

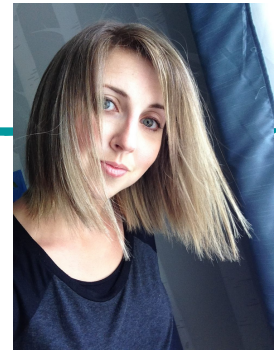
KATRINA D. HAMEL

Website: <https://katrinadhamel.com>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/katrinadhamel>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/katrinahamelwrites>

Email: katrina_hamel@outlook.com



Bio: Katrina is a follower of Jesus, a wife, a mom of four, and a Biblical Fiction author from Alberta, Canada. She writes with a passion for New Testament History, especially first-century women. When she's not lost beneath stacks of research, she's consuming copious amounts of coffee, good books, and board games.

DIVIDING SWORD

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Back cover text: In a time when Rome rules the world and the people are crying out for a savior, a revolutionary rabbi walks the land, dividing families and faith. Experience the epic Gospel of Matthew through the eyes of a Capernaum woman and a young Pharisee scribe.

Beth believes Jesus offers healing and hope, but his plan for her husband rises like the waves of the sea to wash away her dreams for the future. Afraid of being left behind, she chases after her husband Peter, but in traveling with Jesus she finds more questions than answers.

Reuben believes the way to a restored Israel is through careful obedience to law and tradition, and Jesus of Nazareth is challenging tradition at every turn. Under the watchful eye of his secretive rabbi, Reuben hopes he can rise above obscurity and take his place as a leader among men, but a disastrous confrontation with the Nazarene threatens to destroy everything.

Available for purchase in paperback and ebook on Amazon. Read for free through the Kindle Unlimited program.

Katrina D. Hamel has also published: As the Stars: 45 Bible Fiction Short Stories

THE FICTIONAL STORY WEAVES IN AND AROUND THESE FAMOUS STORIES FROM MATTHEW AS POWERFUL, EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNTS

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Raising the synagogue official's daughter back to life
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Jesus and his position on the Sabbath
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The sermon by the Sea of Galilee
Jesus' rejection in Nazareth
The beheading of John the Baptist
Five thousand fed
Jesus walks on water
The healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter
Jesus heals and feeds four thousand by the Sea of Galilee
Peter declares Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God
Jesus' instructions to his disciples
Jesus and the rich ruler
Jesus promises blessings to those who have followed him
The triumphant entry in Jerusalem
Overturning tables in the temple
Healing, teaching, and debating in the temple courts
Jesus warning about the signs of the end times
The plot between Judas and the Pharisees to kill Jesus
The Lord's Supper
The betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane
Jesus before Pilate
Jesus' crucifixion
Jesus rises from the dead
The meeting of Jesus and his disciples in Galilee and the Great Commission

EXERPT FROM DIVIDING SWORD

1

THE VEIL OF INNOCENCE

The air rippled under his feathers as the raven mounted the wind and soared high over his domain. In the heights, he could not see the borders that broke the once whole land into three territories, governed by puppets held over unwilling subjects by the iron fists of Rome.

Suspended beneath the clouds, the raven did not discern between Jew and Gentile, nor did he understand the vast separation in culture, customs, and belief that split the little country into jagged bits that pricked and cut each other without mercy.

All the raven saw were the lands that in ancient times had been promised to the descendants of Abraham—craggy mountains and grassy slopes, harsh wilderness and fertile fields of sprouting vines and grains, trees and wildflowers nudged to new life by the spring sun.

With a glittering eye, the raven saw a long road. The road went through valleys, hugged canyons, rose to the heights, and then sunk once more, sometimes even and cobbled, more often rough and almost impossible to trace. The road was traveled by a steady flow of people. Their journey had been long, and sometimes dangerous.

The circling ravens overhead should have been a warning, but Beth and Reuben were innocent to the dark omen. The cousins broke away from their traveling group and raced ahead, each determined to be the first to set eyes on the city walls.

Their friends and family fell behind them; old and young moved steadily by foot or on donkeys, some with rugged carts. They were but one group in a massive country-wide pilgrimage headed to the festival. They were near the end of their three-day journey from the north.

