

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

What follows is an expanded Author's Note for my novel, *Before the King: Joanna's Story*. There was so much I wanted to share and not enough space in the book, so I offer it to you here. You'll find overlap with the note in the book but also new content that dives deeper into such topics as Sadducean beliefs, the fatherhood of God, Chuza's relationship with Herod, and more! At the end, you'll find footnotes and recommended resources. Thank you for reading!

The Historical Joanna

On the surface, there doesn't appear to be much available information on the biblical Joanna. After all, she's named only twice in Scripture—first in Luke 8:2–3 as someone whom Jesus healed and who supported him from her own means, and second in Luke 24:10 as eyewitness to the empty tomb. Given how briefly she's mentioned in Scripture, can we know anything at all about her life? Astoundingly, the answer is yes, and the key lies with her husband.

Luke tells us that Joanna was the wife of Chuza, Herod Antipas' steward. This statement contains two significant pieces of information. First, Chuza is not a Jewish name; rather, it's Nabatean.¹ Nestled in northwest Arabia, just southeast of Herod's own territory of Perea, Nabatea was one of the major world powers at the time. Herod's own grandmother was Nabatean, as was his first wife, therefore Nabateans within his court and administration would not have been unusual.

Chuza's position of steward is better translated as "procurator." The idea is one who manages the estate of another and, in the case of a



king, would include his financial business.² Rather than merely one of many procurators for the king, some scholars suggest that Chuza was the financial minister more generally, stationed in Galilee and overseeing Herod's revenues.³

From these pieces of information, we see that Joanna was most likely married to a Gentile high up in Herod's administration, and this leads to some interesting questions. Most Jewish families would not see such a union as desirable, for there was a strong taboo against both Herod's court and intermarriage with Gentiles. Because marriages were typically arranged within the same socioeconomic circles, it's highly probable that Joanna came from an elite Jewish family that would have seen an alliance with the Herodian court as advantageous.⁴

The lay nobility of Jesus' day consisted mainly of Sadducees, those connected to the temple and its services. In general, the Sadducees were compliant with Rome and its representatives, for this allowed them to retain their economic and religious power. A Sadducean family would be more liberal in their politics;⁵ therefore, I decided to place Joanna within such a family.

Who Were the Sadducees?

The Sadducees were a religious sect that differed widely from the Pharisees in both their politics and theology. Sadducees did not adhere to the Mishnah, the oral interpretation of the Law; did not believe in God's involvement in everyday life; and did not believe in an afterlife or the concept of a human soul.⁶ The Messianic expectation that was so prevalent among the Jewish people, was absent among the Sadducees, who did not interpret the prophets as depicting a future Messiah. Rather, they viewed depictions of deliverance as timebound events in Israel's history as she experienced redemption from Assyria and Babylon.⁷ Their ideology was one that was rooted in the immediate—life lived once and under one's own control. To them, Jesus' message

would have been particularly offensive, so if Joanna indeed came from such a family, her support of Jesus is even more fantastic!

Sepphoris: The Jewel of Galilee

In choosing a home for Joanna and her family, I placed them in Sepphoris because it served as Herod's capital until construction on Tiberias concluded sometime between the years 18 and 23 AD.⁸ Described by Josephus as "the ornament of all Galilee," Sepphoris was situated four miles north of Nazareth and was a bustling, cultured city, complete with a four-thousand-seat theater.⁹ Like other major cities at the time, Sepphoris would have been home to a "lesser Sanhedrin," a court of twenty-three judges who, although under the governance of the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, would have tried local cases. Herod's actions in Part One in which he circumvents the Sepphoris Sanhedrin in an effort to impress Sejanus is entirely fictional and my way of introducing Herod's historical willingness to cooperate with Rome as well as the growing disillusionment of Joanna's father.

With such a large city only four miles north of Nazareth, Jesus would have grown up under the shadow of this Hellenized culture and certainly would have been exposed to the urban world. In fact, in using the word "hypocrite," Jesus drew upon the language of the theater, for the Greek word translates into "stage actor."¹⁰

Whether or not Joanna originated from Sepphoris specifically, there's little doubt her world was far removed from many of the other disciples. An educated and cultured daughter of an elite, possibly Sadducean, family; married to a Gentile; walking in circles close to the throne—how astounding that Joanna, wife of Chuza, followed Jesus Christ! She crossed every line one could cross in her support of Jesus as she left the court for the dusty road to throw her influence at Jesus' feet.

