

## ON THE JERICHO ROAD

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Faster, O Issachar, my long-eared friend!  
Come, make those little hoofs ply faster yet!  
We are alone, and Jericho is far.  
Those rogues who left that poor wretch crumpled up  
Beside the thorn-bush may be lurking near,  
So that to reach the haunts of peaceful men  
Must be the only thought that matters now.

. . . I am not heartless: who has ever called  
Ben-Esdras cruel in Samaria?

It might have been my duty to remain  
Beside that wounded traveller, but I dare  
Not lose from sight how Ruth depends on me  
For sustenance at home, my faithful wife,  
And Reuben, Deborah, and Isaac too.  
What if these dear ones had to beg their bread  
Because I tarried on this frightful road  
And jeopardised them for a wounded Jew!

. . . He called me "Brother" in his need, who would  
Have scorned me from him any other time.  
What if our lot had been reversed? What Jew  
Would risk his life except for other Jews?  
And that not gladly. Yet it called to mind  
How Seth, my father's youngest, long since dead,  
Sometimes said "Brother" in that very tone.

. . . Yet if I did turn back now, Issachar?  
Suppose I were so foolish as to try  
If he could yet be saved? Well, to begin,  
He may be dead by this. If I were seen  
Standing above a man known to have died  
By violence, should I seem innocent?  
Say a quaternion of the Romans came  
Just as I rose from where the body lay,  
How would I clear myself? And would they heed  
If I said, "See, search me, and you will find  
Nothing but what is obviously my own?"

I should be dragged to their Praetorium  
And forced to carry up the nearest hill  
The cross on which the captured robber dies.

And then Ben-Esdras, harmless merchant I,  
 Should have my hands stamped flat along the beam,  
 Be nailed there, living, by the Carnifex,  
 And then set upright, given as prey to flies  
 I could not brush away, and pangs that arch  
 The buttocks forward from that scanty ledge  
 Men grimly call the Malefactor's Throne,  
 So that my body, curving like a sail,  
 Would billow to one mighty guest of pain  
 —A punishment that makes the victim be  
 His own tormentor as he jerks the cross  
 That flops in its loose socket to and fro.  
 No, on the cross no man has ever died,  
 Or ever will, except in broken shame.  
 Far worse such death than that beneath the bush  
 Of him back there.

. . . "Brother" was what he said.  
 No, I must hold my truant fancies in.  
 Perhaps, before I came to give him aid,  
 I could make sure that I was not surprised  
 By those who might think me a criminal.  
 But, as I said, there may be lurking near  
 The criminals themselves. Or would they stay  
 And rob two victims in so short a time?  
 I could return. . . I could. . . It might be safe.

But if I did? The victim is a Jew,  
 And I know Jews. He would be capable  
 Of saying the thieves did not take everything  
 But left some valuable he had concealed  
 About him; should it be no longer there,  
 I should be called upon to make it good  
 In some vociferous Jewish court of law,  
 And would a Hebrew call me brother then?

Then, Issachar, suppose I loaded him  
 Upon your back—and you are burdened now!—,  
 And brought him down to Jericho: what then?  
 He would need food and shelter certainly,  
 And I should make the rounds of many an inn  
 Before I found one that gave lodging free  
 To any Hebrew brother. Would not I  
 Find myself saddled with the reckoning,

And for how many days? I do not know.

And what would Ruth, the thrifty, have to say,  
Hearing my tale, how most of what I made  
In my hard bargaining at Jerusalem,  
Had gone to guarantee the sustenance  
Of one without the slightest claim on me?  
Does saying "Brother" constitute a claim?  
Somehow I wish that, when he turned away,  
He had not raised his eyes so up to mine.

—Turn about, Issachar! We retrace our steps.  
If I believed the tales the Gentiles tell  
Of men their Gods have metamorphosed, I  
Should wonder if my ears were lengthening,  
And if I may not soon exchange my speech  
For braying, and be brother unto you.

But, Issachar, neither you nor I will be  
So utterly, completely asinine,  
When we have seen our wounded brother safe,  
As to believe that lips of any Jew  
Will own there was a good Samaritan.