he does it after receiving a sign from God - this bit is, most likely, a loaned story from Christianity, and he simply baptized him as a general courtesy]) is explicitly mentioned... as a false prophet and a "deceiver". And if you think about it, it's all quite natural. How, in your opinion, should someone look like in the eyes of John - a gloomy puritan - who reportedly miraculously turns water into wine for festivities and hobnobs with harlots, tax collectors, and sometimes even - it's horrifying to even say! - with uncircumcised Gentiles?

So, we observe a very remarkable asymmetry in assessments: John for Christians is the greatest prophet and a highly respected figure in general, while Jesus for the Johannites is a false messiah. And there is no reason to believe that these assessments formed in each of the sects contrary to the statements of their founders. Thus, when describing the events, the Evangelists faced a hard-to-solve problem. On the one hand, Jesus Christ - the Son of God, whose every word is the Truth - very highly valued John the Baptist (to this they were witnesses); on the other hand, John, as far as they knew, had sent "mixed signals" towards their Teacher at best. How can this tension be resolved?

Here's how: to select among the many sayings of John the Baptist (both authentic and ones attributed to him by hearsay) precisely those

that can testify to the recognition by the prophet of the greatness of the Teacher of the Evangelists. The absence of recorded texts greatly facilitated this task. Some of the sayings attributed to John could even be born among the followers of Jesus themselves; then, after circulating among the masses of the people for some time (and acquiring new “details” along the way - such as the attribution to John), they returned to the Evangelists, who happily wrote them down as some kind of “independent testimonies” - an effect well-known in sociology. The “beloved disciple” - the author of the fourth Gospel, John - went further than the others along this path. He not only introduced the episodes of “gifting” Jesus with his first disciples and “instruction about Christ”, drawn from rumors (and missing from the Synoptics), but also excluded from the narrative the mention of the “inspection” of the Mentor by the disciples of the Baptist (which, on the contrary, he probably was a witness of, along with the other Apostles [but, say, in his mind it could instead just be the disciples’ whim due to their lack of faith, and thus an unimportant detail; or maybe even not and he did view it as compromising, then see below]). So, did the Evangelists deliberately try to support the reputation of their Teacher with the opinion of an authoritative independent source - correcting the real statements of the latter in the appropriate direction? Absolutely not! It is quite clear to any believer that the authority of Christ - in the eyes of the Apostles - did not need any “independent evidence” at all. For this reason I am fully convinced that the aforementioned selection of the statements of the Baptist by the Evangelists is a sincere attempt to save *his own* authority - as he, for some reason, hesitated in recognizing the completely obvious divine chosenness of Jesus. In the eyes of the Evangelists, all they were doing is omitting *embarrassing lapses of faith*, a common human weakness that, of course, not even John the Baptist is safe from - just like, for example, no one in the Bible is ever mentioned going to the toilet, there is obviously no good point in speaking about such all-too-human things... And the Evangelists certainly succeeded in these efforts, literally creating that John the Baptist which now exists in the Christian lore. Meanwhile, the real John - as I strongly suspect - would rightly have to take a place if not right next to the Pharisees and other “Elders of the Jews” then in any case very far from the Son of Man.

Turning to the analysis of another line of relationships of John the Baptist, namely with the authorities, I will make one reservation. The circumstances of the tragic death of the prophet were known to the Evangelists only by hearsay, and the same applies to any inhabitant

of Palestine who wasn't one of Herod's courtiers or a member of his police services. For this reason, the information gleaned from the New Testament texts is not considered here to have a priority over what is contained in *Antiquities of the Jews* by Flavius Josephus. Let me remind you that it is the only non-Christian source directly featuring such Gospel characters as John the Baptist and James the Brother of the Lord. Because of this, the Church treats the Flavian testimonies with great reverence; in particular, the place where the Baptist was imprisoned, the fortress called Machaerus (Bible Encyclopedia, I:342), was taken from this source.

Mark (6:17-29) describes the death of the prophet in the following way. John, even while being imprisoned, continued to maintain influence over Herod:

“Herod was afraid of John. He knew that John was a righteous and holy man, and so he protected him; he did a lot, obeying him, and liked to listen to him.”

The prophet, among other things, continued to insist that the tetrarch should break up with Herodias, who he had married after divorcing his former wife (a daughter of Arab king Aretas) and destroying the marriage of his brother Philip.

“For John had been saying to Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’ So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him; but she was not able to.”

The opportunity presented itself when during a feast the daughter of Herodias, Salome, impressed Herod with her dance so much that he, simply put, lost his mind:

“And he promised her with an oath, ‘Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.’”

Neglecting half of the kingdom, the princess, at the instigation of her demonic mother, asked the lord for the head of the annoying denunciator.

“The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her.”

And a few minutes later, the squire sent to the dungeon delivered to the bloodthirsty beauties a dish with the severed head of the prophet. Well, of course, it's a well-known thing: all evil comes from women - verily said, they are the “the Devil's vessel” (and if anyone has any doubts, re-read Wilde's *Salome*)...

Josephus, however, recounts this story in a different, much more prosaic way:

“And since many people came to him [John the Baptist], for they were very fond of his preaching, Herod was afraid that such a strong

influence on the minds could cause an uprising [...]; therefore, he considered it best to prevent any complication by putting him to death rather than to rue his negligence later after the excitement of a turmoil. So John, on this suspicion of Herod, was chained up and imprisoned in the aforementioned fortress of Machaerus and killed there. Afterwards the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of Herod's army [in the war with Aretas - K. Y.] was sent as a punishment upon Herod for the death of this man." (Antiq. XVIII, 5:2).

So, nothing personal - just politics, and nothing but politics. To compare these two versions, let's turn to the factual side of the matter - what we actually know about the marriage of Herod Antipas to Herodias.

Firstly, what was Herod's previous, dissolved marriage like? Let's give the floor to a commentator of *Antiquities of the Jews*, hieromonk Joseph:

"Touching by the boundaries of his tetrarchy with such long-standing predators as the Arabs, Antipas did a lot to secure all his subjects with newly erected fortified outposts on the outskirts of the country. And his marriage to a daughter of the Arab king Aretas is suspected, not without reason, of simple political prudence, which ensured peace of his country better than any fortifications and armaments, unless this marriage was suggested to him by Augustus."

The dissolution of this forced, dynastic marriage union - by the way, at the initiative of his wife - resulted in Herod's unlucky border war with Aretas, but that's a completely different story.

Secondly, Herodias was formerly the wife of not an actual brother (as it is usually thought) but a step-brother of Herod; aforementioned hieromonk Joseph substantiates this circumstance in detail. It is not surprising that in the presentation of Josephus all this looks like a completely ordinary story of a second marriage; and in general, marriage among the Jews was not a sacrament but a civil status, so divorces were quite common. Let me note that Josephus himself was a Pharisee, who were reputed to be the finest experts on the Law of Moses, and did not have any warm feelings toward Herod, a Hellenist. He, one must think, would not have missed an opportunity to kick this worthy offspring of Herod the Bloody - had this story contained at least a hint of crime.

On the other hand, Herodias is always perceived as a cold, calculating predator, who firstly violated all marriage laws in order to wed the lord of Galilee, and then vigilantly guarded, blade in hand, the cozy place at the throne. But again, things just don't add up. A few years later, emperor Caligula ordered, so to speak, "to free Herod

Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, from his position in view of failure to fulfill his duties”, and exiled him to Spain, where he died - in poverty, oblivion, and almost complete loneliness, with only one person remaining by his side and sharing his exile with him until the last day - Herodias... So I'm thinking: would this woman suddenly take the cries of some unwashed-unkempt puritan about her “moral character” seriously?

Let's now turn to the Gospel episode of the beheading of John the Baptist itself. Let's start with a seemingly elementary question - where did it happen? So, the lord with his courtiers, military leaders and elders celebrates his birthday; in view of the *absence* of any special instructions in the text it is logical to assume that the feast took place in its usual place - in the Tiberias Palace of Herod near the Lake of Gennesaret. But at that time John was languishing in the fortress of Machaerus, which is beyond the Dead Sea - this follows from the testimony of Josephus, accepted by the Church! Let's note: from the story of the Evangelists it follows that Herod did not just give the order for the execution of the Baptist (for this it would be possible to send messengers from Tiberias to Machaerus, the distance between which is about 60 kilometers in a straight line) - no, he immediately, just after a few minutes, presented his stepdaughter with a dish with the severed head of the prophet.

In an attempt to resolve this obvious contradiction, some Christian commentators try - quite arbitrarily - to move the feast scene to Machaerus (as the saying goes, if the mountain won't come to Muhammad, then Muhammad must go to the mountain). Gladkov, for example, even links this to political events:

“Insulted [by a divorce from his daughter - K. Y.] Aretas began a war against Herod; as a result, Herod with all his court moved to Machaerus, where he imprisoned John the Baptist, and lived there in his palace.”

Well, to start with, Machaerus is a small border fortress on the outskirts of the Arabian Desert, and there was some living space in it but, of course, no palace. This fortification was just recently, at the beginning of the tepid border war between Herod and Aretas, captured by the Jews from the Arabs, who had controlled it in previous years. Quite a strange fantasy - to go to such a place to celebrate a birthday, don't you think so? Besides, who has ever heard of taking your whole court *to war*, including your own children and household?!

Here's another detail. After the reckless oath of Herod, Salome “went out and asked her mother, ‘What shall I ask for?’ ‘The head of John the Baptist,’ she answered. At once she hurried in to the king with

the request: ‘I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter right now.’” (Mark 6:24-25). So the cold-blooded princess decided to perform her breathtaking strip show [speaking of which, Oscar Wilde’s note “Salome dances the dance of the seven veils” in his play - tantalizingly, with no further explanations - is sometimes said to be *the* definitive origin of striptease as such] in front of the drunken guests just because, without a specific goal in advance?

These considerations make me extremely skeptical of the Evangelists’ version. At the same time, from an artistic point of view, this story is truly magnificent: clear folklore elements (“Ask me for even half the kingdom!”) organically combine in it with strict plot architectonics; and even the semantic hieroglyph “head on a platter” - what a scope there is for aestheticizing art critics and psychoanalysts! Of course, in order to preserve the dynamism of the action (the immediate fulfillment of a reckless oath), it was necessary to sacrifice some realities of life - to transfer John to Tiberias (or Herod to Machaerus), but such a sacrifice seems quite justified. It seems absolutely incredible that something this splendid would spontaneously “stick together” from various rumors about the death of a popular prophet circulating among the people.

All this allows me to make the following assumption: the rumor faithfully reproduced by Evangelists Mark and Matthew about the circumstances of John the Baptist’s death arose as the result of a campaign of “active measures” [which is a modern term for influencing the public opinion outside of the channels of the official propaganda; classic “active measures” are described in *The Tale of Hodja Nasreddin*, when disguised guards in teahouses and caravanserais try to convince the people of Bukhara that their favorite has long been in the service of the emir; a more recent example is the dissemination through KGB-controlled newspapers (mainly in Third World countries) of the tale that the HIV virus was created in Pentagon laboratories (see *The KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* by K. Andrew and O. Gordievsky, 633-634)]. Its goal seems quite transparent: to remove a significant share of the blame from Herod (who allegedly “did a lot, obeying John, and listened to him with pleasure”), presenting the tetrarch as a simple-hearted victim of eternal female guile. Who was the initiator of this highly professional (as can be judged by its result) influence on the public opinion of Palestine?

The answer, it seems to me, will come by itself if we can correctly answer another question closely related to the first one: who arrested John the Baptist? Now I’m feeling that the reader is beginning to look

at me like I'm a complete idiot - there are no discrepancies between the Evangelists and Josephus here. Therefore, I hasten to clarify my question: suppose John really was *executed* by Herod; but who and on what basis had *carried out the arrest*? There are no specific indications in this regard in the Gospel texts; meanwhile, the situation here is not at all so simple, and here's why.

The fact of the matter is, John was a native of Judea, in which he spent his whole life. The places of his seclusion and preaching were the Judean Desert and the Jordan River Valley near Bethabara and Aenon. He sometimes appeared on the Jordanian left bank, in Perea, but, apparently, he had never been to Galilee at all. Therefore, John's sermons should have become a headache primarily for the Judean high priests and the procurator, and not at all for Herod. The Judean leadership, meanwhile, treated the prophet rather favorably (at least at first), and many Pharisees and Sadducees even desired to be baptized by him (Matthew 3:7).

Further, if the tetrarch of Galilee wished to get his hands on the scandalous preacher, it would not have been so easy: Judea was, after all, more or less a foreign land, and on top of that, the relations between the Judean and Galilean authorities left much to be desired. But maybe John, for reasons unknown to us, pestered Herod so badly with his preaching that Herod decided to ignore the laws and proprieties and sent the capture group to a foreign land? [If someone were to believe that the foreign actions of the NKVD, the victims of which were Kutepov, Trotsky, and a multitude of other Russian emigrants, are something unique in history, that would be a mistake; for example, the French special services kidnapped and killed OAS members who had taken refuge abroad with great pleasure and ignoring the protests of their neighbors - thereby continuing a good tradition laid down during the kidnapping of the Duke of Enghien by Napoleon's gendarmes.] This cannot be ruled out, but then the reaction to this event by Jesus, who was at that moment in Judea, becomes absolutely incomprehensible: "When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew *to Galilee*." (Matthew 4:12).

So, let's try to summarize all of the above. Firstly, a very influential and popular spiritual leader preached in Palestine in parallel with Jesus Christ. Secondly, his relationships with the Son of Man do not appear to be as idyllic as it is commonly believed. Thirdly, the death of this leader is associated with a number of unclear and suspicious circumstances, which I propose to reflect upon.

THE RESURRECTION OF LAZARUS

And now let's turn to the event that immediately preceded the Holy Week and was, in a certain sense, the starting point of the ensuing tragedy - namely, the resurrection of Lazarus. It was after this incident that the high priests decided that the popularity of the new prophet and miracle worker had reached a dangerous point for them, and it was time to take serious measures. And it is at this moment that fate, as if by order, sends them an invaluable gift - a defector, Judas; what a coincidence...

Among the miracles performed by Christ, the resurrection of Lazarus really stands apart. Unorthodox Gospel commentators have rightly pointed out that almost all the healings performed by Christ concerned mental or psychosomatic disorders. These were various types of paralysis and blindness, epilepsy, lethargic sleep (of the daughter of Jairus); in the case of lepers, it could actually be severe, advanced eczema. The possibility in principle of curing such disorders with the power of suggestion (neuroinduction) is, as they say, "a medical fact". Another group of miracles, such as feeding people with five loaves of bread and two fish, turning water into wine, or walking on water, can be (for example) likewise understood as attesting to the fact that "the power of Christ compels you" - they are easily interpreted as private recollections of delusions due to a mass hypnotic-like state [another example of this is the notorious "Fatima sun miracle"; note that this does not imply any intentional misleading but merely an altered state of mind, which can even spontaneously arise and self-reinforce in a crowd, especially a religiously tuned one; and there are other possibilities too, not mutually exclusive: a different recent example of a spontaneous bona fide miracle narrative - originating through rumor evolution, and also even having its own written "gospel" - is the so-called "Zoino stoyaniye" ("Зоино стояние", "The standing of Zoya") - or, the Holy Fire, widely sincerely believed by the Orthodox Christians to be a regularly occurring miracle... finally, on the question whether Jesus performed or intended to perform any miracles there is no better authority than Jesus himself, and his answer is *no* (Mark 8:12), or at least it was at that moment - and, by the way, the same situation later repeated with Muhammad, who, despite having explicitly stated that Quran is his only miracle, is widely believed by the faithful to have travelled on a winged horse, split the Moon, etc.]. However, the resurrection of Lazarus (to which John was a direct witness) - a man who died a few days before, was buried, and was presumed to have already begun to decompose (John 11:39) - strongly

resists non-supernatural explanations. A resurrected person cannot be a temporary impression like the “Fatima sun miracle” - he’s still there tomorrow!

Now, as a side remark, if things go “for the principle”, some non-supernatural hypotheses can be considered here as well, of course. The cases of “revivals” of people who have been in a state of “false death” for a long time (when a person’s metabolic rate drops to indistinguishably low levels, and there are no such manifestations of vital activity as a detectable heartbeat) are now quite widely known. First of all (if these stories are to be trusted), there are Indian yogis, who, willingly putting themselves in such a state and then leaving it, are able to spend some time underwater or under a layer of earth, and there were similar spontaneous accidents (especially in low-temperature conditions). Secondly, there are the more interesting (from the point of view of our case) zombies [the word “zombie” is used here in its original meaning, originating in the black voodoo cults of West Africa and the Antilles - not, for example, in the sense of zombifying that was the goal of shady CIA operations ARTICHOKE and MKUltra, which even became the subject of a Senate investigation], which are temporarily induced into this state by the “sorcerer”, who then demonstrates them to their fellow tribesmen as resurrected by the power of his magic. Recently, physiologists have come much closer to understanding the mechanisms of “false death” - for example, it was found that the functions of the heart that is being “switched off” are taken over by the hepatic portal system, which has its own contractile automatism.

However, all this is only mentioned incidentally; I have no desire to write a script for an enticing thriller tentatively titled *A Zombie Named Lazarus*. First of all, it is only possible to assume that Jesus acted as a voodoo sorcerer by rejecting the “presumption of honesty”, which is obligatory for me. Second, let’s not forget that the extremely complex technique of immersing a person into a “zombie state”, which requires centuries-old traditions, was in all likelihood simply unknown to the ancient Jews. Moreover, there are no hints that even their neighbors, who Jesus could have theoretically learned this technique from - the Chaldean magicians or the priests of Phoenicia and Egypt - had any idea of such a technique. Meanwhile, it is difficult to imagine that such an impressive practice would not be properly noted in the extensive historical literature about this region.

Speaking of the resurrection of Lazarus, let’s firstly note that it appears only in the Gospel of John; all the Synoptics keep silent about this event. This is so strange that, for example, Farrar felt it necessary to specifically comment on this discrepancy, suggesting three possible

explanations; let's look at them in order:

1. Generally, the narratives of the Synoptics mainly dealt with the Galilean part of the ministry of Christ, and the Judean part of it (which includes the events in Bethany) is given in much less detail; John has the opposite correlation. Such an explanation seems very strange since the Synoptic Gospels directly feature some (much less significant) episodes related to the stay of Christ in the house of Lazarus and Mary with Martha.

2. The Synoptics could consider this resurrection no more significant than the miracles they had previously seen. Hmm, well, all three actually thought the revival of a decaying corpse to be yawn-worthy? (Furthermore, specifically when it's Lazarus, not when it's Jesus?)

3. Farrar notes the "special restraint of the Synoptics towards the Bethany family"; they call it "the house of Simon the leper" (John, on the contrary, does not mention any lepers), Mary is called simply "the woman", without any clarifications. He believes that at the time of the writing of the Synoptic Gospels there was still a threat of physical elimination of Lazarus and other witnesses of the resurrection by the Judean authorities (John 12:9-11). Clearly, under these conditions it was not a good idea to supply the investigators of the Sanhedrin with any information about the Bethany family. On the other hand by the time the Gospel of John was written, this reason for the "sealing of the mouths" was already gone, and it became possible to speak about the miracle. Is this logical? I don't think so. Let me remind you how the resurrection ended:

"Then many of the Jews who came to visit Mary, and saw what Jesus had done, believed in Him; but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done." (John 11:45-46).

Of course - "If there's something strange | In your neighborhood, | Who you gonna call?" - well, in the absence of Ghostbusters (who would indeed be the best option in this case!), just the regular authorities - and they will sort it out... So I think the Apostles, had they even wanted to, would not be able to reveal to the sleuths anything hitherto unknown to them about the Bethany family.

To summarize, none of the versions proposed by Farrar seem to me convincing in the slightest. But, in my opinion, two other explanations of these discrepancies are possible (and, as a side note, both are in accordance with the subtle soundness constraint, to be discussed later, that events not essential for Christianity's existence should not feature startling coincidences):

1. The episode with the resurrection of Lazarus, which appeared only in the chronologically latest of the four Gospels, simply had no real

basis (like the aforementioned “Zoino stoyaniye”, for example). Of course, as usual, we seek no easy ways and refrain from accepting such an explanation - especially since not going the easy way may pay off in the form of a deeper insight. Besides, this option is, as always, prohibited by our strict assumptions anyway: under them, we have a direct truthful eyewitness testimony of Apostle John. So, the following option remains:

2. The silence of the Synoptics is explained by the fact that they, unlike John, were sure that something was off about this resurrection, and it was better left not reminded of. In this regard, it seems appropriate to cite the version of New Testament commentator Renan.

He believed that the resurrection of Lazarus was “an intrigue of the sisters from Bethany, Mary and Martha. Outraged by the bad reception given in Jerusalem to their adored Jesus, the sisters tried to arrange something that would shake the skepticism of incredulous Jews. Such an event could be the resurrection of a man who was well-known in Jerusalem. When Jesus was beyond Jordan River, Lazarus fell seriously ill. The terrified sisters sent for Jesus, but before he appeared in Bethany, the brother was already on the mend. Then the sisters had a brilliant idea - pale, not yet recovered Lazarus was wrapped in graveclothes and placed in the tomb.” After Jesus, who was taken to the tomb, wished to look at his friend, the stone blocking the entrance was rolled away, Lazarus went outside, and everyone believed in the “miracle”.

Did Christ know about this? Renan believes that he, like for example Francis of Assisi, was simply unable to curb the thirst for miracles that overwhelmed his supporters. The apostles, however, were genuinely outraged by this obvious swindle, even if it was done for a good purpose (remember one of the designations for the Bethany family in the Synoptic Gospels - “the house of a leper”), but they couldn’t wash Jesus’s supporters’ dirty linen in public.

But why didn’t John see through this staging? The answer here, undoubtedly, lies in the very personality of this Apostle. The man who wrote the *Apocalypse* must certainly be somewhat out of this world (note that the words “out of this world” really do not mean the same as “out of his mind”). What seemed quite obvious to Peter and Matthew, who stood more firmly on this earth, did not seem so to John at all. In the unreal world that he had created for himself and lived in - and which would later become inhabited by billions of people - miracles like the resurrection of Lazarus were indeed completely normal and natural. (Later he would immediately believe in the resurrection of Jesus upon merely seeing the empty tomb, with no other clues - John

20:8-9. And vice versa, one may conjecture that the other disciples would silently need some “independent reassurance” in the legitimacy of the resurrection of Jesus, and that the direct comment of God the Father himself on Jesus, which we’ll discuss later, was it.)

Returning to the “general line” of our investigation, we should note two important points connected with the sojourn of Christ in Bethany. Firstly, the Apostles and the Teacher repeatedly visited the house of Mary and Martha, both before and after the resurrection of Lazarus. Secondly, it was from this house, after the episode of anointing of Christ, that Judas went to the Sanhedrin. Let’s now turn to this character, perhaps the most mysterious one of all.

JUDAS

So, Judas from the town of Kerieth. The only Judean among the Twelve - all others were Galileans. The relations between these Palestinian peoples were not particularly warm; this is often mentioned as the reason for the not-too-enthusiastic reception of Jesus in Judea and its capital - Jerusalem (“Aren’t you from Galilee? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.” - John 7:52). This circumstance, however, did not prevent Judas, who furthermore joined Christ quite late, one of the last among the Apostles, to become one of the Twelve and even to become the treasurer. This alone clearly testifies to the trust and authority he enjoyed in the community. And Jesus, by the way, does not at all create the impression of some sort of a “holy fool”, unable to put two and two together in earthly affairs, in particular, of someone not people-savvy.

It is not for nothing that the canonical version of “betrayal for thirty silver coins” seemed unconvincing to many, and they looked for other explanations for Judas’s act; in this sense, he is undoubtedly the most popular of the Gospel characters. Most diverse versions were proposed here: a burning resentment against “deceiver” Christ, whose kingdom, as it turned out, would not be of this world; the desire to find out whether a person who claims to be the Messiah would be able to save at least himself [like in an old Soviet joke: “Comrade Stalin, a man came who claims to be a clairvoyant, able to see the future, and he’s asking for an audience with you, what should we do? - ...Shoot him. A clairvoyant would foresee that, so get rid of this charlatan.”]; the desire to accelerate in this way the onset of the kingdom of God on Earth (a variation: to provoke a popular uprising). Here’s just one characteristic case: Zeffirelli’s grandiose film *Jesus of Nazareth* is, generally speaking,

a collection of amazing quality “live illustrations” to the Gospel text, but even here Judas is presented in a non-canonical manner.

The heretical version expounded by Borges and attributed by him to fictional Swedish theologian Runeberg is noteworthy in this regard:

“...He begins with a convincing observation that Judas’s act was redundant. [...] In order to identify the Teacher who preached in the synagogue daily and performed miracles before gatherings of thousands, the treachery of an apostle is unnecessary.”

He then says that Judas’s true motive was “hypertrophied, almost limitless asceticism. Ascetic, for the sake of the greater glory of God, defiles and mortifies the flesh; Judas did the same with his spirit. He renounced honor, goodness, peace, the kingdom of heaven, like others, less heroic ones, renounce pleasure.” Well... we, perhaps, will not soar up to such heights of theological thought. Let’s try to look for the motives of Judas’s act somewhere closer to “the objective reality, given to us in perception”.

“Thirty silver coins” as a motive of betrayal, however, does not stand up to criticism even for the most pragmatic reasons: what did this insignificant amount mean compared to the capabilities of the treasurer of the Apostles? If greed was indeed the driving force behind Judas’s actions, then he should have quietly siphoned money from the community’s cash box entrusted to him, indefinitely. Only a complete idiot (or a *sovok*) kills the goose that lays the golden eggs.

And indeed, did Judas steal? John writes about it with full confidence (John 12:6); it is strange, however, that not one of the Synoptics said a word about such a colorful detail, which greatly enlivens the image of a traitor. What remains to be assumed is that John, as had already happened to him, heard the sound of the bells, but didn’t know where the clapper was - that some time before the tragedy, a tense conversation between Jesus and Judas on money matters took place. This, however, was not an accusation of Judas in shortage - otherwise, Peter and the other Apostles would not have dismissed this episode in their narratives as unimportant. Let’s remember this.

It should be noted that the text of the New Testament contains one direct indication that Christ foresaw the betrayal of Judas long before his last trip to Jerusalem. We are talking about John’s *interpretation* of the Teacher’s statement after The Bread of Life Discourse and the subsequent desertion of many of his companions.

“You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, who shall we go to?’ [...] Jesus replied, ‘Have I not chosen the twelve of you? Yet one of you is a devil!’ He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, while being

one of the Twelve, wanted to betray him.” (John 6:67-71).

However, things are not as simple and unambiguous as they seem to John.

To begin with, generally speaking, it does not follow from this text that Jesus had Judas in mind - even though this is retrospectively logical, it is only a conjecture. Anyway, suppose the statement reproduced by John was indeed uttered, and furthermore let's assume that it did refer specifically to Judas. From all this, however, it does not at all follow that it was about the COMING BETRAYAL, and not about some other act of this character, already accomplished at that time.

By the way, under what circumstances did Judas die? The version of Matthew became generally accepted - “went away and hanged himself” (Matthew 27:5). Meanwhile, in the *Acts of the Apostles* something completely different is said: “his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out”, and furthermore, “everyone in Jerusalem heard about this” (Acts 1:18-19). Farrar, however, believes that “these versions do not contradict each other too much”, and even invents a kind of hybrid: the hanging Judas's rope breaks, he falls from a height to the ground, his belly bursts... The plausibility of such a construction, in my opinion, needs no comment [Archpriest A. Men, at least, honestly writes that “the information contained in Matthew 27, 3-9 and Acts 1, 16-20 is so far quite difficult to reconcile”... hold on, what do you mean “*so far*”?!].

And in general, suicide on the basis of remorse, after all the exploits of Judas during the arrest of the Teacher, is psychologically completely unconvincing. This does happen with people who have committed betrayal by succumbing to violence or blackmail; Judas acted freely, quite deliberately, and coolly. [For obvious reasons we're leaving aside the common narrative that at the moment of betrayal he was possessed by Satan (John 13:27, Luke 22:3) who later left him; note, by the way, that this would mean that Judas himself is not guilty. And if this is interpreted non-supernaturally as some sudden and temporary insanity... well, let's leave this kind of “explanation” for the case if there is nothing better, as a very last resort.]

Yet, what's even more mysterious is the scene of the arrest of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. That is, here the number of incongruities (if we stick to the canonical version) is not even big, the episode simply consists of them entirely, without a remainder. Let me again give the floor to Dombrovsky:

“In this story there is something extremely confusing. After all, Christ did not hide but spoke publicly. Even without Judas, they could perfectly well seize him any day. ‘What are these swords and spears

for', he said upon arrest, 'every day you saw me, and I preached to you. Why didn't you take me then?'"

"That's a reasonable question", smiled Surovtsev [NKVD officer - K. Y.]. "That is, of course, it is reasonable only from the point of view of Christ. Arrested people often ask about such things. They are unaware that there are also operational considerations."

Interesting - what were these "operational considerations"? So, let's formulate the questions:

1. The arrest of Christ could be carried out at any moment during the day on the streets of Jerusalem; the number of his supporters was very small, and they, of course, could not effectively oppose the temple guard. Let me remind you that the authorities did not have any special problems with the arrest of incomparably more popular John the Baptist. Why then was it necessary to let the Galileans in the evening out of the city into the wooded outskirts of Jerusalem, where it would be difficult to control their movements even in daylight? In other words: what exactly did the Jewish authorities gain by incredibly complicating the arrest procedure and transferring it to a remote secluded place, in the dead of night?

2. Judas's behavior during the arrest seems completely irrational. His task was to bring the capture group to the place (indeed unknown to anyone in Jerusalem), which he succeeded in. After that, any normal traitor would try to move deeper into the shadows (both figuratively and literally), not into the proscenium, demonstrating to everyone his exceptional merits. Seriously, what need was there for a public, theatrical identification of Christ? During the days that he preached in Jerusalem, he was undoubtedly mentally "photographed" from every angle by members of the Judean secret police, who, of course, must've been present during the arrest. [And if somehow Jesus looked like a very good spy - extremely generic and easily confusable with every second man where he lived, so much so that even professionals needed help "finding Waldo" (by the way, if the popular images do resemble what he actually looked like, it is very easy to notice even *now* that being a Jesus lookalike is extremely easy indeed, probably second only to Hitler, but unlike for the latter it's easy even inadvertently), then this would also be of great interest in evaluating resurrection appearances. By way of analogy, imagine that Jesus was East Asian and the disciples were from rural Alabama, and then present to them someone who may or may not be their resurrected Teacher - they would probably not be able to tell if that's definitely him or maybe another person. We will return to this point again: the ultimate source of the disciples' certainty that who they saw was resurrected Jesus

were his *words and behavior*, not his *appearance* - with one major exception, the stigmata...] And why did Judas need to pretend to be the commander of the capture group (“Concerning Judas who served as leader for those who arrested Jesus” - Acts 1:16), which he, of course, in reality was not? After all, even if the high priests unanimously went mad and put a defector at the head of the detachment (a traitor, as is well known, remains a traitor, no matter who he betrays), then the Romans who participated in the operation would never in their lives allow some Jewish bandit, who had just sold his leader, to command them.

