

The explorers who opened the New World operated from a master plan and were agents of rediscovery rather than discoverers. Very little is “known” about the origin, lives, characters and policies of these intrepid adventurers. Although they lived in a century amply provided with historians and biographers, these saw fit either to remain silent or invent plausible accounts without substance. ... If there was a mystery, that which was hidden must have been regarded as valuable.

Manly P. Hall
America's Assignment With Destiny

[Newton] looked on the whole universe and all that is in it as a riddle, as a secret which could be read by applying pure thought to certain evidence, certain mystic clues which God had laid about the world to allow a sort of philosopher's treasure hunt to the esoteric brotherhood. He believed that these clues were to be found partly in the evidence of the heavens and in the constitution of elements (and that is what gives the false suggestion of his being an experimental natural philosopher), but also partly in certain papers and traditions handed down by the brethren in an unbroken chain back to the original cryptic revelation in Babylonia. He regarded the universe as a cryptogram set by the Almighty. ...

John Maynard Keynes
Newton the Man



In 1921, laborers discovered a large earthen circle near an old church in the Algarve region of southwestern Portugal. This carving with radiating spokes had remained hidden for centuries on Sagres Point's windswept peninsula.

The ancient Greeks knew this hinterland as *Ophiussa*, where the native Serpent People worshipped a snake goddess who revealed lost treasures. Centuries later, the Romans built a temple on the cliffs there to stand guard over the edge of the world. They named it *Sacrum Promontorium*, the holy promontory where the sun god slithered hissing into the sea each night.

Today, the origin and purpose of this excavated circle remain a mystery. The Portuguese call it their *Rosa dos Ventos*, the Wind Rose.

ΟΠΕ



LALIBELA, EṬHĪOPIĀ
JANUARY 20, PRESENT DAY

Sopped in sweat, the ten-year-old Ethiopian boy prayed to St. Georgis the Dragonslayer for protection as he wormed his way toward the tomb of the first man on Earth.

Stained with the ancient blood of Satan's serpents, the tunnel's gritty red sandstone punished his hands and knees, and though the settling of the night had cooled his mountain village above him, here, sixty meters below the surface, the trapped midday heat could roast a chicken. Faint from hunger, he stopped crawling and brought out a crust of *injera* bread from his pocket. He chewed the morsel slowly, taking care to muzzle its aroma with the sleeve of his tunic to avoid being swarmed by the bees that hived in the crevices.

At last, his dizziness eased, and he resumed his quest. Groping blindly on all fours along the narrowing walls, he finally came to the Armory of the Shining Ones, the long notch in the floor where the angels had once stored their lances.

"*Mäqäraräb*," he whispered. *Not far now.*

He knew each bend and cranny in this secret passage by memory. Every morning for the past three years, he had accompanied his father, the High Priest of Lalibela, on his ritual inspections of these connected subterranean churches. Marked at birth for God's service with a blue cross tattooed on his right temple, he had been forbidden to play football or chase tourists for candy. Now he was expected to slave six more years carrying sandals before becoming a deacon. Everyone told him he should be grateful for the honor, but he had no desire to waste his life mumbling incantations. Tomorrow he planned to stow away in the cargo bin of the bus to Addis Ababa, where he would find prosperous construction work and a beautiful girlfriend.

Before leaving home, however, he craved another escape, one that promised a rare glimpse of Paradise. In a few hours, at dawn, his fellow Lalibelans would

celebrate Timkat, the holiest of their many religious festivals. The elders of the monastery had already retired early to their cloisters to prepare with chants. This night, the tenth of Terr, was the only time of the year when Bet Golgota, the underground church of the Crucifixion, was left unguarded. It was his last chance to pierce the veil that shrouded Heaven's wisdom and delights.

He came hovering over the yawning trench that protected the entrance to the nave and ran a finger across an inscription on a stone carved in *Gé'ez*:

The opening verse of Genesis.

