

The Murdered Messiah

Len Lamensdorf

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The Murdered Messiah skillfully recasts Jesus as a man whose peaceful dissidence revealed the meaning of biblical love.

Son of God, radical, enigma, rabbi, martyr—Jesus of Nazareth has long fascinated believers and nonbelievers. In *The Murdered Messiah*, a deeply imaginative historical novel, Len Lamensdorf recasts the monumental figure as a man whose family tragedy unfolded amid Roman hostility.

Jesus—named Joshua in the novel, a derivative of Yehoshua in Hebrew—is born of violent circumstances. The daring plot detail immediately positions him as a man with dark origins, and not as a divine figure whose mission is evident from the outset. The path from his upbringing as the adopted son of a carpenter to a resolute figure who finds the seeds for his ministry in the book of Isaiah unfolds in complex turns that emphasize his humanity as well as his faith. Occasional chapters written from the perspective of those close to him—including his mother, his brother, his wife, his sister, and Judas—enhance the drama through first-person testimonies.

The foreboding plot skillfully moves between the story of Joshua's mother, Miriam; Joshua's gradual confirmation of his calling; the conversion of a Roman soldier and rapist, Gaius; Judas's flight from his Roman persecutors; ongoing unrest caused by Pontius Pilate's men; divisions among the Sanhedrin; and how the lives of these first-century men intersect.

One of the novel's most speculative, central ideas—that a massacre by the Romans spurred Joshua toward a messianic role—provides a controversial theory for his actions. Less focused on fulfilling prophecy and overturning the law of the Hebrew Bible than on finding a peaceful way to end the Roman occupation, Joshua's efforts highlight the degree to which he feels the political devastations on his people.

Lamensdorf's version remains mostly faithful to the Bible's best-known moments. From the Sermon on the Mount to acts of healing, Joshua's charismatic persona unfolds. When departures do take place—including an alternative to the events after the resurrection—or when the work takes cinematic turns—including a frame story outside of Joshua's story that involves a hunt for stolen scrolls—the writing quickens, even loosens. A few embellishments lead toward expected, familiar perspectives, including a brief account from Miriam of Magdala. Still, bold portrayals of the characters' thoughts propel the story.

Apt scenes alternate between the treachery of the Romans and the movement forming amid Joshua and his followers. Judas especially stands out for his struggle to reconcile his former warring instincts with respect for Joshua's instructions. That Joshua includes him in his inner circle—even while knowing what Judas is experiencing—illustrates his profound hope in God's deliverance.

With a dramatic buildup toward Passover, the novel works through insightful themes on divine law and human interpretations, sedition, and freedom. The novel successfully portrays Joshua's faith without lionizing him. From start

to finish, his otherworldliness remains grounded in daily interactions. In *The Murdered Messiah*, peaceful dissidence reveals the real meaning behind the Bible's tenets of love.

KAREN RIGBY (December 7, 2016)

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