

JOSÉ SARAMAGO

THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO
JESUS CHRIST

TRANSLATED FROM THE PORTUGUESE BY GIOVANNI PONTIERO



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FOR PILAR

FORASMUCH AS MANY HAVE TAKEN IN HAND TO SET FORTH IN ORDER a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

Luke 1.1-4

Quod scripsi, scripsi.
What I have written, I have written.

Pontius Pilate

THE SUN APPEARS IN ONE OF THE UPPER CORNERS OF THE rectangle, on the left of anyone looking at the picture. Representing the sun is a man's head that sends out rays of brilliant light and sinuous flames, like a wavering compass in search of the right direction, and this head has a tearful face, contorted by spasms of pain that refuse to abate. The gaping mouth sends up a cry we shall never hear, for none of these things is real, what we are contemplating is mere paper and ink, and nothing more. Beneath the sun we see a naked man tied to a tree trunk with a cloth around his loins to cover those parts we call private, and his feet are resting on a piece of wood set crosswise, to give him support and to prevent his feet from slipping, they are held by two nails driven deep into the wood. Judging from the anguished expression on the man's face and from his eyes, which are raised to heaven, this must be the Good Thief. His ringlets are another reassuring sign, for it is well known that this is how angels and archangels wear their hair, and so it would appear that the repentant criminal is already ascending to the world of heavenly beings. Impossible to

say whether the trunk is still a tree that has been arbitrarily turned into an instrument of torture while continuing to draw nourishment from the soil through its roots, inasmuch as the lower part of the picture is covered by a man with a long beard. Richly attired in loose, flowing robes, he is looking upward but not toward heaven. This solemn posture and sad countenance must belong to Joseph of Arimathaea, because the only other person who comes to mind, Simon of Cyrene, after being forced to help the condemned man carry his cross, as was the practice when these executions took place, went about his own affairs, thinking more of a business transaction that called for an urgent decision than of the sufferings of a miserable wretch about to be crucified. Joseph of Arimathaea is that affluent and good-hearted man who donated a grave for the burial of the greatest criminal of all, but this act of generosity will be to no avail when the time comes to consider his beatification, let alone canonization. All he has on his head is the turban he always wears outdoors, unlike the woman in the foreground of the picture, whose hair hangs all the way down her back as she leans forward, enhanced by the supreme glory of a halo, in her case one edged with the finest embroidery. The kneeling woman must be Mary, because, as we know, all the women gathered here have that name, with one exception, she who is also called Magdalene. Anyone viewing this picture who knows the facts of life will swear immediately that this is the woman called Magdalene, for only someone with her disreputable past would have dared appear at such a solemn occasion wearing a low-cut dress with a close-fitting bodice to emphasize her ample bosom, which inevitably draws the lewd stares of passing men and puts their souls at grave risk of being dragged to perdition. Yet the expression on her face is one of contrition, and her wilting body conveys nothing other than her sorrowing soul, which we cannot ignore, even if it is hidden by tempting flesh, for this woman could

be completely naked, had the artist so chosen to portray her, and still she would deserve our respect and veneration. Mary Magdalene, if that is her name, is holding to her lips the hand of another woman, who has collapsed to the ground as if bereft of strength or mortally wounded. Her name is also Mary, second in order of appearance but undoubtedly the most important Mary of all, if the central position she occupies in the lower part of the picture has any significance. Apart from her grieving expression and limp hands, nothing can be seen of her body, covered as it is by the copious folds of her mantle and by a tunic tied at the waist with a coarsely woven cord. She is older than the other Mary, which is reason enough, although not the only reason, why her halo should be more elaborate, at least that is what one would conclude in the absence of more precise information about the privileges of rank and seniority observed at that time. Considering, however, the enormous influence of this iconography, only an inhabitant of another planet, where no such drama has ever been enacted, could fail to know that this anguished woman is the widow of a carpenter named Joseph and the mother of numerous sons and daughters, although only one of her children was decreed by fate, or whoever governs fate, to achieve a little renown during his life and a great deal more after his death. Reclining on her left side, Mary, the mother of Jesus, rests her forearm on the hip of another woman, also kneeling and also named Mary, who might well be the real Mary Magdalene although we can neither see nor imagine the neckline of her tunic. Like the first woman in this trinity, she lets her long tresses hang loose down her back, but to all appearances they are fair, unless it is only by chance that the pen strokes are more delicate here, leaving empty spaces between the locks and thus allowing the engraver to lighten the tone. We are not trying to prove that Mary Magdalene was in fact blond, but simply point to the popular belief that women with blond hair, whether

