



Phenom

*The Search For
The Ark of the Covenant*

Another Sports Thriller

By Jim Plautz

Featuring Marquette University Basketball

Phenom - Let's Play Basketball

By James Plautz

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Novels by Jim Plautz



PHENOM – Let’s Play Basketball - Too good to be true, a mid-year transfer student leads his high school basketball team to the State Championship and along the way helps others become better students and young adults. Matthew Wilson’s past finally catches up with him when the Russian Mafia seeks retribution for past transgressions. This is a feel-good love story and suspense novel structured around a basketball theme. At graduation, students, faculty and the President of the U.S. make a vow; “If you ever need me, I’ll be there for you.”



PHENOM – Search for the Ark of the Covenant – Matthew Wilson leads Marquette University to four successive NCAA championships and then forms a globe-trotter team to travel the world and play all star teams from China, Africa, South America and Europe. But basketball for Matthew’s quest to find the Ark of the Covenant, an event heralded by Muslims and Christians as a precursor to the second coming of the Lord. Matthew’s former high school classmates are asked to renew a vow made ten years ago (see PHENOM - Let’s Play Basketball); “If you ever need me, I’ll be there for you.”



OUT OF BOUNDS - Drug smuggling and corporate finance structured around a 36-hole club championship golf tournament. A Miami-based drug cartel is pitted against Swiss financiers for control of a new resort and casino in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. The match-play tournament stakes are ‘winner-takes-all’.



DOUBLE FAULT at ROLAND GARROS - Four junior tennis players destined to meet at the French Open Tennis Championship get caught up in Basque terrorist plans to destroy the newly rebuilt Roland Garros Tennis Stadium; a story of love, jealousy and revenge.



The Agents (Coming Soon)! - “I regret to inform you that you that your petition to purchase the New York Yankees has been denied. A majority of owners have decided that your ownership group fails to meet the high standards that major league baseball has established for admission into this closed fraternity.”

“Screw you, you sanctimonious windbag, and screw the rest of you that voted no. Your fraternity is nothing but a sham. This isn’t over by a longshot.” Malcolm Linebaum stormed out of the conference room and initiated a five-year plan to bring baseball to its knees.

Characters

- **Mathew Wilson:** ‘Phenom’
- **Jim Simpson:** Coach; President- Simpson Construction
- **Father Sean McGinnis:** Roman Catholic priest
- **Amar Rashad:** ‘The Mahdi’
- **Ken Reed:** Simpson’s right-hand man
- **Chris Lewis Reed:** Former DEA; married to Ken
- **Marco:** Construction Manager in Ethiopia and Babylon
- **Hugues de Payens:** Founder, Knights Templar, 1118 AD
- **James Bruce:** Scottish traveler, writer and Freemason
- **Oleg Ivanov:** Russian Mafia
- **Falashas:** Black Jews of Ethiopia
- **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad:** Iran President; the Antichrist
- **Moses;** Built ‘Ark of the Covenant’; Mt. Sinai, 1480 BC
- **Marquette Basketball Players:** Hall of Fame members

Let's Play Basketball

Prologue

Father McGinnis and I settled quietly into our first-class seats and prepared for the nine hour transatlantic flight from Cairo to New York's LaGuardia Airport where we would connect to St. Louis' Lambert field. Rosann had called an hour earlier - Matthew remained in critical condition. We could only pray. There was nothing else we could do. The stewardess brought us wine shortly after takeoff and I closed my eyes and reflected back on the events that changed my life and brought about this crisis.

It had been ten years since Matthew Wilson and his father Ray walked into my tiny coach's office. I smiled inwardly remembering how his father had asked if Matthew could try out for the team. I learned quickly that Matthew was an exceptional basketball player, possibly the best player there ever was, but I had no inkling that this young man would have such a dramatic impact on my life and the others he touched while a student at Shorewood High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He made all of us better people. Now he needed our help.

Just six days ago Matthew walked down the steps of the Temple Mount after he was mysteriously released from imprisonment by Iran President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, described by many as the Antichrist. Later I learned that his release had been orchestrated by his adversary, the Muslim basketball sensation they called The Mahdi. Two days earlier these two stars had faced each other in a basketball game labeled as a clash of East vs. West, Muslim vs. Christianity and various other metaphors. It was the basketball game of the century.

Looking back, I should have told Matthew about our discovery in that small island cave on Lake Tana, Ethiopia – we had found the Ark of the Covenant. What should we do with this symbol that is a

fundamental to the beliefs of Jews, Christians and Muslims? The Ark is referred to in both the Bible and Koran and whoever can harness its power will likely control the world.

1320 BC - The defending soldiers high atop the walls of Jericho observed a strange procession that first morning of the siege. No armies rushed the ramparts. In the distance they could hear the sound of the shofar, the ram's horn trumpet of battle.

And then they came, marching in order. First, an armed guard in ranks. Then priest s, blowing the shofar, then four priest s carrying on gilded poles over their shoulders a box draped in blue (Numbers 4:5-6). And after the priest s a rear guard marched. And after the rear guard, the entire Israelite army, 600,000 strong (6:3), marched in stillness. The dust billowed from under a million feet, but their voices were still. The procession seemed endless, like it would go on forever. They circled the city once, and then returned to their camp, the sound of shofars finally dying in the distance, and the muffled sound of the marching army finally stilled.

The next morning the same strange procession occurred again. And the same thing occurred each morning for six mornings in a row. For those who knew what the Ark represented -- the throne of God -- it all made sense. Here is the procession of the King, guarded front and rear by soldiers, preceded by his ministers, and followed by his people, as they tour the city that would soon be theirs.

To watch 600,000 troops (Numbers 1:45-46) march around the city each day must have increased their sense of impending doom. 'When will they attack?' must have been their constant question.

The final day the Israelites got up at daybreak and marched not once but seven times around the city, seven being the number in the Bible to signify wholeness and completeness. At the final trumpet blast held long, the people shouted, and 'when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed' (6:20).

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho

Jericho, Jericho

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho

And the walls came tumbling down

626 BC - Josiah said unto the Levites that taught all Israel, which were holy unto the Lord, "Put the Holy Ark in the house that Solomon, the son of David, King of Israel, did build; it shall not be a burden upon your shoulders." This was the final Biblical reference to the Ark of the Covenant. Its location remains a mystery.

Today - The Freemasons had been searching for the Ark of the Covenant since 1104 AD when Hugh de Payens, founder of the Knights Templar, first visited the Holy Land. The search was over.

"Grand Master, I have news for you."

"Is he still alive?"

"The last we heard was that he is in critical condition and might only have hours to live. The explosion caused severe internal injuries."

"Do we know who did this? "

"It could have been the Muslims, or the Palestinians, or several other groups. It might have been the Orthodox Jews for all we know. The Ark will be a powerful tool for whoever finds it."

"That assumes they can find a way to harness its power. The Bible claims there is only one person that has this power."

"Yes, I thought he might be the One."

"Is it safe?"

"Yes, for the time being. The Americans are planning to enter the cave tomorrow. I don't know what they'll do once they find it."

"Our troops must be ready to move it to a safe place if Matthew Wilson should die. We can't let the others take it. The world is not ready to find the Ark of the Covenant."

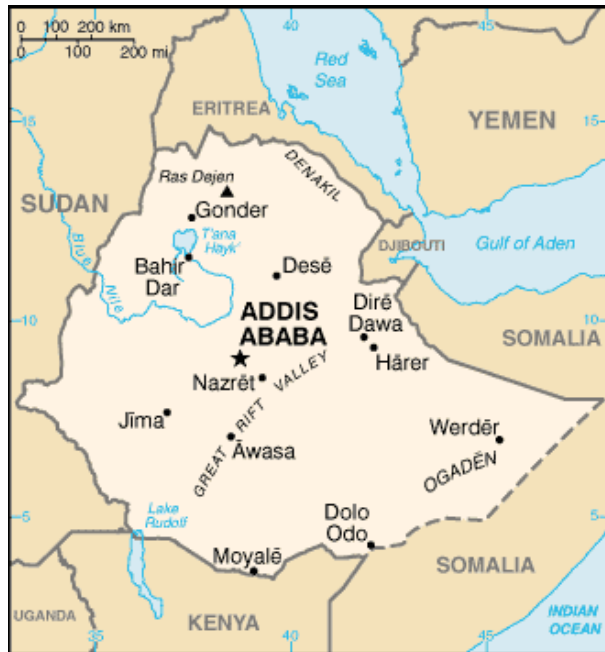
"Will we take the Ark back to Axum?"

"No, we must find a safer place. But, if he lives, it will be returned to its rightful home, The Temple Mount."

Phenom

BOOK TWO

Search for the Ark of the Covenant



Ethiopia

Chapter 1

Marquette University

Al McGuire blew his whistle and the scrimmage began.

It was the first day of practice and Matthew Wilson lined up at forward with four other freshmen. They faced a veteran varsity team that returned four starters from a team that went 22-7 the previous year and advanced to the finals of the year-ending NIT. It was only the third time in Marquette's long history that they had been to a post-season tournament. This year the Golden Eagles were picked to finish fifth in the 14-team Big East Conference. Marquette basketball was on its way up.

The freshmen lineup was undersized with their tallest player only 6'8". The forwards were small; Matthew at 6'5" and another 6'4" scholarship player. The guards were both under six feet. Coach McGuire was using the freshmen as cannon fodder for his experienced varsity team. He also wanted to see how the new kid would stand up to the beating he would surely receive. "Let's see how he plays when he's down by 30."

Hank Raymonds warned McGuire not to be so sure. "I'm telling you, Al, this kid can play."

"Hank, I've seen a lot of kids that were stars in high school where they beat up on smaller players, but don't have it when they played kids that are bigger and stronger. Let's see how well he shoots with a hand in his face."

"\$20 says the freshmen team wins," Hank challenged. He knew that despite the fact that Wilson played high school ball in the same city, McGuire had never seen him play. Al was too busy 'doing his thing'.

"You're on," McGuire said quickly, already thinking about the antique he would buy with his winnings.

Two hours later Raymonds pocketed the \$20, thanks largely to 26 points, 22 rebounds and 15 assists by Matthew Wilson. "He's better than I thought," McGuire admitted. "He sure can pass. We just might just run the table this year."

Hank Raymonds and Al McGuire made a great team. McGuire was a great recruiter and a great game-day coach, but he wasn't much of a practice coach. Throughout the season he often left his assistant Hank Raymonds in charge of practice while he hopped on his motorcycle and rode the back roads of Wisconsin looking for bargains at old antique shops. McGuire was probably the person that Thoreau had in mind when spoke of people marching to the beat of their own drummer. He most assuredly would have been labeled a hippy in another time, but he was born 20 years too soon. McGuire hopped on his Harley to go antique hunting or whatever. Raymonds took over practices and Marquette never missed a beat.

"That's him," the 19 year old co-ed whispered to her girlfriend. That's Matthew Wilson."

"It can't be," her friend countered, "he doesn't look that special. My boyfriend is better looking."

"Shhh, he's coming this way."

"Good morning girls. Can help me? I'm trying to find Emory Hall."

"You're Matthew Wilson," Tina blurted out. "I recognize you from your pictures in the newspaper."

"And you're Tina Albright, I recognize you from the yearbook. You're a philosophy major, and you must be your friend Betty Fagen, majoring in undecided," he said with a smile. It's a pleasure to meet you girls. I hope we can be good friends."

Tina and Betty stared at Matthew in awe, before Tina finally found her tongue. "Do you know everyone's name?"

"No, just the people in the yearbook or with pictures on the school website. I started with the good looking co-eds," he said smoothly.

The girls knew the last part was just a corny line, but they didn't feel offended or that he was making a move on them. His smile and demeanor softened the words. They just felt proud that Matthew had remembered their names and proud that he thought they were good looking.

"Emory Hall?" Matthew repeated with a broad smile.

Tina pointed at a building across the street.

“Thanks girls, I’m sure we’ll see each other soon.” Matthew hurried to his first class at Marquette University.

The two friends watched him leave, both deep in their own thoughts. Tina was thinking that *this was one, special guy. Those Russian Terrorists never had a chance.*”

Betty was stubbornly thinking that her boyfriend was more handsome, but realized how insignificant this was. “*Matthew Wilson was a man’s man.*”

Everyone on campus knew of Matthew Wilson, with the possible exception of a few out of state transfers or freshmen. Marquette was a basketball school and Matthew was the most heralded recruit to ever choose Marquette. He was also a Milwaukee native, or at least an adopted native, transferring to Shorewood High School for his final semester, and leading them to the Wisconsin State Championship.

His off the court achievements and positive impact on the Milwaukee community were even more newsworthy. His ‘We Kick Ass’ campaign was an inspiration for high school students throughout the country. Revenues from the movie and memorabilia exceeded one hundred million dollars and used to fund youth programs and many charities. The President of the United States was a personal friend and only two months ago addressed the United Nations.

“Matthew’s role in rescuing the 1,400 students and faculty from the Russian terrorists was never fully disclosed, but the public had seen enough courtesy of a live television feed provided by the terrorists. Millions of viewers so Matthew stare down the terrorist leader and use his leadership skills to attack and disarm eleven, heavily armed Chechnya militants. His charisma was there for all to see as all 1,400 hostages walked out of the school unharmed.

It was September 5, the first day of school and Matthew Wilson hurried to his first class, Philosophy of Religion. How fitting for a Jesuit School. The bell rang as he hurriedly took a seat in the back row of the 300 seat lecture hall. He was too late. Father Fitzgerald, or Father Fritz as he liked to be called, spotted him. Father Fitz decided to have some fun.

“Students, it appears we have a celerity is this class,” the Professor announced. “No one else but a celerity would be late for his first class.” 300 pairs of eyes turned and looked at Matthew Wilson. A few started to applaud, but were silenced by Father Fitzgerald’s frown.

“Since you have everyone’s attention, maybe you would like to teach this class?” Father Fitz inquired.

“No sir,” Matthew replied. “What do I know about Aristotle, Descartes and other great religious philosophers?”

“Ah, Rene Descartes, who many claim is the Father of Modern Philosophy. You have heard of him?”

“Yes sir, at least I believe that I have,” Matthew replied coyly, not falling into the Professor’s trap.

“Yes, indeed; Mr. Descartes was fond of saying that the only thing you truly can be sure of is that you exist. What was he able to deduce from this?”

Matthew had studied Descartes and spent many hours arguing with Father McGinnis about the implications this French philosopher had upon today’s religions. “Many things, Professor, including empirical proof that a benevolent God does exist. His ‘Casual Adequacy Principle’ is a wonderful example of deductive reasoning.”

Father Fitz was smart enough to put a reign on this boy before he summarized the entire syllabus. “Mr. Wilson, I have heard a lot of good things about you, and I must say that it appears that what I heard is true. I look forward to an interesting semester. Students, help me welcome Matthew Wilson to Marquette.” Professor Fitz led the applause which soon became a standing ovation.

Matthew stood and joined the applause, letting everyone know that he was proud to be a member of this great University. He smiled inwardly as he gave thanks for his ability to quickly scan books with almost total recall. He had spent an hour Sunday evening reading up on Descartes and a couple more hours looking at photos. Would Tina and Betty have been impressed if they knew that’s how long it took to memorize the names and faces in last year’s Marquette yearbook?

Chapter 2

Back to Business

Jim Simpson tried to establish control of the meeting. Two weeks earlier he had attended Shorewood High School's graduation ceremony and watched Matthew Wilson and his teammates graduate. It marked the official end to Wilson's tenure as Coach of the Wisconsin State Basketball Champions. The five-month ride with these kids was an unforgettable experience, but all good things eventually come to an end – only the fond memories persist. It was time to get back to work.

“Come on kids, let's get started,” I pleaded. “We need to be out of here in 45 minutes,” I announced, realizing there was no way we would make that deadline. There was a lot of business to cover and I needed to catch up on what was going on in my company. I looked around and realized how lucky I was to have friends and business associates that could be trusted. It reminded me of the old adage; ‘There they go, and I must catch up, for I am their leader.’

Simpson Construction, LLC had its first weekly Monday morning staff meeting in several months, at least the first one that I attended. There were ten of us and it seemed like nine of them were still talking five minutes after our scheduled start time. Some things never changed.

“Sally, start us off, tell us about the equipment leasing business.” The format of the meeting was simple. Each of the four department managers would give a brief summary of their business concentrating on financial highlights, new business and projections before opening up the floor for questions. Problems were normally discussed with me in advance, but today was the exception. This was my first day back in the office.

“Welcome back, Jim. It's nice to get right down to business. For the last ten months we have been forced to listen to Ken tell stories for 45 minutes before we got started.” I smiled as the room

erupted in denials from Ken and agreement from the other managers. I knew there was a semblance of truth in Sally's dig, but that was part of who he is. You had to put up with a little BS once in a while, but it was worth it. Ken was my best friend and one of the smartest men I knew. I've seen him do diabolical Sudoku puzzles or the Sunday New York Times crossword puzzle in minutes. He also possessed a sometimes irritating penchant for spouting trivia on just about any subject you could think of. But I also knew I could trust him to bring problems to me that needed my attention. He did this only four times while I was in Milwaukee, one time being when Sally was having difficulty with her equipment leasing business. I remembered Ken's call.

"Jim, I see from the internet that you're kicking some butt up there," Ken started obliquely, obviously alluding to the 'kick-ass' theme that had spread to high schools throughout the country.

"Who is this speaking?" I asked playing along with his game; "President Bush?"

"No, this is someone much more important, and someone with a problem that only you can handle," Ken answered, letting me know this wasn't a social call. "Is this a good time?"

"Continue, you have my undivided attention."

"Well, Sally's isn't doing as well on her own as we thought she would and I think she might want back into our company." I was shocked. She had not said anything to me in the few times we had talked although I realized it had been several weeks since our last conversation. It had been only two years since I offered to let Sally spin off the leasing business and form her own company. She had been doing all the work anyway and I felt guilty for taking most of the profits. Sally Parkinson was my first hire when I came to Florida 15 years ago and started my equipment leasing business. She started as my assistant and gradually grew to a point where she basically ran the business while I concentrated on commercial mortgage and project financing. I wanted her to succeed.

"What's the problem? The leasing business was netting over \$2M a month when we spun it off."

"Talk to her, Jim. I have a few ideas, but I think you should hear it from her."

“I’ll call her tonight. Maybe she just misses our Monday staff meetings?” I joked.

“That might be closer to the truth than you think,” Ken responded before saying good night.

Ken was right on target. I called Sally minutes later and we talked for almost an hour before Sally got to the heart of her problem. “Jim, I just miss you guys and the support we gave each other. It’s not as much fun when you are making all the decisions alone.”

Two of Sally’s key people had gone off on their own, taking some good clients with them. She had also made a few decisions that backfired and one of her major sources of funding had changed their name to CIT Vendor Financing. They were now competing for the same business, but with lower lease rates. She needed the bank relationships that our mortgage financing business enjoyed.

“Jim, I’d like to come back. Do you have room for an old friend?”

I realized how tough it must be for Sally to ask, but she should have known that I would never turn her down. I didn’t hesitate.

“Sally, let’s go back to the way it was. Your leasing group keeps 50% of the profits from the leasing business and 10% of the profit from the other departments. Is that fair?”

“It’s more than fair Jim, especially since Roger and Marco are probably making 10 times what I’m making in leasing. Will they agree to that?”

“You were with me at the beginning, Sally, and besides, they don’t have a choice. I’m sure they will be happy to have you back. It won’t be long and you will be back on top.” That was three months ago and we were proven right.

“Gentlemen,” Sally continued, “I’m happy to say that the equipment leasing business is looking good. Thanks to Roger’s help, we have three new capital sources that allow us to compete with the big boys for major deals. I am revising my annual forecast upward by 45% in revenues which translates to a 30% increase in net profit.”

“Why the squeeze on margins?” Ken interrupted. “Are we talking mix or lower lease rates?”

“Some of both, Ken. We’re bidding a couple big, low margin deals including a high-speed internet access system for all Marriott hotels. It’s a \$6M dollar deal, but we needed to keep our margins low because we were competing against CIT and GE Capital.”

“What’s the other reason, Sally?” I asked, picking up on her statement that this was only some of the reason.

Sally smiled thinly. “I’m going after market share and trying to win back the clients my former friends took with them when they quit. So far we have gotten seven of Andy’s clients back, including his brother-in-law who owns that trucking fleet. I’m going after Ray next. They don’t have the client base to withstand these losses for long.”

“Will you take them back if they beg and say pretty-please?” We knew the answer, but Ken wanted to hear it from Sally.

“If they ask real nice, I can always use another clerk.”

The wrath of some women has no limits. I made a note to talk with Sally later about considering the possibility that bringing these guys back might benefit the business; after all, they had been good employees for several years before going off on their own. It never hurts to keep an open mind.

“Okay, Roger, your turn. How’s the commercial mortgage business looking?”

“I’m going to keep this real short and simple, Jim, unless Ken has a lot of questions.” He knew the word ‘simple’ would get a reaction from Ken and he wasn’t disappointed.

“Just try not to use any big words,” Ken retorted. “Keeping it simple should be easy.”

“Boys, that’s enough.” Nothing changes, I mused. “Roger!”

“Revenues are up, net margins are up and we expect to exceed our forecasted net profit by 18% this year. We have 15 deals in our backlog and expect to close \$28M this month. Questions?”

“How many deals are we closing?” I asked trying to get an idea of the average size.

“Six,” Roger answered, looking at Ken.

“\$4,666,667, rounded off to the nearest dollar,” Ken replied on queue.

“I’m happy to see your math skills haven’t deteriorated,” I thought. It used to be more fun when people used a calculator check his answers, but nobody bothered anymore. He was never wrong.

“Okay, Marco, Your turn, but keep it short; we are running short of time and there are a few other things we still need to cover.” Marco Noah was the backbone of both our domestic and international construction business. After some initial problems, he was also one of my most trusted employees. I could count on him to let me know if there were problems or something that needed my attention. It was a good day when we had hired Marco away from the French construction giant, Bouygues.

“Short, I can do. We have nine domestic jobs in progress and only the Chicago convention center is behind schedule. The project is getting caught up in zoning issues and politics. It seems like a couple of aldermen are not getting their fair share. It might not hurt if we placed a call to the mayor.”

I made a note to get together with Marco after the meeting and get up to speed on the details before I called Mayor Daley. “Okay, what’s going on across the water?”

“Six projects, and all are going well. We should be getting a sign-off on the Madrid Tennis Arena sometime next month.”

“Excellent, does that mean they will release the hold-back?”

“Yep, the entire \$45 million.”

“How does new business look?”

“We have proposals on four small projects, but nothing imminent. We could use a little work,” Marco concluded. His segue was perfect.

“Ken, speaking of new business, why don’t you tell us about Ethiopia?” I smiled as I saw the shocked expressions on everyone’s face.

“Ethiopia,” Sally repeated. “What are we going to build, sand castles? Ethiopia is nothing but a big desert.”

“Ah, contrar - contrar,” Ken smiled with delight at the opportunity to educate the uninformed. “Let me tell you about the real Ethiopia.”

I had heard his dissertation and stepped in before Ken got rolling. “Ken, let’s save the history lesson for another day, I have a conference call at noon. Just tell us about the project.”

Ken was obviously disappointed, but got in one parting shot. “Ignorance is bliss,” he chided before starting. “We have been hired to build a four star tourist resort on Lake Tana, just a few miles from the city of Gondar. Questions?” This was Ken’s way of pouting.

“You might mention the dam and give us just a little background information,” I suggested. “Oh yeah, the dam; I’m sure everyone already knows that Lake Tana is an inland lake located in the Simeon Mountains and is the source of the Nile River, you know the one that dribbles down through Egypt, Sudan and the Middle East before emptying into the Mediterranean.”

“You’re kidding me,” Roger exclaimed. “Egypt would never allow anyone to block the Nile, especially a backward country such as Ethiopia. That’s their lifeline.”

Ken smiled; he had everyone’s attention again. “I didn’t say it was an easy project, did I? There are obviously a few political concerns,” he said as an understatement. “And by the way, Ethiopia has been a cultural center for the region for over 3,000 years, dating back to when ...”

“Ken, we don’t have time. Tell them a little about the resort.”

“Where should I begin?”

“How about mentioning why Ethiopia and the Lake Tana area is an ideal location for a resort.” Ken had his opportunity to lecture.

“Okay, but I’m sure that everyone already knows that the Ark of the Covenant is kept in Axum, Ethiopia and was hidden at the Monastery of Daga Stephanos on an island in Lake Tana for several hundred years after it was taken from Solomon’s Temple.” I smiled to myself at Ken’s ability to memorize trivia, but he got the reaction he wanted.

“Ethiopia! How did the Ark ever get to Ethiopia,” Roger asked. “That must be 500 miles from Jerusalem.”

“Just a four month boat ride up the Nile,” Ken interjected, “with possibly a 200 year layover in a monastery on Elephantine Island in Egypt.”

“But why Ethiopia?”

In the interest in brevity I decided to take charge. “Needless to say, this can be a long and interesting discussion. All we need to understand now is that the combination of lakes, the Ark rumors

and moderate temperatures make this an ideal tourist destination. You will be surprised to see that the plateau region has plenty of rainfall even though much of the country is desert. I'm sure Ken will provide you with more information if you buy him lunch."

"How did we get a job in Ethiopia?" one of the project managers persisted. "I don't recall us getting a request for proposal or submitting any bid."

"There was no bid, Frank. This was a sole source award courtesy of a State Department contact Matthew Wilson made when he was in D.C. testifying before Congress about his We Kick Ass program."

"How do we get paid?" Rosann asked. "Is this a fixed fee contract?"

"No, it's a cost plus contract, but I would estimate our profits will be in the \$45M range."

"Wow, how much did we give Matthew for the referral?"

"Nothing, Frank, although I offered. His exact words were, "Coach, I don't take money from friends, but maybe someday you will be in position to help me out."

"We also volunteered to donate 10% of gross revenue to local charities," Ken added.

"Okay, one more item on the agenda before we get back to work. Due to the amount of work we are doing overseas, I have hired a vice president of security. She will be responsible for establishing physical security on project sites, vetting subcontractors and whatever else we can think of."

"Anyone we know?" Marco inquired.

"Some of you that have been with me for a while know her well; she was my third employee after my secretary Gloria, and Sally."

"You're kidding," Ken said with his mouth agape.

"Chris Lewis?" Sally said, unable to hold back her laughter.

"For those of you that don't know, Chris Lewis Reed is a Harvard MBA, is fluent in French and Spanish, and has ten years experience with the DEA and CIA. She worked on the Mexico City casino job which is what got us started in the international construction business. She's well qualified."

“But she married Ken,” Sally managed to say while continuing to laugh. “Doesn’t that say something about her judgment?”

“It certainly does,” Ken gloated. “You forget it was moi that ran through a hail of bullets to save her life in Mexico.”

That wasn’t quite the way I remembered it, but there was a kernel of truth in Ken’s recollection.

“Okay, back to work everybody.”



Chapter 3

Freshman Year - Al McGuire Era

1961 Ohio State Buckeyes

Dean "The Dream" Meminger, the silky smooth floor leader for Marquette, was the most valuable player of the 1970 NIT Championship as Marquette beat St. John's University in the finals 65-53. It was a satisfying victory for coach Al McGuire who starred at St. John's for four years and captained the 1951 team that posted a 26-5 mark and finished third in the NIT. The championship rewarded McGuire for his decision to snub the NCAA tournament because of their decision to place the 8th ranked Golden Eagles in the Midwest Region in Dallas rather than the Mideast Region in Dayton, Ohio, which was closer to home and would be easier for Marquette fans to attend. The NCAA got the last word the following year, passing a rule that barred teams from playing NCAA teams if they refused an "invitation" to their yearend tournament; crude, but effective. The 1970 NIT Championship began an era of 'seashells and balloons' and Milwaukee's love affair with Al McGuire that culminated with an NCAA Championship in 1977, beating Dean Smith's North Carolina team in the finals. That was the last game that Al McGuire coached, choosing to go out on top as a winner and ride his motorcycle into the sunset searching for antiques and listening to the beat of his own drum.

Author's Note: This chapter, and the other chapters about basketball, are mostly fiction. Most of the names and names are correct, but the times and places have been changed. Marquette rosters are jumbled so that every member of Marquette's Basketball Hall of Fame could be included. The games are fictitious. Most were played in a time when palming the ball, and taking two steps without dribbling, were traveling violations.

Marquette was loaded. In addition to Matthew Wilson at shooting guard, the team featured Terry Rand, a smooth 6'11" senior who last year averaged 18 points and 10 rebounds. Maurice Lucas was at power forward, a 6'10" junior out of New York, dubbed the 'aircraft carrier' by McGuire because of his ability to carry a team. The point guard, Butch Lee, was a senior with three years' experience. Lee almost single handedly led the Puerto Rico national team to an upset of the US Olympic team the previous summer, scoring 39 points in a one point loss. The small forward was George Thompson, a 6'5", 230 pound jumping jack from New York City who played like he was 6'10". Never much of an outside shooter, Thompson brought his inner city game to Marquette and dominated much taller players.

As was typical of Marquette basketball teams under McGuire, the pre-season schedule was full of cupcakes, teams that allowed Marquette to rack up victories which got them into the year-end NCAA tournament. Their first real test was in the sixth game when they played the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and lost 72-69. Matthew was in foul trouble throughout the game and finished with only 13 points. Butch Lee had seven turnovers and was an anemic three for 14 from the field.

Marquette finished the pre-season eight and one and entered the Big East schedule with high hopes. The opening game against a mediocre Providence team proved to be a cakewalk as they got off to a fast start and won by 18. They followed this with victories against West Virginia, Seton Hall and Notre Dame before running up against a tough Louisville team in Freedom Hall. They lost by seven points as they were unable to handle the Louisville press and athleticism under the basket. Matthew had 28 points, but got little

help on the front line as Terry Rand and Maurice Lucas fouled out with a total of only 13 points and 8 rebounds between them.

Big East favorite, the #3 ranked Georgetown Hoyas, came to Milwaukee the following week. It was the Golden Eagles first big test. They were more than up to it as they easily beat the Hoyas 74-58, playing smothering defense highlighted by full court press for the entire game. Butch Lee dominated the Hoya guards and finished with 26 points and eight assists. Matthew only had seven points but contributed six steals and 17 rebounds. George Thompson, only 6'5", had his way inside against the taller Hoyas players and finished with 19 points and 15 rebounds. Marquette was 22 and three as they entered the Big East tournament which they won handily; beating South Florida, Seton Hall and Pittsburgh in the finals.

Marquette was ranked #4 in the national polls and awarded a #1 seed in the Eastern region. Al McGuire would have preferred to play in Chicago, the home of the Midwest region, where Marquette fans could pack the arena and show their support. However, unlike 1970 when he pulled his team out of the NCAA and instead won the NIT Invitational tournament, he acquiesced and accepted the invitation to play in New York. Besides, it was good for recruiting New York players.

The Golden Eagles won their first two games easily and advanced to the round of 16 at New York's Madison Square Garden where they faced the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. The Running Rebels came out hot, hitting their first seven shots, and quickly took a 17-6 lead before Marquette slowly crept back. Butch Lee got in immediate foul trouble against the fast UNLV guards and was replaced by a promising freshman, Dean Meminger. Like Thompson, Meminger was a product of the New York City playgrounds where he shattered several of Lou Alcindor's high school scoring records. Despite being only 6'1, Meminger could sky, and today he showed the national television audience why he was such a prized recruit. Meminger finished the game with 23 points and 10 rebounds and led the Golden Eagles to a 12 point victory. Matthew contributed 18 points and 14 rebounds. Terry Rand led all scorers with 23 points.

In the round of eight, the Golden Eagles were matched against Big East rival Louisville who had beaten them earlier in the year. This time Marquette jumped off to a quick start and easily beat the Cardinals, 81-66, exacting revenge for their early season loss. The Marquette was in the Final Four.

Their first game in the Final Four was against UCLA, the No. 1 seed from the West. Unlike recent UCLA teams that were dominated by the All-American centers Lou Alcindor and Bill Walton, this team featured two power forwards - David Meyers and Curtis Rowe. McGuire knew that Terry Rand and Maurice Lucas needed to have big game if the Golden Eagles were to compete. Marquette jumped off to a quick start and Matthew completely shut down Curtis Rowe who was held to 11 points. His running mate, David Myers, the consensus all-American and future #1 draft pick of the Milwaukee Bucks, had 26 points and 16 rebounds but it was not enough as Marquette prevailed, 86-82. Terry Rand had a game-high 28 points and Lucas contributed 17 points and 17 rebounds.

Marquette advanced to the finals where they were matched against possibly the greatest collection of college basketball players ever put together, the Ohio State Buckeyes, led by three-time All-American Jerry Lucas. In addition to Lucas, Ohio State featured four other starters that would go on to play pro basketball; John Havlicek, a member of the NBA Hall of Fame, Mel Nowell, Joel Roberts and Larry Siegfried. The sixth man for the Buckeyes was Bob Knight, future coach of the Indiana Hoosiers.

John Havlicek wasn't much of a scorer in college but was already a great defensive player. He set his mind to shutting down Matthew Wilson. He succeeded for the first 35 minutes and his team led by seven points. At that point, Matthew had four fouls and six points on 3 of 12 shooting as Havlicek had a hand in his face on every shot attempt. The Golden Eagles stayed close as George Thompson, Terry Rand and Butch Lee each had 15-18 points after three quarters. Rand fouled out with seven minutes to go and it was time for Matthew to step. He did. Matthew scored Marquette's next 12 points starting his spree with a rebound basket off a miss by Thompson. He then hit two outside jump shots, stole the ball from Siegfried and drove in for an uncontested layup. He finished his scoring spree with a running hook shot over the outstretched arms

of Havlicek and the Golden Eagles were up by three points. This lead quickly dissipated as Lucas hit a short hook shot and then followed up a missed shot by Roberts with a rebound basket. Ohio State was up by one with only eight seconds to go.

The team huddled around Al McGuire who had a deserved reputation as one of the best game day coaches of all time. McGuire gave directions for the final play. It was typical of McGuire not to go to his shooting star, but go with the person he felt would perform in this situation, which in this instance was freshman Dean Meminger. Only 6'1", Meminger scored most of his points underneath the basket and to this point had been stifled by Lucas and Havlicek. That didn't stop McGuire from calling his number for the final play.

"Matthew, get the ball to Dean at the top of the circle. Maurice and Terry will set a double screen at the free throw line and draw their men away from the basket. Dean, fake left and drive hard right and you should have an easy layup. Questions?"

The play worked to perfection although not as originally planned. Meminger found a clear path to the basket and went up for the winning shot, only to find his path blocked by Havlicek who switched off his man to help out. 'Hondo' leapt high to block the layup attempt but at the last moment Meminger double clutched, turned in the air and found Matthew alone in the corner with a perfect pass. The buzzer went off as the ball swished through the basket. The Marquette Golden Eagles were National Champions.

Chapter 4 - Ethiopia

Lake Tana

The search for the Ark of the Covenant began in Ethiopia. Ken, Marco and I flew Ethiopian Airlines from Zurich and arrived in Ethiopia's capitol city of Addis Ababa late afternoon. From 20,000

feet, the city of five million people looked like most European cities with new skyscrapers and roads signaling the progress and revitalization effort that was underway. It wasn't until we landed that we saw this was mostly a mirage. As we made our way to our hotel, it was evident that living conditions and the economy left much to be desired.

My brief research on Ethiopia made me realize how little I knew about this fascinating country and how wrong my perceptions had been. Asked to describe Ethiopia in one sentence, I would have answered; "a war-torn country inhabited by a bunch of Arabs living in a big desert with no food." That was all that I read about in Western newspapers and media accounts. I wasn't proud of my ignorance, but that's what it was.

