

Return to Zion

the seventh art west adventure

BEN WITHERINGTON III
ANN WITHERINGTON

TIME IS RUNNING OUT FOR KHALIL EL SAID, AS HIS cancer treatments have become less and less effective. And so it is that his old friends Art West (and his new wife Marissa) and Grace Levine, plan something very special for Khalil, while there is still time—the opening of an el Said wing of the Israeli Museum of Antiquities, which includes many of the items he bequeathed to the museum over many years. All of this might be quite enough, but as the Wests and others arrive in Jerusalem, a huge explosion blows the top off of the Dome of the Rock. How did it happen? Will there be war? And who is this person hiding in the shadows who seems to be the spitting image of the well-known dead villain el Tigre? Along the way new archaeological discoveries come to light and Yelena, the adopted daughter of Grace and Manny, must decide if her future lies in Israel or not. The old friends discover they are at a crossroads in all their lives—which avenues will they take as the future beckons?

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ANN WITHERINGTON is Instructor of Biology and Environmental Sciences at Asbury University. Ben and Ann have been married for over thirty- eight years.

“Ben and Ann Witherington have given us another Art West adventure, which, like the previous novels, blends imagination with the realities of archaeology and the Holy Land. In reading this book you will not only be entertained, quickly turning the pages to find out what happens next, you will also be acquiring an excellent education relating to biblical scholarship, Christian origins, Jewish customs, life in Israel in the time of Jesus, history, and archaeology. In short, the Witheringtons have made entertainment educational and education entertaining!”

—CRAIG A. EVANS

John Bisagno Distinguished Professor of Christian Origins and Dean of the School of Christian Thought
Houston Baptist University

“What happens when a Jewish zealot conspires to blow up Jerusalem’s Temple Mount with a Palestinian Muslim? Ben Witherington’s seventh Art West novel is a compelling account of murder, stolen antiquities, archaeological discoveries, and the cold case revelation of Yasser Arafat’s murder, capped off with the destruction of the Temple Mount. Return to Zion is a gripping story that’s hard to put down.”

—MARK R. FAIRCHILD

Luke J. Peters Professor of Biblical Studies, Chair Dept. Bible & Religion, Huntington University

“The Witheringtons plant the reader between the frenzy of religious extremism—Christian, Jewish, and Muslim—and the impetus of people of good conscience toward peace and cooperation across faiths. But this is also a story about valuing life, facing death, and finding direction in the midst of danger and opportunity. The result is a story as multi-layered as the archaeological digs that inevitably come into play where Art West is involved.”

—DAVID A. deSILVA

Trustees’ Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Ashland Theological Seminary

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By Ben and Ann Witherington

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“This is what the LORD says: ‘I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the city of Truth, and the mountain of the Lord will be called the Holy Mountain.’”

—ZECHARIAH 8:3

“Jesus turned to them and said: ‘Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for me, weep for yourselves and your children.’”

—LUKE 23:28

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand a double portion for her sins.”

—ISAIAH 40:2

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CHAPTER ONE

BOXED IN

NOW WELL PAST MIDNIGHT, the city was mostly silent on this Friday morning. Chilly gusts of wind blew down the road alongside the concrete wall erected around Bethlehem. The Hizma checkpoint on the north side of Jerusalem was not a beehive of activity at this hour; nevertheless, the guards drank more coffee to keep themselves alert. Besides, it was so cold they could hardly fall asleep. Instead, they turned the kerosene heater higher and warmed their hands vigorously.