3. It is worth paying attention to the composition of the capture group - it is very strange from any point of view. Firstly, as already noted, it included not only Jews, but also Roman soldiers, who are not directly subordinate to the initiators of the arrest - the high priests. In order to make legionnaires participate in the operation, it is necessary at least to notify the procurator, and this means losing precious time to inevitable negotiations - and what for? This might have been justified if Caiaphas had expected a serious armed resistance; such a risk, however, was negligible - compared to the very real possibility that the alarmed sect would simply disappear into the night, and then you can go whistle for them. Secondly, the Romans, who number no more than two or three dozen, are commanded by a “leader of a thousand” (military tribune). The participation in the operation of an officer of this rank (corresponding to a colonel) clearly indicates that Pilate took the “request for international assistance” with full seriousness. Why then does he begin to play the fool the next morning, portraying benevolent neutrality towards the prisoner? Thirdly, among the Jews, in addition to the temple guard (and likely sleuths), there were a lot of the high priest’s slaves with their weapons. I wonder - what kind of need suddenly arose in such a “total mobilization”, and what was this ragtag good for - besides only getting in the way of the professionals?

4. It is completely incomprehensible why the capture group did not take any measures to detain the Apostles. Even if the authorities decided not to give a damn about their previous complicity in subversive propaganda, during the arrest of Christ there was, after all, direct armed resistance [and, say, according to an old Russian version of *The Jewish War* (IX: 3), many people were killed during the arrest of Jesus - this isn’t true but it reflects understanding of this fact]. Nevertheless, the ear of the high priest’s servant Malchus, cut off by Peter (John 18:10), is left without any consequences and the Apostles are allowed to disappear without hindrance. This seems especially incomprehensible against the background of further events of the same

night - three attempts to arrest Peter, and for merely belonging to Christ's entourage, regardless of his participation in an armed clash with the guards.

5. As Sherlock Holmes said, "the more ridiculous and brute a detail seems to you, the more attention it deserves. Those circumstances that, at first glance, only complicate the matter, most often lead you to the solution." In our case, such a detail is... the torches; yes, the same torches which the capture group came to the place with (for example, John 18:3). The thing is, the events took place on Passover night, which coincides with the full moon. Torches could be needed in order to carry out a search in a previously cordoned off area of the garden in pitch darkness (although even here they would do no less harm than good), or to identify the detainees. Who and why, however, needed to arrange illumination in the moonlit garden, unmasking the capture group on its way to the already known place?

THE LAST SUPPER AND THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE: ABOUT THOSE WHO ARE OFF THE SCREEN

Let's not forget about one more thing: during the Last Supper, Jesus already knew about the betrayal of one of the Apostles. Never mentioning the name of Judas, he made several completely unambiguous hints, after which the only thing left for Judas to do was to run, taking advantage of the loophole left for him by the Teacher: "Since Judas had the money box, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night." (John 13:29-30).

Why Jesus did not name the traitor - whether he was not completely sure of his information and his hints were a test, or he simply did not want bloodshed (there were some pretty tough guys among the Apostles, such as that same Peter) - is not so important. Another thing is more interesting: how did Jesus get information about treason in his inner circle?

This question may seem completely foolish: clearly Christ knew about this by virtue of his divine omniscience; and how could he receive any such information without it also being noticed by the Apostles, who were always with him? Well, I won't comment on the topic of divine omniscience, but I'll allow myself to argue against Christ's lack of stable contacts outside of his usual circle described by the Evangelists. First of all: why is the Last Supper called the Secret Supper ("Тайная

вечеря”) by the Russian-speaking Christians? [By the way, in English the previous day is sometimes called Spy Wednesday, also not without a reason.] What is known about the house where it took place, from which Christ and the Apostles then departed to Gethsemane? There is no need to strain your memory or look for a Bible - you won't find much information on this subject in it. Which is very strange: the Evangelists always speak in some detail about the owners of the houses where the Teacher stayed for any reason, but there is not a word about the location where such an important event took place [in the Christian tradition, the tomb of David, which is on the southern slope of Mount Zion (Bible Encyclopedia I:323), is taken for the Zion Upper Room - the site of the Last Supper; it is this room that appears, for example, on numerous paintings dedicated to this episode; we, however, cannot possibly accept this point of view; the fact that it was built only in the fourth century AD is half of the problem - and the other half is that the Scripture directly states that the Last Supper took place in a residential building (see below)]. In my opinion, the description of how Christ and the Apostles found this house deserves citing.

On Thursday morning the Apostles ask the Teacher: where is he going to eat the Passover meal? - whereupon Christ sends Peter and John to Jerusalem, providing them with the following instructions:

“As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished. Make preparations there.’ They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.” (Luke 22:10-13).

This episode, frankly, seems to be taken not from the Holy Scripture but from *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (or, rather, from *Aquarium*). It's absolutely clear that it is about liaisons, exchanges of physical and verbal passwords, a safe house, and the classic method of detecting surveillance (through counter-surveillance carried out by the partner of the “man with a jar”). It is also clear, by the way, that Peter and John were sent precisely to check whether the meeting place was exposed. The owner of the apartment, in strict accordance with the requirements of secrecy (which, apparently, have not undergone changes over the past twenty centuries), never saw its visitors - that's why there is no information about him in the Gospels.

Evangelists clearly did not find all this worthy of attention; for us, however, it is very significant that Jesus maintained secret (or at least

undisclosed) contacts with at least one Jerusalem group unknown to the Apostles. The members of the latter (which included the “man with a jar”), on the contrary, knew the Apostles at least by sight. Intrigued by the secret contacts of Jesus, I began to study the text of the New Testament under this angle, immediately discovering a number of promising episodes. However, at the third or fourth of them, I resolutely said “Stop!” to myself, feeling that I was starting to fit the facts to the concept. It will not take long along this path to become like our half-witted “patriots” who are able to detect manifestations of the Judeo-Masonic Conspiracy even in the six-pointedness of snowflakes. [However, to be fair, in our Russian realities - unlike in the West, where the entire conspiracy direction of thought is rightly shunned and knee-jerked by rational people - malicious conspiracy by the government or government-supported forces usually just genuinely *is* the correct explanation - thus making someone like me fundamentally more likely than a Western skeptic to discover the correct explanation for the resurrection of Jesus. (Speaking of the difference in this “worldview assumption” as an aside, in a non-democratic country there is no such thing as a bet along the lines of “they would never do that” - and at least here in Russia, it’s usually “well, of course they would!” And even in democratic countries there are occasionally characters like Richard Nixon or Henry Kissinger (read *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* by Christopher Hitchens) - and much more, just have a listen to Noam Chomsky on the US foreign policy. Chomsky will explain to you, for example, the actual reason why 9/11 happened, although there is one even better authority on the matter - Bin Laden himself, and here is what he had to say: “Before I begin, I say to you that security is an indispensable pillar of human life and that free men do not forfeit their security, contrary to Bush’s claim that we hate freedom. If so, then let him explain to us why we don’t strike, for example, Sweden? And we know that freedom-haters don’t possess defiant spirits like those of the 19 hijackers. No, we fight because we are free men who don’t sleep under oppression. We want to restore freedom to our nation, just as you lay waste to our nation.” “I say to you, God knows that it had never occurred to us to strike the towers. But after it became unbearable and we witnessed the oppression and tyranny of the American/Israeli coalition against our people in Palestine and Lebanon, it came to my mind. The events that affected my soul in a direct way started in 1982 when America permitted the Israelis to invade Lebanon and the American Sixth Fleet helped them in that. This bombardment began and many were killed and injured and others were terrorised and displaced. I couldn’t forget those moving scenes,

blood and severed limbs, women and children sprawled everywhere. Houses destroyed along with their occupants and high rises demolished over their residents, rockets raining down on our home without mercy. The situation was like a crocodile meeting a helpless child, powerless except for his screams. Does the crocodile understand a conversation that doesn't include a weapon? And the whole world saw and heard it but didn't respond. In those difficult moments many hard-to-describe ideas bubbled in my soul, but in the end they produced an intense feeling of rejection of tyranny, and gave birth to a strong resolve to punish the oppressors. And as I looked at those demolished towers in Lebanon, it entered my mind that we should punish the oppressor in kind and that we should destroy towers in America in order that they taste some of what we tasted and so that they be deterred from killing our women and children. And that day, it was confirmed to me that oppression and the intentional killing of innocent women and children is a deliberate American policy. Destruction is freedom and democracy, while resistance is terrorism and intolerance." Needless to say, a sane person cannot appreciate his *methods*, but the same cannot be said about his *motives*... Anyhow, the direct relevance of these quotes to the present work is the following, which you can call "Yeskov's razor": don't explain with God what can be explained with politics! - even more specifically, don't explain with the local God what can be explained with shady Western foreign policy in the Middle East.]) And yet there is one episode that we should consider - the Transfiguration of the Lord.

Shortly before his third (and the last) trip to Jerusalem, Christ, accompanied by Peter, John, and James, went up a still-unidentified "high mountain" to pray. Then a series of events took place [from which we will omit direct miracles like the shining of the face and clothes of Jesus (unless it was simply caused by a stray ray of sunlight) and possibly the voice of God without comment (because the relevant comments were already made; by the way, if there was indeed a voice not just in Peter's mind, did it really belong to God? - after all, there were people there - see below - and one of them, while being invisible to Peter at the moment, namely with the visibility obscured at least by mountain fog - "a cloud appeared and surrounded them... a voice came out of the cloud" - could have easily, even casually, said "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." - deliberate staging or lying here is excluded by the direct presence of Jesus, so to be real it... merely had to belong to Jesus's actual father, reported by Celsus to be a Roman named Pantera - and there is another, even simpler, possibility for his identity, see below; this

thought is sacrilegious to many people because of the implication that Mary had sex, but she certainly did - remember, Jesus had a *brother*, James: besides the authentic testimony of Josephus - "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James" - we might even have the former container of his remains, the famous James Ossuary, notably precovered on an old photograph later and withstanding authenticity trials]):

"Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, 'Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters - one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' (HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HE WAS SAYING.)" (Luke 9:32-33).

Jesus, however, did not confirm with a single word the speculation that the people who talked to him were really Moses and Elijah. Then the incident in the fog happens (whether in reality or in Peter's altered mind; by the way, if it did happen in reality, it could be interpreted as a direct corrective answer to Peter's speculation - one of the two people replying "I'm not Moses or Elijah, I'm his dad" amalgamated with a natural compliment to Jesus - which, if so, in turn implies that had Jesus even wanted to explicitly correct Peter, who obviously "didn't know what he was saying", this would've been accomplished already, or so Jesus thought), after which comes another very interesting part: "As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus forbade them, saying, 'Don't tell anyone about what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'" (Matthew 17:9);

"They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant." (Mark 9:10).

To put it simply, the three Apostles happened to witness a meeting between Jesus and two people, one of which could be Jesus's father (who definitely had to exist - otherwise Jesus's birth was a miracle [the Evangelists or who they were writing after definitely weren't eyewitnesses of the Nativity or any related stories - which only bloated as time went by, cf. the apocryphal Gospels; for this reason it is not unlikely that the Nativity narratives (without the finding in the temple of teenager Jesus) are the only chunks of the New Testament, not counting the *Apocalypse*, that are simply one hundred percent false top to bottom (even though some apparently locally well-known people referenced in them by name, especially Anna the daughter of Penuel, might well be real), the same kind of (spontaneous!) thing as *Зовно жемтуйе*, the "gospel" of "Zoino stoyaniye"; by the way, speaking of eyewitnesses of Jesus's birth, why the unbelievable extreme paucity

of records in the New Testament on Mary, the mother of Jesus (!), especially her direct speech? - you'd think, of all the people... and the one and only time she does say an actual, very believable, motherly thing (Luke 2:48), it is "Son, why have you treated us like this? YOUR FATHER and I have been anxiously searching for you."; another argument for Joseph being Jesus's father (and Panter being Mary's grandfather, according to another non-Christian source, presumably someone locally relatively well-known - with the confusion probably arising because Jesus was called son of Panter in the same intended sense in which he is called son of David and Abraham in Matthew 1:1) is that John doesn't have Nativity narratives - and he *lived with Mary* (John 19:27) after Jesus's death, so who if not he would know if there was actually anything unusual about Jesus's birth, he certainly had plenty of time to ask - and furthermore he directly mentions Joseph in uncommented quoted speech as Jesus's father (1:45, 6:42); nor is there any hint that the disciples had ever met Joseph - he doesn't appear outside of the Nativity narratives and John's two purely nominal references at all (!) - unless we count Jesus's genealogy and supposed descent from David, important for the messianic claims, which doesn't make too much sense if Joseph was only his stepfather (and thus the appearance of genealogy linking Jesus to David plausibly precedes the appearance of the Nativity narratives - and by the way this genealogy is not a single thing, differing radically in the versions of Matthew and Luke, in particular, they don't agree on the name of Joseph's dad...); nor does John mention the "voice of God", despite having been its *direct witness* (!) - so, ... is it possible that he, and not Peter, understood Joseph's reply from the fog correctly?..]), that was clearly not really intended for their eyes. Otherwise, why would the Teacher demand that they keep their mouths shut - until the afterlife? (If those were simply saints from Heaven [despite the qualifier "he didn't know what he was saying"], and also Jesus was presciently talking about his resurrection coming soon after this, not in the end times (or just much later), then what would be the point of this, furthermore very brief, silence period?)

Let's return, however, to the main thread of our investigation - to the events of Thursday of the Holy Week. So, how and when could the information about the betrayal of Judas be privately passed on to Jesus (who passed it on is a separate topic)? There are countless possibilities here (as a random example, through an almost undetectable liaison disguised as a beggar on a temple porch), but in this case the simplest one can be assumed: Jesus found the corresponding message in a predetermined place in the safehouse apartment - "large, furnished,

ready”, after which he accused Judas of betrayal.

There is, however, another mystery. After the Last Supper, Jesus with the eleven Apostles left Jerusalem and went to Gethsemane, the olive garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives, which is east of the city [by the way, the village of Bethany, which is associated with a number of remarkable events (see above), is located on the same Mount of Olives as the Garden of Gethsemane, only the former is on its southeast slope, and the latter is on its western slope]. Judging by the length of the conversations that took place along the way, the journey was not a short one. In the Garden of Gethsemane, after his prayer to “let this cup pass”, Christ was arrested. The Gospel texts do not contain any hint that the Teacher shared his plans with the Apostles in advance - where exactly he was going to go from Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Judas, who had left the Last Supper long before it ended, accurately led the capture group exactly where it was supposed to be - to the Garden of Gethsemane.

I hope we will not attribute the gift of omniscience to this character? Then let's think logically. Well, how Judas guessed the place itself is more or less clear: apparently, Gethsemane served as a refuge for the Apostles during the last days (“Each day He was teaching at the temple, and each evening He went out to spend the night on the mount called the Mount of Olives” - Luke 21:37); in the Garden of Gethsemane there is indeed a rock with a large cave, which, in all likelihood, served as the dwelling place for the Apostles (Bible Encyclopedia, I:159). It was probably from here that they went to Jerusalem for the Last Supper. Another thing is not clear, however: why was Judas confident that Jesus would return that night to his - already known - base? Putting himself in the place of the Teacher, Judas would have to assume that he would try to escape and immediately disappear from the neighborhoods of Jerusalem, as he had repeatedly done before (for example, John 10:39-40). (These “disappearances” of Jesus are very interesting in their own right, by the way, but we are not talking about them now.)

It has become customary to proceed from the assumption that on that night the basis of all the actions (or rather, inaction) of Christ was his firm intention to “drink from this chalice”. Meanwhile, for the success of real operations and search activities, investigators need to at least correctly reflect on the motivations of the wanted person. Do Judas and the guards of the Sanhedrin seem capable of such an accurate penetration into the thoughts of Christ? This question, in my opinion, is rhetorical. Also, suppose Jesus did make a final decision about his own life. However, could a man like him have deliberately put his

disciples in - mortal, and, moreover, completely senseless - danger by remaining with them? At the moment of arrest, the Teacher declares: "If you are looking for me, let these men go then. (This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: 'I have not lost even one of those you gave me.')" (John 18:8-9).

However, to be frank, his own contribution to the fact that the disciples remained alive seems minimal. It's just "criminal negligence" by the arresters that they were not killed on the spot after the incident with Malchus!

All these considerations suggest the following. That night, in the Garden of Gethsemane, some very important unfinished business waited for Jesus - so important that, without attending to it, he could neither leave Jerusalem (even under the threat of arrest), nor voluntarily surrender to the high priests; and Judas knew about it. It can be assumed that in the garden, the place of his last refuge, Jesus had to either take something in an agreed place, or, on the contrary, to leave something, or - more likely - to meet someone. And if a certain person was indeed waiting for him in the garden (recall, for example, a night-time visit to Jesus by Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, a year before), then it becomes clear why Jesus, regardless of the danger, tried to get to Gethsemane (and to get there first).

When was this meeting supposed to take place (whether it actually happened is a separate question)? I think, at the very moment when Jesus went into the depths of the garden to pray, and here's why. Let's compare the scenes of this prayer and of the Transfiguration of the Lord (see above). In both cases Christ withdraws from the disciples in order to pray in solitude. In both cases he is accompanied by the same three Apostles - Peter, John, and James. In both cases all three "bodyguards" strangely fall asleep. Aren't there too many coincidences here, and isn't it really a repetition of the same or very similar meeting, incomprehensible to the Apostles (with the possible partial exception of John)? Moreover, there is also a direct indication that Jesus was not alone in the garden (Luke 22:43); the Evangelist believes that an "angel" was with the Teacher, but that is pure conjecture...

Let's also ask the following question: could the Apostles see the person talking with the Teacher in the depths of the garden (if such a meeting did take place)? I don't think so, and here's why. Let us recall another event of the same night - Peter's disavowal of Jesus in the courtyard of Caiaphas's house: "It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm; Peter was also standing with them, warming himself." (John 18:18). This was in the courtyard of a city mansion; it certainly wasn't much warmer in the Garden of

Gethsemane on that spring night. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to assume that the Apostles likewise made a campfire to keep warm. And this means that they weren't able to discern things outside of the area illuminated by it.

Okay, but could the three accompanying Apostles, who ingloriously fell asleep, have noticed anything? By the way, in the light of the assumption just made, this strange sleep becomes understandable and natural. One must think that the disciples, after a few minutes of their vigil (speaking of which, did the Teacher assign the duties of watchmen to this trio?) froze to the bone and decided to go to the fire to warm up - just for a second! Alas, such "seconds" always end in the same way - instantly they became abask in the warmth and coziness, and, you know... So, one wouldn't have high hopes for their testimonies either, but they still probably noticed something - *before and after* their stay near the campfire. In any case, the information about the "angel" who visited Jesus must come from them - there is simply no one else who it can be coming from.

THE EMPTIED TOMB

Soon after the crucifixion took place, two more rather mysterious characters appeared on the scene. One of them is Joseph of Arimathea, "a prominent member of the Council who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43); in the apocryphal Gospel of Peter, he is described as "a friend of Pilate and the Lord" - *hmm...* It was he who took, with the permission of the procurator, the body of the executed criminal - the "King of the Jews" - and then buried him in a tomb he owned. Evangelists present Joseph as a "secret disciple of Christ" (John 19:30), although there is no mention of his contact with Jesus or the Apostles in the preceding text of the New Testament - neither before nor, what's especially strange, after the burial. Although there is a tradition according to which he was the first to preach the Gospel in Britain, it seems unlikely even to the official Church (Bible Encyclopedia I:364).

He was assisted by Nicodemus, who was also a member of the Sanhedrin. Unlike Joseph, Nicodemus (openly) met Christ twice, and the first time he spent the whole night in conversation with Jesus (John 3:1-21); in another episode, he openly spoke to other members of the Sanhedrin about his support of Jesus (John 7:50-52). Therefore, it can be assumed that the initiator of the burial was in fact not Joseph but Nicodemus. The narrative regarding the further fate of

Nicodemus looks much more modest (“later he received baptism from the Apostles” - Bible Encyclopedia II:17), and therefore instills more confidence in its truth.

In any case, the fact is that two prominent representatives of the local establishment did something quite daring and defiant at the very moment when it became clear that the jokes were over and all the “official” disciples of Christ were trembling and thinking only about their own salvation (in the perfectly non-theological sense, for once). What motivated them to do this? Purely just “waiting for the Kingdom of God”? Hmm... Joseph and Nicodemus, by the way, had a lot to lose - in contrast to the disciples, who had the social status of Aladdin (and unlike the genie [or Muhammad with respect to his Companions, by the way], Jesus didn’t help them much with that - if anything, it’s the opposite).

This was all a preamble. And now it’s time to go directly to one of the key episodes of this story, the importance of which cannot be overstated - the disappearance of the body of Christ from the guarded tomb. (Just as a reminder for clarity, we’re proceeding from the assumption that there were no supernatural events but the historical data of the Gospels is reliable - including everything miraculous only “by inference”, as opposed to real-time events “requiring CGI”.) This tomb, which as mentioned above belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, was a new burial chamber just recently cut out in a rock, located in a rather secluded place near Jerusalem; the latter circumstance greatly facilitated the task of the guards. The entrance to the tomb, blocked with a heavy stone (weighing one and a half tons, according to McDowell) and sealed with an imperial seal, was guarded by Roman guards. The fact that the tomb guard was specifically Roman (that is, highly disciplined and, moreover, neutral with respect to intra-Jewish squabbles [are these the reasons why there was a panicked request for a Roman guard in the first place - in a city packed with temple guards?]) played a significant role in the argumentation of McDowell and Gladkov, and was substantiated by them in detail and convincingly [the following objection can be put forward here: in response to the request by the high priests “Pilate told them, ‘Take the guard, go and protect the way you know’” (Matthew 27:65); these words of the procurator can in principle be understood as a refusal (“You have your own temple guards - so deal with your scandals yourselves!”); McDowell, however, gives purely linguistic arguments in favor of the fact that in the original Gospel text (unlike in many translations into European languages) all three verbs should be read in the same mood - imperative; the phrase in question is thus really “have the guard, and

go guard as you know”, i.e., “sure, take my soldiers and proceed as you please”].

On the third day at dawn, the guards, having found to their amazement that the tomb was empty, immediately informed the high priests about this. “Having met with the elders and gathered a meeting, they gave the soldiers enough money and told them, ‘You are to say that his disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep, and if this rumor reaches the governor, we will convince him and keep you out of trouble.’ Having taken the money they did as they were taught.” (Matthew 28:11-15). Later Pilate concluded that the high priests confirmed the innocence of the soldiers by giving them a bribe, and did not punish the latter.

Firstly, while I can imagine that some Jewish hierarchs really believed in the divine, messianic essence of Christ, the Romans are another matter. Everything that we know from historical and literary sources about their mentality allows us to assert that at the time under consideration the Roman society was essentially irreligious. This is what is usually invoked to explain the fundamental inability of the civilization of classical antiquity to resist the expansionism of Christianity that began several decades later. Therefore, the very idea that the pragmatic Romans, who treated even their own gods without much piety, were ready to take some Jewish fairytales about the Messiah resurrecting on the third day after death seriously seems absurd to me (e.g. see Acts 26:24).

Secondly, it should be recalled that the disciplinary regulations of the Roman army were very severe. McDowell notes that soldiers who fell asleep on duty were subject to the death penalty, without alternatives (and regardless of the result of such negligence). Bearing these two considerations in mind, all the actions of all the participants in the incident - everyone, the guards, the high priests, the procurator - should be recognized as completely ridiculous (regardless of the reason why the tomb became empty). It’s as if all of them agreed to do exactly what contradicts the real interests of each of them the most. Judge for yourself.

For example, the guard discovers the loss of the guarded object in the morning. If the soldiers really did keep watch all night, they can be sure that this most unpleasant incident was not their own fault - but no one else would believe that. And so if the guards themselves discovered the loss (hmm, how, exactly? did they break the seal for no reason, “just to check?”), then the most logical thing in this situation is to wait until guard removal and brazenly report that everything is in order - hoping that this would work. If later the Jewish authorities

discover the emptied tomb and raise a fuss, just make a poker face and declare that when the guard was removed everything was alright, and what happened next - I cannot know, boss; and why don't these Jews themselves keep an eye on their restless corpses, what is this madness, your honor!

Okay, suppose the head of the guard is exceptionally honest (but took the bribe later...) to the point of risking his own life in order to not lie even when he's not guilty of anything - why, however, did this disciplined Roman go with his report not to his direct commanders as required by the regulations but to the local Jewish authorities? Is he really counting on the intercession of the Sanhedrin, hated by Pilate? Well, he's a complete idiot then. Furthermore, the Sanhedrin invites the guards to sign their own death warrant (to acknowledge their sleep on duty) - for a moderate fee. The guards agree and, doing what they were bribed for with maximum enthusiasm, vigorously ring all over the city about their own malfeasance - otherwise what if the Roman command might remain ignorant of their exploits.

As for the high priests, they - if they really wanted to dispute the fact of the mysterious emptying of the tomb - simply had to immediately officially accuse the soldiers of having fallen asleep on duty and thus letting the body be stolen. The Jews couldn't not understand that in the eyes of the Roman officers this incident simply could not have any other explanations, and, for example, the soldiers' babble about some miracles (such as the body inexplicably disappearing right behind their backs) would only aggravate their misdeed. Imagine a modern general who is being given something like the following report: "I report that while on guard duty, a flying saucer landed near our post, paralyzing the personnel with a glowing blue ray, after which little green men took out 42 machine guns and 12 boxes of hand grenades from the warehouse guarded by us"; can you predict what the general's reaction would be? [Here I have in mind a normal army, and not the so-called "Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"...] Meanwhile, it was by entering into negotiations with the guards and giving them a bribe that the high priests actually "signed" their recognition of the fact of the mysterious disappearance of the body. Which was noted by Pilate.

Now, the procurator. His subordinates first fell asleep on duty and let the guarded object be stolen, for which they should be subject to the death penalty. Not only that, but they also take a bribe from the local non-Roman authorities and then follow their instructions; in any army in the world, this would be considered even more of a crime than the original offense itself. In our case, however, two wrongs amazingly

make a right: as the result of all this, the guards were not subjected to any punishment by Pilate at all - he was supposedly satisfied with the story of inexplicable disappearance of the body. I can't help but recall another episode in this connection. When, sometime later, Saint Peter just as mysteriously disappeared from a guarded dungeon, it never occurred to Herod to take into account the "miraculous" nature of this event, and he immediately executed the guards, in accordance with the rules (Acts 12:19). One can't help but wonder whether the difference in the treatment of the guards in these two cases was due to the fact that in one of them, but not in the other, the mysterious disappearance was *quietly sanctioned in advance* by the corresponding ruler...

Speaking of Peter's disappearance:

"That night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance to the dungeon. [...] An angel pushed Peter on the side and woke him up and said, 'Get up quickly'. And the chains fell off Peter's wrists. Then the Angel said to him, 'Put on your clothes and sandals [...] Wrap your cloak around you and follow me [...] They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.'" (Acts 12:6-10).

...I personally fully agree with Herod here: these events can certainly be considered *mysterious*, but by no means *miraculous*. And if Herod became interested in the identity of the Angel acting in this episode (you betcha he did!), he probably turned for advice not to his theologians but to the chief of his security service. It should be noted that this wasn't the first time that the mighty messengers of the Higher Power performed such tricks with the release of prisoners (cf. for example Acts 5:18-24). It is not surprising that the patience of the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea ended ("Am I a king or not?!") and he tried to clip the wings of the insufferably brazen Angels.

Refuting the idea that the body of Christ was indeed stolen by the disciples, McDowell, among other things, cites the following consideration: breaking the Roman seal that sealed the tomb was completely unthinkable for a resident of Judea. According to the Roman law, an upside down crucifixion was the prescribed punishment for this, and the secret services of the Empire did not know either sleep or rest until the criminal was captured. This information is of course interesting, but McDowell strangely does not notice that, however that happened and whatever else is the case, the seal was indeed broken; and yet there was no investigation, not even the most superficial one.

Although, it would seem, what could be easier - to quickly crucify a couple of students and thereby close the case of the breaking of the seal; sometime later, Nero will close the case of the burning of Rome in just this way. As we know, nothing of the kind happened, and this fits perfectly into the overall picture of the strange complacency of the Roman authorities.

I can find only one explanation for all this oddity. The testimonies of the guards who had been at fault and some other details of this incident - should they come to light in the course of an official investigation - were for some reason so inconvenient for Pilate that he preferred to just quietly shut the whole thing down. In fact one gets the impression that in this episode both the Roman and Jewish officials are acting under a tacit agreement, both trying to put out a scandal that is fraught with dangerous exposures and revelations.

In this regard, the apocryphal Gospel of Peter is very remarkable. Apparently, its writer wanted to eradicate all doubts about the fact of the resurrection: here it takes place right in front of many people, and with the active participation of two angels.

“The heavens opened, and two men came down, radiating light. The stone, rolled against the door, fell off by itself, and they entered the tomb [...] [the guards] saw three people coming out of the tomb - two supporting one, and the cross following them. And the heads of two of them reached the sky, and the head of the one who was led was higher than the sky.”

As a result, the Evangelist overdid it a little - the density of miracles per page did not fit even the mildest standards of likelihood; perhaps that is why this version became regarded as apocryphal.

However, it contains a most curious detail: in this Gospel - only in this one - the guard is *joint*. Here it consists of Roman legionnaires led by a centurion named Petronius plus Jewish elders and scribes keeping vigil together - which is absolutely implausible! - in one tent. The fact that the unknown Evangelist, while simple-mindedly writing down a “super-convincing” hearsay version of the resurrection (“amplified” over the years), had, among others, this detail, is very significant. It is clear that a joint guard (providing mutual control and observation) would remove any questions even more convincingly than a purely Roman one - from the canonical version.

