

My Best Friend

BY REGGIE PENNINGTON



The summer nights were very hot. My father instructed the family we would be sleeping on the roof to take advantage of the cool, night air. I laid out each mat in the exact position and order as my father had instructed. To arrange them any differently would be considered disobedient.

Being alone on the roof and having the burden of knowing my twelfth year was one of preparation for my anointing into manhood at age 13, I would often lie down on the roof to contemplate the heavens that were so close and mysterious. The sky was filled with stars. So many stars I could not begin to count them all. This time alone, with the heavens as my text, is very special as it is the one place I can go to, physically and spiritually and be completely alone; separated from the rest of the village below.

Would I be ready for 13? I know how much it means to my father, my teacher and my village for a boy to accept the duties and responsibilities of manhood. If I could not convince myself I was ready to be a man how would I be able to earn the pride of my father, gain the respect of the village and win the confidence of my teacher?

On nights when his father would allow, my best friend would join me and we would share this adventure together. He would lay down next to me, on my brother's mat, fingers laced behind his head and feet propped up on the stool that was standing next to the parapet wall.

We both shared the mystery of the stars; their meaning and their purpose. We had many questions about the stars, all designed to propel boys into manhood.

How many are there?

Why do their positions in the sky seem to change?

Why do we only see them at night?

How far away are they?

If I could jump high enough would I be able to touch one?

Would I be able to pinch out its light with my fingers as I often do the flame of a candle?

How should a “man” look at the heavens and determine how this mystery will be an influence in his life? His family? His faith?

These were questions we often heard debated by our fathers outside of the temple as they sought answers and guidance for living their faith as taught through the law and the prophets. Would we, as men, discover the answers that have eluded our fathers for so many centuries?

As perplexing as all of this is to me, my friend’s response was often as mysterious as the questions themselves. He seemed to have a knowledge and understanding of the heavens that at times, was puzzling even to him. He would carefully study the heavens and express his thoughts as though he were preparing questions for our teacher the next day. However, when the opportunity presented itself, he never discussed these in class. He always seemed to have the answers before the questions were even presented.

Also, when asked about other mysteries of our lives he always wanted to respond with a story or a riddle rather than just giving an honest, straight forward answer. He was different to say the least.

At times I do not think he understands how valuable my friendship is to him as most of the other boys do not like to be around him. Often I have had to defend his awkward personality as the others just do not want to accept him as one of them.

He is always the first to answer a question in class, not giving anyone else an opportunity to respond so they could impress our teacher. He always receives the highest marks from our teacher who often brags of his accomplishments and how all of us should be as studious as he. If the other boys are having problems accepting him at the age of 12, I wonder how will they accept him as a man?

I am, no doubt, the best friend he has and can only hope he places as much value in my friendship as I do his.

As time for him to leave was approaching my friend extended his usual, parting greeting and I responded as well. “Shalom, Jesus.”