The winds blew clouds of dust down the road alongside the concrete wall that ran through the Jerusalem suburb of Hizma. Once a thriving town with an educated workforce and low unemployment, Hizma is now a ghetto. Without an Israeli ID card, its citizens can no longer work in Jerusalem as they have done for generations. Travel back and forth is at the whim of the Israeli guards—sometimes they let people through and sometimes they don't. Rules can change depending on the time of day. Citizens of the Palestinian capital of Ramallah also use this checkpoint to get to Jerusalem. On a good day, the twenty-minute drive from Ramallah to Jerusalem can take up to two hours thanks to the checkpoint. While the Palestinians tended to just wave people coming into the West Bank right through, this was definitely not the *modus operandi* of the Israeli soldiers with traffic going in the opposite direction.¹

1. The Israeli West Bank barrier, or separation wall, makes the Berlin Wall look like a backyard fence. When completed it will stretch over four hundred miles and effectively separate the West Bank from the rest of Israel. The majority of Palestinians will be fenced off and traversing the checkpoints is often difficult if not impossible.

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Ever vigilant, Israeli guard Tevi Schneider noticed several men congregating near vans at least two hundred yards away from his booth. Pointing to the distant group, he said, “Jacob, let’s go for a walk on the dark side.” The pair quietly approached, taking advantage of every hiding spot. Finally, they were able to hear several voices speaking rapidly in Arabic, a language Tevi learned in preparation for his border patrol job.

“Move a little faster!” growled one of the four men. “Get this stuff on board!”

“Relax! Who’s going to bother us? The Israelis are way over at the checkpoint probably trying to stay awake.”

Tevi and Jacob crept closer. On Tevi’s signal, they leapt out, their flashlights spotlighting the men and their two vans. “Halt! This is a security check!” cried Tevi.

Startled, one of the men began to run behind the vehicles, but Jacob stopped the man cold by pointing his M14 at him and herded him back to the group. Tevi called for more backup.

A tall man with a black beard and a red and white *keffiyeh* began to walk toward him. “Let me explain,” he began with a smile.

“Down on your knees,” barked Jacob. By then more guards arrived at a run. As he approached the black van, Tevi could see that the back doors

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were open. But he was not prepared for what he found inside. There were no less than eleven ossuaries, ancient burial boxes from the biblical period, neatly lined up, apparently ready to be transferred to the other vehicle. Tevi could see that one of them was quite ornate. “We received a memo to be on the lookout for stolen ossuaries,” cried Tevi. “I think we’ve found them!”



“Looks like stolen antiquities to me,” agreed Jacob. “I’ll call the IAA police. This is out of our jurisdiction.”

Tevi blinked and looked closely at the man standing by the empty van. “Say, haven’t I seen you somewhere before? Aren’t you one of the antiquities dealers in the Cardo?”

The man flinched, but did not answer the question replying instead in a deep raspy voice, “I will not say anything without my lawyer present.”

“Whatever! You can all call your lawyers from headquarters, because that’s where you’re all going tonight. I’m sure they’ll be thrilled to hear from you at this hour!” laughed Tevi.

And so it was that eleven ancient ossuaries were intercepted at the point where they were about to become items on the black market.² About twenty minutes later, the flashing lights of the IAA police van arrive, sirens blaring. “Just another dark night in Judea,” Tevi said with a little laugh. “Never a dull moment!”

2. Recovery of the eleven ossuaries actually occurred Friday morning, March 28, 2014 after extensive detective work by the IAA and Shefet Police Station in Jerusalem. Read more: http://www.antiquities.org.il/Article_eng.aspx?sec_id=25&subj_id=240&id=4050&hist=1

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Sean walked along the Pool of Siloam and stood near the entrance of Hezekiah's Tunnel in the Old City of David. He could see a man coming up the path—but it was not his intended contact! The man spotted him and began running. Sean also ran into the tunnel—the dark, wet, 1500-foot long tunnel. Somehow he knew he was running for his life. Sean was soon out of breath, completely out of breath, and yet still he continued running through the cold water. When he stopped briefly, he heard someone running toward him also, the splashing sounds echoing against the walls of the tunnel.



