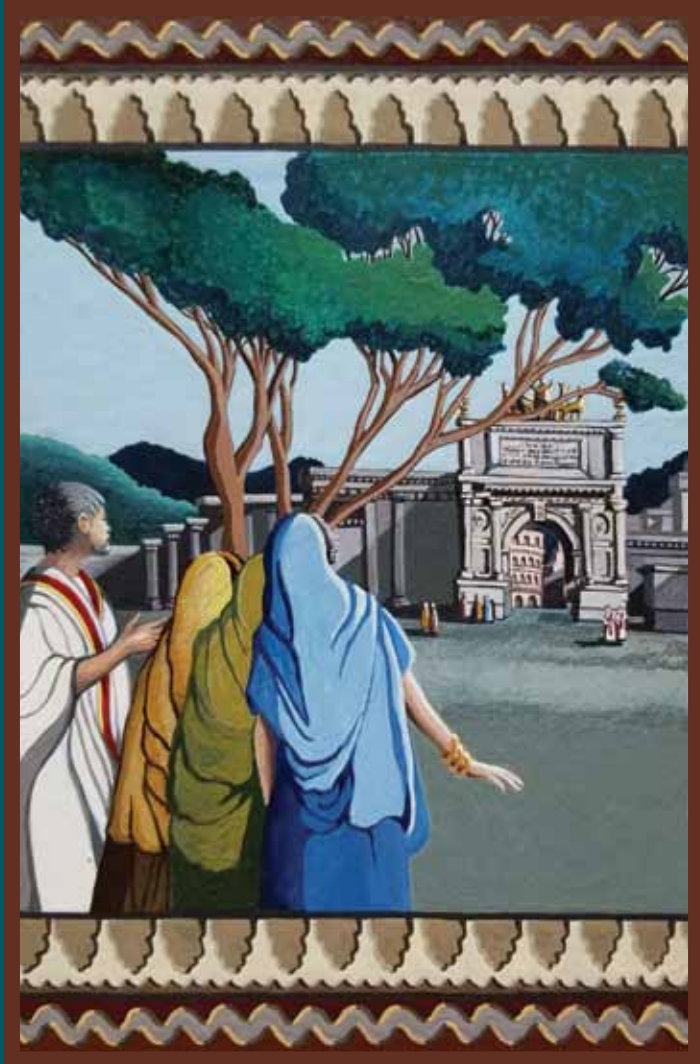


THE GODS HELP THOSE

A SEVENTH CASE FROM THE NOTEBOOKS
OF PLINY THE YOUNGER



ALBERT A. BELL, JR.

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THE GODS
HELP THOSE

I

THIS MAKES THREE DAYS of rain without *any* let-up,” Tacitus grouched. “And no sign that it’s going to stop any time soon. It must be about the sixth hour—although who can tell—and it just won’t stop.”

The rain had not been especially heavy, but Tacitus was right. It simply would not stop. Autumn can be a wet season in Rome, but this September was well beyond anything I could remember. We were sitting under the colonnade that runs around the garden of my house on the Esquiline Hill, watching the fish pond fill up and overflow. I was reading some poetry written by my friend Caninius Rufus, who had asked for my comments on some passages about the eruption of Vesuvius. The topic still sends shivers down my spine, even six years after I witnessed the disaster and my uncle died there, but I had promised to give Caninius my reaction.

In a corner of the colonnade to our right sat my wife, Livia, and her mother, Pompeia Celerina, along with several of their servant women. They were here at my mother’s invitation—certainly not mine—to celebrate my upcoming birthday. Pompeia has been in my house on several occasions recently, but this was the first time I’d seen Livia in nearly four months. She and I have reached what I can only describe as an uneasy truce in the fiasco that we call our marriage. She lives on her estate in Umbria, a legacy of her first husband, and I keep my relationship with my servant Aurora in the background.

My mother and her most trusted servant and confidante, Naomi, sat in the corner of the colonnade to our left. Naomi was reading something to my mother and a few other servant women.

Tacitus stood up, stretched, and held out his hand to feel the rain, as though he hoped it might prove to be an illusion. “Three...*days*.” The volume of his voice made us aware of his impatience, but, out of deference to my mother, he left out the sort of colorful adjective with which he would normally have modified “days.”

“Three days?” my mother called to us. “That’s nothing. Imagine it raining for forty days and forty nights.”

I got up from my seat and Tacitus and I walked over to the women. Except for Naomi and my mother, they stood.

“Forty days and forty nights?” I said. “That amount of water would submerge most of Rome. Another day and the Tiber will be flooding the lower part of the city. We’re lucky to be on this hill. Where did you get such an absurd number?”

