

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MEMORY

By

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PLACE AND TIME

Jerusalem, 45CE

CHARACTERS

MEMORY, slave to JUNIA, female who is slight, easily overlooked

JUNIA, female of Jewish descent, married to a Roman official.

SAUL, male, brother of JUNIA

SYNOPSIS

MEMORY is a slave with a mental condition resembling hyperthymia (total recall of all life events and conversations). Memory is owned by JUNIA, the wife of a Roman aristocrat and sister to SAUL. JUNIA wants to be known as an historian and is attempting to write a history of Jewish cults such as Nazarites and Baptists (Dippers). JUNIA sends MEMORY to interview the surviving followers. SAUL attempts to steal her work to aid his persecutions.

Scene 1

A poorly lit room furnished with crude table, stool, and bookshelf. Papyrus, candles, and other items on the bookshelf. MEMORY enters, barefoot, wearing a simple if not drab but clean tunic, and carrying quill, ink, blank papyrus, and a candle or oil lamp. MEMORY is highly focused and meticulous as she places these items on the table.

MEMORY Is this right? It has to be right. I could get a beating if I don't do this right. Mistress hasn't beaten me yet, but she could beat me if I don't do this right. I remember words, not things. Words. Candle in the center, toward the edge but not too close to the edge. Ink on her right. Papyrus neat and flat. What will she want? What will she ask me? There are too many voices in my head. Words. All of the voices are arguing, arguing with me, with each other. Words. They all want to be heard, they all want to be first. Words. Why do I remember? I remember too much. It's like they crowd me and trample around in my head while they argue. It wasn't always this way. I didn't have to remember so much, but now I have to remember. I have to remember so I won't get punished. I have to remember to be fed. I have to remember to stay alive. I don't want to remember. But she'll ask me to remember. What have I heard? I have to tell her. I have to remember. I have to remember. It's what I am, it's all I am. Maybe that's not enough. Maybe I don't want to remember. Maybe it's best to be dead.

JUNIA enters. She wears a tunic with stola and sandals.

MEMORY Mistress.

JUNIA Is everything ready?

MEMORY As you told me.

JUNIA sits and focuses on the papyrus and quill, writing down what MEMORY is telling her, only occasionally looking at MEMORY. MEMORY stands as if being scolded and rarely looks up as the scene progresses.

JUNIA All seems in order.

MEMORY Yes, mistress.

JUNIA More on the Jewish cults. Did you have any trouble today?

MEMORY No, mistress.

JUNIA You sought out the Dippers and the Nazarites?

MEMORY As you instructed.

JUNIA Who did you find?

MEMORY Two Nazarites. Jude, a brother of their founder.

JUNIA Brother? By blood?

MEMORY Yes, by blood. And Bartholomew. He says he was a favorite.

JUNIA No Dippers?

MEMORY They are few and avoid the city. They avoid me.

JUNIA Where are the Nazarites hiding?

MEMORY No one will tell me.

JUNIA Then how did you find them?

MEMORY They look for me.

JUNIA They must trust you after all these months. Good.

MEMORY They want to tell their stories.

JUNIA And you remember every word.

MEMORY I remember words. Maybe not every word, mistress.

JUNIA But you tell me exactly what you remember.

MEMORY I tell you what has entered my head.

JUNIA The truth.

MEMORY Is what true? I don't know. I just hear and remember.

JUNIA What is truth?

MEMORY Mistress?

JUNIA Never mind. If I want to finish this history, I need to know as much as possible. I should be in the slums and taverns myself, finding the Dippers and Nazarites. But a woman of my rank in low places -- that would be scandal. My husband would never allow it. He'd divorce me, or worse, if I tried to do what you can do.

MEMORY No, Mistress, he would not divorce you.

JUNIA I did not ask you to speak.

MEMORY Mistress.

JUNIA Has my brother Saul been following you?

MEMORY He has tried.

JUNIA Don't tell me how you evade him. I don't want to know.