“I’m trapped!” he muttered. The phone call had promised money, a lot of money, for the evidence he had—photographic evidence of a crime, a crime so outrageous, so important, that men would kill to get hold of it. The footsteps were getting closer and closer on both sides. A shot rang out and Sean fell headlong into the water. Blood began to stream from the wound in the back of his head. Only seconds later, a dark shadow loomed over the fallen form, frantically searching for the precious evidence he sought. He emptied pockets until finally, zipped inside the man’s jacket he found a flash drive. Two gold teeth gleamed in the dark.

“Ensh’allah” said Abdullah as he stepped over the body and walked out the front entrance with his newly-arrived accomplice. With a sinister laugh he remarked, “Just another night in old Jerusalem, another dark and dangerous night!”

CHAPTER TWO

NEWS TRAVELS FAST

IAA DIRECTOR DR. SAMUEL Cohen was very pleased with himself. Months of work had finally led to the interception of eleven stolen ossuaries, albeit, a bit by chance. He called a quick press conference for Friday noon. The *Jerusalem Post* and *Ha'aretz* were the first to arrive, followed by a better than usual showing from the international press. The word was out already.

Sammy, as his friends called him, began by explaining that the boxes were stolen from a cave near Jerusalem with the intent of being sold to collectors. He reported that IAA had been tracking the suspects for some time, and that the exchange involved an Israeli and a Palestinian seller attempting ultimately to make the sale to an Israeli customer. He added that the two most ornate boxes seem to have belonged to a nobleman and his family, and yes, several of the boxes contained bone fragments and pottery items buried with the deceased.

Dr. Ethan Klein, the IAA's Director of the Unit for the Prevention of Antiquities Robbery, rushed into the conference to help out. "We can learn from each ossuary about a different aspect of language, art, and burial practice. And we can learn about the soul of the person."¹ Klein was noted for his enthusiasm and the press was loving it.

When pressed for details, Klein went on to add that two of the ossuaries were inscribed in Hebrew with the names Yoezer and Ralphine. "These ossuaries held the remains primarily of rabbis, businessmen, and aristocrats of the time, in other words the social elite."

1. Quoted from IAA deputy director, Eitan Klein. Read more. <http://news.national-post.com/2014/03/31/israel-unveils-11-ancient-burial-boxes-or-ossuaries-stolen-from-a-cave-after-midnight-raid-on-antiquities-dealers/>

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Finally, he reminded the press that the use of ossuaries became popular during the second century BC, influenced by the individualism of Greek and Roman societies. They fell out of fashion after Roman domination of Jerusalem in AD 70, though the practice continued into the second century and was even taken up by the followers of Jesus.

When challenged about the authenticity of the ossuaries by Simon Kalman, famous for being the one reporter who sat through the entire James ossuary trial, Klein added he had no doubts about the authenticity of the latest discovery. “These ossuaries are authentic,” he affirmed. “Everything here smells authentic.”

Cohen was beaming throughout the short news conference. He was still in damage control after the humiliation of losing the trial of Oded Golan. The judge ruled that Golan was wrongly accused of forging the first-century ossuary bearing the inscription, “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” After years of litigation Cohen rued the fact that Golan would probably never turn it over to the IAA!

Today’s recovery of eleven ossuaries would begin the rehabilitation of the reputation of the IAA. What Cohen could not have anticipated was that this story, after being the talk in the coffee shops on Ben Yehuda Street over the weekend, would disappear entirely off the radar after Monday morning.

One reporter from the *Jerusalem Post* asked a surprising question. “Do either of you have any information on the body that was found this morning at the end of Hezekiah’s Tunnel? Apparently, the man wasn’t carrying any identification.”

Cohen and Klein looked at each other in genuine shock, both shaking their heads. “We haven’t heard about this yet! That’s an active dig and a major tourist site! I guarantee I’ll be checking into this right away!”

Sighing loudly, Sammy called Police Commissioner Danino right after the short conference. “Is it true you found a dead man in Hezekiah’s Tunnel?”