Instead, I was surprised to learn that my preconceptions did little to justify the diverse and tradition-rich culture of a country credited with being the 'origin of mankind' with archeological evidence of civilization dating back 3,200 years. Yes, there still are periodic famines in the plains bordering Somalia on the East and Sudan on the West that are mostly inhabited by Muslim Arabs who constitute 45% of Ethiopia's 70M population. But there is also a high central plateau inhabited primarily by Catholics that runs through the center of the country with average elevations of 6,000' to 10,000' and moderate temperatures ranging between 40F to 80F. The Simien Mountains reach elevations exceeding 15,000 feet, just prior to plunging into the Great Rift Valley that dissects the plateau. This is where Addis Ababa and Lake Tana are located.

My guidebook told me that Ethiopia is now a Federal republic divided into nine regions. Their last emperor of the Solomonic Dynasty, Haile Selassie I, was overthrown in the 1974 revolution. He was placed under house arrest and later found strangled to death in the palace basement. What caught my eye was his claim to have the Divine Right to govern based upon his royal blood. He was the 225th direct descendant from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Jerusalem. Even the most radical revolutionaries that overthrew his dynasty and later murdered the last emperor in the Solomonic line accepted this claim as fact.

“Wow,” did you know this?” I asked Ken, showing him the guidebook. “I thought the Queen of Sheba was a myth.”

“Maybe she is,” Ken said with that twinkle in his eye that told me I wasn’t going to get a direct answer. “Some claim that the Queen of Sheba was real, but wasn’t Ethiopian. Still others say she is real, but question how and why she ever went to Jerusalem.”

“What do you think?” I asked, pressing the point.

“There is a plethora of historical evidence of a Jewish-Ethiopian connection. It’s likely that Menelik brought the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia.”

“You’re kidding,” I said, recalling that evening a year ago in Father Sean’s church. “Is that why Rosann asked us to look for the Ark while I we are here?”

“Yep, it might even be at Lake Tana. Most people think the Ark is 300 miles from here in a church in Axum, but some believe it was moved into hiding just before the rebels took control of the city. Lake Tana is one of the places it might have been taken to.”

“Why Lake Tana?”

“Because this is where many historians believe that the Ark was kept for several hundred years before it was taken to Axum.”

“I thought you said Menelik took it to Axum,” I said perplexed.

“No I didn’t; I just said that’s one of the stories. The Ark might be there now, but Menelik couldn’t have taken it there. The Ark disappeared around 640 BC, but archaeological evidence proves that Axum wasn’t founded until three hundred years later.”

“So, are the stories about Menelik being the son of Solomon and Sheba true?” I persevered, knowing that I was becoming hopelessly confused.

“Probably; most Ethiopian Jews today are descendants of Menelik’s bodyguards. The exception is the Falashas that settled around Lake Tana long before King Solomon’s time. Are you aware that the Falashas are indigenous to this area and are known as the Black Jews of Ethiopia?” Ken added with a grin.

“Enough,” I said. “Ken, let’s go get a drink. I have a headache.”

“Sorry, Jim, but it’s a dry country, no pun intended.”

The next morning we collected our travel papers from local officials and headed 310 kilometers northwest to Bahar Dar, a small village on the Southern tip of Lake Tana, headquarters for our project. I had spent a long evening researching some of the points that Ken raised the previous day, knowing that Ken was seldom wrong about the miscellaneous facts he spewed from the depths of his complex mind. I was not disappointed. Everything Ken said checked out.

The correlation between the lost Ark of the Covenant and Ethiopia was indeed real and the theory that the Ark was once brought to Lake Tana was a distinct possibility in the minds of many respected scholars. Graham Hancock, in his book *The Sign and The Seal*, posits that the Ark was stored on one of Lake Tana's many islands and protected by the Black Jews of Ethiopia who trace their history back to 1500 BC. The strong Jewish presence in Ethiopia also answers the question; why take the Ark to Ethiopia? The obvious answer is; because this is where it would be safe from marauding conquerors that captured Jerusalem and looted Solomon's Temple many times starting in the sixth century BC when the Babylonians ousted the Jews from Jerusalem in 587 BC.

As we approached Bahar Dar I noticed signs pointing to the city of Gondar, an area noted to be the cultural center of the Falashas, or Black Jews. I still had many questions in my mind about the Ark. What better place to start than in this region? I vowed to dig deeper into this mystery if time allowed. However, getting our resort project going came first and took most of my time over the next two months.

Marco divided the project into five components with the resort construction as the focal point. The four other tasks were designed to improve the infrastructure to support the new resort. This included roads, public utilities and housing to support the construction crews.

First, we needed to identify why tourists would come to the Lake Tana area. We huddled with local leaders from Gondar and surrounding communities and compiled a list of tourist attractions. I was amazed at the plethora of attractions that Lake Tana offers. The clear, fresh water lake already supports a major commercial fishing

industry as more than 1,400 tons of fish are taken from Bahar Dar annually, but the lake also had the potential for sport fishing, swimming, water skiing and canoe rides using the papyrus-reed boats that are native to this region. Marco planned to import tons of sand from the Somalia desert to build a two-mile long, fifty yard deep, white sand beach surrounding a 200 foot fishing pier and 80 slip marina.

The 37 small islands dotting Lake Tana contain countless tourist attractions for anyone interested in the rich history of this region. There are active monasteries or churches on 19 of the 37 islands, many resting on earlier religious sites tracing back almost four thousand years. Tana Qieqos Island contains a rock where the Virgin Mary rested on her journey back to Egypt. Tana Kirkos Island is where Graham Hancock believes the Ark rested for 800 years before being taken to Axum. Frumentius, who introduced Christianity to Ethiopia, is buried on Tana Cherqos; Daga Island is the resting site of St. Stephanos and five emperors that can trace their lineage to King Solomon; Dek Island contains the tombs of several emperors in the Solomonic line.

“The possibility for one-day tours and excursions is unlimited,” Marco gushed. “Both Jews and Christians will want to investigate their origins.”

“Not to mention that archeologists have discovered human bones and fossils dating back more than 3,000 years,” Ken added. “This area has plenty to offer if we market it correctly.”

Adamu, our Ethiopian project manager had another suggestion. “Why not set up a ferry service to Georgina and other lakeside villages surrounding the lake? Every small village has its own story.”

“Good idea, Adamu. What about Ark-related activities?” I continued. “How can we take advantage of the stories that the Ark might have been kept here for hundreds of years?”

Adamu thought for a few moments before answering. “Gondar is only 300 kilometers away and is one of the last remaining areas where the Falashas still practice their religion the old way. They are famous for their Timket Festival which uses Tabots to represent the tablets containing the 10 commandments.”

I must have had a perplexed look on my face as I tried to see the correlation, before Ken came to my aid. “According to the Bible, the tablets containing the 10 commandments were the sole contents of the Ark of the Covenant. The fact that Tabots are a fundamental part of the Falasha ceremony lends credence to their claim that the Ark might have been brought to Ethiopia. Why else would the Black Jews have ever started this practice? It ties into the traditions of the Ark’s journey nicely.”

“Is there any way we could set up a tour to retrace the journey?”

“It’s possible, but it would take too long. The original journey must have taken more than two months to sail up the Nile, assuming they didn’t stop in Egypt for a couple hundred years.” Ken replied with his trademark ‘I know something you don’t smile.

“How about two or three day tours to Axum?” Adamu suggested. “Their Timket festival reportedly features the real Ark.”

“Great idea. Are there any other tourist attractions that we haven’t discussed?” I asked, trying to speed up the meeting.

Adamu had another suggestion. “Tis Abay is just 30 kilometers south and the home of the Blue Nile Falls where Lake Tana discharges its water into the Blue Nile. In Ethiopia we call it Tis Issat, which means ‘Water that Smokes’. It has a sheer drop of 45 feet and is one of the largest waterfalls in the world. The hike is beautiful and the area is famous for Burke watching. Kids can swim under the falls if they avoid the hippos.”

“I’ll pass,” I replied.

“You’re from Florida,” Ken observed. “Hippos are nothing more than manatees, just a little bigger.”

“Size matters,” I responded, drawing groans from Marco and Ken.

“Moving on, what about the coffee industry? I would think there would be a way to take advantage of Ethiopia’s reputation for coffee production. Are there any coffee plantations tourists could visit?”

Twenty minutes later we were out of ideas, but satisfied that if we built it, the tourists would come.



Chapter 5

Sophomore Year - Al McGuire Era

1976 Indiana Hoosiers

Marquette entered the college basketball season as defending NCAA champions with only one returning starter, Matthew Wilson, and ranked outside the top 20 in pre-season polls. Terry Rand and George Thompson graduated and Maurice Lucas, Dean Meminger and Butch Lee left school a year early to enter the NBA draft. It was time to put Al McGuire's considerable recruiting skills to good use. His style didn't appeal to everyone, but McGuire knew his niche.

There were a couple of old adages that defined McGuire's recruiting style. He liked to say, "I couldn't recruit a kid if he had grass in front of his house. That's not my world. My world is a cracked sidewalk."

McGuire claimed he could tell right away if a recruit would accept Marquette by what happened when he entered the house. He knew he had no chance if the recruit's mother invited him to sit in the living room, but if she allowed him into the kitchen and offered him a glass of milk, her boy was coming to Marquette. McGuire was the first Marquette coach to recruit out of the New York area and had a steady stream of talent including George Thompson, Meminger and Ric Cobb.

Redshirt Freshman Glenn 'Doc' Rivers was ready to step into a starter's role and was more than an adequate replacement for Butch Lee at point guard. Earl Tatum, a seldom-used sophomore, would replace George Thompson at power forward. McGuire still needed two recruits. He landed forward Bo Ellis from Chicago, who would go on to be a future All-American. Ellis was 6'9" with a tremendous wingspan that allowed him to play taller than his height.

McGuire had only to look 15 miles to the South to find a new center; Jim Chones a 6'11" freshman from Racine, Wisconsin.

Chones would prove to be one of the best big men ever to play at Marquette. McGuire capped off a great recruiting season by finding another big man, Eugene Berce, a junior college player from California. Berce was only 6'9", but weighed 230 pounds and took up space underneath the boards.

The season opened with a tournament in Alaska; the Great Alaskan Shootout. Marquette had played an AAU team and an international team as practice games, but these would not count in the NCAA standings. The Great Alaskan Shootout was their first real test and it would be a good one because 18 of the 24 teams that were invited had been ranked in the top 25 the preceding year. Given the team's youth and inexperience, and the stellar competition, it was not surprising that Marquette lost in the second round and then lost again in the 5th place consolation game. The two losses would make it difficult to match the prior year's final record of 27 - 3.

The team started to shape into form as Marquette settled into the easy part of its schedule, interrupted only by a 15 point home win against the University of Wisconsin, the team that beat them in Madison the prior year. It was a good win and gave indications that this team might be better than some people thought. Jim Chones was turning into a dominating center with a smooth fade-away jump shot from ten to fifteen feet.

Matthew took a different approach this year. As a freshman he had been surrounded by good players and content to contribute assists, rebounds and occasional scoring; whatever the team needed. He finished the season averaging a respectable 16 points and 12 rebounds. This year, despite the emergence of Chones, he was asked to provide more offense and was averaging 23 points heading into the tough Big East schedule. They finished the Big East schedule 14 - 2, in second place behind Connecticut. Big wins against Louisville and Georgetown were offset by upsets at Seton Hall and Villanova. Still, second place finish and a #2 seed was a good way to enter the Big East tournament.

The Golden Eagles easily beat Syracuse in the opening round as Matthew scored 31 points, the fifth time this year he had been over 30. Marquette suffered a shocking upset to 7th seeded Rutgers

in round two. Possibly overconfident, they came out flat and lost a heartbreaker on a last second desperation shot from center court. The team waited to see how the loss would affect their NCAA seeding. No one was surprised when they were given a #4 seed and banished to the Western Region where the top seeds were UCLA, Stanford and UNLV. Marquette was not expected to make it out of this region.

Matthew took it upon himself to call a team meeting before the first game at the large UCLA pavilion stadium. “Nobody’s giving us much of a chance this year, but I disagree. We have a good team. Let’s give 100% and see what happens.”

Matthew carried the team on his back, scoring 33 and 36 points as the Golden Eagles easily defeated Pepperdine and Oklahoma State to reach the round of 16 where they were matched against UNLV, the No. 3 seed. Jerry Tarkanian’s Running Rebels were fast and could shoot, but paid little attention to defense. Predictably, it was a high scoring game. The outcome came down to which team was willing to step up and play defense?

Larry Johnson, destined to be the #1 overall pick in next year’s NBA Draft, erupted for 26 in the first half, continually using his 6’7”, 250 pound body to get position underneath the basket. At half time, Marquette switched to a man to man defense and Matthew took it upon himself to shut Johnson down. He did, holding Johnson to three points in the second half. Matthew finished with 31 points and Marquette prevailed 103-97.

The regional championship game was set for Saturday evening against the No. 1 seed, UCLA, featuring two-time All-American Gale Goodrich. Rivers put the clamps on Goodrich as Earl Tatum scored 21 points while Bo Ellis had 20 points and 14 rebounds. Chones also played a great game, finishing with a double-double, 12 points and 10 rebounds. Marquette won 89-76 and it was on to New Orleans for their second consecutive Final Four.

The final four was loaded with talent from the Big Ten plus one of the greatest ACC teams, NC State. Marquette was matched against the Michigan Wolverines who had finished 2nd in the Big Ten. The Wolverines were big and talented, featuring center Bill Buntin and three-time All-American Cazzie Russell. Russell didn’t

disappoint as he scored a game high 46 points for the Wolverines but it was not enough. Matthew had 41 points and 22 rebounds in a dominating display of basketball. Jim Chones had another good game and Bo Ellis contributed 19 points and 12 rebounds. After the win, the players stayed around and watched Indiana easily defeat a North Carolina State Wolfpack team led by 7'4" Tom Burleson and David Thompson. Legend had it that the 6'6" Thompson could touch the top of the backboard from a standing jump. He scored 27, but it was not enough.

Indiana was undefeated and coached by the legendary Bob Knight, the former Ohio State player and Army coach. The Hoosiers sported three All-Americans; Kent Benson, who would be the 1st overall pick by the Milwaukee Bucks in next year's NBA draft, Scott May, a high scoring shooting forward and Quinn Buckner, one of the best defensive guards ever to play the game of basketball. Although giving away five inches, Quinn Buckner accepted the assignment of guarding Matthew who took him inside, but was constantly double teamed by Benson. Together, they held Matthew to only 11 points on four for nine shooting, but that was all Marquette needed. With the Indiana defense packed inside to stop Matthew, 'Doc' Rivers and Bo Ellis erupted for 27 and 24 points respectively and Marquette won their second national championship, 86-81.

Last year Matthew was the hero, making the final shot, while this year the accolades went to his teammates. Matthew could care less. There is no I in TEAM, at least the way Matthew Wilson played basketball.

Chapter 6

Father McGinnis - Somalia

“Jim, you have a visitor,” Gail announced as she interrupted our project meeting. Ken and I had arrived yesterday and were getting an update from Marco and his five local project managers.

“Gail, we won’t be done here for an hour. Can it wait? Who is it?”

“He says he is an old friend from Milwaukee, Father Sean McGinnis.”

“Father Sean, why didn’t you tell me?” I said, jumping out of my chair.

“I think she just did,” I heard Ken say in the background, but I was already heading for the door. “Guys, let’s take a short break.”

“Father Sean, what a great surprise,” I said as I grasped his arms. “What brings you to Ethiopia?”

“I was in the area and thought I’d stop and visit with an old friend.”

“What are you working on?” I asked, realizing that this visit might be more than just a coincidence. “The last I heard you were in Rhodesia.”

“Yes, I spent two wonderful years there and we accomplished quite a lot. I’ve been in Ethiopia for three months working in the Somalia desert area. The people in that region have a hard time making a go of it.”

“I haven’t been down there myself, but I have heard some grim stories. It’s pretty dangerous, isn’t it?” I remembered reading stories about famine and uprisings against local government officials. “Don’t most of the people in that area believe they are Somalians?”

“They do, and that’s part of the problem that Ethiopia has, but the bigger problem is that these people are starving and dying of thirst.”

“How can I help?”

“Well, I have a small favor to ask. Can we talk about it at lunch?”

Father Sean and I spent the first half hour catching up on old times including that night at his church when the Ark exploded. “What ever happened with the investigation? Did the police ever find out what caused the explosion? I’ve asked Matthew, but he won’t give me a straight answer.”

“I bet he told you something like ‘it was meant to happen’,” Father Sean replied. “That’s what he tells me.”

“Exactly, but there has to be a reason. What did the three kids who planned the whole thing have to say?”

“Well, they admit that they created the smoke and sound effects, but claim to have no idea why the fire started or how it could have exploded like it did.”

“Did they say why they did it?” I asked.

“Jim, how much do you know about the history and legend surrounding the Ark?”

“I’ve read a fair amount and certainly am aware that local legends say that the Ark might have been hidden on Tana Kirkos before it was shipped to Axum. I suspect this is mostly legend.”

“I wouldn’t dismiss it so fast if I were you. There is evidence to support the theory that the Ark was brought to the Lake Tana area for safekeeping. But, I was asking if you are familiar with some of the legends surrounding how the Ark was created. Specifically, there is a viewpoint that Moses was basically a magician who created the Ark as a means to control his people. All the powers attributed to the Ark were just smoke and mirrors.”

“Wow, how could he have done all those things?”

“Possibly, Moses was trained by the best. He was adopted into the Egyptian royal family as a baby and had access to secrets passed down from ancient Egypt. The stories about changing his staff into a serpent, and even parting the waters as told in Exodus, are tricks that were told many times in that era and attributed to many others as well as Moses.”

“I had never heard that,” I admitted. “What’s that have to do with the Ark of the Covenant?”

“Well, there weren’t any witnesses on Mt. Sinai when God instructed Moses to build the Ark and supposedly gave Moses the

specific dimensions. Critics point out that the dimensions and construction of the Ark, including the pole-rings to carry the Ark, is almost identical to artifacts found in King Tut's tomb dating several centuries earlier."

"I'm still not sure what you're getting at."

"Well, theologians believe the Ark was a vehicle for God to communicate with man. An alternative theory claim's the Ark was nothing more than a man-made creation and all the powers attributed to the Ark are nothing more than black magic. Moses created the Ark to rally the Jews, but all the powers, including tumbling the walls of Jericho, can be explained."

"Is this what you believe?" I was feeling a little bit like a kid asking his parents if there really is a Santa Claus, but already knowing the answer.

"No, of course not," Father Sean answered firmly. "All I am saying is that is why the high school kids did what they did. In fact, only one of the three doubted the scripture and believed that Moses was nothing more than a good magician. The other two boys went along with it because they thought it would be a good way to debate the topic."

"Okay, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with that," I offered. "Why did you and Matthew get so upset?"

"Let me count the reasons," Father Sean said softly, changing into his priestly role. "Are you familiar with the First Commandment?"

"Of course; 'I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me,'" parroting the words I had memorized many years ago.

"Good, now put these into the perspective of putting a false idol on the Ark, particularly the fatted calf, as these kids did. It was blasphemy. Remember, Moses lived in a time when Jews still made animal sacrifices to appease their idols. When you have time, take a trip to the Falasha village near Gondar. You can see for yourself how important blood sacrifices to idols were in Moses' day."

"I'd love to," I said seriously. "Truthfully, I haven't been able to get that evening out of my head. I would like to learn more about the Ark. Maybe we could take a trip to Gondar?"

Father Sean must have been waiting for an opportunity to ask his favor. “Excellent idea, Jim, I’d be happy to help you when I’ve finished my work here. Let’s talk about sharing a little bit of the Lake Tana water that is so plentiful around here. The Somalians sure could use a little.”

“Ah, now we get to the heart of the matter,” I said with a smile. “I gather you have some ideas as to how this can be accomplished.”

“Yes we do.”

“We?”

“Matthew wants to meet with us next week. He already has most of the permits and approvals in place.”

“Matthew,” I thought to myself, “I should have known.”

“Father, tell me what you know about this. I would like to get Ken and Marco to start working on this so we can be ready to go when Matthew gets here.”

“Okay, but we need to keep this confidential for awhile. The Egyptians haven’t signed off on this yet. As you know, the Nile River is fundamental to their economy.”

“Have they been told?”

“I think Matthew would like to have more information about the impact upon water flow before we raise the issue.”

“Okay, let’s see what the ramifications will be.”

Matthew walked into our little conference room and greeted me like a long, lost friend. “Coach, I appreciate your taking the time to see me. I gather this must Marco,” he said walking over to shake hands. “Ken, it’s good to see you again. Coach has told me a lot of good things about both of you and how much you did for us while he was leading my high school to a State basketball championship.”

“We heard a little about you too,” Marco replied easily. “Can you really walk on water?” The question provided a perfect segue.

“I hope we have the opportunity to try in Somalia,” Matthew replied, taking advantage of the opportunity to get down to business. “Father Sean tells me you two have come up with some ideas on how we can get this done.”

“We have some ideas,” Marco interrupted, “but I’m not sure the Egyptians will like it. You can’t pay Matthew without robbing Peter.”

Matthew didn’t rise to the challenge, but instead took a conciliatory tone. “Well, we have the best people working on this. If we can’t come up with something that can accommodate everyone, then it can’t be done. Let’s give it our best shot.”

Three days later we had a workable plan, a combination of a new dam and riverbed that would route the water to the lowlands where a 16” diameter pipeline would carry the water to a man made reservoir and eventual distribution. The new dam would be set up below the Blue River Falls and send water to the desert only during the 6-8 month rainy season. The impact on water flow to Egypt would be minimal and transparent because of the water control already established at the Aswan Dam.

The major impact would be on Lake Tana itself, which would fall an estimated two-three meters from its current maximum depth of 15 meters. This in turn would reduce the size of the lake by 10% and expose up to 100 feet of new beach. Existing piers and marinas would need to be extended, but this would have a long-term positive impact upon the tourist economy.

“I can’t speak for everyone,” I commented, “but this seems like a win-win for everyone. Matthew, can you sell this to the Egyptians?”

“I’ll do my best, Coach. Your team certainly did your job well.”


Matthew left soon after for Addis Ababa and a connection to Cairo. Ken told me later that they could now appreciate what I had told them about Matthew. “He never told us what to do, but I always had the feeling that he was a step ahead of us, that he had already thought of it and was just waiting for us to come up with the idea. Do you know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean. I learned that early in my coaching days. He is a true leader.”

“He is also smarter than you, Ken,” Marco added with obvious satisfaction. “I never thought I would be able to say that.”

“Well, you won’t get any argument from me.” Ken said ruefully. “I threw in the towel when he started speaking Ge’ez with those Monks on Tana Kirkos.”

We didn’t realize it at the time, but it would be almost seven years before we got the permits to lower the water level on Lake Tana. The Egyptians were only part of the problem; wildlife preservation and environmental concerns presented even bigger delays.



Chapter 9

Junior Year - The Tom Crean Era

1982 UNC Tar Heels

Preseason polls were unanimous – ESPN, Sports Illustrated, Basketball Weekly - all had Marquette ranked #1 and a prohibitive favorite to make it three-in-a row. Marquette had height, experience and most of all they had Matthew Wilson.

Everything changed before the first game was played. Jim Chones and Doc Rivers declared themselves eligible for the NBA draft. Marquette’s chances for a third consecutive national championship hit rock bottom when Al McGuire abruptly retired. Even Dick Vitale was silent about the odds for a three-peat. Nobody had Marquette in their top ten.

The story of why Jim Chones declared for the draft tells us a lot about Al McGuire. Chones was raised in Racine, just 15 miles south of Milwaukee. Money was tight, but his parents always provided the basics for their six children and provided Chones a stable, loving family environment. 1972 was the second year of the American Basketball Association and the ABA needed star power. Chones was in the right place at the right time. The New York Nets

offered Chones a ‘take it now or forget about it’ offer. “You have until Friday to decide.”

“Coach, I’m not ready to turn pro.”

“Jim, they are offering you a five million dollar signing bonus; take it.”

“I’m scared, Coach. I’m not sure I’m ready.”

Al McGuire, the son of an Irish immigrant saloon keeper, grew up in New York’s inner city and never feared anything. He played three years in the NBA for the Knicks and was known as a hard-nosed, defensive player that made the most of his limited abilities. “Jim, you are going to take the offer. The money is too good to turn down and next year the ABA might not be around. Take the money and buy your parents a new house.”

“Don’t you want me to play two more years at Marquette?” Chones was already a second team all American and could have become one of the best college centers of all time.

“Jim, I told your mother when I recruited you that I would look out for you and that’s what I’m doing. You don’t owe me or Marquette anything.” To Al McGuire, his players came first. Jim Chones took the Net’s offer, cashed the check and went on to enjoy a nice ABA and NBA career.

McGuire was replaced by Tom Crean, an assistant coach from Michigan State University. Crean had been a prodigy and heir apparent to succeed Tom Izzo before taking the Marquette job. Izzo-coached teams are known for tough, in your face man-to-man defense. This was how Al McGuire’s teams played defense when he wasn’t messing around with gimmick defenses such as the triangle and two or the box and one. It remained to be seen how Crean would mesh with Matthew Wilson.

Marquette would have to depend heavily upon freshmen and sophomores. There was a lot of talent at the guard level but almost no height. Matthew and Don Kojis, both 6’5”, would be the tallest starters. There were plenty of guards competing for the other three spots, including Tony Smith, a 6’3” point guard out of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, who would go on to have an excellent NBA career.

There was one special player that redshirted his freshman year for academic reasons, but during practice had displayed tremendous

potential and the ability to dominate a game. His name was Dwayne Wade and he would go on to be one of the greatest Marquette Warrior basketball players of all time. Wade would also earn the MVP award in the NBA with the Miami Heat.

With successive championships under their belt, the Golden Eagles were still considered dangerous despite the loss of Chones, Berce, Tatum and Rivers. This quickly changed as they were upset by Cleveland State in their second game of the season and lost a home game against the University of Wisconsin. They limped into the Big East conference schedule with two losses and quickly absorbed two more losses as Louisville and Seton Hall beat them handily on their home courts. It appeared that Marquette did not have enough rebounding strength or interior defense to compete with the good teams.

The new half-court system that Tom Crean was trying to install was another problem. It might have worked with Chones in the middle, but the Marquette team was too small to do well in a half court offense. They needed to score quickly. Once they got into the half court game their lack of height and offensive rebounding was a decided disadvantage. To his credit, Crean was smart enough to recognize the problem and changed to an up-tempo style. This better suited his player's talents and Marquette became a fun team to watch.

The Golden Eagles played a three guard offense with Kojis and Matthew at the forwards and ran at every opportunity. They pressed full court and their defense became instant offense as they led the league in deflections and outright steals. The first two subs off the bench were also guards making it easy to press full court and turn the game into a helter-skelter affair. It was not unusual for one or two guards to foul out each game, but the substitutes who were brought in never missed a beat. Marquette's backcourt depth proved a deciding factor as opposing teams tired in the final ten minutes. Once more Matthew adjusted his game and concentrated on rebounding and defense, despite giving up six inches to taller opponents. He didn't complain - they were winning.

Dwayne Wade was a big part of the team's improvement in the second half of the season. His talent and acrobatic skills were

unbelievable as he made fantastic shot after fantastic shot. Matthew Wilson, well he was Matthew Wilson. He was averaging 28 points, far above his 19 and a half point average for his first three years. He was playing the best basketball of his life. The Golden Eagles won 13 of the final 14 Big East games to finish in a tie for second behind the Louisville Cardinals.

Marquette entered the Big East tournament as the number two seed and quickly advanced to the finals for a rematch against Louisville. The winner of this game would almost assuredly be given a No. 1 seed in the NCAA tournament. The tournament was held on the Cardinal's home floor and the partisan crowd erupted in thunderous applause as Louisville scored four points in the final 30 seconds to upset Marquette 77-76. Matthew missed a makeable 22 foot shot at the buzzer. It was one of the few times Matthew missed when the game was on the line. He addressed the players after the game.

“My fault, guys, I blew it – it won't happen again. I need your help in making this a fourth consecutive championship. Most of you are freshmen and sophomores and have two or three more years of eligibility remaining, but this is my last year. The experts say we are too small and too young, but I know this team is as good as any that I've played on. We can win if we all give 100%. Will you help me?”

Some of the younger players were still in awe of Matthew and they appreciated his asking for help. There was no loud chorus of cheers or empty promises, but one by one the players walked up to Matthew and quietly promised their support. Dwayne Wade said it best; “Bro, don't worry about a thing – I've got your back.”

Team morale was high as they entered the NCAA tournament. Their first game was against College of Pacific, a small school with a rich academic and athletic history. It was a marvelous game from a fan point of view; both teams pressing full court the entire game. Marquette prevailed as Dwayne Wade erupted for 32 points and caught the attention of the national media. It was his coming out party and solidified his reputation as an up and coming star.

The second game was against the Oklahoma State Cowboys who played a slow-down, half court game. Big and brawny, they

dominated the inside and relied upon offensive rebounds and strength to score points. Surprisingly, Kojis and Matthew Wilson, giving away 3 or 4 inches and 30 pounds to every OSU player, out-rebounded the Cowboys and Marquette advanced to the round of 16, on schedule for another NCAA championship.

The next opponent was the DePaul Blue Demons who featured a 5'9" shooting guard named Howie Karl. Karl had unbelievable range and accuracy with his two handed set shot, a throwback to a shooting style popular in the '50s and '60s. Karl scored 33 points to keep his team in the game, but it wasn't enough as Matthew had 28 and Wade 25 to go along with 22 points and 18 rebounds by Kojis. The Golden Eagles prevailed 79-67.

The regional final match-up was against Michigan State of the Big Ten and featured a matchup of Tom Izzo and former assistant coach Tom Crean – mentor and pupil. The Spartans gave no quarter. They were tall and athletic and featured a 6'8" point guard Earvin "Magic" Johnson who would go on to become one of the greatest players in NBA history. The other guard was Drew Neitzel, a 6'0" sharp shooter that could put up 30 points in a hurry. The Spartans were up by seven points with three minutes to go before Marquette full court press finally wore down the Spartan guards and began generating turnovers. Three steals and eight straight points by Matthew Wilson sealed a tough, 75-72 victory. Magic had 29 points, but got little help from Neitzel who was held to three points on 1-10 shooting. The Golden Eagles advanced to the Final Four for the fourth consecutive year.

Forty thousand cheering fans packed the Houston Astrodome to see if Matthew Wilson and the Marquette Golden Eagles could make it four straight NCAA tournaments and surpass the mighty UCLA Bruins teams as the most dominant in college basketball. It would not be an easy road for the undersized team from Milwaukee. The semi final matchup was against the 'Fab Five' from the University of Michigan, all five of whom would go on to play professional basketball. Now seniors, Chris Weber, Jalen Rose, Juwan Howard, Ray Jackson and Jimmy King had come out of high school as the best recruiting classes in college basketball, promising to bring four NCAA titles to the Wolverines. This was

the Fab Five's 4th and final opportunity and their fans were confident that this was their year.

Jalen Rose, at 6'6", had several inches height on the talented, but diminutive, Marquette defenders. Chris Weber and Juwan Howard, both 6'11", could dominate opponents inside. Pundits said Matthew and Kojis were just too small to keep up with these two giants under the board for the entire game, at least that's what the scouting report said. That's why they play the game.

Marquette pressed the entire game and the Warrior guards were tremendous. Oliver Lee and Lloyd Walton came off the bench and played aggressive defense, giving the starters a needed breather. Allie McGuire got hot from outside and hit three consecutive three-point shots in the first half. Tony Smith, Marquette's 4th all time leading scorer, contributed two jump shots of his own and played great defense on Jimmy King. Kojis, Marquette's all-time leading rebounder, was a brute force underneath the basket. The Warrior chances diminished when Kojis picked up his third foul with five minutes remaining in the first half with the Golden Eagles trailing by five points. Dwayne Wade was having an off night and was only two for 12 in the first half. Marquette entered the second half trailing by nine points and with Kojis on the bench in foul trouble.

It was Matthew Wilson time and he didn't disappoint. Taking only five shots in the first half and making four, Matthew was 13 out of 14 in the second half and finished with a game high 44 points. Nevertheless, Michigan was ahead 74-73 with 20 seconds to go as Jackson broke the press and got the ball to Weber on the sideline where he was double teamed by Matthew and Wade. Weber turned to the referee and signaled for a time out as his coach covered his face in despair; Michigan was out of timeouts. Weber's ill-advised timeout would cost the Wolverines the game and live on in NCAA lore as one of the all time bonehead decisions in NCAA history.

Matthew calmly made the technical free throw to tie the score and with five seconds to go drove to the basket and went up for a clinching layup. Howard came over to challenge the shot forcing Matthew to dish off to Wade who laid the ball in as the buzzer sounded. Marquette and Matthew Wilson were in the NCAA finals for the fourth consecutive year. Their opponent was the North

Carolina Tar Heels led by senior Sam Perkins, junior James Worthy, and freshman sensation Michael Jordan. Worthy was unstoppable and scored 28 points, but it was Jordan's clutch jump shot from the corner with 15 seconds remaining on the clock that put the Tar Heels in front 62-61

"Crean called time out to set up the final play. Let's change things up. They will be expecting Matthew to take the final shot so we are going to use him as a decoy. Matthew, wait until there are five seconds on the clock and then set a screen for Wade at the top of the key. Dwayne; drive to the basket and take the shot if you're open; if not, look for Lloyd in the corner. Questions?"

Nobody said a word for several seconds, until Wade spoke up. "Coach, Matthew has earned the right to take the final shot," Wade said quietly.

"But he'll be double teamed," Crean argued. "Matthew, do you agree?"

"You're the coach; I'll do whatever you decide."

"Okay, then"

"But have I ever let you down?"

Matthew wasn't double teamed; he was triple teamed, but that didn't stop him from elevating above his defenders and launching a 25-foot jump shot that swished through the net as time expired.

Reporters asked Matthew if this was the most satisfying win of the four. "Yes, I believe it was, because this team achieved more with less natural talent than some of the others. The teams we played in the last two nights were great teams and it took a great effort from everyone to win this title."

The Marquette Golden Eagles were three-time NCAA Champions.



St. Mary's of Zion Church, old and new, in the outskirts of Axum, Ethiopia. The church is the purported resting place of the Ark of the Covenant. The new church, built by King Haile Selassie, was built in the 1960s to replace the original church built in AD 372, making it possibly the first Christian church in Africa.



Chapter 8

Axum – Home of the Ark

Delays in the Lake Tana resort project were caused in large part by the commercial fishing industry, a giant business in Bahir Dar where more than 1,400 tons of fish are harvested annually. Three species of fish are harvested; African catfish, Nile tilapia and a fish endemic to this region called the *Labeobarbus*. These large food fish breed in the mouths of the three rivers feeding Lake Tana and are particularly vulnerable to the gill nets thrown from the Paparyrus boats used by native fishermen. Environmentalists filed petitions to prevent any construction that might further the possible extinction of this unique *Labeobarbus* species which had dwindled in population by 75% since the fishery was built in 1986. All fishing was banned near the river mouths and on the upstream spawning areas during the August–September peak breeding periods. As a result, it took almost three years to obtain the permits necessary to complete the water front portion of the resort and marina.

Marco delegated day-to-day responsibility to the Ethiopian task managers, but still needed to be on site almost 50% of the time or work would slow to almost a standstill. I tried to free up more time for Marco, but to no avail.

“Marco, can you break free from the Lake Tana project for six months? We could use you on the hydro electric power plant project in Switzerland.”

“Jim, I would love to, but I really can’t break away from here for that long. How about one week a month?”

“No, the client wants someone full time. What’s the problem? Why can’t you delegate? These guys seem pretty sharp.”

“They are sharp, but they just don’t want to be in charge – it’s against their culture to give orders and assume responsibility. I can leave them with specific instructions to get something done and

trust them to get it done, but work will stop as soon as they hit a snag.”