it be natural or dyed, are the most effective instruments of sin. Mary Magdalene, who, as everyone knows, was as wicked a woman as ever lived, must have been blond if we accept the opinion held, for better or worse, by half of mankind. It is not, however, because this third Mary has skin and hair fairer than the first that we suggest, despite the damning evidence of the first's exposed bosom, that the third is the Magdalene. What confirms her identity is that this third Mary, as she distractedly supports the limp arm of the mother of Jesus, is looking upward, and her enraptured gaze ascends with such power that it appears to elevate her entire being, it is a light that outshines the halo already encircling her head, a light that overpowers every thought and emotion. Only a woman who has loved as much as we believe Mary Magdalene loved could possibly have such an expression, it is she and no other, and thus we rule out the woman standing beside her. This is the fourth Mary, her hands half raised in a gesture of piety and her expression vague, she is accompanied on this side of the engraving by a youth barely adolescent, his knee bent languidly while with an affected and theatrical right hand he presents the four women playing out the poignant drama in the foreground. This is John, who looks so youthful, his hair in ringlets and his lips trembling. Like Joseph of Arimathaea, he also blocks some of the picture, his body concealing the foot of the tree on the other side, where no birds nest. All we see at the top is a second naked man hoisted into the air and bound and nailed to the wood like the first thief, but this one has smooth hair and his eyes are lowered, perhaps still capable of seeing the ground below. His thin face arouses our compassion, unlike the third thief on the other side, who even in the final throes of torment defiantly shows his face, which was not always so pale, for thieving gave him a good living. Thin and smooth haired, the second man bows to the earth that will devour him, this pathetic creature condemned to both death and

hell must be the Bad Thief, an honest man when all is said and done, who, free of divine and human laws, did not pretend to believe that sudden repentance suffices to redeem a whole life of evil. Above him, also weeping and wailing like the sun in front, the moon can be seen in the guise of a woman with the most incongruous ring in one ear, an unprecedented liberty no artist or poet is likely to repeat. Both sun and moon illuminate the earth in equal measure, but the ambience of light is circular and shadowless, causing everything on the distant horizon to stand out clearly, turrets and walls, a drawbridge across a moat whose water glistens, Gothic arches, and, on the crest of the farthest hill, the motionless sails of a windmill. Somewhat closer, in this deceptive perspective, four horsemen in armor and helmets, bearing lances, proudly parade their horses with admirable dexterity, but they appear to have come to the end of their display and are making farewell gestures to an invisible audience. The same impression of closing festivities is given by that foot soldier who is on the point of going off, carrying something in his right hand that could be a cloth, perhaps even a mantle or tunic, while two more soldiers look annoyed, frustrated, as if they had lost at gambling, although from afar it is difficult to tell what is in their minute faces. Hovering over these common soldiers and the walled city are four angels, two of them portrayed full length. They weep and mourn, with the exception of the angel who solemnly holds a goblet to the crucified man's right side in order to collect the last drop of blood from a lance wound. In this place known as Golgotha, many have met the same cruel fate and many others will follow them, but this naked man, nailed by hands and feet to a cross, the son of Joseph and Mary, named Jesus, is the only one whom posterity will remember and honor by inscribing his initials in capitals. So this is he whom Joseph of Arimathaea and Mary Magdalene are gazing upon, this is he who causes the sun and moon