The Police Chief confirmed it all. “He’s not from around here—American I think. We haven’t identified him yet. Our internal Intelligence Agency, Mossad, is still checking his prints. Right now the tunnel is closed to tourists of course. It’s a crime scene! But I promise to keep you in the loop given I know how much you’re involved in the City of David dig!”

“Thanks. I hate getting my news from the news!” groaned Sammy before hanging up.

CHAPTER THREE

PRELUDE TO A REUNION

IT WAS A DAMP Monday morning, half past eight, and the wind was whipping up the incline of Mount Scopus, 2700 feet above sea level. Grace walked quickly, her collar turned up against the wind, hoping to get to class a few minutes early. Though she was going to give yet another lecture at Hebrew University's main campus, her mind was far from the classroom. Two things predominated her thoughts—her daughter Yelena, and the storm clouds that hovered over the Holy Land. Clashes between Israel and Palestinians, Hezbollah, Iran, Syria and others were endless. Even relations with the US were suffering due primarily to Netanyahu's hard line on Palestinian and Iranian issues. So many distracting ill winds were blowing through Jerusalem and her mind. It seemed like nothing could keep her focused on her scholarly work these days.

The political situation had not been getting better in the past few months, with Israelis shelling Gaza yet again and Palestinians retaliating by blowing up buses in Haifa. The struggle for turf seemed unending and relentless with no peace and quiet in sight anywhere, or by any means. And what did this augur for Yelena if she grew up in Israel? Now officially on the citizen list at fourteen years of age as the adopted child of Manny Cohen and Grace Levine, Yelena had blossomed into a beautiful and bright young lady whose modern Israeli Hebrew was coming along nicely. Just last fall she celebrated her *bas mitzvah*. Even the Wests had flown in from America to be there on the special day. What future was there for Yelena in this volatile country? Maybe she could get some fresh perspectives when her friends arrived soon for a reunion of sorts.

The reunion, as she had dubbed it, was a get together of all those who had been influential in one way or another in the grand opening of the

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Lazarus Museum on the grounds of the Israel Museum. Recently a bougainvillea-covered walkway had been built to connect the two. Artifacts from the Lazarus tomb; the Gospel of John manuscript written by Lazarus, the Beloved Disciple; second-century works by Papias; and many donations from the el Said family would be housed in separate rooms of the Museum. It was too bad, thought Grace, that the Q document found at Capernaum would not be moved to Jerusalem any time soon. In any case, the ribbon-cutting ceremony would take place at the end of the following week.

The other reason for having the reunion now was that Khalil el Said was not well. His cancer was terminal and the doctors only gave him a few months to live at most. Though he still looked all right to the undiscerning eye, much of the time he had no energy due to the chemo treatments. Hannah, his daughter was looking after him, a task that was becoming a full time job.

Much had changed for all of those involved in these recent discoveries. In the interim, Grace married Manny Cohen and adopted Yelena. Art married Dr. Marissa Okur who was now expecting a child. Hannah, despite being raped by her then ex-husband, rejoiced in the birth of a son, Samuel. Grayson Johnson, for his part, was married to his archaeological work first at Caesarea Philippi and now at Caesarea Maritima, though he had mustered up enough courage to ask Sarah, owner of Solomon's Porch coffee shop, out on several dates (made possible by her divorce from Yakov). Jake Arafat was married to Melody, a Christian girl from Wilmington, North Carolina. Meanwhile, Jake, who used to play for Manny's team, Maccabi Elite, had become an NBA star. Yes, much had changed, but soon the old gang would be back together again and eager to reminisce.

Entering the biblical studies building at Hebrew University, Grace headed down the hall, her red high heels clicking on the marble floor. Today's subject was Aramaic inscriptions from the Second Temple period—Grace's strongest area of expertise. She could give this lecture in her sleep. But for some reason she was so preoccupied, she decided to take her dusty lectures notes to class.

Just as Grace entered the lecture hall, a huge explosion went off which shook the floor of the building. Grace grabbed the doorframe to keep from falling down. Plaster fell from the ceiling in the old classroom.