Let’s, however, once again examine the whole sequence of events that took place around the mysteriously emptied tomb from the very beginning. Let’s rewind the tape a little. So, on Friday, in the afternoon, Nicodemus and Joseph take the body of Christ and perform all the rites on it, according to the Jewish custom. I have read a

detailed description of these rites in McDowell's book with great (mostly ethnographic) interest. The Jews bound the deceased in many layers of cloth strips soaked in fragrant compositions. The amount of resinous substances transferred to the fabric could reach many tens of pounds; as a result, the deceased became enclosed in a thick cloth-resin shell. The "empty burial sheets" discovered by Peter and John in the tomb of Christ were something like an empty cocoon from which a butterfly had fluttered away.

Before dark, Nicodemus and Joseph manage to transfer the body to the tomb located outside the city and block the entrance to it with a stone; all this happens in the presence of Jesus's female companions: "The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed and saw how His body was laid in it" (Luke 23:55). By the way, speaking of the stone. One must think that it was not as ginormous as is sometimes indicated (Mark 16:4) - after all, that evening it was calmly turned over by two people who were clearly not weightlifters. The next morning (on Saturday), the Jewish leadership "woke up":

"The high priests and Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, 'Sir, we remember how that impostor said while he was still alive, 'I will be raised after three days.' Therefore, order the tomb to be secured until the third day, or his disciples may come and steal him and then tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead.''" (Matthew 27:62-64). Ignoring even the sacred Sabbath rest for the sake of such an occasion, the high priests, accompanied by soldiers, go to the tomb, and seal the stone covering it. The Roman guards remaining at the tomb... *Wait a second!!!* Rewind the tape!! "The next morning..." Sooo, you're telling me that FROM EARLY FRIDAY EVENING UNTIL LATE SATURDAY MORNING, THE TOMB WAS BOTH UNSEALED AND WITHOUT ANY SUPERVISION AT ALL? I wonder then, what as the result of this very interesting night did the Roman soldiers "receive for safekeeping"?

THE SECOND WARNING TO MCDOWELL: "YELLOW CARD"

It cannot be said that this circumstance has not occurred to Christian commentators at all. Here, for example, is what Gladkov writes:

"First of all, [the high priests] had to make sure that the body of Jesus had not been stolen on the previous night, from Friday to Saturday, otherwise there would be no reason to put up a guard [...]. And they undoubtedly ordered the stone to be rolled away, made sure that the

body of the Lord was not stolen, and only then the stone was rolled up again, the seal was applied to it...”

While technically this does not directly follow from the Gospel text (“So they went and posted the guard at the tomb and applied a seal on the stone” - Matthew 27:66), I agree with Gladkov - the check was undoubtedly conducted. Let’s try, however, to imagine how it all looked like in reality.

The soldiers roll off the stone that closes the entrance to the burial cave. The Sanhedrin’s representatives - orthodox Jews - are not to be envied at this moment. Not only have they already been defiled by breaking the Sabbath, but they still need to inspect the burial chamber (consider the shock that Jesus’s desire to see dead Lazarus threw upon the Jews). What do you think, will our orthodox Jews multiply their Sabbath deeds with another terrible violation of the Mosaic law - touching a dead body - and check what is really lying there: a dead person or... AN EMPTY “COCOON” MADE OUT OF FUNERAL WRAPS, a very convincing deception unless it is *poked or squeezed*? I think that they at best stuck the very tips of their noses into the burial chamber and immediately ran like they were scalded to atone for their sins in the nearest synagogue, shouting over their shoulder while on the move, “Seal it!” - it’s unlikely that it crossed the mind of any one of them to *come up and palpate it*. [I really hope that’s right - otherwise, Jesus resurrected, Christianity is true, and I’m going to be eternally unspeakably tortured in Hellfire (strictly eternally, as that is then just the final destination of my soul) - and this is clearly worse than anything, even nonexistence after death (Mark 14:21) plus death of the whole humanity and world (watch *These Final Hours* if you want to reflect on those things); on a related note, *only on atheism* it is true that, at least, every suffering comes to an end! - and isn’t that really something? Also, on a more everyday note, if Jesus didn’t resurrect, then many powerful political organizations are ideologically baseless, for example, the (heavily state-serving) Russian Orthodox Church, or the Republican Party of the United States (but of course not a fully secular right-wing party, like the Libertarians): if Christianity is false, what is it that the conservatives want to conserve, baseless falsehoods? Clearly, everything crucially depends here on whether Christianity is actually true or not, which in turn crucially depends on one and one question only - whether Jesus actually resurrected or not. (And if you are concerned about social order, there is police, money, and democratic vote - and *this* Holy Trinity is more than enough for the society to function. Some people are also concerned that irreligion leads to nihilism - well, after losing religion you’re only a nihilist until

the moment you stub your toe! And, these and many other people also need to take a little more relaxed general outlook on life: for fish out of water, we're in pretty deep!)]

Then perhaps the legionnaires looked at each other understandingly, twirling fingers at their temples, sent one of the greenhorns to the neighboring village for some port, and began to serve.

That was the "how", and here is one version of "who" and "why". Joseph and Nicodemus, having waited for the departure of the women and the onset of darkness, remove the body from the tomb and put in its place the "cocoon". In the morning, they - through intermediaries - suggest to their colleagues from the Sanhedrin the idea of guarding the tomb; the environment of the "receipt of the object" - doubly such on the occasion of Passover Sabbath - was foreseen by them exactly. The appearance of guards at the tomb is a very important element of the plan, killing two birds with one stone. Firstly, it preemptively undermines the attempts of the high priests, inevitable in the future, to explain the disappearance of the body as an intrigue of the disciples; secondly, it creates a convincing alibi for the authors of the staging and removes all suspicion from them.

On the night from Saturday to Sunday, Nicodemus and Joseph - again, through intermediaries - inform the procurator that his people are guarding nothing. An officer immediately sent to the scene confirms that there really is nothing in the tomb but rags. The first thing that comes to Pilate's mind is, naturally, that he fell into a trap set by the high priests, the purpose of which is to discredit him. Now, his only option is to attack. The legionnaires instructed by him appear at dawn at the Sanhedrin with a warm "Good morning!" to the sleepy high priests, turning everything upside down and promising rich "rewards" for their shenanigans, in particular to make them widely known. The high priests, no less shocked from this than Pilate was, swear up and down that they have nothing to do with this story, and find a mutually acceptable way out: let the body be supposedly stolen by the disciples. After a short hesitation, the soldiers agree; the order of the procurator has been carried out, both sides saved face, more or less, and even a bit of money from the Sanhedrin has flown into the soldiers' pockets, so they return to the location of their unit "with a feeling of deep satisfaction and well-deserved pride".

Joseph and Nicodemus, meanwhile, brilliantly complete their maneuver. The most dangerous thing for them is if the Romans, having colluded with the high priests, decide to immediately seal the tomb back and pretend that nothing happened at all (Pilate would not risk doing this on his own, alone, out of fear that all of this is a cunning

provocation of the Sanhedrin). In this case, Joseph can, of course, open the sealed tomb the next day in front of witnesses - he's its owner, after all! - and "find out to his amazement" the disappearance of the body; the trouble, however, is that then his bunny ears will stick out of the bush unhideably. Therefore, it is necessary for someone else to be the first to discover the opened empty tomb. And this is when the myrrh-bearing women appear on the stage.

For nearly two millenia people have been rereading this scene, but, surprisingly, not asking themselves a basic question: for what purpose did Mary Magdalene, James's Mary, and Salome come to the tomb of Christ at the crack of dawn? What kind of rites were they going to perform if on Friday they themselves were present at the burial and knew that the Teacher was buried in full accordance with the Jewish customs (John 19:39-40)? Why did they bring the incense ("myrrh-bearing") if Nicodemus had already used "a composition of myrrh and aloe, about seventy-five pounds" (John 19:39), and they knew all this? Where did this wonderful idea come from - TO DISTURB THE REST OF THE DEAD, which, according to any human laws, but especially Jewish ones, is a sin bordering on unthinkability? But if we assume that the true (and unknown to them) purpose of the pre-dawn vigils of the women (as well as Peter and John, mobilized by Magdalene) - myrrh-bearing according to Mark and Luke, and simply "sightseeing" according to Matthew - was to witness the disappearance of the body and prevent the authorities from quietly sealing the tomb back [by the way, did the women go to the tomb when the guards were supposedly still there?], then everything immediately falls into place. Alternatively, the following explanation is possible: due to the imminent beginning of Sabbath with its restrictions (on Friday evening - Jewish day does not end at midnight), Jesus needed to be buried urgently, with the burial thus lacking some extra bells and whistles (and John got this minor detail wrong; this has happened before and is normal - especially since he wasn't there; in fact, this is to be expected from earnest testimonies of actual people and it is much more believable and less suspicious than perfect accord! [but the people who say that the Bible is strictly inerrant God's word seriously need to relax - at the very least, it has been "filtered" through human beings; Quran, on the other hand, *is* supposed to be the direct word of God, so if it contains even a single untruth or mistake, it is not from God]) - which could not be added on Saturday evening either due to the Roman seal and guard; if this is the case, then it was simply known in advance to everyone interested that the women would appear at the tomb the moment the guard is supposed to be taken down.

So, Joseph and Nicodemus's elegant, albeit risky, plan was a complete success. Although, if you think about it, what did they risk? The only risky part of the plan is the sealing of the tomb, when the disappearance of the body could be detected; so what? On the night from Friday to Saturday anyone could have stolen the body from the unguarded tomb. This, by the way, is where Joseph and Nicodemus's "indirect alibi" would come in handy - after all, in the case of an investigation, it will be possible to prove that the very idea of guarding the burial place belongs to them. Thus even in the worst case they just lose nothing.

What purpose did they pursue in their intrigue, then? This part is also not mysterious. It is quite obvious that in the event of a sufficiently loud scandal, mighty high priests Caiaphas and (his father-in-law) Annas will be on the receiving end of troubles more than anyone else. In 36 A.D., Caiaphas was "relieved of his post" with disgrace and deprived of the title of a high priest, which, as a rule, was lifelong. And who knows, maybe the recent scandal with the disappearance of the body of the Galilean impostor (alternatively - the murder of a holy miracle worker) was the straw that broke the camel's back? The fall of Caiaphas, meanwhile, brought to power a rival Sadducean group, a representative of which was Jonathan, the new high priest; it was this group, apparently, that Joseph and Nicodemus belonged to. Jonathan pursued a more pro-Roman policy than his predecessor, for which he was killed by the Sicarii, as was mentioned before; and Joseph, as we remember, is "*a friend of Pilate* and the Lord". Everything does seem to add up...

A simpler and more straightforward option is also possible. The stolen body was just a tool for blackmail. Either you give us, anonymous blackmailers, forty-five talents in gold, a mansion in Idumea, [insert the correct option]... and then the body will be returned - or else, you will find yourselves in a lot of trouble... If so, there was no deal, and the result is known.

Let McDowell deal with this version further. Personally, I will again use my "right of veto" and just abandon this hypothesis and simply assume no scheming by Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus (even though they are not covered by the honesty presumption) - something that my absentee opponent, unfortunately for him, cannot do.

And here McDowell, apparently, is not to be envied. I have "stress-tested" this version and am yet to find any noticeable weaknesses in it. And if we assume that the last time (with the "Uncrucified Christ" hypothesis) McDowell's ship ran into a stray mine, now the captain seems to have missed an enemy submarine, which greeted him with a

full volley from six torpedo tubes.

THE APPEARANCES OF RISEN CHRIST

Let's now turn to the chronologically last but, of course, most important part of the events - the appearances of Christ after his resurrection. In support of their reality McDowell gives the following rational arguments:

1. It is difficult to imagine that hostile or, at least, skeptical witnesses (which, one has to think, were not in short supply) would have missed an opportunity to expose ridiculous rumors about the appearances of a deceased person as false. Meanwhile, no traces of such revelations have been found in any archives yet.
2. The appearances were witnessed by dozens of people, up to "five hundred brethren" at a time (at the appearance on a mount in Galilee). Is it conceivable that 500 people simultaneously erred or all conspired to lie?
3. People met risen Christ alone and in groups, being in different emotional states, at different times of the day (Magdalene - at dawn, travelers on the way to Emmaus - in the afternoon, the Apostles - in the evening, after dark). This variety of circumstances under which the appearances occurred allows us to reject the hypothesis of "hallucinations", which is a popular handwave "explanation" by skeptics.
4. McDowell draws our attention to the fact that the first appearances of Christ were not to the disciples but to the women. In his opinion, this is an important (albeit indirect) argument against the possibility of falsification: according to the Jewish laws, the testimonies of women had no legal force, and therefore it was completely pointless to arrange any staging for them.

It is easy to see that the persuasiveness of the arguments presented is very different:

1. May McDowell forgive me, but his argument from the absence of contradicting testimonies regarding the resurrection is a paraphrase of a well-known joke from the Soviet times of the "struggle against cosmopolitanism and servilism", which goes like this. Western scientists find a piece of copper wire in an Egyptian tomb of the III millennium BC; on this basis it is concluded that the ancient Egyptians had already mastered telegraphy by then. In response, Soviet scientists responsibly declare that no one has ever found wire in the burial places of the III millennium BC in USSR - therefore, the ancestors of

the Soviet people at that time were already using *wireless* telegraphy. For one thing, how many skeptics are bothered even *now* (let alone when Christianity was incomparably more marginal) to write down and disseminate an explicit debunking of this overtly phantasmagorical story? Doesn't that seem a little superfluous? How many works like this one have you ever seen? (As a reminder, it is a response to the rare absurdity of someone trying to *rationaly prove* a *miracle* - sorry, but it's called *faith* for a reason!) And complete uniformity of the archival data on a certain issue is actually a double-edged sword: here everything depends on the initial premise. For McDowell, raised in a democratic society, such uniformity seems to be a positive argument; to me (a product of Soviet totalitarianism [which is not a good thing but sometimes neither does democracy seem appropriate - for example, when Jesus Seminar votes on the historicity of some statement of Jesus, etc.; sorry, but this is reminiscent of the notorious Indiana Pi Bill - some things, like truth, cannot be determined by democratic vote or majority rule; "most people believe..." or "9 out of 10 doctors recommend..." doesn't actually mean anything - according to statistics, five out of six people enjoy playing Russian Roulette, try to argue with that (and six out of six don't complain)! - what does that tenth doctor have to say? or imagine, for example, that a large crowd is playing chess against a single competent individual, voting for each move, with the most popular one being played; it's really not obvious who would win then - and the one time this actually happened, as the famous game *Garry Kasparov vs. The World*, Kasparov won; and things like philosophy or what we're dealing with here are very much like a chess game - just one wrong move and you're completely out; by the way, there is nothing strange about the timing of the present work either - another example of something that could've been done long ago but nevertheless somehow only appeared very recently and in Russia is the popular game of Mafia (a partial explanation for this is the bias of hindsight - to put it in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, the difference between very good ideas and truly brilliant ideas is that afterwards, very good ideas seem amazing, while truly brilliant ideas seem completely obvious); when faced with something really unclear, human mind is like water spilled on the floor - it goes in every direction and fills every crevice, and thus many people will believe in rubbish in any such situation, but also thus eventually someone might find the truth - and this is yet another argument for the importance of democracy, specifically, free expression and exchange of ideas and views - and at the same time an argument for not being too sensitive to majority views and peer pressure]) such

uniformity automatically suggests, by default, a purposeful “cleaning” of the archives - a common thing! (This point is by no means abstract - as a concrete example, in the Scripture the verse about an angel visiting Jesus for reassurance, Luke 22:43, was commonly omitted because of its Christological inconvenience.) I’ll note in passing: if anything convinces me of the historical authenticity of the Gospel texts and absence of their subsequent editing (at least one that would be present in all the surviving versions), it is precisely the discrepancies and inconsistencies contained in them [having come to this conclusion completely on my own, I have subsequently discovered, with great interest, a similar argument in the already mentioned *Jesus the Unknown* by D. Merezhkovsky].

2. If we rank the known appearances of Christ according to the degree of convincingness of the evidence supporting them, then the appearance to the five hundred people on a mount in Galilee should actually take the place at the very bottom of this list. Any student of psychology (as well as any barker at a fair) can confirm that a crowd of this size can be convinced of anything in no time - unlike each of its constituent people. In social psychology this is called “increase of the suggestive effect in the conditions of a group”, and in common parlance - “herd mentality”; one example of this is the notorious “work” of Kashpirovsky.

By the way, these considerations, among others, are also fully applicable to the Ascension of the Lord, not mentioned by McDowell (and formally not a subject of our analysis). Note also that this episode appears only in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 24:50-52) and in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:2-11), which are based on the testimony of St. Paul, who was not its direct eyewitness (and are both addressed to a certain Theophilus by an author who says - Luke 1:3 - “it seemed good to me, HAVING CAREFULLY INVESTIGATED EVERYTHING FOR A LONG TIME, to write down the events in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus” - hold on, mate, *this can also be an intro to the present Gospel!* - and as to who of us wrote their Gospel after “having investigated everything carefully” you can judge by the fact that the former author includes a description of Jesus literally soaring up into the sky, just like Neo in the ending of *The Matrix* - Acts 1:9-10). Neither Matthew nor Mark (who recorded the testimony of Peter), nor even John (which is completely strange!) - that is, none of the supposed direct participants of the events - contain a description of the Ascension (albeit Mark (16:19) mentions very briefly that Jesus was later “taken up into heaven and sat at the right hand of God” - which arguably does not look like an eyewitness

report, what do you think?). Not very solid for the sole event that's even more mind-bending than the resurrection (or rather, it is one of two such events, alongside the mass resurrection of holy people, who "came out of the tombs, and entered the holy city, and appeared to many", described in Matthew 27:52-53 - ...which definitely happened, no room for uncertainty here at all). And if it didn't occur, what happened to resurrected Jesus - did he eventually die again, like resurrected Lazarus? Or is he still walking among us incognito, like the Wandering Jew or Bulgakov's Woland? [The ending of the Gospel of Matthew seems compatible with this, by the way...] But if it did occur, where exactly did he go (Carl Sagan once remarked on the Ascension that even if Jesus moved with the speed of light he still wouldn't have left the Galaxy by now), what is that place that he *ascended* to? (We're assuming here, unlike the Flat-Earthers, that space isn't fake; but even in the 16th century people didn't know yet that what's up there is not just a few layers of celestial spheres followed by the Abode of God, but the ocean of outer space - this latter idea was first popularized by Giordano Bruno, and that went famously smoothly... Nowadays, however, one can ask something like the following question: does anybody seriously think that for example when two supermassive black holes violently collide a billion lightyears away, etc., this is somehow about us? It's probably not about us - and not a matter of God's decision - any more than say the intricacies of the distribution of prime numbers in the natural sequence are, such as whether the Riemann hypothesis is true or not; at least for the latter, clearly, it's not up to God how it goes, but up to itself.) Or if he "teleported to another dimension" (wait, Heaven is a physical - bodily visitable - self-contained world of its own, existing in parallel with ours?), he could do this - *be raptured* to Heaven, not *ascend* to Heaven - from the "ground level" too, it's not any more convenient to do it from the clouds (cf.: Neo soaring up in the ending of *The Matrix* may be a show of power but it did not help him in any way to get back to the Real World) - why the outright misleading [see also John 20:17] show? [It is worth reminding here that the Ascension of Jesus (and his subsequent Second Coming) is also a basic doctrine of Islam; four billion people believe in it, so it's definitely worth a paragraph. (And as a rule of thumb, if Islam and Christianity both agree on something nontrivial, it is wrong; this also applies to the virginity of Mary, for example.)] Returning to the appearance on a mount in Galilee, I'll note that pertaining to its factual side things are also not at all as smooth as they seem to McDowell (see below).

The arguments (3) and (4), on the other hand, seem to me quite

reasonable. Let us now, taking into account the considerations mentioned by McDowell, analyze in detail all the cases of the appearance of resurrected Christ to the people who knew him personally. It is quite obvious that the testimony of this particular group of witnesses is the weightiest. We will not discuss only the one-on-one appearances of Christ - to Peter and to James the Brother of the Lord, because, firstly, such evidence is less convincing in the legal sense (e.g. we do assume at least that the vision of Paul was non-physical, see below), but more importantly, no details of these appearances are given in the New Testament anyway - there is not much to discuss here. The chronology of the analyzed appearances (like McDowell, I consider this factor to be quite important) is given here according to Farrar.

1. At dawn on the third day after the execution, when the guards who had found the empty tomb went to report this to the high priests, the myrrh-bearing women appeared at the burial site. Entering the open burial chamber, they see “a young man dressed in white clothes. When they were perplexed by this, suddenly two men in shining clothes appeared before them. And when they were in fear, and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said: Do not be afraid, for we know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here: he has risen. Remember that he told you back in Galilee, that the Son of Man must [...] be crucified and on the third day rise again. AND THEY REMEMBERED HIS WORDS. But the angel said: [...] go quickly and tell His disciples that HE HAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD AND IS WAITING FOR YOU IN GALILEE: YOU WILL SEE HIM THERE.” And the women did as they were told.

So, the message of the myrrh-bearing women about the resurrection of Christ is what’s judicially called “hearsay testimony”, in this case, from the words of some “men in shining clothes”. These men, among other things, transmit through the women to the disciples the instructions of a very practical nature: to immediately get out of Jerusalem and spend some time in their homeland, in Galilee. Well, this is highly reasonable: it will be quite “hot” in Jerusalem in the coming days, because the reaction of the angry and frightened high priests might be very harsh; on the other hand, the Sanhedrin cannot reach the Apostles in Galilee.

One circumstance should be specifically mentioned here. The Gospel of Matthew states that Christ himself appeared to the women after the angels. This indication (Matthew 28:9-10), however, seems very strange, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, this episode is an infrequent

case when the stories of the Synoptic Evangelists are discordant. It is hard to imagine that in their reports all the Evangelists - except Matthew - missed an event the importance of which does not need any comments; but more importantly, the other Synoptic texts in fact directly deny this appearance of Jesus to the group of myrrh-bearing women (Mark 16:9 and Luke 24:23). It is also notable that Christ in Matthew's story only said "Greetings", after which he reproduced, almost word for word, the preceding instruction of the angels to go to Galilee (compare Matthew 28:7 and 28:10). Therefore, it can be assumed that the frightened women simply mistook one of the "shining angels" for the Teacher; Matthew, not being a direct witness of the event, simply conscientiously recorded their confused story (or, perhaps it might be a reflection of the appearance to Mary Magdalene, see below).

2. From the report of John (and Mark 16:9) it can be concluded that Mary Magdalene acted separately from the other myrrh-bearing women; she was the first to discover the empty tomb with the stone rolled away and immediately ran to inform the Apostles about it. By the time she, accompanied by Peter and John, returned to the burial place, the other myrrh-bearing women had already left. Having examined the tomb and found only empty burial robes in it, the two Apostles returned to Jerusalem.

"Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying [...] And saw two angels in white, sitting [...] They asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying?' 'They have taken my Lord away,' she said, 'and I don't know where they have put Him.' At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, BUT SHE DID NOT REALIZE THAT IT WAS JESUS. He asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?' THINKING HE WAS THE GARDENER, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get Him.'"

And only after some suggestive addressing did she realize that the person talking to her was Jesus himself.

It's a little strange not to recognize a loved one right away, don't you think so? Well, okay - grief, shock, reduced visibility in twilight... Here's what's more interesting. The white-robed angels, who had talked to the myrrh-bearing women earlier, disappeared as soon as Peter and John arrived; the angels appeared again only after the woman was left alone. And even to convey to the Apostles the Teacher's instructions to go to Galilee, the angels for some reason preferred to relay them through the women and to refrain from telling anything directly to the addressees, John and Peter, who were present

right there!

3. On the same day two disciples of Christ, who were not among the Apostles, were walking along the road to the city of Emmaus.

“And as they talked and reasoned among themselves, Jesus himself came up and went along with them; BUT THEIR EYES WERE KEPT FROM RECOGNIZING HIM.”

After a long (and theologically quite important) conversation among themselves, the three travelers reached Emmaus, where the disciples invited the stranger to share a meal with them. It was then that “their eyes were opened, and, they recognized that the Lord was with them”. What kind of changed appearance must he have had so that the students did not recognize their Teacher - in broad daylight, having a long conversation with him? How are we to understand Mark’s words that Christ “APPEARED IN A DIFFERENT FORM” (Mark 16:12)? What, strictly speaking, certifies that the stranger was indeed Christ? It is no wonder that the Apostles, with whom the two disciples shared their discovery, did not believe them, just like they didn’t believe the women earlier.

4. In the evening of the same day ten of the Apostles, who were hiding from the Judeans, sat in a locked house. Suddenly, Jesus appeared inside this room, “saying: Peace be with you! Having said this, He showed them his hands and feet and his ribs” with wounds. However, he was present not in a perfectly identifiable form: “WHY ARE YOU TROUBLED, AND WHY DO DOUBTS RISE IN YOUR MINDS? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself!” Hmm... “The lady doth protest too much, methinks!”

“WHILE THEY STILL DID NOT BELIEVE IT”, renewed-subscription Jesus also invited them to touch him to show that he is not a ghost either, and then he continued trying to create the right impression in this (easier) direction by eating fish and honey with them. At this meeting, as if by order, there was everyone but Thomas - a skeptic, bothering with his questions and doubts when least needed. Having heard the stories of his comrades about the appearance, he declared (thus creating the phrase “doubting Thomas”):

“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and put my finger into the wound left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe!”

Rereading this scene, it is difficult to get rid of the strange impression that risen Jesus, having begun the first meeting with the Apostles precisely with a demonstration of the wounds, uses them... well, let’s say, as an ID card. On the other hand, if you think about it, what Thomas said also seems rather strange. Why would a normal person

- not a sadist or a KGBist - suddenly decide to stick his fingers into someone's wounds?

Something in the story of his comrades obviously alarmed him, and I think I can guess what it is exactly. He probably asked them - how did the Teacher move? - and, having heard in response: normally, like all people - he realized that something was off. Since the Heavenly Father resurrected Christ in the very flesh that underwent the crucifixion (which is evidenced by the nature of the wounds, as well as by the empty tomb [to clarify the point here, *this* kind of resurrection would not be available, for example, to those victims of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that were evaporated instantly by the nuclear flash, leaving only a characteristic shadow on the stone behind them - they would need a completely new body, like in *Avatar*, or, more precisely, like in *The Medallion*... hmm... come to think of it, then why doesn't this apply to everybody, including Jesus, making the empty tomb unnecessary - except just for show?]), then this flesh, in theory, should behave accordingly. And if it's the same flesh and the same wounds, a very reasonable question arises: what kind of wounds are these if a person who has his ankles pierced with nails the size of a rail spike walks as if nothing has happened?

It is unlikely that anyone among the believers will dare to throw a stone at Thomas - bearing in mind that the question of the nature of the body of the resurrected Christ immediately became one of the most acute theological problems. At any rate, from Saint Paul's long (and, frankly speaking, quite confusing) reasoning (1 Corinth 15:35-54) one can conclude that it is not the directly reanimated - "healed back to life" - earthly flesh; and if so, we're back to square one - what do the wounds have to do with it? It is not surprising that Thomas resolved this conundrum for himself simply and straightforwardly: "I won't believe it until I touch it myself."

There is one more thing here that is not clear to me. Passing through walls and appearing inside a locked room is certainly a privilege of ghosts. However, a spirit cannot eat honey with fish - therefore, this is a creature from the material world. Something doesn't add up here. I personally have nothing against ghosts (especially the ones like the ghost of Hamlet's father, or, say, the murdered samurai from *Rashomon*), but let's nevertheless be minimally consistent and avoid the temptation to change the rules on the go. I can assume that the Evangelist truthfully described his *observations*, but I cannot agree with his *interpretations* - unless the following two hypotheses, taking priority according to Occam's Razor, are refuted:

(1) The apparition was in fact an ordinary real human;

(2) The apparition did not belong to the real world at all, and all its features (including the emphatically “bodily” ones) are equally illusory. 5. Thomas’s wish was granted eight days later. The apostles, now all present, sat in a locked room again. And again Christ appears inside, instilling awe in the Apostles, and, again demonstrating the wounds on his hands and on his side, invites Thomas to touch them. And then comes the most interesting part. Christian commentators write that Thomas really *probed* the wounds of the Lord, after which he believed - finally and irrevocably (for example, Bible Encyclopedia I: 135); here is how Gladkov narrates the Gospel text:

“Suddenly the Lord stood among them and, saying to everyone: peace be with you! turned to Thomas: put your finger here and look at my hands. Thomas obeyed, feeling the nail wounds of his hands with a finger. Then the Lord says to him: Give me your hand and put it in My side, and do not be unbelieving. - The Lord exposed his pierced side, the wound of which was so great that one could put a hand into it. Thomas, having already convinced himself that the hands of the Lord were really pierced with nails, now stretches out his hand to the wound in his side, feels it, and, falling before Him, exclaims: My Lord and my God!”

And here’s what it actually looked like:

“Jesus came when the doors were locked, stood in the midst of them and said: peace be with you! Then he said to Thomas: put your finger here and examine my hands; give me your hand and put it in My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believe. Thomas REPLIED: My Lord and my God!” (John 20:26-28).

That is, there was no wound depth probing in reality [not that if he tried to perform it there would be much risk - “the wounds have partially healed, any questions?” - and indeed, again, they had to, otherwise Jesus wouldn’t be physically walking or breathing, and Thomas knew that], moreover, it seems that there was no touching of the wounds on the part of Thomas at all; he behaved like almost any normal person in his shoes would, and his previous “promise”, as one might expect, was only an expression of emotion. All this could, of course, be considered a secondary detail, if not for one “however”: Christ, let me remind you, was present in an imperfectly recognizable form, and it was the nature of his wounds, his words, and his ability to appear inside a locked house that served as the basis for identifying the person who appeared as Christ. But what these interesting wounds were really like, as it turns out, no one knows.

6. Sometime later, now in Galilee, seven Apostles [by the way, what happened to the other four?] went out to fish at night in the Lake of

Gennesaret (also known as “the Sea of Galilee”), but “they didn’t catch anything that night. And when the morning had already come, Jesus stood on the shore; BUT THE DISCIPLES DID NOT REALIZE THAT IT WAS JESUS.” Following his advice, they cast the net again, this time with great success.

“Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter: this is the Lord. When Simon Peter HEARD THAT THIS WAS THE LORD, he girded himself with his garment [...] and threw himself into the sea. And the other disciples sailed in the boat.”

On the shore there was a campfire and some cooked food - baked fish and bread.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ *AND NONE OF THE DISCIPLES DARED TO ASK HIM, ‘WHO ARE YOU?’, FOR THEY KNEW IT WAS THE LORD.*” (This is then followed by an important dialogue with Peter - “Do you love me?”, “Look after my sheep”.)

Well, well, well... No need to channel Sherlock Holmes for this one!

This *so* does not require any comments that you’ll be surprised to realize that things are *even worse*: they have already met the altered, post-resurrection Jesus (and where are the wounds now, by the way?) twice recently (as reported in particular by the same Evangelist, John, just a few paragraphs before), shared a meal with him, talked to him, and now they don’t recognize him - now it’s “Jesus 3.0”, resembling neither the old Jesus nor even the new Jesus.

Also, this episode is, almost beyond doubt, historical - no one could possibly make up something *this* inconvenient for themselves, nor would it survive as a rumor. This story is literally *crushingly* honest! And so, paradoxically, one can conclude that the disciples really did see someone, presenting himself as Jesus, two millenia ago; this story is so self-authenticating that it’s even a good argument for the historicity of Jesus and the disciples in the first place! Hmm, come to think of it, maybe Tertullian had a point when he said “I believe, because it is absurd”... To slightly rephrase a popular song, “...But then I saw this verse, | Now I’m a believer! | Not a trace | Of doubt in my mind!”

I tried to understand for some time - what does this all remind me of? And suddenly I realized: this is how an orphan is being taught to call the man who adopted him “dad”...

7. Finally, the last appearance mentioned by Farrar was to the Apostles and many others on a mount in Galilee. The fundamental value of such a collective testimony has been discussed above. As for the factual side of the matter, it is as follows:

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where

Jesus had told them to go, and when they saw Him, they worshiped Him; BUT SOME DOUBTED.” (Matthew 28:16-17).

So - the usual.

Summary time. If we appeal to the legal rules so beloved by McDowell, we will be forced to admit the following. IN EACH OF THE EPISODES CONSIDERED, NO COURT WOULD RECOGNIZE THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE PERSON IN QUESTION AS JESUS BY THE PEOPLE WHO KNEW HIM CLOSELY AS HAVING BEEN ACCOMPLISHED. This conclusion has two consequences, which, in my opinion, are rather unexpected:

1. If the appearances of Christ were in fact the product of individual and collective hallucinations (a version undeservedly loved by irreligious commentators), then the witnesses would deal only with their own subconscious projections of the Teacher. For example, take the vision of St. Paul (at that time still a Pharisee and a fierce persecutor of Christians), discussed below: having never seen Jesus in his life, he, nevertheless, immediately understood without a doubt who was talking to him - and likewise later, when he “fell into a trance” (Acts 22:17). Meanwhile, the witnesses’ clear (albeit somewhat veiled) doubts about the authenticity of the resurrected Christ prove that they all (except Paul) dealt not with someone from their subconsciousness but with a real human of flesh and blood. (Whether that person was in fact Jesus is a completely separate question.)

2. I have already had an occasion to remark that in my opinion the incongruities contained in the Gospel texts testify to their authenticity and honesty. And the doubts of the witnesses of the appearances recorded by the Evangelists are the most striking example of such a “guarantee from the contrary”. It is well-known that the bodily resurrection is the key event for Christianity in the whole story of Jesus: “*And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is also in vain*” (1 Corinthians 15:14) [note that the present work also implies rejection of Islam, and on the same grounds that Christians usually reject it - because it gets the story of Jesus fundamentally wrong (not that there aren’t any other arguments - first of all, again, the infinite cruelty of eternally unspeakably torturing God)]. Because of this, it makes sense to assume that it is the discussed group of “oopsie-daisies” that should have disappeared from the Gospels at the very first purposeful editing of the original text. An employee of the Orwellian “Ministry of Truth” who overlooked a mismatch of this gravity would undoubtedly be immediately “vaporized”. [Well, in fact there was one very well-known attempt at precisely this kind of “ideological conformity overwrite”

(i.e. deliberate editing spread to many places and verses, not just a single omission like the reassurance angel verse mentioned above) - namely, replacement of "his parents" with "Joseph and his mother", etc. - but precisely the fact that it wasn't successful, and above all that this is even known, are again strong *positive* arguments.]

Let's now recall what McDowell said about the diversity of the circumstances of the appearances (different numbers of witnesses, various times of day, etc.). Let's still try to find at least something that unites all these events. It turns out that there really is such a common feature: it is POOR LIGHTING. Appearances 2 and 6 took place in pre-dawn twilight, appearances 4 and 5 - in the evening, and furthermore in a locked room. Only appearance 3, on the road to Emmaus (and, possibly, 7, on a mount in Galilee [by the way, it might be noted that it was at first from afar, and afterwards Jesus came up only to the Apostles, so for the five hundred it could even be purely from afar; one may also wonder, can the ending of the Gospel of Matthew describe two different appearances, corresponding to those before and after the appearance to James in Paul's list? - if yes, the first one could be only from afar for all... whatever, though]) took place in bright daylight - and in the case of Emmaus, as we remember, identification was near-absent (and how many in the crowd of five hundred people could be sure that they saw specifically Jesus? - on the other hand, again, they could indeed be sure that they saw *someone*, a real person).

Classifying these events, it is easy to see that the two appearances to the Apostles that took place in Jerusalem differ qualitatively from the other ones. Firstly, only here Jesus clearly and unambiguously names himself, stressing his identity. Secondly, only here he bears the clear evidence of having been on the cross - a characteristic set of wounds. Apparently, precisely as the result of combination of these two factors, resurrected Christ was recognized here with somewhat greater certainty than in the other cases.

There is however also a third distinguishing feature - these two appearances are also the most meaningless ones: Jesus appears only to demonstrate his wounds twice, eat fish with honey, and to reproach the disciples for insufficient faith. And vice versa: all dogmatically important and lengthy speeches were delivered by Christ in the course of two other appearances - on the road to Emmaus and on the Lake of Gennesaret. Here, as we remember, there were no wounds and no due confidence in the identity of the speaker. As they say, "Coincidence?.. I don't think so." And take even just the wounds alone, isn't their story already very interesting? They haven't yet been present on the road

to Emmaus (for is it conceivable that the travelers did not notice such a “detail” during several hours of impassioned discussions, in broad daylight?), then they pop up later - exactly for the two Jerusalem appearances, and by the time of the Galilean appearances they vanish without a trace again...

Let’s now consider the chronological sequence of the appearances under another angle. The first witnesses were women - shocked, grieving, frightened, but, despite all this, still remaining faithful to the executed Teacher; and most of the information that they receive about what is happening comes from some “men in white clothes”. The next appearance is to the two disciples, who are not among the ones closest to Jesus. And only after information about these events reaches the Apostles, and they become mentally prepared, Christ appears to them too. But not to everyone: more skeptically minded Thomas is left out. Only after he is subjected to intense peer pressure by his comrades for a week, the appearance to all eleven Apostles follows. And it is difficult to get rid of the impression that in the course of this second appearance Christ is interested only in Thomas. Isn’t the resulting sequence here very telling: at one end of it are the most agitable and suggestible or least familiar people, and at the other end are those who are the closest and most independently thinking - and each previous rung of this ladder gets an opportunity to psychologically influence the next one? In particular, the appearance to James, Jesus’s brother, came after all the ones discussed above! (On the other hand the appearance to Peter was before the appearance to the full group of the Apostles minus Thomas - doesn’t this look like a very logical “test run”?)

And yet this sequence of Christ’s appearances to various people suffers from certain incompleteness. Or rather, there is a completely inexplicable gap of astronomical proportions in it. Jesus appeared to just about everybody - to a couple of barely familiar disciples going to Emmaus, to “five hundred brethren”, to clearly unloved brother James... there was only one person he did not honor with his visit. His own mother.

This is so beyond comprehension that Gladkov ends his story of the appearances of Christ with the following remarkable piece of reasoning: “According to tradition, Christ appeared to Our Lady before everyone else. The Evangelists do not say anything about this appearance, BUT IT IS DIFFICULT TO ALLOW THE ASSUMPTION that He, having appeared several times to the Apostles, never pleased His mother, who He cared so much about in His death throes on the cross, with His appearance.”

Indeed, it is very difficult to assume such a thing, and yet - we have to. And as for the words "According to tradition...", in this context they look... well, exactly like the magical introductory "As is well-known..." from the ever-memorable "TASS Statements".

There are two more appearances of Jesus that we haven't considered yet: to Paul and Ananias. Unlike the previous ones these were clearly not bodily, by everyone's admission (which, again, is a good argument that the previous ones weren't hallucinations!), but they are extremely important nonetheless - literally as vital for the existence of Christianity as the previous ones: it is widely understood that without Paul, and his preaching to the Gentiles, Christianity would at best be as mighty as for example the mentioned Johannite sect.

It is worth noting that the (first) vision to Paul was sudden, unexpected, and *contrary to his own desires and beliefs* - he was an orthodox Pharisee and on his way to Damascus to persecute some Christians, no less! - and therefore all the more convincing. By contrast, Muhammad had his first vision in the same circumstances that Paul had his second vision - during religious meditation; Paul himself says that he was "in a trance", on the other hand Muhammad got scared, did not understand what was happening to him, and ran to seek reassurance to his wife Khadija. Muhammad's second vision, however, was more like Paul's first vision - sudden and when he was on his way. Both of them heard a voice giving religious instructions, but let's compare the visual components. For Paul, it was nothing but blindingly bright light, he only *heard* Jesus; now, let's give word to Muhammad as to what he *saw* (besides, like Paul, also hearing his interlocutor - in his case, angel Gabriel): "I stood gazing at him moving neither forward nor backward, then I began to turn my face away from him, but towards whatever region of the sky I looked, I saw him as before." (E.g. Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*.) Also genuinely impressive. Which makes sense, in both cases - you've got to really *get* a guy to make him start a world-conquering religion!

What sense can one make of all this? To start with, before the formulation of the Trinitarian doctrine Jesus was often believed to be a great *angel*, thus allowing a complete identification of the visions of at least Paul and Muhammad and likely also Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, and Bahauallah, the founder of the Bahai Faith - plus their angels Jesus, Gabriel, Moroni (the latter, like Jesus, was also a human once), Heavenly Twin, and The Maid of Heaven, correspondingly - as the same rare but real psychological phenomenon; and note that since these revelations are not consistently compatible, a follower of one of them would have no

account for the others - unlike a disbeliever in all religions, who has a uniform consistent explanation. By the way, Joseph Smith is the only one of them who has verifiable *co-witnesses*, the best Paul has is his co-travelers to Damascus who maybe heard something but didn't see anything (Acts 9:7), or maybe saw something but didn't hear anything (Acts 22:9)?.. (It's hard to avoid thinking that the source of their astonishment, perhaps later interpreted incorrectly, was simply what was suddenly happening to Paul.) Of course, Joseph Smith's situation still pales in comparison to the co-witnesses of the "Fatima sun miracle", but it may still be more unique than the others' - perhaps a combo of Paul/Muhammad and "Fatima"? (However, his "creative translations" are another story... By the way, he and Muhammad were really lucky - by contrast, their analog in China has also *really* tried but failed, with tens of millions of lives lost in one of the bloodiest wars in history, similar to World War I in losses - but one that you probably haven't heard about - known to historians as the Taiping religious war. Had he won, China would be a Protestant-ish country, something between Utah and Alabama!)

Okay, but what about Ananias? He was reportedly told by Jesus in a vision to (miraculously!) find Paul and cure him of his temporary blindness, to tell him he is the Chosen One, to instruct him accordingly, and to send him on his world-conquering way (in particular, he was the one who baptized Paul). In the contemporary movie-goer's terms, if Paul is Neo, Ananias is Morpheus. Or rather, Paul is a "neuralization" victim, and Ananias is the Man in Black, giving the appropriate (mis-)instructions after the blinding flash of light that erased the victim's past self..

By the way, Muhammad also had his own Morpheus/Man in Black, perhaps even more crucial than Ananias was for Paul. When, as mentioned above, he ran to his wife, "with his heart beating severely, [and] said, 'Cover me! Cover me!', [Khadija with the children] covered him till his fear was over, [Bukhari 9:87:111 adds here: 'and then he said, 'O Khadija, what is wrong with me?']] and after that he told her everything that had happened and said, 'I fear that something might happen to me.'" (Bukhari 1:1:3) [again, like Jesus Muhammad does not at all create an impression of someone who's inferior in honesty or intelligence to a normal person - and as to his wit, remember also that this man would soon create and rule an empire, from scratch and against all odds; atheist commentators should probably start taking religions and their founders slightly more seriously - if you want to win, you should take your enemy seriously! - and the most common personal objections to Muhammad are (1) that he married his wife

Aisha when she was young; well, the perception of such things differs greatly across times and places, like e.g. that of polygamy or irreligion - for example, according to the famous work of B. Malinowski, on Trobriand Islands girls lose their vaginal virginity at the average age of six years old, while at the same time Trobrianders are absolutely shocked and outraged at the idea of beating kids for discipline - or, for a Western example, in 1880 the age of consent in Delaware, USA, was seven years old - and you might find it relieving to know that Aisha became one of the few female Muslim military leaders in history, from which and other facts about her one may safely infer that whatever happened, Muhammad didn't do anything that would traumatize her, and (2) the "wife-beating verse", about which the following can be said: while the word used in it, *dharaba*, in *later* Arabic only means to hit, during Muhammad's time it also meant to send forth, and a native Russian speaker can't help but wonder whether it could have had the same connotation as the corresponding Russian word, *poslat'*, that is, to say to someone "go f*** yourself" and such? Muhammad himself was quite tender to his wives! - and in general, Muhammad's moral character is arguably even more consistent than Jesus's: contrary to the latter's pronouncements "love your enemies", "turn the other cheek", which he himself did not follow - when he was actually in those shoes himself, his attitude to Judas was quite the opposite, "it would be better for this man if he was never born" - Muhammad taught that a wise man "is not stung from the same hole twice", and followed that)], besides consoling him directly she took him for spiritual advice and guidance to her cousin, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a Christian:

"Khadija said to Waraqa: 'Listen to the story of your nephew, O my cousin!' Waraqa asked, 'O my nephew! What have you seen?' God's Messenger described what he had seen. Waraqa said, 'This is the same one who keeps the secrets [angel Gabriel] whom God had sent to Moses. I wish I were young and could live up to the time when your people would turn you out.' God's Messenger asked, 'Will they drive me out?' Waraqa replied in the affirmative and said, 'Anyone who came with something similar to what you have brought was treated with hostility; and if I should remain alive till the day when you will be turned out then I would support you strongly.'" (Bukhari 1:1:3)

...Have you noticed something odd about this story? It is... not miraculous, at all. And there is little doubt that this is exactly what actually happened. But why - why is there such a difference between it and its direct Christian analog? The answer undoubtedly lies in the fact that it was narrated by aforementioned Aisha, in other words, that the narrator is very close to the source; thus, if we want to dig

up the truth as to what happened to Ananias, we should try to find Paul's own retelling of it - the closer to the origin, the fewer miracles there are. And here's what Paul himself said about his encounter with Ananias:

"Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing there said to me, 'Brother Saul, recover your sight.' And at that very hour I recovered my sight and saw him. And he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth. For you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why are you waiting? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'" (Acts 22:12-16)

So, here's probably what happened: over the three days (Acts 9:9) that elapsed after Paul's astonishing experience, the information about this has spread (you bet it did!), and Ananias, who by the way already knew who Paul was very well (Acts 9:13), made for himself the same conclusions as Waraqa, came to Paul (as door-to-door Christian proselytizers often do even without thinking that you're chosen by God), and voiced them. (And as to "curing blindness", it looks like Paul would've recovered even without Ananias's "moral support" - but Ananias could've certainly fastened it, as this is a very clear case of a psychosomatic problem.)

Note an important subtlety: in Paul's narration, Ananias says that Paul is chosen by "the God of our fathers... to know his will" and "to see [and hear] the Righteous One", whereas in the narration of Theophilus's correspondent, Luke - the guy who has "investigated everything carefully" - it is Jesus himself who tells Ananias *his* will and says that Paul is *his* "chosen vessel" [that's an apt historical characterization of Paul, to be fair] (Acts 9:10-16). But Ananias's words in Paul's narration are - just like you would expect from anybody before Paul - clearly about the will of *God the Father*, not *Jesus*. What's more, isn't there a problem with the idea that Ananias really saw *Jesus* telling him that Paul is the man chosen to see Jesus?... Imagine, for example, that you wake up in a UFO surrounded by aliens, who tell you to relay a very important message to your neighbor - that he is the man selected to be directly contacted by aliens; you would probably rightfully wonder - hold on, guys, and what's *this*? In short, there is in fact a direct, if subtle, tension between Paul's narration and the idea that Ananias had a vision of Jesus. Finally, Paul explicitly states, "and last of all, as to one abnormally born [into the faith], He appeared also to me" - not to Ananias (who isn't

mentioned before Paul in the list either).

...Whew, that was the last one! Don't ever believe anybody who says that religion is intellectually boring! But... we're not done yet. You may rightfully wonder, after having read all of the above: okay, suppose you can explain the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances [see the next part of this work, in particular], and Paul's vision, and Peter's vision (crucially convincing him - 2 Peter 16-18, "...We did not follow cunningly crafted stories... but we were eyewitnesses to His majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when a voice borne to Him by the Majestic Glory proclaimed... We ourselves heard this voice"), but *aren't there far too many bloody coincidences here, mate?* And the answer to that is... yes, there are - and that's "not a bug, but a feature". Let me explain.

The simple unpleasant truth is, that is how cancer and new powerful viruses and infections originate, and Christianity is no exception (the formative chain of hosts with unlikely mutations at each jump, in this case, is Jesus - Peter & co. - Paul). And no matter how unlikely their origin is, we do hear about them, because they *spread*. Furthermore, in the case of the origin of a major religion, this effect is double-boosted, because they aren't as transient (as, for example, the Spanish Flu pandemic, which naturally "dissolved" eventually) - like AIDS, once they appear, major religions tend to *stay*; so all it takes is one "winning lottery ticket" (or rather, one "perfect storm") across space and time for us to be now staring at a powerful religion originating through a chain of unlikely coincidences. The same two considerations also apply, for example, to the origin of life - a highly unlikely event! [Speaking of which, a natural guess decreasing the improbability of the appearance of the first cell, its "irreducible complexity", is that living things added one dimension at a time, from RNA strands to membrane-based forms that then warped into closed bubbles - the first proto-cells.] To be fair, in this specific example, the origin of life, there is also another "probability boost" - the so-called anthropic selection effect, which may or may not be more important than the others; in any case, the point is that there are environments where due to some selection effect you'd *expect* to see something *unlikely*. Imagine, for example, that the winner of some major lottery automatically became the king; then the throne would rarely be empty, even though becoming the king is exceedingly unlikely in any particular case - but we would certainly hear about those few unlikely cases. As an example from real life, in Japan there are popular memoirs by (very few) *ex-kamikaze* who were prevented from completing their missions by chains of unlikely coincidences, and

thus were able to survive and write memoirs about being a kamikaze - which, you bet, would be interesting and would become popular. This point is nontrivial; for example, what *would* still be strange is concurrent presence of equally unlikely events and coincidences *not* essential for Christianity's appearance, survival, and spread - say, if the resurrection of Lazarus required something not completely ho-hum. By the way, given the prior events, just how unlikely was the vision of Paul? The rarity of such a phenomenon itself was already commented upon - namely, it's very rare and very impressive, but not singular - now let's consider its timing. It is usually assumed that Paul's conversion happened 4 to 7 years after Jesus's death; this means that life had opportunities to "toss the dice". In other words, if it wasn't Paul, it is not implausible that sometime later someone else out there would suddenly feel a burning urge to preach Christianity to the Gentiles - and with the inherent firepower Christianity already had, again, "all it takes is one". (Recall also that his vision had no "video" - it had just enough to *get* him, but no further, "gratuitous", unlikely bells and whistles than that, in accordance with the point made above.) Likewise, one would guess that a spontaneous religious "wow" moment, like the one experienced by Peter, is not something unique among devout sectarians - nor is the doctrinal substance of Christianity something qualitatively unique, vice versa, it is something that tends to "convergently re-evolve" (reappear), like crabs (or, say, the likes of Muhammad and Joseph Smith), cf. Madhvacharya's Dvaita [speaking of Eastern religions, we didn't have much occasion to discuss them above, but this should not create an impression that they are any sounder or wiser; it is particularly incomprehensible how such a life- and joy-denying, soul-crushing, nihilistic doctrine as Buddhism gets such wholly undeserved respect in the West - there is literally nothing good to its name! ...except, of course, the practice of *karmamudra* and pretty much everything about Drukpa Kunley, what a man! - but Buddha himself definitely made wrong - *degenerate* - conclusions from seeing suffering [incomparably more degenerate than lighthearted hedonism, by the way; almost everyone likes to worship something, but out of (1) God, (2) Emperor, and (3) Kim Kardashian's buttocks, for example, does anybody seriously think that the third option is *not* by far the least annoying, jokes aside - and is not really a cultural evolution achievement? - worship of pretty people is genuinely probably the only healthy form of worship], a much healthier attitude, for example, is "well, the better - the better!"; and by contrast with Christianity or Islam, Buddhism is based on nothing but one person's PTSD!]; what is really unique is, of course, the resurrection of Jesus.

THE THIRD WARNING TO MCDOWELL: "RED CARD"

And this is it. Our story has come to that moment when Rex Stout gathers all his heroes in the office of Nero Wolfe so that the latter can expose the killer, causing a particularly emotional reader to exclaim: "How did I not think of it myself!" In accordance with the canons of the classic detective story, the author does not hide any aces up his sleeve: the reader knows all the facts, so, no doubt, many have already put this puzzle together.

As for the others, they have no choice but to get acquainted with a certain manuscript, the authenticity of which, however, has not yet been confirmed by the experts. It has spent almost twenty centuries in a sealed jar, accidentally found recently by speleologists from Ben-Gurion University while studying one of the karst caves near Jerusalem. The author of this manuscript was once brought to life by the sheer power of Bulgakov's genius. As it turned out now, he has found a completely independent life, miraculously retaining all the features that the Master had once endowed him with. So, I give the floor to "the man who never parted with his hood" - the head of the secret service under the procurator of Judea, military tribune Afranius. [In his study *From Observations on the Motivational Structure of M. A. Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita* (Daugava, 1989, N1: 78-81) on the basis of a number of textual arguments B. M. Gasparov directly identifies Afranius with... Woland. In his opinion, "the head of the secret guard" is just the Jerusalem mask of Satan, exactly like "a professor of black magic" was one in Moscow. However, a number of serious objections can be raised against such an identification. For example, I can imagine Woland - the "free son of aether" - in various guises, but certainly not as a representative of the service class; Afranius, meanwhile, expresses himself quite definitively on this subject: "I have been working in Judea for fifteen years, procurator. I began my service under Valerius Gratus." From my point of view, Gasparov's version is interesting mainly as a reflection of the modern person's tendency to demonize the secret services. Andrzej Wajda's postmodern Afranius, who has swapped his hood and sword for dark glasses and a pistol in a shoulder holster, looks much more convincing.]

Secret Service of the Empire. Jerusalem residency.

Antioch. To Proconsul of Syria Vitellius. Strictly confidential.

Proconsul!

Some time ago I developed and, with verbal consent of Procurator Pilate, carried out a secret operation under the code name "Ichthys". Presently the main phase of this operation can be considered successfully completed; I would even say - too successfully completed, because if its progress and results become known in Rome, we will both lose our heads. There is also no doubt that a leak of information on "Ichthys" - should it occur in the next two or three years - would have objectively catastrophic consequences for the eastern policy of the Empire. Putting myself in the place of the Procurator, I must honestly admit that the situation is so serious that a sudden death of the initiator and direct leader of the operation would be the best way out of it. However, as you can easily guess, I have a drastically nonconcordant opinion on this question, and I am going to defend it by all means available to me.

The Procurator has already been informed that there is a detailed account of the course of the operation, which in the event of my untimely death or arrest will immediately fall into the hands of interested parties. Your receipt of this document means that the Procurator did not heed the warning and I am already dead - stabbed to death by "Jewish terrorists", poisoned by unfresh oysters, or executed for spying for Parthia, India, or Atlantis. On the other hand if the Procurator shows prudence, this document will never leave the place in the vicinity of Jerusalem where it is hidden. It seems to me that the indicated circumstances make the humiliating oaths - "to tell the truth, and only the truth, etc.", unnecessary - there is no reason for a dead man to lie...

About three years ago our service carried out Operation Centaur, a massive planting of our agents into the organizations of the Zealots, which have grown and multiplied immeasurably in the Galilean territory in recent years. Among others, special agent Demiurge was then put in Galilee. A Judean by origin, according to the legend developed for him he had to act under the name of Judas bar Simon, a native of Keriioth, a provincial town: this minimized the risk of

stumbling upon a “fellow local” when performing a task.

“Judas” (as I will also call him) at first had the task of joining the entourage of one of Galilean wandering preachers, which is not difficult. Having established strong relationships with the radicals that all these sects are teeming with, and having secured the appropriate recommendations, the agent was to proceed to the second phase of infiltration - now directly into the conspiratorial structures of the Zealots. From then on, Judas was to stop all contacts with our Galilean residency, because the security service of the Zealots is very vigilant and quite competent.

Acting completely autonomously, he had to build up his authority among the Galilean extremists - for a year, two, or as long as needed. With this kind of infiltration, everything should be serious; in particular, Judas had a sanction to carry out terrorist attacks against representatives of the local, and, if strictly necessary, imperial military administration.

Upon reaching the proper rung of the hierarchy of the underground, he had to carefully and unobtrusively convince the leadership of the organization that it was stupid not to use his knowledge of the situation in Judea and extensive connections there. In the end, Judas would return to his homeland, having the necessary authority to organize a permanent communication channel between the Galilean and Judean organizations of the Zealots, and potentially even to become the coordinator of their joint actions. This seemed so important to us that Judas was ordered not to be distracted by any other, even the most tempting, possibilities (for example, infiltrating the security service). For the initial infiltration, we chose - more or less at random - the sect of certain Jesus of Nazareth, also called Jesus Christ by his supporters, that was operating in Capernaum.

The task, as you can see, was very difficult, but I estimated the chances of success at about two to one. Demiurge was the best local agent that I have ever worked with - determined, cool-headed, and extraordinarily lucky. He was technically well-prepared (with skills in conducting and avoiding surveillance, disguise, managing communication systems and places for hiding things, weapon use and hand-to-hand combat techniques), but most importantly, he had an innate gift of instantly charming and prepossessing in his favor a wide variety of people. He began his service in the auxiliary units of the special forces on the Parthian border, composed of the locals. The guy was devilishly cunning, and most importantly he was not afraid of blood, so he soon began to be used as a penetrator (raiding agent) in reconnaissance and sabotage operations inside the enemy territory. The life of a penetrator

is usually short, like his Syrian sword, but Demiurge was lucky. Once he got an opportunity to demonstrate his artistic talent to me, and he did not miss his chance. From that day on, he was used exclusively to infiltrate Judean radical groups; I find it difficult to even count how many extremists over the past five years have to thank the amazing charm of Demiurge for having lost their lives, Proconsul.

It cannot be said that he was completely devoid of flaws - although, on the other hand, it's not so obvious as to what to consider a flaw in the first place... The thing is that Demiurge has never hidden that he worked solely for the sake of money, and the day when he accumulates an amount sufficient to retire and start merchant business (under a new name) somewhere in Alexandria or Cyprus will be the last day of our cooperation. Personally, this clarity in our relationship was perfectly fine with me. Like any intelligence agent, I can't stand those who cooperate with our service out of ideological motives: these people always tend to throw a tantrum at the most inopportune moment or suddenly start playing Vestals. Demiurge, on the other hand, worked for money and, I can assure you, his work was worth his salary to the fullest and even more. It is, by the way, almost the same as the salary of a clerk of the city government, but the nature of the work is somewhat different: the corpses of the agents who fell into the hands of Zealot security service are usually not a sight for the faint of heart... In short, Demiurge loved money, knew his worth as a professional, and believed that he was underpaid (to be honest, not without a reason). Studying reports of the agents during the initial phase of Operation Centaur, I came across an unremarkable report by Judas/Demiurge. He reported that he had an unfortunate hitch at the start. There are indeed quite a few Zealots in the sect of Jesus of Nazareth, but all of them have completely lost contacts with their former organizations, allegedly under the influence of the Teacher's sermons, and therefore they are now of no operational interest. In this regard, Judas asked for a sanction for his departure from the Nazarene and for an independent search for another sect for the initial infiltration.

...My old friend Poliktetos of Antioch, a wonderful sculptor, has once laconically described to me the state of mind of an artist that occurs when a thing that you struggle with weeks upon weeks suddenly reveals itself to you - completed to the very last detail.

"Well, my Artemis is almost ready; there is virtually nothing left - just to sculpt her... No, I'm completely serious. It's just that the gods have already done their part of the work, and I can handle the rest myself!" And I have suddenly experienced something similar myself while reading Judas's report. I realized that I had been waiting for this

message for several years - ever since the first appearance in my mind of a vague outline of a grandiose covert operation, capable of changing - to the better - the entire political alignment in Palestine. Well, the gods seemed to have done their part; now it was time to get down to business.

Having dug up our service's materials on Jesus and his sect, I quickly realized that with respect to what I was interested in all these dossiers were worthless. There was nothing I could do here; I had to personally go to Galilee under the guise of a Greek merchant from Decapolis. The risk, of course, was immense, but I could not entrust this to any of my subordinates for reasons of secrecy. I was even covered by the operatives of the Samaritan residency, whose leadership had no idea about the nature of my mission. After having spent five days at the location studying the situation around the sect, listening to the sermons of its head, and even having a personal conversation with him, I was convinced of the correctness of the choice I had made. Upon my return to Jerusalem, I submitted a top-secret report to the Procurator, after which I took Judas out of Operation Centaur, reassigned him to be directly under my personal supervision, and provided him with the most secure line of communication and support that our service had in Galilee. Thus, Operation Ichthys began.