MEMORY No, mistress.

JUNIA He's already harassed me, and I suppose he won't stop.

MEMORY He won't. He's determined.

JUNIA As am I.

MEMORY I only tell you what you want me to tell you.

JUNIA You tell me what you think I want to hear?

MEMORY What you ask me to hear.

- JUNIA Sometimes I think there is too much to hear. Pharisees. Those in Qumran. Essenes. Sadducees. Dippers. Nazarites. Idiots, the insane crying out to God in public. The unwashed Jews in the countryside. Such profusion. Confusion. None the less, I have chosen this work. Let me hear about the Baptists.
- MEMORY They are few since their master was executed. They are scattered, and most try to live in the wilds. They are so poor it's said they eat locusts.
- JUNIA Herod should have killed them all.
- MEMORY He nearly did.
- JUNIA Who told you about the Dipper?
- MEMORY Ruth, the wife of Barnabus.
- JUNIA What was the work of the Dipper?
- MEMORY He warned the Jews that the Jewish people are in danger. God is bringing hell fire to burn the sinners at the end of times.
- JUNIA But Jews are the chosen of God, rescued from bondage and the wilderness.
- MEMORY It's easy to stray from the path.
- JUNIA So by worshipping this John, the sinners can be saved?
- MEMORY No. John was not worshipped. He wouldn't allow it. Only God is to be worshipped. John cleaned and protected the faithful with water by dipping them.
- JUNIA Water only? Not holy oil? Not the blood of a bull like Mithras?
- MEMORY Mithras? I do not know a Mithras.
- JUNIA They're not Jews. My husband's friends follow Mithras. I don't care about that – my interest is in the cults of the Jews. But this John used only water.
- MEMORY Water.

JUNIA Holy water blessed by a priest?

MEMORY Water at hand, in the river Jordan.

JUNIA And again, why?

MEMORY To clean body and soul and protect from the fires to come.

JUNIA Fires to come?

MEMORY God's fire.

JUNIA God is coming to kill – how many?

MEMORY No one knows. God will kill only the sinners. He will kill them with fire.

JUNIA That means everyone, doesn't it?

MEMORY I don't know sinners from faithful.

JUNIA The Dipper claimed to have a kingdom?

MEMORY No, he did not. Another would bring a kingdom.

JUNIA Another? Who?

MEMORY Most say the Nazarite.

JUNIA The Nazarite?

MEMORY Jude said (*mimicking a male voice*) when the Dipper was imprisoned, he sent his closest followers to my brother to ask if he was the one bringing the kingdom. My brother said, look around. See the lame walking, the diseased healed, the blind seeing, and the dead raised. What does that tell you?

JUNIA That another fraud was at hand. So, this kingdom, this kingdom is the kingdom of the Nazarite?

MEMORY He talked of a kingdom of God.

JUNIA Tell me more about this kingdom of theirs. Who is the king?

MEMORY God.

JUNIA Which god?

MEMORY Their god.

JUNIA There are gods enough. The Romans have too many. I sometimes regret that I married a Roman. The things I must worship. Vesta. Jupiter. The genius of the emperor. It's wearisome.

MEMORY The Nazarites have only one.

JUNIA So said Jude?

MEMORY Yes.

JUNIA Well, then?

MEMORY My mind is full. I must sort things out. He spoke in Aramaic. I speak to you in Greek.

JUNIA So I can write in Greek, like a proper historian. Tell me what you heard from Jude.

MEMORY I will do my best.

JUNIA As always.

MEMORY Jude says they were taught about the kingdom of God. Some, like Bartholmew, say they were taught about the kingdom of heaven.

JUNIA God, heaven. Which is it?

MEMORY Some say kingdom of God, some say kingdom of heaven.

JUNIA Which is it?

MEMORY As you wish.

JUNIA It has to be a god. One of the gods.

MEMORY All ask, where is it? Where is God and the kingdom? They say it was promised then and now, any moment, but it has not appeared.

