By Mrs. Paul E. King

It was a dark night; one of the darkest that old Matthias had ever seen or experienced in his better than fifty years of looking after sheep. He looked upward, feeling that he could almost touch or even slice the darkness, so keenly intense was it.

If it had only been the nightly darkness he could have better endured it, unusual though this night's darkness was. And different, too. But it was more than the night that was dark and lay like a heavy and ominous shroud over all the countryside: the heavy taxation levied upon all who were Jews -- his people -seemed sometimes more than he could bear.

It would have been bad enough had the taxation been imposed only upon the men; but, no, the ruler wanted a head tax, thus making it mandatory that every man, woman, boy and girl go up to Jerusalem to be taxed. And with his large family, the sum of money he paid out in taxes yearly was almost unbelievable. Last year's taxes were the highest ever. An uncle of his told him it was because Amon took his tax money.

"He's a shrewd one," Uncle Joab declared with an air of certainty. "Cheating's become a way of life with him."

"Are you sure of this?" Matthias had asked in shocked disbelief. "How do you know?. Surely he would be ousted if this reached the ears of the ruler."

He had been so naive; so honest himself that it was hard for him to imagine anyone being otherwise. His father and mother had instilled principles of righteousness and uprightness and honesty and integrity into him from infancy. From his earliest years, he had had an aversion to those who had unscrupulous principles and dealings. Not that he considered himself better than others, or that he was self-righteous and high-minded; oh no! He realized the weaknesses of the flesh and, like his fellow beings, he, too, found the Mosaic Law hard to live up to at times. But the tenets of the Law, as revered, honored and practiced by his devout parents, had been instilled so firmly into his being until he considered it a privilege and not a duty to abide by them.
He drew his robe more closely around him, feeling the chill night air steal silently inward toward his bones. He loved the night; always, its silence and quietness gave him a sense of awareness that God was near; that He guarded him -- Matthias -- like he himself guarded and watched over the sheep in his care. His robe, when drawed closely around him, warmed him like God's presence did as he meditated and prayed. Yes, he loved the night. It afforded him time to meditate and to pray.

The sheep settled down for the night; he settled down with them, quiet in body but restless of mind. When would Messiah come? Why did He tarry so long in coming? What would He do to the godless rulers who had neither thought nor regard for Jehovah? On and on the questions raced, back and forth, back and forth in his mind.

He thought of Esther then; Esther and their newest, latest son. What a fine wife and mother Esther was! He could never have found a better, more God-fearing woman anywhere, he realized. He raised his eyes heavenward and thanked the God of Abraham for blessing him with a wife who shared his deep religious beliefs and convictions. Like himself, Esther was reared and taught and schooled by deep religious and pious parents. She was instilling those same beliefs and principles deeply into each child of theirs. He was a blest man; he had so much to be thankful for.

The thought of his faithful wife and obedient children erased the pall of gloom from the man's mind for a brief moment. But only for a moment: with almost violent momentum it raced back to him, nagging him and pulling his thoughts away from the beautiful, the pleasanter, more uplifting things in life.

Matthias looked heavenward and breathed a fervent prayer to God, imploring Him to send the Messiah. So long he had waited and looked forward to the wonderful event. His father, too, had long looked forward to the day when Messiah would come. His grandfather also. And come He would! There was no doubt whatever in his mind about this; the prophets had long ago prophesied His coming. It was not a matter of would He come but when.

Matthias listened to the soft breathing of the sheep and felt a calmness settle deep inside his heart. He must trust his future, and that of his lastly-growing family, into the hands of the God of his fathers. Abraham was sorely and severely tested, even to the point of offering up Isaac; but he trusted in
God and counted Him faithful who had promised, and it was counted unto him for righteousness, was it not?

"O God, of our father Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," he cried aloud, "hear the prayers of Thy people and send us deliverance from the hands of these our oppressors. They fear neither God nor man, their hands are swift to shed innocent blood; their feet run swiftly to evil; their tongue is as a drawn sword. Send deliverance speedily. Come" Messiah, come! Long we have waited for Thee."

He felt better after he had prayed and he snuggled his bearded chin deeply into the folds of his heavy robe and closed his eyes. There was something unspeakably awesome and wonderful about the night, he mused silently, feeling a sense of deepest satisfaction over knowing that his flock of sheep rested quietly and peacefully because they loved and trusted their fives to the guardianship of their shepherd. This alone was reason enough for him to praise the Almighty One, he realized, comparing his own calm and peaceful flock with the flock of Jethro, who had to use a hireling to tend his beautiful sheep. Amaziah was a ruthlessly-cruel and hard man, having neither love nor interest in sheep except for the silver which Jethro paid him for tending his flock.

