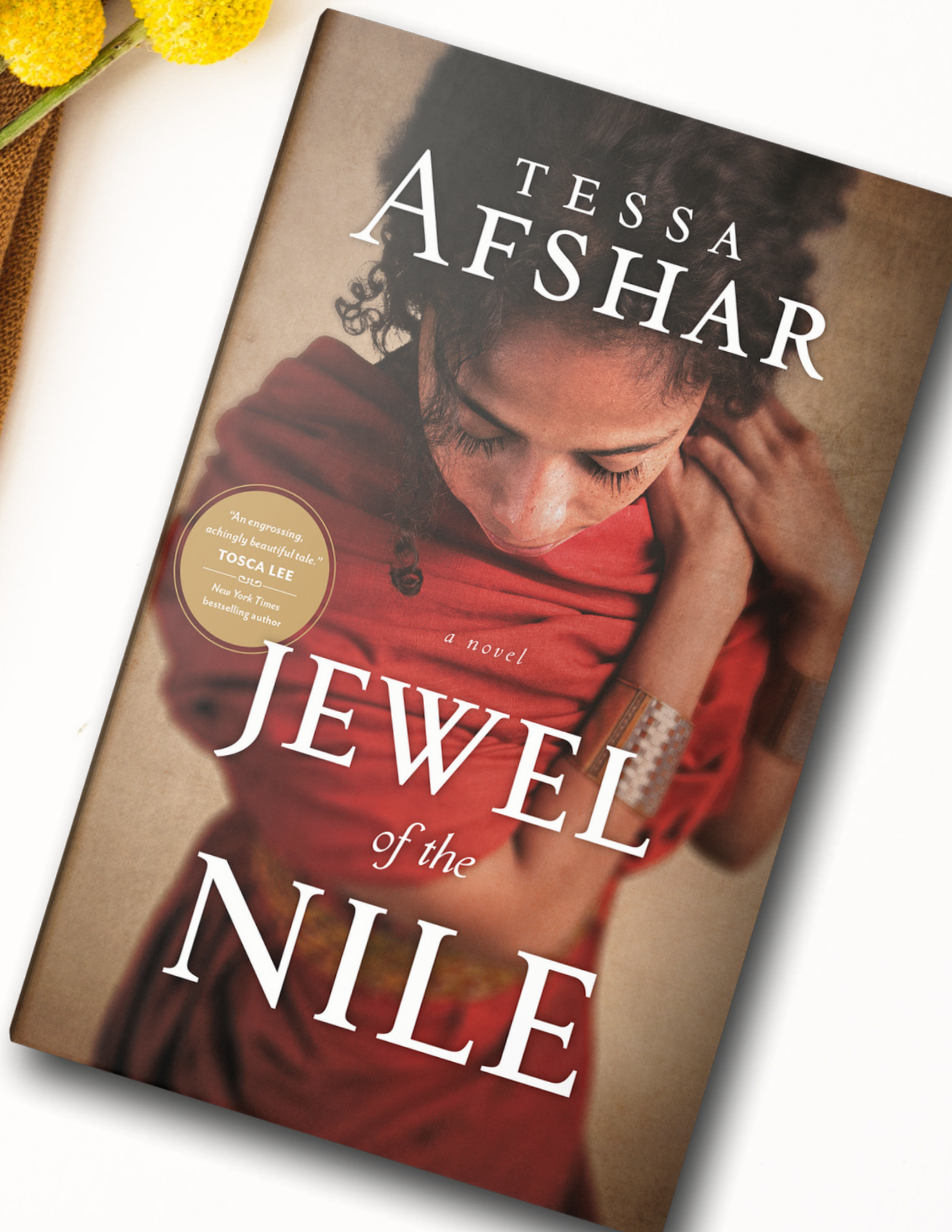


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About Tessa Afshar

Tessa Afshar is an award-winning author of historical and biblical fiction. Her novel *Daughter of Rome* was a *Publishers Weekly* and ECPA bestseller. *Thief of Corinth* was an Inspy Award finalist, and *Land of Silence* won an Inspy Award and was voted by *Library Journal* as one of the top five Christian fiction titles of 2016. *Harvest of Gold* won the prestigious Christy Award in the historical romance category, and *Harvest of Rubies* was a finalist for the ECPA Christian Book Award in the fiction category. Tessa also recently released her first Bible study and DVD called *The Way Home: God's Invitation to New Beginnings*, based on the book of Ruth.