Witness to Court Life

In Luke 8:2–3, we discover that Joanna was healed from an infirmity, and perhaps this is what compelled her to then pour herself out for Jesus. Many scholars agree that Joanna’s support was ongoing and financial in nature¹¹ and that scriptural accounts depicting Herod’s attitude and events at court were possibly derived from her. The beheading of John the Baptist, Herod’s deep interest in Jesus, and Jesus’ own trial before Herod—details of these accounts could have flowed from Joanna’s lips to the Gospel writers’ ears.¹²

Another member of Herod’s inner circle who could have reported court details was Manaen. Mentioned only once in Scripture in Acts 13:1 as a founding member of the church in Antioch, Manaen is listed as an intimate friend of Herod Antipas and could also have been an informant.¹³ His pairing with Susanna (who is mentioned in Luke 8:2–3 as another woman healed by Jesus who then supported his ministry) is fictional and was my way of introducing how and when Manaen came to believe in Jesus. Details such as Herod’s attitude toward and handling of John the Baptist, therefore, could have come from one or both of these individuals.

From Mark’s account of John’s beheading, we learn that Herod, although “perplexed” by John, liked to listen to him speak and desired to protect him from Herodias (6:20). Rather than contradicting Matthew’s account in 14:1–12, scholars see the differences as indicative of the Gospel writers’ varying aims.¹⁴ Matthew’s abbreviated account gets directly to the point, whereas Mark’s fleshes out deeper motives. In constructing these events, I relied upon Mark’s more detailed account and chose to highlight Herod’s interest in John and the deep distress he felt at the request for his head (6:26). The problem of John’s disciples being barred from the palace is fictional and was my way of sparking Joanna and Susanna’s reconciliation.

Chuza the Nabatean

The relationship between Chuza and Phasaelis, Herod's first wife, is fiction, as is Chuza's aid in helping with Phasaelis' historical flight to Machaerus and King Aretas' offer of a reward. But the political interplay between the Nabatean and Herodian courts is grounded in history. Upon Herod the Great's death in 4 BC, King Aretas plundered villages throughout Judea. The marriage of his daughter to Herod the Great's son forged a much-needed political alliance, and it's this alliance that Herod Antipas threatens upon his divorce of Phasaelis.¹⁵

As Joanna was "caught between two courts" (that of Herod and Jesus Christ), I depicted Chuza caught between the Nabatean and Herodian courts. Sources remained silent as to what might have happened to Nabateans in Herod's administration after he so infamously divorced his first wife. Were they viewed with suspicion as animosity grew between the two countries? We know that this animosity came to a head in approximately 36 AD when King Aretas IV went to battle with Herod over a border dispute in Gabalis and soundly defeated him thanks to the defection of some of Israel's troops.¹⁶

In constructing Chuza's story, then, I pulled from history and addressed the problem of his continued safety in court in several ways. First, I had Chuza make the same bold move that Herod the Great, himself, had done. Years earlier, Herod the Great found himself caught between two power-hungry Roman rulers—Marc Antony and Octavian. When Octavian came to the throne, Herod the Great didn't conceal his former support of Marc Antony; rather, he openly disclosed his loyal friendship and promised the same to Octavian, now boasting the title of Emperor Caesar Augustus. Essentially, he put all of his eggs in one basket and told the truth—and it worked. The new emperor accepted his pledge of loyalty.¹⁷ I had Chuza do the same—boldly going before Herod to disclose his actions, claiming that the loyalty he'd exhibited to Phasaelis was now firmly in Herod's own hand. Second, I speculated

that Herod might have made use of any remaining Nabateans within his administration, testing their loyalty in tangible ways. Therefore, I hinted at the conflict to come in Gabalis, allowing Chuza to prove his fidelity.

Pilate and Herod

King Aretas wasn't the only foreign dignitary at odds with Herod. Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea, had a long history of stirring up unrest. Luke 13:1–5 details the slaughter of Galilean pilgrims in which Pilate mixes their blood with their sacrifices. It's likely that this event caused deep discord between Pilate and Herod.¹⁸ The incident with the votive shields is lifted straight from history and would have stoked the fires between the two men. Herod indeed appealed directly to Pilate to remove the shields, which contained the name of Emperor Tiberius. When the appeal failed, he went to the emperor himself, who demanded Pilate remove the shields.¹⁹ In layering these details into the story, I added the portion about circumventing Sejanus by appealing to Antonia.

Scholars place the timing of these events as most likely occurring before Jesus' crucifixion, which would mean that Pilate entered Passover week at odds with the emperor, Herod, and the Jewish people at large. Notoriously cutthroat and unyielding, Pilate is instead depicted in the Gospel accounts as eager to please—which makes sense if he'd recently been humbled by the emperor himself! Pilate would have been especially interested in appeasing both Herod and the Jewish people.²⁰ And appease he did, for Luke 23:12 tells us that Herod and Pilate were “at enmity” with one another prior to Jesus' crucifixion and that Pilate's “gift” of Jesus to Herod solidified their friendship.

How astounding that the conflict between two political rulers thrust Jesus into the position of a bargaining chip and certainly aided Pilate's decision to give the people what they wanted—Jesus' death.

The current of human history is indeed in the very hand of God who uses both the righteous and the unrighteous to accomplish His will!