JUNIA Promised then? When?

MEMORY While the Nazarite lived.

JUNIA Kingdom of God, kingdom of Heaven. Which is it? God or heaven?

MEMORY As I have said, as you please.

JUNIA Yes, yes. Why so evasive?

MEMORY I was told both.

JUNIA Where did he get this teaching?

MEMORY Where?

JUNIA Did he study with a scribe? A teacher?

MEMORY Bartholomew said the Nazarite Jesus learned from the Dipper.

JUNIA From the Dipper.

MEMORY Jude said the same. He said his brother left the family to join the Dipper. His brother stayed with the Dipper for maybe two years. After the Dipper was arrested and beheaded, his brother continued the work.

JUNIA Continued the work?

MEMORY Preaching, dipping into water.

JUNIA Dipping?

MEMORY Washing people in water.

JUNIA Go on.

- MEMORY The Nazarite found new followers of all sorts. Men, women. Farmers, fishermen, tax men. It's mostly women who paid for his needs. He named twelve men to be closest to him. He preached the coming of the kingdom of God, that God's kingdom is at hand.
- JUNIA Does Claudius know this?
- MEMORY Claudius, mistress?
- JUNIA I asked myself that question. The emperor, Claudius the emperor. What did he preach, this Nazarene?
- MEMORY The time is fulfilled. Or the time is at hand. Or the time has come. The kingdom of god is at hand. Or is coming. It may be here, now.
- JUNIA All of those, or just one?
- MEMORY In Greek, any one of them. All of them. As you wish.
- JUNIA The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of god is at hand. How does the king arrive? With an army?
- MEMORY No one talks of armies.
- JUNIA Then his crowds or his followers -- farmers, fishermen, the tax men, the widows and old maids?
- MEMORY No one talks of armies. God appears and the kingdom comes with him.
- JUNIA No armies, no wars. God just arrives.
- MEMORY God appears as ruler.
- JUNIA How do we know?
- MEMORY The sick are healed, the blind can see, lepers are cured and cleansed, all sinners are destroyed.
- JUNIA How do they summon their god?

MEMORY They have a prayer.

JUNIA A prayer?

MEMORY Begging or pleading to their god to come.

JUNIA What are you doing?

MEMORY Mistress?

JUNIA You're pacing.

MEMORY I don't mean to. My head is so

JUNIA It makes me nervous when you pace.

MEMORY Mistress.

JUNIA Sit if you must. And slow down just a little. I'm having trouble keeping up with you.

MEMORY As you wish.

JUNIA This begging.

MEMORY I call it so.

JUNIA Repeat the prayer.

MEMORY It begins: Abba, father.

JUNIA Father?

MEMORY My own dear father.

JUNIA Father? One does not call a king father.

MEMORY It's what he told me. Father.

JUNIA Father.

MEMORY Father in heaven, blessed be your name.

JUNIA This is the prayer?

MEMORY Yes.

JUNIA Slowly.

MEMORY Your kingdom come. Our daily bread give us today. And forgive us our debts as we forgive those who owe us. And do not lead us to the test.

JUNIA Continue.

MEMORY That is the prayer.

JUNIA How is a god, any god, supposed to pay attention to that? Again.

MEMORY Again?

JUNIA The prayer. The begging prayer. Slowly.

MEMORY Father in heaven.

JUNIA Father in heaven.

MEMORY Your kingdom come.

JUNIA Your kingdom come.

MEMORY Our daily bread give us today.

JUNIA Slowly.

MEMORY And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

JUNIA Debtors? Not those who owe us?

MEMORY I heard both.

JUNIA Both.

MEMORY Yes.

JUNIA From?

MEMORY Jude, the brother of the Nazarene.

JUNIA Good, then, I suppose. Go on.

MEMOFRY And do not lead us to the test.

JUNIA The test? What test?

MEMORY Sin, mistress.

JUNIA God would lead me into sin? Ridiculous. Who are these Jews?