“I understand. You know, there are a lot of people like that back home too. It just seems like such a small hurdle to overcome.”

“Maybe that’s why every ant colony needs a queen?” Marco concluded.

“Okay, queen-bee, I’ll see you next week. Ken and I have meetings in Addis Abba Tuesday and then we’ll come visit for a couple days. Do you need anything from home?”

“Not unless you can bring some excitement with you, but I look forward to the company. It gets pretty boring over here. As you know, the night life here needs a little improvement.”

Ken and I usually visited the project about once a month, mainly to meet with government officials in Addis Abba. The meetings usually lasted only a few hours before we headed to Lake Tana to get an update from Marco. I had high hopes for next week’s meeting because Matthew had told me we were getting close to getting permission from the fishing industry to build on Lake Tana. I was disappointed again.

“Eventually we’ll get the permits, but nobody is in a hurry,” I told Ken as we caught an early Ethiopian Airlines shuttle from Asmara airport to our newly completed private airport on Lake Tana. “At least they agreed to pay us for the delays,”

“Why did you offer to give back the extra money if we received a go-ahead by the end of the year? Ken asked. “That sounded almost like a bribe.”

“I prefer to use the word incentive. Matthew is adamant that we do everything by the book, but I don’t think he would object to a little incentive. Besides, the money would go back to the Ethiopian government, not any official.”

“Do you really believe that?” Marco asked when we told him about our meetings. “They were figuring out ways to funnel the money back to their own pockets before you left the building.”

“How cynical,” Ken said with a wink.

“Any problems we should talk about while we are here?” I asked, changing the subject?

“Not really, everything is going along pretty smoothly. I’m sorry you wasted your trip, but there is really nothing for me to complain about.”

“Well, Ken and I are going to drive over to Gondar and talk to a Falasha priest; care to join us?”

“Sure, why not. Is there a reason for this?”

“I’ve wanted to do this for two years. I can’t understand how a group of Black Jews ended up in the highlands of Ethiopia, two thousand miles from Israel.”

“Good question.”

The trip to Gondar was fascinating despite the fact that the only remaining Falashas in Ethiopia were women, children and old men. Most of the men had immigrated to Israel to build a home for their families. “Why did the men flee?” we asked a village elder.

“Some left because of the famine, but most left because of religious persecution. Jews and Christians got along for hundreds of years, but this changed in 1974 when militants overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie, putting an end to the Solomonic dynasty. There are less than 10,000 Falashas remaining in Ethiopia.”

We spent six hours with the Falasha priest who described a pre-Talmud Jewish faith based on the Old Testament. They didn’t eat the meat of animals dying of natural causes or any meat slain by a gentile. They worshipped sacred groves of trees and most significantly, still performed blood sacrifice to their lord, a practice that had been outlawed by King David since 600 BC.

“It’s like they have been in an incubator, completely out of touch with current Jewish practices,” Ken remarked.

We toured two churches that were more than a thousand years old, and realized that both churches had an inner chamber called a Holy of Holies, where only high could enter. Each inner chamber contained a Tabot, the centerpiece of their worship.

“All churches in Ethiopia are the same,” the priest replied in response to our questions. “Each church has a Holy of Holies containing a Tabot that represents God’s word. They are just copies, of course. The original Tabot is in Axum.”

“May we see it,” I asked.

“Oh no, only the most senior priest is allowed to see the Tabot. It is brought out only once a year during the Timkat ceremony in January.”

I decided to ask the priest another question that had been bothering me. “There are rumors that your people are direct descendants of Menelik I, the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Is there any truth to that rumor?”

“Oh yes, our ancestors tell many ancient stories about this time. I’m not sure that the Queen of Sheba was from Ethiopia or Arabia, but the stories are true. It is documented in a 13th century manuscript called the Kebra Nagast which is sacred to Ethiopian beliefs.”

We were quiet during the ride home, lost in our own thoughts, before Marco broke the silence. “Why the questions about the Queen of Sheba, Jim?”

“Well, I find it interesting that Jews were here at least 1,000 years before Christ, and apparently have a different lineage entirely than the Jews in Eastern Ethiopia. Their skin color is a smooth, bronze color, different than most Africans.”

“I still don’t get it,” Marco asked again. “What’s the point?”

Ken came to my rescue. “Imagine having to flee Jerusalem in 587 BC and needing a new place to hide the Ark of the Covenant. What better place than somewhere where there already is a Jewish community that will guard it. If the Falashas are indeed direct descendants of King Solomon, it makes Ethiopia’s claim that they possess the Ark much more believable.”

“It certainly explains their bronze skin color. What other possible reason is there for a race of bronze-skinned Jews to be in Ethiopia, still practicing a pre-600 BC Jewish faith that allows blood sacrifices. The story about being blood-line descendants of Menelik I makes sense,” I replied, trying to get my own beliefs in order. “It also fits the timeline. The Falashas trace their history back to about 900 BC which coincides with how old Moses’ offspring would have been. Moses died in 925 BC.”

“Not to confuse things,” Ken added with his typical smile, “but many people believe there is also a story about Solomon having a child with the Queen of Sheba’s maid servant who was the real source of the Solomonic empire.”

“For real?” I asked.

“Scouts honor, cross-my-heart,” Ken promised, laughing aloud.

Marco was still confused. “Well, that might explain how they got up here in the highlands, but why do they worship the Tabot and what does that have to do with the Ark?”

“Worshipping a Tabot is also is a direct connection to the Ark of the Covenant,” Ken explained. “A Tabot is a small board that represents the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai. They worship the word of God, not the Ark.”

We lapsed into silence again until Ken made a suggestion. “Anyone care to fly to Axum next month for the Timkat ceremony January 18 and 19? We might as well see for ourselves.”

“I’m in,” Marcos replied eagerly, apparently caught up in the excitement of the legend that was an intoxicating mixture of myth, religion and science. I knew how he must feel, because the legend of the lost Ark of the Covenant had a hold on me.

“So am I, but one thing still bothers me. The priest claimed that the Ark came here roughly 470 BC, but we know it disappeared from Jerusalem before the 587 BC when Solomon’s Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians.”

“Where was it for 117 years?” Ken added, doing the math.

“In Axum?” Marco answered tentatively.

“Not likely; archeologists say Axum wasn’t built until around 200 BC,” Ken replied. “Assuming the priest is correct about receiving the Ark in 470 BC, there still is a 300 year gap between when it left Israel in 587 BC and arrived in Gondar. Where was it?”

“You’re right, Marco. Graham Hancock postulates in his book, *The Sign and the Seal*, that the Ark was already gone from the Temple when Josiah ascended to the Jewish throne in 640 BC. In 626 BC Jeremiah asked where it was. In 622 BC Josiah asked the Levite Priests to put it back in the house that Solomon built. Hancock believes the Ark was taken sometime during the reign of King Manasseh. If Hancock is correct, the gap is closer to 200 years.”

“I’m impressed,” Ken responded in mock awe, although I knew he was at least a little bit surprised I had pulled these facts out of my memory bank.

“Furthermore, you might be surprised to learn that a Jewish Temple was built on Elephantine Island around 640 BC that was ninety feet long and 30 feet wide, the exact dimensions given in the Bible for Solomon’s Temple,” Ken said, finishing my thought.

“Okay you two, that’s enough. One of you spouting miscellaneous trivia is all I can handle,” Marco interrupted good naturedly. “But tell me, why on Elephantine Island? That’s in Egypt near the Aswan Dam, isn’t it?”

“That’s the spot,” Ken agreed. “Maybe our new trivia expert can tell us why.”

“Well Ken, since you obviously don’t know, I will enlighten you. I’m sure you both know that in those days the Nile was the natural roadway through Egypt and Sudan. In addition, it is well accepted that a group of Jewish mercenaries in the employ of Egypt had already established a colony on Elephantine Island well before the 7th century BC. Coincidentally, they also practiced an older form of the religion that included animal sacrifices, including the sacrifice of a lamb on the first day of Passover.”

“Didn’t King Josiah outlaw animal sacrifices?” Marco asked.

“Yes, sometime between 640-609 BC, but it’s interesting to note that the practices continued long after, apparently on the authority of the ‘Lord that was dwelling there’.”

“They were referring to the Ark,” Ken said quietly.

The three of us were lost in our own thoughts until Marco broke the silence. “Maybe we’ll find some answers in Axum?”

Axum, dating back centuries before Christ, was the capital of the powerful Axumite Empire until the 10th century and was the home of Ethiopian Christianity. It traces its roots to the Queen of Sheba although historians doubt that the city of Axum is that old.

Axum served as a connecting point in the trade route between the Eastern Roman Empire and Persia and has been the heart of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church since King Ezana brought Christianity to the country in the 4th century. A Christian Monk visited the city in 600 AD and wrote the following description; “the four-towered palace of the King of Ethiopia was adorned with brazen figures of a unicorn, as well as the skins of rhinoceros stuffed with chaff.”

We gazed upon the new St. Mary's of Zion Church in the outskirts of Axum, the purported resting place of the Ark of the Covenant. The new church, built by King Haile Selassie, was built in the 1960s to replace the original church built in AD 372, making it possibly the first Christian church in Africa. "May we see it?" Ken asked, as we entered the chapel.

"Only the Guardian of the Ark of the Covenant is allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and gaze upon the Ark."

"Then how do we know for sure that the Ark is in there?"

"The guardian swears to it, as did the 33 guardians before him," our guide replied earnestly, pointing to 33 white robes on display. "The guardian is trained as a youth and devotes his entire life to this task. When he dies, another guardian is appointed. The Ark is only seen once a year, at Timkat, the celebration of the Holy Epiphany which to early Eastern Christians commemorates the baptism of Christ."

We spent the next fifteen minutes walking around the church looking at artifacts, including two silver trumpets that were purportedly stolen from the second temple during the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Closer inspection indicated they were copies.

"The original trumpets decorate the arch of Titus, commemorating his victory over Jerusalem and his destruction of the temple," our guide pointed out.

The Timkat ceremony started tomorrow so we spent the afternoon walking around the city and talking with locals. "Maybe it's a tourist hype, but they are sure consistent in claiming that the real Ark of the Covenant is in St. Mary's," Marco concluded.

"That, and the fact that every one of them claims that they would guard it with their lives," I said in agreement. "I believe, that they believe, the Ark is in that church."

"Say that again," Ken needed. "I got lost in the second, I believe."

We asked our guide what happened to the Ark when the Axum was run over by the rebels in 1990 and the King was overthrown, and earlier when the Muslims overran the country and destroyed almost all the Catholic and Jewish churches. "The rebels would have no reason to worship the Ark, would they?"

“The Ark is moved to other safe places in times of crisis,” our guide responded.

“Was it moved to Gondar before the rebels came?”

“There are many stories that the Ark was taken to Tana Kirkos Island for safety, but that was hundreds of years ago,” he replied vaguely.

I dropped the subject, sensing that I was not going to get a direct answer. We took the short ride to the city of Dongar to see the Queen of Sheba’s palace and pleasure bath, passing a field of roughly 75 erected obelisks of various shapes and sizes, each obelisk with symbolic engravings, erected more than 2,000 years ago. The tallest standing monolith is about 75 feet high, but the largest would have stood 108 feet tall. “Think of the engineering it must have taken to stand those suckers up,” Ken remarked.

“It wouldn’t be hard; all you need is a couple 100-foot cranes,” Marco answered absentmindedly.

Ken looked at me to see if I thought Marco was kidding. I wasn’t sure.

We found the palace and bath to be fairly well preserved, but not nearly old enough to have been a residence of the Queen of Sheba who lived in Solomon’s time. At most, the Axum area’s history traces back to 500 BC, but probably closer to 200 BC. Our guide pointed out that the bath, fed by an underground spring, would play an important role in tomorrow’s Timkat ceremony. “Water, traditionally, is symbolic of cleansing and a new beginning.”

Our biggest surprise came as we walked the grounds and surrounding fields and noticed a number of crosses etched into stones and brickwork. “What are these?” I asked. “Didn’t we see the same cross in the palace foundation?”

“This is the emblem of the Knights Templar,” our guide answered.

“The same Knights Templar that set up headquarters on the Temple Mount?” I said more to myself than to anyone else. “This is more than a coincidence.”

The following day we attended Timkat hoping to catch a glimpse of the true Ark of the Covenant. I was disappointed as the High Priest was escorted out of Saint Mary of Zion church holding

a small chest, wrapped in cloth. I couldn't see it, but was sure this wasn't the real Ark of the Covenant. One indicator was that the guardian monk stayed in the Holy of Holies, chanting in his slow, rhythmic style, and lighting frankincense to honor the Lord. Would he not carry the Ark himself if it indeed was authentic?

The people didn't mind as they joyously followed the High Priest in a day-long procession that ended at the Queen of Sheba's palace. Men and women shamelessly bathed themselves in the Queen's pleasure bath. We didn't stay for the second day of Timkat when the Ark is returned to Saint Mary of Zion.

"Well, are you satisfied?" Marco asked as we prepared to board our flight back to Lake Tana.

"Not entirely. It's hard to believe that the Ark is here and hasn't been stolen by a half-dozen conquerors over the past two thousand years."

"Where do you think it is?"

"I'm not sure, but I need to read up on the good Knights Templar. They seem to be popping up everywhere the Ark has been."



Chapter 7

Senior Year - The Buzz Williams Era

1968 UCLA Bruins

The three-time defending NCAA champion Marquette Golden Eagles entered the final year of Matthew's reign ranked No. 1 in the nation, despite losing four starters from last year's championship team. They still had Matthew Wilson and Marquette's version of The Three Amigos; Dominic James, Jerel McNeal and Wesley Mathews. They also had Lazar Hayward, and undersized 6'6" power forward.

Tom Crean bolted for greener pastures despite the wealth of talent. Crean's replacement was assistant coach Buzz Williams who had virtually no head coaching experience. The jury was out.

It was soon evident that the Three Amigos, and Hayward, would become future stars. Dominic Jones, only 6'1", was a tremendous athlete and could sky with much bigger players. Matthews was a solid six five, played great defense and showed the maturity you would expect from someone raised in a basketball family. His father, Wes, starred for Wisconsin in the '70s and later played in the NBA. The Badger's were not pleased when the younger Matthews chose Marquette over Wisconsin. Jerel McNeal would go on to become Marquette's all time leading scorer.

All three played with poise and confidence not usually seen in freshmen, and together with AAU friend Lazar Hayward, played an unselfish brand of basketball that was beautiful to watch. This style of play fit right in with Matthew Wilson.

Marquette played two exhibition games before departing for the Maui classic in Hawaii where all five starters averaged in double figures. The Golden Eagles won the tournament easily, whipping Duke in the finals 85-63. Matthew Wilson again retreated to a supporting role, content to play defense, rebound and spread the ball to open teammates – willing to do whatever was necessary to win.

Marquette enjoyed a great non-conference season, beating Wisconsin for the second consecutive year, in a hard fought game in Madison where the Badgers seldom lose. The lead switched hands six times in the final two minutes before McNeal hit a 10-foot jumper at the buzzer for a 72-71 victory. The Golden Eagles entered the Big East conference with a perfect 10-0 record and ranked No. 1 in the nation.

Marquette easily won their first four conference games before the injury bug hit. Dominic James broke the fifth metatarsal in his left foot and would require season ending surgery. Travis Diener, a 6'1", highly recruited prospect from Fond du Lac, replaced James in the starting lineup. Diener didn't have James' athletic skills, but he sure could shoot the basketball.

Marquette finished the Big East season with two losses for the second consecutive year; a three-point defeat to highly regarded Louisville Cardinals and a five-point loss to Connecticut.

The Golden Eagles were ranked No. 2 in the country as they headed into the Big East tournament. Hayward and McNeal were

playing great basketball and Marquette easily swept through the Big East tournament, beating the Georgetown Hoyas by 12 points in the semi-finals and Connecticut by 14 points in the finals.

Marquette sat back and waited for their expected No. 1 seed. The tournament committee had no choice but to keep them in the Midwest region. The 'Final Four' would be in St. Louis, but the initial two games were at the Milwaukee Arena, providing the Golden Eagles with a tremendous home court advantage. They did not waste this advantage as they easily defeated a shell-shocked Bob Huggin's Cincinnati team in the opening round and won by 38 points. It was the first time the University of Cincinnati had been in the NCAA tournament since Oscar Robinson dominated the tournament in the late 1960's. The district championship game was against George Mason University out of the Colonial Athletic conference and again Marquette won easily, this time by 22 points. They advanced to the Sweet Sixteen tournament in Chicago.

The opener in Chicago was against a surprise NCAA qualifier, Miami of Ohio, who made the tournament for only the second time. The Cinderella story for the Tartans ended quickly as Marquette cruised, 83-51. Miami didn't have the height or brawn to compete with Marquette's athleticism on the backboards. Hayward and Matthew dominated inside, each scoring 24 points and grabbing 12 rebounds.

The regional final was against a strong Kentucky team, seeded No. 3 in the Midwest Region. The Wildcats had the size and athleticism to neutralize the Marquette big men, but unfortunately for them, they caught Matthew on a hot day. They had no answers as Matthew took the Kentucky big men outside and poured in 37 points to lead Marquette to an easy 83-67 victory. The Golden Eagles were headed to the NCAA Final Four for the third consecutive year.

The NCAA tournament was in St. Louis and the Golden Eagles were matched against Houston who had given the UCLA Bruins their only defeat of the year. The Cougars were led by Elvin Hayes who scored 44 points in their mid-season victory over Lou Alcindor and UCLA to break the Bruins 73 game winning streak. He was

unstoppable as he poured in 47 points, but it wasn't enough as he got little help from his teammates. Wesley Mathews, Diener, and McNeal all had over 20 points for Marquette. They won easily despite an off day by Matthew Wilson who was held to 16 points but did not mind at all. Marquette was in the NCAA finals for the fourth consecutive year.

The Golden Eagles opponent was the once-beaten UCLA Bruins coached by John Wooden. Despite Marquette being three-time defending NCAA champions, Las Vegas made UCLA a five point favorite. Led by Lou Alcindor, who might have been the greatest basketball player in college history, the Bruins sported four other players that averaged in double figures; Lucius Allen, Mike Warren, Jr., Linn Shackelford and senior Mike Lynn. It would be a formidable test for Marquette and pundits agreed that Matthew Wilson needed to have a great game.

Unlike other highly touted games, this game lived up to expectations. Hayward, at 6'6", was no match for the bigger, more talented and experienced UCLA center. Alcindor outscored Hayward 35-6 before Hayward fouled out with two minutes left. The rest of the Golden Eagles took up the slack. Four players scored over 15 points, led by Matthew Wilson with a team high 28 points. The game was tied at 87 points with 30 seconds on the clock. UCLA inbounded the ball from underneath its own basket and attempted an alley-oop pass to Lou Alcindor who at 7'2" leaped high to grab the pass. To his surprise a hand went up with him and deflected the ball to a Marquette teammate. Surprisingly, it wasn't Matthew Wilson, but a substitute by the name of Walter Mangham, one of the greatest leapers in Marquette history. Hard core Marquette fans were not surprised when Mangham out jumped Alcindor on the key play of the game. They had seen him do it many times before.

Doc Rivers brought the ball down court without calling time out and fed to McNeal at the free throw line. His jump shot was on line, but caught the back iron and bounced harmlessly away, causing groans from the Marquette faithful. Players were preparing themselves for overtime until they Matthew leaped from the free throw line, grabbed the ball as its apex, and laid it gently over the rim as time expired.

John Wooden would say later that David Thompson of NC State was the only other player who could have made that play. “I swear his hand was over the top of the backboard,” Wooden muttered to himself, shaking his head in amazement. The Marquette Golden Eagles were NCAA champions for the fourth consecutive year.

When asked later how it felt to be a four-time NCAA champion, Matthew thanked his teammates and coach, Buzz Williams, before adding; “I’m proud to have played for Marquette University.”

The future is bright for Marquette basketball. Buzz Williams has proven to be a good coach, inspirational motivator and a great recruiter. Now, if he can only recruit a big man.

Chapter 10

Babylon Job Award

“Jim, you have a call - a Lynda Suarez, from the White House.”

I rolled over in bed and looked at the clock; 9:30 AM. Not too early, even for a Saturday, unless you throw in the fact that I was experiencing severe jet lag after a red eye flight from Cairo. “Thanks Mary. Tell her it will be just a minute,” I said as I tried to wake up. I needed to splash cold water on my face and get rid of the foul taste in my mouth.

“Ms. Suarez, this is Jim Simpson. What can I do for you?”

“I’m sorry for bothering you at home on a Saturday, but we are operating on a tight time frame. Can you be in Washington Monday to meet with the Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East?”

“Why?” I asked succinctly. After being home only eight hours after two weeks in Africa, I wasn’t in the mood to jump onto a plane again to meet with some politician.

“I don’t have the specifics, but my boss asked me to tell you that the State Department has several fast-track civilian contracts that will be awarded next week. Matthew Wilson suggested we give you the first crack at one of them.”

Name dropper, I thought. The mention of Matthew’s name was all it took. “Okay, I can be there by 10:00 AM if there are seats left on US Air. Just tell me where to go.”

“Don’t worry about a commercial flight. We will have a Lear Jet waiting for you at the private hanger at Tampa International. You should be home for dinner. There is plenty of room on the plane if you wish to bring a business associate.”

“Is there anything else I should bring?”

“No, just an open mind,” Suarez replied seriously.

“This has to be a joke,” I said to myself as I dialed Matthew’s cell phone number.

“No joke,” Matthew said without bothering to say hello.

“I’ll see you Monday. Bring your pen.”

With Matthew involved, this was likely to be a major undertaking in some third world country. I considered how Rosann would react to the news of another big overseas contract. We had been looking forward to spending more time together around the house. Pete and Lisa were never home anymore given their tennis careers and Pete’s upcoming wedding to Ambre in June. It’s funny, most people look forward to taking vacations overseas or traveling to Paris or Australia to watch their kids play in a grand slam tennis tournament. We were so lucky that we could do all that, but now we looked forward to spending time together at home, especially Mary. She had several close friends and was active in several clubs and charities to keep her busy and still ranked #6 in the Florida 35 and over tennis rankings. I knew, however, she had been looking for the Ethiopia job to wind down so I could cut back on my travel.

“Breakfast is ready,” Rosann shouted from the kitchen. Intercoms were a waste of money I thought, as I threw on some workout clothes.

“Good morning, dear,” I said, kissing her on the cheek. “Thanks for letting me sleep late.”

“That was your reward for your Oscar performance last night,” Rosann said with a smile.

“I don’t remember having much of a choice,” remembering the sheer negligee she was wearing when I entered the house. “What if it had been the Maytag repair man?”

“Well, then we probably would have the best maintained appliances in the subdivision,” she said with a laugh. “After two weeks alone in the house I wasn’t asking for IDs.”

I might as well get it over with, I thought. “That phone call” I started.

“Yes,” Rosann answered, putting the waffles on my plate. She had noticed the hesitancy in my voice. “Where are you off to this time?”

“They want me in Washington Monday to discuss some contracts that the State Department is awarding. Apparently Matthew has something to do with it.” Rosann liked Matthew and usually I got a free pass if I used his name. Not today.

“Oh no, you’re not taking another job in Africa or some God-forsaken place like that. Why should you? We don’t need the money.”

“I haven’t said yes to anything,” I argued. “I just want to see what they have to say. Who knows, maybe they want us to clean the beaches in Malaga.” I was desperate and I knew Rosann wanted to take a vacation to Southern Spain.

“Eat your breakfast. We are in a mixed doubles tournament at the club this afternoon and have an 8:30 tee time tomorrow. We might as well enjoy the weekend.”

Monday, Ken and I boarded the private jet to Washington and enjoyed a continental breakfast on board consisting of coffee, juice and croissants. “How was your weekend, Jim? Play any golf?”

“I played bad tennis Saturday and bad golf on Sunday. I saw so much sand that I thought I was still in Ethiopia. Luckily, I had a good partner Saturday or it would have been a lost weekend.”

“She sure can hit that backhand,” Ken added referring to Mary’s two-handed service return.

“Yeah, she was hot. All I had to do was cover the alley and stay out of her way. How about you? Did you golf this weekend?” I asked knowing that Ken played at least once.

“74 on Saturday and a cool 69 on Sunday that would have been a 65 if I could putt. I bought some new irons and I couldn’t miss. We will have to play some this week.”

“Yeah, right,” I said without enthusiasm, “and I suppose you want a stroke or two?”

“Why not? You’re the ex club champion.”

“That was so long ago that we’re the only two people that remember.” I said, reflecting back on that weekend that I beat Jack with a 12-foot putt on the 36th hole. “That sure brings back some memories.”

“Not for me,” Ken mused. “I was in a Mexican hospital fighting for my life.”

“That’s because you got drunk and fell off a balcony,” I chided, knowing full well that Ken had been pushed.

“By the way, Jack says hi. He shot a 71 Saturday, but still lost a little money. He had the nerve to call me a ‘Simpson’.”

I laughed, realizing that Jack still told anyone that would listen that he was sandbagged in that winner-take-all tournament. “Yes, we should try to play a little if we have time this week; maybe Friday? It would be fun seeing Jack and the guys again.”

“Why don’t we see about playing in the Friday morning men’s game? I’ll get us a 4th and enter us as a four-some so we can play together,” Ken added, knowing full well that on Fridays the teams were picked by the lowest handicap golfers, but the golfers chose their own foursomes. “They still play two-best-balls so it’s ideal for players like you that haven’t played much and might hit a couple bad shots.”

“Yes, let’s do it; that will be fun. Hopefully we won’t need to be out of town again,” I said thinking back to my discussions with Rosann.”

“What are we getting ourselves into today?” Ken asked. “Do you know anything more than you told me?”

“Nope, only that Matthew is involved”

“Which means that we will be flying off to some starving, bug-infested nation that can’t pay us anything,” Ken said almost half-joking. “Why can’t Matthew and Father McGinnis devote their energy to saving countries that at least have running water and cable TV?”

I smiled at the absurdity of his statement. “Let’s hear them out, Ken, but I will say this; I’m not in any mood to build roads or office buildings in some third-world country. Rosann would have my ass,” I confided. Ken nodded in understanding.

The rest of the flight we spent reading and lost in our own thoughts.

Matthew kept a low profile, away from the mahogany conference table where Ken and I sat listening as David Rutherford; the Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East described the project. Thirty minutes into the presentation Mr. Rutherford came to the point. “Mr. Simpson, we want Simpson International to take the lead in a multi-national effort to rebuild Babylon and restore this historic city to the greatness and world prominence it once enjoyed.”

I spilled my coffee; literally, I spilled my coffee. Fortunately, this gave me time to absorb what the man had said while everyone scrambled to limit the damage. I noticed Matthew smiling at my embarrassment. “Matthew, you could have warned me so I didn’t make such a fool of myself,” I complained.

“Please go on, Mr. Rutherford. You now have our complete attention,” I said with a wooden smile.

“I take it this means you have some understanding of the importance of this project to the free world. Baghdad is beyond repair. Its infrastructure is shot and it seems it is irrevocably divided into religious sects. We are proposing to rebuild Babylon and make it the political and financial center of this part of the world.”

“Not to mention the religious capital of this region,” Matthew added. “There is no other city in the world where Shiite and Shia Muslims would live together in peace.”

“I thought Babylon was a biblical city,” Ken said, making a statement more than a question. “If I remember my Bible studies correctly, Babylon is mentioned more than 300 times.”

“That’s right, Mr. Reed, it was the first city built after Genesis and was once the cultural and political center of the world. The historical and biblical significance of Babylon is unrivaled by any other city with the possible exceptions of Rome and Jerusalem,” Rutherford continued. “That’s why we have agreed to help Iraq restore Babylon to its prior glory.”

“Let’s talk a little bit about the details,” I suggested. “How do you plan on accomplishing this goal and how long do you think it will take?”

“This project will take forever,” Rutherford said with a smile, “but we hope to have a framework in place in five years. Restoring the ‘old town’ of Babylon is just a small part of it. We also envision a new, modern city resplendent with office buildings, shopping centers, restaurants, residential communities and so on. Five years from now we hope to have a thriving city and a blueprint for growth.”

“Where does Simpson Construction fit into this plan? We obviously would be there forever if we tried to rebuild Babylon ourselves.”

“There are plenty of governments and private contractors that are eager to get a piece of this. Several countries including France, Germany and Iran would love to undertake the entire project. There is no shortage of manpower or financial resources. The World Bank will provide whatever money we require, within reason of course.”

“You want someone to manage the project and coordinate all of these groups,” I said, starting to get the picture.

“That’s correct, we need a project manager. Matthew said you were the best and that if anyone can do a fast-track project, it was you.” The way he looked at me told me that he thought it was an impossible job to control all these diverse factions.

“Can we take a 15-minute break to talk this over?”

“You’re not really thinking of doing this, are you?” Ken asked in amazement. “Everyone in the room knows it’s an impossible job.”

“This reminds me a little bit of that job we undertook in Mexico City to build the sports arena. It was tough, but we did it and eventually it got us the work to rebuild Roland Garros.”

“You can’t compare a rinky-dink job like that to rebuilding the entire city of Babylon. The problem in Mexico was getting them off their asses to do some work; the problem in Iraq is to stop someone from shooting us in the ass.”

“It won’t be that bad,” I replied unconvincingly.

“Yes it will,” Matthew said as he walked over to our table. “Nobody will want to follow your orders and there are a lot of fanatics that will try to disrupt anything that will get Iraq back on its feet. Don’t underestimate the challenge.”

“You are the one that recommended us,” Ken stated.

“I just told them that if anyone can do it, you could. I’m just not sure anyone can do it.”

“Think of the benefit to the Iraqis and the Western world if this succeeds,” I argued. “A prosperous, democratic Iraq would go a long way to curbing Iran and the radical Muslim movement. I would like to give it a try, with one condition.”

“Which is?” Ken asked.

“We need to control the money. Nobody gets paid unless we approve the invoice.”

“It might work,” Ken agreed; “it will take a lot of accountants, but it might work.”

“Matthew, what do you think?”

“Try it. By the way, ask for a 10% project management fee which includes a 5% donation to my world disaster relief program. The money will feed a lot of hungry children in Africa,” he said seriously. “I still don’t know if you can pull this off, but it’s worth a try. I wish you luck.”

The 5% fee Matthew requested startled me and I flashed back to my discussions with Chris Lewis and the CIA, but I should have known that Matthew was one step ahead of me. He always was. What I didn’t know was that Matthew was 10 steps ahead of us on this one.

It took twenty minutes to get a handshake agreement with Rutherford and settle on an 8% management fee, plus expenses. Matthew still insisted on getting his 5%, but three percent of a \$600 million dollar per month expenditure is still a lot of money and would pay for quite a few accountants. It took another three hours to get a status report from the State Department’s technical team and to work out the mechanics of how the money would flow. I was pleased to see that a lot of work had already been started. At 3:00 PM we were ready to go home when Matthew informed me of a change in plans.

“Jim, I took the liberty of calling Rosann and asking her if I could borrow you for a couple days. Do you mind?”

“I assume she said yes,” I asked. “Where are we going?”

“Have you been to Jerusalem?”

“No, are we leaving this afternoon?”

“Tomorrow morning. Tonight we are attending a small, black tie dinner party at the White House. The President wants to meet you and Mary.”

“Mary?” I repeated in surprise.

“Yes, she should be on her way now. I sent the Lear back to pick her up. The President took the liberty of making hotel reservations. Tomorrow, she and Ken will head back home to Tampa on the Lear and we will fly to Jerusalem.”

“Why are we going to Jerusalem?”

“To see the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock; you could use a little perspective on what you are getting yourself into.”

Matthew and I strolled through the walled city of Jerusalem, past the Armenian Quarter, and past the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which dominated the Christian Quarter. Matthew had been here a year earlier and was my guide.

“We’ll come back later and visit the Chapel of the Invention of the Cross which was dedicated to the Ethiopian community in the 12th Century after the Muslims overran the city. The Ethiopian connection with Jerusalem is really quite remarkable.”

I just nodded as I took in the sights of this historic city. We continued walking along the Street of Chains. To our right was the Jewish Quarter and to the left was the Muslim enclave. Straight ahead were the Temple Mount and the magnificent Al-Aqsa mosque erected by the Caliph Omar in the seventh century AD.

“There it is,” I said to myself thinking of the wars that had been fought over this piece of land, identified in both the Bible and the Koran as the site where Abraham offered up his son in sacrifice.

“This is the 3rd most sacred site in the Islamic world,” Matthew explained. “According to the Koran, Mohammed and Gabriel made the Night Journey to the Throne of God in the 7th century AD.”

“The Muslims built smack dab on the site where Solomon built the Temple as a permanent resting place for the Ark of the Covenant, a centerpiece for the traditional Jewish religion,” I added, showing off the research I had done in preparation for our visit.

“That wasn’t unusual,” Matthew replied. “Muslims often built their Mosques directly over the religious sites of the people they conquered. They did the same thing in Elephantine,” he explained, referring to the location where the Ark was rumored to be hidden before continuing its journey from Solomon’s Temple to Lake Tana.

“If the Ark is ever found, Matthew, do you think there is any chance it would be returned here? The Muslims wouldn’t allow it, would they?”

“It depends upon who finds it. Who knows what they would do with the Ark if the Muslims found it? But if the Jews or Christians find it, there will be a lot of pressure to build a 3rd Temple on this site. Let’s go inside,” Matthew said, putting an end to this line of questioning.

Minutes later we were kneeling next to the Shetiyyah, the foundation stone of the world according to orthodox Jews. The massive stone was about 30 feet in diameter and jutted out above the bedrock of Mount Moriah. Rugged and asymmetrical, it seemed to emit a presence that made you believe that this indeed could be the foundation stone of civilization.

“Touch it, Jim. Can you feel it?”

I laid my hand on the porous rock and closed my eyes, trying to envision what the rock saw in 955 BC when Solomon, son of David, placed the Ark of the Covenant on this spot. “I wonder if Solomon believed in his heart that this would be the Ark’s final resting place,” I mused.

“Well, if he did,” Matthew commented, “he was a bit of an optimist. It wasn’t 30 years later that an Egyptian king overran the city and according to scripture, looted the treasures of the house. This was the first of many conquerors that overran the city before the Babylonians completely destroyed the Temple in 587 BC.”

“So where did the Ark go, and who took it?” I asked, more perplexed than ever.

“Let’s go downstairs,” Matthew replied, momentarily putting an end to my inquiries.

We descended down a stairway into a hollow beneath the stone that Muslims call the ‘Well of Souls’ where legend says that you can hear the voices of the dead intermingled with sounds of the River of Paradise. Below are the secret passages, now sealed, where many Jews believe the Ark was hidden when the temple was looted. Many Jews believe the Ark is still here, but we might never know for sure. Islam authorities vigorously prohibit excavation below the Dome.

“Do you believe there is a secret hiding place below us?” I asked Matthew. “Could the Ark still be here, hidden beneath the rock where it was originally kept?”

“No, I don’t. Many people have looked since the Ark disappeared? Let’s go next door to the Mosque and you will see what I mean.”

“See those three bays?” Matthew asked as we neared the mosque.

“Magnificent,” I commented. “What type of architecture is that?”

“The Al Asqa Mosque is a fascinating mixture of old and new architecture that tells a story by itself. For example, Mussolini donated the marble columns inside, but the porch bays were designed by the Knights Templar between 1119-1187 AD when they used the mosque as their headquarters. This is where the Catholic Order was founded,” Matthew added. “Take your shoes off.”

We entered the mosque and saw immediately what Matthew meant by the mixed architecture. It was a blend of many periods and obviously had been added to and renovated since it was built. “Why did the Knights Templar come here?” I asked, as we proceeded downstairs. The stables used 800 years ago by the Knights were well preserved.” My senses could almost detect the odors of the majestic steeds and the sounds of Knights putting on their metal armor preparing for battle.