to weep and who only a moment ago praised the Good Thief and despised the Bad Thief, failing to understand that there is no difference between them, or, if there is a difference, it lies in something else, for good and evil do not exist in themselves, each being merely the absence of the other. Shining above his head with a thousand rays brighter than those of the sun and moon put together is a placard in Roman letters proclaiming him king of the Jews, surrounded by a wounding crown of thorns like that worn, without their even knowing and with no visible sign of blood, by all who are not allowed to be sovereigns of their own bodies. Jesus, unlike the two thieves, has nowhere to rest his feet, the entire weight of his body would be supported by his hands nailed to the wood had he not life enough left in him to hold himself erect over his bent legs, but that life is nearing its end as the blood continues to flow from the abovementioned wound. Between the two wedges that keep the cross upright and that have also been driven into the dark ground, making a gaping wound there as irremediable as any human grave, we see a skull, also a shinbone and a shoulder blade, but what concerns us is the skull, for this is what Golgotha means, skull. No one knows who put these human remains here or for what purpose, perhaps it was simply a sly reminder to these poor wretches about what awaits them before they turn at last to earth, dust, and nothingness. But there are some who claim that this is Adam's skull, risen from the deep murk of ancient geological strata and, because it can not now return there, eternally condemned to behold its only possible paradise which is forever lost. Farther back, in the same field where the horsemen execute one last maneuver, a man is walking away but looking back in this direction. In his left hand he carries a bucket, and in his right a staff. At the tip of the staff there ought to be a sponge, not easy to see from here, and the bucket, one can safely bet, contains water with vinegar. One day, and forever after, this man will be much

maligned, accused of having given Jesus vinegar out of spite and contempt when he asked for water, but the truth is that he offered him vinegar and water because at that time it was one of the best ways of quenching thirst. The man walks away, does not wait for the end, he did all he could to relieve the mortal thirst of the three condemned men, making no distinction between Jesus and the thieves, because these are things of this earth, which will persist on this earth, and from them will be written the only possible history.

NIGHT IS FAR FROM OVER. HANGING FROM A NAIL NEAR THE door, an oil lamp is burning, but its flickering flame, like a small, luminous almond, barely impinges on the darkness, which fills the house from top to bottom and penetrates the farthest corners, where the shadows are so dense that they appear to form a solid mass. Joseph awoke with a fright, as if someone had roughly shaken him by the shoulder, but he must have been dreaming, because he lives alone in this house with his wife, who has not so much as stirred and is fast asleep. Not only is it unusual for him to wake in the middle of the night, but he rarely opens his eyes before daybreak, when the gray, cold morning light begins to filter through the chink in the door. How often he has thought of repairing the door, what could be easier for a carpenter than to cover the chink with a piece of wood left over from some job, but he is now so accustomed to seeing that vertical strip of light when he opens his eyes in the morning that he has reached the absurd conclusion that without it he would be trapped forever in the shadows of sleep, in the darkness of his own body and the

darkness of the world. The chink in the door is as much a part of the house as the walls and ceiling, as the oven and earthen floor. In a whisper, to avoid disturbing his wife, who was still asleep, he recited words of thanksgiving, words he said each morning upon returning from the mysterious land of dreams, Thanks be to You, Almighty God, King of the Universe, who has mercifully restored my soul to life. Perhaps because he had not fully regained the power of all five senses, five unless at that time people were not yet aware there were five or, conversely, had more and were about to lose those that would serve little purpose nowadays, Joseph watched his body from a distance while it slowly was occupied by a soul making its gradual return, like trickling waters as they wend their way in rivulets and streams before penetrating the earth to feed sap into stems and leaves. Looking at Mary as she lay beside him, Joseph began to realize just how laborious this return to wakefulness could be, and a disturbing thought came to him, that this wife of his, fast asleep, was really a body without a soul, for no soul is present in a body while it sleeps, otherwise there would be no sense in our thanking God each morning for having restored our souls as we awaken. Then a voice within him asked, What thing or person inside us dreams what we dream, and then he wondered, Are dreams perhaps the soul's memories of the body, and this seemed a reasonable explanation. Mary stirred, could her soul have been near at hand, already here in the house, but she did not awaken, no doubt in the midst of some troubled dream, and after heaving a deep sigh like a broken sob she drew closer to her husband, with a sensuousness she would never have dared indulge while awake. Joseph pulled the thick, rough blanket over his shoulders and snuggled up close to Mary. He could feel her warmth, perfumed like a linen chest filled with dried herbs, gradually penetrate the fibers of his tunic and merge with the heat of his own body. Then slowly he closed his eyes,

stopped thinking, and, oblivious to his soul, sank back into a deep sleep.