"Wow!" she said. "What was that?"

The twenty-five students were stunned into silence but raced to the windows. From their perch high on Mt. Scopus they looked down the

PRELUDE TO A REUNION

Kidron Valley and over to the Temple Mount. As their line of sight scanned the Old City they were shocked by a revelation. The golden Dome of the Rock now had a gaping hole in it! Smoke was billowing toward them.



Grace joined the students at the window and saw what they saw. No one spoke. Finally, Grace expressed what they were all thinking. “That could be the last straw, the prelude to all out war!”

Suddenly her cell phone startled everyone. Dumping her whole purse on the nearest desk, she quickly flipped open her phone and heard the one voice she most wanted to hear. “Mom! What just happened?”

CHAPTER FOUR

YULIYA'S DISCOVERY

YULIYA KARPOVA NEVER COULD choose between philosophy and art, so she simply studied both. Her first PhD came from Freiburg, Germany for her work on the philosopher Heidegger who had much to say about the Philosophy of Art. Thanks to her, many of Heidegger's works were translated into English. Her second PhD, specifically in symbolism and art, came from the University of Chicago. Combining all this with a BA and MA in religion, she was already recognized as an expert in the philosophy of art from a Christian perspective. What most intrigued her were the symbolism and aesthetic qualities of the ancient designs she found everywhere in Turkey. Her area of expertise included Greco-Roman and Byzantine art, especially the artistic patterns in the architecture, the pottery, the ceramics, and even the icons. She was now on loan from the Sorbonne as a visiting research professor in residence at the Istanbul Archaeology Museum.

Right now, she was sitting in the garden of the Museum café sipping a cup of Turkish coffee while staring at the picture she brought with her. Two uniformed men were bent over a table. They seemed to be poking at something very intently. Finally it dawned on her! Finishing her Turkish coffee, she hurried from the café and back to her small office.

Thumbing through her carefully organized, computerized picture files, a smile creased her face. She unconsciously fingered the blue and white pashmina she was wearing that morning and exclaimed to no one but herself, "They're playing a game, an ancient game! Imagine putting a picture of soldiers playing a game on a fourth century Greek urn. It's the ancient equivalent of backgammon," she exclaimed, looking at the photo she just discovered in her files, a picture Dr. Mark Fairchild, an American colleague, had sent her of a backgammon board housed in the Antalya museum in Turkey.

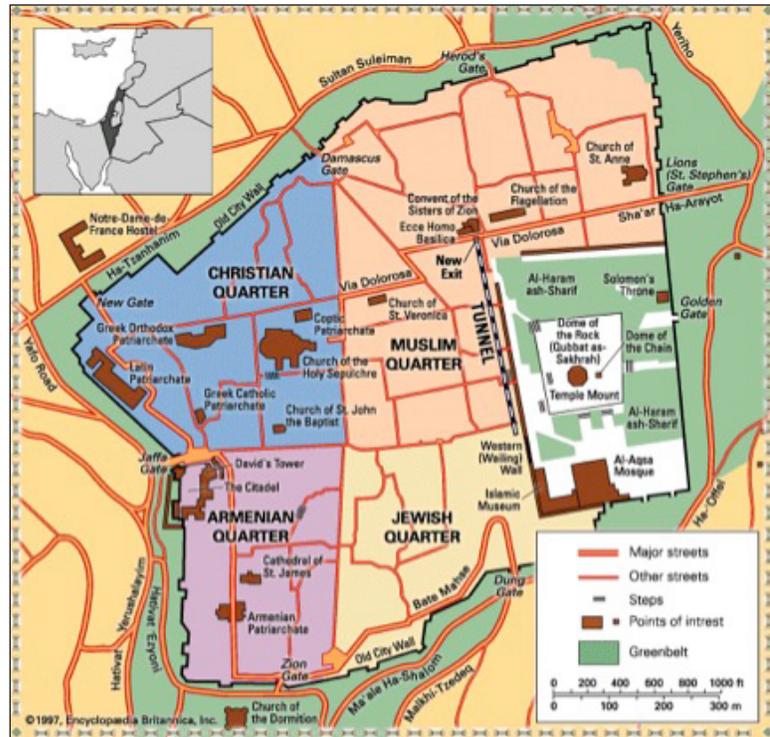
YULIYA'S DISCOVERY

Just then her phone announced a text message from her very young Russian friend, Yelena Levine. "All Hades breaking loose here; somebody blew up Dome of the Rock!"