He kissed the ground that covered the bones of the biblical Adam. Then, he reached up and inserted the stolen key into a lock just beyond the grave.

After several turns of the rusty tumbler, the pitted door squealed open.

He slithered inside the trapezoidal cavern and looked up at faded frescoes of martyred saints lit by ambient moonlight from fissures in the ceiling. As the Holy Ones glared down at him in accusation, he climbed to his feet and slowly approached the Selassie Chapel, a sanctuary so sacred that for ages only the head priests had been allowed to enter it. His hands shook slightly as he drew aside a ratty curtain that covered the burial vault of King Lalibela, the monarch who had ruled Ethiopia during the time of the White Knights.

It was here—in this very vault—where he had spied his father hiding the precious Leaves of Eden. How long he had dreamt of the ecstasy now so near his grasp. He heard a whisper of warning from his soul: *He who gazes upon the hidden treasures of Lalibela will be struck blind and mute for eternity.*

That ancient curse gave him pause, but only for a moment. His father and the priests had likely spread such tales to scare off grave robbers. He pushed against the slab, and finally the adhesions of centuries gave way. With a deep breath, he reached blindly into the sarcophagus. His palm brushed the trove.

“Egziabhiyär Ymäsgn,” he said softly. *May God be praised.*

Clutching his discovery to his chest, he shoved the heavy lid back into place with his shoulder and spread dust over it to conceal the—

A bolt of light radiated through the chapel.

The foundations shook and buckled the ceiling. He ran through the arches to avoid being buried alive—a second flash blinded him. He covered his face and screamed, *“Abba!”*

Seconds passed, and he took another shallow breath before opening his eyes. His mouth gaped in horror—he tried again to call for his father, but this time he could not force a sound from his quivering lips.

Washington, D.C.

January 20, Present Day

Jaqueline Quartermane—‘Jaq’ to her friends and fellow lawyers at the State Department—dashed through the doors of the agency’s Foggy Bottom headquarters and slid into a waiting cab. She told the driver, “EEOB.”

As the cabbie sped off, she congratulated herself for remembering the inside-the-Beltway lingo for the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. She was a player now, one of the chosen charged with spreading Freedom and Christ around the world, and she had learned the importance of using Washington’s code words of power. She usually walked the half-mile to her weekly prayer breakfast to save money, but today she didn’t want to be late. Her mentor, Rev. Calvin Merry, the televangelist and founder of her *alma mater*, John Darby School of Law, would be speaking. He had flown up from Knoxville that morning to lobby for a faith-based initiative that would earmark federal funds to bring the Gospel to Third World countries. Having not seen him since graduation, she was eager to thank him in person for greasing the wheels on her new job at the Office of Legal Advisor.

On the sidewalks, sleepy students trudged to class at George Washington University. She sighed with relief, so glad to be done with school. She had been working in D.C. for six months now, but there were still times she couldn’t quite believe that a poor farm girl from eastern Kentucky had really made it all the way to the center of the political—

The cab screeched to a jolting stop.

The gnomish driver with copper skin the texture of a cigar’s binding grinned at her through the rear-view mirror. “*Temos chegado.*”

Sent flying across the back seat, Jaq came back upright. “Excuse me?”

“We arrive. . . . You are from Brasilia, no? *Muito bonito.* Like our *senhoras.*”

Flustered by the creepy compliment, she paid the fare and bolted the taxi. She often got that sort of reaction here because of her lithe Caribbean figure, black olive eyes, and luscious sable hair tangled with wild Medusa curls. Many in this city of embassies and consulates simply assumed she was from South America or the Middle East.

She huffed, still exasperated, as she climbed the EEOB steps. She’d always had dark skin with light patches splotched across her back. Growing up, she had suffered such merciless teasing about this oddity from the other kids that she still reacted defensively when anyone, even a homesick cabbie, perceived her as different. She finally made it past the security guards, who scanned her a second time with their leers. Hearing Rev. Merry’s booming drawl echoing down the hall, she rushed up to the conference room and, smiling, opened the door.