When he woke again, the cock was crowing. A dim, grayish light seeped through the chink in the door. Having patiently waited for the shadows of night to disperse, time was preparing the way for yet another day to reach the world. Because we no longer live in that fabulous age when the sun, to whom we owe so much, was so generous that it halted its journey over Gibeon in order to give Joshua ample time to overcome the five kings besieging the city. Joseph sat up on his mat, drew back the sheet, and at that moment the cock crowed a second time, reminding him that there was another prayer of thanksgiving to be said. Praise be to You, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who gave the cock the intelligence to distinguish between night and day, prayed Joseph, and the cock crowed for a third time. Usually, at the first sign of daybreak all the cocks in the neighborhood would crow to one another, but today they remained silent, as if their night had not yet ended or was just beginning. Joseph looked at his wife's face, puzzled by her deep slumber, since normally the slightest noise awakened her, as if she were a bird. Some mysterious power appeared to be hovering over Mary, pressing her down without completely immobilizing her, for even in the shadows her body could be seen to tremble gently, like water rippling in the breeze. Could she be ill, he wondered, but he was distracted from this worrying thought by a sudden urge to urinate, and this, too, was unusual. He rarely felt the need to relieve himself at this early hour or with such urgency. Slipping quietly from under the sheet to avoid waking his wife, for it is written that a man should do everything possible to maintain his self-respect, he cautiously opened the creaking door and went out into the yard. At that hour of the morning everything was gray as ash. Joseph headed for the low shed where he tethered his donkey, and there he relieved him-

self, listening with dreamy satisfaction to the explosive sound of his urine as it spurted onto the hay scattered on the ground. The donkey turned its head, two huge eyes shining in the dark, then gave its furry ears a vigorous shake before sticking its nose back into the manger, foraging for leftovers with thick, sensuous lips. Joseph fetched the large pitcher used for washing, tipped it sideways, and let the water pour over his hands, then, drying them on his tunic, he praised God who in His infinite wisdom had endowed mankind with the essential orifices and vessels to live, for if any one of them should fail to close or open as required, the result would be death. Looking up at the sky, Joseph was overwhelmed. The sun is slow to appear, in the sky there is not even a hint of dawn's crimson, no shade of rose or cherry, nothing except clouds to be seen from where he stands, one vast roof of low clouds like tiny flattened balls of wool, all identical and the same shade of violet, which deepens and glows on the side where the sun breaks through, then across the sky is increasingly dark until it merges with what remains of the night on the other side. Joseph had never seen such a sky, although old men often spoke of portents in the skies that attested to the power of God, rainbows that covered half the celestial vault, towering ladders that connected heaven and earth, providential showers of manna, but never of this mysterious color, which might just as easily signify the beginning of the world as the end, this roof floating above the earth, made up of thousands of tiny clouds that almost touch one another and reach in all directions like the stones of a wasteland. Terror-stricken, he thought the world was ending and he was the only witness of God's final judgment, the only one. Silence reigns in heaven and on earth, no sounds can be heard from the nearby houses, not so much as a human voice, a child crying, a prayer or curse, a gust of wind, the bleat of a goat or the bark of a dog. Why are the cocks not crowing, he muttered to himself, and repeated the

question anxiously, as if the cocks, crowing might be the last hope of salvation. Then the sky began to change. Pink tinges and streaks gradually, almost imperceptibly crept into the violet on the belly of the clouds, until finally it turned red, then was gone, and without warning the sky exploded into light, many shafts of gold that pierced clouds no longer small but now formidable, enormous barges that hoisted blazing sails and plied a sky that had at last been liberated. Joseph's fear subsided, his eyes widened in astonishment and wonder, and with good reason, for he alone was witnessing this spectacle. In a loud voice he praised the Lord of all creation for the eternal majesty of the heavens, whose ineffable splendors leave men struggling with simple words of gratitude, Thanks be to You, O Lord, for this and for that and for that. As he spoke, the tumult of life, whether summoned by his voice or rushing through a door that had carelessly been left open, invaded the space previously occupied by silence, leaving it scarcely any room, a patch here and there, such as those tiny marshes that the murmuring forests engulf and hide from view. The sun rose and spread its light, a vision of unbearable beauty, two enormous hands sending into flight a shimmering bird of paradise that opened its great tail with a thousand iridescent eyes, causing a nameless bird nearby to burst into song. A gust of wind hit Joseph in the face, caught his beard and tunic, eddied around him like a tiny whirlwind moving across a desert, unless he was imagining things and this was nothing more than the blood rushing to his head, a shiver going up his spine like a tongue of fire and stirring a quite different urge.

