

# *AND TO US*

*A Life Is Given*

By Mesu Andrews

### *Note to Readers*

The year of 2021 was the most challenging year I've ever experienced in my writing career. I had no idea when I began the series of short stories on *David's Wives* that these fascinating characters would become the bright spot during a time when I felt overwhelmed and defeated by every other writing task. Were it not for the creative release of greeting Ahinoam, Abigail, Maakah, Haggith, Abital, Eglah—and yes, even Michal—on my laptop screen through the months, I would have stopped writing.

I'm also grateful for you—my Patreon peeps—and the encouragement you offer through comments and messages. Your kindred hearts for biblical fiction inspire me to dig deeper and keep searching out more characters our busy world has forgotten.

As we bask in the glow of Christmas, savoring all we know and don't know of our Savior's birth, let's dig a little deeper into the lives of those shepherds who were tending their flock that night.

Remember, they were in Bethlehem—David's hometown—busy with the same tasks David was doing when Samuel came to anoint him as Israel's king. The anointing came years before David sat on Israel's throne and centuries before his prophesied descendant would come to earth and establish His eternal Kingdom.

As you may know, I write only Old Testament *novels*, so a New Testament story is a whole other research animal. If you find mistakes in culture or facts in the story you're about to read, please offer grace and forgive me. Though I've researched quite a bit about Bethlehem and its shepherds, I'm far more interested that you follow the Crimson Thread of David's blood into Jesus's veins.

So, come with me to Bethlehem, where David was born—and the little town that Abital, his fifth wife, also called home before she bore a king's heir. Their son, Shephatiah, is mentioned only in the list of sons born to David's "Hebron wives." Shephatiah is mentioned nowhere else in Scripture or in Jewish history, so I gave him a place in my heart. I hope one of his descendants—a woman named Johanna—touches your soul too.

## **Prologue**

*“Now David was the son of an Ephrathite named Jesse,  
who was from Bethlehem in Judah.”*

### **1 Samuel 17:12**

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
though you are small among the clans of Judah,  
out of you will come for me  
one who will be ruler over Israel,  
whose origins are from of old,  
from ancient times.”*

### **Micah 5:2**

*“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that  
a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.*

*(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)*

*And everyone went to their own town to register.*

*So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea,  
to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.”*

### **Luke 2:1-4**

## Chapter One

*“. . . Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary,  
and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.”*

### Matthew 1:16

#### Year of the Census

#### Bethlehem, Judea

#### Johanna

My husband hovered over me like a rooster over hens. “You must rest, Josy. Let our visiting family—those who aren’t large with child—prepare their own food.”

I slammed my fist into the warm, brown dough and glared at my husband. “Nathan ben Jacob, did you just say your wife is *large* with child?”

He paled instantly. “I would never be so stupid. What I said was . . .” Skirting the table, he wedged himself between me and my task and used his golden-brown eyes to woo me. “I meant to say you need rest, my love. Our first child is more important than feeding my inconsiderate relatives.”

“Shh, Nathan!” I peered over his shoulder into our spacious front room. Two families of cousins had arrived unannounced with news of more family needing shelter not far behind. “Be kind. If you must be angry, then be angry at Caesar for his census that will surely raise our taxes.”

He pulled me into his arms and whispered, “I’m angry that the descendants of David fled Bethlehem to seek wealth and fortune elsewhere. They should have been loyal to tradition and built their own flocks and homes in Bethlehem.”

His anger was aimed at one relative in particular. “Did anyone say if your brother Joseph and Mary planned to stay with us?” Nathan grew quiet, but with my head against his chest, I heard his heartrate soar.

“They’re coming,” he said, “but I won’t have Joseph under my roof with his harlot.”

I nudged him away. “Name-calling is beneath you. Mary is carrying the Messiah. Whether you believe or not is entirely up to you, Nathan ben Jacob.” I returned to kneading the dough, hoping my extra zeal in the pounding encouraged him to leave.

He remained. “We’ve had this conversation a hundred times, Johanna. The Messiah will come as a conquering king to save—”

“Was David born a king?” I pressed my palms into the dough, nerves tightening with each turn. “Mary is also a descendant of King David, so her conception of God’s child means the baby is a fulfillment—”

“Joseph chose Mary’s family over ours!” His pained shout drew the attention of the cousins. I bowed my head, embarrassed, as my normally level-headed husband shooed his family from our home to explore their hometown before sunset.

When he returned, I’d finished kneading and was forming the dough in circles to bake on the sides of the clay oven. “Will you punish your big brother forever?”

“Joseph should be our family’s chief shepherd, Josy. Not me. He abandoned us to become a wealthy carpenter in Nazareth. He supports Mary’s whole family, while we scratch out a meager living—”

“Nathan.” I reached for his hand, halting his tirade. “Look at this house. We have a front room for thirty guests to banquet and a second story for just as many to sleep. The stable below

us shelters the animals for our daily lives, and it's all because *Hashem* provides for this family. Not you. Not Joseph."

He pulled away. "Joseph destroyed our family to save hers."

"Mary's family needed help. Your parents and Joseph moved to Nazareth because they trusted you to take care of your family—as you have, my love."

"They *abandoned* us." He straightened, lifting his chin. "And the cousins that arrived today said Joseph traveled to En-Karim a few months ago—less than a morning's walk from here—but didn't even visit us!"

"Why would he visit us after your terrible reply to his news that Mary was pregnant before they married?"

"She tricked him into marriage, Jo. Don't tell me *you* believe her ridiculous story?"

"I do believe it—because I believe Joseph. He's never lied to us, Nathan, even when he must say hard things."

My words hit him like a blow, but I saw the roots of resentment grow deeper as his expression hardened. "I'll never forgive him." He stormed toward the door and ran headlong into a larger version of himself.

"Joseph!" I gasped.

"We need a room." Joseph directed his plea to me. "Mary's in labor."

"Of course, I'll—"

"We have no room." Nathan's tone was cold, his chin raised in challenge.

"Nathan, she's—" An icy stare silenced me.

"Please." Joseph's single word held the same fury I'd heard in my husband's voice, but Joseph's was tempered with desperation.

The brothers' silent battle raged while I looked past their shoulders for the first glimpse of a sister-in-law I'd heard so much about but never met. Seated atop a donkey, she cupped her large belly with both arms, eyes squeezed tightly shut, baring her teeth. I'd seen the throes of a birth pain in others, and the child inside me kicked—hard. There would be no more waiting for the men to decide.

“Out of my way!” I split a path between the brothers and charged through the door toward the laboring woman. “Nathan,” I shouted over my shoulder, “get four blankets and take them to the stable below. Joseph, your child will be born tonight in the quietest and cleanest place in our home.” I reached Mary as her pain was subsiding and recognized in her features the fear I'd felt with my first child. “Don't worry, dear one. There is a houseful of women here to see you through this.”