The children were eager for their very first view of the city where the mighty King David had ruled in the distant past, in the glorious years of their forefathers.

A shepherd with his long staff drove a flock of sacrificial lambs ahead of him on the grassy plain beside the road. Beth could hear the bleating over Reuben's laughter. Disappearing around a bend in the road, a merchant caravan of camels plodded, their loads swaying. Only a small hill stood between them and their first view of the city of Jerusalem. Deaf to calls behind, the children dashed far ahead, fueled by the fresh spring day.

They stumbled to a stop. Reuben flung out an arm and caught Beth's sleeve. Unable to tear their eyes

away, they fumbled and found each other's hand.

Gaping and frozen in place with horror, they stared up at a contorted face. Flies buzzed over sunburned limbs that were spiked to a splintered cross. Crusted blood ran down his forearms and dripped from his feet to the packed dirt below. The man's chest rose and fell sporadically. He was unable to pull a full breath through his swollen lips. Fresh blood oozed from his wounds as he strained, trying to raise himself to take a breath. His glazed eyes rolled, unfocused. The smell of the man made Beth's stomach roil. Her nose burned with the coppery scent of blood and the sour stink of urine.

Nailed to the cross were letters on papyrus, but Beth couldn't read. In this case, she didn't need to. The message was clear. This man had been an enemy of omnipresent Rome.

An inky raven came and perched over the man's shoulder, turning its glinting eye this way and that, deciding if it was time to begin his feast.

A shifting movement startled Beth as she noticed a trio of Roman soldiers keeping guard. Two were sprawled on the ground, but the third stood with a wide stance and his muscled arms crossed over a dull metal breastplate. He watched the two children with mild curiosity on his scarred face.

"Run back to your family," he said. His voice rang with authority.

Beth wanted nothing more than to obey and escape from this horror. She tugged on Reuben, whose wide-eyed gaze was still fixed upon the cross. He didn't move. She bit her lip to keep from crying as she yanked his arm once more, hard.

"Come on!" she hissed at her cousin. Reuben tore his eyes away. Together they fled back around the turn in the road.

They collided with Zebedee, who was coming to find them. Their uncle was broad of chest, with unusually long, thick, and curly hair tied back at the nape of his neck with a leather thong. Panting, the children flung their arms around the kindly man's waist, and Beth took comfort as his large hand rested on her back.

"What is it?" he asked in his deep voice.

Reuben looked up at his uncle, his expression full of bitterness. "There's a cross, with a rebel." It was the first cross the cousins had ever seen with their own eyes, though every child had heard whispers of the horrible fate that awaited a traitor to Rome.

Zebedee's eyes hardened as he gazed at the road ahead, and his voice rumbled like thunder. "What? They should have been emptied before Passover!"

Beth's mother, Tamar, bustled towards them. She wore a frown on her face and Beth's baby brother on her generous hip. The rest of the travelers from Capernaum were not far behind.

"There's a cross up ahead," Zebedee grunted to Tamar, sparks in his eyes. Tamar looked at her daughter with concern, and Beth tried to swallow the ache in her throat. "It's right by the road. We'll have to pass by it."

Tamar pressed her lips together until they formed a thin line, then puffed out her breath. "Well, there's no helping it. Even at Passover, they can't let us forget." She clicked her tongue and turned around to warn the others so they could shield their children.

"Come, Beth!" her mother called over her shoulder.

Beth obeyed at once, Reuben hastening with her as they wove their way through friends and neighbors to find their families.

Reuben came up to his parents and two younger brothers first, and the cousins shared a look before

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Beth pushed deeper into the moving throng. Tamar came up to her husband, Benjamin, and spoke to him in clipped tones as he led the soft-eyed donkey beside him. Spread over the donkey was a harness that held two large baskets on either side, baskets that still smelled of fish. One held their traveling supplies, and the other basket held Beth's two-year-old sister, Hannah. Tamar passed little David to her eldest daughter. Beth held her baby brother close. She drew in the sweet scent of his downy head greedily, trying to wash away the stink of human waste and the tang of blood. Tamar took Hannah into her arms, and drew her mantle round her little daughter, shielding her from witnessing the grisly scene.