Moving as if inside a swirling column of air, Joseph went into the house and shut the door behind him. He paused for a moment, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the dark. The lamp cast scarcely any light. Wide awake, Mary lay on her back, listening, staring into space, as if waiting. Joseph quietly approached and slowly

drew back the sheet. She averted her eyes, began to lift the hem of her tunic, and no sooner had she pulled it to her navel than he was on top of her, his own tunic hitched to his waist. Mary's legs now were open, perhaps they had opened by themselves as she dreamed and she did not close them out of this sudden lassitude, or else from the premonition of a married woman who knows her duty. God, who is omnipresent, was there but, pure spirit that He is, was unable to see how Joseph's flesh touched Mary's, how his flesh penetrated her flesh as had been ordained, and perhaps He was not even there when the holy seed of Joseph poured into the holy womb of Mary, both holy, being the fountain and chalice of life. For in truth, there are things God Himself does not understand, even though He created them. Out in the yard, God could hear neither the gasp that escaped Joseph's lips as he came nor the low moan Mary was unable to suppress. Joseph rested on his wife's body no more than a minute, and perhaps less. Pulling down her tunic and drawing up the sheet, she covered her face with her arm. Joseph stood in the middle of the room, raised his hands, and, looking up at the ceiling, gave the most heartfelt thanksgiving of all, which is reserved for men, I thank You, Almighty God, King of the Universe, for not having made me a woman. By then, God must have already abandoned the yard, for the walls did not shake or cave in, nor did the ground part. All that could be heard was Mary saying, in that submissive voice one expects from women, Thanks be to You, O Lord, for having made me according to Your will. Now, there is no difference between these words and those spoken to the angel Gabriel, for clearly anyone who could say, Behold the handmaiden of the Lord, do with me as You will, might just as easily have said, instead, this prayer. Then the wife of the carpenter Joseph got up from her mat, rolled it up together with that of her husband, and folded the sheet they shared in common.

JOSEPH AND MARY LIVED IN A VILLAGE CALLED NAZARETH, a place of little importance and with few inhabitants, in the region of Galilee. Their house was no different from the others, a lopsided cube made of bricks and clay and as poor as poor could be. No striking examples of imaginative architecture to be found here. To save on material, the house had been built into a hillside, which formed the rear wall and allowed easy access to the flat roof, which also served as a terrace. Joseph, as we know, was a carpenter by trade and fairly capable, although he had neither the skill nor the talent for jobs that required fine workmanship. This criticism should not be taken too seriously, for one needs time to gain experience and acquire skills, and we must not forget that Joseph is barely in his twenties and lives in a place with few resources and even fewer opportunities. Nor should a man be measured simply on the basis of his professional ability. For all his youth, this Joseph is one of the most honest and pious men of Nazareth, assiduous in attending the synagogue and prompt in carrying out his duties, and while he may not be endowed

with any special powers of eloquence, he can argue and make astute observations, especially when given a chance to use some apt image or metaphor related to his work, carpentry. He does not possess, however, what one might call a creative imagination, and during his brief life will never come up with a memorable parable to be handed down to posterity, let alone one of those brilliant conceits so clearly expressed that there is nothing more to say yet so obscure and ambiguous that they intrigue scholars for years to come.

As for Mary's talents, these are even less apparent, but no more than we might expect of a sixteen-year-old girl who, although married, is still a baby, as it were, for even in those days people used such expressions. Notwithstanding her frail appearance, she works as hard as all the other women, carding, spinning, and weaving cloth, baking the family bread each morning, fetching water from the well and then carrying it up the steep slope, a large pitcher balanced on her head and another on her hip. In the late afternoon she sets off through the byways and fields of the Lord, gathering wood and cutting stubble and filling an extra basket with cow's dung and the thistles and briars that thrive on the upper slopes of Nazareth, the best thing God could ever have devised for lighting a fire or braiding a crown. It would have been easier to load everything onto a donkey's back, but Joseph needs the beast to carry his lumber. Mary goes barefoot to the well, goes barefoot into the fields, in clothes that are forever getting soiled and torn and that constantly need washing and mending, because new clothes are reserved for her husband, women like Mary making do with very little. When she attends the synagogue, she enters by the side door, as the law requires of women, and even if she finds thirty other women there, or all the women of Nazareth, or even the entire female population of Galilee, they must wait until at least ten men arrive for the service, in which the women will participate

only passively. Unlike Joseph her husband, Mary is neither upright nor pious, but she is not to blame for this, the blame lies with the language she speaks if not with the men who invented it, because that language has no feminine form for the words upright and pious.