I need not explain to you, Proconsul, that all our decades-long attempts to stabilize the situation in Palestine and to incorporate this arrogant and quarrelsome people into the Empire are purely palliative. It is possible, of course, to just continue to methodically catch and hang terrorists - one by one, by dozens, and if necessary - by hundreds, but this, you see, is simply scooping water out with a sieve. The atmosphere of nationalistic psychosis and religious fanaticism created in the country by its "spiritual fathers" will continue to reproduce extremists with the same relentlessness with which marsh miasmata produce fever. The "special rights of God's chosen people" are a wonderful foundation for the internal unity of the Sadducean "pragmatists" with the orthodox Pharisees and political radicals of all stripes. There is a certain number of intellectuals oriented towards liberal cosmopolitan values among the local elite, but their political influence is small and unlikely to increase in the foreseeable future. Many of them are also compromised by their active collaboration with the Hellenized (and therefore extremely unpopular) Idumean dynasty. Looking at this gloomy situation one way and another, I realized that we have one and only one chance to finally get out of the deep defensive. This chance is the appearance on the political scene of Palestine of an influential religious leader who would preach the

renunciation of violent actions and the transfer of the natural (alas, this is so, Proconsul) confrontation of the Jews with the power of the Emperor exclusively to the sphere of ideology and morality. This leader should not be in any way connected with the official hierarchy, which, in the opinion of the people (not too fair), is fed from Rome's hands; it is most logical to look for such a figure among sectarians and wandering preachers.

It may turn out that in time he will become the true spiritual leader of the nation, and maybe even - you never know - the head of the official church; however, this possibility is unlikely, and one should not seriously count on it. On the other hand, another outcome is quite realistic: having entered into an inevitable confrontation with the Judaic Orthodoxy in the course of his preaching, the new prophet - if he is sufficiently popular - will split the religiously monolithic Jewish society. In the future, we will be able to carefully deepen the crack that has arisen, while acting as an arbitrator in the inevitable "inter-confessional" litigation.

It is quite obvious that a leader who is promising in this respect should be provided with purposeful support; it is also obvious that this support must be strictly secret, because the dangers here lie in wait for us literally everywhere. You can judge for yourself, Proconsul. Firstly, the official Jewish authorities: they will undoubtedly regard the attempt to promote an opposition sectarian checker to a king as a clear treachery on the part of Rome and will react accordingly. Secondly, the Zealots: having heard that a certain preacher enjoys special favor of the Roman authorities, they will immediately, without saying a bad word, cut his throat. Thirdly, the highest administration and the imperial court: you can easily imagine, Proconsul, how practical assistance to "subversive elements" would be regarded in Rome and Capri - we'd be lucky if not as direct state treason. And, last but not least, this assistance should be provided in such a way that the religious leader himself never has even a shadow of suspicion that he is a piece in someone's game - otherwise the whole operation will instantly go down the drain. In our professional slang, this is called "being played blind" - one of the most difficult types of undercover combinations.

Frankly, it was this last problem that worried me most of all when I finally decided to place my bet on Jesus - a man who is exceptionally honest and at the same time (a rare combination!) very insightful. However, I found a possible fundamental solution fairly quickly and immediately gave the corresponding instructions to Demiurge. After several months he reported that the task had been completed: he

managed to gain Jesus's trust and become the bearer of the money box and the actual manager of the community's finances - and I sighed with relief; in particular, the problem of a permanent funding channel was now solved.

Now Judas had to act in a rather unusual role for him - as a guardian angel. From now on, he resolved all the financial and other practical problems of the community, protected it from local secret police agents, but most importantly, he was responsible for the personal safety of Jesus (in case the Zealots or the high priests, having finally seen through his teaching, organize an assassination attempt). However, Judas also had one more delicate task: if the Nazarene suddenly started calling for a "holy war with the Roman occupiers", he would immediately be eliminated...

Be that as it may, Judas gradually acquired a high status in the community, and with respect to being someone controlling the practical aspects of its activities he became second only to Jesus himself. He also had enough to do outside the sect: actively shaping public opinion, he not only spread fantastic rumors, but also staged various "miracles" himself. By the way, it was precisely the imitations of healings, organized in abundance by Judas, that were listed as the main expense item in the budget of Operation Ichthys.

The operation progressed well. Jesus's popularity grew rapidly, and within just three years he had indeed become one of the most influential religious leaders in Palestine. Moreover, the differences between his teaching and classical Judaism were rapidly deepening, and I watched with amazement as a new religious doctrine was being born right before my eyes - a doctrine that did not disappoint me in anything, Proconsul! Meanwhile, the high priests clearly overlooked the danger and hopelessly missed the moment when the opponent could still be strangled in the cradle. Now they had no choice but to organize the indignation of the crowd when Nazarene visited Jerusalem or to try to arrest him. This was done extremely clumsily and, of course, only increased Jesus's popularity. He, however, did not remain in debt himself (take, for example, expelling of money changers from the temple!), so his Jerusalem pilgrimages were a constant headache for our service. Once the situation became so heated that we had to arrange an urgent evacuation of Jesus (by anonymous "supporters").

The increased popularity of Jesus also had one consequence that I did not foresee: representatives of the liberal wing of the Sanhedrin began to establish contacts with him. At first, the reports about this did not arouse the slightest delight in me. The aforementioned liberals are the subject of my separate concern (whether good or bad, they are still

some counterbalance to the “hawks” in the Judean leadership); as a result of their forming cordial relations with the Nazarene, there was a danger that all the eggs would turn out to be put in one basket. However, having weighed up all the “pros” and “cons”, I decided to take a certain risk and not interfere with these spontaneous contacts; after all, Jesus and Nicodemus (a liberal member of the Sanhedrin particularly fond of Jesus) are political figures, not illegal agents. Firstly, most curious cumulative effects could be expected from such a connection. Secondly, I got the opportunity to provide emergency assistance to the Nazarene ostensibly on behalf of an influential Judean group, making it possible to avoid unnecessary questions; this is how, for example, the aforementioned evacuation was presented to him.

Unfortunately, one serious complication arose. Another prophet was preaching in Judea at that time - John, nicknamed the Baptist. This fundamentalist, more orthodox than the Pharisees, enjoyed great popularity among the common people, and the Judean authorities treated him with cautious reverence. And so for some time a spontaneous experiment was taking place before our eyes, set up on the banks of the Jordan River by life itself - parallel preaching of two strong religious leaders. Alas! Almost immediately it became clear that we wouldn't get anything nice here: Judeans found the furious accusatory style of their fellow countryman much more to their liking. Of course, rivalry immediately arose between the sects. And while Jesus and John themselves considered it necessary to stay within the bounds of decency, their disciples were excited about any opportunity to battle it out for the glory of their Rabbis, influencing the rest of the flock accordingly. It was as clear as daylight that in the very near future the situation would escalate and the competition would develop into an open confrontation - a confrontation that was completely hopeless for Jesus. I had no choice but to intervene in the natural course of events and *isolate* John; in fact, he was already a pain in our necks even without that, but it was actually not so easy to get to him. Arresting the Baptist in the name of the Emperor and then quickly executing him on charges of anti-Roman propaganda was out of the question: such “fraternal help” would stain Jesus in a way that would never be washed off. And it was practically impossible to achieve the condemnation of John by the Sanhedrin: the Pharisees openly sympathized with him, and the Sadducees were afraid to get involved; any attempt to put pressure on them through the Procurator simply returned us to our original position. In addition, the Procurator himself categorically objected to even temporary detention of the prophet in custody on the territory entrusted to him - justifiably

fearing mass riots. It was in principle possible to organize an attempt at his assassination, but the Baptist, as I knew for sure, had a sufficient number of secret admirers in the police and intelligence services of Judea who were quite capable of conducting an independent investigation - and that's even if it goes smoothly, what if it doesn't? The situation on the Jordan river was heating up, and then on top of that, as bad luck would have it, I received an order from the Procurator to go to Galilee on a diplomatic mission. But then it suddenly dawned on me: this was a blessing in disguise. Leaving my deputy with the necessary instructions, I left for Tiberias the same day. During the negotiations that began there, I told Herod that we were already fed up with the promises of the Galilean leadership to stop the terrorist activity of the local Zealots - "right today after the lunch!":

"It is quite clear to us that all the armed forces of Galilee are now engaged in a border conflict with Aretas of Arabia. Due to this circumstance, I am authorized to declare that Rome is ready to help the local authorities and provide them with urgent international assistance in clearing the territory from gangs; two special forces cohorts have already been trained and are ready for redeployment and can start their services even tomorrow."

Herod quite reasonably objected that the Roman authorities would do well by first putting things in order on their own territory - in Judea. For example, on his territory he would have never in his life tolerated the bandit army of Eleazar or subversive propaganda - like the one that is conducted by notorious John the Baptist, with full connivance of the Sanhedrin and the Roman Procurator. After that, the tetrarch, as expected, uttered a series of heartfelt wishes about the future fate of the Baptist - both in life and afterlife (as this brilliant orator had long chosen Herod as one of the main targets of his denunciations).

...Having sent an urgent dispatch to Jerusalem, I spent the next three days in forced idleness; I conducted some pointless "consultations" with local police officials (a couple of them weren't even quite sure what the word "Zealot" meant) but mainly paid tribute to the local wine and especially palace dancers. The wine was too rough for my taste; the girls, on the contrary, were absolutely delightful, alternating their refined dances with even more exquisite caress... (This pastime, by the way, gave me a certain idea as to how to whitewash Herod later.) By the end of the third night I received the expected encryption and in the morning I was again having an audience with Herod.

Smiling radiantly, I told him that the Roman leadership had taken into account the wishes of the Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, expressed

in the last conversation, and had made a gesture of goodwill. The notorious John, nicknamed the Baptist, was captured last night and taken to the territory of Perea, to the distant front-line fortress of Machaerus. So, Herod's long-time offender is delivered to him, tied with a silk ribbon, and the tetrarch can deal with him as he pleases. Would His Eminence like to revisit the issue of the immediate conduct of anti-insurgency operations on the territory of Galilee by Roman special forces?

I diplomatically kept silent about the fact that the capture group was outfitted in the uniform of the Galilean police, and the garrison of Machaerus, consisting mainly of Decapolis Greeks, was deliberately misled by us. Herod, however, had more than enough already; after picking up his jaw back from the floor, he yelled:

"So you decided to make me the fall guy?!"

I just spread my hands in perplexion ("But we just wished to do the best..."), waiting for him to come to his senses.

In any case, you have nowhere to go, my dear. In such cases, the fishie doesn't swim backwards: to imprison a person is nothing, but to release him back is very difficult... After all, this is either an admission of one's own mistake, or an admission of impotence; it's better to get rid of him altogether, because, as is well-known, no person means no problem! (However, had Herod suddenly gone for such foolishness as the release of John, the latter would still have not gone far from the fortress gates of Machaerus, that's something we would have taken care of.) Finally, the tetrarch pulled himself together and firmly declared:

"Pretty clever - two skins from one cat! But such jokes will not work with me, tribune; if you want to *bargain*, let's talk about the price."

The further negotiations were quite constructive.

As time passed, when the first indignation of the Jewish public about the arrest of the Baptist subsided, he was quietly beheaded, and we began to gradually work on the public opinion, spreading two legends. Firstly, we tried to whitewash Herod as much as possible, passing the lion's share of the blame on Herodias - thanks to John she had already had bad reputation. Secondly (and this is much more important), we were trying to persuade everyone that John allegedly recognized Jesus as the Messiah and in general considered himself "unworthy to untie the lace on his shoe". This was the first active measures campaign carried out in the course of Operation Ichthys; they have all been quite successful.

So, there was every reason to expect that in five or six years the fruit would ripen, and we would have a "third force" in Palestine which

we would be able to rely on. Everything was going so smoothly that I ignored the first wake-up call that sounded about six months ago. One day Jesus reached into the money box and discovered a pile of silver, which had been forwarded to Judas only the day before. The community demanded explanations, and, of course, they received them - quantum satis. Just like for any cynical business executive, it was not difficult for Judas to confuse his "fellow believers", who were not very literate in debits and credits - especially since the question was not about shortage but about surplus. Jesus himself, however, was clearly not satisfied with these explanations; he seems to have begun to suspect that his "minister of finance" was engaged in some kind of side business under the shadow of the community - perhaps he began to take payments for healings, or something else. Judas made titanic efforts to regain the trust of the Teacher, but it seems that he did not succeed in restoring the status quo.

And then came a catastrophe, the seeds of which, as it turned out later, I sowed with my own hands. This spring Jesus made his usual Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem. I don't know myself what led me to this strange idea - to slip him a couple of real, not fake paralytics for healing; you can think whatever you want, Proconsul, but they got up and walked. I have heard many times about such things done by oriental magicians, but I should admit that, personally, I had never believed in these stories (our service sometimes manages to perform even much more impressive "miracles"). Here, however, there was nothing to say - I chose the paralytics myself. And in fact even the Pharisees always agreed that the Nazarene does heal, but he heals "by the power of Beelzebub"; well, so what even if so! I'm not a theologian, and I don't care what the source of these healings is, it only matters if it's a scam or not. This became important for me for the following reason: in the next report by Judas, both of my paralytics were included in the general list along with all other imitations of miracles... It was then that I remembered the pile of money we had sunk into the Galilean stagings; what if the healings there (or at least some of them) were also genuine? I called Judas to the safe house and politely asked him to comment on the story of my paralytics. He immediately realized which way the wind was blowing; at first, he tried to play the fool (you see, he doesn't remember - just like that - to whom the accountable money was paid), and then he changed his tactic and began to feed me an entertaining story that he had clearly just made up. All the missing money was allegedly invested by him in the organization of some grandiose "miracle", which would very soon occur in the vicinity of Jerusalem. So, the diagnosis was clear: the guy went nuts

from contemplating the stream of silver flowing through his hands. It was imperative to immediately remove him from the operation and court-martial him for the theft of government money. Had I done so, Proconsul, the operation could have rolled on, and Judas himself, by the way, would have remained alive. Alas! Having disobeyed my inner voice and keeping in mind his former impeccable service, I decided to give him a chance to expiate his misdeed. Judas used this chance with brilliance: upon having gotten completely confused and failing the operation, he did not find anything better than to commit a betrayal; he got the Nazarene executed, died himself, and now, presumably, has also killed me. Talk about “not as planned”!

Be that as it may, about a week later, a rumor spread around Jerusalem bazaars that a great miracle had happened in the village of Bethany, on the Mount of Olives. In the presence of dozens of witnesses, Jesus of Nazareth resurrected a well-known and respected man named Lazarus, who had died four days earlier. I calmed down, but, as it turned out, this was completely wrong, because from that moment on the whole operation started slowly rolling down right into the abyss.

Later, of course, I did a thorough investigation and found out that Judas, as one might expect, was destroyed by his greed. Everything would have been fine if he had hired the proper number of crooks to organize his “miracle” and properly paid them for their work (I personally viewed this story in that way). Judas, however, decided to save money - this is much better than bringing back from his stash and using the silver that was “honestly stolen” from me, right? - and involved normal people in his staging, expecting not without reason that they would do the same work for free. Lazarus’s entire family consisted of ardent supporters of Jesus; I think that it was not too difficult for Judas to convince them to commit this deceit - for a noblest purpose, of course - especially since he was just amazingly good at *working* with women. Unfortunately, everything went on according to the textbook scenario “greed did him in”: Judas somehow lost sight of the fact that a blow between the shoulder blades should first of all be expected from honest people.

And so it happened. The disciples, most of whom easily realized that they were dealing with a scam, subjected the Bethany family to ostracism. Lazarus’s sisters took this very hard and began to ask Judas to intercede for them before his fellow believers by taking part of the blame on himself. Judas realized that the case was starting to reek of expulsion from the community, which was a complete disaster for him. It is winners who are grinners, but an agent gone up in flames who

also stole could hardly count on lenience. For some time he managed to maneuver, delaying a decisive conversation, but on the evening of a certain Wednesday, corresponding to the early hours of the 14th of Nisan according to the Jewish calendar, after “anointing” Jesus the sisters presented Judas with an ultimatum: either he himself would tell the community about his role in the resurrection of Lazarus, or they would do it for him. Judas realized that everything was over, and it was time to quit the game; to win a little more time he promised them to do it, and then, leaving the meal, he went straight to High Priest Caiaphas.

Yes, he has accompanied notorious Jesus of Nazareth for a long time. Now, however, the veil has fallen from his eyes; he realized that this Galilean troublemaker, not knowing what he was doing, was leading the Jewish people to rebellion and bloodshed, right onto the Roman swords. Yes-yes.

“It is better for us that one man should die for the people, than for the whole nation to perish.” Brilliantly said, Your Holiness, is it one of the ancient prophets? You yourself?! Truly happy are the people who have such shepherds!.. Well, of course, it would be pure madness to arrange an open trial - here one will find oneself up to one’s ears in... trouble, no matter how it ends. However, between the arrest and trial, all sorts of unexpected things can happen to a person; and the arrest itself... how should I put it... opens up various *possibilities* - such as an escape attempt or armed resistance... No, in Jerusalem, right on the streets, this is, of course, impossible - and what for? After all, he has a habit of stopping with his close disciples for the night outside the city, in silence and solitude... In what places? Ha! Well... You, Your Holiness, should keep a guard of loyal people at hand every night for a couple of days, and everything else is my problem; yes, I think we’ll be done in a day or two. Just be careful, Your Holiness, because right here in the Sanhedrin you have some... uh-huh, exactly. No, I don’t need any money. And no again, no hiding - on the contrary, I wish to receive official gratitude from the Sanhedrin; and some personal security - for a little bit...

Of course, I cannot reproduce this conversation verbatim, but I guarantee that it was something close enough. And I must honestly admit: this scoundrel unmistakably found the only loophole that allowed him - in a favorable scenario - to get away with everything. Judge for yourself, Proconsul.

What opportunities did Judas have in general? To give up (“let everything go as it’s going”) and be doomed to wait for a trial and sentence for embezzlement - we will of course discard this without

considering: not the right kind of person for that. The most obvious idea is to quietly leave and, after digging up the accumulated money, to disappear into the hustle and bustle of big Middle Eastern cities - unfortunately, this is also not an option: our service really does not like such jokes. To spend the rest of his life listed on the All-Imperial Wanted List, constantly changing cheap hotels and being scared by his own shadow is even worse than serving the punishment that he would face under the first option. In principle, there could be another exotic way out: to disappear into the Zealot underground, starting a career as a religious fanatic and "honest terrorist". But in this case, as you might guess, we would find a way to bring authentic materials about Judas's previous exploits in the field of combating terrorism to the attention of the Zealots.

Of course, it's possible to flee to the territories that are in the sphere of influence of Parthia, but this choice would bring Judas its own problems. The entire Euphrates border area is extremely tightly controlled by the Parthian counterintelligence; for him to live there illegally means to be impaled as an active Roman agent in no time, which is completely stupid. What remains is an open surrender; in this case, long exhausting checks await the defector. And I would estimate Judas's chances to pass them very pessimistically: his true story, unfortunately, looks just like a standard legend for infiltration. But let's even assume that the defector would convince the investigators of his sincerity and thus avoid execution. Do you think this would be the end of his misadventures ("on to freedom with a clear conscience", so to speak)? What likely awaits him then is simply re-recruitment with subsequent transfer back to his native Palestine with an extremely dangerous or bloody task (for example, as a so-called "unreturnable agent" - a carrier of misinformation). The peak of dreams, isn't it? However, all the above considerations on the "Parthian" version are purely speculative anyway. The problem here is the nature of the operations on the Parthian border with which commando Demiurge once began his career. Some of them left such a memory that, if I were in his shoes, I would risk returning to those places only after unsuccessfully trying all the other corners of the Oikumene as a refuge, including the vent of Vesuvius...

So, Proconsul, by the method of exclusion you and I have found the only power capable to guarantee safety to Judas - subject to a number of conditions. This power is the official Judean authorities. What kind of goods, however, can Judas offer for a trade with them? The high priests hated Jesus with every fiber of their soul, and furthermore clearly preferred his quiet death to his open trial. And Judas volunteers

to organize the *physical elimination* of the Teacher, using precisely his capabilities as a member of the community - first of all, his information about the suburban night shelters of the Nazarene. The Sanhedrin indeed cannot obtain such information anywhere else, and therefore they have to enter into a deal with Judas on his terms. In this deal, Judas appears to the high priests as an associate of Jesus, carefully hiding that he is - or rather, now *was* - a Roman agent; when the deed is done, he must necessarily appear before the Roman authorities as an official agent of the Sanhedrin. Of course, with his skills and experience, Judas could easily eliminate the Teacher alone, but what for? The Sanhedrin, undoubtedly, would immediately distance itself from this whole nasty story - bloody infighting in some semi-bandit Galilean sect. Therefore, Judas needed both "high contracting parties" to be smeared with blood.

If Judas were successful, he would indeed be saved. We could not have officially arrested Judas without disclosing to the Jewish authorities his role in Operation Ichthys; it is easy to imagine what a scandal would have erupted in this case. He cannot be quietly eliminated either if he has Sanhedrin's ear, trust, and protection, as he, no doubt, would then prepare as a precaution a document like the one you're currently reading, Proconsul; but other than that, it's very much not in his interest to disclose who he worked for, so he would present no danger and it would not be in our interest to eliminate him in the first place (other than purely as a punishment). From that moment on Judas, of course, would have to be wary of the Zealots, but this, as they say, is the lesser of two evils... In short, Proconsul, if events had unfolded as Judas had planned, we really would have to leave him alone.

However, he would be able to feel safe only after successfully completing his maneuver. If our service finds out about his contact with the Sanhedrin before that, no one would give a rotten olive for his life. At the same time, Judas understood perfectly well that he can't hide an awl in a sack (in an organization like the Sanhedrin, information leakage will happen almost instantly) and, since everything was now a question of days, he had to stay ahead of the curve. The best thing in such a situation is to throw a false lead to the enemy, which will irrevocably take precious time to process.

Immediately after the meeting with the high priests, he got in touch with me via an emergency channel (having thus also given his appearance in the city a pretext) and reported that in the last few days one of the members of the sect, John, was behaving strangely. He, Judas, suspects that he might contact the Sanhedrin,

and therefore asks our service to immediately make the appropriate inquiries. Judas's calculation was based on the fact that he had a certain portrait resemblance to John, and furthermore, when leaving Lazarus's house, he "mistakenly" put on not his own, but John's cloak - and he plainly named himself John in his conversation with the High Priest (who cares anyway - before there is a result? - and by the way, John is actually Demiurge's real name). As he rightly believed, all this would be enough so that our informants inside the Sanhedrin would at the very least not be able to say with certainty that the visitor to Caiaphas was *not John*.

Thus, as soon as we receive information from the Sanhedrin ("Indeed, a member of the Nazarene sect has been here... named himself... facial features... he was dressed... etc."), which is inevitable anyway, it will reinforce Judas's preemptive report. This will create an excellent cover for Judas - at least for a couple of days, and he won't need more... And as the finishing touch, Judas asked for a large additional heap of silver (man, this guy!..) - for the possible evacuation, bribery of guards, and other measures to eliminate the consequences of a potential betrayal; I had no reason to refuse to provide it.

No doubt, it was a brilliant move on the part of Judas. Nevertheless, he would have hardly misled me if I had been in a normal working condition at that time. Unfortunately, at some point everything began to turn against us in this operation: at the moment of Judas's report, I had just returned from the Galilean residency, where we had just had a vast bloody operational failure. I had been working on the spot for the previous week, trying to contain it - evacuating those who could still be saved, and *retiring completely* those whom it was too late to save; everything was in vain, the Galilean net continued to crumble like a sandcastle dried up in the sun. Overall, during all those days I slept for a total of several hours, and having just arrived and not caught any more sleep yet I could only move the rusty cogs in my brain with an incredible creak. Having received the first "confirmation" of Judas's signal from our informants in the Sanhedrin, I swallowed the bait and immediately ordered to eliminate the "traitor" - that is, John.

However, it was necessary to act with the highest degree of caution. The members of the sect usually walked along the city streets in groups, closely guarded by local surveillance agents, so it was impossible to approach John unnoticed. If there was an urgent need, of course, we could act straightforwardly - for example, to organize small street riots and in the resulting commotion to quietly poke the traitor with an awl under the shoulder blade, or, by involving our snipers, to hit

him from the distance of up to two hundred cubits with a poisoned arrow. However, in such a professionally executed assassination, Jewish investigators could recognize a “Roman trace”, which would inevitably lead them to the correct (and highly undesirable) conclusions; in addition, this would alarm the sect itself. (It was also much more dangerous - and bothersome - for Judas to try to do it himself.) And there was nothing too dramatic happening yet; in this situation, the most reasonable thing was to stretch the web and wait patiently: to observe the sect directly and control the places of the most likely appearance of the defector - the approaches to the Sanhedrin, the house of Caiaphas, and the headquarters of the temple guard. It's not difficult to track down an amateur; sooner or later, John will have to break away from his comrades and go alone in order to have a secret meeting, and that's when the “robbers” will stab him.

In the early morning on Thursday, our surveillance service detected the appearance of John in the city, though not alone but together with Peter. After entering one of the houses in the downtown and staying there for about half an hour, they left Jerusalem through the Sheep Gate in the Eastern Wall and went to the Mount of Olives; the Jericho Road was completely empty at this hour, and the surveillance had to be removed. But the man who came out of the same house a few minutes after John and Peter, led our observers to... previously mentioned Nicodemus, one of the leaders of the liberal faction of the Sanhedrin.

And that's when I really started worrying; at least, now Caiaphas's plan became clear - why he needed an informant in an absolutely openly operating sect. It seems that with the help of provocateur John the High Priest managed to mold a “Jesus-Nicodemus conspiracy”, so desirable for him, which could potentially allow Caiaphas and Annas to strike a blow at the entire intra-Sanhedrin opposition. The role of Peter was still unclear, and most importantly - why was Judas silent about these contacts? However, it would be possible to reflect on all this a little later, and now it was necessary to save Jesus and Nicodemus - and to do that immediately: there was no time left for complex many-step combinations.

Somewhere near noon, Nicodemus was spending time in conversation with his old friend Gaius Fabricius, who had been occupying the position of the Cultural Advisor of the Procurator of Judea for a dozen years. A refined and witty intellectual, forever poisoned by the insidious charm of the East, the advisor has grown thick roots into this rocky soil, like Calabrian pines once brought to Italy by Phoenician colonists. About ten years ago, he met Nicodemus on the basis of a

shared interest in interpreting some Babylonian mystical texts. This acquaintance then developed into friendship (as far as it is possible between a devout Jew and a “pagan”), which revealed to Fabricius both the gloomy beauty of the Jewish faith and the fascinating picture of the World organized as a whole by a formidable singular Deity. And a couple of years ago, at Nicodemus’s suggestion, he got very seriously interested in the teachings of a certain Galilean preacher, with whom he even had a conversation once. In short, the advisor enjoyed the reputation of a complete philosemite among his fellow officials, and, of course, served as the target of every other delation received by our service from this public.

Interacting with this man in the previous years, I sometimes found myself having a frightening thought: I wonder who (or what) the Jerusalem resident of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Empire, General Staff centurion Gaius Fabricius really serves? And then I realized: this caustic intellectual, who would have long ago been executed for lese-majesty in Rome, at his own peril and risk served the idea of a grandiose world Empire. The Empire that would unite the crystal logic of the West with the mystical intuition of the East; the valor of the victorious legions with the wisdom of millenia-old papyri; the chiseled formulas of the Roman law with the absolute contained in the revelations emanating from the ultimate incorporeal God. The Empire in which the copper of Europe would be fused with the tin of Asia into black bronze, over which the elements and time would have no power.

But in the meantime Fabricius was often bored and had a constant addict-like need to solve problems of increased complexity - while the grandiose game conceived by him, where the entire existing world order would be challenged, clearly promised the centurion much brighter and more refined pleasures than wine or Hyperborean roulette.

You might get the impression, Proconsul, that I am talking about a pampered aesthete, whose place is not in the Jerusalem residency but in the Library of Alexandria; this generally forgivable misjudgment was the last in their lives for a couple of tough guys. In fact for many years Fabricius managed to deceive even me in this very way: obviously, it’s just another romantically minded aristocratic spoiled child, seeking thrills in the intelligence service. Quiet work in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was traditional for his family (following in the footsteps of his famous ancestor, who once brilliantly negotiated with Pyrrhus) - so why can’t he just sit in some embassy and not get in the way of actual professionals doing their work?

Perhaps I would have remained in the dark if six years ago the Center,

preoccupied with the unrelenting wave of Palestinian terrorism, had not started another reorganization. This time, they introduced the position of the regional coordinator of the activities of all the special services of the Empire in the South-East Mediterranean, giving the respective residents dual subordination, and entrusted this job to me. This idea was, in principle, sound, but it was implemented... as always: the theorists from the central apparatus (the very ones who have been simply obsessed with compartmentation for secrecy all their lives) suddenly began to ardently unite everything that is possible and everything that isn't. Well, one can still find a hint of rationality in reassignment of the residencies of the Main Intelligence Directorate in the buffer "states" of the Euphrates region to our service: although so far all reports of connections between Jewish nationalists and the Parthian State Security have turned out to be false, you never know... But the fact that these staff thinkers put under my command all the army special services led to lamentable consequences. For more than a year, until they finally came to their senses and stopped this nonsense, I was forced, for no good reason at all, to supervise the combined army intelligence of the Syrian military district (with all its intelligence networks and infiltration-and-sabotage divisions), the Special Departments of the six Asian legions, and the territorial counterintelligence of the border troops. The military intelligence officers, with whom by that time we had developed surprisingly decent working relationships, understandably considered this a malicious violation of our basic working conventions. There's more: it was during this time that we experienced a completely inexplicable operational failure that cost the lives of two of the most valuable illegal agents. I did not have time to collect the irrefutable evidence then (the investigation was curtailed by order of Seianus), but everything pointed to a completely deliberate leak of information from Antioch. However, as they say, even a mangy sheep's good for a bit of wool: during that year I managed to drag several bright guys from the army special forces into my operational work; one of them, by the way, was Demiurge.

However, I digress. So, back to Fabricius... I remember well the acute feeling of envy that seized me at the first acquaintance with the possibilities of the agent network that the frivolous cultural adviser had woven over the years right under my nose. The resident did little work on extremists (and this was not his operative niche) but the amount and quality of his informants and agents of influence inside the top Judean ruling elite was simply stunning. Only then did I finally appreciate what a titanic effort lay behind each flutter of the

iridescent wings of this spring butterfly.

