

Turnabout Spy: A Story of Intrigue in the Temple During the Time of Jesus

Ruth Ellen Millard

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A young man witnesses history in the Christian novel Turnabout Spy, an imaginative retelling of New Testament tales.

In Ruth Ellen Millard's intricate historical novel *Turnabout Spy*, politics, faith, and courage are prominent in the time of Jesus.

In first-century Jerusalem, tensions rise among the Sanhedrin. Stories circulate of a prophet, Jesus, who is alleged to be the awaited messiah. Jannaeus, who is eager to prove himself to the court, is tasked with gathering information about him. Jannaeus is drawn into a dangerous web of politics as he searches for the truth about Jesus and those behind the sabotage of his uncle's business.

An imaginative retelling of the biblical narrative, the story is divided into five parts that span the years of Jesus's ministry. The passage of time is often vague, though. Well-known stories from the New Testament are used as plot points, with Jannaeus as a witness. In a bout of illness, he is tended by Martha, the sister of Lazarus. And he knows the two men who become the criminals crucified alongside Jesus. Jannaeus's incorporation into extant tales is intriguing, helping to maintain suspense in the otherwise familiar plot.

On the cusp of manhood and marriage, Jannaeus exudes youthful angst. He is at times rash, and he is prone to making spur-of-the-moment trips out of Jerusalem. But he's also tender and introspective, especially around Rebekah, the girl he loves. He is haunted by a night in Corinth and yearns for forgiveness before pursuing her. Jannaeus's rawness and desire to do what's right, even in the face of uncertainty, make him an endearing lead.

The story also explores the political and religious disagreements of the period. Zealot, Pharisee, and Sadducee characters present differing scriptural interpretations and plans of action, and much of Jannaeus's growth is dependent on how he wrestles through these differences. The prose also includes Hebrew, Greek, and Latin terms for verisimilitude, and the story is supplemented by ample back matter for additional context. For example, John announces Jesus as *ha-mashiach*, "the messiah," instead of an undefined *mashiach*. At times, however, the book's commitment to historical accuracy obscures its story. Further, several among the expansive cast share names, and the book's minor characters are often underdeveloped. Still, thanks to a dramatic encounter at the story's end, Jannaeus at last finds his peace amid the chaos.

Saturated with linguistic and cultural details, *Turnabout Spy* is a historical novel in which a Jewish boy witnesses the ministry of Jesus and the ensuing political upheaval.

VIVIAN TURNBULL (January 23, 2025)

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