“Most people agree their prime purpose was to search for the Ark of the Covenant,” Matthew answered. “As you might know, the Knights Templar became a warlike offshoot of the church and finding the Ark would have made them the dominant power in their day. In fact, in later years the church was fearful of the Knights because of the power and money they had amassed. This power was the source of their demise.”

“That’s why you don’t believe the Ark is hidden beneath the Well of Souls, isn’t it. If the Ark was here, they would have found it. But what if they did find it?”

Matthew smiled. “If they found it, what was James Bruce doing in Ethiopia 650 years later, if not looking for the Ark?”

“Wasn’t Bruce a member of the Knights Templar?” I asked in bewilderment. Just as I thought I understood the situation, another angle cropped up. “Who was he?”

“He was a Scottish freemason and claimed to be a distant relative of Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland. Regardless of this claim there is no dispute that James Bruce was one of the most brilliant people of his time and spent many years in Ethiopia searching for the Ark,” Matthew added.

I was now totally confused.

“Let’s get a bite to eat. This afternoon I want to introduce you to a Falashas priest that lived in Gondar.”

“Gondar, Ethiopia; what’s he doing in Jerusalem?”

“Most of the ‘Black Jews’ relocated back in the 1990s because they were being persecuted in Ethiopia. It will do you good to hear their story.”

“What story?”

The story of why the Ark might have been taken to Ethiopia and particularly the Lake Tana region, in the first place.”

“Okay. I’ll bite; why Ethiopia?”

“Because there was a sizeable population of Jews in the Gondar area that they knew would protect the Ark.”

“How did Jews get to Ethiopia 3,000 years ago?” I asked, trying to follow Matthew’s line of thought. “Was this part of the Solomon – Queen of Sheba connection?”

“You’re half right. Solomon was rumored to have fathered another child with the Queen’s maid-servant and this is the origin of the Solomonic dynasty that ruled Ethiopia from 1268 - 1974, when the last emperor, Haile Selassie, was deposed by a military coup.”

“So you believe the Ark is in Ethiopia?”

“Maybe, but I sure don’t believe it’s in Jerusalem,” Matthew answered carefully. “Who knows for sure, maybe it’s in Babylon? Remember, Jim, it was Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, that burned Solomon’s Temple to the ground in 587 BC and evicted the Jews from Jerusalem and relocated the Jews to Babylon.”

“The entire Jewish population?”

“Yes, everyone; and the Jews have not forgotten. There is a passage in the Old Testament that starts and ends like this;”

*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept,
when we remembered Zion.*

If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

“When did they come back to Jerusalem?”

“Fifty years later the King of Persia, Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylon and freed the Jews. He returned the treasures Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple and allowed them to return to Jerusalem in 538 BC. A year later they started to build the 2nd temple.”

“I gather the Ark wasn’t one of the treasures that were returned,” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“No, in fact, there is evidence that the Ark was not in the Temple when it was looted. The list compiled by the Babylonians of what they took was pretty complete and it didn’t contain any mention of the Ark. Most historians agree that the Ark had already been moved to another location.”

“So you don’t think the Ark is in Babylon?”

“No, but Babylon is a key to the puzzle for many other reasons.”

“Matthew, I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“Not now, Jim, but suffice it to say that Babylon was once known as the city of sin. I’m hopeful that the new city will erase the blasphemy that is associated with the old Babylon.”

Years later, when Matthew lay on his bed close to death, I would wish that I had pursued this topic while I had the opportunity. Babylon was indeed an important key to the puzzle, but at that time I did not understand the Biblical implications of rebuilding Babylon.





Chapter 11

International Basketball

Basketball is one of few sports with a known birth date. Think about it. Baseball? Football? Soccer? On December 1, 1891, in Springfield, Massachusetts, James Naismith hung two half-bushel peach baskets at opposite ends of a gymnasium and out-lined 13 rules to his students at the International Training School of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), which later became Springfield College. Naismith (1861-1939) was a physical education teacher who was seeking a team sport with limited physical contact but a lot of running, jumping, shooting, and the hand-eye coordination required in handling a ball. The peach baskets he hung as goals gave the sport the name of basketball.

Naismith and his wife were Christians and subscribed to a Christian Missionary magazine from Central America where Naismith saw a feature article about the Aztec ball game called Ollamalitzli and the Mayan game of Ulama. He had also read articles by a New Zealander called Tom Ellison who wrote about ancient Maori ball sports that required a lot of aerial handball skills. He took account of the hole that the round bouncy ball had to go through in the Central American games and the excitement of the traditional Maori game where a round flax ball was passed with speed and dexterity. With his supportive wife he then devised a game suitable for an indoor gymnasium. Winters are cold in Massachusetts.

Basketball was born in the United States, but five of Naismith's original players were Canadians, and the game spread to Canada immediately. It was played in France by 1893; England in 1894; Australia, China, and India between 1895 and 1900; and Japan in 1900. America's game of basketball continued to spread world and today is the second most popular sport in the world. Soccer is king, but American football and baseball lag far behind in both participation and fan base. Basketball is truly an international sport.

Matthew Wilson was drafted #1 by the Washington Bullets, despite his statements that he did not intend to play NBA basketball. I saw Matthew at a fund raiser in New York and asked him why he didn't want to play in the NBA. "It's a great opportunity to keep your name in front in the headlines," I pointed out. "Besides, I would like to see how you match up against the great players."

"Coach, there is so much more that I need to do, that would be impossible to do if I played in the NBA eight months a year. Father McGinnis and I have organized a world-wide disaster relief program that occupies much of my time,"

"But isn't basketball a good way to advertise?" I asked.

"You're right, Coach. It is a perfect way for me to get my message across to millions of people. I realize I couldn't get the press coverage unless I keep playing."

"If that's true, I don't understand why you refuse to play in the NBA?"

"Do you realize how popular basketball is worldwide? Take a look at the FIBA.com website. The NBA is just a small piece of the pie. When is the last time the US won the Olympics games?"

I did a quick look up on my laptop while Matthew waited. I was surprised at what I found. The FIBA is the world governing body for basketball and is formed by five FIBA Zones and 213 National federations of basketball throughout the world. The association was founded in Geneva in 1932, two years after the sport was officially recognized by the International Olympic Committee. Its original name was 'Fédération Internationale de Basketball Amateur'. Eight nations were founding members: Argentina, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, and Switzerland. During the 1936 Summer Olympics held in Berlin, the Federation named James Naismith, the founder of basketball, as its Honorary President. The Federation headquarters moved to Munich in 1956, then returned to Geneva in 2002.

FIBA has organized a FIBA World Championship for men since 1950 and a World Championship for Women since 1953. Both events are now held every four years, alternating with the Olympics. FIBA dropped the distinction between amateur and

professional players in 1989, and in 1992, professional players played for the first time in the Olympic Games. United States' dominance continued until 2002 when a U.S. team made entirely of NBA players finished sixth in the 2002 World Championships. The globalization of basketball was further illustrated by the makeup of the all-tournament teams at the 2002 and 2006 Olympics; only one member of either team was American.

“So how does this fit into your plans?” I asked, still not sure what Matthew had in mind.

“I’m forming an all-star team that will travel around the world. We’ll do clinics for kids, play exhibition games against national teams and maybe raise a little money to address some of the problems in the region.”

“Another Harlem Globetrotters,” I suggested. “All you need is the Washington Generals,” the whipping boys that the globetrotters took along on their tours.

“Don’t minimize what Abe Saperstein and his Globetrotters did for the African American people or for basketball. Their model is a good one, but I’ll let each country provide the competition. I will add a small, political or social agenda, depending upon where we play.”

“Have you thought about how you are going to publicize this tour?” knowing it was a stupid question as soon as I asked. Matthew always thought of everything.

“Did you ever get to know Freddie and his crew in high school?”

“You mean the Freddie that did the lights and sound effects for the pep rallies?”

“Yep; that’s the guy. He also produced the ‘We Kick Ass’ video. The five of them all received degrees from the New York Film Academy and have agreed to help me out. They will be the advance publicity team, produce videos to distribute at clinics, schedule meetings with people I want to meet with, and basically manage my tour.”

“I have to admit that I thought those guys were a little weird, but I’m happy to hear that they are doing well. When do you start?”

“They have been in Rio de Janeiro for two weeks setting things up. Our team is flying to Brazil next week to play a South

American all star team captained by Manu Ginobili. I understand President Nestor Kirchner is a huge basketball fan and has agreed to meet with me to discuss ways we can address Argentina's energy crisis."

"Let me know what I can do to help."

Chapter 12

Ancient Babylon

Herodotus, a Greek historian who traveled widely over the ancient world several centuries before the birth of Christ, has left us a description of the city of Babylon, once the largest city in the world and the capital of the Old Kingdom of Babylonia. This description represented almost all that we knew about Babylon until recent times.

"The city was built in a perfect square, one-half on each side of the river Euphrates, and the streets ran in straight lines, north to south and east to west. Two vast walls, three hundred and thirty-five feet in height and eighty-five feet broad at the top, enclosed the city; and they were, he says, fifty-six miles in circumference, so that the entire enclosed area would comprise nearly two hundred square miles! A hundred magnificent bronze gates pierced the walls; and smaller walls, each pierced by twenty-five bronze gates at the end of the streets, shut the city from the river."

"In magnificence," Herodotus goes on, "there is no other city that approaches it." The walls and public buildings, constructed generally of sun-dried bricks - for there is little stone in the region - were faced with glazed or enameled tile of brilliant colors. The Babylonian artisans attained so high a pitch of art in enameling their clay that huge figures of bulls or lions or legendary animals stood out in relief from the bright surface. Great bronze figures of

bulls and serpents guarded the gates. The houses that lined the streets were "mostly three or four stories high."

"The palaces of the rich added to the splendor; and one of the 'seven wonders of the world' were certain 'hanging gardens', which seem to have been beautiful parks of trees and flowers in the topmost of a series of super-imposed arches rising seventy-five feet above the ground, and irrigated by an ingenious apparatus which brought up water from the river."

"The king's palace was a stupendous building, nearly half a mile in circuit. But the most impressive edifices were the great temples. That of the chief god, Marduk, rose about three hundred feet above the level of the city; and its seven stages were (at the lowest level) coated with pitch and above faced with red, blue, orange or yellow enameled tile, or faced with gold or silver, in honor of the sun (gold), the moon (silver), and the five large known planets, with which the chief Babylonian gods were associated."

"The furniture was as magnificent as the structure was imposing. Three great courts enclosed the area round the temple, and on the west side of the inner court, opposite the vast pyramid, was the temple of the god Marduk and his wife. Here was a gold statue of the god forty feet high, with a gold table, a gold chair, and a gold altar. Outside was a stone altar on which animals were sacrificed, and an incredible quantity of incense was burned. Up the side of the seven-staged temple ran a winding stair, and at the top was the symbolical chamber of the god, with furniture of solid gold, awaiting the hour when he would descend to visit his priestess."

"From the summit of the temple one would look for many miles over the great plain (in Babylonian, "Edin") which sustained the millions of humbler folk who in turn sustained all this splendor. But even the soil was a prodigy. The harvest was twice or thrice as bountiful as in other lands, the ears of wheat and barley growing to a phenomenal size. Rich groves of palm trees waved in the breeze all over the plain; and so expert were the food-growers that from the fruit of the palm they got "bread, wine, and honey."

From their scattered villages they looked with pride toward Babel -- it is the Greeks who made the name "Babylon" -- or "The Gate of the God. Herodotus also brings the very people before us in

this enthusiastic account of Babylon in the First Book of his history. "They were clad in white linen tunics to the feet. Over this they wore a woolen tunic or robe and a white mantle. They had the full beards of the Semite, and wore their hair long; and both men and women copiously bathed themselves with perfumes. Men carried walking sticks, with fancily carved heads; and they had seals, to seal the clay envelopes of their clay letters, dangling from their girdles. Women had strings of beads on their heads."

But how did they live? Here the historian begins to tell stories which, considering the high civilization of the Babylonians, are less easy to believe than his descriptions of the city.

"They had no physicians," he says. "The sick man was laid in one of the public squares with which the city abounded, and every passerby was compelled to ask his symptoms or his malady. If any had had the same malady, or knew another person who had been similarly afflicted, he told the patient what to do. And if the sick man died, he was buried in honey!"

"Marriage was by purchase or auction sale. On a certain day all the maids of a place were assembled and put up to the highest bidder. No parent was permitted otherwise to dispose of his daughter; and assuredly no daughter to dispose of herself. The price was pooled and equally divided in dowries, so that the prettier girls helped to endow the less favored."

"Every woman 'once in her life' must prostitute herself in 'the court of Venus', meaning no doubt, the court of the temple of the goddess Ishtar. There she was compelled to stand until some man threw her a coin, saying, 'The goddess Mylitta prosper thee,' and taking her away to his couch. The ordeal was over at once for the prettier maids of Babylon; but the plainer," he calmly says, "had to wait three or four years in the precinct."

"Babylonian women shrink from the affront to which their religion and their priest expose them, but, once a woman has accepted the coin and discharged her debt, no gift, however great, will prevail with her. When a husband and wife have had intercourse at night, they must sit on either side of a burning censer until dawn, and they must then purify themselves by washing before they are allowed to touch anything."

“Have you read this Ken?” I asked, handing him the transcript.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure how much to believe. The physical description of the city is probably pretty accurate, but I’m not sure how much credence to give the part about women offering themselves up for prostitution. Most scholars don’t believe he even spoke the language so how did he get this information? It didn’t come from the ‘Khammurabi Code’ which is the law they lived by. The code specifically prohibits prostitution. Here, let me show you,” Ken said, as he googled up a copy of the code on the internet.

129. If the wife of a man is found lying with another male, they shall be bound and thrown into the water [the Euphrates]; unless the husband lets the wife live, and the king lets his servant live.

130. If a man has forced the wife of another man, who has not known the male [a child wife] and who still resides in the house of her father, and has lain within her breasts, and he is found, that man shall be slain.

“These passages don’t specifically refute what Herodotus claimed, but it does cast some doubts,” I agreed.

“Yes, but unfortunately, Babylon’s reputation for lust and vice is traced in large part to Herodotus’ claim of rampant prostitution,” Ken continued.

“Well, I’m not sure this is where their reputation originated. It may have played some part, but Babylon was also known as the center of idol worship and source of rebellion against God. That might have had something to do with it,” I argued. “Either way, Babylon must have been quite a city in its time. What led to its destruction?”

“It never was destroyed. Contrary to what Jeremiah prophesized, it just sort of withered away and gradually decayed. The city fell into disuse after Nebuchadnezzar's empire was overrun by the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, in 539 BC. In 312 BC a new city was built 50 miles to the north on the Tigris River and the inhabitants of Babylon were forcibly moved to the new city, now Baghdad. By 115 BC, Babylon was barely inhabited. Walls collapsed and temples disintegrated, and 750 years after Jeremiah’s Biblical prophecy that the great city would be destroyed, ‘Babylon the Great’ ceased to exist.”

Another indignity was that over time, the Euphrates River, one of the four rivers in Genesis that flowed through the Garden of Eden, changed course and now flows nine miles to the east of the 2,100 acre site of the ruins of Babylon. I decided this unfortunate act of nature must be rectified if Babylon was to be restored to its former glory.

It was a bold plan and would require the cooperation of a diverse set of Iraqi people, who traditionally seldom could agree on anything. Their agreement was fundamental to my plan. I called a two-day meeting of politicians, religious leaders, engineers, archeologists and contractors.

“Babylon was known in biblical times as the city on the Euphrates. Tell me how we can reroute the Euphrates back to its original riverbed,” I challenged the 40 people attending the conference.

“There have been villages built all along the new river. What would happen to them?”

“Hillah has a population of over 50,000,” another man added. “It can’t be done. Their economy depends upon the river.”

“Tell me, were these villages built using the stones and bricks taken from Babylon? Isn’t this contrary to the prophecy?” I asked, appealing to the religious leaders.

“Yes, but it would be a tremendous hardship on our city,” the mayor of Hillah pointed out. “We depend upon the river for shipping and transportation.”

“Any ideas?” I asked, scanning the room. Marco and I had a plan, but we wanted it to be an Iraqi’s idea. There was a lot of muttering, but no suggestions until a young engineer volunteered an idea.

“Why don’t we build canals?” he asked. “We could reroute the main flow of the river back to the original course and set up a series of locks and sluices to feed water to existing villages and cities.”

“It could be done,” another engineer chimed in. “We could deepen the old river bed and the new Euphrates will lower the water table in the surrounding region.”

“That will make it easier to excavate under the Old Babylon ruins,” an archeologist proclaimed excitedly. “The high water table has always caused problems.”

“Okay, this is encouraging,” I interrupted, sensing the excitement in the room. “Let’s break up into smaller groups and work out the details.”

Ken distributed a proposed map of the new River Euphrates. “Gentlemen, this is just a suggestion so feel free to make modifications.”

“Just so we have an agreement in place before we adjourn tomorrow,” I added.

Two days later they approved the plan with only minor modifications. Ken and I celebrated with a cocktail. “Jim, it looks like the \$500,000 we spent on the engineering study last month was worth it.”

“Well, it’s a lot more productive than asking a 40-man committee to come up with a solution. These conferences never are productive unless you know in advance what you want.”

“Yep, this way they rubber stamp the plan and walk away taking credit for the idea.”

“Salud!”

Rerouting the Euphrates to its old river bed allowed us to finalize plans and begin working on designing and building the city infrastructure. We divided the project into two pieces - restoration of old Babylon and building the new city. Building a new city from scratch was a daunting challenge. It had been done once before. I sent a team of politicians and engineers to Brazil which years ago carved Brasilia out of the Amazon jungle. It took twenty years, but today the city has a population of three million people and is a thriving metropolis. We didn’t have twenty years and were looking for shortcuts.

“Where do we start - what comes first?” I asked the engineers.

“We need everything,” was the answer I got from the Germans; “sewage and water treatment centers, electrical grids, communication networks – everything.”

“That’s just for starters,” the French engineer added. “Once we lay the pipes and wire below ground we need to start on roads and

transportation routes. We will ship as much equipment and supplies along the river, but we need paved highways to get us 26 miles to the Tigris River which connects to Baghdad and the outside world.”

“Why not just truck everything to Baghdad?” I asked.

“Security, or lack thereof,” was the unanimous answer.

“All right, that’s settled. What’s next?”

“Has everyone seen the plans for dividing up the work?” Marco asked. “Does everyone understand their responsibilities and the need to stay on schedule?”

One by one the project managers nodded as I looked around the room. “Okay, let’s get started. Your contracts will be signed this week.”

“One more thing before we adjourn,” I said. “Can we get started on old Babylon while we complete the infrastructure for the new city?” I knew this was a sensitive topic and had intentionally waited for the right moment to raise the question. The old city needed a new infrastructure, but this presented a huge problem to the archeologists. If it was their decision, all work on the 2,100 acre site of the old city would be postponed indefinitely while they dug around for old pottery.

“You know our position on this,” Jawad Kamal Hashemi, the representative from Iraq’s ministry of culture stated.

“Jawad, we need to compromise on this,” I interrupted. “Restoration of the old city is the key to making this a successful project and getting world wide support. Tell us how we can help each other here. It’s not as if the site hasn’t been plundered already. What the Germans didn’t take before World War I, the French and British took later.”

“I know. It’s embarrassing to know that the Ishtar Gate and 118 of the 120 golden lions that lined Babylon’s Procession Street are in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin along with countless other artifacts.”

“And what you don’t find there you can see in the Louvre or the British Museum,” I added sympathetically. “That doesn’t leave much, does it?” It was a touching moment as tears come to the eyes of several Iraqis in the room.

“No, it doesn’t,” he answered softly.

“Jawad, what if I promise to get these treasures returned to Babylon?”

“You can do that?” he asked, sitting upright in his chair.

“Yes I can, but I need you to work with me on this. We need to make some progress and show the Germans and French we are serious about restoring Babylon to its former glory.”

“There is a way that might allow you to build the new city and still allow us to excavate later when the water table is lowered. It’s more expensive to build this way,” he pointed out, looking at me for confirmation. I nodded my assent.

“We will want archeologists to monitor the work,” he added.

“Agreed, as long as they don’t slow us up every time we see an old brick,” I replied. “Most of the old Nebuchadnezzar-stamped bricks are gone anyway,” I said, referring to the widespread practice of using the bricks from old Babylon to build new structures in Hillah and other cities.

“Agreed, but may I make one more suggestion?” Jawad asked.

“Don’t push it,” I replied with a smile.

“We should start by getting rid of most of the restoration work that Sadamm Hussein did. It looks more like a Disneyland attraction.” This brought a laugh from most of us in the room, but also nods of support.

“I agree with you, Jawad, except for the palace on the hill. I think we can do something with that. I also want to repair the damages done by the Gulf War troops including the concrete helipad and the graffiti.” I knew this was a sore point with the Iraqis.

“Excellent,” Jawad stated with a broad grin, still thinking about how he could take credit when the Ishtar Gate and other national treasures were returned to Iraq.

“We will start tomorrow tearing down the brick walls that Sadam built.”

“How are you planning on getting the Germans, French and British to return the artifacts?” Ken asked me later. “They have said no for thirty years.”

“No problem,” I said with a grin. “I delegated the job to Matthew.”



Chapter 13

Eurobasket

Eurobasket is the name commonly used to refer to the men's European bi-annual championships. Founded in 1935, the league now consists of 16 teams representing 16 nations and features some of the best players and teams in the world, bar none. Russia edged Spain, the host company, 60-59 to win the Eurobasket 2007 gold medal, their first gold since the breakup of the Soviet Union which had claimed a total of 14 Eurobasket championships.

The game was close throughout until Spain broke out to a 59-54 lead on the strength of two baskets by Pau Gasol who finished with 14 points, 14 rebounds, three assists and three blocked shots, but the NBA superstar also missed five of eight foul shots in the fourth quarter and committed five turnovers. The final turnover was fatal as he lost the ball in the paint to J.R. Holden who eventually made the winning basket with only 2.1 seconds on the clock. Gasol's ten foot jump shot at the buzzer rattled in and out, sending 18,000 Spanish fans home in disappointment. It was Spain's 6th silver medal at the Eurobasket games.

Andrei Kirilenko finished with 17 points and 5 rebounds. The tournament MVP award went to Russian team leader. "Victor Khrypa was also deserving," said coach, David Blatt; "and let's not forget the defensive job that Holden did on Gasol, and before that Tony Parker of France. We did not want to double team Gasol unless he put the ball on the floor. We played a lot of matchup zone and didn't allow Gasol to get the ball close to the rim. We wanted to put him on the line and it worked. We also did a great job against Calderon. He didn't play as well as he did in the last game against us."

The leading scorer of the tournament was Dirk Nowitzki whose German team beat Croatia for fifth place. Nowitzki finished with 31 points and 12 rebounds and averaged 24 points for the tournament.

The leading rebounder was Yniv Green of Israel who averaged almost ten rebounds a game.

Lithuania, a small Baltic nation, finished a ‘disappointing’ third, beating Greece 78-69 to earn the bronze medal. Lithuania was led by Theo Papaloukas with 19 points. The Greek team was the 2005 Eurobasket defending champion.

Lithuania was the first stop on a seven nation tour of Europe that included stops in Italy, Germany, France, Greece, Turkey and Israel. The European tour finished up in Paris with a game against the European all stars. Ken and I decided to join Matthew in Vilnius, the republic’s capital and largest city. This small nation of only 25,000 square miles is located on the Baltic Sea and shares borders with Latvia, Belarus and Poland. Lithuania declared its independence in 1990 after 46 years of occupation by the Soviet Union preceded by five years occupation by Nazi Germany. Lithuania was admitted to the United Nations in 1991 after the Soviet Union joined the rest of the world and recognized Lithuania’s sovereignty.

Ken and I flew first class on the flight to Vilnius and I took the opportunity to see what he knew about European basketball. I shouldn’t have been surprised. “Ken, it says here that Lithuania was disappointed with their bronze medal. Isn’t third place pretty good for such a small country?”

“Sure, except that the Lithuanians are accustomed to winning.”

“Well, it says here that they won in 2003, but before that they hadn’t won since 1939,” I pointed out, figuring I had finally gotten one-up on Ken. “That’s not what I would call a dynasty.”

“Ah, but you forget about the occupation. During the Communist era, Lithuanian players formed the core of the Soviet Union teams. Remember when the Soviets won the gold medal in 1988?”

“Who can forget?” I answered. “I can still remember the disputed last second field goal and the clock-controversy that followed.”

“Maybe so, but the Soviets won and that was the end of USA basketball dominance, don’t you agree?”

“No question about that. From that point on we stopped using college players and started the ‘dream teams’.”

“Well, what you might not know is that four Lithuanians formed the core of that Soviet team and did most of the scoring; namely Valdemaras Chomicius, Rimas Kurtinaitis, Sarunas Marciulionis and Arvydas Sabonis.”

“How can anyone pronounce these names, much less remember them?” I asked in genuine amazement, “and why would you want to?”

“Because I can,” Ken replied with his big I-got-you grin. “Furthermore, my illiterate friend, since Lithuanian independence in 1990, the national team has won bronze medals in the first three Olympics to feature NBA players. They finished fourth last year.”

“I give up,” I sighed. “You are the master of trivia. But why, why does a small country like Lithuania produce so many great players and teams?”

“Coincidentally, while I was doing my research last night,” Ken said with a wink, “I came across a great quote from a book written by Michael Ferch that addresses just this question;

“So why the drive in small countries to play basketball?”

As a Lithuanian noted: “In Lithuania today, if you have money, you have no reputation, because your money is black [market] money. If you have reputation, you are teacher, scientist, artist--but you have no money. Only a basketball player has money and reputation.”

“Playing basketball has become more than just a game, it’s become part of their culture, a way to excel,” Ken added.

“You know, this is similar to what I found when I looked into why the Russians excel in tennis. I believe there is another factor that comes into play. They just want it more than we do.” I smiled inwardly as I recalled the years I spent in Paris at the French Open.

Team Lithuania was led by current NBA players; Linas Kleiza of the Denver Nuggets, Darius Songaila of the Washington Wizards and Zydrunas Ilgauskas of the Cleveland Cavaliers. However, 6’10’ forward Andris Biedrins, from Riga, proved to be nearly unstoppable and led his team in scoring with 19 points. The score was knotted at 72 and the Lithuanian team had the ball out of

bounds in their front court with only seven seconds left on the clock.

“This is a strong team,” I commented to Ken as we waited for play to resume.

“No question, they could beat a lot of NBA teams. Let’s hope we can stop them here and beat them in overtime.”

Matthew had other ideas as he came out of nowhere to deflect the inbounds pass to a teammate and raced up court where he took the return pass and dunked as the clock expired, disappointing the sellout crowd that had been primed for victory.

“Wow, can you believe that? That was just amazing,” Ken exclaimed. “I didn’t realize he was that quick.” Ken hadn’t seen Matthew play before and did not realize that last minute heroics were expected from Matthew.

“Yeah, sometimes I think Matthew is just toying with the opposition until the end of the game, when his competitive instincts take over.”

“That was unbelievable,” Ken repeated, shaking his head.

“Watch this,” I said pointing at the floor. “This is even more amazing.”

The crowd had stayed and their groans gradually changed to cheers and eventually to a standing ovation as Matthew congratulated one Lithuanian player after another, holding up their arm to salute the crowd. It was an impressive display of sportsmanship, culminated with a short speech.

“I want to dedicate this game to the past stars of Lithuanian basketball.” Sarunas Marciuliois was introduced first and received a standing ovation as Matthew recapped the highlights of his career as highlights were displayed on a high definition screen. Forty-five minutes and ten players later Matthew paused and waited for the crowd to calm.

“There is one player that is the icon of Lithuanian basketball and perhaps the greatest player of all time – bar none. I have the great pleasure of introducing ...”

The noise from the crowd drowned out Matthew’s introduction as Arvydas Sabonis walked onto the court and stood awkwardly as the enthusiastic crowd gave him a tremendous ovation.

Word on the street is that Arvydas Sabonis was only a shell of himself by the time he made it to the NBA. Everything in Sabonis' bio talks about how much better his Portland Blazer teams would have been had he played at an earlier age. This is believable when you consider that by the time he entered the league he was 31 years old with several major surgeries under his belt, yet still one of the better centers in the league.

Like most international big men, he had the ability to play on the perimeter, knocking down outside shots, and dropping dimes with the same level of ability as a Bill Walton. Sabonis played seven seasons with Portland, helping them make the playoffs in each one of his seasons, as well as guiding them to two Western Conference Finals. Blazer fans can only imagine if they had Sabonis in his prime instead of Kevin Duckworth during their NBA Finals years. It's safe to say that if Sabonis had been in his prime either Michael or Isiah would have at least one less championship.

As the applause died down, Matthew continued. "I also want to dedicate this game to the thousands of partisans and Jews that lost their lives during World War II and after, fighting for the independent Republic of Lithuania."

I didn't think it was possible, but the noise level in the 20,000 seat arena increased again with Matthew leading the applause for several minutes before waving good bye to the appreciative crowd.

"Amazing," repeated Ken. "He had the crowd in the palm of his hand."

"It's like this everywhere he goes," I pointed out.

The next stop was Berlin Germany where 20,000 screaming fans and politicians packed the arena for a game against the German National Team. Chancellor Kohl headed a delegation of politicians that were provided free passes by Matthew's advance team.

"The Germans were led by Dirk Nowitzki, all-pro forward with the Dallas Mavericks and 2007 NBA most valuable player. Other German-born players with NBA experience included 7'4" Shawn Bradley who was raised in Utah and Detlef Schrempf who was born in Leverkusen, Germany, but moved to the U.S. in high school. The German guards were good enough to lead the team to

world cup and Eurobasket championships, but they lacked NBA experience.

“Okay, Ken, here’s one for you. Who drafted Dirk Nowitzki?”

“The Dallas Mavericks, of course, or is this a trick question?”

“It’s not a trick, but just one of the worst trades in NBA history. The Milwaukee Bucks traded the rights to sign Nowitzki to the Mavericks for Tractor Traylor, a 6’9”, 300-pound journeyman out of Michigan State.”

“You would think that with all those Germans in Milwaukee, Nowitzki would have been a perfect fit for them.”

“And then ten years later they draft Yi when they have maybe ten Chinese in the entire state.”

“Go figure; think what the difference that trade made for the two franchises.”

Nowitzki tried to make a difference tonight as he poured in 44 points and grabbed 16 rebounds. Shawn Bradley was held to six points, but contributed 12 rebounds and a whopping nine blocked shots, but the German team’s inexperience at guard proved too much of a hurdle to overcome. The score was tied with five minutes to play until Matthew’s all-stars forced the German guards into four turnovers down the stretch. The final score was 77-71.

The basketball game was only a prelude to the main event. Chancellor Kohl found out the hard way that sometimes the price of a free ticket can be huge.

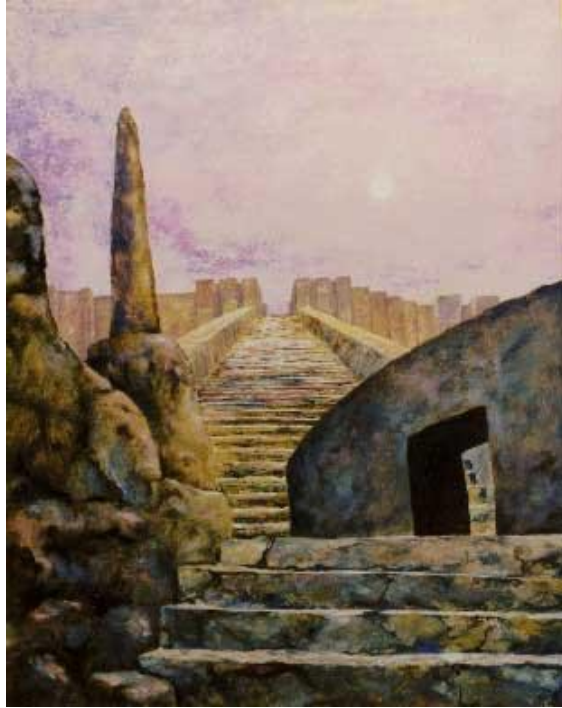
Matthew held the microphone and waited for silence. He started in a low voice that gradually increased in depth and power as he made his point. “Germany’s parliament passed legislation in 1985, making it a crime to deny the extermination of the Jews. In 1994, the law was tightened. Now, anyone who publicly endorses, denies or plays down the genocide against the Jews faces a maximum penalty of five years in jail and no less than the imposition of a fine. Austria imposes even tougher penalties. Historian David Irving has denied the Holocaust and faces up to 20 years in prison.”

“These are facts that you all know. My question is this. How can you allow foreign leaders to deny the existence of the holocaust or the right of Israel to exist?” Matthew paused before continuing.

“Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has described the Holocaust as ‘a myth’ and suggested that Israel be moved to Europe, the United States, Canada or Alaska. Previously, Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be ‘wiped off the map’. Last week, he expressed doubt that the Nazi’s killed six million Jews during World War II and Wednesday repeated that the Holocaust was a myth.”

“And what do we do about it? We issue empty condemnations. The leaders of the free world, particularly those of you with first-hand knowledge of what non-action can do, must do more. We need Germany to speak out!”

Matthew exited to a thunderous ovation while Chancellor Kohl and his advisors fumed and contemplated their options.



Steps to the Tower of Babel

Chapter 14

Babylon Complete

The five-year completion deadline was fast approaching and the pieces were finally falling into place. Restoration of ‘Old Babylon’ was almost finished thanks in large part to the success Matthew had in convincing the Germans, French and English to return the treasures looted from the city over the last 110 years. The English and surprisingly the French had been cooperative, due in large part to the pressure brought to bear by the US and the United Nations. The treasures that had been in the Louvre and British Museum were returned to Babylon.

The biggest prize may have been the Code of Hammurabi that was returned by the French. Consisting of a collection of the laws and edicts of the Babylonian King Hammurabi in 2000 BC, the Code is the earliest legal code known in its entirety. The divine origin of the written law is emphasized by a bas-relief in which the king is depicted receiving the code from the sun god, Shamash. The block of black diorite, nearly eight feet high, was unearthed by a team of French archaeologists at Susa, Iraq, formerly ancient Elam, during the winter of 1901. The block, broken in three pieces, has been restored and is now displayed in the Louvre in Paris.

“What do you know about the Code of Hammurabi?” I asked Ken one evening. “I remember you pointing out to me that code did not support Herodotus’ claim that ancient Babylon was rampant with prostitution. The French made a big deal about giving it up before they acquiesced.”

“They should, it’s the foundation for many of today’s legal systems. Hammurabi described the code as ‘enabling the land to enjoy stable government and good rule so that the strong may not oppress the weak, that justice may be dealt the orphan and the widow.’”

“Is it not unlike our bill of rights; the right to a trial by jury and that type of thing?”

“Not really, but it did address property rights and recourse the people had if they were screwed by a judge or a physician caused them injury. The criminal law was based upon the principle of equal retaliation, an eye-for-an-eye system similar to Semitic law.”

“The sun god must have been an enlightened man,” I joked. “What did he have to say about religion?”

“Nothing, that’s one thing that makes this code unique. The law offers protection to all classes of Babylonian society including women, children, and slaves, against injustice at the hands of the rich and powerful.”

“Well, I’m glad to have it back. We’ll let the historians decide where it should be presented.”

The French and British treasures paled in comparison to the contents of the of Berlin's famous Pergamon Museum. The Germans were initially reluctant to relinquish their treasures because the artifacts were an integral component of the Vorderasiatisches; the Middle East wing of the Pergamon Museum. Founded in 1899, the first floor contains fourteen rooms which give a comprehensive view of 4,000 years of history, art and culture in the Near East. Many of the exhibits were discovered by German archaeologists in the twenty years preceding World War II. These Neo-Babylonian artifacts are a significant part of the total Near East collection containing examples of architecture from the time of Nebuchadnezzar II, including the monumental Ishtar Gate, the Processional Way and part of the facade of the Throne Room from Babylon.