I must confess that Fabricius sometimes annoyed me madly with his extravagance, however, be that as it may, the puzzling combinations he invented *always* turned out to be successful. And since I am firmly convinced that the tendency to be lucky (or unfortunate) in one's undertakings is a person's feature like the color of the eyes or the ear for music, I have learned to regard the centurion's antics as a kind of luxury tax; it is said sometimes that it's better to lose with a wise man than to find with a fool. He slowly became my friend - and someone I trust, as much as one can trust anyone in such a specific profession as ours. Fabricius became one of the only two people who had heard anything about "Ichthys", not counting myself and Demiurge, and the only one who was privy to its operational details.

So, around noon on Thursday, Gaius Fabricius, the Cultural Advisor of the Procurator of Judea, casually visited his good friend and kindred spirit Nicodemus to say "happy Passover", which slowly grew into a lengthy conversation. First, as usual, they gossiped about the city news. For example, the people gleefully discuss the amazing luck of the famous rebel Eleazar, a man of legend, who again managed to slip between the fingers of the Romans hunting him - although this time he lost many of his people. The advisor noted sourly that the luck that had been invariably accompanying this person clearly indicated patronage of the Higher Power; as a highly learned member of the Sanhedrin, what does Nicodemus think, can the Messiah - purely theoretically! - appear in the guise of a highwayman? (It was Fabricius who once persuaded me to make a kind of "cannibal rat" out of Eleazar. I can say honestly: it was a really good job - in just three years to turn an average criminal into the sole leader of the partisan movement, who methodically devoured all other field commanders of central Judea in the course of his promotion. As for the Eleazar's grouping itself, the man in charge of intelligence in it is the equally legendary One-Eyed Simon, also known as "Pike", with whom communication is conducted on even Tuesdays and odd Thursdays through the blind beggar to the right from the entrance to the leather row...)

Then, having ascertained the confidentiality of the conversation, the advisor got down to business. He and Nicodemus have been good friends for a long time; and he also has great respect and sympathy for Jesus of Nazareth and his preaching. All this forces him, Fabricius, to commit a malfeasance now - to divulge official secrets. Yesterday the office of the Procurator of Judea received a memo, the contents of which - by pure chance - became known to him. It follows from the message that a traitor has appeared in the inner circle of the Nazarene,

and High Priest Caiaphas is apparently preparing a provocation with his help. He, apparently, will try to portray the matter as if a most dangerous conspiracy has appeared in Jerusalem, the main parties to which are Jesus and Nicodemus. In his hatred towards Nicodemus, which is not a secret to anyone in Jerusalem, Caiaphas is undoubtedly capable of any vileness. Therefore, the advisor urges his friend to refrain from communicating with the Nazarene for the time being, but at the same time, if he has the opportunity, to send him a warning about betrayal and a request to leave Jerusalem at least for a while. Needless to say, their conversation is completely confidential, so Nicodemus should mention in his warning that the information leak has occurred inside the Sanhedrin.

Nicodemus was surprised, saddened, angry, anything but frightened. Yes, he does keep in touch with Jesus of Nazareth and has never made a secret of it (although he hasn't been very vocal about it either). Moreover, this very night he is going to meet Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. This meeting was set a few days ago by the prophet himself, who is obviously going to tell Nicodemus something important, and he will come today to this meeting, no matter who tries to prevent it - be it Caiaphas or even Beelzebub himself. Nicodemus highly appreciates the counselor's dedication (disclosure of an official secret is no joke) and thanks him for the warning. And in general, something strange is indeed happening in the Sanhedrin - a group of some terrifying armed goons was on duty last night in the courtyard. What does the advisor think, could Caiaphas have scared himself to such an extent that he really is fearing that the "conspirators" might storm the Sanhedrin?

But, fortunately, we can send a warning to Jesus right today. During their previous meeting a few days ago (again, why doesn't Judas say anything? is he sleeping over there, or what?), Jesus asked him to find a place in Jerusalem where he and his disciples could safely celebrate the Passover. For some reason he wants to do it in Jerusalem and not in Bethany; Nicodemus, of course, offered his house, but Jesus, having thanked him, refused: in his opinion, this was dangerous for the owner. And since, according to Jesus, the Jerusalem outdoor surveillance tends to tread on his heels, they will enter the city without any noise and go right to the place prepared for their meal as quickly and imperceptibly as possible.

As previously agreed, this morning Jesus sent two disciples to the city... Who exactly? Nicodemus honestly doesn't know; and does it really matter? So, the disciples were met at the gate and shown the place; it is the house of a certain recommendable man, who is not

currently in Jerusalem. Now the disciples are probably already outside the city, somewhere in Gethsemane (it's a pity that we were a little late - we could have sent the message directly with them), and by the evening they will have brought the rest, together with the Teacher - to eat the Passover meal. He even had an agreement with Jesus as to where to leave a message in the house should a need arise - and it did arise! After which the cultural advisor bowed and left, noting to himself that from the professional point of view these guys act surprisingly competently. And, by the way, we should check - what's up with the night guard in the courtyard of the Sanhedrin?

So, the situation cleared up in one way, and in another way it became even more confusing. In the end, the very assumption that Caiaphas is trying to make an "amalgam" for a coming political process was based precisely on the identity of the liaison - John. If the contact really took place at the initiative of Jesus, and John's participation in it is an accident, then we are back to square one: what task does the High Priest assign to the defector? Well, at least the warning to the Nazarene will be delivered today; we could not pass it on earlier, through Judas - there is no source to which he could refer. It would also be unwise and unnecessary to reveal the name of the traitor to Jesus at this moment - we need to get them out immediately, and potentially provoking additional internal drama, let alone one that could easily get bloody, won't help with that.

By six in the evening, our operatives blocked all approaches to the house of Nicodemus's friend; I was determined to eliminate John tonight, when the sect got rid of police oversight. As the last resort, we still had a plan B - at night to pay the traitor a visit directly to Gethsemane, where, as we now knew for sure, the sect would stay until morning. Quite unexpectedly for me, Fabricius decided to personally lead this operation:

"Allow me, Excellency," - and, after hesitating, he added: "For some reason I'm having a very bad feeling, and it has rarely deceived me. Maybe I'll notice something right on the spot."

Somewhat alarmed (the centurion's fantastic intuition was well known to me), I did what I could: I strengthened the surveillance in the Downtown and brought the special forces platoon under the command of decurion Petronius to the state of five-minute readiness; now the only thing that remained was to wait.

Closer to midnight, Fabricius appeared, extremely anxious. Having informed me, as if casually, that the elimination of John had been postponed, he asked: had Judas been contacted in the last couple of hours? I snapped back that the centurion would still do well to explain

himself on the subject of John first. He only waved his hand - yes, of course, but first I should call, and immediately, for the head of the post monitoring the approaches to the Sanhedrin; I will understand why in a moment.

"Excuse me, Excellency, but what exactly is the basis of our confidence that the traitor is John?"

"What do you mean, what? The report of Judas and the reports of the informants from the Sanhedrin."

"Right, but if you consider these messages *separately*, it will turn out that they actually do not confirm each other. That there was a betrayal is a fact; but the fact that the traitor is John only follows from the reports of the informants *indirectly*, and that's a very slippery ground, Excellency..."

"...I don't understand, centurion, what are you getting at?"

"Here's the thing. A lone disciple has indeed just come out of the house where the meal was taking place, yet it wasn't John, who we were waiting for, but Judas himself. And when he was walking out, we almost stabbed him in the darkness, mistaking him for John. It was at this moment that it dawned on me that they looked a lot like each other, especially under poor lighting conditions; in fact, we recognized Judas mainly by the money box. Naturally, I immediately ordered a couple of men to follow him, but he managed to break away in the darkness. So I'm wondering - have you ever had any suspicions about Judas?"

I replied, "Not yet," feeling a lump of ice form in my stomach...

"In principle, of course, he could break away due to mistaking us for Judean surveillance..."

"Come on, centurion, you know that I'm not a fan of hiding my head in the sand. Thank you for taking care of calling the head of the Sanhedrin surveillance - he's probably on his way. By the way, what was Judas wearing today?"

...I wonder what to compare such an expectation to? I think it's like a toothache: impossible to endure any longer, but still you try to delay the inevitable - for an hour, a minute, a moment... Aha! Here is our tooth puller.

"At your command, your honor!"

"Sit down, decurion. Has your unit closed off the approaches to the Sanhedrin?"

"Yes, Sir! And we were just taking turns when your order came."

"Please strain your memory, decurion. A short time ago, did a tall man, dressed in a dark chiton and a brown headband, with a box slung over his shoulder, come into the courtyard of the Sanhedrin?"

Keep in mind - he could carry the box in his hands, wrapped in the headband.”

“There is no need to strain it, your honor: there was a person like this, and in his hands he was carrying a dark brown wrapped package, exactly as you said - he came about half an hour before the shift or slightly less. He looked a lot like the verbal portrait of the guy that we have been on the lookout for since yesterday; at first, we even thought that this could be him... Wait a minute! So maybe... Your Excellency!..”

“No, no, decurion, don’t worry, it’s not him. Unfortunately... Well, you can go to bed now. Thank you for your service.”

“Proud to serve! Thank you, Your Excellency!”

Listening to the footsteps dying away in the distance, I faint-heartedly thought: man, I wish I were in the shoes of this decurion... However, it’s not about me and my forced retirement with dishonor; I feel indescribably sorry for the operation itself - the Empire won’t get such a chance again soon, if at all... Meanwhile, Fabricius stretched sweetly in his chair, cracking his fingers.

“Well, that’s all, Excellency. The mosaic has been completed: today’s walks under the moon, and the absence of proper communication, and slander against John. By the way, about John: I bet my half-year salary that this guy will now live a hundred years, no less. Anyhow, it’s time for us to get to work. Our friend has probably already made his report to the High Priest and received new instructions, so it’s time for him to hurry to Gethsemane, under the wings of his beloved Rabbi. I’ll take a couple of commandos in civilian clothes with me and go beyond the Sheep Gate - to get some fresh air, sitting in roadside bushes. Judas, of course, is also a former commando, but I don’t foresee any special problems with his capture - fortunately, as I understand it, we need him alive, but not necessarily unharmed. I think there is an abandoned quarry just three hundred cubits south of the road. That’s where we’ll ask him a couple of questions about the plans of the High Priest; this place is nice and quiet, and there will be no fuss with the corpse later: we can just pile some pebbles on top of it, and that’s it. You should admit, Excellency - compared to how this story could have ended, we should consider ourselves to have gotten away with just a slight fright.”

“Unfortunately, centurion, you are wrong: this story has not ended at all, and it seems that your earlier gut feeling hasn’t deceived you. Two more fragments are missing in your wonderful mosaic: the fact that ‘our friend’ appeared at the Sanhedrin at night, and this strange night guard of the people of Caiaphas.”

A few seconds passed before the peaceful expression faded from his face.

“Oh Gods! So you think...”

“I am sure: they are not preparing an arrest. They are intending to kill him. And if we know about Gethsemane, then so does Caiaphas - for whom it is the perfect opportunity. Well, centurion, it looks like this is the endgame. Moreover, our opponent has a checker about to promote to a king, which I have missed due to inacuity of my mind...”

“We have missed, Excellency...”

“Thank you, Fabricius. Okay, let’s stop smearing our heads with ashes. Let’s tighten up and bristle up! We may still have some minimum of time. First, get a horse and gallop to Gethsemane, right now - luckily, it’s the full moon today. Do you have any thoughts as to what to say to the Nazarene?”

“Not yet, but by the time I get there, there will be some.”

“Good. Just remember that first of all we should rescue Nicodemus, and only then the Nazarene, if we can.”

“Well, that’s obvious...”

“Not to me! Well, okay; now, about the signals...”

And so, while Gaius Fabricius, the Cultural Advisor of the Procurator of Judea, wrapped in a gray invisibility cloak for night operations (the favorite clothes of assassins and special forces) is galloping at full speed along the Jericho Road... While Judas together with the commander of the temple guard detachment, desperate from trying to explain to this asinine Caiaphas that in such operations the quantity is not important, are losing precious moments by attaching to the platoon of select thugs a loose column of the High Priest’s slaves armed with whatever they could find... While I am tightening the lacing of my official armor with the badges of a military tribune (for the first time in many years!), and decurion Petronius, standing nearby, is yelling loudly to the commandos, livening them up:

“Platoon! Ready the weapons! Combat Alert!”

While, in a word, there is a little pause, you, Proconsul, have an opportunity to get acquainted with the events that took place at the last meal of Jesus with his disciples, as restored by us a few days later. In fact, Jesus, apparently, had already guessed a lot. In any case, he accepted the message of Nicodemus with almost complete indifference; he only said that, it seems, all of Jerusalem now already knew that he would be betrayed today - except, of course, his own disciples. Having announced the betrayal in the community, he waited a little, looked at Judas directly and said:

“Whatever you are doing, do it quickly!”

Judas understood the hint and immediately got out - of course, with the money box (which, as it turns out, saved his life when he walked out into the street). In general, from all that evening's speeches of Jesus it was clear that he thought his life was ending and he was putting his things in order, trying not to miss a single trifle. He didn't just give up the fight and go with the flow, no - he was precisely convinced of the completion of his earthly path and behaved accordingly.

Subsequently, when we were able to restore the events with sufficient completeness, Fabricius admitted that it was this episode that seemed to him the most mysterious in our entire story.

"I don't understand anything, Excellency. After all, as it later turned out, we were wrong in literally everything. The warning to Jesus was sent on that day only because we thought that Caiaphas was getting to Nicodemus through him, but nothing remotely like that was actually happening. We thought that John was a traitor - but he was purer than an angel. In addition, the text of the message, for added safety, was vague - no names, only the fact of betrayal by one of the disciples. In short, Excellency, our 'warning' turned out to be essentially misinformation and wasn't useful to Jesus."

"Well, what's to call misinformation! All our assumptions were indeed wrong, but the result turned out to be correct - two wrongs magically made a right. The final message, paradoxically, contained "pure truth and nothing but the truth" - there is a traitor in the community, period. And it turned out to be delivered on time - in that last period of time when something could have been changed. Now, it's another question that Jesus decided not to use this information, but this definitely did not depend on us."

"I don't know, Excellency... I still don't understand how this information could in any way help Jesus figure out that Judas was a traitor. He had done this even before we did it! I am rather ready to admit that some kind of *alternative* act of comprehension took place here, fantastic in its strength and certainty..."

"Come on, Fabricius! In our profession, it is equally dangerous to underestimate intuition with all sorts of inspirations from within and to attach excessive importance to them. By the way, for some reason you're ignoring Jesus's elementary power of observation, yet, as far as I can tell, it was hardly inferior to yours; one must think that over the years he had accumulated plenty of food for thought. The disciples threw the story of the overfull money box out of their heads the very next day, but he didn't; there were, apparently, some other bits here and there that further added to his sense that something's not right with Judas. He must have recently begun to suspect Judas

of some kind of unclean game. And, having received the message from a trustworthy source that there was a traitor in the community, he simply put two and two together - and voila!"

"And Judas lost his nerve, and ran away - he probably decided that the message contained his name..."

"Not exactly. That evening Judas, probably, only thought about how to get out of the house; so Jesus's announcement just triggered that."

"Okay. But why didn't Jesus try to stop the traitor, or announce his name for everyone to hear?"

"I guess he wasn't completely certain, and that hint was in part a check. Besides, he could've thought like us - about avoiding the bloodshed; the disciples had two swords with them (as if this could help them in any way if push had really come to shove). However, there was also a third sword, worth not only this pair, but also many others - under Judas's chiton. This wasn't known to Jesus, but he could've guessed that if Judas really was a traitor he probably had with him something for self-defense, if not for attack. Had the Teacher pointed at him with his finger - that same Peter would likely have started a mess, and this would have certainly been the last fight in his life. So, if Jesus really valued the lives of his disciples, then he acted in the only possible way: he did not force the rat into a corner, but let it quietly slip away. Judas would be gone anyway, but this way he didn't leave a few corpses behind him in the process. But for what reasons Jesus decided to allow himself to be killed - this, you know, is a question not for detectives, but for philosophers."

"Hmm... Then... We get a very interesting picture, Excellency. It looks like on that day the final result was *completely predetermined*, and nothing happening to us or done by us - neither insights, nor gross mistakes - could change anything. As if some other forces, of a different order, came into play here... I'm getting a hint of the feeling, Excellency, that *maybe it is us who are being 'played blind'?*..."

"Oh, come on, centurion!..."

However, on the night of the 15th of Nisan all these circumstances were still unknown to us; here you, Proconsul, have a head start over us. But even if we had known more, I think Fabricius is right - this wouldn't have changed anything...

...We intercepted them at the very approaches to Gethsemane, where the Jericho Road, making a small loop, crosses a brook, called Kidron. The column mixed up, and a panicked cry was heard somewhere in its end:

"Zealots!" - and several of the High Priest's slaves darted across the moonlit slope. The temple guards, however, surprisingly quickly

reorganized into a slightly loose square, and the edges of this thundercloud immediately turned into bluish sparks of blades.

After a dramatic pause, I ordered:

“Lights up!” - and the light of several torches started dancing over our helmets and armor. And only after that I went out to the line of Jews bristling with swords, took a closer look and exclaimed in amazement: “Holy Fathers! These aren’t robbers but the temple guards of His Holiness... Pull back, guys, swords in sheaths!” - and then in Aramaic: “The commander of the detachment to me!”

A ripple passed through the lines of the Jews, and a tall man pushed his way towards me. For some reason he was in civilian clothes - in a dark chiton and a brown headband; when I looked at him, I froze.

The fact that Judas was in command of the detachment could only mean one thing. Before me stood not a miserable defector, but a staff member of one of the Judean special services - either of the secret police, or the intelligence department of the Temple Guard Corps - who successfully completed his task and returned to his fellows. Thus for me personally this case started now distinctly reeking not of retirement with dishonor, but of a guaranteed lethal outcome.

Judas, however, rejoiced at the meeting no more than I did, understandably - his plan also went a little awry. Meeting Roman special forces a stone’s throw from the desired goal was not a part of the plans of these guys, and the gears in the head of the commander of the operation should now be spinning with a breathtaking speed - what does this dream mean? Was it a coincidence or a *leak*? This already left me some room - if not for a meaningful maneuver, then at least for a bluff. And then I heard a familiar voice, coming somewhere from the left, saying:

“My God, no way, it’s venerable Afranius! What are you doing here at such a strange hour, dear colleague?”

I turned around. So, that’s right: in front of me stood half-akimbo a handsome black-bearded man in a cloak draped over light Parthian chain armor - Nathanael ben Canaan, a famous terrorist in his youth, and now the head of the Special Operations Division of the Temple Guard Corps, my old acquaintance in joint actions against the Galilean rebels. But how is he in Jerusalem? - according to our information, he and his people should now be *working* somewhere beyond Machaerus, in the operational rear of the Arabs... Meanwhile, the supreme saboteur of all Judea, kindly taking me by my elbow, moved to the edge of the torch-lit space; while doing so, he pushed Judas away with such remarkable carelessness that I realized: no, not everything is lost yet. So, it is Nathanael who is in charge of the

operation; of course - someone of his rank could hardly be here in any other capacity. So, Judas is either just a defector, or, in the worst case for me, Nathanael's competitor, an employee of the secret police. Well, my situation is extremely bad, but not hopeless - and I will fight.

"Wow! Congrats on the new acquisition, venerable Nathanael," - I remarked with buddy-like directness, looking at the fresh scar on the cheekbone of my colleague, - "the best decoration for any man, except for an infiltrator... Where did you get it - let me guess, under Al-Jahazi? I've heard that you barely escaped from there, leaving all the feathers from the tail in the teeth of the Arabs. They don't like those who poison their wells, and they probably have a point there, don't they?.. And by the way - can you please explain to me, as a friend to a friend: why did your Corps need to get involved in these clashes between Herod and Aretas?"

"You know, Afranius, sometimes it seems to me that no more than a quarter of your agents are working against the enemies of the Empire, and the other three quarters are spying on the allies."

"Ha! Well, there are some allies who I would be glad to exchange for two enemies each. This, of course, does not apply to you personally..."

"Then why in the bloody world are you hanging around here?! Just don't lie to me about 'search for Eleazar's militants', or something like that!"

"You're offending me, venerable Nathanael; when did I ever lie to you? By the way, speaking of Eleazar - it's funny that you should mention him, because some extremely interesting information appeared yesterday, and we, as usual, are ready to share it. And here I am following the order of the Procurator of Judea to detain and take into custody a certain subversive itinerant preacher."

"Really? Let me guess, Jesus of Nazareth?"

"Hmm... I'm impressed by your knowledge, colleague; my compliments to you. It seems that our internal counterintelligence has become completely lazy and has stopped catching mice..."

"Are you playing the fool, Afranius? You probably know that the order to arrest the Nazarene has already been given by the Sanhedrin - and that's why we're going to Gethsemane. Why are you creating this running race - don't you have other things to do? You should be really working on Eleazar, for example... After all, this is our internal affair, furthermore one that's not political but purely religious, and it does not concern you and your cutthroats in any way. So, you can report to the Procurator: all the necessary measures have already been taken by the Temple Guard."

"Wait, why not the other way around: *you* report to the Sanhedrin

that the Nazarene has already been arrested by the Procurator's Secret Service?"

"Because this arrest will be carried out by *me!*"

"Well, that's easier said than done..."

"Are you going to stop me - a legal representative of the Judean authorities - in the performance of my official duties?"

"Precisely. And if necessary, by force."

"This is madness! What does this all mean, tribune?"

"Enough! You're a terrible dramatic actor, venerable Nathanael. So, let me explain - with maximum possible intelligibility. If some preacher, popular among the masses, is killed tonight together with his close followers, and furthermore some evidence is found at the murder site that allows one to attribute this monstrous atrocity to Rome, that will not be something pleasant for us at all - nor for you, by the way, if only you had the brains to calculate this combination at least two moves ahead. So let Jesus, for greater safety, sit under lock and key for the time being. As they say, safe bind, safe find. Am I being clear enough?"

"But listen, tribune, this is utter nonsense!"

"It may well be nonsense. But we have received the corresponding signal, and in the current tense situation, you know, it's better to be safe than sorry. The Procurator declared that he did not want to be cruising for a bruising, and here I am with the corresponding order."

"You took a load off my mind, venerable Afranius. This means that it wasn't you who went mad, but your informants."

"It wasn't our informant. A couple of hours ago, the headquarters of our service received a letter in which this action was described in detail, and it was alleged that it was scheduled for this night. I'm not sure if I myself believed in this whole story when I read it, to be frank, but we had no right to ignore this kind of information. Now, seeing you all, just like it predicted, I have even less desire to ignore it! And on my own behalf, Nathanael, I'll add this: I have the feeling that it's you and me who are being pitted against each other, but I still can't figure out by who exactly."

"Hmm, it does look a lot like that... So, you're saying that the letter came a couple of hours ago... And what did this provocateur ask for?"

"The letter only said how and where to transfer the payment - which is rather modest, by the way, the informant asked for 'the pay of prophet Zechariah', that is, thirty pieces of silver - if the reported information turns out to be true; that, and under what conditions he (or maybe she) would work for us in the future. After all, we had nothing to lose..."

Of course, that's crude. Very crude. However, at the moment I am not up to filigreed work, like Judas a day ago I'm going straight ahead and trying to be ahead of the curve. In the end, what to think of such suspiciously "gifted" information is Nathanael's private matter. The bottom line here is that in a couple of hours he would have to report about the hopefully failed operation. And when their internal counterintelligence begins to dig the earth with their noses in search of the source of the leak, the head of the Special Operations Division will be able to divert suspicions from himself in one and only one way: by trying to point his finger more convincingly at those who already knew for sure about the upcoming action earlier. And since there is only one such person, it will be very difficult for Judas - even if he really is a Judean intelligence officer, but especially if they only know him as a traitor - to refute the accusation of a double game.

And when we were returning to our detachments, Nathanael suddenly dropped:

"Shouldn't we finally put out the torches, tribune? I bet they have already been seen a while ago, and the conclusions have been made..."

"Then what's the point of putting them out now?"

Of course they saw it, dear colleague. So if everything goes as planned, we will not find anyone in the Gethsemane cave now, except maybe for a few disciples, who will have to be released in the morning anyway - due to lack of evidence and complete uselessness.

When we, having walked a few hundred more cubits, reached the cave, they were indeed already waiting for us. A fire was burning in a clearing bordering its entrance, highlighting the disciples, frozen in tense poses. A little further away we saw standing Jesus; he, on the contrary, was absolutely calm and seemed to be deep in thought. In the meantime, the lighting intensified a lot: the High Priest's slaves followed our example and had also lit many torches, joining my festive illumination; and my commandos have quietly taken Nathanael's commandos under their control, one-on-one, so now almost all of them were standing in pairs - just like dancers at a festivity. All we were lacking for a party was music!

Upon recognizing Jesus, I felt nothing but immense fatigue - everything turned out to be in vain; it's good at least that Nicodemus got away in time. Could it be that Fabricius never managed to transmit the warning, despite having at least quarter of an hour of time advantage? Ridiculous as it may seem, it looks like I will really have to arrest the Nazarene and thereby terminate "Ichthys" with my own hands.

Besides these problems of the Empire, my own personal prospects aren't looking rosy to put it mildly. My only chance here is to

completely marginalize Judas in the eyes of the Sanhedrin, and thereby, in particular, to annihilate the potential weight of his possible statements on "Ichthys". And for this, right now I need at least to disrupt Nathanael's plan to liquidate the Nazarene - only then will my dear colleague need not only to give way to my misinformation, but also to give it due persuasiveness. We are now bound by one chain - me and Jesus, who has already lost all real value for me; I will have to protect his life as if it were mine until at least tomorrow's morning. And as soon as I calculated this unexpected alignment, I had a clear premonition of danger - the very one that gives rise to a biting chill under the heart and rears up invisible hair on the scruff of the neck.

I learned to recognize this feeling and obey it without hesitation already when as a nineteen year old boy I hunted Phoenician gangsters in the port slums of Tyre - and they, of course, hunted me; it's hard to count how many times it has saved my life. For some reason, suddenly - perhaps the cypresses covered in frozen flakes of moonlight reminded me of it? - from the depths of my memory appeared a similar cold spring night in Edessa, a toy kingdom on the Parthian border, where I was once preparing a completely real coup d'état. And everything was going fine and dandy when Fortune suddenly burst out laughing in our face: just two days before the "showtime" the officer from the Antioch Directorate in charge of the operation, who as it turned out had defected to the Parthians, crossed the Parthian border and disappeared. Artaban's counterintelligence officers, not having enough time to establish a correct counterplay, were forced to simply *neutralize* our residency, which was working under the cover of a trade mission. They only got a problem with me alone then.

Well, the warm-up seems to be over, and now the fight with cornered Nathanael, more dangerous than a beleaguered Levant viper guarding its eggs, will begin. I even knew exactly what I especially didn't like: my dearest colleague gave me the initiative too easily. Not only had his commandos not yet made any attempt to approach the Nazarene, but on the contrary they had dispersed along the periphery of the clearing, leaving only a crowd of the High Priest's slaves in the center. Did he really get scared of the order that I loudly gave to the special forces when approaching the cave? -

"Chop into pieces anyone who touches the arrestee!"

Who got scared - this seasoned terrorist, who values his life at a penny, and someone else's - at a spit? No way. Clearly, he's just waiting for something, which means that his plan (or one of the plans), despite all the surprises, is going fine so far. And so if I don't figure out the "home preparation" of my dearest colleague right about now, the Nazarene is

finished, and with him, probably so am I.

The first move, however, was made by Judas, whom I somehow overlooked. Ahead of everyone, he swiftly moved towards Jesus and, as if sticking to him, began to quickly whisper something in his ear. I only thought to myself with a slight grin: the “attempt to escape” that the traitor is probably now offering to his beloved Rabbi is a nice try, but the Nazarene clearly sees through it. I didn’t like this maneuver, but it didn’t particularly worry me either; there was no reason to expect something like a blow with a dagger from Judas, because firstly, again, considering what was in his own interests, that couldn’t have been the plan, and secondly, Petronius followed him like a shadow, not taking his hand off the hilt of his sword. Judas, meanwhile, just as quickly stepped aside and stopped about ten steps away, but this, oddly enough, did not calm me down; on the contrary, the inaudible buccinas in my brain sounded the alarm at full blast. And when I turned around and noticed that Nathanael’s commandos had suddenly begun some strange, unsystematic movements on a far edge of the clearing, I realized that I had seconds left to think. Think! Think faster!!

But what if... What if Judas was really just *showing* the Nazarene? - But to whom? - To the assassin, who will strike his blow right now! But what is this overcautiousness - it cannot be that Nathanael did not bother to show the Nazarene to him ahead of time, and the light from the torches is now more than enough for... Idiot!!! It’s enough for us - for those who are standing inside the illuminated space and see the face of Jesus, turned to the fire and the line of torches. And the signal, meanwhile, is intended for someone who is now hiding in the dark, beyond the circle of light! Of course, he is absolutely invisible to all of us, but, unfortunately for him, he himself also distinguishes only *silhouettes* against the background of lights - and go figure which one of them is Jesus. Now, however, he already knows...

I finished thinking this all through already on the go, when, yelling in Aramaic:

“Everybody freeze!!!” - I rushed to Jesus, who was standing, as ill luck would have it, on the very edge of the illuminated area. And, of course, I ran into Judas, who blocked my way and then hung on me very competently, not allowing me to take out any weapon and screaming at the same time:

“You want to remove the witness, bastard?!”

Petronius, naturally, twitched in our direction and for a moment lost Jesus out of sight. It was then that my brain neatly laid out the final calculation: “That’s it! Late” - because fifteen steps behind the

Nazarene, a figure in a gray invisibility cloak appeared, as if thickened from the darkness of the night, and every movement of this gargantuan bat showed his professionalism. And I was able to notice him at all only because I exactly foresaw where to look; Petronius, stopped mid-way - "Cover the Nazarene!" - did not know this, and besides, having stood facing the lights, in those first moments he did not and could not see anything in the darkness. Here it is - the viper's attack! My colleague Nathanael beat me...