The crowd pushed ever forward. Like a wave, silence rolled back from the front until the only noise was the shuffle of footsteps and the rattling of wheels. Beth felt her heart pound as she came around the bend once more and heard the piercing cry of the ravens. She tried to avert her gaze. She lifted her chin, and with narrowed eyes she fixed her gaze down the dusty road to where it led right through the large gates of Jerusalem—the city she had longed to see with her own eyes for as long as she could remember.

The enormous Northern Gates were thrown wide, and from this distance, she could see a blurry mass of people funneling into the city. She forced herself to notice the bulky, yellowish stone walls. She looked over the walls and saw towers that rose into the sky—the overbearing feature of the Roman garrison. That blight on the most Holy City was called simply the Antonia. She shuddered. She didn't want to think of Romans just then. A glint caught her eye, and her gaze shifted so she could see the top of a gleaming, white and gold structure, a building so dazzlingly beautiful it could only be the Temple.

The pilgrims pushed forward in their unnatural hush. Beth clutched her brother to her chest and tried to ignore the agony beside her. Her gaze wavered, and then, almost against her will, her eyes stole up and looked at the dying man just as they passed. His breathing was even more ragged now. His muscles trembled. How much longer could he endure? Beth realized she was holding her breath, and let it slip out.

The soldiers glared as the pilgrims passed. Beth wondered if they expected trouble with the Passover festival so near. It was a festival of freedom after all. With her heart in her throat and her stomach knotted, she did not feel free.

At last they were past the torturous scene. Little by little, conversations resumed and her pulse slowed.

Beth's extended family left their traveling companions a little before the city and walked the rough road to Bethany.

Beth's father, Benjamin, her Uncle Zebedee, and Reuben's father, Ebenezer, were brothers, fishermen all. Zebedee was eldest. He had inherited his wealth and his valuable boat from their prosperous father. Her father and Ebenezer had also inherited a boat each, but Ebenezer, for reasons not clear to Beth, had lost his boat and was obliged to rent from the guild. Their cousin, Simon, was a Pharisee and shopkeeper. He had a good-sized house in the town of Bethany, just two miles from Jerusalem. Simon's home would be full of relatives now, all come for the yearly Passover and Week of Unleavened Bread. As they ducked under the doorway, Tamar and Benjamin greeted their distant relations joyfully. Beth followed them inside and found the house was packed full of noisy bustle. Unnerved still, Beth huddled near her mother.

Tamar found a seat with the other mothers. All the women talked at once, their daughters clustered around them. Beth wondered how anyone could understand anything, but heads bobbed all around. Her

mother took David from Beth to nurse him while Beth minded Hannah. As usual, the determined toddler kept trying to wander off. Benjamin went to the courtyard with the other men. Their voices carried into the house as they shared the news from their respective areas.

Beth's mind was full, but she knew her mother wouldn't wish to discuss the horror she had seen. Beth chewed her lower lip and wished she could speak to Reuben away from the others.

A little while later, Beth discerned a shift in the mood and conversation. Families began filing back outside, and Beth wondered where they were going. Reuben left with his family. He gave her a small wave as he passed. With a swoop in the pit of her stomach, Beth realized it was nearly time for the evening sacrifice in the Temple. She was used to stopping to pray at the time of the evening sacrifice in her hometown far to the north, but perhaps from here, she might be able to hear the shofar blow.

She looked up as her father came over, smiling. "Would you like to go and see the Temple, my girl?"

Beth felt her heart skip a beat, and nodded. "Yes, Papa!"

They left Tamar with the two little ones in the house, busy in happy conversation. Beth followed her father out the door and over the mountainous ridge. Her heart pounded, and it had little to do with the sharply ascending road.

They paused atop the Mount of Olives and looked down over the city. "Stop here for a moment, my girl," Benjamin said. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and she leaned against him. Standing together, the father and daughter could see over the low Eastern Wall and into the Temple Courts. The Courts were an enormous raised platform lifted above the rest of the city.