There were many important items in the museum that were not Babylonian, but contributed to the resistance of the Germans to relinquish any part of their collection. A particular attraction is the Pergamon Altar, one of the wonders of the ancient world. The reconstructed altar, dedicated to Zeus and Athena, dates from about 160BC. The frieze showing the gods fighting against the giants once circled the altar and is one of the finest examples of the exquisite workmanship of that era.

Pressure on the Germans mounted as the Babylon rebuilding process progressed and the world community began to see results.

Sadam Hussein's imprint on the city had been eliminated. The palace he had constructed on the hill overlooking the city had been completely renovated into a 400 room hotel and conference center. The infrastructure was complete, but there were no streetlights or utility poles marring the landscape. All power was provided through underground cables. The old city would enjoy running water, modern sewage and would be wi-fi friendly, but you couldn't tell from the outside. However, time was running out when I approached Matthew eighteen months ago.

"Matthew, the engineers are starting to run into delays. We need the artifacts here soon or start on plan-B."

"What's plan-B?"

"Plan-B is when we complete the walls and streets without the German artifacts," I replied impatiently.

"Jim, the artifacts will be here in June. Can you wait six months?"

"Okay, but six months is cutting it close. If they're not here by then we have to go ahead without them. You are aware that we need to have something ready in five years or our funding stops. Getting the artifacts in June means we have only nine months to complete the installation."

"They will be here, Jim. Have I ever let you down?"

Five months later the trucks began to arrive from Germany and the final stages of the restoration process forged ahead. It took us ten months to complete the walled city and put the finishing touches on 'Procession Street' which would be the cornerstone of our achievement. Last week we conducted a walk-through for archeologists, museum curators and historians and received rave reviews. The comments of the Pergamon museum director were particularly rewarding.

"You have captured the splendor and feeling of what the Old Babylon must have been like. I was breathless when I entered the Ishtar Gate and walked down Procession Street. The castle and temple are magnificent. I am so happy that the German government agreed to donate our artifacts."

I almost choked at his characterization of these artifacts as 'German', but I diplomatically held my tongue. I knew the truth of

how Matthew had convinced the Germans to donate the artifacts they had stolen a century earlier. It had started with the exhibition basketball game Matthew's team had played in Germany and a subsequent one-hour meeting with Chancellor Kohl. I laughed aloud when I heard that Matthew had played the "We Kick Ass" video and a subsequent video showing the popularity and support from kids and adults alike, when the Milwaukee TV station had attempted to chastise Matthew and the kick-ass theme.

"What a great story," Chancellor Kohl volunteered after the tape had been completed, "but I'm not sure why you showed it to me?"

"Chancellor, we need the Babylonian artifacts to make the restoration authentic."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wilson, but the answer is no. Our museum curators assure me that the artifacts are legally ours and that losing them would result in irreparable damage to our Middle East exhibit."

"Chancellor, you were at the game last night. Did you stay for the speeches?"

"I did. Your challenge to the German people to accept the facts of what happened in World War II was particularly courageous; although my political advisors are surprised the crowd didn't turn on you. No German politician could have made that speech."

"You just saw the tape from my high school. With all due respect, I ask you Chancellor, do you believe your political career could survive a world-wide, grass roots boycott of German exports?"

"Embargos never work," Kohl replied confidently. "There are always nations that will do business with you."

"I'm not talking about government embargos; I'm talking about basketball fans and kids world-wide, boycotting German products. Let me show you a 30-second commercial we developed that is scheduled to be shown Monday in Europe, America, Africa and the Middle East."

Minutes later Kohl offered Matthew his full support and three weeks later the German parliament had enacted a declaration to return the artifacts to Iraq.

Basketball wasn't the only game Matthew could play – he could also play political hardball when required.

Construction of new Babylon presented an entirely different set of problems. Rather than fighting with archeologists and museum curators, we were fighting time and the elements. It was a massive undertaking involving twelve construction companies from seven countries. I brought Marco in the first month to lead the effort and he had returned home to the United States only six times in four years. He had a staff of 22 assistants to control the various projects, but this was not enough to free him from the 'big decisions' that required his attention. Ken was overseeing the fifty-five accountants and clerical support staff responsible for reviewing, approving and paying vendor invoices, but it was difficult to separate the two groups. Vendors and construction companies were always screaming for payment, but Ken's group demanded proof that the work had been completed or the goods were delivered. I refused to allow this project to acquire a reputation of paying \$75.00 for a screwdriver or for paying bogus employees. We established a quality control group to help ensure we got what we paid for, but this did not stop construction companies from running to Marco demanding payment and threatening to pull their crews off the job if they weren't paid.

"Jim, the French company has stopped working on the sewage system until we bring their account up to date," Marco reported at our weekly staff meeting.

"What's the hold up?"

"The holdup is that they have invoiced us for twenty miles of work that they haven't started."

"Why?" I asked, knowing it probably wasn't as simple as it appeared.

"They claim they have been held up because of delays in 'river dredging', but that's a bunch of bullshit. All they had to do is move their crews to another sector."

"Can we compromise?"

"I tried offering them a 25% stoppage fee, but they want it all. They won't compromise."

“What’s the damage if they walked off the job?” I asked the project manager responsible for the sewage.

“It would take a few weeks for another crew to come up to speed, but in the long run this isn’t a critical path item.”

“Is the Korean company still available, Marco?”

“I talked to them this morning. They can be here next week.”

“Let’s take a five minute break;” Marco and I need to have a little heart-to-heart talk with the French.”

Ten minutes later we reconvened. “Gentlemen, the Korean company starts Monday. What’s next?”

The engineers had not exaggerated the importance of the high water table underneath the city and the difficulty this presented not only to archeologists, but also to laying the infrastructure to the new city. To complicate matters, this area of the world was a vast reservoir of underground oil deposits making it difficult to finalize a transportation grid until geologists had completed their studies. It took almost two years, but the new river bed was finally completed and water began seeping into the river bed helped out by a pumping system developed by the Germans that captured ground water from the surrounding region. The initial concern that there would not be enough water to feed the canal system had been satisfactorily addressed and the resultant drop in the water table facilitated a rapid completion of the infrastructure and highway system.

Now, with only two months before the grand opening, the new city was rounding into shape. Nine hundred thousand square feet of office would be ready by April 1st, all of it pre-leased. Another two million would be ready in six months, half of it in a high-tech office park four miles west of downtown Babylon. Two banks, and a community hospital had opened a year ago and the large, 400 bed, downtown hospital and surgical center opened last month. Condominiums and apartment complexes were popping up all over and demand was outpacing supply. The ‘Marriott Saddam Hotel and Resort’ as the former palace was nicknamed, enjoyed a 95% year-to-date occupancy rate. Three gated bedroom communities had sprung up featuring fifteen hundred 2,500 square foot homes and a private security force. Large housing projects were in varying

stages of completion featuring more affordable 800 sq. ft. condos and 1,300 square foot homes.

Downtown was for the international bankers and businessmen - the Iraqi section of the new city was for the shopkeepers and the traders. It was traditional Iraq and already sported an active farmers market and numerous souvenir shops. Iraqis hoped that when tourists tired of visiting Old Babylon, they would come here to spend their money. It was working, as this was the fastest growing area in the new city, second only to the black market shops that were cropping up all over. It was an Iraqi way of life and you couldn't stop it.

"As long as there are shortages and demand," an Iraqi government official told me, "there will be underground trading."

"Can we at least control the drugs?" I asked.

"We can try, but it's part of the culture."

"Well, let's see what we can do. Nobody wants Babylon to become a sin city again."

Mosques, adorned with beautiful minarets rising to over 100 feet, were everywhere as Iraq was 97% Muslim, but there was also a small Hindu Temple, Roman Catholic Church and a synagogue. So far there had been no problems. I kept my fingers crossed.

The grand opening was set for March 20th, the time of the vernal equinox, the date of the traditional New Year's celebration in the Assyrian empire. We had a lot of clean-up work to do to prepare.



Chapter 15

Africa

As NBA rosters begin to swell with international players, the league has started to look for the next frontier of great basketball talent. Most experts believe the next frontier is Africa.

"I think if there's a market in the future, it's Africa," said Dallas Mavericks coach Don Nelson, one of the major figures in the international game. "The problem is infrastructure. There is virtually none over there. That's why you see raw, talented athletes that really don't have a good feel for the game and as a result, those guys have a hard time sticking; Hakeem Olajuwon, Michael Olowokandi and Mutumbo are the exceptions. The majority of African players that come to the States have lacked that development in their formative years. And just like in scholastic education where you can't be expected to skip high school and go to Harvard, it's the same thing with basketball. Although there are a few exceptions, a young player cannot be expected to come to America and excel at the collegiate or professional level if they aren't taught the basics during your formative years."

Basketball without Borders Africa, an NBA sponsored program, is one of several programs designed to rectify this situation and take advantage of the large talent pool that exists throughout Africa. The camp is held in Johannesburg and brings together the continent's top 100 junior high school players for three and a half days of intensive training. This year, 22 African nations will be represented. Similar basketball instruction camps have been held for the past three years in Europe and for the past two years in Latin America. Dikembe Mutombo has run the camp since 2004 with the help of more than twenty NBA players and coaches scheduled to participate. Mutombo, who didn't start playing basketball until he was 19, went on to become the NBA's greatest

shot blockers of all time in a career that spanned three decades. Mutumbo was the exception to the rule.

Matthew's all star team scheduled a month tour of African countries including Chad, Algeria, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, the Senegal, Angola, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Each stop included clinics, exhibition games and a match-up against the host nation national team. I caught up with Matthew in Ethiopia where I watched him personally spend two hours with a tall, 16-year old boy named Mekdem. The boy had no idea how to play defense, shoot a free throw or execute a two-handed bounce pass, but boy, Mekdem could jump.

Matthew and Mekdem passed the ball back and forth for fifteen minutes alternating bounce passes and chest passes, as the boy tried to copy what Matthew was showing him. Twenty other boys watched and listened. Matthew's patience was amazing.

"Try to keep the ball on your fingers; don't let it get into the palm of your hands," Matthew said as he demonstrated the proper way to make a chest pass."

"That's it; now let's pretend there is someone guarding me, so we'll try a bounce pass. Not bad, but remember to snap it with your fingers and wrists. That's good, just keep practicing that."

"Soft hands," he shouted to the attentive crowd that watched his every move. "When you catch the ball, you need soft hands. Pretend someone is handing you a baby, just let the ball settle into your hands. Don't fight it. Okay, practice that every day. Nobody wants to pass the ball to you if you can't catch it. Good, that's what I'm talking about, now you're kicking ass." The big smile on the Mekdem's face told me he had seen the video and wanted to kick some ass himself.

Matthew's teammates took over the instructions as Matthew walked over to where I was sitting. "Coach, it's good to see you, we could use another good teacher out here."

"I don't have your patience, Matthew; I don't know how you do it. What's your secret?"

"No secret, Coach. I just love basketball and love people. What a thrill it would give me if some of these kids used basketball as a means to get a college education and give something back to the community. Do you know that Mekdem means 'first' in his

language? Mekdem told me he wants to be the first from his village to play basketball in America. Doesn't that bring tears to your eyes?"

It did, especially the way Matthew said it. I realized that his tour was much more than large crowds and world leaders – it was also an opportunity to work one-on-one with the children. Words were not necessary as my eyes answered Matthew's question. I changed the subject.

"I was going to catch your game tonight against the Ethiopian all-stars. Do they have anyone any good?"

"They have some nice players, but if you want to see some good basketball, come see us play next Wednesday in the Republic of Congo. This will also give you an idea of what this program is all about."

Ken, Marco, Father Sean and I chartered a plane Wednesday to see Matthew's International all-star team play an all-African team led by NBA players Hakeem Olajuwon, with the Houston Rockets, now Portland's Ruben Boumtje-Boumtje (Cameroon) and Toronto's Mamadou N'diaye and DeSagana Diop from Senegal and Orlando's Olumide Oyedeji from Nigeria. Dikembe Mutumbo, from Zaire, was team captain.

The first half was nothing, if not entertaining. It was a typical all-star game with Olajuwon leading fast breaks and throwing down dunks reminiscent of his college days with Clyde "the Glide" Drexel at the University of "Phi-Slamma-Jamma", sometimes referred to as the University of Houston, and players on both sides getting open for wide open jump shots and layups. The score was tied at 63 when the horn sounded.

"Where's the defense?" Ken asked, as the players left the floor. "It's like watching an NBA all-star game."

"The only person that hasn't scored much is Matthew," Marco remarked. "I thought he was better than that."

Father Sean and I kept silent. We had learned that Matthew could defend himself and there was no need to sing his praises.

Africa took the ball out in the second half and quickly got the ball to Diop who drove for the basket only to lose the ball as Matthew reached in and deflected it away. The turnover started a fast break resulting in two points. Moments later Olajuwon missed

a short, contested jumper. Matthew rebounded and started another fast break resulting in what appeared to be an easy layup for a teammate until Mutumbo leaped high to swat the ball into the stands. The crowd stood and roared as Mutumbo waived his forefinger at the player - 'don't bring that weak stuff into my house', Mutumbo's trademark gesture that now draws technical fouls in the NBA for taunting – but not in Africa.

The rest of the half featured exciting, hard-nosed defensive basketball. It was almost impossible to score inside on the African big men unless you beat them down the court off a steal or long rebound. The International team relied almost solely on Matthew's long range shooting and he didn't disappoint. Although double and triple teamed, frequently by seven-footers, Matthew could get his shot off any time he wanted.

"I thought Jordan was the best at creating separation for his shot, but Wilson is even better," Marco said in awe, wanting to retract his earlier skepticism.

"The difference is that Wilson can do it from longer range," Ken added.

Matthew could also do it on the defensive end as he disappointed the sold-out crowd of 17,000 when he blocked Olajuwon's shot at the buzzer to give the International team a one-point victory.

"Come on, let's try to beat the crowd out of here," Marco said as the crowd gave the players a standing ovation.

"Hold on, I have a feeling the best is yet to come." I said, remembering Matthew's promise to show us what this African basketball tour was all about. The crowd was still applauding the players as Matthew grabbed a microphone and asked for silence.

"I want to thank all the great basketball players that played tonight and have helped make basketball in Africa so popular." Matthew hesitated and the crowd applauded. "Tonight, we have raised almost \$400,000, all of which will be donated to developing youth basketball in the Republic of Congo and throughout Africa." More applause. "But tonight I want to personally pay my respects to one great man; Dikembe Mutumbo, will you please join me?" The crowd stood to cheer one of their own.

“Dikembe, I will let others praise you for your basketball skills which were on display tonight. I am more interested in Dikembe Mutumbo, the person, the man who never forgot the less fortunate people from your home country of Zaire, now the Republic of Congo. You didn’t forget who you are or where you came from, and for that I applaud you.” The crowd remained standing and gave Mutumbo another long and enthusiastic ovation.

“Most of you know this man can dunk a basketball and block the shots of others like no one else in NBA history, but do you know he paid for the Congolese women's basketball team's trip to the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and for the track team's uniforms and expenses?”

“Do you know the Mutombo set up the Dikembe Mutombo Foundation to combat childhood diseases in this country and that he regularly sends back supplies and medicine?”

“Do you know he has contributed \$15 million dollars of his own money to help fund a 300-bed Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital and Research Center, named for the memory of his mother?”

“Do you know that every year he returns home in the NBA offseason and works tirelessly with children in your country’s youth programs?”

“Do you know this man is fluent in nine languages, five of them African, and uses his voice to speak out about the 800 million people living on the edge of starvation and has recorded Public Service Announcements in English and French calling for support in the battle to prevent 24,000 people from dying of hunger every year?”

Matthew paused as the crowd erupted in cheers again. “Dikembe Mutombo Mpolondo Mukamba Jean Jacques Wamutombo”, Matthew started, putting a hand on Mutumbo’s shoulder and using his full name, “this world would be a much better place if there were more men and women like you. Please let me know if you ever need my help, and I will be there for you.”

The crowd roared in delight, and pride in their countryman, as Mutumbo and Wilson embraced.

Father McGinnis summed it up for all of us; “I could have skipped the basketball and gone directly to the main course. Wasn’t that wonderful?”

“There wasn’t a dry eye in the place,” Ken added.

“*It makes me feel ashamed that I don’t do more,*” I thought. I made a promise to myself to sit down with Rosann the next time I was home and decide how we could help make a difference. We needed to devote time as well as money, much like Dikembe Mutombo.

Chapter 16

Akitu New Year Festival

There is a saying in sports made famous by Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams*; “build it and they will come.” Well, our job was done and they would come. I had done my part. We finished our work on schedule and Babylon was ready to be reintroduced to the world. What better time than Akitu, the traditional New Year’s festival. The eleven-day festival was expected to draw millions including fourteen heads of states and numerous dignitaries.

In ancient Babylon, Akitu was celebrated at the time of vernal equinox, the beginning of spring and the time of hope. Akitu was a ritual enactment of a battle between the new god Marduk and the old goddess Tiamat. The myth was the story of creation, and the ritual enactment of this battle between the gods was for the purposes of bringing heaven and earth, macrocosm and microcosm, back into proper relationship and synchronization. Putting it more simply, it was a yearly ritual performed for the purposes of starting over fresh with a clean slate.

New Year's is the oldest of all holidays and was first observed in ancient Babylon about 4,000 years ago. The Babylonian New Year began with the first visible crescent of the first New Moon after the first day of spring, the vernal equinox. It made perfect sense to celebrate in spring when new crops are planted and

everything starts growing again. Viewed as the season of rebirth, Akitu is a time of hope and optimism. Many ancient cultures celebrated the New Year twice, in the spring during planting and in the autumn during harvesting. Babylonians and Assyrians placed greater importance on the spring festival.

Planning for the 11-day festival was undertaken by a blue-ribbon committee of politicians and tribal leaders. Our job was to make sure that the committee's wish list was fulfilled. Four days before the festival Marco and I met with the Akitu committee for the last time. We were ready; the basic elements were in place.

There were two main temples framed by lush gardens and ponds. Regularly spaced trees and shrubs and on either side were majestic porticoes inlaid with decorative friezes, an unusual feature in Mesopotamian temples. The "cella", the inner chamber of the temple, would serve as a huge, banquet hall for the Akitu ceremony. The temples were surrounded by elaborate, carefully watered gardens designed to remind the people that the god, Marduk, was not merely a conqueror of Chaos, but also the personification of the life in nature. The Bit Akitu, the place where the Creator's victory over Tiamat, the god of chaos, was celebrated and was located two hundred meters outside the city walls. Inside the Bit Akitu was the main temple or 'House of Akitu', the focal point of the religious celebration.

"Let's go through the schedule one day at a time," the committee chairman requested, "but before we start, I must say that the temples and grounds look wonderful; my compliments to you and your team."

"Thank you. I thought the landscaping turned out well," I concurred. "We should be able to create an authentic celebration."

"How many people do you expect?"

"Three million, maybe more; we don't know for sure. Keep in mind this is a celebration of the people and in ancient Babylon, everyone was expected to attend."

Marco interrupted. "You realize the Akitu grounds won't handle more than a couple million people. Where are you planning to house them?"

“The first five days of the celebration are individual prayer days and we have scheduled the different cities to come on specified days.”

“If they all show up at one time, I’m not sure that Marduk will be able to defeat Tiamat this time,” Ken added in his dry-humor tone. I didn’t get it until I remembered that Tiamat was the god of chaos. I wanted to laugh, but thought better of it.

“Ken,” I admonished, knowing the Iraqis might not think this was funny.

“On day six, the gods arrive by barge at Babylon, among them Nabu, the son and avenger, who takes up residence in Ezida, his private chapel in the temple of Marduk. Is the waterway ready?”

He spoke of gods, but was obviously referring to the 37 dignitaries that would be sailing up the Euphrates River, duplicating the path taken by the gods 6,000 years earlier. “Marco, are we ready?” I asked, already knowing the answer. We had done a complete walkthrough of the entire project yesterday and everything looked good.

“There are fifty barges available and the water is fifteen feet deep and clear. Security will be handled by the Iraqi army with air support provided by the air force. Luxury suites have been reserved for heads of state in the Nebuchadnezzar Palace in Old Babylon. If they needed more space, we got them hotel rooms on the hill,” Marco explained, referring to The Sadamm Marriott.

“Excellent. By the way, I recommend that you find a good spot to view the parade of barges. It will be something special. The committee is installing temporary grandstands along the route.

“I’ll be there. We have already staked out a good spot,” I replied.

“Day seven, Nabu, with help from other gods, liberates Marduk by force from the mountain of the Netherworld, and on day eight all powers are conferred to the liberated god who then is ready to lead the battle against the powers of darkness, death and chaos that might affect Babylon in the coming year,” the committee chairman continued. “After Marduk’s liberation, the statues of the gods are brought together in the Chamber of Destinies to foretell the future.”

“Jim, does your team have any responsibilities on these days?”

“This will be the first live test of the four restaurants and lounges in the palace. The service staff has been adequately trained. Marco, anything to add?”

“No, other than the liquor situation - it’s there if they want it.”

The committee ignored Marco’s remark, knowing that despite traditional Islam teachings, liquor would be flowing freely in most restaurants and suites.

“Day nine is the triumphal procession to the Bit Akitu under the king’s guidance. This represents the participation of the community in the victory taking place in nature and Marduk’s destruction of Tiamat, the god of chaos. Any questions?”

“Just a general question,” Ken replied. “Who is going to play the king?” Good question, I thought. The king represents the people during the Akitu Festival and is a key player in the celebration. The political implications of this designation were huge.

“You will need to wait to find out, Ken” the chairman said politely, “but you are correct. The king’s participation is fundamental to the celebration as is the participation of the people. Remember that the king in Mesopotamia was a trained initiate, not perfect, but a model of wholeness the subjects should emulate. As such, the king represents the people in Akitu.” I resisted my urge to press Ken’s point.

“On day 10, Marduk celebrates his victory with the gods of the Upper and Under Worlds at a banquet in the Bit Akitu and returns to Babylon for the Sacred Marriage Rite. The king was then made the Divine Bridegroom, and the High Priestess as his Divine Consort, the Goddess incarnate. Are there any questions?”

“Who is playing the High Priestess?” Ken asked, obviously bored with the slow pace of the meeting

“Actually, Ken, there will be a group marriage outside the Marduk’s temple, Esagila, where the original sacred marriage probably took place. We are expecting over a thousand couples.”

“Regarding the feast,” I interrupted; “might I suggest you have a feast for the people on the Bit Akitu grounds, but have a second feast for the heads of state in Nebuchadnezzar’s castle. That would make your security people happy.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll talk it over with my superiors, but I think they will agree.”

“Day 11 is the Second Determination of Destiny. The gods assemble once more in the Chamber of Destinies to determine the destiny of society in the ensuing year. This is the last act of deities, bringing auguries and omens for the prosperity of the land. We are going to have a ‘head of state’ business conference that morning and try to take advantage of so many key people being together in the same hotel.”

“Let’s hope they have been talking one-on-one throughout the week,” I added.

“Day 12 - The visiting gods return to their temples, and life returned to its everyday normalcy, and the business of plowing and sowing and trading for the new crops is taken at hand.”

“Transportation has been arranged,” Marco responded before the question was asked.

“Any other questions before we break up?” the chairman asked.

“How are the Kurds reacting to all of this?” Ken inquired. “Don’t some of them still believe that the Akitu celebration is Kurdish in origin and traces back to 612 BC when Kawa led them in an attack on the king’s palace which effectively brought an end to the Assyrian Empire.” I was about to chastise Ken, but stopped when I saw that the committee took this question seriously. The Kurds were a real concern to the Iraqis.

“You are correct, Mr. Reed. A sizeable group of Kurds still make that claim even though historians trace the Akitu ceremony back to 2,000 BC. We are keeping a close watch on them.”

“If that’s all, I thank you gentlemen and I look forward to seeing you at the Akitu Festival.”

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Marco will stay to keep an eye on things, but Ken and I are headed to China tonight to do a little sightseeing with the wives and watch a friend play basketball. We’ll be back in time for the procession of gods.”



Chapter 17

Beijing, China

We visited The Great Wall, The Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, but nothing compared to this. It was the largest crowd for a basketball game in China's long and glorious history. 91,000 people packed the "Burkes Nest", home of the 2008 summer Olympics opening and closing ceremonies. The game had been originally scheduled for the new Wukesong Indoor Stadium which hosted the Olympic basketball games, but the 18,000 seat stadium was far too small. This was a culmination of a five-city tour through China that included competitions against the Chinese team in Hong Kong, Chengdu, Shanghai and Taiwan plus clinics for junior basketball players in twenty small cities. The four games were split evenly, but the real winner was China's rapidly growing junior basketball program which was the primary beneficiary of the \$33 million raised by Matthew's exhibition tour.

Matthew led his all star team out of the tunnel and was greeted with polite applause from appreciative Chinese fans that were well aware of the financial contributions that this group was making to their children's future. Moments later, the polite applause became a thunderous ovation as Yao Ming proudly led the Chinese National Team into the stadium.

Yao Ming, at 7'6", 310 pounds, is a dominant force in the NBA, and throughout China. One of the first Chinese players to play in the NBA, Yao Ming was the first to be drafted #1 in 2002 and the first to be considered an all-star. It would be easy to define Yao Ming as simply just another tall basketball player, but he is much more. Second only to Michael Jordan as a world sports celebrity, Yao Ming is one of the top 100 most influential people in the world. He is a living symbol for a country of 1.3 billion people.

Born in the modern city of Shanghai in 1980, Yao grew up in an era when 80% of China was agriculture and still aspired to the

teachings of Confucius, a 5th century B.C. scholar who taught the proper way to act, whom you should respect and how you should approach everyday life. There was little freedom of choice and room for alternative philosophies such as Taoism and Buddhism. Yao learned the principles of Confucianism, but also studied the teachings of others such as Zhuge Liang; a military advisory who lived from 181-234 A.D. Liang advocated providing people with beliefs that could be applied to the problem at hand. This sounds simple, but it is a radical departure for traditional Chinese thinking. Yao Ming is competitive on the court and has never been afraid to state his goals, in a time when most Chinese avoid making claims of victory and make excuses why they might not win.

There is a Chinese saying that “the first is always the best,” and Wang Zhi Zhi was the first Chinese basketball ambassador. China’s flag bearer in the 2000 summer Olympics in Sydney Australia, Wang was the first Asian player to be drafted into the NBA as the 36th pick in the 1999 draft. He dominated the younger Yao Ming in early match-ups and rarely spoke to the new pretender. Wang was more popular in China than Yao Ming, but his popularity fell when he refused to play for the national team after his first year with the Dallas Mavericks. Conversely, Yao Ming has made it clear that, forced to choose, he would choose the honor of playing for the Chinese National Team over the NBA. Today Wang languishes on the bench for the Mavericks and his popularity has declined. In China, and with Yao Ming, there is no bigger honor or responsibility than playing for your country. Yao Ming was honored with carrying China’s flag in the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Greece and in 2008 was the most photographed Olympian during the games opening ceremony.

In his autobiography Yao cites two quotes that influenced his development; “The successful are the kings and royalty; those who have failed are bandits and villains.” Every Chinese person knows this expression and many people live by it. The second adage was applicable to today’s contest. “Winners always write the history books.” There would be no losers this evening, but Yao wanted to write the history of this historic competition. These thoughts were in Yao’s mind as he led his team onto the floor. It was time to step up and be a winner.

Outdoor basketball games on temporary platforms, with a 15 mph wind swirling around the arena, often blowing shot attempts off course, do not lend themselves to perfect basketball. The conditions favor the big man and China had three; Yao Ming, Yi JianLian, a 7', 230 pound forward who played for the Guangdong Tigers, and Chang Zhi Zhi from the Dallas Mavericks. Many Chinese including Ming himself, believe that Yi is already the best player in China.

The game seesawed back and forth and was tied as the teams entered the fourth quarter. Yao Ming's 22 points and Yi's 20 points were offset by 38 points from Matthew who was unstoppable, hitting 14 of 18 shots including six three-pointers, despite the windy conditions. Yao Ming sank a 6' hook shot to put China up by one point with only seven seconds to play. Matthew took the inbounds pass and raced up the sideline looking for an open jump shot, but at the last moment, dribbled behind his back to elude his defender and headed to the basket where Yi JianLian was waiting. The crowd was silent as Matthew soared high above the basket for a two-handed, in-your-face-dunk that would win the game for the all stars. Yi was too light and lacked the strength to stop Matthew. Maybe in five years he would add weight and muscle, but today he had no chance.

But Yao Ming could and did. Displaying the competitiveness and will to win that is lacking in most Chinese, Yao raced up the floor after his go ahead basket, Mao launched his 7'6", 320 pound body into the air and managed to get one-hand on the basketball; deflecting it away a moment before Matthew was about to throw it down for the winning points. Yao sprawled to the floor under the basket as tens of millions Chinese cheered across the huge nation and thousands stormed the court and lifted Yao onto their shoulders in what was later described as an atypical, Chinese reaction. History books would describe this exhibition victory as one of China's most glorious moments in sports, and it was Yao Ming who would write the history.

I asked Matthew later why he had not pulled up for a short jump shot as he had done all evening, rather than drive all the way to the basket. His reply was interesting. "What would that have accomplished? How many people would that have pleased?"

It was yet another confirmation that Matthew was always one step ahead of us.

“How is Babylon looking?” Matthew asked, deftly changing the subject. “I understand you made the five-year time schedule the State Department gave you?”

I laughed. “Has it been that long? It seems like yesterday, but yes, we have made some good progress. Didn’t I email you pictures?”

“You did, Jim. I just never got around to looking at them.”

“What is it about Babylon, Matthew? You have been indispensable in getting things done, but you have never visited the job site. Why?”

“I’ve been busy, Jim.”

“Are you coming to the Akitu Festival? Sixteen heads of state have already committed.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Why? Why don’t you want to be part of the new Babylon?”

Matthew hesitated before answering. “There is a reason that Babylon was called the city of sin. It was in Babel, the Hebrew spelling of Babylon, where man first rebelled against God by attempting to build a tower that would reach heaven. Yahweh was not pleased and destroyed the worker’s ability to communicate, thereby creating so much confusion among the workers that they were forced to give up their plans.”

“But that was then and this is now. We have built a brand new city.”

“Do you remember what Jeremiah prophesized?”

“Jeremiah predicted the destruction of Babylon, but the prophecy never came true. Babylon never was destroyed, it was just allowed to decay and wither away.”

“Jim, Jeremiah was referring to the future Babylon, the one you just built. Read Revelation, the final book in the Bible.”

“You believe it will happen, don’t you?” I said with a new understanding of where Matthew was coming from. “You always believed this project was doomed from the start.”

“You have done a great job, Jim. It was necessary to rebuild the city so that the prophecy could be fulfilled.”

Ken and I flew back to Baghdad and arrived in time to meet Rosann and Chris at the airport. It had been four weeks and the ladies looked especially good. We cleared customs and found the man holding the “Simpson Party” sign. Thirty minutes later our luggage was loaded and the limo driver started the fifty-six mile journey to Baghdad.

“This is first class treatment,” Chris commented. “Do you boys have something bad you want to tell us?”

“I agree, Jim,” Rosann added. “You don’t usually spend money like this unless there is a reason. Are you going to tell us that your project is extended and you’re not flying home with us next week?”

“Nope,” I laughed, “we have no sinister motives other than the obvious. We just want you to be impressed when we drive into the new city.”

“Have there been security concerns?” Chris asked, noticing the bullet proof glass in the windows.

“Not really,” I replied. “It’s been quiet.”

Ken supported me; “It seems everyone wants Babylon to succeed; Sunnis, Shiites, Iranians, Kurds; everyone. There has hardly been crime in the city to speak of.”

Two hours later we still had not reached Babylon as our limo was forced to slow down for thousands of pilgrims making the trip to Babylon on foot. “I thought you said the trip would only be an hour.”

Fifteen minutes later my cell phone rang. “It’s Marco,” I said as I answered the phone. Five minutes later I hung up and turned to Ken. “Apparently Marco has been busy while we have been gone.”

“Good-busy, I hope,” Ken said with concern.

“Remember that last committee meeting when they thought that they might have three million people for the ceremony and I asked where they would put them?”

“Don’t tell me they underestimated and everyone came at once.”

“You guessed it. Marco says there were over ten million the first day and as you can see, the roads are still packed with pilgrimages from as far away as Turkey and Iran. He estimates there are over thirty million people in the city today.”

“How did they handle it,” Chris asked thinking like a former CIA agent, which she was. “Security must be a nightmare with all Shias, Shiites and Kurds all thrown into the same mess.”

“No, surprisingly security is not an issue. Marco says there hasn’t been a single act of terrorism, or even a serious crime, since the festival began five days ago; not one!”

“You know, that’s what the historians said about Akitu. It’s a time of rejoicing and peace.”

“So, what is the problem?” Rosann asked.

“The challenge is to find a place for all these people to sleep and eat,” Ken said. “Not to mention getting thirty million people to the prayer temples that are designed to hold a million people at most.”

“How are they handling it?” Chris asked again.

“After our meeting last week, Marco and I discussed the potential problems if three million people showed up at once,” I answered with my proud, I thought of everything voice. “Before we left for China the U.S. and Iraqi military were building tent camps in every park, stadium and open space in the city complete with portable toilets and mess halls.”

“So despite the size of the crowd, the supply system is already in place,” Ken surmised.

“That’s right. Marco built five huge camps outside the city, complete with small temples where the people can celebrate Akitu without going all the way into the city.”

“See how much can get done when you boys are away,” Chris commented while poking Ken in the ribs.

“Look, we are coming up on one now,” Rosann said as she pointed to the right. “And I don’t know if you boys have noticed, but there has been a steady stream of people since we left Baghdad. How many more people can they handle?”

“Today should be the end of it. Tomorrow the gods arrive by barge, sailing up the Euphrates. I would think most people would want to be here for the procession.”

“That’s going to be quite a sight, do we have good seats?” Rosann asked?

I started to answer, but was interrupted. “Shhh; what’s that noise?” We all listened as the noise became louder. It best could be

described as a loud, mournful wailing. I finally figured out where it was coming from.

“Muslims are praying. Marco mentioned the unbelievable noise during the daily prayer ceremonies. This must be the midday prayer.”

“When do they pray?” Chris asked. “Ken, you must know this.”

Rosann beat Ken to the punch, saving us a long lecture.

“Muslims pray once before the sun rises, once at noon, once at midday, once when the sun sets, and once at night. The prayer times vary daily depending on the season and the rising and setting of the sun,” Rosann said proudly, looking directly at Ken.

Not to be outdone, Ken added his two cents worth. “But did you know that Muslims only pray towards Mecca because that is where the Kabaa is located; the house of god built by the prophet Abraham. If you live in Mecca you face in the direction of Kabaa.”

“Too much information,” I added, trying to put an end to the one-upmanship, but Rosann managed to have the last word.

“If this noise is the product of Muslims praying, I wonder what it sounds like at funerals.”

Twenty minutes later the limo dropped us off in front of the Ishtar Gate, a magnificent structure dating back to 575 BC. One of eight gates to the inner city, the Ishtar Gate is the most beautiful and ornate. Lavishly decorated with blue glazed tiles and alternating rows of dragons and aurochs in bas relief, the Gate together with the Walls of Babylon was once considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

“Come on ladies, it’s a short walk to the Days-Inn. There are no cars allowed in the old city.” The Gate opened up onto Procession Street where tomorrow the gods would walk to Marduk’s temple.