Fifty pairs of interrogating eyes turned on her.

Mary Magdalene emerging from the Holy Sepulcher couldn't have been met with a more skeptical reception. This wasn't the usual gathering of low-level staffers; today's invitation-only guests were middle-aged men and older, Republicans mostly, with the typical Washington mask of placid authority etched into their pasty jowls. She recognized a couple of senators, a few representatives and cabinet members. They were being served eggs and grits around a long mahogany table lit in amber by a Georgian chandelier.

"Press room's on the first floor," mumbled one of the grayheads while stuffing his mouth.

For once, she was thankful for her dark complexion, to hide the blush of embarrassment. Being branded a member of the media was a Washington insult comparable to being born into the lowest caste in India. She was about to retreat to the hallway when a command froze her.

"Please stand, gentlemen," Rev. Merry ordered.

The pastor looked more tired than usual, she thought, and there was a little less gold in his thinning hair. But his round face, a bit liverish from too much fried food, still featured that famous forbearing smile that channeled God's forgiveness. His ample girth, as always, was immaculately draped in a charcoal merino suit, fitted by the same Nashville haberdashery that had tailored General Pat Cleburne's butternut uniform before both wool and wearer were ripped to shreds by Union lead at Franklin.

The reverend abandoned the head of the table and, in more of a demand than a request, boomed, "Would you captains of government join me here on this side of the room?"

The men traded vexed glances, but they slowly stood and gathered as ordered. None dared disobey the most prolific GOP fundraiser in the country, for even a gentle scolding sent out across the airwaves of the reverend's Glorious Resurrection Network could bring a penitent congressman crawling to Knoxville for absolution.

Surrounded now by his disciples, Rev. Merry thumbed open his well-worn bible like a casino dealer who could stop a shuffle and identify a card without peeking. "And He shall separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Who knows the verse?"

When no one risked a guess, Jaq sheepishly offered, "Matthew Twenty-Five: Thirty-two."

The reverend broke a gold-capped grin and threw open his arms in welcome. "Jagie, darling, come bless me with a hug. And don't give a moment's thought to these old billies. They've forgotten the manners their mamas taught them. I suspect some have a deficient Yankee upbringing to blame."

Wrapped in the pastor's loving embrace, Jaq saw a distinguished-looking man with cropped silver hair and penetrating cobalt eyes come forward and extend his hand to her. "I'm the damned Yankee he just slandered."

She was shocked that anyone would use an expletive in the pastor's presence, but Rev. Merry merely chuckled at her nonplussed reaction.

"This is Josiah Mayfield," the pastor said. "Deputy Director of the National Security Agency. His Indiana forefathers probably shot at our kinfolk, so don't trust him with any of our Confederate secrets."

Informed of the powerful pastor's affection for Jaq, the other men came up and gathered around her as if she were Scarlett O'Hara at the cotillion ball.

"Quartermane is Scottish, isn't it?" Mayfield asked her.

She was a little unsettled to learn that the NSA official knew her last name. "I'm embarrassed to admit, I don't know. I was always told my kin came west through the Cumberland Gap."

Mayfield curled a wry smile suggesting that he could read her thoughts. "Don't worry. We haven't started a dossier on you yet. Actually, we have something more in common than hailing from bordering states. The Reverend here has parted the waters many times during my exodus through the desert of public service."

She was anxious to divert the attention. "We should give him the pulpit."

"Amen to that." Mayfield finally broke off his wilting scrutiny on her and turned to fire a quip at the pastor, "Cal, I trust there's no commandment against me finishing my oatmeal while you save our souls?"

"Just don't ask me to multiply the toast."

Jaq tried to escape to the corner, but Rev. Merry caught her hand.

"But first, I have an announcement," the pastor said. "In a few weeks, I'm going to have the honor of marrying off our lovely guest here."