MEMORY The Nazarites, mistress.

JUNIA Yes, yes, the Nazarites. That much I understand. Why can't there be unity among us?

MEMORY Mistress?

JUNIA So, I have father in heaven. Your kingdom come. Our daily bread give us today. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us to the test.

MEMORY Yes, mistress.

JUNIA Odd, but simple, almost touching. Praying to Yahweh or Jupiter takes a full day. The Nazarites ask for god's kingdom with this?

MEMORY I do not know. No one said. I just heard the prayer.

JUNIA Do the Dippers have such a prayer?

MEMORY The Dippers will not talk to me.

JUNIA They will not talk to you? Why not?

MEMORY They are very few and fewer all the time. They believe you wish to see them all dead, that I spy for you and your husband, the Roman.

JUNIA If my husband finds this useful, all the better.

MEMORY Mistress.

JUNIA They can believe what they like. I want the sayings of the Nazarene. What's wrong? Why are you holding your head?

MEMORY To calm the voices.

JUNIA I know you work to calm the voices, but I have never seen you hold your head like that. Do I need to stop already?

MEMORY No, mistress. I will calm the voices.

JUNIA You are valuable only if you remember.

MEMORY Yes, mistress. I am worthless without the words in my head.

JUNIA Slowly, then. What did you hear about this kingdom? Who is the king?

MEMORY God.

JUNIA Not the Nazarene?

MEMORY He did not call himself a god.

JUNIA What did he call himself, then, if not king?

MEMORY The son of man.

JUNIA Son of man?

MEMORY Everyone agrees, he called himself son of man.

JUNIA So, does this Son of Man have other prayers?

MEMORY Yes, so I was told, but none was recited to me.

JUNIA Secret words?

MEMORY I do not know if any are secret.

(In the following, MEMORY alternates between two mimicked voices, as if in conversation.)

MEMORY Jude asked Bartholomew, *what are you doing?* Talking to this girl, says Bartholomew. *Why did you teach her our prayer?*

JUNIA I don't follow you.

MEMORY She could join us. *She's a spy for Saul.* She slaves for the sister. *Have her talk to Miriam, then: Miriam can sort the true from the false.* Miriam won't see her. She's afraid to see her.

JUNIA You're going too fast. Calm the voices.

MEMORY *Afraid, why be afraid of a harmless little thing?* Because Miriam isn't sure which is true – *her dreams or her waking visions.* She's tormented by the hanging of her boy, the crucifix. *Of course she is, we all are.* And the loss of the body. *To our shame.* She sees him in dreams and waking visions. So much so she never ceases talking about it. *First the women accepted her vision, then that fool Thomaas, then all the Nazarites.*

JUNIA What are you doing? Calm the voices.

MEMORY But how could we lose his body? *So much fear and shame, for all of us but especially Miriam.* She is still mad with grief. *She sees her son everywhere, in dreams and awake. She has so many visions that we believe her, that her son is alive.* The girl is harmless. *Harmless? She remembers. She could be a spy.* She could speak for us.

JUNIA Memory?

MEMORY *Speak for us? To whom?*

JUNIA Memory, calm yourself.

MEMORY Anyone who seeks the truth. *Which truth – Miriam’s, yours, Peter’s?*

JUNIA You’re going too fast. I’m lost.

MEMORY My head. The words. I remember too much.

JUNIA Go rest.

MEMORY I need to empty my head. I’ve heard too much. Maybe I need to die.

JUNIA That’s stupid talk. Don’t be stupid.

MEMORY Mistress.

JUNIA Go rest, but not too long.

MEMORY May I have wine?

JUNIA If you calm yourself. Go.

MEMORY I will. I will calm myself.

(Exit Memory. JUNIA shuffles her work. Memory screams offstage.)

JUNIA And now what?

(MEMORY enters, agitated, followed closely by SAUL, who is drunk.)

JUNIA No, no. I don’t want you near me, brother. Why do you haunt me?