Ken and I were proud puppies as we saw the reaction of Rosann and Chris. Their mouths were agape as they took in the splendor of the gold-laden street and the 120 ornate friezes that lined Procession Street, each depicting a golden lion. Ahead of us was Nebuchadnezzarkaneezer’s castle that rose four hundred feet high, blocking the lower half of the Tower of Babel that reached up

to the clouds. To our right were the hanging gardens, still considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

I looked at Rosann and saw the tears come to her eyes. "Are you okay?" I asked, not knowing what else to say.

"I have never seen anything so spectacular and beautiful," she said between tears. "The pictures you emailed me don't do it justice."

Chris was equally impressed. "It's like we went back three thousand years in time when we walked through that gate. It's absolutely amazing."

I was more than a little proud. "Well, here is our hotel," I said as we entered the Nebuchadnezzar's castle. "Let me pick up the keys."

"How did you swing this?" Ken asked as he walked with me to the front desk. "I thought this was only for heads of state?"

"And also for people that know that the U.S. party somehow booked two extra suites by mistake," I answered with a smile.

"I wonder how that could have happened," Ken mused.

"Guys, we're going to change and meet down here in thirty minutes," Chris declared.

"We can't wait to see the city," Rosann agreed. "It's unbelievable."

Ken and I looked at each other and shook our heads from east to west. "No way," we said simultaneously. "Dinner reservations are for 8:00."

"It's only 3:00. We have plenty of time to walk around before dinner," Chris suggested, refusing to get the point.

The following afternoon we watched from our vantage point among the splendor of the Hanging Gardens as the boats came into view. Millions of people lined both sides of the Euphrates and packed the viewing stands along the route, but the four of us were alone, high above the throng of revelers. For the last fifteen minutes we could hear the roar of the people upriver as the procession passed.

"This reminds me of the Gasparilla invasion in Tampa," Rosann said in awe as the flotilla of vintage sailing craft preceded the barges carrying the gods. Rosann was referring to the annual

invasion of the pirate, Jose Gasparilla, who every year accompanied by hundreds of revelers, sails his pirate ship into Tampa Bay and captures the city. The mayor of Tampa surrenders the keys to the city, initiating a wild celebration and victory parade.

“Yes, in a small way, it does, but notice that there are no power boats in this invasion.”

“Thanks so much for inviting me here,” Chris said, leaning over to kiss me on the cheek.

“Don’t thank me, thank Ken. He did all the work.”

“Again?”

“Look, here comes Marduk’s barge,” Ken said as the largest barge complete with a small temple and a raised throne came into view.

“Do you see who I see,” I said, passing the binoculars to Ken.

“What is it?” Chris asked.

“The President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad” Ken announced. “I don’t believe it.”

“Isn’t that a slap at the United States?” Rosann asked. “Why did we allow it?”

“Nobody knew,” I replied, “nobody except that damn committee chairman we dealt with,” I muttered with genuine anger.

“Let’s go get a drink,” Ken suggested.

The 11-day Akitu festival was an overwhelming success from an organizational perspective. Day after day the events went as planned and the participation of the common people represented by the King, played by the President of Iraq, went much better than expected. U.S. and Western diplomats kept a stiff upper lip regarding the choice of Ahmadinejad to assume the role of the conquering god Marduk, who triumphed over chaos.

Did the United States represent chaos to the Muslim world?

The four of us had a wonderful time and met more dignitaries than we ever thought possible. It would probably improve our business opportunities in the future, but Ken and I were more interested in making sure Chris and Rosann were happy. “If Rosann is happy, I am happy,” I told Ken.

“And if Rosann isn’t happy, ...” I interrupted before he could finish the adage.

We had nothing to worry about as the women continued to be star struck by the beauty of the city. We climbed to the top of the Tower of Babel, spent hours upon hours looking at the artifacts displayed in the castle and temples, took a moonlight boat ride on the Euphrates, visited the markets and shops in new Babylon, dined at the small restaurant in the Hanging Gardens and made love every day. After five years of hard work, Ken and I were able to step back and enjoy Babylon for the first time.

“Where are you taking us to dinner tonight?” Rosann asked the four of us walked along Procession Street for the last time. “It’s our last night. How about the restaurant in Hanging Gardens again, assuming we can get a reservation?”

“That would be fine, but first I need to attend the final ‘meeting of the gods’. I want to see what Marduk, Iranian President Ahmadinejad, has to say. Akitu tradition holds that on the eleventh day the gods determine the destiny of Iraq for the following year.”

“That ought to be good,” Ken added. “Why don’t I take the ladies to dinner and you join us when you can.”

The three of them were just ordering drinks when I arrived. “Did the meeting of the gods break up early?” Ken asked.

“What’s wrong, Jim?” Rosann asked as she saw the ashen expression on my face. I waited for the drinks to come before I answered.

“Marduk announced that an hour ago Iran and the Palestinians signed a peace treaty and he personally has moved his headquarters to the Temple on the Mount.”

“What’s that mean?” Chris gasped, knowing something was terribly wrong.

“It means that that Iran has declared war on Israel,” Ken answered.

“And that’s not all,” I continued, taking a gulp from my drink and signaling to the waiter to bring another. “The King announced a joint treaty with Iran and the intention of moving the capital of Iraq to Babylon. The coalition, meaning the U.S., has been given one month to pack up and leave.”

“You mean that Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Ahmadinejad have been planning this all along as we busted our asses to rebuild Babylon for them,” Ken said angrily.

“I’m not sure when this started, but it must have been in the works for some time,” I replied as the drinks came none too soon.

“Is there anything else?” Rosann asked.

“Isn’t that enough?” I replied curtly, before realizing I was taking my anger out on the wrong person. “I’m sorry, Mary, I’m just in a foul mood.”

“That’s okay, I understand – this time. Why don’t we forget dinner and head back to the Days Inn and order pizza?”

“Let’s stay here,” I suggested. “It might be the last time we will ever be here.”

Chris agreed. “Let’s celebrate the great work you two did and let others worry about Babylon’s destiny.”

Chapter 18

Iran Expansion

The four of us headed towards Baghdad the next morning along with millions of Iraqis in a jubilant, anti-American, mood. Unlike our ride into Babylon, the return trip to Baghdad was done in a military escort and an ordinary car so as not to attract undue attention. The peaceful atmosphere of Akitu was replaced by militants lining the highway brandishing automatic guns and chanting slogans. We were all relieved when the wheels of the Boeing 767 lifted off from Baghdad.

“Drinks anyone?” asked the stewardess as we took our seats.

“Scotch, and keep ‘em coming.” Ken replied. “Will anyone join me?”

“I’ll have a bloody mary, but I’m going to be careful. Drinking on airplanes gets to me because of the altitude.”

“So, what’s your point?” Ken asked as the girls ordered wine. Ken was in an aggressive mood and apparently felt no effect from last night’s drinking.

I called Matthew on the phone built into the back rest of the seat in front of me as the drinks were served. It rang just once before I heard the familiar voice. “Coach, I was hoping you would call.”

“Well hello, Matthew, I tried to reach you last night. I’m sure you heard the news.”

“What news, I’ve been out of communication at a fat farm since Wednesday. What’s going on?”

Matthew had me going for a moment until I envisioned him on a fat farm. “Yeah, you’re body fat must be in the 2% range. You really need to lose weight.”

“I heard the news and by the way, I am relieved that you made it out safely. Please give my best to Rosann and the others.”

“I will.”

“Is there anything you can tell me about the situation in Iraq?”

I described the mood of the people on the ride from Babylon to the airport. “Ahmadinejad definitely tapped into their nationalism. Did I tell you I was there when he made the announcement?”

“No, give me your impressions. What was his demeanor?”

I thought for a moment before answering. “He really believes he has divine authority, that what he is doing has the backing of a higher power,” I told Matthew, carefully omitting use of any direct reference to God. “The role of Marduk was perfect for him.”

“Yeah, that role would fit his egomaniac personality; anything else?”

“I got the impression that this is just the start of something much bigger, like this is only the first move.”

“It is, Jim. Some of the prophecies will come true.”

“What do you think is going to happen to Israel?” I asked.

“Israel is in a tough position with Ahmadinejad headquartered at the Temple Mount. It’s just a matter of time until there is a crackdown on all non-Islamic religions. Read your Bible, Jim; Daniel, Jeremiah, Revelation.”

“You don’t think they would force the Jews to leave Jerusalem, do you?”

“Read Jeremiah,” Matthew answered. “They have been exiled three times before. Why don’t you believe it could happen again?” I didn’t have an answer so I switched subjects.

“Will you be in Florida anytime soon? Rosann and I would love to cook you dinner.”

“I’ll let you know. If not Florida, I’ll see you in Ethiopia. The permits are close to being approved. Say hi to Ken and Chris.”

“What did Matthew have to say?” Rosann asked.

“Not too much; he basically wanted to know if we got out of Iraq all right. He did tell me to say hi.”

“I thought I heard him mention Ethiopia.”

“I don’t recall him saying that,” I lied. This was no time to tell Rosann I might be traveling again. “We are going to sit on the couch and watch TV together until you can’t wait to get rid of me.”

“Try me,” Rosann said as she squeezed my hand.

I kept my promise, and for the next four years I seldom left home without Mary. We didn't spend the whole time watching television, but we did spend a lot of quality time together. We also spent time with our kids and two grandchildren, courtesy of Pete and Ambre. Pete was still competing on the professional tennis circuit and was currently ranked #6 in the world. He was still looking for his second grand slam title to back up his win at Roland Garros six years ago. He had come close in Australia this year, finishing runner-up to Roger Federer. Winning Roland Garros again would be a tough task as long as Nadal was around.

Ambre was ranked #1 in the world three years ago when she announced that she and Pete were expecting their first child in January. A year after giving birth to Cassidy she welcomed Luke and Logan, fraternal twins who weighed in at a combined weight of fourteen pounds, twelve ounces. Ambre's tennis career appeared to be over at the age of twenty six.

Pete's younger sister Lisa was ranked #3 in the world thanks to her win at Wimbledon this year and three other victories. It was her third grand slam tournament win including a victory over Ambre at the French Open to avenge her loss in the finals six years ago, the year that Pete shared the title with Carlos. Rosann and I were in Paris and the five of us had celebrated at dinner that night. Lisa was obviously in a good mood and was not about to let Ambre off easily.

"Well, I guess we know who's #1 tonight," Lisa gloated as the waiter delivered a special cake that Rosann had ordered.

Ambre wasn't backing down. "Has someone discovered an error in the world rankings? The last time I looked you were like ten thousand points behind me," a slight exaggeration.

"I'm not good at numbers; I just know that winner's trophy will look awfully good on my mantle."

"Yeah, but I had to put my last one in storage until I add a trophy room to my house, but I still have the one on display from the year I kicked your butt in the finals."

"Well, this is going to be the first of many," Lisa bragged, "it looks like you might have lost a step or two."

"Girls," that's enough, Rosann said as she saw the verbal sparring was getting out of hand. "Let's cut the cake."

Conversation was minimal for a few minutes until we finished the cake. I couldn't help but notice that Ambre didn't finish her slice. Pete broke the silence. "Ambre and I have an announcement to make. Ambre, will you do the honors?" Rosann squeezed my hand and we held our breath with expectation, but Ambre couldn't help getting in one more jab at Lisa.

"I have decided to retire from tennis after the US Open. I just can't stand playing like this and I don't want to be one of those ex-champions that just hang on."

"Ambre, I was just kidding about you losing a step," Lisa apologized.

"Ambre," Pete chastened.

"Well, by September, I will definitely have lost a step or two. I'm three months pregnant."

That was how we found out we would become grandparents for the first time. Needless to say I ordered champagne to celebrate and the three of us toasted Pete and Ambre and the newest addition to our family.

Christmas was family time, and we invited the kids to Tampa for the holidays. Surprisingly, Lisa asked if she had could bring a friend. Rosann and I hoped it would be someone special.

"I didn't even know she was dating anyone."

"Parents are often the last to know, Jim. I think she is past the age when they ask permission."

"She was past that age when she was fourteen."

"Maybe it's that English tennis player we saw her with at Wimbledon?"

"I thought they were just good friends."

"I guess we will find out when they get here, but either way he is sleeping in the guestroom."

We were not disappointed. Lisa and Tom Reynolds, a thirty-three year old businessman from New Amsterdam, announced their engagement at dinner the night they arrived. It only took me two seconds to say yes when he asked permission to marry my only daughter. Lisa just laughed when we mentioned the guest room.

"Come on, dad, get real."

Pete, Ambre, Cassidy and the twins arrived the next day and the house turned into a delightful madhouse. The twins were fourteen months old and a handful, and Cassidy was at an age where she alternated between being a big girl and mommy's helper, to a typical two year old that demanded attention. Who better than a doting grandfather to spoil her?

Pete was playing the Australian Open this year and Ambre had asked us two months ago if we could babysit the kids. She wanted to go to Australia with Pete. Rosann and I knew that a month would be a long time.

"They offered to pay us to hire a nanny," Rosann pointed out, "but we can't leave a nanny alone with three toddlers all day; she would go crazy."

"I think we should forget the nanny and just do it ourselves. It can't be that bad, can it?"

"You don't have a clue, do you?"

"Well, it will be a good way to get to know the grandkids. I'll stay at home the first week and then take a couple days off every week to spell you."

"I'm just a little disappointed with Pete and Ambre. Why does Ambre need to stay there the entire month?"

"Pete says that they want to relive that month from six years ago, when Ambre made her comeback with Martina Hingis and she helped Pete gain the confidence he needed to play on the pro tour."

"I know, but a month is still a long time."

On Christmas Eve, we heard the rest of the story. "Ambre's making a comeback," Pete announced out of the blue. "That's the real reason we asked you to watch the kids for so long. We are going to play the same tournaments that we did six years ago, including an exhibition match in Chennai, India." I caught on immediately, remembering Ambre's exhibition match against Hingis. This year Lisa would substitute for Martina.

"Lisa, have you been in on this little secret?"

"Sure, but I want Pete to know that I'm going to kick his wife's butt again. I bet she's still a step slow."

"You'll find out how slow I am next week," Ambre replied with confidence.

“What am I getting into?” Tom asked, feigning surprise. “Is this what they call a blood feud or just a regular catfight?”

“Don’t worry, Tom, this is nothing compared to the Thanksgiving holiday,” I said thinking back to the time that Lisa had hammered Ambre in the chest with a point-blank overhead, before being humiliated by Ambre 6-0 in a grudge match.

“Yes, we have grown up a lot since then,” Ambre said with a grin, drawing moans from the rest of us.

They might have grown up and become good friends, but they were still just as competitive. I would have loved to see their exhibition match, but I didn’t think that Rosann would agree to stay home to watch the grandkids by herself.

The next month flew by quickly, but both Rosann and I were happy to see Pete and Ambre get off the shuttle at the Tampa airport. “Never again,” we both said after the kids finally went to bed last night, but we knew we would feel differently in a few months, or years.

“How did it go, any problems?” Ambre asked as we took the escalator down to the baggage claim section on the ground floor.

“Great, the kids were absolute angels the entire time,” I replied with a straight face.

“Dad, how bad was it?”

“Not too bad,” I said. “By the way, where’s the trophy?”

“Sorry, but I had it shipped. It should get here tomorrow.”

“Congratulations, again,” I said as I gave him a big hug. “Your second major must feel pretty good.”

“It does; better than the first which I had to share with Carlos.”

“And he owes it all to me,” Ambre interrupted.

“Yep, you were my number one fan, just like seven years ago.”

“I’ll always be your number one fan,” Ambre said with a playful smile.

For the record, Lisa had beaten Ambre in their exhibition match, winning 6-4 in the third set in a competitive match not usually seen in exhibition matches. As the luck of the draw would have it, the girls did not play each other again. Lisa won the Sydney tournament the week before the Australian, but was upset in the quarters of the Australian by a French qualifier. Ambre reached the quarterfinals of her warm-up tournament and then wowed the

crowd again as she made it all the way to the finals in Melbourne before losing to Justine Henin. Ambre and Pete were the talk of tennis, and everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before Ambre was back to #1.

Ken and I were two-up with three to play, on Jack Pardo and Hil Davis, last year's club champion who had moved to Tampa from Montgomery, Alabama, when my cell phone started to vibrate. We had a no cell phone rule at the club, but this was an exception. I was expecting the call.

"Matthew, I'm in a meeting, may I call you back in a half hour?"

"Use your three-wood off the tee, Jim; driver will get you into trouble."

"Okay, you got me. What can I do for you?" I asked as the other three players groaned.

"Real quick; you can call me later if you want, but it's not necessary as long as you and Ken are at Lake Tana by Monday. Father McGinnis and I will be waiting."

"Does this mean you have the permits?"

"Yep!"

"See you Monday. I'll let you know when we are getting in."

"Okay, let's finish these guys off," Ken said, already surmising what the conversation was about. "We have honors, start us off." We were playing alternate shots and both teams were under par for the round, a little deceiving since some putts are conceded in this format, but still good golf.

I pulled driver without thinking and hit through the fairway into a pot bunker that would leave Ken with no option other than to play sideways into the fairway.

"You're hitting the ball farther than ever," Ken said encouragingly, after I hit six iron from 175 yards to ten feet.

"Yeah, but I should have used three-wood off the tee," I replied, thinking back to what Matthew had said. Ken didn't need to putt as Jack made a 12-foot birdie putt to win the whole. Our lead was down to one, with two to play. We were all even as we headed to eighteen after Jack stiffed a four-iron on the 180-yard Par three 17th and my twenty-five foot birdie putt rimmed the cup.

“Jack, it’s like old times,” I said as we walked across the bridge to the 18th tee.

“Sure does bring back memories; maybe I can sink the winning putt this time,” referring to the 12-foot putt I made to win the club championship and control over the Mexico casino project.

The eighteenth hole was a 540 yard, par five to an island green. Davis took three-wood and found the middle of the fairway, leaving his partner a four or five iron layup to the front of the water hazard. I took driver and caught all of it and watched as the ball hit the hard fairway and blew past their ball and rolled forever, or so it seemed.

“Wow,” Ken exclaimed, “that’s the longest ball I’ve ever seen you hit.”

Jack’s layup was perfect, leaving his partner a simple wedge to the green. Ken had a decision. Despite my 310-yard drive, Ken still had 230 yards left to a small target with little margin for error. Fortunately, he had drawn a decent lie.

“I might need to lay up, Jim. I don’t think I can get a 3-wood high enough to hold the green.”

“Can you get there with five-wood?”

“Maybe, but I would need to catch all of it.”

“You’re the man,” I said, giving him permission to go for it.

“Here goes nothing,” he muttered in his backswing.

Ninety nine percent of amateur golfers would over swing in this situation, but Ken was the other one percent. He made perfect contact and was in complete balance as he held his follow through and watched as the ball floated down softly on the front of the green, bounce once and stopped six feet from the flag.

“How could you leave it short?” I complained, but Ken wasn’t going to be baited.

“You’re welcome,” he replied.

Davis hit sand wedge to eight feet and Jack made the birdie putt, but could only watch as my eagle putt curled in the right side of the cup.

“Deja vu,” Jack said as he shook his head and congratulated me.

“Let’s have a few beers to celebrate, using your money of course,” knowing that Ken and I would be lucky to break even after we bought drinks for our friends and other club members. \$100

wouldn't go far, but bragging rights would last forever, or until the next time we played. I was playing to a two handicap, a far cry from the 18-handicap golfer that had joined the club 15 years ago. It also was testimony to the amount of golf that I had played the last four years since the Babylon project ended.

"Do you ever think about what's happening in Babylon?" I asked Ken after the others had left and we sat around and nursed our last beer.

"I sure do. I wonder what it looks like now after four years of Muslim occupation."

"You know, Iraq and Babylon are nothing more than puppets for that guy in Jerusalem. Ahmadinejad has set himself up as the divine ruler of the world."

"What's strange is that Ahmadinejad admits he is only a caretaker. They are all waiting for the 12th Imam, or so-called Mahdi, to appear," Ken mused as he started on another beer.

"The whole thing scares me," Ken. "Have you read much of the Bible or some of those books about end times prophesies and the second coming?"

"I've read a little bit. Are you talking about the Book of Revelation and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, seven bowl judgments, seven trumpets and stuff like that? Isn't Revelation more about the Roman empire?"

"That's the Historicism viewpoint, but many people believe that the prophecies apply to the future and that John was just using Rome as a symbol for the Roman Catholic Church. And it's not just Revelation, but Jeremiah, Matthew, David and others talk about it too."

"I'm not following you, Jim. What are you getting at?"

"I'm concerned that we are in what many people are calling mid-tribulation, where the world has gone to hell and God is punishing us for our sins. This precedes the second coming and fight against the Antichrist and the end of the world as we know it. Hundreds of millions of people will die. I'm afraid, Ken."

"It's hard to deny that we're not in tribulation with Iran threatening to drop a nuclear bomb on Baghdad."

“And all the natural disasters that occurred over the past five years; hurricanes, floods, droughts, volcanoes, mass starvation in Africa; the list goes on and on.”

“Do you think the time is near?”

“I don’t know, but I do know just about everyone agrees that the end times will be preceded by the Antichrist setting up headquarters on the Temple Mount and establishing a puppet regime in Babylon. I’m thinking that rebuilding Babylon was a big mistake.”

“What does Matthew say?”

“I think he would agree. You know to this day he has not set foot in Babylon. He considers Babel the original city of sin.”

“Well, it’s hard to argue with that description. I read that the new Babylon is earning a reputation as the drug and vice capital of the world. Matthew probably saw it coming.”

“Come on, Jim, let me drive you home. You’re getting too morose.”

“I know, maybe I’m just afraid of what Rosann will say when I tell her I’m off to Ethiopia again.”

“This might be your personal Armageddon.”

Eleven months later we opened the flood gates and watched as the water from Lake Tana began the journey to the desert region bordering Somalia. Three hours later we received a phone call from an excited Father McGinnis and listened to the screams of jubilation in the background. “Oh, thank you Lord,” Father Sean said before hanging up to join the wild celebration.

It took a week to fill the reservoir and assess the impact upon the Lake Tana water table. I was in Israel watching Matthew’s all star team play an exhibition game when Marco called with the good news.

“The water level dropped 13 feet, well within the 10-15 feet range that we estimated.”

“How does the shoreline look?”

“We have some work to do to clean it up and extend some of the piers and docks, but nothing we hadn’t anticipated. The marina at our resort is fine because we planned for the drop in water level.”

“Great job, Marco, why don’t you call Ken and Matthew and give them the good news.”



Chapter 19

Israel

Matthew's trip to Jerusalem had political overtones from the start, but the basketball game was one of the most entertaining sporting events I have ever witnessed. Part of it was that the Jewish people in this oppressed country were desperately searching for something to cheer about, but a lot of it was Matthew.

There is no shortage of Jews at the executive levels of the NBA, including the commissioner of the league, David Stern. There have been a few great Jewish players in the past including Hall of Famer Dolph Schayes, who played for the Syracuse Nationals throughout the 1950s, and Ernie Grunfeld, the son of Holocaust survivors, who went on to star with the New York Knicks in the 1980s. Today, though, there are no Jewish players in the NBA. An Israeli-born player has never played in the NBA.

Israeli basketball star Oded Katash is trying to become the first. Katash's 22 points per game for the Israeli National Team at the European Championships was the best average among all tournament scorers and he was one of 20 players picked for the first-ever European All-Star game. If Katash makes the NBA team, he'll have to accept a salary that would reportedly be in the \$400,000 range - considerably less than what he makes playing basketball in Israel.

The last Israeli player with serious hopes to make the NBA was Doron Sheffer, who starred for the University of Connecticut from 1993 to 1996. He was selected in the second round of the 1996 NBA draft by the Los Angeles Clippers, but decided to return home after not being offered a guaranteed contract. Three other Israeli players in the past have attended summer free-agent camps with respective NBA clubs. Amit Tamira, a 6-foot, 10-inch recent graduate from the University of California at Berkeley, and Elad Inbar, a 26-year-old forward, at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, are also NBA prospects. Israeli basketball legend Mickey Berkowitz had offers from the Atlanta Hawks and New Jersey Nets in the early 1980s, but a contract with Maccabi Tel Aviv stood in

the way. These four players all played on the Israeli national team which beat Russia to win the European championships two years ago.

The score was tied at the end of the first quarter before Matthew's team pulled away and took a comfortable ten point lead into the halftime break. It was good basketball and the crowd cheered both teams. The same crowd erupted spontaneously when the Israeli team came out on the floor to start the second half with two new players in the starting line-up; two women whose homes are only about 10 miles away from each other along the Mediterranean Sea. Shay Doran is a junior at Maryland and an All-American candidate. Liad Suez-Karni is a senior All-Big East selection at Villanova. These ladies are changing the way Israelis look at basketball.

Suez-Karni, a 6-foot-2 senior forward, started playing basketball in Israel the same way many American girls learned the ropes - she just tagged along when her big brother went to the court. The most popular woman player is point guard Shay Doran who is almost a rock star. Maryland women basketball games are televised back to the small nation and eight million people follow her every move.

The girls are no slouches on the court and the crowd went wild as Doran stole the ball from Matthew and went in for a layup to give the Israelis their first lead. The lead went back and forth until Matthew's jump shot put his team ahead by two points with only 12 seconds remaining. The Israeli team called time out to set up the final shot.

The ball was inbound to Oded Katash who had 24 points on 10 for 12 shooting and was the team's go-to man. Katash drove off a screen and headed to the basket where Matthew was waiting to block his shot attempt, but the shot never came. At the last moment Katash passed out to Doran who had set up at the top of the circle, just outside the men's three point line. The ball was in the air when the final buzzer went off and fifteen thousand people screamed for the ball to be good. The cheers changed to groans as the ball bounced hard off the back rim, but changed again to a thunderous roar as miraculously, the ball reached its pinnacle and slowly

dropped down through the center of the net. I was too emotionally drained to follow the crowd as they stormed the court to celebrate.

It took twenty minutes to restore order and get the fans back to their seats. Matthew congratulated the Israeli team and awarded the game's MVP trophy to Shay Doran, much to the delight of the crowd. "This proves once again, that women can compete with men and deserve the right to be treated as equals." The crowd was momentarily silent as they glanced over at the president's box, waiting for a reaction to this obvious criticism of Muslim traditions, before erupting in applause. Matthew waited stoically for the noise to abate before continuing, and when he did, Matthew got right to the point.

"The Jewish people are being oppressed once again, but I promise you that this will not last." Pointing directly at Ahmadinejad in his royal box, Matthew said the words that rocked the world; "the end is coming and your time is almost over. God will not allow false idols in the house of Yahweh."

The crowd gasped as the words sunk in before erupting again with a standing ovation. I watched Ahmadinejad's face turn blood red as he stood and pointed at Matthew. I couldn't hear his words over the noise of the crowd, but the meaning became clear as armed guards marched to the podium to arrest Matthew. The crowd booed as Mathew was forcibly escorted away. Scores of Jews piled onto the basketball floor and the heavily armed guards were moments away from firing on the unruly mob. We were moments away from an awful slaughter when Matthew held his arms above his head for silence. "Have faith, my children, and trust in the Lord. Yahweh will protect me."

I called Rosann a half-hour later, but she had already heard. The game had been televised internationally and all major networks were provided footage of the arrest.

"What happened, Jim; it was like he wanted to be arrested."

"I'm not sure, but I hope he isn't trying to be a martyr."

"Get out of there, Jim, there is nothing you can do that isn't being done. The network says that the President has already called demanding his release, as have presidents from almost every Western country."

“I know, Mary, but I have to try. I’ll call you in the morning.”

I was at the Temple Mount with thousands of other protestors, when, surprisingly, Matthew was released just before noon. Matthew calmly walked down the steps as his supporters roared their approval. He smiled when he saw me.

“Hi Jim, what are you doing here?”

“I was bringing you a toothbrush and pajamas; I figured you would be here for a while. How did you break out?”

“I’m not sure why they released me, but I’m glad they did. It wasn’t comfortable in there.”

“Did you meet with Ahmadinejad?”

“Oh yes, and I can assure you it wasn’t his idea to release me. I think he mentioned something to the effect of rotting in hell.”

“I’m confused. He’s the top guy, isn’t he?”

“Apparently not, or at least not in this instance. I think it had something to do with not wanting to cancel next week’s basketball game. They want to see my butt kicked by that Muslim kid everyone is talking about.”

“Why did you get yourself arrested in the first place? Were you trying to draw attention to the Israeli plight?”

“Yes, but I was also passing on a message. His days are numbered.”

“Do you know something? What’s going to happen?”

“All in good time, Coach.”

I wasn’t going to get any more out of him so I decided to pass on the good news. “By the way, did you know that Lake Tana only dropped 13 feet when we released the water to Somalia? Everything looks good.”

“That’s great. Father McGinnis called me yesterday and told me the Somalians are pleased. Your team did a great job. Please congratulate them for me.”

“Thanks, Matthew, I’ll pass that on. Is there anything you need from me before I head back to Ethiopia?”

“No, I’m heading back to the United States for the game against the Turkish team.”

“Good luck! The Muslim kid is pretty good.”

“Good luck to you, Jim. What you are doing in Ethiopia is more important than any basketball game.”

At the time I thought that Matthew was referring to our efforts to get water to the Somalians, but I would soon learn that Matthew was a step ahead of me again.

Amar Rashad had watched the game in Israel from his home in Constantinople, the name still used in the old section of Istanbul. Amar had been following the exploits of Matthew Wilson for several years. He knew that one day he would be matched against this man who many people claimed was the greatest basketball player of all time. Amar was without question the greatest Muslim player of all time, but his handlers had not allowed him to compete in the United States. “There will be a time when you will meet this pretender, and show the world that Muslims are superior to the infidels in every way.” Well, the time had finally come as “the game” was scheduled for Saturday night in St. Louis, Missouri. It would be Amar’s first trip to the United States.

Amar had watched Matthew win his four NCAA championships at Marquette and followed the International all star team. He watched closely as Matthew Wilson became not only a great basketball player, but also an international leader. Amar was perplexed when Matthew’s all stars lost to China. “Was it possible that Matthew lost intentionally?”

Amar was confident of his own basketball abilities. He had never met a player or even a team that could stop him. He was constantly double or triple teamed, but still averaged over 40 points in Euro basketball. Amar was confident that his game was equal to Matthew’s, but there was something about Matthew that intrigued him. His handlers told him that Matthew was a typical Westerner, corrupted by material possessions. Amar saw something else. He saw a humble man that led by example. Others followed him because they saw something they identified with. Matthew’s religion and belief in Jesus Christ was not an obstacle as he got along equally well with Jews, Muslims and people from any other religion. He respected everyone.

Amar had come a long way since he was 17 and walked onto the basketball floor in Istanbul and scored 42 points against the Turkish National Team. He continued to improve as a basketball player and was dubbed “the Mahdi” by Muslim sportswriters who

looked at Amar as the savior of Muslim basketball. Amar was much more than a basketball player. Extremely intelligent, he graduated from school with honors with a concentration in world politics and religion. He was fluent in nine languages including English and read everything he could get his hands on. Like many other Muslims, Amar could recite the Koran from memory, but unlike many of his peers, questioned some of the readings. Why had Mohammed's message changed from peace to jihad when he migrated to Mecca? What makes it right to kill infidels? Who was Jesus Christ? Will there be a second coming? Amar debated these topics with his handlers and was disappointed that they provided little insight. Now, ten years later, Amar was forming his own opinions and prepared to assume a leadership role in the Muslim community.

Amar was devastated as he watched the events unfold in Jerusalem, culminating in the arrest of Matthew Wilson. Amar had watched Ahmadinejad rise to power with increasing skepticism and frustration. He had met the man once when he was invited to the Temple Mount Palace along with other sports dignitaries. He had hoped to meet a true leader of the Muslim people, but had been disappointed. Ahmadinejad was a small, petty man that desired power for power's sake. Although he shunned material possessions in accordance with Muslim beliefs, he was not the true leader. In his own words, he was waiting for the true Mahdi to appear and lead Muslims to their destiny.

Amar watched the events in the basketball game unfurl and shouted in anger as Matthew was led away. He knew it was time to act. The following morning he flew from Istanbul to Jerusalem to meet with Ahmadinejad. Matthew Wilson was freed from prison an hour later.

Matthew Wilson's release had little to do with basketball.

Chapter 20

The Cave

The two Ethiopians paddled towards the small island less than eight hundred meters from Tana Kirkos. Before the water level of Lake Tana had dropped, the small island had been nothing more than a bunch of rocks sticking out of the lake. Now with the reduced water level, the size of the island had increased tenfold. Paddling around to the far side they noticed water flowing from a small opening that was partially covered by sea grass and coral. As the boat came closer the opening was larger than it first appeared. Abdul decided to investigate.

Hacking away seaweeds and coral that had taken hundreds of years to grow, the two men created an opening of almost four feet. Once inside the passageway increased in size and they were able to stand and move about freely. They proceeded a hundred meters into the heart of the island and to their surprise came upon a door that opened onto a small temple, not unlike temples they had seen on other islands on Lake Tana and outside the city of Gondar. The walls of the outer chamber were decorated and behind the altar there were golden goblets and platters that were worth a fortune. The two men stuffed their pockets with gold coins that were strewn across the floor and looked longingly at the heavy veil that protected the inner chamber, the Holy of Holies.

“I’m going to look inside,” Sanji decided.

“No, Abdul you must not violate the sanctity of the temple. Only the most senior priests are allowed to enter the Holy of Holies.”

“There are valuables inside, I can feel it. Why else would we have found such riches in the chapel?”

Sanji was afraid and waited outside as Abdul pulled back the veil and entered the inner chamber.

Moments later he let out a gasp. “It’s beautiful, Sanji,” he exclaimed. Abdul had never seen pictures of the Ark of the

Covenant, but he had heard stories. The five foot wide chest, protected by two cherubs mounted on either end, rested upon a marble altar. The top of the chest was pure gold and the ends were decorated with rare gemstones. It was in perfect condition and looked like it had been placed on the altar only yesterday.

“There is a chest in here,” he yelled out to his friend; “I am going to open the lid.” Those were the last words Abdul would ever say.

Outside, Sanji waited in fear when he saw the bright light and heard Abdul’s lifeless body crash against the wall. He raced inside the Holy of Holies to help, but stopped in his tracks as he saw the chest aglow and sparks flying from the mouths of the two cherubs on either end of the chest. He saw Abdul crushed against the wall and raced out of the temple in fear. Moments later he was wildly paddling back to the project site.

Marco and Ken were inspecting the repairs made to extend the dock when they spotted the rapidly approaching boat. “What’s wrong with him?” Ken asked, “he looks like the devil is chasing him?”

“That’s Sanji, one of my most trusted men. I sent him and Abdul over to look at that little island, but I don’t see Abdul?”

“Where’s Abdul?” Marco asked as the boat drew up to the pier.

“He’s dead, the demons killed him,” Sanji reported as he fell to his knees and crossed himself.

“Take it easy,” Marco said, putting his arm around the frightened man’s shoulder. “Tell us what happened.”

Ten minutes later the three of them were sitting in my office and Sanji related the story once again.

“Could this be the Ark of the Covenant?” I thought as I listened to the man.

“Take a look at what he had in his pockets,” Marco said as he laid the gold coins and goblet on the desk. “These things are old.”

“Wow,” was all I could muster, “any ideas?”

“It must be the Ark of the Covenant,” the Ethiopian exclaimed.

“If it is, we must keep this discovery a secret for now. So far only the four of us knew and we keep it that way. This place will be a zoo if this gets out to the press. Sanji, we need to ...” I started to say as I looked at the man who was slowly collapsing in his chair.

Sanji was dead before he hit the floor. We attempted to resuscitate him to no avail and we were stunned when we saw the spots and lesions over his chest.

“He must have seen the Ark of the Covenant and gotten too close,” I whispered aloud, trying to contain my excitement despite the death of these two men.

“Marco, can you hide the body until we determine our next step?”

