

# STEPHIEN: UNLIKELY MARTYR

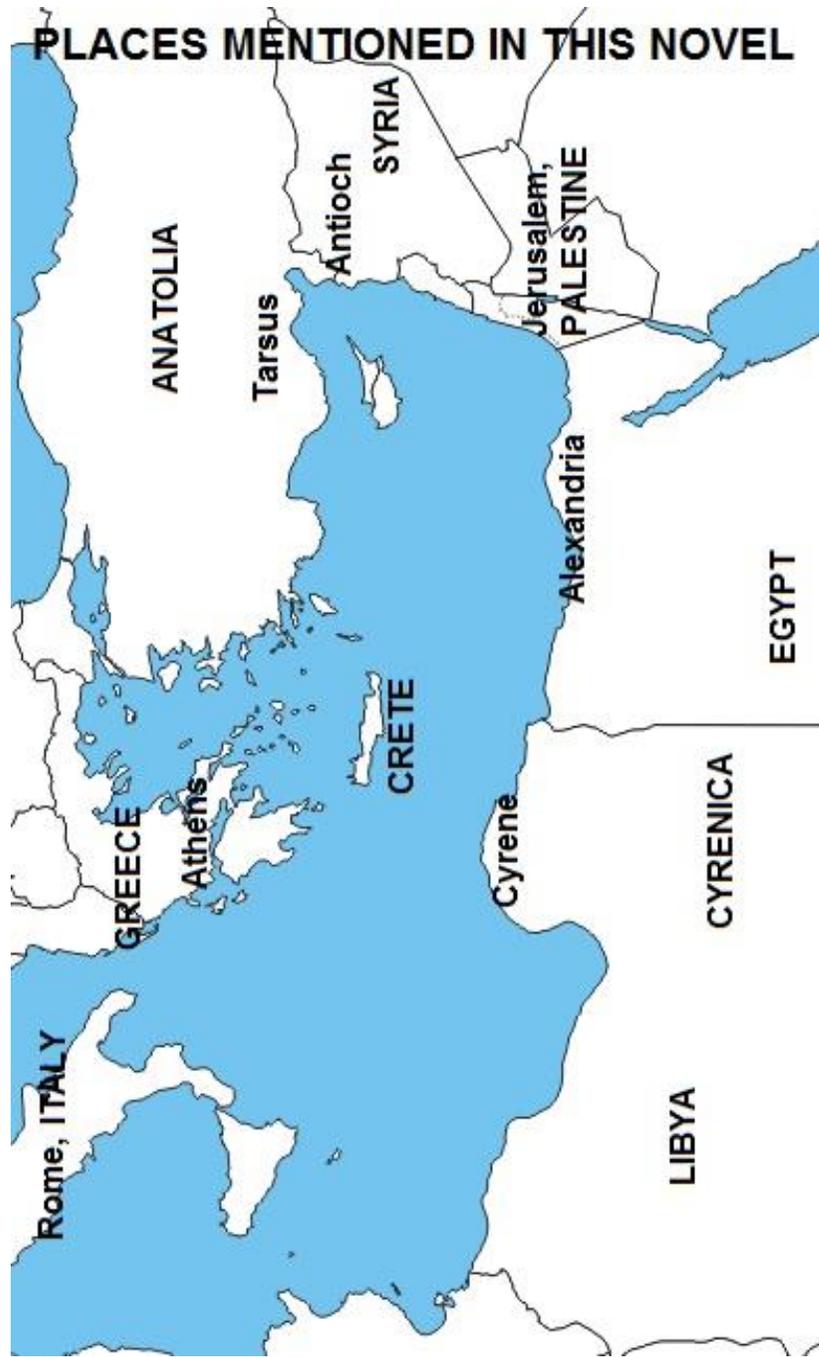
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A COMMENTARY IN NARRATIVE FORM

*Dedicated to all Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and  
everyone else in our modern world  
who have become Christians  
and now face their own life-threatening existence.*

## PLACES MENTIONED IN THIS NOVEL



## 1 ~ ABRAHAM'S CRUCIFIXION

“Hurry, Stephen! They’re crucifying Abraham.”