Tessa was born to a nominally Muslim family in the Middle East and lived there for the first fourteen years of her life. She then moved to England, where she survived boarding school for girls, before moving to the United States permanently. Her conversion to Christianity in her twenties changed the course of her life forever. Tessa holds a master of divinity from Yale University, where she served as cochair of the Evangelical Fellowship at the Divinity School. She worked in women's and prayer ministries for nearly twenty years before becoming a full-time writer. Tessa speaks regularly at national women's events. She is a devoted wife, mediocre tomato grower, and chocolate connoisseur. Visit her website at tessaafshar.com.

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A Journey to the Ancient Kingdom of Cush

By Tessa Afshar

Located along the banks of the Nile River in what is modern-day Sudan, Cush was an ancient kingdom, shrouded in secrets and legend.

Initially, the land was referred to as Nubia, and for over a hundred years, starting in the eighth century BC, the kings of Nubia also ruled as the Pharaohs of Egypt. Afterward, the kings and queens of Cush established an independent and often influential kingdom with vast silver and gold mines, though much of their rich history has been lost to us.

Modern archaeologists have discovered over 250 pyramids left behind by this mysterious people. Smaller and more slender than the Egyptian pyramids, they are elegant, colorful structures built to house the dead. Unlike the Egyptians, who saved their pyramids for royalty only, the lesser nobles of Cush were allowed pyramids provided they were wealthy enough to build them.

Continued on next page →

By the first century AD, when my story takes place, the Cushites possessed a smaller kingdom, barely holding on to independence, with the shadow of Rome hanging over them. Somehow they managed to prevent the Roman Empire from swallowing them up completely, though they paid well for this privilege. By this time, they had moved their capital to Meroë on the east bank of the Nile, located between the fifth and sixth cataracts in the river. Meroë was a city of twenty thousand, boasting at least two palaces—one housing the king and the other for the queen.

The people of Cush spoke Meroitic, a language that has been preserved in various documents and yet never deciphered, tragically leaving us with a dearth of knowledge regarding this significant civilization. I can't wait for some brilliant linguist to tackle this language!

The people of Cush flourished on the shores of the middle Nile for over a thousand years. In time, their queens rose to power alongside their kings. Since kings were considered sons of the gods, they were thought to be too important to dabble in the daily responsibilities of ruling a nation. Instead, they were given rule over the temples and religious life of the land, while the queens wielded power over the political and financial realms.

As you can imagine, this mysterious world creates the perfect backdrop for a story about secrets, self-discovery, scarred pasts, and forgiveness.



Q&A

with Tessa Afshar

What did you learn while writing this novel?

A. I fell in love with the world of Cush. The separation between the king and queen and the mysteries that remain after so many centuries intrigue me. I can't wait for someone to break the code of Meroitic and tell us more about this brilliant people. I also learned about navigating the Nile, the challenge of the six cataracts, and the fascinating world of antiquities that populated its shores, even as late as the first century.

Another wonderful new insight I gained was about the complex world of Roman architecture. My husband found me *The Ten Books of Architecture* by Vitruvius, the most famous architect at the time in the Roman world. We were amazed by his grasp of engineering and genius for design. Those ancient architects had to know everything from mathematics to soil quality to load bearing to the nature of different woods, concrete, and construction-site management. Truly impressive!

What can Chariline's story teach us about faith?