Naomi rolled up the scroll from which she had been reading, but Mother put her hand on it. “It’s all right, dear,” she said. When she looked up at me I noticed the sadness in her eyes that has become a permanent fixture. “It comes from the story Naomi was reading us, about a man who survived a flood.”

“Oh, yes,” Tacitus said. “Deucalion and his wife, Pyrrha. But I don’t remember any mention of forty days and forty nights, or any particular period of time.” He scratched his chin.

“No, this is a different story,” Mother said. “It comes from a book”—she looked at Naomi—“What’s it called again, dear?”

“In Greek it’s ‘Genesis,’ my lady,” Naomi said quietly, “a book about beginnings. It’s one of the sacred books of my people.”

Naomi and her son Phineas, my most able scribe, were taken captive when Jerusalem fell to Titus and his army fifteen years ago. She and my mother have become more like sisters since they discovered that they both lost a daughter at birth at about the same time and have both lost a brother in recent years. I worry that Naomi is influencing my mother with her bizarre beliefs. Mother has gone with her to their synagogue and given money to decorate the place. It’s her money, so I can’t do anything to stop her. To keep peace in the house I don’t voice my objections, though I certainly have some.

“May I see that?” I held out my hand and Naomi grudgingly gave me the book, like a child whose favorite toy was being taken away.

The script, which I recognized immediately as Phineas' work, was larger than usual. I would have to talk to him about his use of my materials. Or I could confiscate the scroll and keep it in my library. I wondered how many others he had copied. Naomi did say "one of" her sacred books.

"Rather large script, isn't it?" Tacitus said.

"Phineas does that to make it easier for me to read," Mother said.

"Where is the story about a flood?" I asked.

"It's about five pages in," my mother said.

I unrolled the scroll far enough and Tacitus looked on as I read about a god getting angry at the human race and deciding to annihilate us by means of a flood. One man was told to build a boat and take his family and numerous animals aboard.

"Wait a minute," Tacitus said, pointing to two passages. "This passage says one pair of each animal, but back here it says one pair of every *unclean* animal and seven pairs of every clean animal. Which animals are clean and which unclean?"

"It's a question of our law, my lord," Naomi said, still seated. Her close friendship with my mother has given her privileges that no other slave in my house, except for Aurora, enjoys. "Some animals are acceptable for sacrifice. They're the clean ones, but others are unclean."

"So how many animals were on the boat?"

Naomi raised her hands in a gesture of ignorance. "I don't know, my lord. A huge number, I'm sure."

"Must have been a damn big boat!" Tacitus laughed. "Where did this Noah live?"

"I believe he lived in southern Mesopotamia, my lord."

"Have you ever been there?" Tacitus asked.

"No, my lord."

"Well, I have. There are no trees in southern Mesopotamia, or anywhere in Mesopotamia. That's why they build things out of mud bricks."

"This happened a long time ago, my lord. There must have been trees there then."

"I believe it's always been a desert."

"This says," I put in, "that Noah took only his wife, three sons, and their wives on board."

"Yes, my lord."

"And everyone else drowned?"

"Yes, my lord."

"But then, after the flood they would have been the only humans, meaning that the entire human race today is descended from that one family. That's positively incestuous." I wrinkled my nose.

"Well, it could account for some of the crazy behavior we see every day," Tacitus said, with a jerk of his head toward Domitian's house on the Palatine.

"I'll grant you that." Everyone knew that Domitian, in addition to the other bizarre behavior he demonstrated, was having an affair with Julia, the daughter of his deceased brother Titus. I thought it best not to dwell on that. "But how do you account for Ethiopians and Indians and other races? Greek and Roman women don't give birth to any kind of children except Greeks and Romans, unless the father is from somewhere else."

Tacitus nodded. "The story of Deucalion and Pyrrha makes more sense. Or less nonsense. It happened in a place where there are trees, so they had material to build a boat. And afterwards, they repopulated the earth by throwing stones—the 'bones of their mother,' Gaia—over their shoulders. The stones became people—males from Deucalion's stones and women from Pyrrha's."

"Nothing incestuous about that," I said. "Nothing logical, but certainly nothing incestuous."

Before we could carry the discussion to any further degree of absurdity, my steward, Demetrius, came out of the house. "My lord, forgive me, but someone is here to see you."

"Do you know what's it about?" I was afraid it was bad news, if someone had come out in this weather.

"No, my lord. He says he needs to talk to you."

Tacitus and I, with Mother and her servant women trailing us and Livia and Pompeia joining the crowd, went into the atrium and found three rain-soaked men standing just inside the door, one slightly in front of the other two. They wore the uniform of the *vigiles urbani*, the

CAST OF CHARACTERS

HISTORICAL PERSONS

All dates are A.D. unless otherwise noted.