Beholding the Empty Tomb

Even though she isn't named during the crucifixion, Joanna might have been present. Luke 23:49 states that women who had followed Jesus from Galilee observed the crucifixion, and verse 55 details how they followed Joseph of Arimathea and saw exactly where Jesus was buried. It's these same women who then prepared spices and brought them to the tomb that first Easter morning. Luke goes on to place Joanna at that tomb-side discovery (24:10), so it's certainly possible that Joanna observed the full extent of Jesus' sacrifice from cross to grave to resurrected life. In constructing the story, however, I chose to keep Joanna closer to Herod's court, giving the readers a more direct view of Jesus' trial by Herod rather than the moment of his crucifixion. However, the very real possibility remains—Joanna could have been present for the entirety of that emotional weekend.

That first Easter morning is full of beautiful discovery. John records how Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden (20:14), but Mary wasn't the only woman to enjoy this privilege. Matthew 28:9 states that Jesus met the other women as they were leaving the tomb to tell his disciples the good news. He meets them with a greeting, and they hold onto his feet in overwhelmed worship. Some scholars suggest there were as many as seven women present at the empty tomb whereas others think the number was smaller.²¹ In constructing this story, I chose to limit the women to an intimate four and while depicting their discovery of the empty tomb, I intentionally left the timeframe a tad ambiguous.

There is general consensus that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene first, but she was also the one to run back for Peter and John. In the interim between Mary leaving and returning, the other women enter the tomb and encounter the angels. Sometime after they exit the tomb,

Peter and John both arrive and leave while Mary Magdalene lingers and encounters Christ. It's after this initial encounter that Jesus appears to the other women as well.

Whereas some of the particulars are up for scholarly debate, certain truths remain clear: The women knew exactly where the body was laid, and when they arrived, that body was not there. Jesus—God in the flesh—met them, greeted them, and they worshiped at his feet. In conveying these timeless truths, I zeroed in on Joanna's particular experience—certainly not to detract from the other women—but in order to root the reader in the moment when Joanna comes face-to-face with God in the garden.

God As Father

Part of Joanna's journey is learning to reject the belief that God is uninvolved in her affairs, leaving her to direct the course of her own life. Instead, she comes to embrace the belief that God is not uncaring and distant, but rather as close and intimate as her own breath. In encouraging his disciples to address God as their Father, Jesus speaks into this intimacy. His teaching would have immediately snagged the attention of first-century Judeans, who viewed God as the Father of the nation of Israel, not of individuals.²² Jesus showed that the way to the Father was not through reliance upon one's heritage but through acceptance of His Son.

Jesus, as the pre-existent second person of the Trinity, is equal to and one with the Father (John 10:30), and in him "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1:19 ESV). He is the "exact imprint" of God's nature (Hebrews 1:3), revealing the Father to a waiting and weary world. There is a startling beauty to our fathomless, three-in-one God, who loves us, reveals Himself to us, and pursues us. The only way Joanna or any of us can call God Abba is because of the resurrected Christ, who made everlasting peace possible.

Final Exhortation

Dear reader, go to the Word, soak your heart and mind within its pages, and let it transform you from the inside out. In constructing this story, my heart was to remain true to historical and scriptural accounts. Where I inevitably get it wrong, I beg your grace and exhort you to plant yourself within the Word, which is inherently true and trustworthy.

May this story encourage you to live a bold faith. God is still using ordinary people to do extraordinary things, and His Kingdom is still worth our all. The commission to go and tell remains for us who follow. Like those women on that first Easter morning, may we carry the flame hot in our hearts with lips and life declaring the truth that cannot, will not be suppressed: “He is not here. He is risen!”

Notes

1. Bauckham 150–61; Cohick 311; Hoehner 303
2. Bauckham 135–50; Hoehner 303–04
3. Bauckham 136–37; Hoehner 304
4. Bauckham 142; Cohick 311
5. Beck 222–24; Edersheim 203; Hoehner 336–37; Jeremias 228–32
6. Beck 223
7. Parker
8. Hoehner 94
9. Batey 94
10. Batey 86
11. Bauckham 113; Cohick 309–12; McLaughlin 57–58
12. Batey 120; Bauckham 112–14; Cohick 314; Hoehner 120, 184, 317; McLaughlin 57
13. Hoehner 121, 184, 231–32, 305–06
14. Hoehner 158–62
15. Hoehner 130
16. Hoehner 254–55
17. Cohick 289
18. Hoehner 176
19. Hoehner 176 ff
20. Hoehner 181
21. Bauckham 299
22. Bray

For Further Study

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Thank you for reading!

If you enjoyed *Before the King*, please consider leaving a review on Goodreads, Amazon, or similar sites. Reviews don't need to be long and are incredibly helpful in spreading the word. Thank you so much for your support! All glory to our King!

In Him,

Heather

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