Her father said, "From here, you can see everything. If your eyes are good, you can see over the Golden Gate, over the gates to the outer and inner courtyards, and perhaps even through the Temple doors. If you had the sight of an eagle, you could perhaps see to the curtain of the Holy of Holies itself."

Beth felt a surge of ancestral pride and awe. She wrapped her arms around her father in a sideways hug.

"It's so beautiful!" she breathed.

"It's the most beautiful Temple in the world!" her father exclaimed, tipping back his chin and raising a hand to the heavens. "As it should be."

Beth had heard the Temple described to her again and again by her father. He had detailed the rooms and their purposes and told her all about the careful way the priests performed the rites and sacrifices. As she saw it with her own eyes, she thought it was more wondrous, and more enormous in scale than she had ever imagined. Her entire town could fit upon the Temple Mount, with room to spare. The vast number of tiny people that milled in the courts staggered her mind.

They could have stayed and gazed in wonder for hours, but the Temple sacrifices were precise, so they hurried on. They descended the Mount of Olives and crossed the valley. Fearful she would be separated from her father, Beth kept her hand within his as they joined the great crush outside the Eastern Golden Gate.

Beth looked upwards in amazement as they passed through the thick city walls. The gateway alone was far larger than her house. When they emerged on the other side, they were under a colonnade that wrapped around the entire complex—a roofed area supported by double columns. She looked up once more and saw the underside was elaborately engraved wood. The area sheltered many merchants and noisy animals. The din was overwhelming.

People streamed into the vast Court of Gentiles from the many large gates. Two gates were to her left, below the Royal Stoa where her father had told her the client king liked to entertain overlooking the spectacular Temple. Four more gates stood opposite her, and to her right was the infamous Antonia fortress, with a little gate allowing easy access for soldiers. The entire courtyard was paved in multi-hued, intricate stonework. In the Temple even the floor was beautiful.

She caught all that in a moment, then her gaze was fixed upon the dominating feature before her—the Temple itself. It was a marvel to behold, gleaming with gold trim and dazzling white marble. This was the place where God met with His chosen people.

Her heart soared with eagerness. She was about to speak to her father, but then her gaze was caught. Pushed out of the way was an old man dressed in rags. His milky eyes were almost hidden in deep wrinkles, and he held a beggar's bowl in his shaky hands. Near him was a middle-aged woman sitting on the intricate tiles, her legs twisted and deformed. Beth's joy drained away and her stomach wrenched. Here, so close to the one true God's Temple, how could there be the poor and the sick?

Beth tugged on her father's hand until he looked down. She tried to voice her questions, but tears rose and the words stuck in her throat. She gestured to the beggars. Benjamin glanced at them, then at his daughter. Her father smiled at her. He wove his way to the beggars and dropped a hard-earned coin into each bowl.

"Peace be on you," the old man whispered, and the woman bobbed her head with a small smile. Beth felt a little better, and she smiled again.

Benjamin led his daughter over to where people waited to pass through a narrow opening in a low balustrade. This was where the Court of Gentiles ended.

"What does that say, Papa?" Beth pointed to an engraved sign.

"No man of another nation is to enter into the barrier and the enclosure around the Temple. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which follows." Benjamin rested a hand on her hair. "The Temple's only for the Jews, my dear. We are the Lord's chosen people."

They made it through the narrow gate and climbed the steps that led to the Temple's inner courts. They crossed through another gateway into the first court, the Court of Women. It was full of people in preparation for the evening sacrifice and prayers. On the western side was a large, ornate gateway that led to the next courtyard, and men climbed more steps and went up to the Court of Israel. The gate between the Court of Women and the Court of Israel was thrown wide to reveal the Temple building on the highest platform with the large stone altar before it. The area directly around the Temple was the third courtyard, the Court of Priests. Beyond that courtyard, only the priests went into the Temple itself, and only the High Priest ever entered into the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place in the entire world.

Standing in awe of her surroundings, her inner turmoil melted away as she stood in the courts of the one true God. The pagans had their own temples, with figures of men or beasts that they sacrificed to. But none of those gods were real; they were not like Israel's God.