“Sure, for a day or two, but then they will be missed.”

“Just for tonight; I want to call Father McGinnis and see if he can fly up from Somalia and help us out here.”

Father Sean answered on the first ring. “Jim, it’s good to hear ...”

I interrupted, not able to hold back my excitement. “Father, I need you here as soon as possible; can you fly up tonight?”

“I’m in the middle of something important, can it wait until Friday?”

“No it can’t, Father. I really need you here tonight.”

“Can you tell me why?”

“Not on the phone, Father, but remember that evening in Milwaukee when you and Matthew both got upset?”

“Yes, don’t tell me ...”

“Maybe,” I said interrupting him again.

“I’ll be there in four hours. In the meantime, Jim, find a Falasha priest from Gondar and ask him to join us on an excursion tomorrow. Don’t tell him why, but make sure he gets here. We need someone that is familiar with the traditions of the Ark.”

“I will, Father Sean; call me when you get in.”

“Marco, make sure we have a boat. I’ll see if I can get a hold of that priest we met with last summer.”

“Did they find it” Oleg asked as he reviewed the transcript of the phone call to Father McGinnis.

“They think they have. Simpson told the priest that it was urgent and they needed his advice on how to deal with an artifact they found. It has to be the Ark. What do you want us to do?”

“Do we know where it is?”

“Not yet.”

“Let’s wait until we see what happens tomorrow? Keep an eye on them, but don’t let them know they are being watched. Meanwhile, I’m going to get some more firepower into the area. We’re not the only ones interested in finding the Ark.”



Chapter 21

The Game

Twenty thousand fans packed the Scott Trade Center Arena in St. Louis, Missouri, for the biggest basketball game of the 21st century. This was more than a basketball game; it was a clash of cultures. The crowd was evenly divided between Muslims, many of the women wearing the traditional amira scarf, and basketball fans that had seized the opportunity to compare Matthew Wilson to the young star from Turkey who was ripping up European and Asian basketball leagues. This would be Amar Rashad’s first appearance in the United States and the first time he had faced off against Matthew Wilson.

I had wanted so much to be at the game, but it was impossible to get away. Fortunately, the BBC was telecasting the game live across the world where millions of viewers were expected. I had to settle for watching on a 14 inch screen in my hotel room. I called Matthew three hours prior to tipoff to wish him luck.

“Matthew, are you ready?”

“Coach, it’s good to hear from you. I suppose you’re looking for a couple of tickets like everyone else.”

“Not this time. I’m pretty busy here in Ethiopia and just couldn’t justify being away for so long. Believe me; I would love to be there.”

“How are things going?” Matthew asked, deflecting the conversation away from the game.

I wanted to tell him about the discovery this morning, but decided he had enough to worry about. “Things are going well, Matthew. There is something I need to talk with you about, but it can wait. You better concentrate on this game because this guy is good. Like I told you last week, I saw him play a month ago in Cairo, and the boy can do everything. He’s tall, agile and can run the floor. You better have your ‘A game’ ready.”

“I know he’s good, I’ve seen some film on him. But, tell me Coach, what’s he like? Did you get a chance to meet him?”

“No, I tried after the game, but he was surrounded by his people. But, I can tell you this, he is a leader out there. The Muslim people would follow him anywhere.”

“What’s he like personally, Coach? Could you tell by watching him?”

I thought for a moment and realized that there was something about him that I had never thought about too much. “He’s different, Matthew. He plays without much emotion and it’s almost like he would prefer to be somewhere else. It’s a mechanical game. He doesn’t appear to have your competitiveness.”

“Maybe that’s because he’s never needed to play hard. I understand he’s not involved in many close games.”

“That’s true, Matthew, but he has this aloofness that surprised me. Either way, you better be ready; this kid will give you all you can handle.”

“I’ll be ready, Coach, and I appreciate your call. I’m looking forward to hearing about what’s going on in Ethiopia. Please call me after the game.”

“I will, Matthew, and good luck tonight.”

“Oh, by the way, did you know that Amar was the one who sprung me from jail?”

I was trying to assimilate what Matthew had just told me when he said good night. Wow, maybe there is more to this guy than I gave him credit for?

Warm-ups were over and the captains were called to center court. Matthew looked forward to meeting Amar Rashad for the

first time. He knew well that others were saying this was more than a basketball game; it was a clash of cultures – East against West – Christianity against Islam. Matthew was not buying into that. This was a basketball game; one team against the other – one star player competing against another. Let the best team win.

The two greatest basketball players of modern times shook hands at center court. It seemed like a quick perfunctory greeting to most of the 20,000 people in the stands and the millions watching worldwide over television, but for the two principal combatants, time almost stopped. The two young men and leaders sized up their opponent.

Matthew looked into Rashad's eyes and was surprised at the profoundness he saw. Coach Simpson was wrong in saying that this man was aloof. What his eyes showed was a tremendous sadness and caring for his people. This man had a depth of feeling and personality that Matthew had never evidenced in another man.

Rashad was startled by the power of Matthew Wilson's personality and the jolt of electricity that flowed through his body when they shook hands. They gazed into each other's eyes and Rashad knew that this man was not the demigod that his handlers had told him. There was a softness and kindness in Wilson's eyes that he had not seen on television. This was a man who he could respect and was the friend that he had been searching for.

The referees finished their instructions and the game was ready to start.

"Let's play basketball," Matthew said to his opponent.

"Yes, let's give everyone a good show," Amar replied with a smile.

The opening tip went to Rashad who quickly drove around his defender and went in for a thunderous two-handed dunk. Several of the Americans were still standing at half court, amazed at the man's speed. Matthew took the inbounds pass and drove quickly up court and launched a 28 foot jump shot to put his team ahead 3-2. Four seconds later Rashad returned the favor and put his team ahead by two – game on!

This was just the beginning of a fantastic display of basketball. At half time, the Turkish team led 62-57 and Rashad had 41 of

those points on 14 of 17 shooting. Matthew was held to a measly 37 points.

Basketball is a team game. It is sometimes dominated by stars, but it is essentially a five on five contest and usually the better team wins. This game, however, was a contest between two individuals and the fans were treated to one of the greatest one on one contests that basketball has ever seen; better than Chamberlain against Russell, better than Elgin Baylor against Jerry West, better than the scoring contest between Michael Jordon and Dominic Wilkins or Magic Johnson and Larry Bird.. The fans loved it and remained on their feet for almost the entire half.

I sat in front of my 14 inch, black and white screen watching the game thrilled with the talent shown by the two young men but disappointed in Matthew's decision to get caught up in playing one on one basketball. This was not his style, and I hoped his coach would let him know at halftime. There was no need, as Matthew was fully aware of what was happening. As usual, he was a step ahead of the rest of us.

“Okay, team, now we start playing our kind of basketball. Everyone plays defense and everybody hustles. We rebound, go for the loose ball and take the open shot.”

“But what about Rashad? That guy is unbelievable,” a player asked.

“I'll try to contain Rashad, at least slow him down. You fellows just play team basketball and everything will take care of itself.”

The Turkish team took the ball out of bounds to start the second half and immediately got the ball to Rashad. Matthew was on him like a blanket, but Rashad showed his best move. Rashad, a natural right-handed player, faked to his right and drove left and launched a 25 foot fade away jump shot from just beyond the three point lane. This was a shot he had been making the entire first half, but this time Matthew went up with him and deflected the shot to a teammate, broke for the basket and took the long pass for an easy layup.

“Press”, screamed Matthew, asking his players to go into a man to man full court pressure defense. Four turnovers later the Americans were up by three points before the Turkish team took a

timeout. Matthew had blanketed Rashad, keeping him from getting the ball and the remaining four players showed their inexperience against quality competition. The more experienced Americans continually stole the ball and went in for easy shots. The Turkish team came out of the timeout with a new plan to get Rashad the ball. Setting double screens on Matthew, Rashad broke off the screens to retrieve the ball and drove in for a layup. Matthew again came out of nowhere and deflected the ball at the last moment.

Matthew was finally going full out 100% and playing defense the way I knew he could. He had not scored in the second half, but was dominating the game.

With five minutes left, the Americans were ahead by 14. Amar Rashad was too good a player to be stopped completely and had managed 15 points on 5-14 shooting. He also had two steals, five assists and ten rebounds. Matthew only scored eight points, but 15 assists and at least a dozen rebounds. The game was rapidly becoming out of reach when Rashad came around a double screen to launch an open 3 point jump shot. Matthew again deflected the ball and headed up court in one motion. Matthew passed to a teammate and got the return pass and launched a Michael Jordan-like dunk, leaping from the free throw line and with his arm several feet above the basket. Rashad had reacted to the latest block of his shot and raced back on defense and got a hand above the rim as Matthew was coming down for his powerful dunk. Millions of basketball fans around the world watched in horror as Rashad's elbow was pinned awkwardly against the rim. There was no way his arm could withstand the force of Matthew's shot.

Amar recognized the situation and used all his strength to push back against the downward thrust, but realized his efforts would be futile. Matthew recognized the situation and at the last moment released his hand from the basketball. Rashad was pushing forward at full strength trying to avoid a broken arm when the resistance ceased, causing the ball to fly halfway up into the stands for a crowd-pleasing block. The Muslim crowd roared their approval, but both players knew better. Amar looked at Matthew and mouthed a silent thank you as the two players stumbled into the basket support and fell to the ground.

A new basketball was thrown from the crowd and rolled slowly across the floor towards the two star players. Later, nobody would remember where the ball came from or who had started it on its perilous journey. To everyone watching, it was just another basketball, but to Matthew it looked different. Maybe it was because the ball rolled off-center due to the extra weight inside, but something caught Matthew's attention. "Bomb!" he yelled, while he grabbed Amar and dragged him behind the basket support. "Get away," he shouted over the screams of the crowd.

The ball rolled to a stop at the free throw line as players and fans watched held their breath. It appeared tragedy had been averted.

Gregory, an eight-year old Muslim ball boy wearing the traditional Arabian wraparound robe, also saw the ball roll to a stop. It was his first basketball game and the first chance to see his hero, Amar Rashad, in person. He wasn't going to do a poor job and embarrass his parents. His father told him all he had to do is get the ball if it came off the floor and return it to the players. This was his chance to show his dad that he had listened. Gregory ran on to the floor to retrieve the ball that nobody else would pick up. This was his job.

The boy was only five feet away when the ball exploded with a tremendous force. He would have been killed instantly if it were not for that man diving in front of him, using his body to shield Gregory from the explosion. His head hurt and his nose was bleeding, but Gregory would be okay. The man who saved him was lying on the floor motionless and bleeding.

Viewers from around the world, Christians and Muslims alike, watched with horror as the tragedy unfolded. Their hearts stopped as Matthew raced from his secure location and saved the boy. It did not look good – there was no way anyone could have survived that explosion. The 20,000 fans in attendance were in pandemonium and began racing for the exits until Amar Rashad took control. Standing above Matthew he raised his arms and surprisingly the crowd stopped running and became silent. Rashad knelt over Matthew. "Let us pray", Rashad asked, "for the recovery of this great man." Amar Rashad continued praying over Matthew's lifeless body until

paramedics came and took Matthew away. Amar made one final announcement before he followed the paramedics to the hospital.

“Matthew Wilson is alive, but needs our help. We must continue to pray for him.”

For the rest of the evening I monitored BBC and CNN broadcasts trying to get new information. Matthew had been taken to Barnes Hospital and doctors said he was in critical condition. I finally called Rosann who was monitoring the information from our home in Tampa.

“Jim, I don’t have any information for you. Isn’t it terrible?”

“I feel like I have lost a son. I can’t help but think of the happiness he brought to us since he walked into my coaches office ten years ago. It was horrible seeing him lie there motionless and bleeding from his ears and nose. Call me if you hear anything.”

“I will, Jim, is there anything else I can do?”

“Yes, get me on a plane to St. Louis. I can’t leave until late tomorrow evening, but try to get me there as soon as possible, preferably first class.”

“Okay, I’ll get right on it, Jim. I’ll let you know tomorrow morning.”

“Good night, Mary, I love you.”

“Good night, Jim; you know that I’ll be praying for Matthew.”

Chapter 22

Discovery

Marco sent a small Cessna to pick up the Falasha priest and they were waiting for us at the dock when Ken and I arrived. “Thank you so much for coming,” I said, greeting the man dressed in the traditional Ethiopian robe. “This is my friend, Father Sean McGinnis. He has been working with your people in the Somalia desert for the past five years.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Father McGinnis.”

“Likewise,” Father said, with his customary broad smile. “I’m told that you helped educate these three about your religious customs.”

“Is that why you brought me here?” the priest asked

“Hop in, Father. We can all learn together. Here is a goblet and some coins that were found in the cave that we are headed for.”

“Oh my,” the Falasha priest exclaimed as he studied the artifacts. “This goblet is identical to the goblets we use to celebrate Timkat,” he said in awe, “but this one is made of real gold. Where did you find it?”

“In a temple on that island,” I answered, pointing to the small island that we were nearing. “The drop in water level last week uncovered the entrance to a cave, and inside the cave we found the goblet and coins.”

“Among a few other artifacts,” Ken added with understatement.

“Oh my God,” the priest whispered. He kept silent and stared at the goblet for the remainder of the trip.

Marco related the story Sanji had told us yesterday, but I wasn’t sure the priest was listening.

Fifteen minutes later we found the cave opening that Sanji had described. I can’t describe the excitement that I felt as the five of us tied the boat to the dock and we approached the cave. I could see

that Father Sean was just as excited. I led the way into the cave, but gave way to the Falasha priest when we saw the door to the temple.

“Magnificent,” the priest said as he saw the wall carvings and the ornate altar.

Father McGinnis dropped to his knees and made the sign of the cross. The rest of us did likewise. “I can feel His presence,” Father McGinnis said solemnly. “He is here.”

“Who is here?” Marco asked, feeling uncomfortable at the way both holy men were acting.

The Falasha priest was staring at the veil protecting the inner chamber. “I must go in alone,” he stated.

“Are you sure you will be safe?” I asked, reminding him of Abdul’s death.

“I have trained for this day my entire life,” the priest proclaimed, as he pulled back the protective veil and entered the Holy of Holies. The priest was inside for almost an hour and all we detected was ritual chanting and the scent of frankincense wafting from the room. We waited anxiously to hear what he had found.

“There is nothing for you here,” the priest announced, as he came out of the inner chamber and closed the veil. “You must never enter the Holy of Holies lest you be punished by the Lord.”

“You found the Ark of the Covenant, didn’t you?” I said aloud.

“I found nothing that concerns you. Come, we must leave this place.”

I looked at the others for support, but I already knew that I couldn’t leave here without knowing for sure what was behind curtain number one. “We can’t do that, Father. We need to see for ourselves.”

“No, I will not allow it.”

Father McGinnis offered a compromise. “I’ll go in. I am a man of God and the Lord will protect me.”

“No,” the priest said again, attempting to forcibly stop Father McGinnis from entering. Ken and Marco stepped forward to restrain the priest as Father Sean pulled back the veil and entered the inner chamber.

“Oh, my,” he exclaimed immediately as he saw the golden chest. “It is more beautiful than I imagined,” he said in a voice that

was filled with tears of joy. “It is the Ark of the Covenant, just as described in the Bible. I’m sure of it.”

“Father, do you think we will be safe if you pulled back the veil and let us see?”

“No,” the Falasha priest proclaimed angrily. “The purity of the Ark must not be adulterated by allowing laymen to gaze upon it.”

“Father Sean?”

“Just to be safe, it might be wise if one or two of you stepped outside.”

“I’ll volunteer,” Marco said immediately.

“Ken, would you mind? I would need you to clean up after me if we are wrong.”

Ken nodded his agreement, although I know he would have preferred to stay. “Someone will have to tell Rosann what happened,” Ken added.

“Okay, Father Sean. They’re gone.”

The veil was pulled back and I had a clear view of the most beautiful object that I have ever seen. It was more than a beautiful chest, it was alive. “It’s wonderful; I can feel its power from here.”

“I know; I almost expect God to appear on the mercy seat and talk to me,” Father Sean replied. “I don’t want to leave here.”

“Well, you had better come out so we can determine what we should do next. The Falasha priest might cause a scene.”

“Hold the curtain while I pull Abdul out of here.”

We were stepping into the boat when the Falasha priest made a request that satisfied our immediate problem. “Please allow me to stay and guard the temple. The Ark must never be left alone again.”

I looked at Father McGinnis who nodded. “That is an excellent idea, Father. We appreciate that. We will bring back some food and drinking water. Is there anything else you require?”

”More frankincense.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Ken asked as we neared our pier.

“I think so,” I replied, “and other than tying him up, it was the best solution to our problem. We can’t let word of this leak out or we will have a stampede on our hands.”

“Believe me, he won’t do anything to harm the Ark,” Father Sean promised.

“Even if he could,” Ken added with a little levity.

“No phone calls,” I ordered. “Sometimes I get the feeling that someone is listening to every phone call I make, so let’s not take any chances. Let’s go back to our offices and talk this over and try to determine what to do. I wish Matthew were here.”

“I have been afraid to ask, but did you talk with Matthew yesterday?” Father Sean asked gently.

“Yes, but I didn’t want to mention the Ark until we knew for sure. I didn’t want to take his mind off the game. Boy, do I regret that now.”

“I’m not sure that would have been a good idea anyway,” Father Sean said in support. “There is nothing he could have done.”

“When are you leaving?” Ken asked.

“Let me call Rosann to make sure. In the meantime, can you get the Falasha priest the supplies he needs while Marco notifies the authorities about the two bodies we found in the woods?”

“Okay, I’ll be back in an hour or two.”

“While you are talking to Mary, ask her why she has called me six times already. Between her and some guy named Jerry Hayes, my mail box is full.”

Five minutes later Rosann was on the phone and her first question was if I knew where Father McGinnis was. “He’s right here; do you want to talk with him?”

“Put me on speaker so I only need to go through this once.”

“Hi, Father Sean, I’m so happy we finally caught up to you.”

“What can I do for you, Mary?”

“Father, you were at Matthew’s graduation ceremony when everyone promised they would be there for Matthew if he ever needed them, weren’t you?”

“I was. I made the vow like everyone else.”

“Well, he needs you here in St Louis by 8:00 PM Wednesday evening.” Rosann proceeded to tell the story. “Can we count on you?”

“Need you ask?”

“Okay, pack your bags, you and Jim are taking a private plane to Cairo tomorrow where you catch a 11 P.M. flight to New York and a connecting flight to St Louis.”

“My prayers will get there first, Mary. I’ll call Mr. Hayes and let him know I’m coming.”

Ken and Marco came back an hour later and finished the conversation we started earlier; what to do about the Ark.

“Ken, what was the Falasha priest’s attitude when you took him the supplies? Does he still believe the Ark is his?”

“No question about that, Jim; but he has calmed down. I think he was afraid that we were going to try to take the Ark.”

“You know, Jim, the priest has a point,” Father Sean interjected. “The Ethiopians won’t allow you to take the Ark out of the country. They would claim the Ark belongs to them and they would have a pretty good claim in a world court.”

“Possession is nine points of the law,” Ken mused.

“Well, we are in agreement. I don’t want to take it anywhere; I just don’t want others to take it. The only place it belongs is the Temple Mount, and that’s not a possibility as long as Ahmadinejad is there. Ugh, think what that megalomaniac would do with the Ark in his possession.”

“Father, who else would want the Ark?” Marco asked. “Other than the Jews and the Catholic Church, what would anybody else do with it?”

“Oh golly, any number of Muslim groups would want it. Remember, Muslims believe that the Mahdi, or 12th Imam, will discover the Ark along with hidden scrolls. The Mahdi will then lead Muslims to a thousand years of peace and prosperity, not to mention the spread of Islam across the world. The Ark would be a tremendous symbol of power and authority.”

“Not to mention its value to countless numbers of extremist and terrorist groups,” Ken added.

“But could they harness the power?” I asked aloud. “The Bible tells several stories about deaths caused by the Ark, including two nephews of Moses.”

“You’re right, Jim. The Bible tells the story of the Philistines defeating the Israelites at the battle of Ebenezer and taking the Ark to Ashdod and placing it next to statue of their deity, a Dagon. The next morning the statue lay face down in front of the Ark of Yahweh with its arms and head severed. Seven months later the

Philistines returned the Ark to Israel, their entire population either dead, or covered with tumors.”

“Like the tumors on Sanji’s body,” Marco added.

“According to what I have read,” I continued, “there are only two people that could harness the power of the Ark of the Covenant. One is the Mahdi or guided one, who Father Sean mentioned earlier.”

“Is Ahmadinejad the Mahdi?” Marco asked, looking at Father Sean.

“I don’t think so. He has been quoted many times as saying that the Mahdi will appear soon. I don’t think he could claim to be the Mahdi.”

“Who is the other person?” Ken prodded, already knowing the answer.

“Jesus Christ will reappear in mid-tribulation and lead the armies of God against the Antichrist. Many of the signs foretelling the ‘second coming’ are already in place, aren’t they Father?”

“Yes, Jim. Scripture says that before the second coming happens, the Antichrist will set up headquarters on the Temple Mount and the city of Babylon will be rebuilt.”

Nobody spoke for several minutes while we contemplated the magnitude of the decision at hand. I finally broke the silence and made my decision.

“We need to keep our discovery among the four of us, well five counting the priest. Marco, you and Ken will be the only ones that will visit the priest and take him food and supplies, and by no means allow him to leave the island. We need a few days.”

“And what will you be doing?” Ken asked.

“Praying for a miracle,” I replied. “Father Sean and I will be in St. Louis by tomorrow evening and hopefully we will have an opportunity to talk with Matthew. He is the only one that can make this decision.”

The Masons, after a thousand years of searching starting with the Knights Templar and continuing with James Bruce and many others, had finally located the Ark of the Covenant. There was a brief meeting in Scotland where many Knights had fled to in the sixteenth century.

“They found it, didn’t they?”

“Yes, it’s in a cave on a small island near Tana Kirkos.”

“Have you seen it?”

“No, it’s being guarded by a Falasha priest, but I saw the bodies of the two men that made the discovery. One had tumors and the other scorch marks and a hundred broken bones.”

“Get our men into position.”

The Russians had also been closely following the events as they unfolded. This was their opportunity to cash in on their investment in Matthew Wilson, once known as Randy Wolkson. “How soon can we be ready?” the Russian Mafia leader asked.

“We can have forty soldiers there by Wednesday night with enough firepower to defeat the entire Ethiopian army.”

“Excellent, we will attack at midnight.”

Chapter 23

HELP

“Son, it’s time you came home. We have tried, but the world isn’t ready.”

“Father, please let me stay. The man I met today is the one I have been seeking. Together we can do great things.”

“We tried for 28 years and what do we have to show for it? Sure, millions of people know that you are a great basketball player, but how many friends have you made, friends that you could count on?”

“Father, I have many friends that I can depend upon. These are good people and will support me if I need them.”

“I’m not sure that they would, Matthew, but I am willing to give them one final opportunity. Do you recall your high school graduation when everyone promised they would be there for you if you needed them?”

“Yes, I remember that clearly, Father.”

“Well, how many of them do you think would come to you in St. Louis if you told them it was necessary to save your life?”

“All of them, Father. I’m sure that all of them would be there for me.”

“Well, let’s give this a try, son. If you’re right, I’ll let you stay and try to work things out with this man you met today. Tell just one person and ask him to spread the word on your behalf. Tell him that your life depends upon everyone who attended that graduation party fulfilling their promise; if they said they’d be there for you when you needed them, they must be in St Louis Wednesday evening.”

“Father, thank you. You will be pleasantly surprised.”

“Remember, son, no exceptions.”

That evening, Jerry Hayes had finally fallen into a deep asleep. He and his family had watched the basketball game on television and prayed for Matthew with his wife Sarah and two

children. His phone had rung constantly with grief stricken calls from classmates and friends. It seemed everyone had watched the game and witnessed the terrible tragedy. Hayes finally went to bed when it became clear that there would be no further updates from any of the networks or cable television, finally falling into a fitful sleep after hours of tossing and turning.

Early Monday morning he received a visitor in his dreams, a vision so clear that he knew immediately this was more than a dream; this was real.

“Jerry, I need you. It’s time for you to be the leader that I always knew you could be. My life depends upon it.”

“What can I do?” Jerry had responded in his dream.

“Remember when you promised me that you would be there for me if I ever needed you?”

“Yes!”

“I need you now, and everyone else that made that promise. My life depends upon all of you fulfilling your promise.”

“What do you want me do?”

“Contact everyone that was at the pep rally; teachers, students and others that were there and made the vow. I need them to be in St. Louis by 8:00 PM Wednesday evening.”

“I’ll do it, Matthew.”

“Remember, Jerry, there can be no exceptions. Everyone must be there. I’m counting on you.”

Jerry lay in bed for several minutes, trying to convince himself that he had been dreaming. This wasn’t the first time he had thought about the events of that evening. His old high school friends continually kidded him about how easily Matthew had plucked him from the third row of the bleachers. There were only a dozen kids in their group, but there were at least 50 versions of the look on his face as Matthew lectured him about being a leader. But Jerry never once got angry about this good natured kidding because he knew how much this event had influenced his life. Matthew had asked for his help then and was asking for his help again. Jerry wasn’t about to let him down.

“Sarah, wake up. I need your help.” His wife was groggy from sleep, but became alert when she heard the urgency in his voice and saw the earnest look on her husband’s face.

“You might not be able to believe this, but Matthew just spoke to me in a vision. I swear; it was as if he were sitting next to me.”

“What did he say?”

Hayes related Matthew’s request, leaving no doubt in Sarah’s mind that her husband believed that Matthew had indeed spoken to him. That was good enough for Sarah. “Help me develop a plan. We need to figure out how to spread the word quickly.”

At 4:30 AM Gus Edwards received a phone call. He, too, had watched the basketball game the preceding evening and was devastated, recalling the evening that Matthew came to dinner and the positive impression he made on his wife and two children. He owed so much to Matthew. After taking a two month sabbatical from work as self-imposed punishment, Edwards had turned his life around and was now in charge of the local station and three other NBC affiliates in the state. Edwards knew he owed much of his success and happiness to Matthew Wilson. When Hayes called, his only question was; “What can I do?”

At 7:00 AM Edwards made a public service announcement on his local television station expressing the station’s regret for last night’s incident and promising the station’s full support for doing what is necessary to help Matthew Wilson. “In one hour, Jerry Hayes will tell his former classmates at Shorewood High School what they need to do to save Matthew’s life. Spread the word.”

Only a few of Matthew’s classmates had seen Edward’s message live, but over 80% of the 1,200 students and teachers at the pep rally were tuned into Channel 12 an hour later. Word had spread like wildfire.

At 8:00 AM, Monday morning, viewers saw the highlight of Sunday’s basketball game, culminating with the gruesome bomb explosion that critically wounded Matthew Wilson. At 8:05, Edwards introduced Jerry Hayes, the All-State football player who ten years ago Matthew had challenged to be a leader. Hayes addressed the Milwaukee television audience.

“My name is Jerry Hayes, and I graduated from Shorewood High School before getting my Masters Degree from the University of Wisconsin. I have a lovely wife, Sarah, and two beautiful children. I recently started my own business. I am the luckiest man

in the world and I owe it all to Matthew Wilson. Those of you that went to Shorewood High School with me know exactly what I mean, because I know he helped every one of you in some way. Well, now Matthew needs our help. He needs us to fulfill the pledge we made on graduation day when he promised us that if any of us ever needed him, he would be there for us.”

Hayes paused for what seemed an eternity, but was in actuality only a few seconds, looking directly into the camera. “Do you remember on graduation day when Matthew said that he would be there for us if we ever needed him? We responded; Matthew, if you ever need our help, we will be there for you. Do remember that promise as clearly as I do?” A thousand viewers nodded their heads in assent.

“To me, it seems like yesterday, and I know it does for all of you that were there. Matthew spoke to me last night,” Hayes continued, pausing again for effect. “It was much more than a dream; it was almost like he was standing next to me. There is no doubt in my mind that it was Matthew. His message was, *“Jerry, I need you to contact everyone that was at our graduation ceremony; teachers, students and others that were there and made the vow. I need them to be in St. Louis by 8:00 PM Wednesday evening – my life depends upon it.”*

“We have less than two days to fulfill our promise and I for one will not let him down; will you? I have a preliminary list of the people that attended the graduation ceremony,” Hayes continued. “It is posted on the Channel 12 website in alphabetical order. Check it to make sure that it is complete, and call this number immediately if you know someone that should be added to the list. On the bottom of your screen you will see a list of students or faculty members we have been unable to find. Call us if you know anything. Remember, every one of the people on this list needs to be in St. Louis by Wednesday evening for a candlelight vigil at 8 PM; everyone, including former President Bush.”

“There will be live updates for you on this station throughout the day. All I can tell you now is that we are making hotel reservations as we speak and there will be buses leaving from the high school tonight at 11:00 PM. I’m packing for three days, but I’m ready to stay as long as Matthew needs me.”

“If you are on this list, contact Jennifer to confirm you will be there and if you will be on the bus. Contact Kathy if you need a babysitter or anything else.” A complete list of contact people was posted on the monitor. “Call this number at this station if you have any questions.”

Station manager Gus Edwards made a final announcement. “This station will do everything we can do to support this effort and will provide continuous coverage of this story for the next two days. All local programming has been canceled.”

Jerry and Sarah made eleven calls. That’s all it took to obtain the help of Edwards and fill the eight-person steering committee. Two other people caught a 9:00 AM flight to St. Louis to begin coordinating hotel reservations and everything else that would be needed in St. Louis to accept an influx of over 2,000 people.

Rosann received a phone call shortly after the television broadcast. “Mary, this is Jerry; have you...?”

“Yes Jerry, I saw the announcement this morning and think you did a wonderful job. Jim, Father McGinnis and I will be there in plenty of time. Just let us know if we can help.”

“I will Mary. We might need Coach to make a few calls for us if we run into any people that don’t want to be there.”

George Bush called Jennifer an hour after the broadcast. He had already seen a tape of Jerry Hayes’ appeal and offered his full support. “I’ll be there and so will everyone that was with me that day.”

“That’s great, President Bush. It might only be necessary to bring the people that said they would be there for Matthew,” Jennifer suggested.

“Jennifer, we are talking about saving the life of a great young man. Let’s not take any chances. We’ll all be there,” he said with conviction. “I’ll get you a list later today.”

“Thanks again, Mr. President.”

“Jennifer, here is my private number. You just let me know if there is anything else I can do to help,” the former president added. Jennifer didn’t know it at the time, but she would be calling that number later that day.

Hayes came on again at noon to a background of the “Simply the Best” video and basketball game highlights combined with videos of public service projects. There was a missing persons list scrolling across the bottom of the screen. “Do you know where these people are?”

Hayes provided the statistics. “There were 1,125 people at the ceremony including 955 students and 48 teachers and custodians. As of ten minutes ago 944 people have contacted us and will be there. That includes former President Bush and his party. This means we still need to reach 181 people. Help us, we are running out of time.”

“Jerry, we have a problem. We have a guy in Iraq and another on a naval carrier in the Pacific. The military says it would be impossible to get them back in time.”

“Jennifer, do you still have President Bush’s private number?”

“I have it right here.”

“Dial it.”

“What other problems do you know about, Pete?”

“Well, there is one problem we can’t do much about. Mrs. Reynolds is dying of cancer and is basically on her deathbed. There is no way she could make the trip.”

Jerry thought about it. Matthew had been specific about there being ‘no exceptions’, but he couldn’t have meant to include someone on her deathbed; or could he? Jerry knew how much Mrs. Reynolds liked Matthew and made his decision. “Get me her number. This should be her decision. Anything else?”

“Nothing we haven’t addressed. Ray and Alice are in California, but they said they will be there. Fred is studying in London, but he should already be on a plane.”

“Good job, let’s keep at it. We’re running out of time.”

By 4:00 PM the missing person list was down to 23 people and by 5:00 PM the list was down to seven, including the two servicemen stationed overseas. Former President George Bush had guaranteed they would be there.

John Stevens was one of the seven men that had not received the message. He had spent the entire day giving a presentation to

the New York Department of Administration, the culmination of six months of hard work by his four-man project team. The project to design a statewide accounting system was worth \$25 million and would be the largest job that the small firm he worked for had ever obtained. They were one of six bidders and the presentation process took all morning, followed by a question and answer session in the afternoon. At 4:30 he finally checked his cell phone and saw that his wife, Alice, had been trying to reach him all day.

“What’s up, Alice, I see you’ve been trying to reach me.”

“Have you seen the recent news about Matthew? It’s all over network television.”

John had gone to bed early, but was aware of the accident. “No; is he okay?”

“Yes, but that’s not what I mean. His condition is still the same but Jerry Hayes is coordinating an effort to get all his classmates to St. Louis. Apparently he is convinced that everyone needs to be there by 8 PM tomorrow in order to save Matthew’s life. You’re one of four people that they haven’t been able to reach. Everyone else will be there.”

John didn’t hesitate for a moment. “Contact whoever is in charge and let them know we’ll be there. I’ll fly home tonight and we can catch a plane directly to St. Louis tomorrow morning.” John walked back into the conference room and received the good news from his boss.

“John, we made the finals. They want us to make a presentation tomorrow afternoon and answer questions.”

John looked at his boss and gave him the bad news. “Henry, I need to fly home immediately. I won’t be able to make it tomorrow.”

“John, getting this project is vital to our firm’s future. You’re the key person and the guy they want to talk to. I need you there.”

“I’m sorry, Henry, but something has come up. You’ve heard me talk about Matthew Wilson, the basketball player that got hurt last night. Well, all his classmates promised him that if he ever needed us we would be there for him. He needs me.”

“John, you can’t go. I’m telling you now; if you’re not here tomorrow afternoon for the presentation you can forget about working for this company.”

“Henry, I’m sorry it’s come to this, but I have no choice. This man did everything for us when we were in high school and I wouldn’t be here if it were not for him. He is the one who convinced me that I was wasting my life and I needed to settle down and apply myself. Believe me, Henry, I respect what we are trying to do here but there is no option for me. I need to be in St. Louis.”

“Well, John, you’re through with this firm; pick up your check next week.”

The following afternoon Henry realized his mistake when the steering committee asked where John was. “He said he couldn’t make this meeting so I fired him yesterday for putting personal business ahead of the company. Our motto is ‘the client comes first’.”

“What type of personal business?”

“Apparently he felt he had to be in St. Louis because a high school classmate of his was injured. I expect more loyalty out of my people than that.”

“You mean he was a classmate of Matthew Wilson?” a member of the steering committee asked; “and you fired him?”

Henry could tell by the looks on their faces that he had made the wrong decision, but he couldn’t bring himself to say the right words. The men at the table said it for him. “I think I can speak for everyone and say that if he’s not rehired, your firm has no chance of getting this contract which we were prepared to award you. I can’t imagine anything more important than what John is doing now. He’s supporting his friend.”

The buses started arriving at the high school around 10 PM and by 11:30 PM ninety luxury tour buses were loaded with over 700 people. The county had agreed to donate school buses, but Tom Osteen had managed to get Greyhound and local tour bus operators to donate the luxury buses. “I would like to take credit for this,” Tom told a bunch of people, “but it only took one phone call. Greyhound agreed to provide what they could and promised to convince the others to donate the rest. I’m told we could have had 200 buses if we needed them.”

“And the drivers?”

“All volunteers; not one of them will take a penny.”

At midnight, 16 hours after Hayes first went on TV to make his plea, the caravan, including an ambulance carrying Mrs. Reynolds and a volunteer hospice nurse, left the school escorted by six Wisconsin highway patrol cars with lights flashing. The caravan reached I-90 in twenty minutes and headed south towards Chicago. Ninety minutes later they approached the state line and were greeted by an escort of Illinois highway patrolmen who escorted them through the toll booths without stopping. The mood in the buses was grim, but they were greeted by cheers and home-made signs from pedestrians that lined every bridge they passed under. “We are praying for Matthew Wilson,” was the prevalent theme.