At thought of Amaziah, Matthias shivered. How thankful he was that none of his sheep were in the care of the uncaring man. Like Amon the tax collector, Amaziah was grasping; his greed for gain took him farther than he ever intended it to go. He was a schemer and a conniver, having acquired a reputation for dishonesty and falsehood. Matthias felt especially sad and sorry for the man's lovely, quiet, and shy wife: Deborah's uprightness was known to all who knew her. How the quiet, unassuming, raven-haired, young woman had come to marry a man like Amaziah was always a mystery to Matthias and his lovely wife. Esther had once told him that a near relative of hers had heard that the handsome Amaziah had, during his earlier years, been totally different from the man he now was, having been taught better things by his parents.

"Ah, money!" Matthias remarked aloud, knowing how easily and readily some of his own acquaintance were swayed by its power.

At thought of money, the man's thoughts raced immediately again to the heavy taxes that were imposed upon him and his people. And,
particularly, to the wickedness of the tax collectors themselves, who were getting rich and faring sumptuously by adding more than that which each knew he was to have paid. It was futile to try to reason with them; always, they had a rough spoken answer and, with a shove of the hand, pushed you away to make way for the great multitude of people yet waiting to pay and be gone. Consequently, the tax collectors were a bunch of much-hated and infamous men whose reputations were anything and everything but righteous, upright, good and merciful.

Agitated now by his troublesome thoughts, Matthias rose to his feet and began pacing back and forth over the now cooled-down earth. True, he knew God was a God of mercy. He was long-suffering, too, and full of compassion and goodness; but how He could tolerate the exceeding great wickedness of the grasping tax collectors was something he'd never be able to understand. Oh, how he longed for Messiah to come and put an end to all the injustices and the wickedness and to set up His kingdom of righteousness and holiness.

The man lifted tear-filled eyes upward, gazing into the star-studded, indigo blue sky, and prayed fervently and passionately. He felt like his heart would burst with the deep burden and the great desire, still unfulfilled but long awaited for and greatly expected and eagerly anticipated.

In the distance he heard the soft bleating of a sheep. A ewe, no doubt, he reasoned, bleating for the lamb who may have strayed away a short distance.

The bleating ceased and he smiled, knowing how happy and relieved the ewe was at having her own frolic back to her side.

He never ceased to be amazed how, out of his own big flock of sheep, the mother sheep always knew her own offspring. Hundreds of lambs were born daily during lambing season and, always, each ewe knew which belonged to her and which did not.

How like the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob! the man thought, recalling the exciting event of his people crossing the Red Sea, dry-shod and safely. God knew His own people, a great multitude though they were" and He kept them separated and divided from the Egyptians who followed. He guided them, in their exodus, with a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud
by day. What a great and mighty and powerful God was his God! he mused reverently, feeling a calmness possess his being.

He made a quick check of the flock then settled down once more for a bit of sleep. It was amazing how thoughts about God and of His great and mighty works could calm his soul, he soliloquized, yawning sleepily as he pulled the robe closely around his neck and chin.

He must have slept, or, at the least, dozed off, for he was suddenly aware of a presence. And of light. A light so brilliant and bright as to dazzle the eye.

He got to his feet. Then he bowed, face down on the earth, the light was brighter than any high noon sun he had ever seen or beheld. He dare not look up into it: he could not, it seemed to blind him. He shielded his eyes with his arm. He was sore afraid. And amazed.

Then he heard a voice. No common, ordinary voice, this. It was the voice of an angel! An angel -- a heavenly being! -- and he was speaking to him. And not to him only but to all his companion-shepherds in the hills about him.

"Fear not. . . ."

He lifted his eyes upward at the impact of the consoling words. His arm dropped to his side as the angelic voice continued:

"For, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

"And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

"Our King, in a manger!" Matthias exclaimed to himself in what was little more than a whispered breath. "Still, it must be so; the angel declared it."
And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

"It . . . it's . . . really real!" Matthias cried, jumping to his feet and feeling suddenly quite young and youthful. "Messiah has come. He has come!"

He raised his arms heavenward; tears streamed down his upturned face. The stars twinkled and danced in the blue canopy over his head. And even though the angel was gone and, with him, the blinding, dazzling light of the glory was gone, too; in his heart, the light shone: the glory broke through -- the day had dawned. A new day, it was: the Daystar from on high had arisen in his heart.

Weeping brokenly but joyously, he left the flock in the care of his Heavenly Father and hurried across the hills to Bethlehem.