"We can go no further." Benjamin lowered his head to speak to her. "But we will listen to the prayers and the songs here, won't we?"

Beth saw that her father was happy. He beamed and nodded at the others around him, and they smiled at him too. Beth was in the midst of more people than ever before in her whole life. Young and

old, men and women, all were gathered for worship. Commoners stood side by side with the wealthy. She stared at the man in front of her. She had rarely seen such fine clothes. His garments were embroidered in the Greek style, and he wore thick rings on his smooth hands.

“Beth!” a voice called, and Beth glanced back as Reuben pushed through the crowd with his father and two younger brothers scrambling to catch up. “I’m glad you came. Isn’t it more glorious than we ever imagined?” Beth smiled to see her favorite cousin. Reuben’s eyes widened, and he pointed over her shoulder. “Look,” he said. “That must be a rabbi with his disciples.”

Beth turned and saw a man with a faded beard and a striped shawl over his shoulders. Several young men clustered close before him, and he appeared to be instructing them as he pointed at one of the enclosed, smaller side courts.

Beth saw Reuben’s face grow wistful as he said, “They’re so lucky.”

A long, rich shofar blast rose and filled the Temple Mount, echoing from a corner tower and rippling over the entire city. A hush fell. It was time for the evening sacrifice. Beth knew that on the enormous altar the priests were ritually sacrificing a lamb, as they did every morning and evening.

A priest, dressed in his spotless white robes and turban, appeared and stood before them in the gateway. Men of the priestly tribe of Levi came and lined the steps. The priest led the people in prayer. In one voice the crowd chanted the prayers by memory. The shofar blew again and they all knelt on the ground and pressed their foreheads to the beautiful stone floor before standing to their feet again. Beth had never prayed among so many people at once, and the vibration of the multitude of voices pulsed through her like an extra heartbeat. The Levites began their songs, and Beth soaked in the lilting melody with her hand pressed to her chest. A man jostled her as he passed. A glint caught her attention, something silvery. Even with the loud music, she heard the splatter of thick drops of blood hitting the stone. Her eyes widened as she stared at the wealthy man in front of her.

“Papa!” she cried out, wanting to flee but paralyzed with fear.

The wounded man turned towards her with glassy eyes, blood bubbling between his lips. He fell sideways, blood blooming on his embroidered robe. He convulsed, clutching his chest with twitching, jeweled fingers. Beth tasted bile.

Benjamin gripped her shoulder so hard it hurt. He tried to pull her away, but the crowd was too close. A woman screamed, interrupting the prayers, and the music broke jaggedly. People turned to look, crying out and pulling back. Within seconds the whole courtyard was in turmoil, people pushing past each other in their haste to flee.

Beth felt like the world spun around her. She was hoisted up and carried away by her father.

“What’s happening, Papa?” she cried out, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“I don’t know, my girl, I don’t know.” His voice was grim, and his head swiveled back and forth.

They were held back by people in front and pressed forward by people behind, all squeezing towards the nearest gate. Everywhere Beth looked were white, fearful eyes. She was relieved to see Reuben and his family manage to escape the courtyard ahead of them.

“If the man with the knife was here in the courts, then he’s a Jew, isn’t he?” Beth whispered.

Her father’s eyes flicked to her face, but he didn’t answer. Beth buried her face in his shoulder, feeling that the world was a violent, bloody place. When she lifted her head, they were through the gate. Temple guards appeared, holding their long spears upright. Roman soldiers were also marching from their

garrison, hands on their sword hilts.

"You there!" a Roman demanded, drawing his sword and pointing it right at Beth and her father. "Are you armed?"

"Of course not," Benjamin answered, setting Beth down and putting an arm around her. Beth clung to him as the fleeing crowds buffeted her. "I am here with my daughter."

The soldier's cold eyes flicked to her, and Beth flinched beneath the hatred. She hid behind her father. The man swung his sword to another Jew and repeated the question.

Beth's father clutched her arm, and they rushed out of the Court of Gentiles and back through the Golden Gate. They ran until Beth was panting with a stitch in her side.