A. Sometimes, we are living a life that is ruled by our own desires or common sense or impulses, and we are not even aware. Sometimes, our plans are driven by the lies our old scars whisper into our ears. A life of faith brings our soul into right order. God in Christ frees us from the power of old wounds. Like Chariline, we can learn to find our worth in God and to trust him with our future, instead of striving to control every outcome.

Aside from passages in Acts, what other Scriptures inspired you as you wrote *Jewel of the Nile*?

A. I have included verses at the beginning of each chapter, which help us gain insight into the heart of that chapter and sometimes to gain a deeper understanding of the larger themes in the overall story. Having done this with some of my other books, I am always surprised by how much my readers respond to these verses and how personally they connect to them.

When we meet the novel's protagonist, Chariline, what is she wrestling with in her spiritual life?

A. Chariline is so focused on what she wants that she runs ahead of God, and his plans. She still wants his blessing, but she is not very good at waiting for his direction. Prayer and stillness are hard for Chariline, because she is entirely focused on the impulses that are born from her longings. She doesn't yet know how to fully give the control of her life to Jesus, although she is his disciple.

What is your hope for readers of *Jewel of the Nile*?

A. I hope they learn not to allow their scars to tell their stories. That they see themselves through the prism of faith and inhabit their true worth in Christ. This is ultimately a story about restoration and healing in the deepest soul.



Discussion Questions

- 1 Even before she knows of their true relationship, Chariline rejoices in her lifelong friendship with Natemahar and the way it helps to make up for her lack of a conventional family. How has God used friends in your life, either in place of or in addition to the people you are related to?
- 2 When Chariline is tempted to focus on the bad news of not knowing her father's identity rather than on the good news of knowing that he's alive, her friend Hermione reminds her, "Sometimes, in the frustration of what we don't have, we forget to rejoice in what we do." Why is it often easier to focus on the negative? What are some practical ways we might remind ourselves to rejoice in what we do have?
- 3 Charline is certain that God wants her to find out who her father is, but Hermione urges her to ask for the Lord's guidance. She points out that often "God starts to tell us something, and before the sentence is out of his mouth, we finish it off the way we prefer. We assume. We presume. And we jump to false conclusions." Can you think of examples of this, either from the Bible or from your own experience?
- 4 Natemahar chooses to keep his relationship to Chariline a secret. Do you feel he has a legitimate reason to conceal his true identity from his daughter? Is Charline justified in her anger with him when she finds out? In what ways can secrets be harmful in our relationships, and when is it appropriate to have them?

- 5 Charline promises Theo not to go off on her own in her search for her father, but then breaks that promise. What are the consequences of her impatience, both for her and for those who care about her? When has impatience gotten you in trouble?
- 6 Priscilla challenges Chariline about her intense desire to find her father: "It's not the nature of your longing that is at issue. It is the fact that God does not reign over it. Finding your father has become the jewel you refuse to part with. Not even if God asks it. In that part of your heart, at least, your flesh still rules. The problem is that when you are flesh-driven, you cannot be Spirit-led." Has there been anything in your life that you've had a hard time being willing to part with?
- 7 Once she starts to seek God's will about finding her father, Charline begins to wonder if every hurdle is a message from God telling her she's on the wrong track. How can we tell whether or not a particular circumstance is actually a message from God?
- 8 Both Chariline and Theo struggle with challenges related to tragic circumstances surrounding their birth. Near the end of the book, Theo says, "What the Lord is teaching me is that the sorrows of one generation do not have to be visited upon another. The misfortunes of our parents do not have to shape our lives." Are there generational hurts that still need to be healed for you or your loved ones? How can your relationship with Jesus help overcome them?
- 9 For a long time, because of what happened to him as an infant, Theo struggled with his sense that God was not a loving Father, but rather "a God who would leave me in my time of trouble. A God who would always allow terrible things to happen to me." Have you, or someone you know, struggled with something similar? What are some ways to address this?



Spoiler alert: read this after you finish the novel!