Seventeen-year-old Stephen looks up from his anvil, his eyes wide. “What?”

He throws the small iron bar back into the hot forge, drops his sledge hammer and tongs to the dirt floor and runs out onto the street.

“Along the road to Seleucia,” Ahab shouts, leading the way.

They run through the market and along the River Orontes toward the road leading out of Antioch and to the seaport twelve *milles* west.

Stephen’s chest heaves and his breath comes fast and hard. His face turns dark red as his strong muscles strain to go where he does not want to go. Beads of perspiration form on his head and down into his sparse young man’s black beard.

They race out the western gate of Antioch and down to the bottom of the hill on which the great showplace city—third in magnificence and size only to Alexandria and Rome—is built.

They see the gathering mob ahead of them shouting, and shaking their fists, or laughing in scorn.

Stephen’s eyes mist and he stumbles, though there is nothing to trip over except the awful thing that should not be happening to his very best friend.

He and Ahab slow and stand at the outer edge of the mob.

Abraham’s hands and legs are bound by chains.

“No! No!” he calls out.

Abraham falls to his knees, clasps his hands together, and holds them up to the centurion in charge.

“Please. Not this. I don’t deserve it. You can’t do this to me. Please. Please. I have a mother to support, and two little brothers. Please, I beg you. Oh, I beg you.”

Abraham, the same age as Stephen, drops his head to the cobblestone street, his skinny body trembling. His pleas have the hoarseness of a youth whose voice has recently changed to that of a man.

A legionnaire grabs the condemned and jerks him up.

“Get going there.”

Abraham stumbles on blubbering and begging as he goes.

“All right. This is far enough” the centurion barks.

The procession stops. Abraham looks toward the upright beam already in the ground.

“No! Please! No!”

A legionnaire pushes young Abraham onto the ground. His head hits the crossbeam there waiting for the condemned criminal.

His screams become shrill. A legionnaire unlocks the chains around his wrists. Another joins him and they stretch Abraham’s hands to opposite ends of the cross beam.

“Hand me a spike, someone,” the second legionnaire calls out, easily holding down Abraham’s struggling arm with one hand and reaching up for a spike with the other.

“No!” Abraham shrieks. “No. Please. No. Ahhhhh!”

The first spike is driven into his wrist.

Abraham reaches with his free hand to rescue his wounded one.

The first legionnaire grabs it and holds it in place on the other side of the crossbeam.

“Ahhhhh! Ahhhhh!”

The mallet finds its mark over and over until the criminal is secured to his cross.

Abraham kicks until the legionnaires force him to stand, one at each end of the beam. They push him backward toward the upright beam, and every time he takes a step, the spikes stretch the wounds so that his young blood flows more freely.

“Nooooo!” Abraham screeches. “Nooooo!” His eyes are wide, the veins in his neck swell.

Once at the upright beam, the legionnaires, both much taller than Abraham, lift him up far enough that the crossbeam fits neatly into the notch, thus connecting the two pieces.

A third legionnaire grabs Abraham’s feet so they do not dangle and pull his entire weight down until the rips in his wrists grow so large his hands are freed.

The third legionnaire places Abraham’s feet over the bottom upright beam, but he kicks the legionnaire in the face.

Two of his colleagues come to the rescue and hold Abraham’s feet down so the job can be completed.

Now, with the large spike securely through Abraham’s feet and into the upright beam, they back away and wait for someone to nail his crime over his head.

“Nooooo” Abraham screeches in an unsteady voice that tapers off into the nothingness he has been condemned to.

During the entire process, Stephen has had his head turned. Indeed, his entire body faces away from his friend. When Abraham screams in pain, Stephen puts his hands over his ears.