Yuliya suddenly wasn't smiling any more. Her thoughts turned from her own life in Istanbul, to her friends in Zion.



CHAPTER FIVE
TREMORS



THE GROUND AND BUILDINGS shook the whole way down the Cardo, all the way to the Damascus Gate. In the antiquities shop owned by Kahlil and his daughter Hannah el Said, ancient pottery lamps fell onto the counters. Two precious lamps fell to the floor and broke. Hannah immediately locked

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the door and put up the closed sign. *Earthquakes bring out the looters*, she thought to herself. *Now where did I put that broom?*

“Hannah, what in the world was that?” asked a weary voice from the bedroom in the back of the shop.

“Probably nothing to worry about, Father; perhaps a little tremor. Lie back down and get some more rest. We have to take you for another chemo treatment later this morning. I’ve got everything under control in the shop.”

Hannah thought back to all the grand plans she had to move her family to a nicer home. All that had been put on hold when Khalil was diagnosed with cancer.

There was a groan that echoed down the little hallway, followed by, “I don’t see the point of any more treatments. They will not cure me, I am sure.” Kahlil el Said might be an Islamic mystic but in most things he was a realist. He felt sure that he would be gathered to his ancestors before long, and he wanted to make sure that everything was in order—the will, the shop, the bank accounts—before he passed away.

“Father you never know what may help. For sure, the treatments have *not* taken away your appetite altogether.”

“No, I suppose not. Speaking of which, what is for breakfast?”



Hannah smiled. If her father was still asking about food, it was a good sign. Just then another voice was heard: “Momma, Momma!” Immediately Hannah put down the dustpan with its shards of a pottery lamp, and hurried to the back of the building. Her men were hungry.

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Grabbing two-year old Samuel and parking him in his high chair, Hannah poured cereal bits on the tray and Samuel immediately began stuffing them in his mouth. She filled Samuel's favorite cup with pomegranate juice and offered it to him. Two pudgy hands reached out eagerly. This would keep Samuel occupied for a bit.

Kahlil came staggering into the kitchen, yawning and wearing a robe. Hannah looked up and smiled at the scraggly beard and uncombed hair that confronted her. She told herself she needed to cherish every moment she had with her father, as it was uncertain how much longer he would be with her. Having reached his eightieth year, his hair white and his beard gray, he was quite the patriarch.

"So father, I was thinking bacon, pork sausage, and sliced ham for breakfast," said Hannah winking at Kahlil, waiting to see what sort of rise that would get out of him.

"Excellent," said Kahlil laughing. "And while we are at it, we could wash it down with some good Maccabi beer. That would make a breakfast of champions for a good Muslim like me."

"Actually father I am cooking soft scrambled eggs and warming flat bread. That should suffice until mid-day."

"But what was that noise we heard? Was it really just an earthquake tremor? It sounded more like a bomb going off."

Just then someone began pounding on the shop door. Hannah raced to see what sort of emergency could prompt such an assault. Peering by the side of the blinds, Hannah saw their old friend Omar—and Omar looked very anxious.

Hannah opened the door, and before she could say anything, Omar blurted out, "Didn't you hear the explosion? Someone blew up something on the Temple Mount—maybe even the Dome of the Rock! Smoke is rising. It must mean war will be upon us quickly."

Hannah's face went ghostly pale, and she ran to the back of the shop crying, "Father, Father, the worst thing ever has happened!"