A Note from the Author

You might be scratching your head, wondering why I have described Natemahar as a Cushite rather than an Ethiopian. After all, he is based on the eunuch in the book of Acts, who is described as an Ethiopian court official working for Candace, queen of the Ethiopians (Acts 8:26-27). It turns out that *Candace* is not a proper name. Rather, it is the Greek word for *Kandake*, which is what the Cushites called their queen.

Are you baffled yet? I was, when I started my research. Was the eunuch a Cushite or an Ethiopian? Or was he an Ethiopian working for a Cushite queen?

Most scholars now agree that he was a Cushite (or Kushite, if you want to use the scholarly spelling). Greeks and Romans referred to the lands south of Elephantine as *Ethiopia* and called the natives of those lands *Ethiopian*. Technically, the word means “burnt face.” In biblical times, *Ethiopia* seems to have been a catch-all term for a large geographical area whose people had dark skin, not the nation we now know by that name. And since the book of Acts was written in Koine Greek, its author, Luke, uses the common Greek term for Kush, which is—you guessed it—*Ethiopia*.

It seems likely, then, that our eunuch hails from the Kingdom of Cush, located in modern-day Sudan. He would have called himself a Cushite, not an Ethiopian. Respecting his heritage, that is what I chose to call him as well.





Spoiler alert: read this after you finish the novel!

The language of the people of Cush, Meroitic, which has been preserved in various documents, has never been deciphered, leaving us with a regrettable dearth of knowledge regarding this significant civilization. We know they flourished on the shores of the middle Nile for over a thousand years, leaving behind over 250 extraordinary pyramids, temple ruins, and rumors of enormous silver and gold mines. Their kings served as pharaohs in Egypt for a season. In time, their queens rose to power alongside their kings. We know the names of many of these monarchs, but except in the case of a handful, the exact period of their rule remains a mystery. Hence, I never named my Kandake, though some sources seem to believe her name might have been Nawidemak.

When I first began to outline this novel, I wanted to have one of the daughters of Philip the Evangelist as my main character. A short email from a fan upended my plans. A young lady wrote to tell me that she loved my books. But, as an African American, she wondered if I ever planned to have a character who looked like her. Because, she explained, it was important for her to see heroines who reflected her.

I realized that as a writer of biblical fiction, I had a responsibility to this young woman and others like her. But where was I going to find a heroine that fit the bill in the New Testament? The only character I could think of was the eunuch. How was a eunuch supposed to have a child? Well. Now I had a book, didn't I? I ripped up my outline and never looked back. I did keep the name Chariline, which according to some church records was the name of one of Philip's daughters. And I kept two of his daughters for Chariline's friends.





Spoiler alert: read this after you finish the novel!



According to some early church documents, the eunuch was called Bachos, or Simeon Bachos. People of that time period often had two or three names: the one they were given at birth and another Greek or Latin name in deference to the international world that was the Roman Empire. And the Ethiopian eunuch might have also had a third, Jewish name, since he was a God-fearer before being baptized into Christ. I felt that Natemahar, born in Cush, would have a Cushite name, and that is what I gave him. Whether in his lifetime or afterward he came to be known as Simeon Bachos is a puzzle beyond my scope as a novelist.

Marcus Vitruvius was a real person, and what I've written about him is mostly accurate. Except for the fact that he had a granddaughter called Vitruvia who followed in his architectural footsteps. That didn't happen. But wouldn't it have been fun if it had?

Both Chariline and Theo are fictional characters. To read more of Theo's story, check out *Thief of Corinth* and *Daughter of Rome*.