...I did not even understand where that disciple with a sword came from behind the Nazarene (but at that moment I made a mental note opposite the name "Peter" - for the future). Either he really almost missed everything and only now jumped up onto his feet, or he had deftly hidden in the dark - in any case, now he appeared exactly where he needed to be. Of course, that's not much of an obstacle for a professional - a sword in the hands of a fisherman: with lightning speed, the gray giant dodged an awkward poke, which can't even be called a lunge, and in an instant literally passed through Peter, leaving the latter lying flat. But it was precisely this moment that was enough for another professional - special forces decurion Petronius - to push Jesus aside and meet the assassin face to face. Thus I no longer needed to worry about this source of problems right now, but it was clearly too early to take a breath of relief, because when I finally managed to shake Judas off, the slaves of the High Priest were already running from all sides with their swords and spears - while my commandos were just hurrying towards us from the edges of the clearing - in a race with Nathanael's commandos; and the disciples, of course, weren't of much use either - including, right now, Peter. But despite all these urgent problems, I still momentarily managed to take a look at the assassin with a corner of my eye - an invisibility cloak, a dagger, and an elongated pale face with a blood-drenched cheek - wow, it looks like our fisherman did get him a little after all!

"Nobody move!!" I yelled again, rotating my long Spanish sword so that a thundercloud of quick moonlight reflections appeared between the Nazarene and the Judeans.

"Freeze in place, bastards, or I'll chop everyone on the spot!!!"

They stopped... and rightly so: who wants to put their head under the sword when your boss is already rehearsing "it's not me and it's not my dog" ahead of time: venerable Nathanael is now standing in the farthest corner of the clearing and studying the location of the heavenly bodies with great interest. So that's what he must have thought up: "During the detention of the Nazarene, which had the goal of his subsequent deportation to Galilee, a fight broke out between

the sectarians and the servants of the High Priest, in the course of which, unfortunately, the head of the sect was killed.” Well, the plan was not without some elegance; but at the moment when it mattered the most, luck happened to be on my side...

Taking advantage of the fact that everyone was staring at the illuminated patch, where my commandos had already closed the ring around Jesus, I slowly slipped into the shadows. Leaning over unconscious Peter, I found the sword that he had dropped in the grass and threw it away into the darkness: I can't let Nathanael arrest the disciples for armed resistance. Whether we might need them in the future is a separate question, but now it's important for me to simply not give my dearest colleague even such a consolatory prize as their arrest: the more deplorable his affairs are, the more actively he will try to “drown” Judas. The funny thing is that these guys didn't seem to have realized what happened right in front of their eyes; let's hope they won't get it later either...

“Well, Nathanael, I can see now that our ‘provocateur’ told us the truth in his letter; I hope you understand that your attempt to assassinate the Nazarene will be properly reflected both in my report and in the presentation of the Procurator?”

“*My* attempt?! What are you talking about, dear Afranius?”

“About the man with a dagger, stopped by a disciple and my decurion.”

“Hmm... And you can present this man?”

Makes sense... The assassin had already disappeared into the depths of the garden, and my commandos did not receive an order to pursue him - there were more urgent priorities at the moment. However, every cloud has a silver lining...

“I'm afraid that you are overtired, dear Afranius, and you have begun to hallucinate. You work too hard...”

“Probably, you are right, venerable Nathanael, and the decurion and I were simply visited by a collective hallucination; perhaps. Then, as I understand it, we will now let these toerags go?”

“What do you mean we'll let them go? After direct armed resistance to the authorities?”

“Wait a second, Nathanael. What are you going to charge them with, exactly? Chopping off a ghost's ear?”

“A ghost's?!”

“Well, yes? As you and I seem to have come to the conclusion that the killer with a dagger was a phantom, wasn't he?”

It finally dawned on my cunning saboteur that he overplayed it a little bit.

“...There still remains, however, such a ‘trifle’ as the illegal possession

of weapons...”

“Weapons? I see, dear Nathanael, that you, too, are overtired and suffer from hallucinations. I think it’s time for both of us to go on vacation. I know a great place in the mountains, let’s go there together, shall we?”

The look that the head of the Special Operations Division gave me reflected a rich range of feelings, of which powerless fury was predominant.

“I’m not bluffing, Nathanael, especially since your people have probably already searched the place of the skirmish. The sword is in the same place as your killer; let’s proceed from this.”

“But I don’t understand, tribune, why do you want to free these bandits?”

“All right, Nathanael - let me again be direct: I want to get my hands on the killer in a gray cloak, and these ‘bandits’ are, unfortunately, my only goods to trade with you. Either the gray killer existed - and then we will immediately begin his official search, and you will get the opportunity to hang a case of armed resistance on the sectarians - or this entire episode is a product of our hallucinations. Choose your poison. And remember that you actually have no reason to shield this... hallucination with a severed ear.”

“What do you mean, tribune?”

“Besides the fact that I managed to note his appearance well enough to recognize his face if I see it again, how many of the High Priest’s slaves lack an ear? I bet not too many - it won’t be hard for me to find this guy!” (And indeed, it wasn’t; for example, his name is Malchus.)

“What’s up to you is to choose: hallucinations or not. I’m waiting!”

And when Nathanael chose “hallucinations” (and what else could he do?), I, expressing extreme displeasure with my whole appearance, finally quietly sighed in my mind.

“So, no bargain? Well, as you please, Nathanael. Decurion, release the detainees.”

Well, now everything is well-motivated. The disciples are free, and at the same time Nathanael is congratulating himself for having stayed on the edge of the abyss and saved the High Priest from a grandiose scandal. However, I clearly understood that all this, and even alive and healthy Jesus, were nothing more than minor tactical successes against the backdrop of a lost campaign; in other words - “empty chores on the way to the scaffold”. And during all the time that our united detachment with Nathanael was trudging from Gethsemane, I failed to come up with a single combination that would save the Nazarene (an “escape from custody” would be so transparent that it

would be even worse than simply letting him die). When the walls of Jerusalem, whitened by the moon, were already starting to rise in front of us, I was called softly from somewhere over my shoulder:

“I’m here, Excellency.”

We slowly got out of the column and walked along the side of the road.

“Where did you come from, centurion?”

“I returned from the city, waited for your column, and quietly joined it - no one even raised an eyebrow. There are considerations you should listen to before the prisoner enters the city.”

“Did you know that Jesus got arrested?”

“I foresaw that.”

“You foresaw that... Bloody oracle!.. Okay, report, Fabricius.”

“Nicodemus is already at the Sanhedrin - I took him to the city; all our agents in the Sanhedrin are on full alert...”

“This is all good, but not on point! Why didn’t you evacuate the Nazarene, centurion? Were you late?”

In short, everything turned out to be even worse than I expected - way, way worse. Fabricius managed to approach Jesus without causing alarm when the latter was talking with Nicodemus in the depths of the garden - the disciples who were entrusted with the duties of sentinels were sleeping like logs in the meanwhile (I broke into sweat when I imagined the gray assassin or someone else from Nathanael’s people in Fabricius’s place). As it turned out, for religious reasons the Nazarene firmly decided to die as a martyr, and not some time later in principle, but now. And based on his understanding of an old Jewish prophecy about the Messiah, he was absolutely sure that afterwards, on the third day, he would rise again; then his messianic essence will become obvious to everyone, and his teaching will take the world by storm. He also needed Nicodemus, for quite pragmatic reasons: it was necessary that someone influential enough would take care of the orphaned disciples in the coming days, sheltering them from quite likely persecution by the Sanhedrin. Then Fabricius began to expound some lofty theological gibberish, but I was not up for it.

“Why didn’t you perform forced evacuation, centurion?”

“It’s pointless, Excellency. He is now like a moth flying to a candle; drive him away - and he will simply fly up to it from the other side. And the fact that all this coincided in time with the betrayal of Judas is pure coincidence, that’s completely clear now; if it wasn’t Judas, sooner or later it would be something else.”

“So, we’ve hit rock bottom... The key guy became suicidal and completely uncontrollable. Did I understand you correctly?”

“No, Excellency. The thing is that Jesus absolutely does not want to

die, and does not feel any pleasure from the thought; in this sense, he is absolutely normal. When I finally stepped out of the shadows and approached them with my warning, Jesus told us both to leave the garden immediately, and repeated to Nicodemus again: "Take care of the disciples." When I tried to persuade him to leave with us - after all, the people of Caiaphas, having killed him, would be *obliged* to kill the disciples as well, just as witnesses - he clearly hesitated for a moment and uttered a strange phrase: "Lord! Are you carrying this cup past me?" - and then, immediately afterwards: "Get away from me, Satan!" And then he began to literally push us away - so that we would get out sooner and leave him alone. I saw his face at that moment... In a word, he is not overjoyed at the idea, that's for sure, rather he thinks of this as his fate."

"So what? What's the practical difference? How does any of this even matter?"

"Being his motives, Excellency, these are extremely important operational considerations."

"Seriously? Well, then act in accordance with them - perhaps something might come out of this. As for me, excuse me, but I have things to do - for one, tonight I need to prepare all the business to be presentable to my successor. Don't forget that tomorrow I will be at best fired, and most likely under arrest and tribunal: first, the Galilean residency, now - "Ichthys"; two failures like that in the span of half a month are too much for anyone. And that's without taking Judas into account - if it turns out after all that he's not a defector but a *mole* I had overlooked... Well, then there is no need for me to wait for this tribunal."

"Well, if Operation Ichthys turns out to be a failure, then of course..."

"Are you kidding me, centurion?"

"On the contrary, Excellency, I am as serious as ever. In this position, White has one move that might lead to a win, and I think I have found it..."

A win was of course way too strong a word; however, as Fabricius laid out his plan, I began to feel ready to fight again: the solid wall had cracked, and one could in principle try to climb up this crack, but what would come out of that - well, the only thing we could do is try and see. Of course, the combination conceived by the centurion was very technically complex, and the risk was simply prohibitive, but in my position, I didn't get to be picky. All hope was that the high priests would also be knocked down now - after Nathanael reports to them that instead of the desired corpse, there is alive Jesus and an incredible mess. As the result of all its maneuvers, the Sanhedrin got

exactly what it tried to avoid the most - an open trial, with further pressure due to this happening during Passover.

"...And now, Excellency, comes the riskiest moment in the whole combination: we will have to hand over the arrestee into the hands of the Sanhedrin. It is impossible to avoid this, otherwise they will never believe in our neutrality and complete disinterest in the cause of the Nazarene. Showing that in this whole story we are just neutral observers and thereby lulling their vigilance is the only chance for salvation both for us and for Jesus. However, they may panic and simply kill him this night under the pretext of an attempt to escape - or, less likely, immediately openly execute him officially on their own by stoning; in either case, we will not be able to prevent that. I have already engaged our agents in the Sanhedrin and advised Nicodemus, but their capabilities are clearly not sufficient. But if the next morning the Nazarene is handed over to the Procurator, then we can consider half - or even three-quarters - of the job done. So even before entering the city, we should hand over the Nazarene to the temple guard, and after that, at least for now, we can only pray to all the known gods."

"And in this respect, Fabricius, we were unexpectedly lucky!" - and I told the centurion the details of the unsuccessful Gethsemane assassination attempt in a nutshell. "I don't think they would decide to go for a second run after such a nasty overt failed attempt with many direct Roman witnesses."

And that's how it turned out to be. In any case, my colleague Nathanael, to whom I officially handed over the prisoner, clearly ceased to understand anything at all about what was happening - which was what we needed. Fabricius, watching Nathanael's retreating squad, suddenly and kind of casually said:

"Actually, the plan is extremely risky indeed. You know what, Excellency: appoint me the head of this phase of the operation - with all the consequences that follow..."

"As the operation officially does not exist, it does not have an official head, centurion! Anyway, you can proceed!"

Needless to say, what followed was a jolly great night - nobody could get bored. Less than an hour later, in the courtyard of the house of Caiaphas, where the arrested Nazarene was at that moment, vigilant servants caught a spy - one of the disciples. Luckily, completely coincidentally a Roman patrol happened to be nearby - "Hey there, make a way! Hold back, I said! Come on, move faster, you're crawling like a louse on a corpse... A disciple or whatever - all will be sorted out!" - otherwise the guy would've probably been lynched on the spot. As soon as I received this report, I immediately thought, "It's got to

be Peter” - and I was right. While detained, he behaved absolutely correctly - he went into complete denial, and this gave us a completely legitimate pretext to release him from custody closer to the morning, when roosters crowed - allegedly “for lack of evidence”. This guy was definitely worth looking at properly.

And about half an hour later Fabricius received the long-awaited and only saving message for me from his agents. Judas had left the Sanhedrin (as the surveillance service established, without any escort) after a brief conversation with the High Priest and employees of internal counterintelligence, which ended with handing him a small amount of money, namely, *thirty pieces of silver*... So, I did manage to push my misinformation through with Nathanael’s hands, and Judas was now “burned out” completely. I was not too upset even by the fact that this time he managed to trick the surveillance again and disappear in the lanes and alleys of the Downtown. He no longer posed an immediate threat, so we could search for him a little later, and in the meantime there were more important things to do.

Only after receiving this message I decided that I deserved a couple of hours of sleep, which I needed like air: in the morning I had an audience with the Procurator of Judea on “Ichthys”, and for that I needed an exceptionally clear and acute mind. For it is rightly said - the most dangerous fight is a fight with your own...

I must say that I can - or rather could, before there was a reason for you to open this letter... - call the Procurator “my own” for good reasons. In their countless delations - both to you, Proconsul, and to Rome - Jews write about him as a bloodthirsty monster, mired in corruption; both of those things are lies. After all, he is the third Procurator I got acquainted with (if you remember, I began my service under Valerius Gratus), so I have some room for comparison. As for the Jews, every next Procurator seems to them worse than the previous one; I myself can honestly say that this is the first time that I see someone in this office who is concerned not only with oriental pleasures and filling his own pockets.

Once upon a time there was a military general, an honest but - as it seemed to me at first - simple man, who earned his zigzagged shoulder straps with sweat and blood left at the German borderlands. And now he found himself appointed to rule this land, where the locals were at once granted all the benefits of civilization - from Roman law to plumbing; and these Asian pigs, of course, sleep and dream of crawling back into the ditch. Well, guess what - he, equestrian Pontius Pilate, nicknamed Golden Spear, was put here to plant civilization, and he will plant it, you can count on that. As you might guess, the

first results of the Procurator's activities were absolutely monstrous - take even just the confiscation of temple treasures for the needs of building a new aqueduct, which led to a grandiose revolt. Thus the more interesting was the rapid evolution of the brave general.

Firstly, the Procurator retained an army habit - before making a final decision he finds out the opinion of his subordinates, starting with those junior in rank. Secondly, having become accustomed to being prudent with the personnel and state property entrusted to him, and having received a valuable burn in a frontal attack, he immediately switched to the correct siege tactics; the progress in his understanding of the local situation and environment and the intricacies of eastern politics over the years was simply amazing. In short, the Procurator demonstrated not only the ability not to step on the same rake twice, but a true administrative talent; suffice it to say that he began to evaluate the activities of our service not by the number of neutralized terrorists, but by the quality of analytical reports.

There was one more, quite amusing, incidental circumstance here. All his life the Procurator has been subtly poked with the question of racial purity and allegiance because of his Samnite mother. As a result, as it often happens, he has turned into a hardcore Roman patriot and sincerely perceives the interests of the Empire as his own. Otherwise, one must think, he would never in his life have given me permission (even if purely verbal and unofficial) to conduct such an operation, slippery in many respects, as "Ichthys".

...The Procurator was gloomy, and the ashy dawn shadows added gloom to his face.

"What the crud did you write here?!" - he exclaimed in his hoarse cavalry bass, pointing in my direction with the sheet of my report, which he held by the corner with disgust. "He's asking for resignation and tribunal, you see! And the vomit that you have spread here, do I have to clean it up? Or maybe Alexander the Great? You bloody writer-analyst!..."

At this point, I mentally took a breath, and, lowering my eyes, began to patiently wait for the now inevitable ending: "Redeem it through work!"

"...Here's the deal, tribune: take your whiny scribbles out of my sight; it's no time smear your snot - redeem your mess-up with work! Now let's get down to business. I want to hear a detailed report on Operation Ichthys!"

So, the Procurator is now in the role of "Father-Commander", which is extremely gratifying. It is, by the way, also beloved by the Procurator himself - as one not requiring any special transformation.

“...Hmm, so, as far as I understand it, tribune, I need to find a way to free your preacher; it won’t be easy, of course, but...”

“Quite the opposite, Procurator; you should approve the death sentence that the Sanhedrin will surely pass on him. It is only important that they do not kill him themselves, but hand him over to be executed by us.”

“What do you mean?! Did I hear you right, tribune? Of course, I am a soldier, not a counterintelligence officer, and I may not understand some of the intricacies of your work, but still... This preacher is the key agent in a strategic operation that affects the fate of the Empire; and you have told me yourself that he is uniquely and irreplaceably fit for the role. Is that correct or not?”

“Yes, except that Jesus cannot be just called ‘my agent’ head-on...”

“What do you mean he cannot?” - “Father-Commander” was instantly gone, as if he never existed, and in front of me appeared a granite statue covered with hoarfrost, “A major state official. VIII century from the foundation of Rome, unknown author.”

“Elaborate, tribune. Did I understand you correctly that for more than two years you have been financing a subversive organization beyond your control from the state funds?”

“No, Procurator. All activities of the Nazarene and his sect were under our effective control - and on top of that, as a major technical achievement of ours, he is still unaware of it. I only meant that we cannot apply the same requirements to him as to a career intelligence officer who has undergone appropriate training. The problem is that in the recent days, Jesus experienced such a strong psychological crisis that it made him unsuitable for further use as a religious leader: he has firmly decided to die voluntarily, as a martyr - and to do so right now. In this regard, the following plan for the completion of the operation arose ...”

The Procurator listened without interrupting, and when I finished, he stared at me in grave amazement.

“Did you, tribune, come here to joke? Or maybe you didn’t sleep well after yesterday’s events? So, the deceased comes back to life on the third day after the burial and begins to walk around in broad daylight, holding edifying conversations... sorry, but who in their sane mind can believe in such nonsense - and you want a sizable fraction of the whole population to believe in this?! Of course, the Jews are a benighted and superstitious people to the extreme, but this is too much even for them. And just in terms of the technique, I have grave doubts about your substitution trick... Imagine that Caiaphas decides to visit the place of the execution - you can’t bet what a pervert like him wouldn’t

do! - and take a closer look at the face of the crucified. Do you even begin to fathom the scale of the scandal? Not to mention the fact that the whole teaching of this pacifist of yours will then be instantly compromised...”

I tried to object, while recalling how I myself had voiced all these considerations (as well as many others) to Fabricius earlier. The most salient consideration, however, was that we simply didn't have anything to choose from, but the Procurator, unfortunately, had not yet understood this. (And besides, when I likewise said to Fabricius that a normal person would never in their life believe in such nonsense, ... I will never forget the ear-to-ear silent grin he gave me.)

“Now listen to me carefully, tribune.” - he said in an even, muffled voice, and I innerly held my breath: the Procurator appeared in *this* role infrequently...

“Your cunning plan is actually quite transparent. You recently had a major failure (in Galilee, am I right?), and in order to at least somehow compensate for it, you need a major success. However, Lady Luck has turned her back on you: Demiurge's betrayal follows, and you also lose the Nazarene - albeit at the last moment you managed to prevent his assassination, which is great - well done, tribune, credit where it's due. It might actually be possible to “launder” the Nazarene, but this is hard, painstaking, and most importantly, slow, while you need a *quick* success. And that's where this idea comes into your smart head, to make a virtue of necessity: Jesus, you see, became suicidal and is no good anymore, so it's even sort of a plus that he was arrested. And now we will cunningly take him out of the game, in the end arranging a grandiose performance - to the tune of his sermons, so to speak - one after which his sect will flourish even better than with the living leader! In short: one move - and the game is won! Right?”

“So, tribune: I do not approve of your plan, and I simply do not believe that the Nazarene decided to die. Your whole idea is a pure gamble, and besides, its technical side is dangerous. So, you're just asking for trouble, tribune. I have already said once and I will repeat it again: everything is clear to me with your failures, work on and do not fluster. Tizz off, tribune! And it's my problem how I will launder you before higher authorities, not yours. By the way, about laundering: do not forget that today we could free the Nazarene cleanly, without causing any questions at all - in accordance with the custom of the Passover pardon of one of the convicts.”

“In short, tribune, the disposition will be as follows. We will part now, and then you will act independently, without any consultation with me. I believe that you have the good sense to keep the Nazarene

and to use the Passover pardon for this. Meanwhile, I will play with the Sanhedrin; they will most likely want not only to eliminate the Nazarene but also to push the execution itself onto me, and remain clean themselves. Only this trick will not work for them - in any case I will smack their faces at the table until they have signed each page of this protocol with their noseblood. And while Caiaphas and I will be pushing the prisoner to each other, you will have enough time to prepare the crowd on the square in front of the praetorium - so that when I ask: 'Who should I release for you?' they will shout, 'Jesus of Nazareth!' loud and clear. You have at least three hours left - that's an eternity!"

"And if the crowd yells another name (which Caiaphas is quite possibly whispering to them right now), this will mean that you did not want (or tried but failed - it doesn't matter) to take advantage of your chance, and I will wash my hands of it. You can act according to any scenario - you are the boss; knock yourself out! I can't forbid you anything - after all, there is simply no Operation Ichthys! Naturally, I myself will act within the strictest bounds of law, mercilessly punishing the slightest deviations from it. The winners are not judged, tribune, that is pure truth, but remember that if you get grabbed by your hand by the Jews while doing your manipulations... then, I'm afraid, you will have to learn how hemlock affects the taste of your favorite Falernian wine; however, as an officer, you will probably use a sword, won't you?"

Well, the Procurator did all that he could for me - he did not utter the magic formula: "In the name of the Emperor, I categorically forbid..."; so, everything was in my hands. By the way, all his considerations were very much on point, and the proposed plan with the Passover pardon was very good. The only problem was that unlike the Procurator I knew that the Nazarene is done with, this is a given, already introduced into the conditions of the problem. And therefore, it was necessary to immediately begin to implement Fabricius's plan - which was indeed extremely risky, yes! - and there was a lot of work to do to that end.

...Fabricius and I stood in an empty wing of the praetorium, cordoned off ahead of time - so that not a mouse would slip through - listening to the slowly fading roar of the square. By the clarity with which the crowd had chanted "Bar Abbas!!" before that, I realized that I was right: Caiaphas did not let things go on their own and made sure to leave nothing to chance. Not only would it be very hard to reverse this "people's will", worse yet, it would be extremely risky to try to do so - even through secondary intermediaries like Nicodemus - from the

point of view of not creating the potential possibility of the smallest hint of our direct interest in Jesus. (This could only be justified if we badly needed to reverse the death sentence, which was what the Procurator thought, but alas, his assumptions were more optimistic than the reality...) And when two soldiers of the Sebastian cohort brought him in, a very strange thing happened. It seemed to me that all the sunlight patches on the mosaic floor of the praetorium suddenly ran to the feet of Jesus, enclosing him in a shining ring, and the purple robe thrown over his shoulders turned into pure flame. Anyway, this delusion only lasted for a few moments and ended as soon as I shook my head.

Meanwhile, a special forces officer, having put a bundle with the clothes of the Nazarene on a stool, quietly reported: the order was executed, he was led along the entire outer gallery, twice. Yes, the purple robe was clearly visible from the crowd - this was specifically checked; and the Sebastians were even heard referring to him as "that Jew in a purple robe". In the meantime, I looked at Jesus intently and was satisfied with the result of my examination: it seems that he had clearly realized that the jokes were over, and he would have to die - here and now. He was controlling his face completely, but its pale color and the sweat flowing down his temples in streams, mixing with the blood that was oozing from under a wreath of thorns, could not be hidden. Those Sebastians! This is their favorite shtick - to wrap a Jew suspected of having links with the rebels in a cocoon of thorn branches and leave him to roast in the sun. However, it might be for the best, I thought.

And I was about to tell him something like the following. How did you say there, philosopher - "yes - yes", "no - no", and what is beyond that is from the Evil One? We are interested in you and in your preaching, and therefore we offer the following deal. Over here, behind this door, is someone whose execution was scheduled for tomorrow, but it will happen now; he has also received a large dose of drugs, so that he cannot talk much or think straight. He will now be dressed in your robe, and later crucified instead of you on a cross with a sign saying "The King of the Jews"; the rest of the details don't concern you. We will take you out of here and hide you - so that in three days you will appear to your students, and then to the broad masses of the people. We want the people to believe in your messianic essence, and the authority of your teachings to become indisputable in Judea. After a few appearances, for the safety of the operation you will have to disappear - let's say, ascend to Heaven. Unfortunately, you will have to spend the rest of your life under a false name far from

Palestine; you will receive clean documents and means of subsistence, and most importantly, the opportunity to compose new sermons and messages, which we will clandestinely distribute in Palestine among your followers. So, yes or no?

But suddenly, while the officer was still talking to me and before I could even say anything, Jesus looked at us all, then looked up and said, "O Lord, give me strength!", bent down, took the bundle with his clothes, and swiftly went to the door and managed to go out to the executioners' aides waiting on the steps. I did not expect this at all, and therefore only looked after him with a stunned expression.

It was a clean knockout. I mechanically asked the officer to leave and sat down on the stool vacated by the Nazarene with an empty head.

While I was sitting not knowing what to think, I noticed that Fabricius, likewise, seemed to be doing nothing but following the bustle of the newly revived sunbeams... except his eyes had completely stopped: unlike me, the centurion was *working*. And then he looked up at me, as if he had just woken up, and said thoughtfully:

"Well, there is still something we can try - and, in any case, it is our only chance to save the operation."

"What are you talking about, centurion?"

"Excuse me, Excellency, I thought you already understand. The prophecy that Jesus believed in can still be fulfilled. I'm talking about doing everything as we have planned, but without his participation."

"...Yeah, just like in that Jewish saying that we're having a funeral without anyone having died? Are you out of your mind, centurion?"

"Of course not. Have you ever happened to use imitators in operational work?"

"Imitators?! Wait a minute, Fabricius... But the minimally critical witnesses..."

"...Will not be involved, Excellency. We will show him only to those who believe in him and have heard the prophecy from him, and, above all, would *want* to see him resurrected - at least at first, until we create the appropriate public opinion."

And thus, the already insane idea of Fabricius was now becoming twice more insane, but there was no alternative whatsoever, and with all the bridges behind us burned we could only move forward, without looking back. And as for "doing everything as planned", this was, of course, a gross overstatement: the plan needed massive and most urgent adjustments. For example, all the disciples and companions of Jesus were under tight control at that moment; we took special measures so that none of them could appear close to the place of the execution or take part in the burial of the corpses (the latter were to

be thrown into a common grave after being *processed* to the point of being unidentifiable). Now all these activities have lost their meaning; vice versa, it became highly desirable for them to see the death and corpse of the Teacher with their own eyes.

On the other hand, we now urgently needed a real tomb, and preferably located in a fairly secluded place. Fabricius immediately found Nicodemus. Shouldn't the followers of Jesus take care of a worthy burial of the Teacher? The Roman authorities, as far as he knows, are going to throw the bodies of all the executed into a ditch! On the other hand if someone volunteers to bury the executed with all the respectful rites, he is sure that he can help with this being permitted...

In short, in an hour or so this problem was solved. The owner of the tomb turned out to be a friend and associate of Nicodemus, very well-known to us - Joseph, originally from Arimathea; he went to the Procurator, whom I informed in time, and asked to bury the body. The tomb he owned turned out to be located in a rather remote place - exactly what we needed.

By the way, about my conversation with the Procurator just before. The first thing that he poured on me after I explained the situation was ... that he was completely furious about the release of bar Abbas, who is a "centurion" in Eleazar's group. Did I really decide to just let this terrorist go away in peace? Don't I think that the cost of covering my combo with the Nazarene is too high? I did not, and explained to the Procurator that, as a side effect, One-Eyed Simon now has the opportunity to attribute to bar Abbas all leaks of information, both past and future. Amazingly, however, the Procurator did not even hint at objecting to my combination itself now - and I left him with a (frankly, very helpful) feeling of reassurance.

However, one additional obstacle arose here - threatening to bring down our entire neat construction in one fell swoop. The plan was based on people who wanted to see the Teacher resurrected; we only needed to help them in the fulfillment of their conscious or unconscious desires. There was, however, one person who would not hesitate to give half of his remaining lifetime for the opportunity to expose our staging: Demiurge.

Having loudly declared that the "resurrected Nazarene" is simply an impostor, the ex-apostle would nullify all our efforts to convince anybody. And, of course, having regained his value to the Sanhedrin - as the key witness and incriminator - he will receive appropriate protection. After that, amazing prospects will open before him: he will be able either to blackmail us (preserving his legend of a repentant

sectarian before the Sanhedrin), or to reveal himself to the Judean secret services as a former Roman agent who has proven his usefulness to the new masters. Thus, our combination has a *condicio sine qua non*: by the time of the “resurrection” Judas must be dead.

Well, that’s far easier said than done! At night, he escaped from our surveillance and until noon we did not begin his search, because he was not a priority in the framework of our original plan. Demiurge is an agent of the highest class; even staying in Jerusalem, he can “dissolve” in this city, so that it will take weeks to find him, while only a day and a half and two nights are at our disposal... Having swiftly looked through all conceivable shelters of our fugitive agent and found no trace of him there, we came to the disappointing conclusion that it would be hard to find him unless he makes some major mistake - and if we don’t find him, it’s completely pointless to stage the “resurrection”...

I mechanically made notes on the map of the city in accordance with the constantly arriving reports from the surveillance service (it has begun to work in the “emergency search” mode in the recent hours) - still better than being completely idle. Meanwhile, in search of even the slightest clue Fabricius continued to study the dossier of Demiurge, which we had already gone through page by page at least twice. And then, finally, after two hours spent in complete silence, he quietly called out to me; looking up from the map, I saw that he was holding a document from the dossier, one of the last ones.

“I want to know something, Excellency. Here is Judas’s report about John’s ‘betrayal’. In its margins you left a note that he was immediately given four hundred denarii from an emergency fund ‘for elimination of the consequences of a possible betrayal’. Now, while going with the capture group to Gethsemane, Judas left his cash box in the building of the Sanhedrin; meanwhile, my people - I myself don’t know why - looked into it. And there were only eighteen coins in it; I wonder where the other 382 or more had gone?”

“Well, that’s natural! Do you remember how Judas almost got busted with a box full of money, when the sect demanded explanations? After that incident, he became very cautious...”

“You’re not listening to me carefully, Excellency. I’m interested not in the reason why at least 382 denarii evaporated from the box, but in their *current location*.”

I looked at him in silence for a moment.