Over the applause, Mayfield asked, "Who's the lucky guy?"

"Paul Merion," Rev. Merry said. "A fine young man doing God's work in Kenya. Y'all can send your generous gifts to my office."

Jaq squeezed his forearm in a plea to move on. "That's not necessary."

The pastor laughed. "They have so much PAC money in their war chests, darling, you'll be doing them a favor by taking some off their hands."

Signaling for all to return to their seats, he took his place again at the head of the table and bowed his head in prayer. After nearly a minute of this inward contemplation, he looked up and bore down on his audience with his Celtic green eyes blazing holy fire. "Now, y'all are here today because you live the Word of God. I'm not going to sugarcoat the situation in the world today for men and women who have front row seats." He paused to underscore the gravity of what he would next reveal. "The Rapture, my good friends in Christ, is imminent.

It will be sudden and it will be shocking. Mothers will be separated from their children and husbands from their wives. There will be seven years of Tribulation before we are taken up to abide with the Almighty and His saints.”

Jaq marveled at how swiftly the eloquent minister had captured the attention of men not easily impressed—of all except the NSA guy, who seemed more interested in waving down the waiter for more coffee.

“How do I know this?” Rev. Merry asked rhetorically. “I read the signs prophesied in the Bible. The nations have unified their currencies with the global markets and the Zionists have brought peace to Israel. With the United Nations and the European Union, we are nearing a one-world government. There is only one condition left to fulfill. ... Anyone?”

He glanced at Jaq, but she didn’t dare upstage the room again.

“The Temple,” Josh Mayfield finally answered, as matter-of-factly as if he had just ordered another item off the menu.

Nodding pensively, Rev. Merry turned toward the window to gaze at the columns of the Lincoln Memorial on the mall. “The Jewish Temple must be rebuilt and the Holy of Holies restored. Only then will the Antichrist be revealed and the Kingdom of God installed on Earth.”

Senator Barkin from Arizona cleared his throat. “Cal, let’s cut to the chase. We can all read about the Rapture in those dime-store novels they sell at the airport. What is it you want from us?”

Rev. Mayfield stole a glance at Mayfield before stepping closer to tower over the senator in righteous admonition. “John, my duty is to proclaim God’s commandments. Yours is to see that they’re not ignored by the secularists who have infiltrated this government like a plague of Massachusetts boll weevils.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Sen. Barkin asked.

“I received a call this week from Jerusalem,” Rev. Merry said. “Prime Minister Aronowitz says you’ve been dragging your feet on the foreign-aid bill.”

His appetite ruined, Sen. Barkin shoved his plate away. “The Israelis are asking for another five hundred million. Aronowitz won’t tell us why he needs it. We’re already giving him three billion a year. Is he planning to use the money to build more West Bank settlements? I can’t justify this to the Dems on Appropriations unless Aronowitz and his Likudniks come clean.”

The pastor glared sternly at the senator. “We Americans have been given a biblical mandate to stand by our Jewish brethren.”

Shrugging, Sen. Barkin shook his head. “Why even worry about Israel if the Jews are going to be left behind at the end of it all anyway?”

“God placed the sons and daughters of the Old Testament on Earth to fulfill a vital purpose,” Rev. Merry said. “The Second Coming cannot unfold until the Jews first prepare the way.”

Jaq had heard him talk many times on the pulpit about the destiny of the Jews, but his passion on the subject never failed to stir her. She was about to murmur an “amen” when the door opened.

A female aide stuck her head inside and, with a worried look, glanced at Rev. Merry, then back at Jaq. “Miss Quartermare, Under Secretary Darden needs you back at State immediately.”

Sana'a, Yemen

January 20, Present Day

Jamaal al-Sourouri dragged his crippled right leg down a trash-littered alley, taking his usual route through the slums to avoid being recognized.