Now one fine day, four weeks after that unforgettable morning when the clouds in the sky turned a mysterious violet, Joseph happened to be at home. The sun was about to set and he was sitting on the floor, eating his food with his fingers, as was then the custom, while Mary stood waiting for him to finish before having her own supper. Neither spoke, for he had nothing to say and she was unable to express what was on her mind. Suddenly a beggar appeared at the gate outside, a rare occurrence in this village, where people were so poor, a fact unlikely to have escaped the begging fraternity, which had a nose for places where there were pickings, and that was certainly not the case here. Nevertheless Mary ladled into a bowl a good portion of the lentils with chopped onions and mashed chickpeas set aside for her own supper, and took it out to the beggar, who sat on the ground. She did not need her husband's spoken permission, he merely nodded, for as everyone knows those were times when words were few and a simple thumbs down or up was enough to condemn a man to death or save him, as in the arenas of ancient Rome. The sunset, although quite different, was spectacular, too, with its myriad wisps of cloud scattered through the sky, rose-colored, mother-of-pearl, salmon-pink, cherry, adjectives used here on earth so that we may understand one another, for none of these colors, as far as we know, have names in heaven. The beggar must have gone without food for three days to have scraped and licked his bowl clean so quickly, and back he comes to return the bowl and express his gratitude. Mary, opening the door, finds him standing there, but somehow he looks broader and taller than before. So it must be true that there is a great

difference between going hungry and just having eaten, for this man's face and eyes are glowing, his tattered clothes flap in a strange wind, blurring her vision so that his rags take on the appearance of rich raiment, a sight that must be seen to be believed. Mary put out her hands to receive the earthenware bowl, which, through some extraordinary optical illusion, perhaps due to the light of the sky, was transformed into a vessel of the purest gold. And, as the bowl passed from his hands into hers, the beggar said in resonant tones, because even the poor man's voice had changed, May the Lord bless you, good woman, and give you all the children your husband desires, and may He also protect you from my sad fate, for, alas, I have nowhere to rest my head in this wretched world. Mary held the bowl in cupped hands, one chalice held by another, as if waiting for the beggar to fill it, which is what he did. Without warning he bent down and gathered a handful of earth and, raising his arm, allowed it to trickle through his fingers while reciting in a low voice, Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, nothing begins without coming to an end, every beginning comes from an ending. Mary was puzzled and asked him, What does that mean, but the beggar simply replied, Good woman, you have a child in your womb and that is man's only destiny, to begin and end, to end and begin. How do you know I'm with child. Even before the belly swells, a child can be seen shining through its mother's eyes. If that is true, then my husband would already have seen his child in my eyes. Perhaps he does not look at you when you look at him. Who are you who knows so much without hearing it from my own lips. I am an angel, but tell no one.

Then his shining robe turned back to rags, he shriveled as if licked by fire, and this wondrous transformation took place just in time, thanks be to God, for no sooner had the beggar quietly disappeared than Joseph emerged in the doorway, his suspicions aroused by whispering voices and

for Josephat is the same as Joseph, rather than suffer remorse at the hour of death, which, God willing, will be peaceful. Then he asked himself whether he should tell the elders of the synagogue about this curious affair of the mysterious beggar and the luminous earth, and decided he should, to ease his conscience and keep the peace in his own home.