“Aah, so *that’s* what it is... Yeah, perhaps you’re right: the only thing that can make Judas do something stupid is his greed. So, let’s think: after receiving the money he hurried back out of the city,

and Jerusalem is in any case unlikely as a place for a secret money stash, it must be in a lonelier location... What do you think - maybe Gethsemane, somewhere not far from their cave?"

"That's what I'm thinking too. Maybe somewhere else along the Jericho Road, but this is unlikely - a reliable stationary secluded hiding place is needed here."

"Well, that's an idea. Let the detectives continue their search in the city, while we prepare an ambush in Gethsemane. And if he does try to leave Jerusalem this or the next night (and why should he wait here?) - he must get caught: he does not have the willpower to leave such a stash until better times."

So, in terms of searching for Judas, everything possible had been done; now we could only wait - and hope. In the meantime, another major element of our plan had to be dealt with - ensuring the "mystical" disappearance of Jesus's body. Tomorrow morning, guards will appear at the tomb of Joseph; Nicodemus and Joseph, the Sanhedrin and the Procurator together will take care of this - not knowing, except for the Procurator, what they are doing. We had two possibilities before us, and now we had to decide which one of them to choose.

The simpler option was as follows. The next night, when (or rather, if) we receive the message that Judas is done with, we appear at the tomb, present our IDs to the Roman guards, and simply take the body away, telling the legionnaires to keep their mouths shut; in the morning the soldiers would "discover" an open and empty grave and pretend to panic. This option was of course as simple as ABC, but this is precisely the case when less effort means more danger. Firstly, the high priests could insist on a joint guard of legionnaires with temple guards; the probability of this was relatively small, but it still absolutely existed. Secondly (and much more importantly), it would be a direct violation of the requirements of secrecy, such as the categorical prohibition of the Procurator to draw any further Roman officials into the operation, in this case the head of the guard - and above all, it would create a major possibility of an information leak through the soldiers. So this option was rejected by us, not without regret.

Therefore, we began to act according to another plan, more complex but with a much milder worst-case outcome. This plan was based on a combination of two factors. First, as you may know, Proconsul, the Jews make something like Egyptian mummies out of their dead, wrapping them in many layers of incense-soaked cloth. In particular, it is completely impossible to see the dead body itself under the cloth; that is why we needed Jesus to be buried according to the full Jewish

rite. Secondly, no Jew that respects the Law of Moses can be forced to touch an already buried corpse.

At night, having waited for the departure of Joseph and Nicodemus with female companions of Jesus from the tomb, we removed the corpse from it, and replaced it with an empty “cocoon” carefully made out of funeral sheets by Fabricius. We put the body in a bag, carried it to a safe place prepared nearby, separated the head in order for our imitation expert to have the original for reference, and buried the rest in the soil discreetly. When legionnaires appeared at the tomb in the morning, closely followed by sweating members of the Sanhedrin, the decisive moment arrived. I watched the sealing of the tomb from some distance - ready to instantly intervene (in a distracting way) if, for example, some overzealous decurion decides to take the initiative; the Jewish hierarchs worried me the least. Well, one of them looked, with obvious disgust, inside the tomb; the body is there - all right! But you, my dear, needed to *feel* it to really check...

So, all the preparations were completed. Now everything depended on whether we could get to Judas in the remaining day and night, and in this respect there was no progress so far. Moreover: it turned out that yesterday in the morning a man looking like him was seen in the immediate vicinity of the Susa Gate; so we could be looking for last year’s snow in Jerusalem. However, there was simply nothing else that we could do. The detectives continued to methodically sweep the city’s slums and watch the mansions; turning into stones, the commandos froze in their Gethsemane ambush; Fabricius and I, having already done everything in our power, were doomed to simply wait - in complete idleness...

The stars in the greyish pre-dawn sky had already started to fade, along with our hope, when a gigantic figure silently appeared in the doorway. And when the commander of the Gethsemane ambush decurion Petronius stretched out his arm, carelessly wrapped in a bloody rag, from under his invisibility cloak, I experienced the animal joy of a death row criminal who got a reprieve.

“...That’s right, your honor, we managed to get him, but with a major imperfection. Rufius from the second platoon immediately needs a doctor, please call for one; yes, *serious* - we were afraid he wouldn’t even last till we bring him back. There is another one, but it’s just a scratch, like mine. Too many casualties?! You should have seen how well he fought, while we were bound by your order to capture him alive! And most importantly - all this turned out to be in vain, in the sense that in the end we did not take him alive - we had to kill him on the spot, otherwise he could have left altogether. So, he was finally

hung, but there is such a hole in his belly that his intestines stick out, and the field around is covered in blood... Yes, this 'suicide' is quite a sight... Is the paramedic already waiting? Thank you, your honor. Glad to serve!"

Well, it seems that the imitation of Judas's suicide did not quite work out, but let's not be fussy with luck! In the end, the main goal was achieved, and now it was possible to move on, in accordance with the plan. And we had to move at lightning speed, because the edge of the sky in the east was already brightening, and when I got to the tomb, the predawn twilight was already beginning.

Having pushed my badge with a golden bat under the nose of the head of the guard - a young centurion - and said, "The deceased promised disappearance of his body by now, let's see how you did your job guarding it!", I ordered to move the stone that closed the entrance to the tomb, came inside while they were finishing rolling it off, and instantly dragged out empty open funeral sheets, demonstrating them to the guards with a fuming expression on my face. We prepared the cocoon with a hidden tear to make this smoother - and natural-looking in case one of the guards glances inside "mid-trick"; as I've already mentioned we didn't know for sure from the beginning that the guard wouldn't be joint, so the "plan-minimum" was merely to make them realize that they were guarding nothing (without this realization looking suspicious) - a spread of this word should still be good enough, together with the other measures, to help convince those who want to believe.

They immediately looked inside in shock, but of course saw no body. Thus, in accordance with the basic plan (not depending on the composition and actions of the guard) the whole thing, before and now, looked exactly as it also would if Jesus's body miraculously disappeared after the tomb's sealing, and I simply naturally discovered that. Next, I, looking with rage at the centurion, dead with horror and stupefaction, muttered:

"Well, how are you going to explain all this, centurion?" And a short while later I interrupted his shocked bleating with a bellow: "Do you realize what you've done, idiot?! This is an international scandal! You'll be court-martialled and pray to Jupiter to just be put in a penal unit!"

And when I felt that he was all ripe and ready and clearly considering stabbing himself right now, I somewhat loosened my grip and began to instruct him and the rest of the guard:

"Go to the Sanhedrin, fast. You will describe everything to them there, in detail, like you were trying to describe to me: how you sealed it

(together with them, by the way!), how you were keeping watch here without closing your eyes, and that you haven't got the faintest idea where this body has gone - it's like it just evaporated! Since they asked for this guard, if you manage to convince them that you are innocent (you can even suggest miracles if you want - who knows, Jews are superstitious people), then they might abstain from officially prosecuting you and starting a great scandal, which we certainly don't need! Come on, come on, move! You soiled it, you mop it!"

Now the subject for reflection among the high priests is quite serious indeed. Most importantly, the soldiers were in such a state that it would be immediately obvious to everyone that they were not lying; in order to *play* panic like that, one has to be a professional actor - and even then, how can an actor fake a fast heartbeat and a pale face, and so on?

The centurion saluted - "Yes, Sir!" - and shouted to his subordinates: "Forward - double march!" And it was high time for these guys to get out of here: the second act was about to begin on the stage any minute now, and there was absolutely no need for its characters to meet with the legionnaires.

And as soon as we placed "angels in snow-white clothes" around the tomb, the female companions of Jesus appeared (in fact one of them, Mary from Magdala, came just before everything was ready, but luckily ran away after seeing the empty tomb). Well, everything worked out perfectly here: the women immediately took the bait, and the "angels", having pompously announced to them about the resurrection of the Teacher, moved on to practical instructions:

"Go tell the disciples and Peter that he is ahead of you in Galilee."

Firstly, Fabricius and I unanimously decided that from now on Peter should be the leader of the sect - the rest clearly were not fit for the role. Secondly, it was necessary to evacuate the disciples from Jerusalem, and to do so immediately. In the current situation, the most logical move for the high priests was to capture several disciples, subject them to a *third-degree interrogation*, get a confession that the Teacher's body was stolen by them and then destroyed, and then immediately liquidate them, covering everything up. In any case, that's what I would do.

Then Mary returned, accompanied by John and Peter, and our operatives had to urgently hide: naturally, they were not allowed to appear before the eyes of men. But then - oh luck! - Mary was left in front of the tomb all alone; now it was the time for us to take out the big weapons and try out our key development on her. In any case, it's best to conduct this test right now - and if it turns out that

our imitator is not able to mislead even a lonely grief-stricken loving woman, then he's good for nothing, and needs to be immediately replaced; and the operational risk of this failure is low - it could be handwaved in multiple ways before the disciples later.

It must be said that when Fabricius saw our "Nazarene" for the first time last night, he only grunted, scratching his head, and asked flummoxedly:

"Couldn't you find anything better?.."

I just threw my hands up. Of course, our expert on changing the appearance worked hard that night, but his final conclusion was not encouraging: our imitator could be demonstrated only in conditions of poor visibility (fog, twilight, artificial lighting) - otherwise he did not vouch for anything. It was in the predawn twilight that our soloist made his first appearance on the stage. To be honest, his debut was just so-so, barely satisfactory: at first Mary decided that she saw a local gardener in front of her, and only further verbal exchange convinced her that she was facing the resurrected Teacher. Be that as it may, a positive first result was achieved.

There was also another difficulty. Our agent had no idea about the essence of the religious doctrine of the Nazarene or the details of his previous activities, and therefore, during the appearances, he was ordered to behave according to the well-known principle "a silent fool is counted wise". Nevertheless, it became vital to give at least some explanations to the completely bewildered disciples; and the only person who could freely navigate in all these religious intricacies was Fabricius. On the same day, the advisor made a sortie and, joining a couple of disciples on their way to Emmaus, put their confused thoughts in order for almost two hours. The result of this meeting turned out to be absolutely unexpected for both of us: for some reason, they decided that their interlocutor was none other than the resurrected Teacher himself - only "in a different guise"!

And while the centurion was sowing the word of God in the souls of men, I had to engage in a much more prosaic activity - to save the mortal bodies of the disciples, whose lives were now hanging by a thread. The Sanhedrin had already announced the verdict that I had considered most likely - "the body was stolen by the disciples", so now all the other consequences I had foreseen became more than likely, too. The sect ignored all our morning warnings to flee to Galilee, passed through Mary and other female companions. By the time they finally realized that they were in trouble, all the exits from the city had been already blocked by the temple guards, and the secret police began to sweep the residential areas.

In another situation, the evacuation would not have been difficult: it would be enough, for example, to dress the disciples into the uniform of the Sebastian riot police or Syrian auxiliary units. Here, however, again, I was obviously bound by hand and foot by the considerations of secrecy. Plus, the people of Nicodemus, who also wanted to save the disciples, began to get in our way. This well-intentioned dilettante, who himself had long been under the hood of Caiaphas, was truly dangerous - like an excessively sociable leper who did not want to know about his illness. In short, by the time the disciples were finally gathered in one of our safe houses in the Upper City, I sweated blood. The most interesting thing is that these guys clearly took everything that was done for their salvation by various - real and mythical - "followers of Jesus" as a matter of course. It looks like of all the Teacher's commandments, their favorite one was "Be like children."

Well, at least now these "children" were under our supervision, and we could be sure that they would not play with knives and fire. In addition, they were told the proper amount of "horror stories", to make sure they would no longer want to run away behind the gate without asking their mom. The real situation, by the way, was even more serious than the one with which they were scared. After the corpse of Judas was discovered, criminal investigators joined the secret police in their search; together these services were turning the city inside out.

For us, meanwhile, a decisive moment was approaching: it was time to present to the disciples their "resurrected" Rabbi. And the first experience with Mary did not instill much optimism, while our expert had already squeezed out the possibilities for increasing the portrait similarity of the persons involved. The situation seemed quite hopeless. Having completely seriously discussed using hypnotists and throwing a bit of hemp into the lamp for the disciples, we almost stopped at adding something to their food or drinks, when Fabricius suddenly found a simple and elegant solution.

He asked to make a "certificate of crucifixion" for our imitator - a set of terrible wounds. These wounds turned out to be just wonderful: our expert's masterful creation could be safely demonstrated even in broad daylight, and even the most demanding professional from among the beggars-"cripples" would pay a lot to have something half as good as these. In addition, we temporarily removed the most skeptically minded disciple, Thomas, from the house - we sent him supposedly for emergency communication with another group of "admirers of Jesus" (under a reliable cover - which is much easier to organize for a single person). And when inside the room where the evening twilight had already thickened a familiar figure suddenly appeared and horrific

wounds were presented - who would dare to doubt what he saw with his own eyes?

However, there turned out to be a doubter - Thomas; so it was indeed a perfect catch by us to remove him from the theater for the duration of the first act. We carried out constant monitoring of the disciples (this is how we reconstructed their last supper together and a number of other episodes during these days), in the course of which we learned that Thomas did not swallow our bait and said that he wants to feel with his fingers what kind of interesting wounds these were if they did not prevent a person from walking or breathing. Man, one can't deny that this guy has in him some logic!

I rashly suggested that Thomas should be *accidented*, presenting this as God's punishment for unbelief, but Fabricius strongly opposed:

"It would be much too obvious, Excellency, endangering the whole operation! And besides, we need to instill *faith* in them, not *fear*, otherwise this whole venture won't work."

Throughout the next week, which the community spent essentially under house arrest, the friends actively pressured stubborn Thomas, and he slowly began to lose ground. However, for some reason the greatest impression on him was made by the story of the Emmaus apparition. In short, when "Jesus" reappeared inside the locked house and spoke directly to Thomas:

"Give your finger, and feel my wounds, and do not be unbelieving, but believe!" - Thomas just fell on his knees in repentance, without even touching the wounds, and the incident was over.

In the meantime, the police activity in Jerusalem had subsided, and, with every possible precaution, we moved the disciples back home to Galilee. Here problems began again, because they all immediately quarreled; even during their forced stay in Jerusalem, these guys began to seriously discuss a most urgent question - who of them loved the Lord the most? At first, we did not pay any attention to this: in obedience to their favorite commandment, they just kept being like children. Unfortunately, in Galilee the process spiraled out of control; before we could even blink, John began to seriously pull the blanket over himself, and four others even broke away and, in accordance with their own understanding, began to preach such things that Fabricius only clutched his head. Poor Peter, meanwhile, was stumped and lost control of the situation in the community.

It was necessary to intervene immediately, before the community fell apart altogether. Fabricius had to repeat his Emmaus experience on the Lake of Gennesaret. Without directly naming himself (this uncertainty gave him room to play back and declare himself a

“messenger” in a bad-case scenario - instead of instantly failing the operation), the advisor nevertheless made a much more vivid impression on the disciples than our imitator decorated with wounds. The result exceeded all expectations: Fabricius succeeded both in confirming the leadership of Peter and gently humbling John, and in restoring the cracked monolithicity of the community.

Meanwhile, it was time to complete our maneuvers. The Galilean soil was already sufficiently prepared for sowing (the Messiah turned out to be their countryman after all, whatever those arrogant Judeans say!), and now the time was ripe for a public demonstration. We carried it out on a mount in Galilee, where one evening our imitator appeared to a crowd of several hundred people, led by the newly united disciples. Of course, it would have been better to show Fabricius to the people, so that he would preach the appropriate sermon, but the danger of a different nature laid in wait for us here. The rumor about the appearances had long since reached the authorities; there could easily be Judean agents in the crowd, among which, in turn, there could easily be someone who knew the cultural advisor by sight. On the other hand, we quickly abandoned the idea of a final staging of “the ascension of Jesus to Heaven”. Fabricius said that now the public opinion had already been influenced to such an extent that a massive *inception* of rumors about this event was completely sufficient - the result would be exactly the same; and he was absolutely right.

When the main part of Operation Ichthys was almost completed, the Procurator suddenly summoned me. There has recently been an inexplicable rise in popularity of the subversive teachings of certain Jesus of Nazareth, who was safely executed about a month ago, but then allegedly “resurrected”. Do I know that the Judean authorities had begun the corresponding investigation? And if I know, why in the world am I not doing anything? And if I am doing something, why am I not reporting it? Do I understand what a gigantic danger to the power of the Emperor is the growing teaching of the Nazarene? It’s good that I understand - because the high priests had just visited the Procurator, and they think that they are the only ones so smart...

“In short, it is necessary to immediately begin an investigation parallel to the Sanhedrin’s... When to report the results?! Yesterday!! Get moving, tribune!” Here the Procurator half-rose, resting his fists on the tabletop, and shouted: “In the name of the Emperor!”

I silently saluted and marched out.

What could this all mean? And the more I thought about it, the more I disliked the Procurator’s inexplicable hysterics. Of course, in the final phase of the operation, we left some spots, but the situation was

completely under control, and there were absolutely no grounds for panic. No leaks on “Ichthys” are possible, since even inside our service no one except Fabricius and me is able to put together a complete mosaic of various recent operational activities.

And the rest... The guys involved in cover-up operations? - They were supposed to protect the disciples from lynching, which could provoke riots. Petronius and his boys? - The same, plus they were hunting a tricky bad guy, and nothing more. “Angels in white clothes” (who also spread rumors, in proper guises), the makeover expert, and the imitator? - Hm... Yes, I guess... Say, about three weeks ago our resident in Samosata reported a sharp increase in the activity of Parthian intelligence and, as usual, complained about the shortage of personnel; perhaps his request, and several others like his, should be granted. (But the expert should be given something safe to do - he is just such a good specialist, and we might need him in the future!) What else is there? The head of Jesus? I burned it after the last appearance of our imitator; I still have his skull at home as a souvenir, by the way - marked with a little fish symbol to avoid confusion with another skull next to it, marked with a droplet symbol - the skull of John the Baptist; why, I have a bit of sentiment too! What else? Financial reports? Well, that’s something that I have always been perfect at. So what does the Procurator want from me?

I am afraid that the problem here might be not in the investigation of the Sanhedrin (which has not dug anything up yet, and cannot dig up anything), but in something much more serious. Maybe some major shifts have taken place in the *spheres*, so far indistinguishable from my level. Or maybe the Procurator is hinting that the seeds sown by us might sprout *too* well, and once released this genie can no longer be confined back into a jug, so I need to make sure to tame it while it is still in its infancy and can be influenced; this has crossed my mind, but whatever we have done cannot make the situation in Palestine *worse*, that’s for sure, there is a natural limit to how malignant for us this genie might become - and the Procurator must realize this, too. Or, maybe he is indeed worried about leaks too much, after all. And if so, then the tying up of loose ends that I am currently carrying out has a completely predictable and sad ending for me personally: I am alive only until the moment I finish this work. Coming to this disappointing conclusion, I immediately sat down to write a document on the course of Operation Ichthys - the very one that you, Proconsul, are now holding in your hands. Yet if the Procurator does still approve of “Ichthys” despite the risks - which is something that I will find out soon - this document is actually the lesser guarantee of my life, and

the greater one is that the disciples still need occasional protection and support; so, if the Procurator is still on board, Operation Ichthys will continue (in which case we will still need the “angels”).

By the way, about the Jewish investigation: the Sanhedrin, as one might expect, failed to find any evidence of Rome’s involvement in the mysterious events in Jerusalem and Galilee. Furthermore, in hindsight, the high priests fully appreciated what opportunities for investigating the appearances could now be possible with the testimony of Judas - had he survived. Therefore, the secret police, covering up their blunder (they didn’t save the key witness!), grabbed with both hands at the rumor we planted about the “suicide” of Judas. It is more through their efforts than ours that variations of the ridiculous tale that a man first stabbed himself in the abdomen by falling on a dagger, then gathered his last strength and hanged himself from remorse became indisputable facts.

Anyway, work is work, and after the talk to the Procurator I went to visit the cultural advisor, who was ill with a cold, and to discuss with him the measures to cover up the “Roman trace” in the completed phase of Operation Ichthys. The Procurator himself, for example, had trodden with dirty boots on our polished parquet with his clumsy attempts to obtain an acquittal of Jesus. Now I had to spread rumors that he allegedly acted at the instigation of his wife, who had a “revelation from above” in her dream. This absurd gossip (the Procurator had never been married) was accepted by the people amazingly well. It was also necessary to take more care of the rumors that Judas committed suicide, and many other things.

The advisor greeted me without much joy. Recently, taking advantage of the fact that the rush was over, and the tension subsided, he practically retired from working on “Ichthys” under the pretext of illness. In reality, Fabricius, as I had suspected, simply plunged into dark melancholy; this had happened before, but never had these attacks been so severe and prolonged. After listening rather indifferently to all my considerations, with great effort he immersed himself into reflection for a couple of minutes, and then noted that if in the future I decide to sacrifice some of the disciples of Jesus (due to a forced necessity or maybe even so that the persecution by official bodies would raise the authority of the sect in the eyes of the people), then I should save Peter under any circumstances and regardless of the tangential losses.

“Perhaps you can make an operational development on this topic after your recovery?”

“Maybe...” - The advisor nodded indifferently. “Tell me the following,

Excellency: how and when did John get his moniker Demiurge?"

"I have no idea: he had had it since before we met. Why are you asking?"

"There is no special reason... I've just been thinking, he and I are sort of namesakes: Demiurge, Fabricius... I'm just wondering - what if this was all predetermined already at the moment when he was given his pseudonym?.."

Poor Fabricius, I thought to myself.

"Listen, Fabricius. It seems to me that it's time for someone to get some rest. Go to Antioch, or if you want to, go to Rome, have some proper good time there. Starting tomorrow, you are on vacation; consider this an order."

"On vacation... That's an interesting idea, Excellency..." - The advisor muttered deep in thought, and suddenly laughed softly. It was a strange laugh - it made me feel like an icy centipede crawled along my spine...

It was then that a plump manuscript lying on the advisor's desk caught my attention; in order to change the subject, I politely asked if he had gone back to his translations from Canaanite as a treatment for his blues. Fabricius, not without embarrassment for some reason, began to explain that this manuscript (he called it "Document Q" - apparently from "*quaestio*") was his literary translation into Greek of all the sermons of Jesus known to him from undercover sources, as well as a description of the events in Jerusalem, appropriate for the general eye. He believed that all this information should by no means be lost to history.

While I was reflecting on our conversation, I received an urgent report. Less than an hour after our meeting with him, the Jerusalem resident of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Empire, General Staff centurion Gaius Fabricius, having finally completed the last lines of his poetic translation of an ancient Hittite hymn, which as he had even mentioned to me he could not get quite right for a while, drained a cup of his favorite Caecubian wine and stabbed himself to death with a sword; when I rushed in, the blood on the floor was still warm. So now only two people in the world know the truth about Operation Ichthys: me and the Procurator of Judea... Or rather, just now the composition of this pair has changed somewhat: you, Proconsul, have been added, and I, accordingly, have been eliminated...

This suicide, by the way, was absolutely real; at first I even thought that the Procurator got to the centurion, and I'm the next in line - but then, under the translated hymn, I found his suicide letter, which is kept in my personal archive for the time being. It says that he did

everything that was in his power, for both of his Empires - the current one and that future one (in particular, he had just put Document Q into the right hands), and now he was leaving the game; that he was mortally tired of translating from dead languages and preying on living people; that his work in this operation is truly a masterpiece, above which he cannot rise anyway, and his eternal dream was to leave undefeated. But most importantly: the advisor simply couldn't wait to find out - HOW DID *HE* ULTIMATELY EVALUATE HIS WORK? - and this, of course, is only possible in a personal meeting.

But really, how? I haven't found an answer to this question, although I have thought about it a couple of times these days. So now, Proconsul, I might have one - albeit very dubious - advantage over you: if Jesus and Fabricius are right, by the time you finish reading this far, I will probably already know the answer to that - the final and absolutely correct answer. But, to be honest... Having just looked into the empty eye sockets of the prophets on my shelf, I must say - I don't see an answer there.

Jerusalem, May 28, year 788 from the founding of Rome.

Head of the Secret Service under the Procurator of Judea, military tribune Afranius.

Addendum (B. Veklych): I have rolled up my own sleeves, as they teach us at MIT, and snatched this 27 year old foreign work out of the jaws of oblivion (and somewhat enriched it in the process) because I am incredibly annoyed by continuing absurd attempts to rationally prove miracles. Say, I don't need to be able to explain how David Copperfield did some amazing trick to be justified in thinking that it was not a miracle - and reality can be even fancier than your, my, Kirill Yeskov's, or David Copperfield's imagination. And yet people fall prey to this kind of logic - "it's God, because what else"/"it's a miracle, there is no other explanation" - thus there is a psychological value in going the extra mile and demonstrating some concrete non-supernatural alternative. Yeskov does this with the resurrection of Jesus, let me do the same here with the question of the origin of the world, another popularly alleged "God's miracle". (This guess-the-trick whack-a-mole does get tiring; for example, I don't know how consciousness works - which is yet another popular argument for God along the exact same lines [not for Jains or deists, however] - but isn't it obvious from everyday experience like intoxication or lack of sleep etcetera that one

has to have a well-functioning brain to have a mind, and that a person loses consciousness when dying [Jehova's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists acknowledge this, by the way - and it seems that so did Muhammad, see Quran 2:259; don't believe anybody who says that death is good for you!], and, even more importantly for the current purposes, isn't it obvious that a future baby perfectly well grows in the womb on its own, autonomously, without God's intervention, not any more than there is one in say the orbital motions of celestial bodies? Which means that this argument doesn't work, whatever else is true! [At least the other "arguments" for God's miraculous intervention - resurrection of Jesus, origin of the world, origin of life, etc. - are about more or less once-in-history events... There are also purely metaphysical arguments for atheism - for example, did God ordain the Law of Quadratic Reciprocity or the Fermat-Girard Law? Is it God's choice that there are two perfect squares that add up to a perfect square (e.g. $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$) but there aren't two perfect cubes that add up to a perfect cube (e.g. $9^3 + 10^3 = 1729 \neq 1728 = 12^3$ - very close, but still not a match)? Did he decide that it should be so, is it his design? And did he invent the blue color, that very blueness itself - the blue quale, if we're speaking about consciousness - or is it an eternal Platonic Form? What about time - say, did God invent time? If so, ...when? If God consciously designed the world, like a programmer or an artist, ... what did he do before that? Or, is something beautiful - including morally beautiful - because God likes it, or because of something about itself? Is it wrong to murder people *because* God doesn't like it? Or is it because of the victim's value of life? Who is the source of the prohibitive command that we sense, God or the victim? And how is it even bad in the first place if they get a ticket to Heaven - rather than being destroyed?]) The next paragraph requires some knowledge of physics lore and can be skipped in case of difficulty; it is followed by a summary that should be more readily understandable. There is a lot of entropy-conserving activity - for example, inside a proton: <https://youtu.be/1biTR-zJtfk?t=68> - it is even highly energetic and yet a proton doesn't die from a heat death, no violation of the second law of thermodynamics. Likewise it is conjectured that at the Planck scale there is similar violent bending and twisting of the space itself - roughly illustrated by the picture at the bottom here: www.nasa.gov/sites/default/files/thumbnails/image/quantum_lg.jpg. Now, if this is true, it is applicable at a microscopic scale even to a space that is macroscopically static, flat, and empty, and such a space can quite obviously just exist forever - it is simply naturally eternal; and the Planck-scale droplets that occasionally separate

from it [also illustrated in the picture] as a result of this microscopic “quantum foaming” can be the “seeds” that can quantum-tunnel into new Universes with matter - this quantum tunneling is the so-called “Vilenkin’s tunneling origin of an inflationary Multiverse” - and the rest is history, as they say! (A few technical points are in order. Firstly, there is some disagreement on the details and interpretations of this tunneling, for example between Gott [with whom I side on the interpretation of the state prior to the tunneling, that there must be a “seed” - e.g. for the same (quantum information) reasons that it is argued that there must be a remnant after black hole evaporation] and Vilenkin, and between Vilenkin and Hawking [on a certain detail of the tunneling] - not unexpectedly, since we don’t yet have a theory of quantum gravity. Secondly, there must be this original space, not itself originating from such a bubble, because of the Borde-Guth-Vilenkin theorem. Finally, I asked Vilenkin himself and he confirmed that macroscopically static flat empty space can indeed be eternal and is not covered by other inconsistency results of his either.)

In a nutshell, there is a simple empty space that’s just always there, and due to quantum fluctuations it keeps generating ultramicroscopic “bubbles” of space - new disconnected (baby-)worlds, not affecting the original (“ever-fresh”!) space - which are the “seeds” of future Big Bangs (in case you wondered how that “first seed” that Big-Banged was produced). So, instead of God, in this model we arrive at a classic grandest-scale “steady state” in the spirit of Giordano Bruno. But this is just one speculation (in fact I know a couple more such speculative eternal models, furthermore varied in their basic features - the one presented above is just the least involved one of them), only mentioned here because of the silly psychological reasons explained above - the actual scientific worth of the likes of it is eloquently explained by Sabine Hossenfelder: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAVUvq6BE1E>. [But regardless of any such (hopefully forgivable) extra fancy musings, all this is purely secondary and an aside anyway: what actually matters is that if Jesus died on the cross and did not resurrect, Christianity and Islam are both false, and that means that the *serious*, universally verbally commanding God, relevant in practice, does not exist, whatever else might be true (for example, this has no bearing on the truth of Jainism or deism, again [although, on the topic of deism, if God is disinterested in the world, why did he bother creating it? - the usual analogy is that to a deist God our affairs are like the affairs of ants in an anthill are to you, but it doesn’t work - you did not create the anthill!]). To clarify, I do not have any problems with the concept of unpleasant duty in service of a legitimate authority: say, if you are

a Secret Service agent working as a bodyguard of the President - who, as it also happens, you did not vote for and did not like when he was a candidate - and somebody shoots at him, you absolutely jump and take that bullet! - the problem is specifically the concrete fake absurd infuriating “authorities”, the God of Christianity and the God of Islam (not counting minor religions of secondary practical importance) - and their followers, in terms of the above analogy, are like bodyguards of a mafia boss.] By contrast, Yeskov’s work is unquestionably valuable for historical reconstruction; and, modulo secondary details, I think he nailed it - to rephrase the popular slogan from *The X-Files*, the truth is over here! :)

If you liked this work, please don't forget to share it!

P.S. There are several gay anthems, but there does not seem to be even a single militant atheist anthem yet; may I suggest *Let's Get Loud* by Jennifer Lopez? It has excellent lyrics and spirit!