Agricola Gnaeus Julius Agricola (40–93), Roman general and father-in-law of Tacitus. He was responsible for much of the conquest of Britain. In his biography of Agricola, Tacitus suggests there was something suspicious about his death. There was a “rumor that he had been poisoned,” he says. “We have no definite evidence. That is all I can say for certain.”

Berenice Daughter of Herod Agrippa and great-granddaughter of Herod the Great. She was born in 28 and died sometime after 81. She was married several times, including once to her uncle Herod of Chalcis, by whom she had several children (see below). She and Titus, who was younger than she, had an on-again, off-again relationship, which ended when he sent her away from Rome as a result of popular resentment. She is not mentioned in any source after that, except that Juvenal (ca. 120) derides her (and other “notorious” women) in his sixth *Satire*. She lived with her brother, Agrippa II, in what was almost certainly an incestuous relationship. They appear in Acts 25–26 at the trial of Paul, where Agrippa delivers the famous line: “You almost persuade me to be a Christian.”

Berenicianus We know that Berenice had a son named Julius Berenicianus, born in the mid-40s to Berenice and her uncle, but we know nothing else about him. I’m sorry I had to use such a tongue-twister, but it was his name. In my writers’ group we called him Bernie.

Caninius Rufus A friend of Pliny's from Comum. He apparently eschewed politics and remained in Comum, writing poetry. Pliny chides him a bit for not being more engaged in politics but also envies him his freedom to write.

Hyrchanus Julius Hyrchanus, another son of Berenice and her uncle, about whom nothing is known, except that he was also born in the mid-40s. I've given him the name Simon in this book. Many Jews in this era had both Jewish and Greco-Roman names, such as John Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark.

Josephus Jewish historian who lived and wrote in the last third of the first century A.D. When the Jewish revolt broke out in 66, he led a contingent of troops, but he surrendered to the Flavians early in the war, rather than commit suicide with his men, and took the name Flavius as part of his own. He is our main source of information about the war, although he contradicts himself between his two main works, the earlier *Jewish War* and the later *Antiquities of the Jews*, and then he adds a few more contradictions in his autobiography.

Julia Wife of Tacitus and daughter of Julius Agricola. We know she lived at least until the late 90s because Tacitus mentions her in his biography of her father.

Julia Flavia (64–91) daughter of the emperor Titus. Her image appears on several coins issued by her father and we have numerous busts and other portrayals of her. Titus proposed a marriage between her and his brother Domitian, which Domitian refused. However, Domitian later had an affair with his niece. She supposedly died from an abortion that he insisted she have. Her ashes were mixed with Domitian's after his death in 96. We don't know how Domitian's wife—who remained proud of her status as his widow—felt about that.

Livia A very common name in ancient Rome. I have given it to Pliny's wife. He had two, possibly three, wives, depending on how one interprets his letter to Trajan (*Ep.* 10.2), in which he says he has married

twice. The only wife he mentions by name was the teenaged Calpurnia, whom he married late in life. We don't know if *Ep.* 10.2 was written before or after his marriage to Calpurnia, so we don't know if she was his second or third wife. In any case, we don't know the name of the wife who was the daughter of Pompeia Celerina, so I have taken the liberty of calling her Livia.

Martial Roman poet G. Valerius Martial, author of witty and salacious epigrams. Pliny mentions him in a couple of letters and was a benefactor of his. He plays a major role, along with Lorcis (see below) in my novel *The Flute Player*.

Plinia Pliny's mother and the sister of the elder Pliny. She is mentioned only in Pliny's letters about the eruption of Vesuvius. We do not know the dates of her birth or death. Pliny was born in 62. If his mother married and had a child in the normal timing of things for that day, she would have been about 15 at that time, putting her birth ca. 47. She was alive when Vesuvius erupted in 79, but seems to have been somewhat frail by then. Pliny says that she wanted him to leave her behind when they were trying to escape so that she would not be a burden on him.

Pompeia Celerina Pliny's mother-in-law. He exchanges several letters with her but there is never any mention of her daughter's name. She owns an estate near Narnia, which Pliny enjoys visiting.

Regulus M. Aquilius Regulus, a lawyer and fortune hunter who began his nefarious career in Nero's reign. By informing on people who might be plotting against the emperor and being rewarded with a quarter of whatever was confiscated from them, Regulus built up a fortune. Pliny lambastes and ridicules him in several letters. The one misfortune Regulus did not deserve, Pliny says, was the death of his son. The childless Pliny would have felt that deeply, I believe.