Mary finished eating. She took the bowls outside to wash them, but not the bowl used by the beggar. There are now two lights in the house, that of the oil lamp struggling valiantly against the darkness of night, and the aura from the bowl, flickering yet constant, like a sun that is slow in appearing. Seated on the floor, Mary waits for her husband to resume the conversation, but Joseph has nothing more to say to her, he is mentally rehearsing the speech he will make tomorrow before the council of elders. How frustrating it is, not to know precisely what transpired between his wife and the beggar, not to know what else they might have said to each other, but he decides to question her no further. He might as well believe the story she has now told him twice, because if she is lying, he will never know, while she will know and almost certainly be laughing at him, her mantle covering her face, just as Eve laughed at Adam, but behind his back, for in those days people did not wear mantles. One thought led to another, and Joseph soon convinced himself that the beggar had been sent by Satan. The great tempter, aware that times had changed and that people were now more cautious, was offering not one of nature's fruits but the promise of a different, luminous soil, counting once more on the credulity and weakness of women. Joseph's mind is in turmoil, but he is pleased with himself and the conclusion he has reached. Unaware of her husband's tortuous thoughts about Satan's intrigue, Mary is troubled by a strange feeling of emptiness now that she has told him of her pregnancy. Not an inner emptiness, to be sure, for she knows perfectly well that her

womb, and in the strict sense of the word, is full, but an outer emptiness, as if the world has receded and become remote. She recalls, but as if evoking another life, that after supper and before unrolling the mats for the night she always had some task in hand to fill the hours, but now she feels no inclination whatever to rise from where she sits gazing at the light that glows back at her over the rim of the bowl, gazing and awaiting the birth of her child. If truth be told, her thoughts are not that clear, for thought, when all is said and done, as others and we ourselves have observed before, is like a great ball of thread coiled around itself, loose in places, taut in others, inside our head. It is impossible to know its full extent, one would have to unwind and then measure it, but however hard one tries or pretends to try, this cannot be done without assistance. One day, someone will come and tell us where to cut the cord that ties man to his navel and thought to its origin.

The following morning, after a restless night in which he was constantly disturbed by the same nightmare, where he saw himself falling time and time again inside an enormous upturned bowl as if under a starry sky, Joseph went to the synagogue to seek the advice of the elders. His story was extraordinary, though more extraordinary than he knew because, as we know, he had not been told the whole story. Were it not for the high esteem in which he was held by the old men of Nazareth, he would have had to go home with his tail between his legs and the reproachful words of Ecclesiasticus in his ears, To trust a man hastily shows a shallow mind. And he, poor fellow, would not have had the presence of mind to reply with words from the same Ecclesiasticus, regarding the dream that had haunted him all night, What you see in a dream is but a reflection, a face in a mirror. When he finished telling his story, the elders looked at one another and then at Joseph, and the oldest man there, translating the silent mistrust of the council into a direct question, asked, Is this the truth you have

spoken, whereupon the carpenter replied, The truth, the whole truth, as God is my witness. The elders then debated among themselves while Joseph waited at a discreet distance, until finally they summoned him and said that they would send three envoys to question Mary herself about this mysterious event in order to discover the identity of the beggar whom no one else had seen, by learning what he looked like, the exact words he used, and if anyone could remember seeing him beg for alms in Nazareth or provide any information about the stranger. Joseph was pleased because, although he would never admit it, he did not want to confront his wife alone. Her habit in recent days of keeping her eyes lowered was beginning to disconcert him. There was modesty in it, but also, unmistakably, something provocative, as in the look of a woman who knows more than she is prepared to disclose or wants others to notice. Verily I say unto you, the treachery of women knows no limits, especially when they feign innocence.

And so the envoys depart, Joseph leading the way, and they are Abiathar, Dothan, and Zacchaeus, names recorded here to forestall any suspicion of historical inaccuracy in the minds of those who have acquired their version of the story from other sources, a version perhaps more in accordance with tradition but not necessarily more factual. The names having been revealed and the existence of the men who used them established, there can be no remaining doubts. The unusual sight of three elders moving in solemn procession through the streets, their robes and beards caught by the breeze, soon drew the local urchins, who gathered around them and began aping their walk as children will, jeering and shouting and chasing after the envoys all the way from the synagogue to the house of Joseph, who was much put out by this boisterous parade. Attracted by the noise, women began to appear in the doorways of the neighboring houses and, sensing something amiss, they sent their children to find out what such a del-