They paused to catch their breath at the top of the mount. Her uncles and cousins were there, waiting for them. She was surprised to see her cousins James and John were excited rather than scared.

"You're safe!" Reuben came and grasped her hand as the adults spoke to each other in low voices.

She realized she was trembling and squeezed his fingers. His face was ashen, his eyes wide, and she wondered if she looked just as fearful. Her first visit to the Holy City had not been as she expected.

She peered down upon the magnificence of the Temple, still glinting in the setting sun. It was empty now. Everyone had fled except the Temple staff. The emptiness was haunting. As she gazed at the gleaming white marble and the dazzling gold, almost too bright to look at, she knew something more than worshipers was missing.

Every Jew knew it.

In Moses' day, the Shekinah—the presence of the Lord—descended and filled the Tabernacle. Why didn't the Lord come down to be with them anymore? Why was He so far away? He had promised to be their God and they were to be His chosen people, like a bride joined to a good husband. Why had her ancestors been unfaithful to Him? Was that why there was so much pain and suffering in the world? It was more than her child's mind could understand.

That night, curled up in the crowded upper room with her aunts and cousins, Beth listened to the layered sounds of breathing and tried to find her bearings. Her safe childhood world had tilted, and the veil of innocence had slipped to reveal a bloody side to the world she had thought safe and beautiful.

She felt the need to make water, so she rose from beside her sleeping mother. She tiptoed through the crowded room and went down the stairs.

On her way back to bed, she saw a lamp was lit in the lower room of the house. She paused to peek inside. The men were sitting in a circle and speaking in hushed tones. Beth listened for a moment and realized with a lurch in her stomach that the men were discussing what had happened in the Temple.

"The courtyard is being purified. What a disaster," Reuben's father, Ebenezer, said with a shake of his head. "I think they must have chosen the inner courtyard purposefully, to send a message. Perhaps the assassin was from the Essenes. They are still not pleased that a foreign ruler rebuilt our Temple."

"Perhaps," another man replied, drawing his hand down his long beard. "But that does not seem quite their way. The Essenes have withdrawn to their hidden places in the wilderness, waiting for the Lord to send their Teacher of Righteousness."

"It's the bold teachings of that Judas the Galilean, mark my words," another man cried out. "I heard him once, preaching against the sin of paying taxes to Rome. He called it allegiance to their false reign, selling ourselves in slavery."

Benjamin shook his head. "I just hope we don't have another failed uprising like we did when King Herod died. They are still rebuilding Sepphoris after the disaster with Judah ben Hezekiah." Heads bobbed all around the room. Benjamin's face was grim, and he clutched his hands together in his lap. "My wife was born near there, and her family was either killed or sent away into slavery when the uprising was crushed. Her grandparent's quick-thinking saved her life."

Beth pressed her hand over her mouth. She hadn't known that. To discover that her mother had a past of suffering felt strange. Her mother was like all the other mothers. She cooked, sewed, taught, and cared for them. Beth couldn't imagine her as a little girl running for her life.

"That was a dark time, truly." Zebedee reached out to put a hand on Benjamin's shoulder. "Rebels were crucified all over this country. I heard the total was two thousand men hung up to die."

Beth swallowed hard. A single victim had been torturous for her to behold. She tried to imagine two thousand dying men. That many crosses would be a stark forest of death.

She trembled and fled from the conversation, creeping up the steep stairs into the upper room. She wound around prone forms. How could they sleep so peacefully, knowing all the cruelty that existed in the world?

Long into the night she tossed and turned. The memory of the hungry raven at the cross pecked at her, and she wondered if she would ever be able to forget.

TALKING POINTS ABOUT DIVIDING SWORD

Why did you decide to write a novel about Matthew's gospel?

The book was born out of an in-depth Bible study on Matthew that I did with a few of my family members. An assignment was to write a short story inspired by one of the events in the gospel. My Dad really enjoyed my short story on Herod Antipas reacting to news of Jesus, depicting the tetrarch as plagued by guilt and fear. He shared it with a friend, who suggested that I apply the same creative idea to all of Matthew, with the purpose of telling Matthew's stories, themes, and perspective alone. It seemed like a daunting task for a first-time author, but I was inspired to give it a go!