SAUL To help you. We seek the same ends.

JUNIA We do not.

MEMORY Leave my mistress be.

SAUL Stifle your slave.

JUNIA Do not instruct me.

SAUL You seek the cults, the outcasts, the sinners.

JUNIA I seek the Jews in all their guises.

SAUL As do I.

JUNIA Not for the same ends.

SAUL For your so-called history?

JUNIA It is history. My history.

SAUL A woman collecting history? A camel would walk through the eye of a needle.

MEMORY I heard those words.

JUNIA Be still. Go calm yourself.

MEMORY Your brother, mistress, he tried to grab my breasts.

SAUL Will you not stifle your slave?

JUNIA Be still, I said. Go. Calm yourself.

(MEMORY exits.)

SAUL We should never have allowed you to read and write.

JUNIA Yet I read and write.

SAUL History is for men, to make history or to write it.

JUNIA Yet I write it.

SAUL Fool of a woman. Where is your husband that he does not punish you?

JUNIA Speak to me when you're not drunk.

SAUL If I drink some, it's because my calling is difficult. God is a stern master. We both seek what's known about the cults. You to pass the time as you fool yourself, and me to root out error and blasphemy, to cleanse the temple.

JUNIA And grab what you can from those you persecute. To put your Pharisees above all others and take the greater share from the offers and tithes.

SAUL As you put yourself above the family, above the Law, when you marry a Roman.

JUNIA My marriage brought connections, concessions, money. And a true partner.

SAUL A Roman? Who can trust a Roman?

JUNIA I trust my husband.

SAUL And not me, not the Pharisees?

JUNIA As I said. But you, you only appear when you need something. A name from my history. Wine. Money.

SAUL And will you share?

JUNIA Share?

SAUL Some money. My mission takes me away from business.

JUNIA And why should I help?

SAUL To help do justice.

JUNIA Justice? To beat unbelievers, to stone blasphemers?

SAUL As the Law requires.

JUNIA Does the law require you to rape my slaves?

SAUL Nonsense.

JUNIA She is my property, valuable property not to be touched by you.

SAUL I'm so tired. You don't offer me a cushion?

*(SAUL leans against a wall, slides to the floor, half awake.
MEMORY enters.)*

JUNIA I do not.

MEMORY Mistress, let me help you.

JUNIA Help me? Did you clear your head?

MEMORY My head went empty when he grabbed me. Let me help you.

JUNIA How?

MEMORY I have my knife. We could kill him.

JUNIA What?

MEMORY Like your Judith – she killed Holofernes.

JUNIA No. Do not anger me further.

SAUL Wine. May I have wine?

MEMORY I can help you.

JUNIA No. No more talk of knives or killing. Fetch wine.

MEMORY For two?

JUNIA For me.

*(MEMORY exits. SAUL rouses himself and starts to
look through the stack of papyrus))*

JUNIA No. Damn the gods. Leave my work alone.

SAUL You have names. I need the names.

JUNIA I have names. Leave them alone.

SAUL I need them. God's work. A pure Temple.

JUNIA Stay away from my work.

SAUL You dare touch me?

JUNIA I dare.

SAUL You are unclean.

JUNIA And you are no better.

SAUL No better? A mere woman. Little better than a slave. Married to an outsider.

JUNIA And you persecute me for it? No. You can't. You won't touch me. I have money, connections, names. You dare not touch me.

SAUL God will do that. He will throw you down so low.

JUNIA No God will harm me. The gods work only through us, and there is no one who can touch me. But you. Finding your sinners where you can. Beating them. Killing them.

SAUL I have killed no one.

JUNIA The Nazarite. Stephen.

SAUL What of him?

JUNIA You helped murder him.

SAUL I did nothing.

JUNIA You held the coats and cloaks.

SAUL I did nothing.