“Okay, men,” he hears the centurion say. “Settle in. Only two shifts for this—one for day, one for night. It’s going to take him two or three days to die.”

Stephen waits until he thinks the legionnaires are at rest, then gradually turns around to see what he does not want to see.

“No, no, no,” Stephen mumbles in his adolescent voice forcing its way into manhood.

He puts his big hands on top of his head. He squints, presses his lips hard together, and mumbles still, “No, no, no.”

The tears. The unwanted tears that betray his cowardice and shame. He squints his eyes closed, hoping the whole thing will go away.

“No, No.” This time it is not him.

Stephen opens his eyes and they meet the eyes of his friend.

“Please, Stephen. Get me down,” young Abraham cries. “I hurt. Please. Oh, please. I can’t breathe. I hurt so bad.”

“Shut up,” one of the legionnaires calls up.

“Crying for your mother?” a bystander taunts

“Not so arrogant now, are you?” another tells the condemned.

“I didn’t mean to. It wasn’t me. I was home when it happened. I don’t even own a hammer that big.”

“How do you know it required a big hammer? Or any kind of hammer, you fool?” the high priest of Tyche, guardian goddess of Antioch, bellows. “Your own words condemn you.”

“Abraham,” Stephen cries, walking closer to his friend. “Why did you do it? There are other things we were ....”

“So, you know about it too?” the centurion calls over to Stephen. “I suppose all you Jews knew. You’re nothing but trouble.”

One of the city magistrates walks toward the two friends of the condemned.

“You know you’re not allowed down in Daphne where the sacred cleansing baths and groves are. How did you sneak into the temple of Tyche and deface her holy image?”

The centurion turns and looks toward Stephen and Ahab. “Arrest them too.”

Stephen pivots and sprints back toward the city gate. He charges through the market, dodging in and out of side alleys. He does not know where Ahab is. All he knows is that his life on earth—like Abraham’s—is about to end.

He does not head toward his locksmith shop. Instead, he runs up one of the foothills of Mount Silipius toward Ezekiel’s scribe school.

He scarcely feels his feet touch the ground.

“Father!” he shouts as he draws closer. He rushes inside the mud-brick building, past the students sitting on the floor with their tablets and styluses and to a back room.

“What is it, Son?” Ezekiel asks, rushing after him.

Stephen leans his hands on his knees and looks up, panting. “They’re crucifying Abraham. And they think Ahab and I were in on it.”

“In on what?”

“Defacing the statue of Tyche.”

“Well, were you?”

“Of course, not. But they’re looking for us now to crucify us too. What are we going to do?”

Ezekiel turns in a circle, his head on his thick graying hair.

“Sir, what is it?” Achaius, the oldest of Ezekiel’s hired staff, asks following them into the back room.

“They’re after us.”

“Us who?” Achaius says, pulling at his long, leathery nose.

“Us Jews,” Ezekiel interjects.

“No, Father. Just Ahab and me.”

“I have seen it happen before,” Ezekiel replies, trying to keep his voice calm. “They will blame all the Jews.”

“What are you going to do?” Achaius asks his employer.

“Leave. We’ve got to leave Antioch. It is mid-morning. We cannot go until dark.”

“We won’t be able to get past the city gate,” Stephen objects. “The guards will be watching for me.”

“We’ll walk east across the hills outside of the city and down on the other side of the hills.”

“Do you want Secundus, Justice and Trophimus to help me alert the other Jews?” Achaius asks.

“They will have to decide for themselves whether or not to leave, and where they will go.”

“Well, we’re leaving with you,” Achaius declares.

“Dismiss the school and tell the other teachers what is happening. You can go along with us if you like.”

“What about Mother? Will she want to leave?” Stephen

asks. "She's only Jew by conversion; she wasn't born one of us."

"She will want to help protect you. Now, let's get out of here."

Ezekiel glances at Achaius. "Just leave the writing supplies behind. They will be easy enough to replace."