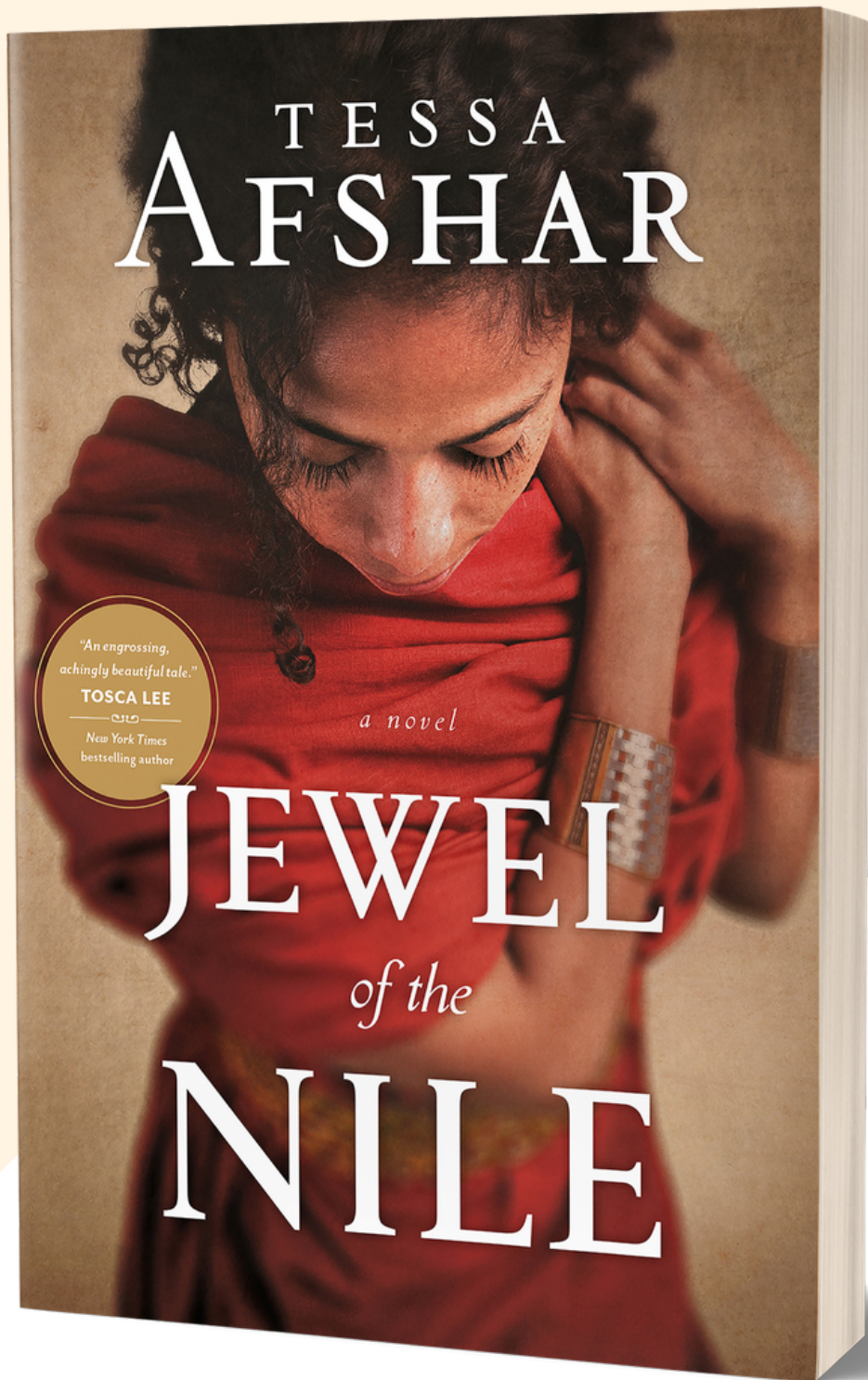
To read more of Natemahar's real story, please refer to Acts 8:26-39. I am a novelist, which is to say, I make up stuff. My words cannot begin to replace the glory and power of the Scriptures. If you have never read this story, or the book of Acts, or if it's been a while, do yourself a favor and read it. You may encounter the vastness of God's grace and mercy just where you need it most.