JUNIA Standing there, it must have seemed like nothing. But you freed the hands and arms. Did you avert your eyes? Did you watch each and every stone? I have seen stoning. Stones and rocks of varied shapes and sizes to fit hands of various shapes and sizes. Nothing too heavy for one hand, nothing too light that it will account for little. Best to have them sorted and ready ahead of time. Strip the guilty party so there's no protection. The first rocks just bounce away. Then one or two break the skin. There is blood, maybe from the nose first, the eyes. Bruising comes later. When the head is struck, maybe the guilty one will lay flat, an easier target. The nose breaks, the mouth is struck and teeth are seen flying or hiding behind torn lips. If the head is struck hard enough, often enough, the skull shows through bloodied skin and hair. Then the skull breaks and you have the gray matter mixed with blood. The shouting explodes among the executioners, and the screams and moans of the guilty one cannot be heard for the ruckus. Arms and hands freed by the fellow holding the cloaks and robes work harder and faster. The guilty one lays still.

SAUL Enough. You cannot be silent?

JUNIA I cannot.

SAUL I only held the cloaks.

JUNIA You perhaps did not pick up a stone, but you have said it. Brave, brave man. Brave enough to find the guilty one and arrange the execution. Brave enough to hold the cloaks. Coward enough not to throw a stone.

SAUL I should beat you, sister.

JUNIA And have me call for my husband and the Roman garrison to arrest you for touching a Roman citizen? Do not persecute me. Persecute yourself.

(MEMORY enters with wine in an earthen vessel)

MEMORY Wine, mistress.

JUNIA Place it here, before me. Now, brother, you were going to leave. Where do you travel?

SAUL Damascus.

JUNIA You have names of the guilty in Damascus, a list perhaps?

SAUL I will get them.

JUNIA Will you be on the list?

SAUL Damn you.

(SAUL exits)

JUNIA I am calm. Memory, are you calm?

MEMORY If you want me to be calm, I will be calm.

JUNIA Where did you get the knife?

MEMORY From the steward. He told me I have to protect myself.

JUNIA Of course you do. Perhaps the steward has good judgement. But inform me of everything you do.

MEMORY I will.

JUNIA Are you calm?

MEMORY If you say so.

JUNIA We both need to be calm. I need to re-center.

MEMORY I have calmed myself. My head is quiet.

JUNIA Where did we leave off?

MEMORY Anyone who seeks the truth. *Which truth – Miriam's, yours, Peter's?*

JUNIA All of which I could not follow. So, remember, then, more about this kingdom.

MEMORY The kingdom of God. Jude said we will know when the kingdom has arrived when 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.

JUNIA In other words, never. But again. Slowly. One idea at a time.

MEMORY Happy the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

JUNIA No, no, no. Go back. When the kingdom has arrived.

MEMORY When the kingdom has arrived.

JUNIA What Jude said.

MEMORY Jude said, *you ask too many questions, little one.*

JUNIA About the kingdom. How will we know about the kingdom?

MEMORY The blind receive sight.

JUNIA Yes, that. Slowly

MEMORY The blind receive sight. The lame walk.

JUNIA Good. Continue. Slowly.

MEMORY Those who have leprosy are cleansed.

JUNIA A moment, wait a moment. Cleansed. Go on.

MEMORY The deaf hear.

JUNIA The deaf hear.

MEMORY The dead are raised.

JUNIA Slowly, good. The dead. The dead are raised.

MEMORY And the good news is shared with the poor.

JUNIA Shared with the poor.

MEMORY And slaves, Jude? What about slaves?

JUNIA Wait. Who's talking?

MEMORY What about slaves? *You ask too many questions, little one.*

JUNIA Who's talking?

MEMORY Too many questions, too many questions.

JUNIA Calm yourself.

MEMORY Too many questions.

JUNIA Enough. I can't work.

MEMORY Too many questions.

JUNIA Arrange my scrolls. Come to me when you are calm.

MEMORY Mistress. Too many questions.

(JUNIA exits)

MEMORY Too many questions. But what about slaves? Please, god, think of slaves.

END OF PLAY