Three barefoot boys stopped kicking a soccer ball and laughed at how he was forced to crouch to ease the excruciating pain caused by the infidel beatings.

He reached for the dagger in his thwab belt to chase them away. Fools! Their mortification was fast approaching. Could they not see the signs? The television in the coffee houses showed Iran's Al Quds militia waving their black flags in triumph. People chattered about the strange weather, ninety degrees in winter, and homosexuals now walked openly in the streets, dancing while demonic American music played on radios. Women were even making themselves barren with potions. All of it had been prophesied long ago.

The Time of Trials was at hand.

He winced in pain, the memories of his wasted life dogging him with each agonizing limp. He too had once been blind to Allah's will. The stench of vomit in that Saudi prison still filled his nostrils. After a week of torture, the Riyadh police had shipped him to Guantanamo on the false charge of being a soldier for Al Qaeda. Even after the Americans discovered that he had been delivered up as a scapegoat for a nephew of the Royal Family, they had kept him locked away five more years. He had tried to hang himself, but the devils had built the cage ceiling too low.

His nightmare should have ended with his release, but it had only just begun. Dumped into an Albanian refugee camp, he had been forced to beg his way back home here to Yemen. Then he discovered that his wife, thinking him dead, had married another man. Now, even his old friends shunned him, convinced that the Americans had recruited him for a spy!

He tried to calm himself by thinking back to that night three months ago when he had climbed to the roof of his tenement to jump to his death. Before he could launch himself over the edge, an old man sneaking a cigarette in the shadows of the stairwell had whispered, *You are persecuted for your faith.*

Let me die!

Do not waste your life. The Awaited One requires your service.

On that fateful night, his intercessor had revealed himself to be Yahya the New Baptist, the advance lieutenant for the Mahdi. In truth, Jamaal could still not be certain if Yahya had been an angel or mortal, for he had not seen him since. A week after his salvation, masked fighters had taken him away to be initiated into the Mahdi's *mujahideen*, tattooing his biceps with the secret hadith. His suffering, he had been promised, was ordained from above to harden him for the coming apocalyptic battles.

Now, as a servant of the Islamic messiah who would defeat the Great Deceiver and rule the world, he received his orders every Sunday by email.

He lived only for these communications.

He turned a corner and levered his useless leg up the steps of an Internet café. When the clerk at the front desk, a lazy Iranian student, refused to look up, Jamaal threw four coins on the counter and snatched the access code. Careening down the row of computers, he landed on an empty chair and began pecking furiously on the keyboard. Waiting and waiting, he cursed the slow processor. Finally, the browser popped up. He inserted his password, concealing it with his jittery hand. One email. Yes, it was from Yahya.

Inspired by Allah, he had spent those many months in prison learning English, vowing to turn the vile language against its users. Now, he quickly converted the message from Arabic, having been instructed that the American intelligence agents placed a lower priority on emails in English: *The Awaited One offers His blessings, my son. He wishes to know if His will is done.*

He tapped a reply: *I have obeyed His command.*

Several seconds passed. Where was the response? Was the infidel machine going to crash? He was about to kick it when another email arrived:

Do you return from your journey with God's Mercy?

He lowered his head in shame. Finally, he found the courage to type: *No.*

Seconds later, Yahya's reply appeared on the screen: *The Awaited One will be disappointed.*

Distraught, Jamaal frantically typed the reason for his failure: *The Ethiopian would not surrender it.*

At last, more words from Yahya—these cold in their brevity—scrolled before his eyes: *Go to Cairo. Wait for instructions.*

The clerk at the desk shouted down the aisle, "Time is up!"

Cheeks hot with tears of shame, Jamaal angrily yanked the computer's cord from its socket. He limped back down the row of cubicles and grinned with a vision of the haughty clerk being incinerated in the coming holocaust. Showing off his knowledge of English, he whispered, "For once, Persian monkey, you speak the truth. Soon—very soon—*your* time is up."