egation was doing at Mary's door. To no avail, because only the elders were allowed to enter. The door was firmly closed behind them, and no woman of Nazareth, however inquisitive, learned or knows to this day what took place in the house of Joseph, the carpenter. Forced to invent something to satisfy the hunger of their curiosity, they accused the beggar, whom they had never set eyes on, of being a common thief. A great injustice, because the angel, if angel is what he was, did not steal the food he ate, and even delivered a holy prophecy in exchange. While the two senior elders interrogated Mary, the third, the youngest, Zacchaeus, went around the immediate vicinity gathering any details people could remember about a beggar who answered the description given by the carpenter's wife, but none of the neighbors could help, No, sir, no beggar passed this way yesterday, and if he did, he didn't knock at my door, it must have been a thief passing through, who when he found someone at home pretended to be a beggar and then left in a hurry, the oldest trick in the book.

Zacchaeus arrived back at Joseph's house with nothing to report about the beggar just as Mary was repeating for the fourth time the facts we already know. She stood as if guilty of a crime, the bowl set on the ground, and inside it, constant as a throbbing heart, the strange earth. Joseph sat on one side, and the elders sat in front like a tribunal of judges. Dothan, the second of the three, said, It's not that we don't believe your story, but you're the only person who spoke to this man, if he was a man, all your husband knows is that he heard his voice, and now Zacchaeus here tells me that none of your neighbors saw him. As God is my witness, I swear I am telling the truth. The truth, perhaps, but is it the whole truth. I shall drink the water of the Lord and He will prove my innocence. The trial of bitter water is for women suspected of infidelity, but you couldn't have been unfaithful to your husband because he didn't give you enough time. Falsehood is said

to be the same as infidelity. That's another kind of infidelity. My words are as true as the rest of me. Then Abiathar, the oldest of the three, told her, We shall question you no further, the Lord will reward you sevenfold for the truth you have spoken or punish you sevenfold if you have deceived us. He fell silent, then turned to Zacchaeus and Dothan and asked them, What shall we do with this bright earth, which prudence demands should not remain here, for it might be one of Satan's tricks. Dothan said, Let this earth return whence it came, let it return to its former darkness. Zacchaeus said, We know not who the beggar is, or why he chose to be seen by Mary alone, or the meaning of the earth that shines in the bowl. Dothan proposed, Let us take it into the desert and scatter it there, far from the eyes of men, that the wind may disperse it and the rain erase it. Zacchaeus said, If this earth is some divine gift, then it must not be removed, if on the other hand it forebodes evil, then let those to whom it was given bear the consequences. Abiathar asked, What do you suggest then, and Zacchaeus replied, That the bowl be buried here and covered up so that there is no contact with the natural earth, for a gift from God, even when buried, is never lost, whereas the power of evil is much diminished if hidden from sight. Abiathar asked, What do you say, Dothan, to which the latter replied, I agree with Zacchaeus, let us do as he says. Abiathar told Mary, Withdraw so that we may proceed. Where shall I go, she asked him, whereupon Joseph, agitated, said, If we are to bury the bowl, let it be somewhere away from the house, for I will never rest with a light buried underneath me. Abiathar reassured him, That can be done, then he told Mary, You remain here. The men went out into the yard, Zacchaeus carrying the bowl. The sound of a spade could soon be heard digging as Joseph briskly set to work, and a few minutes later Mary recognized the voice of Abiathar, You can stop now, the hole is deep enough. Mary peered through the chink in the

door, watched her husband cover the bowl with a curved potsherd then lower it into the hole as deep as his arm was long. He rose, grabbed his spade, filled the hole, and stamped the ground down firmly with his feet.

The men remained in the yard, conversing among themselves and gazing at the patch of fresh earth, as if they had just buried a treasure and were trying to memorize the spot. But this was not the topic of conversation, because suddenly Zacchaeus could be heard saying aloud, in a tone of playful reproach, Now then, Joseph, what kind of carpenter are you, when you can't even make a bed for your pregnant wife. The others laughed, and Joseph joined them rather than lose face by showing his annoyance. Mary saw them walk to the gate, and now, seated on the stone slab of the hearth, she was looking around the room, wondering where they could put a bed if Joseph decided to make one. She tried not to think about the earthenware bowl or the luminous earth or whether the beggar was really an angel or only some practical joker. If a woman is promised a bed for her house, she must start thinking about the best place to put it.