Some people slept and many prayed, but everybody was thinking their own thoughts about Matthew. At Springfield, Illinois, they exited for food and a half-hour break. Fast food restaurants had volunteered to stay open for the special caravan and had been blocked off to insure a fast turnaround. It was amazing the amount of planning that the Illinois highway patrol officials had done to make this trip as easy as possible. Forty-five minutes later everybody had been fed and the caravan was on its way once again. At six AM they entered East St. Louis and crossed over the Mississippi River into St. Louis, where the Missouri highway patrol escorted them to their respective hotels. By 7 AM everyone had received their hotel key and was in their room. The advance team and hotel staffs had worked all night to ensure all guests were pre-registered. Eight hundred of the 1,125 people were in St. Louis, with the others coming by airplane and automobile. Jennifer had a list and contact numbers for the 325 that were in transit. Nothing was left to chance.

Lieutenant Pete Smith was one of the servicemen in Iraq that might have to make his own arrangements. He was having trouble getting clearance from his commander after receiving calls from at least ten classmates reminding him of the urgency of getting to St. Louis for Matthew Wilson. He stood in front of his commanding officer, a one star general.

“Sir, it is important that I return to the United States immediately.”

“And, for the last time, Lieutenant Smith, I cannot grant your request. This is the United States Air Force and we cannot grant the wishes of any person who needs to get home for a personal emergency.”

“Yes sir, but this is much more than just a personal reason. Matthew Wilson is truly a special person and he needs me there.”

“Lieutenant, my decision is final. You are confined to your quarters.”

Lieutenant Smith was about to say something he might have later regretted when the General’s assistant interrupted. “Sir, I have a phone call for you.”

“Not now, corporal, I’ll call them back.”

“Sir, its General Adams.”

This was a phone call that he had to take. General Adams was a four star general in charge of the Marine corp.

“General Adams, what can I do for you?”

“Yes, he is standing right here.....yes sir.....yes sir.....yes sir.”

He hung up, his face ashen. “Captain, scramble a MIG. Lieutenant Smith must be at Heathrow Airport in two hours. Lieutenant, you have five minutes to pack your bags and be on the tarmac.”

Ten minutes later the MIG was in the air headed for Heathrow Airport, where they would meet-up with another serviceman from the Navy before boarding Air Force Two; the Vice President of the United States had been in London at a NATO conference. The MIG pilot had explicit instructions to get there before the Navy pilot. The General had made it clear that the Air Force would not be the reason for any delay. These orders had come directly from the President of the United States who had received an order from his father, George Herbert Walker Bush, who had once asked Matthew to let him know if ever there was anything he could do for him. He kept his promise.

The MIG approached Heathrow and received a landing vector from the control tower. The pilot was asked to circle the airport one time while the Navy pilot landed. “Control tower, that is not acceptable. We are short of fuel. I am on course for runway Bravo and will land in sixty seconds.”

“We have a Navy airplane landing on the same runway. You must change course.”

“Patch me through to the Navy pilot.”

“Captain, my chart shows runway Bravo is 170 feet wide. My plane is 80 feet wide, wing tip to wing tip; how about you?”

“I’m 83 feet tip-to-tip, so what’s the problem? I see no reason why we both can’t use the same runway, do you?”

“I certainly do not. Let’s show these people how we fly airplanes in the military. Control tower, we’re coming in.”

A local television station film crew had been monitoring airport transmissions and picked up the conversation between controller and pilot. He caught the landing on live camera and provided immediate feed to the BBC network, where millions of people watched the two pilots approach Heathrow together. The video would later be used in recruiting for both the Air Force and the Navy as the supersonic jets landed simultaneously with wings only inches apart. As the airplanes screeched to a support, three-star Generals and Admirals raced to escort the passengers to the waiting Air Force Two where they were greeted personally by the Vice President of the United States. Fifteen minutes later Air Force Two was in the air and headed for St. Louis. The plane landed at 7:30 PM and twenty five minutes later the two servicemen arrived by helicopter at the Hospital, with four minutes to spare.

Jennifer checked off the final two names from her list. Everyone was here.

Chapter 24

Protecting the Ark

Oleg Ivanov went from boat to boat addressing each of his men. There were six boats, each carrying six men armed with AK-47 machine guns, semi automatic pistols, grenades and two rocket launchers. Oleg didn't expect trouble, but it always paid to be prepared. Confident that each boat knew its role, he jumped into the lead boat and gave the order to begin the twenty minute trip across the lake. He smiled as he thought of the wealth and power that possessing the Ark of the Covenant would bring.

Oleg thought of himself as a businessman and a member of a powerful cartel known as the Russian Mafia. Much stronger than the Italian Mafia ever hoped to be, the Russian Mafia dominated business activities in Russia and had a major presence in the United States and other foreign countries. His gang alone had over 400 soldiers and controlled a large portion of Moscow. Thirty six of his best men were here today for this mission.

An unlikely set of circumstances brought the Russians to Lake Tana. It was a ten year journey that started with a small loan to a man who needed money to start a nightclub act in France. "My nephew is only ten, but he is the best magician in the country," the man claimed. "Not only that, he can find things that are lost and read your mind."

Oleg loaned the man 10,000 Euros in return for 50% of earnings. Six months later he remembered going to the nightclub to see how his investment was doing and was pleasantly surprised. Randy Wolkson was the real thing. He could read minds, find lost children and foresee the future. They had been disappointed on a few occasions, but Oleg knew this was a sound, long term investment. He was willing to wait.

The boy went back to the United States, but Oleg used his contacts to keep track of the boy who had changed his name to

Matthew Wilson. For ten years the Russian gang leader followed Matthew's progress, eventually leading him to Ethiopia and the Lake Tana resort development. Oleg had a nose for money and sensed this was more than a casual investment; he acted accordingly. The Russians monitored the telephone calls for three years and listened closely as Matthew's friends talked about the Ark. They hit pay dirt when the two Ethiopians discovered the cave. Oleg knew it was time to cash in on his investment.

The bidding on the Ark was unbelievable. Subject to verifying authenticity, the Sunnis offered \$500 million, an offer topped by radical Shiites who offered \$600M. Rome offered a billion and increased their offer to three billion when they heard that Ahmadinejad offered two billion. Oleg wasn't interested; he was going to harness its power and keep the Ark for himself.

They neared the island and Oleg waited as two boats broke off in each direction to circle the island and make sure they were alone. It was 1:00 AM and he didn't expect any visitors. The four remaining boats stopped four hundred yards from the small island and shut down their engines. They floated silently, packed together in a group, waiting until they received the all-clear signal.

The silence was broken by the sounds of a high speed power boat appearing out of the darkness bearing down upon them on a collision course. The maniacal animal-like screams of the five men in the approaching boat could be heard clearly above the noise of the engines and struck fear into Oleg's men. They were not aware that eight hundred years ago this tactic was used successfully in the Crusades.

“A key tactic of the Templars was that of the ‘squadron charge’. A small group of knights and their heavily-armed warhorses would gather into a tight unit which would gallop full speed at the enemy lines, with a determination and force of will that made it clear that they would rather commit suicide than fall back. This terrifying onslaught would frequently have the desired result of breaking a hole in the enemy lines, thereby giving the other Crusader forces an advantage”.

Precious moments were lost as the twenty four Russians stared at the oncoming boat and listened to the war cries of the crew. When they finally reacted, it was too late. The oncoming boat, with a metal battering ram and three foot spikes protecting the sides, rammed into Oleg's lead boat at a speed of 30 knots. Oleg and two of his crew were killed instantly and the other three were thrown into the water where they were raked with automatic gunfire. The wake from the collision capsized a second boat whose crew suffered a similar fate. The two remaining boats were just beginning to mount a defense when the grenades exploded; within minutes Oleg and twenty three of his men were dead. Oleg's other two boats arrived too late to help, but just in time to suffer the fate of their comrades. The fifth boat was rammed and the six-man crew dumped unceremoniously into the water, destined to be mowed down by automatic machine guns. The sixth boat tried to escape, but couldn't outrun the projectile from the hand-held missile launcher.

The water surrounding the small island was littered with debris from sunken boats. A score of lifeless bodies floated aimlessly atop the lake, slowly making their way towards the majestic Blue Nile Falls.

It was approaching eight PM Wednesday in St Louis, four AM the following day on Lake Tana. The battle was over and the victors celebrated while their leaders entered the cave despite the protests and warnings of the Falasha priest standing guard. They proceeded to the Outer Chamber of the Temple before hesitating.

"Is it wise to enter, Grand Master? Maybe the priest is correct?"

"It is our destiny. There is no way I cannot enter. The Ark is the reason our Brotherhood was founded and represents everything the Masonic Temple believes in. I owe it to King Robert the Bruce, George Washington and all the others that championed individual liberty and political liberty since the inquisition forced our predecessor's underground."

"Yes, the founders of the Knights Templar would be proud. It is the culmination of their search for the Ark of the Covenant which started when the eight original knights took residence in the Al

Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount and spent ten years digging under the Temple searching for the Ark.”

“The Scottish adventurer James Bruce of Kinnaird would be envious if he knew that he had been within 100 meters of the Ark. Two hundred and forty years later his belief that the Ark was in the Lake Tana area will be proven correct.”

“We would not be standing here if it were not for Bruce and the travel journals he left behind. Thank you, Sir Bruce, and all the other Templars and Freemasons that have unsuccessfully searched for the lost Ark since it disappeared from Solomon’s Temple.”

The Grand Master of the Masonic Temple slowly opened the curtain to the Holy of Holies and gazed upon the altar.

The Ark was gone.

Exodus tells stories of how people that touched the Ark were killed and only Levites, members of the Hebrew Tribe of Levi, were allowed to transport the Ark without danger. It is difficult to reconcile this documented history with current facts. After all, it was Ken and Marco that relocated the Ark the previous evening after receiving a warning phone call from Amar Rashad.

Chapter 25

Revelation

Robin had prayed for Matthew several times since she came on duty two hours ago. She had been a nurse for sixteen years and prayed for all her patients. It was a simple prayer asking the Lord Jesus Christ to watch over this soul and, if this was their time, accept them into His everlasting Kingdom. Robin also said a quick prayer for her four-year old daughter who was diagnosed several months ago with terminal cancer. She crossed herself and rose from her knees when she heard someone say Amen. Matthew opened his eyes and placed his hand on her shoulder and spoke to her in a gentle voice; “thank you for your prayers, Robin.”

She was startled, but felt a strange calmness as she looked into the patient’s eyes. “Oh my, you are awake; I’m so happy. Let me get the doctor.”

“Not yet; please sit with me a moment and talk to me about Rebecca. You love her a lot, don’t you?”

Tears came to her eyes at the mention of her daughter’s name, and for the next five minutes she spilled out her pain to Matthew. Robin never stopped to question how the patient knew about Rebecca. “More than anything,” she answered. “Rebecca is so young, with her entire life ahead of her. I would do anything if I could trade my life for hers.”

Matthew took her hands in his; “Robin, I believe the Lord would want you to be here to guide her. Go home tonight and pray for her as you do every night. Do this and tomorrow you will find that Rebecca’s cancer is gone.”

There was no doubt in Robin’s heart that her daughter would be cured. “What can I ever do to thank you?”

“Teach your daughter the power of prayer and the power of faith; that’s all I ask of anyone.”

“Let me get the doctor, now,” Robin sobbed as she wiped tears from her face and left the room. It took her a few minutes to find

the doctor and when the doctor entered he found Matthew sitting upright. After a ten-minute examination the doctor pronounced him fit.

“I can’t find a thing wrong with you, young man. Even the bruises on your body from the explosion have disappeared. I’ve never seen anything like this before. How do you feel?”

“I feel great, doctor. Thank you and your staff for helping me these past three days.”

“You’re welcome, but I’m not sure we did anything to help you. Your sudden and complete recovery is almost like a miracle. We didn’t give you any treatment that would explain this.”

“Your nurse gave me exactly what I needed. Ask Robin about the power of prayer sometime.”

“I will, but it will have to wait until tomorrow. She said she had an emergency at home and took the rest of the night off. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Yes, please open the window and tell the crowd outside that I will speak to them in fifteen minutes.”

“I can’t do that, the windows in patient’s rooms are sealed.”

“Please try.”

The doctor started to argue, but something in the patient’s voice made him stop. He decided instead to demonstrate that the windows were locked. He pulled back the drapes and lifted up on the sill and to his amazement the window opened easily. Four stories below the mourners quieted expectantly as they saw the drapes pulled back and the window slide open. The doctor looked back at Matthew who just nodded.

The doctor was succinct. “Matthew Wilson has made a complete recovery and will speak to you in fifteen minutes.”

The crowd was momentarily stunned as they absorbed his words and then erupted in roar usually heard in sporting events for a last minute touchdown, a grand slam home run in the ninth inning or a last second basket to send a game into overtime. It was all of these things to Matthew’s classmates, and more. The roar slowly subsided and replaced with tears of happiness as former classmates hugged and cried without shame. Jerry Hayes and his wife had been kneeling in prayer when the doctor delivered the good news. Hayes

was a big man, but couldn't stop crying as he exchanged congratulations with his wife and friends.

Rosann and I were having dinner with former high school Principal Bill Hawkins in the hotel dining room, when the commotion began. There were no TVs in the dining room and our first clue was hearing a roar from outside, but none of us made the connection. Cell phones started to ring, but there was no need to answer. Peggy Jones, the former cheerleader coach, poked her head into the room and proclaimed the good news.

"Matthew is okay and will speak to us in fifteen, no twelve, minutes," as she checked her watch. The dining room and lounge could not have emptied any faster if a fire alarm went off and people saw the flames. Credit cards were thrown on the tables as everyone raced to the door. Principal Hawkins was no longer a young man, but I had to hurry to keep up. Behind me I heard the dining room manager instruct his staff to guard the credit cards and keep the dinners warm.

Elevators couldn't handle the crowd and many took the stairs. The street was bedlam as crowds from every hotel and restaurant poured out and race towards the hospital. I thought this must be what it was like the during the 1849 gold rush as the miners raced to discover the mother lode. Rosann and I reached the hospital with minutes to spare as we waited silently for Matthew to appear. The crowd became silent as the time approached.

Five thousand eyes focused on the window together with the lenses of cameras from every major television network including the BBC, which would broadcast this event worldwide. I later found that ratings far exceeded any sporting event including the Super Bowl, NCAA finals or the World Cup. More than two-thirds of all television sets in the world were tuned into this real life drama.

Matthew spent the fifteen minutes before his address with two people, Father Sean McGinnis and Amar Rashad. I learned later that Matthew did most of the talking; outlining his vision for a new, unified church. Amar was in complete accord.

"It's time," Matthew announced as he walked alone to the balcony outside his window. The crowd erupted again in cheers, but quieted quickly as Matthew raised his hand for silence.

“If you ever need me, I will be there for you. This is what we promised each other ten years ago. All of you remembered and fulfilled your promise to me, and for that I am eternally thankful.” The crowd listened in silence.

“Because of you, and for you, I am back to serve you. Jerry, thank you for trusting my message and spreading the word to everyone here; you are indeed the leader I knew you would become. President Bush, thank you for your efforts in getting a few of our servicemen here in time. John Smith, you were fired from your job because of me. You could get your job back, but instead, you might contact Michael O’Leary about starting your own firm. The two of you two will do well together. Last of all I want to thank Mrs. Reynolds, one of my favorite teachers. She was told this trip might kill her, but she wanted to come anyway. She is with me now and teaching again.”

Sobs came from her daughter as she noticed her mother was no longer breathing. “There is no need to mourn, Mrs. Fields, your mother is happy. Remember her as a great teacher, loving wife and mother and a great Christian. There is no need to mourn. She is with her God.”

I watched and listened in awe as I slowly realized what Matthew was saying. The boy that I had coached in basketball, had dinner with at our home and traveled to Jerusalem with to visit the Dome of the Rock now claimed to be the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Could it be true?

Matthew stood in the window and the lights behind him dimmed and were replaced by an aura that framed his head. “Bless you my classmates and friends, and rest assured that I will always be there for you when you need me. I am the Lord Jesus Christ and all you need to do to talk with me is to kneel and pray.” The crowd fell to their knees.

We discovered later that the television cameras recorded nothing of Matthew’s conversation with his classmates, nor were his words heard by the people in attendance that were not at the graduation ceremony. Ken and Rosann were not at the ceremony and did not hear Matthew’s claim to be the Lord Jesus Christ. The first words they and the world audience heard were:

“These people saved my life, and I will be forever thankful to them; the world will be forever thankful to them. I have come back to finish a mission that was started 2,000 years ago. Together we will create the world that God envisioned when he created the Garden of Eden. Will you support me in this hour of need?” he asked, looking directly into the television cameras. The roar of the crowd below was representative of the response he received from hundreds of millions watching from around the world.

“I wish to introduce a dear friend of mine, Father Sean McGinnis, whom I have asked to found a new church that is open to all people of faith that believe in me. It is a Christian church, but it is not Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian or any other established religion. We are open to Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and all existing religions as long as they forsake false gods and recognize the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Father McGinnis.”

“I promise you that this church will be a reflection of the Lord and will be open to everyone. It will be a reflection of Jesus Christ’s teaching and the laws handed down by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. It will be a reflection of the life and leadership of Matthew Wilson.” The crowd applauded and was not surprised when Father McGinnis knelt down and kissed Matthew’s hand. The television audience was surprised, as were the television moderators.

“David, is he claiming to be the second coming of Jesus Christ?” Chet Huntley of CBS asked.

“He hasn’t said so directly, but he is sure acting like it.”

“Unbelievable,” the cameras heard Huntley mutter when he thought his microphone was off. “The most watched program in history and we get a kook who thinks he is J.C. reincarnated.”

Matthew continued. “The next person I will introduce has many names, but all Muslims will know him as the Mahdi, or ‘guided one’. I introduce to you Mohammad Abdul Qasim from the House of Mohammad in the line of Imam Hasan.”

There was no rain, but the heavens roared with thunder that reverberated through the heavens as Amar appeared on the balcony and stood beside Matthew.

“That’s the basketball player from Turkey,” another analyst said; “the one that Wilson played against Sunday.”

“What is a Mahdi,” Huntley asked his religious advisor. “Help me out here.”

“Muslims believe he is the 12th Imam. The coming of the Mahdi is to the Muslims what the return of Jesus is to Christians.”

“Oh no, now we have two kooks,” Huntley muttered, not caring that the microphones picked up his every word. He looked at his religious advisor who was staring raptly at Amar standing alongside Matthew.

“Scripture says that the Mahdi will join forces with Jesus Christ to defeat the Dajjal, and lead his people to peaceful times. His coming will be announced by a loud wailing from the sky.”

“Was that thunder we just heard?” Brinkley asked. “It didn’t sound like any thunder I have heard before. It sounded like someone calling from the heavens.”

“Oh my, it is really Him” the religious advisor whispered.

The Mahdi began to speak. “I am Muslim, but I speak to all People of the Book, Muslim and Christian alike. I speak to you of peace and the words handed down to Mohammad by Allah while he resided in Mecca.” Amar hesitated as some in the crowd applauded.

“That is huge,” the BBC religious network expert almost shouted. “It wasn’t until Mohammad moved to Medina that his message became militant and there was talk about jihad and decapitating non-believers.”

“Muslims, I ask you to join forces with the Christians and defeat the armies of the false prophet, Dajjal.”

“What is a Dajjal?” a confused Brinkley asked.

“Al-Dajjal is the Muslim word for antichrist, or imposter Messiah, who many Muslims and Christians believe will be slain by Jesus. This will signal the appearance of the Mahdi who will then change the world into a perfect and just Islam society.”

Muslim stations across the world watched attentively, but there were many disbelievers. “Show us proof,” one Turkish commentator pleaded. “We need something more than a thunder clap.”

Matthew stepped forward and put his arm on the Amar’s shoulder, and the Mahdi did likewise, before speaking. “Many Muslims are asking for proof that I am the guided one, the one that

will guide you and show the way to hidden secrets. We now offer you that proof. We have found the Ark of the Covenant.”

My shock was different than that of others who were stunned by the announcement. Everyone had their own opinion as to what this meant, but everyone knew it was the harbinger of good times.

Muslims everywhere accepted that finding the Ark meant that the Mahdi, the 12th Imam, or leader, had indeed arrived. Finding the Ark would remove all doubts that this was indeed the Mahdi, the Guided One. There would no longer be any doubt except in the minds of militants that believed in the warlike suras uttered by Mohammad after he fled to Medina.

Christians knew the Ark was a symbol of power and would devastate the enemies of Christ. The Knights Templar, a warrior offshoot of the Catholic Church, had searched for the Ark for eight hundred years, knowing that possession of the Ark would make them all-powerful.

Jews remembered the role the Ark played in their history and prayed that its power would allow them to return to Jerusalem.

I wondered why Matthew had allowed the Mahdi to announce the discovery, but the more I thought about it the more I understood. It was for the same reason he had allowed Yao Ming to block his shot which allowed the China National Team to beat Matthew’s all stars; there are almost two billion Muslims in the world.

The Mahdi continued. “The Ark contains more than just the tablets containing the Ten Commandments handed down by God to Moses; the Ark also contains Hadiths and Torahs that correct many errors and misconceptions in established religions.”

“What does he mean?” Brinkley asked. Huntley didn’t answer. He was too busy licking his wounds.

The religious expert couldn’t contain himself. “They seem to be opening up the possibility of rewriting the Koran, and possibly the Bible. Muslims believe scriptures will be found with the Ark. This new information will be so convincing that all Jews and Christians will want to convert to Islam.”

“Doesn’t the Koran also say that people who don’t convert to Islam will be killed?”

“Yes, but the Mahdi had already disavowed the violence in the Koran. Mohammad wrote these suras only after he gained strength and migrated to Medina. The Mahdi is repudiating the part of the Koran that advocates violence.”

Matthew stepped forward to emphasize that the following words were his alone: “There is evil in this world that must be stopped. It must be stopped, now: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, your reign of terror has ended. You have desecrated the Dome of the Rock. My Father is destroying your false temple as we speak.”

“He is accusing Ahmadinejad of being the Dajjal, or antichrist,” the BBC announcer proclaimed what listeners already knew.

Matthew paused as the crowd gasped.

“What is he talking about?” Huntley asked his news desk.

“Nothing on the wires,” a journalist reported. “Wait; hold on, we just received word of a giant earthquake centered on the north side of Jerusalem.”

“That’s where the Dome of the Rock is located; any injuries?”

“It’s too early to tell, but our reporter on the scene says that the Temple Mount has been flattened, but the Al-Aqsa Mosque is still standing.”

“Could it be terrorism?”

“We don’t know for sure, but they don’t think so. It looks like an earthquake and electrical storm, but there has never been an earthquake of this magnitude in the Far East.” The broadcast booth was silent as each man evaluated what they were witnessing.

“Chet, do you still have doubts that these two men are who they claim to be?”

“No, David, I’m convinced.”

The Mahdi stepped forward alongside Matthew and was joined by Father McGinnis as Matthew spoke. “Next week Amar and I will start our journey to return the Ark of the Covenant to its rightful place to a new temple on the Dome of the Rock that will be the headquarters of our new church. Go in peace, my children. Tonight we celebrate and tomorrow we begin a journey towards a better understanding of God’s wishes as expressed in both the Holy Bible and the Koran.”

“Amen,” said Father McGinnis.

“Amin,” said the Mahdi.

Matthew appeared at the celebration party that night and was the same person I knew five days ago, or ten years before. His high school friends were still his friends, and he went from one person to the next until he had thanked each person for living up to their promise and saving his life. He made everyone feel important.

“Speech, speech,” the crowd shouted and Matthew reluctantly took the stage.

“People asked me to give another ‘We Kick Ass’ speech, but I figured Gus Edwards and the TV networks will get on me again,” he joked, pointing at Edwards and smiling his appreciation for the work Edwards had done. “They would say it probably isn’t the type of thing a man in my position should do, but I do have one memory I would like to leave you with.”

The music started and the crowd erupted before the second drum beat was played. It was déjà vu all over again as I watched Matthew and Jennifer recreate the magic they had captured ten years ago. None of us would ever tire of hearing them sing “Simply the Best”.

It was Mary’s first chance to see the live performance and she was awestruck. “The video and movie are good, but this is better,” she gushed. “Now I know what you all must have felt at the time.

“And maybe a little bit about why 100% of his classmates are here today,” I added.

The noise finally abated and Matthew spoke again. “Jennifer and I have an announcement to make,” Matthew said with that sly grin of his. “Jennifer, please do the honors.”

Jennifer didn’t need to say a word, but simply held up her left hand displaying a simple, but beautiful diamond engagement ring. I couldn’t help but wonder what impact this would have upon traditional views of celibacy in Rome and the Catholic Church.

The music started and everyone danced to the music Jennifer had chosen for this occasion; Andrew Lloyd Weber’s “I don’t know how to love him,” as sung by Mary Magdalene in *JC Superstar*.”

*I don't know how to love him.
What to do, how to move him.
I've been changed, yes, really changed.
In these past few days, when I've seen myself,
I seem like someone else.*

*I don't know how to take this.
I don't see why he moves me.
He's a man. He's just a man.
And I've had so many many men before,
In very many ways.
He's just one more.*

*Should I bring him down?
Should I scream and shout?
Should I speak of love,
Let my feelings out?
I never thought I'd come to this.
What's it all about?*

*I never thought I'd come to this.
What's this all about?*

*Yet, if he said he loved me,
I'd be lost. I'd be frightened.
I couldn't cope, just couldn't cope.
I'd turn my head. I'd back away.
I wouldn't want to know.
He scares me so.
I want him so.
I love him so.*

It was a beautiful night and Matthew stayed until the end, dancing with Jennifer and talking with all his friends. Rosann managed to get him to dance a fast dance with her that made her whole evening. I told Jennifer to find a younger partner, hopefully one that could dance.

“Thanks, Coach, for letting me dance with Mary. Will I see you in Ethiopia Monday?”

“I’ll be there. Ken and Marco said they have quite a story to tell me. Do you want to fly together? Maybe you can tell me about the hidden scrolls and Torahs?”

Matthew smiled and gave me a wink. “Amar and I already made plans to lease a private jet. Why don’t you join us and we can talk.”

“I would love to. Maybe you can tell me how you let someone score 41 points on you in one half after all I taught you about defense.”

“One more thing, Coach. I’m not sure I ever thanked you enough for the job you did rebuilding Babylon. I will always be grateful to you and your team for a job well done. You should be proud, no matter what fate awaits the new Babylon.”

“Thank you, Matthew,” I replied without enthusiasm. He had told me several years ago why he had never visited the rebuilt Babylon. I sensed there was an underlying reason that Matthew had mentioned this now. I hoped that Monday’s long plane ride to Ethiopia would provide me an opportunity to discuss his plans for the new Babylon.

Matthew said his goodbyes and the band serenaded with the title song from JC Superstar;

*Everytime I look at you I don't understand
Why you let the things you do get so out of hand
You'd have managed better if you'd had it planned.
Why'd you choose such a backward time in such a strange land?
If you'd come today you would have reached the whole nation.
Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.
Don't get me wrong now. Don't get me wrong. Don't get me wrong.
I Only want to know now....*

CHOIR

*Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ
Who are you? What have you sacrificed?
Jesus Christ, Superstar
Do you think you're what they say you are?*

Sunday, a natural catastrophe dominated the news. Massive earthquakes resulting in floods and landslides had completely destroyed the new Babylon on both sides of the Euphrates River. All buildings, except one, had collapsed and been swallowed by the raging water and mud that cover everything. Only the Tower of Babel remained, standing in isolation, seemingly immune to the utter devastation below.

“What do you make of this, Chet? Is it possible that rerouting the Euphrates to its original channel caused the earthquake?”

“David, I truly believe there was a divine hand in this. Iraq has never seen earthquakes of this magnitude. Religious experts say that this is punishment for the new Babylon returning to the sinful ways of Babel, the original city.”

“Then why is the Tower of Babel still standing?”

Phenom



A flash of lightning accompanied by peals of thunder filled the sky. The Tower of Babel, the original symbol of man's defiance towards God, disintegrated into dust before the eyes of the entire world. The Prophecy was fulfilled.

Epilogue

Prophecy Fulfilled

Rev. 16:12 The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river, the Euphrates; and its water was dried up, so that the way would be prepared for the kings from the east.

Rev. 16:17 Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl upon the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne, saying, "It is done."

Rev. 16:18 And there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder; and there was a great earthquake, such as there had not been since man came to be upon the earth, so great an earthquake was it, and so mighty.

Rev. 16: 19 The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath.

The flotilla of native Ethiopian boats sailed from Lake Tana, forded the spectacular Tis Abay falls, and began the two-month journey to Jerusalem; the original site of Solomon's Temple built to house the Ark of the Covenant. The path took them South along the Blue Nile River, past the falls and hydro-power station, before the Blue Nile curled west and then north towards Khartoum, Sudan, where the Blue Nile merged into the Nile. The flotilla sailed north along the Nile towards Cairo, Egypt and the Aswan dam.

Millions of Egyptians lined the river, eager to catch a glimpse of this magnificent procession. The symbolism left no doubt that

this was a convoy sent by God to defeat the Antichrist. The lead boat was painted white and housed two thrones where Matthew and Amar sat side by side, waiving to the thousands upon thousands of people that lined the river banks. Before them in the boat's bow, was the Ark of the Covenant, glowing in its majestic wonder, for the people to behold.

The white barge was preceded by four "tankwas" or longboats, thirty feet in length with high, curved prows, each paddled by a dozen native Ethiopians. The boats were identical to the 'vessels of bulrushes', or 'papyrus skiffs' mentioned in the book of Isaiah, and still in use on Lake Tana today. The figure of a horse was sculptured into the bow of each boat; one white, one red, one black and the fourth, a pale horse believed to signify death.

The procession was nearing the Aswan Dam when an army of more than a million Muslims appeared out of the East carrying black flags or banners of war, a sure sign that the appearance of the Mahdi is imminent. Written in Arabic were the words, "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Messenger". The black flag, called Ar-Raya, is called the flag of jihad by radical Muslims.

The Messenger of Allah said: The black banners will come from the East and their hearts will be as firm as iron. Whoever hears of them should join them and give allegiance, even if it means crawling across snow.

There were two flags behind Amar's throne. The white flag, called Al-Liwaa, proclaimed that he is the true leader of the Muslim army and the Islamic State. The black flag represents violence for radical Muslims.

When Mohammed returned to his home city of Mecca after being exiled for eight years, he returned as a conqueror. With him were ten thousand Muslim soldiers. They carried with them black flags. On the flags was one word written in Arabic: punishment. Symbolically, the black flag behind Amar was inscribed with the word peace.

The world watched in wonderment as the Muslim army from Iran laid down their arms and burned their flags. The Muslim soldiers knelt along the river and paid homage to their leader who they believed would guide them to better times and set up a new world order based on justice, righteousness and virtue. It was

evident to the world that the Mahdi would not pursue the destruction of other religions or their subjugation to Islamic beliefs. The Mahdi was a man of peace.

The journey to return the Ark of the Covenant was almost complete. The procession wound its way through Jerusalem and approached the Temple Mount. The destruction that had killed Ahmadinejad and destroyed his false temple had been cleared away. Father Sean McGinnis had begun construction of a new temple that would be headquarters for Matthew's new, world church.

Matthew and Amar stood side by side at the top of the steps leading up to the Dome of the Rock as the Falasha priests, the Black Jews of Ethiopia, carried the Ark of the Covenant up the steps and placed the Ark at their feet. The world watched as the two leaders knelt in prayer. Would Matthew allow Amar to lead the prayers as some scholars have prophesized?

I was near enough to see Matthew Wilson, the boy that I once knew as the greatest basketball player that I had ever coached, rise and step forward ever so slightly and proclaim;

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last."

The Agents



The Next Sports Thriller by Jim Plautz

“I regret to inform you that your petition to purchase the New York Yankees has been denied. A majority of owners have decided that your ownership group fails to meet the high standards that major league baseball has established for admission into this closed fraternity. As a result, the Yankees have decided to move in a different direction. The Commissioner’s Office appreciates the time and effort your group has invested. We wish you luck in future endeavors.”

“Screw you, you pompous windbag, and screw the rest of you that voted no. Your fraternity is nothing but a sham. I’ll see you in court. This isn’t over by a longshot.” Having vented his immediate rage, Malcolm Linebaum stormed out of the conference room. His attorneys and minority partners followed, with one exception. There was always Plan B.

Jim Simpson made his decision. Malcolm could have his revenge and the new owners would make a very nice ROI on their investment. Simpson hurried to catch up with Malcolm Linebaum.

‘Yankees win! Yankees win!’

“Sound familiar? It should. The 2009 World Series victory over the Phillies was the Yankee’s 28th championship, 25% of the championships played since 1903. St Louis is next with 10. Chicago last won in 1908. Milwaukee’s only championship came in 1957, 52 years ago. Is life fair? Is baseball fair?”

“What’s your point?” Malcolm Linebaum asked. “That’s why we were willing to pay \$2.4 billion for the privilege of owning that money-making machine. Shit, they could finish last and still be the most profitable franchise in sports.”

“In the short term, yes; but they need to continue winning in order to maximize television revenues. That new stadium gives them a tough nut to crack before they break even.”

“So.”

“So, what if we found a way to equalize the playing field?”

“Are you talking Salary Cap? It’ll never happen, and revenue sharing is a joke? There will never be a level playing field in baseball. It’s been that way since Ruth and Gehrig.”

“I’m not talking revenue sharing – I’m suggesting we beat them at their own game. What if they didn’t have CC Sabathia, A.J. Burnett and Mark Teixeira this year?”

“But they do.”

“Imagine what might have happened if Sabathia had stayed in Milwaukee?”

“But, that’s never going to happen. The Brewers are a small-market team. They offered Sabathia \$100M over five years, but the Yankees offered \$161M. The Brewers will never be able to outbid the Yankees.”

“What if they could, or better yet, what if they didn’t have to?”

“You do remember Curt Flood and Catfish Hunter.” Malcolm replied with sarcasm. “We now have something called free agency.

“Yeah, and Baseball also has the Rule 4 Draft and a bunch of other regulations that protect the owners. Players are still at a disadvantage for the first five years of their career. Let’s use this to our advantage.”

How?” asked Malcolm, leaning forward across the table. Simpson knew he was hooked.

“Form a new league.”

“No way; it would be impossible. We would need stadiums, television contracts and hundred other things. The league would lose money and end up just like the WFL and ABA. Are you serious?”

“Very serious. Baseball revenues are generated by the star system. The league that has the stars will control the market.”

“And how do we sign the stars?”

“Agents.”

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PHENOM, and the Search for the Ark of the Covenant - Too good to be true, a mid-year transfer student leads his high school basketball team to the State Championship and along the way helps others become better students and young adults. Ten years later these former classmates are asked to repay their debt when Matthew Wilson is severely injured while searching for the Ark of the Covenant. In the interim, the ancient city of Babylon, the original city of sin, is rebuilt to its former glory despite Biblical prophecies that Babylon will be destroyed.

Did you know?

- Basketball is the world's second most popular sport, behind soccer.
- The Knights Templar's 900 year search for the Ark is factual.
- The Koran and Bible suggest that the appearance of 'The Mahdi' and the 'Second Coming of the Lord' may be dependent upon finding the Ark of the Covenant.



Jim Plautz is a businessman, former basketball player and father of three. Originally from Wisconsin, Jim now makes his home in Tampa, Florida with his wife, Rosann. This is his third novel. "My novels are action thrillers set in a sports environment. My first book ('Out of Bounds') is about golf and my second book ('Double Fault at Roland Garros') is about tennis. The two Phenom books are about basketball and the search for the Ark of the Covenant."