Book Club Notes

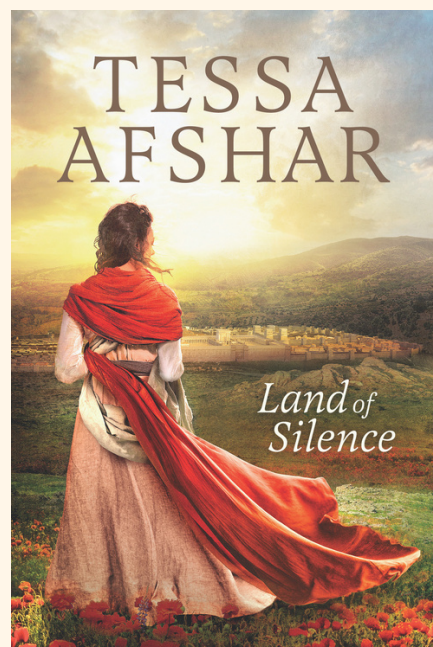
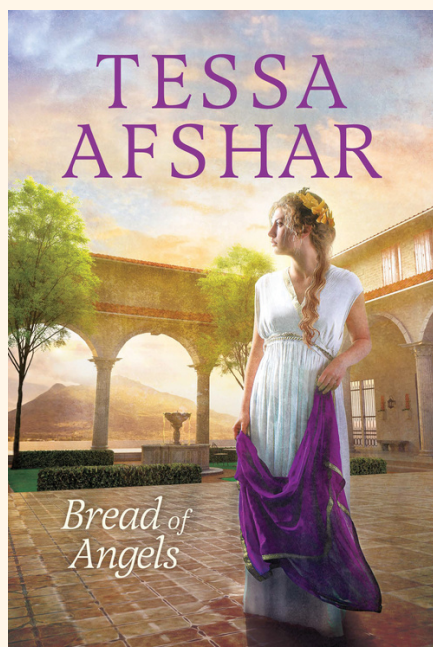
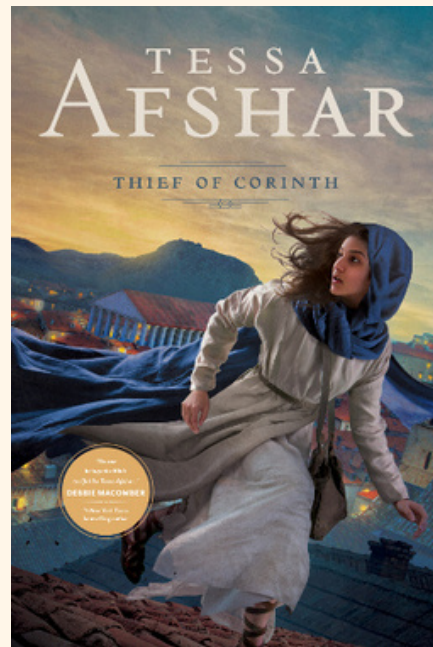
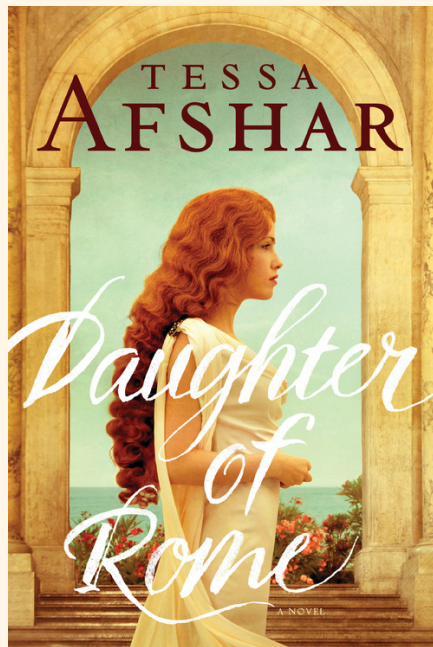


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