

The Boy who killed Christ

by Frank Vander Rasky

He was on his way home from school on a dank winter afternoon when the attack came from nowhere, launched like a missile across the Gaza Strip. Suddenly he lay on his back with Jonathan Love pounding him in the face. "You dirty Jew. Dirty little Jew! You killed Christ."

There was nothing Ben could do. His furious 13-year-old assailant was three years older, much bigger and heavier. And his knees had pinned Ben's arms, driving them into the ground where they stretched out from each side of Ben's shoulders as if nailed on a cross in the cold, grey snow.

In the mainly Jewish neighbourhood, whose prosperous families lived in roomy suburban bungalows, Ben lived in an enclave inhabited by Irish-Scottish immigrants. The long narrow side street was a double-sided row of dreary three-story red brick buildings, with four units on each floor. The unit he lived in was the only one with a mezuzah, a reminder of God's presence and commandments. His mother had insisted he nail the small brass tubular case, adorned with a Star of David and Kabbalah protection hand, to their front doorpost.

Inside every mezuzah was a tiny paper scroll inscribed with Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. Ben had memorized passages from the ancient Hebrew scriptures.

"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."

When he entered the apartment his mother was sitting at the notebook-laden kitchen table, which she used as a place not for meals but for her writing. Ben knew she was different from other

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mothers. She was a Catholic who had converted to Judaism, now determined to become a professional Jew and writer, and to take her revenge on his father, an author and renegade Jew who had divorced her to marry an atheist.

“And these things that I command you today shall be upon your heart.”

It was confusing. At age four he'd attended Saint Mark's Nursery School, been one of The Three Wise Men in the Christmas play, and come to love baby Jesus in the manger. Now, at 10, in addition to public school, he was enrolled as a student at Talmud Torah, and on Saturday mornings sang in the choir at Temple Sinai. He had, his mother said, “a surprisingly sweet voice.”

“And you shall teach them to your children...”

Ben had once asked her why she'd married his father. She replied, as if astonished by his ignorance, “Everyone knows Jews are the smartest, and make the most money.”

“...and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house and when you go on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up.”

She now looked at him, shook her head, and said, with a sneer of disgust, “What sort of trouble have you been getting yourself into? Keep it up, Benny. No nice Jewish girl will ever love you.” She resumed scribbling in one of her hundreds of coiled wire-bound notebooks. Her latest entry was about what she called The Holy Trinity — the rabbi, the psychiatrist, and herself as object of their desire.

“And you shall bind them as a sign upon your arm and they shall be an ornament between your eyes.”

He went into the bathroom to examine the cuts and caked blood on his battered face and ripening bruises on his aching arms. He didn't cry. He never cried. It would be a sign that what happened to him mattered. He looked into the mirror, and said to himself, "It doesn't matter. God loves us whether we're Jewish or Christian."

"And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

That night, after cooking his own dinner, completing his double load of homework, and saying his prayers, he dreamt he was afloat in the infant Moses' basket of papyrus, and that the gentle voice singing him to sleep belonged to a woman named Mary.