He ducks out a back door of his scribe school, Stephen following close. Both look around to see if they have been spotted. They work their way along the same ridge of the foothill where Ezekiel's school is.

Ezekiel strains and breathes hard, his bulky weight trying to hold him back.

"What about my smithing tools, Father?"

"If you think you can go back there without being spotted, you can grab a few of your smaller tools. But I would rather you not even try."

Shortly, they come to the gate leading into their home compound. Stephen, the locksmith of the family, pulls out a key he keeps around his neck. They hear the rattle of a handle on the other side.

Before he can unlock it, the gate is opened by a slender, petite woman with dark hair, square face and sparkling eyes.

Her smile disappears.

"What's wrong?" she asks, looking first at her husband of twenty-nine years, then their late-born son.

"Tullia, Stephen in danger."

"They caught Abraham, Mother. They're, they're..."

"They're crucifying the young man," Ezekiel says, finishing for their son.

"Oh, no," Tullia says. She looks at Stephen and reaches up to hold his reddened face in her hands.

Mother and son stare at each other a moment. Stephen breaks away and walks over to the reflecting pool in the middle of their courtyard. He sits on the raised rim.

"Well, we have a lot to do," Tullia says, looking back at Ezekiel. "Of course, we will return to Tarsus. It is the only reasonable thing to do."

"I believe you are right," he replies. "Well, we need to decide what we can take with us. Hopefully the ship will allow us to take a pack animal with us."

"I thought we could take our horses and carriage up to Tarsus, dear," Tullia replies.

"Too easy for the soldiers to follow us. It's a one-week trip up to Tarsus. Too much risk walking. We shall go by ship."

"Well, I will run to the market and get cheese and bread for

the trip, and a few fresh grapes, apricots, and apples.”

“Mother, don’t do it.”

“I will be fine, Stephen. Remember, I am part Hittite and my father was the famous Athenodorus. No one dares bother me.” She forces a smile and a wink.

“Well, then, maybe we could go together,” Stephen says, standing.

“To the market? That would be fine. You can carry my basket.”

“Well, there. But also to my shop.”

“You’ll be recognized, Son,” Ezekiel interjects.

“I am taller than Mother, but not that much taller. I can wear one of her robes with a hood.”

“And that bushy black beard of yours?” Tullia says with a grin.

“I’ll put a veil over my head.”

“The shop owners will wonder who you are,” Tullia objects.

“Just don’t answer them when they ask. Just wink at them and walk away.”

Tullia looks over at Ezekiel and shrugs her shoulders.

“Might work,” he responds. “He will need his tools, especially the ones he uses for the intricate locks he makes.”

Shortly, Tullia and Stephen leave the compound. “I’ll have our pack mule ready when you get back. And enough food to keep him happy for the two days aboard the ship.”

They walk across the foothill, then down a familiar path closer to the city. They walk toward the market.

“Where is everyone?” Stephen asks.

Tullia does not answer.

Stephen looks up at the sky and she can hear sniffs from behind the veil. “They’re all down watching Abraham die,” he whispers. “Why did he have to do it, Mother?”

“He thought he was pleasing Jehovah,” she replies. “Now, let’s stop talking.”

With most of the produce stands left unattended while the merchants run go to the excitement at the city gate, Tullia selects what she wants for the trip and puts them in the basket Stephen is carrying for her. Each time, she places a few copper coins on the stool where the merchant normally sits.

“Okay, while everyone is gone, let’s slip over to your shop.”

As they walk, they hear shouting down at the river front.

Stephen, half boy and half man, sobs and is glad for his mother’s veil that hides the part of him he cannot control.

“Okay, start at the beginning of the alphabet with me,” she

whispers.

As they follow the example of his mother's famous philosophy father, Stephen manages to maintain control of his emotions.

When they arrive at the shop, Tullia stands outside to watch for anyone looking their way. It does not take Stephen long.

They head back toward home when they hear shouting behind them.

"Hey, you!"

They stop. Stephen freezes in place. "Run, Mother. Run."