Was it difficult to stay with only one gospel account?

Yes, very! Thankfully our months of studying Matthew had prepared me for this approach. Even so, as I wrote the dramatic moments I often discovered that I had drawn conclusions or details from Luke or John, and I would have to rework those scenes. It was sometimes a challenge to separate art and popular media on the Bible from what the scriptures actually portray. I desired to give Matthew the respect of sitting quietly and listening to the message he was trying to share with me.

What inspired the fictional characters that we follow in Dividing Sword, Beth and Reuben?

We know Peter had a wife, but we don't know much about her, besides the fact that Peter sometimes brought her along as he worked in the early church. I wanted characters that were very much in the thick of it, who would witness the events for themselves, bringing the reader along with them. I thought Peter's wife, whom I named Beth (which means "house" in Hebrew, a subtle nod to her tendency to be a home-body) was a good character to witness the gospel unfolding, to participate in the ministry, but she was also a character with whom I could explore the anxiety and confusion someone might have felt as they saw Jesus ruffling the feathers of those in power. She had the memories of suppressed rebellion in her memory, and Jesus' ministry was a real threat to her stability, her comfort, and her husband's life. She has to decide if the risk of following Jesus is worth the reward.

Reuben, as a character far more ambitious than Beth, provides the other emotions a witness might have experienced: doubt and suspicion. As a long time Christian, I automatically peg Jesus as the hero of the story, but to conservative traditionalists like the Pharisees, he was anything but. They had worked really hard to study the law. They had poured their heart and soul into the traditions that protected the law. They were doing everything in their power to please God, and here comes Jesus, callously accusing them of being blind guides and white-washed tombs. It would be no different than if Jesus walked into our

churches today and told us that everything in our service is a convolution of what God had originally intended, that our faith is shallow and self-serving, and that our actions are making it impossible for others to find the gospel. (If you're like me, you immediately dismiss the notion that Jesus would do such a thing, and that should give us sympathy for the Pharisees!) Reuben functions as a mirror to long-time Christians and our "this is the way it's always been done" mentality. But he also serves as the one who can voice difficult questions on faith, like: If Jewish scholars can't accept the teachings of Jesus, how do we know if Jesus really is the savior? What if we've been horribly tricked?

What kind of research was required to write a biblical fiction book like this?

The scriptural study was actually the easiest part of the research, though very time-consuming. There is so much information on the gospels, dissected verse by verse, easily found online and in books. There were passages of Matthew that I was wrestling with that I'm still not 100% sure I have right, but at least I had a vast library of information to draw my conclusions from.

The harder part of the research was on the culture of the people in the first century. Little facts about everyday life were difficult to get concrete answers to. I was often stumped by questions like: What did they eat for breakfast? What colors of dye were available for the common Galilean? How did they bathe, and did they have soap? Did husbands and wives share a bed? Did men and women sit together in first-century synagogues? How did they bury their dead? And of course, when I found an answer in one place, another historian elsewhere was stating the opposite. I could not rely on modern Jewish beliefs, or even be confident that a practice recorded three hundred years after the New Testament was in vogue in the days of Jesus. Judaism was functioning in a very different world after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. There were many, many, historical or cultural points where I had to look at both sides and choose the one that made sense to me, but I believe the work paid off in creating a reasonably realistic background to the gospel of Matthew.

What do you hope readers take away from *Dividing Sword*?

I hope the Bible feels a little more real to them. Giving myself the liberty to imagine what it was like to actually be there brought the gospel to life for me. I hope this imaginative journey gives the reader permission to ask hard questions they might otherwise shy away from, and to examine their own faith.

I hope that when people finish reading *Dividing Sword*, they immediately pick up their Bible and read Matthew's account for themselves. Maybe they'll enjoy it in a new way, or passages that seemed confusing before will make more sense. Maybe they'll question some of my interpretations and it will start them on a journey of study and discovery.

I truly hope that the dramatic ending of *Dividing Sword* helps readers find the courage to leap out in faith, trusting that Jesus will be there to catch them.

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