

JourneyForth Study Guide

This study guide is designed to help you think analytically about the content of the book. The questions that follow are open-ended, allowing you to discuss various topics and issues addressed in the novel. They cover four broad categories: character, plot, setting, and theme.

A Sparrow Alone **by Alicia Petersen** **a JourneyForth book © 2004 BJU Press**

Introduction

Who is the coming Messiah? This question is frequently asked in *A Sparrow Alone*.

Messiah comes from the Hebrew word meaning “to anoint” or “anointed.” It was used to refer to Aaron and his sons, who were anointed with oil and thereby consecrated to the service of God as priests according to Exodus 28:41, and to kings who were anointed for their office. Several passages in the Old Testament shed light on what the Messiah would do and why He would come—Micah 5, Isaiah 53, Daniel 9, Zechariah 12, and Psalms 2 and 22, two Psalms describing the Messiah. From these passages one can put together a picture of the Messiah. He would be a righteous king sent to restore Israel to God. He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5) and be “cut off” about AD 30 (Daniel 9). The Jews believed that the Messiah would reign on the throne of David and free Israel from Roman rule.

In 4 BC, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Caesar Augustus was emperor of Rome, and Herod the Great, ruler of Palestine, was in the last year of his life. The Jews believed that Messiah would soon come as a great king, powerful enough to free Israel from Roman rule and to reign on the throne of David.

During Jesus’ public ministry He claimed to be both God and Messiah when He said “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.” (John 8: 58–59). The words “I am” are the word *Yahweh*, the name God gave for Himself in Exodus 3:14: “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM.” Jesus was not, however, the great and powerful king expected by the Jews. They charged Jesus with blasphemy and tried unsuccessfully to stone Him.

When Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was, Peter responded, “Thou art the Christ [*Christos*, the Greek word for Messiah], the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, . . . flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 16:16–17).

The Romans crucified Jesus at the insistence of the Jewish leaders. Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, presided at the trial. As before, the charge was blasphemy. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each recorded the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Their accounts provide the basis for the character Mala meets in *A Sparrow Alone*.

Concerning character

1. Abdon is so consumed with anger toward the Romans that he “has chosen deafness . . . to everything and everyone having to do with his yesterdays” (p. 48). He has even turned his back on Jehovah God. Why does he act and feel this way (pp. 3–4)? What is Abdon’s new “god” (p. 24)?
2. Mala hears rumors about Jesus of Nazareth. Based upon Jesus’ actions and words in the book, what are some evidences that Jesus really is the Messiah (as described in the introduction)?
3. On page 53, Tahath asks Mala to be betrothed to him. For what reasons does she say no? What do her reasons reveal about her character?
4. In *A Sparrow Alone*, Mala and Huldah are starkly different. Huldah is large, strong, “toughened,” and “a warrior woman” with “empty hands [curled] into fists” (pp. 69–70). Mala is small and fragile, soft and “tender.” Mala believes the contrasting views between Jews like herself and Romans like Huldah come from “differing worship” and that “the spiritual focus of a people ultimately determines everything about that people” (p. 30). After studying pages 8, 30, 36, 69–70, 73–77, 94–97, and 128, discuss some differences between the character and actions of Mala’s Jehovah God and Huldah’s many Roman gods and household god. For example:

Jehovah God has revealed Himself to His people through His tangible, readable “Word”—the Ten Commandments. Huldah’s Roman gods are revealed through tales which “chang[e] in [their] transmission . . . the story at its last telling may be barely recognizable as the one that began it all” (p. 96)—a very unreliable method to trust.

5. Mala works for both Lady Diana and Lady Terentia, two very different Roman women. Using quotes and examples of their actions, discuss how Diana and Terentia are different, especially in the ways they treat Mala and their own servants—Lady Diana’s two servant girls and Terentia’s servant Hodesh.

Concerning plot

6. Mala’s parents taught her “to make Jehovah’s written revelation part of daily living. The Law was to be stored in one’s memory, but it was also to be consulted and *obeyed*” (p. 74). Besides page 74 in which Mala knows she must ask Huldah to get rid of her household idol because Jehovah’s Word says to “have no graven images before” Him, discuss some other plot points when Mala uses Jehovah’s Word in her daily life.
7. After Dalan knocks Huldah senseless, Dr. Ignatius visits to try to help heal her, but he can’t do anything. On page 119, Mala seeks help from Jesus of Nazareth for Huldah who is dying. What does Jesus do for her?
8. On page 120, Jesus says that Mala and Abdon will know the “saving of soul.” What does He mean by this? When in the plot does His prediction come true?

9. On page 128, Mala quotes the Psalmist, “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up.” How has Jehovah taken Mala up and cared for her? Give some specific instances from the plot of the book. For example:

Jehovah cared for Mala after Abdon abandoned her for Keturah, Ben-Oni, and Dalan, by providing Huldah to watch out for Mala and keep her company in her loneliness.

10. A climax is the moment of highest tension or emotion in a story. After having read the book, what do you think is the climax of *A Sparrow Alone*? Is it Tahath’s asking to be betrothed to Mala, the crucifixion, Huldah’s coming to stay with Mala, Mala’s believing on Jesus as Jehovah’s promised Messiah, or another event?

Concerning setting and historical context

11. A story’s setting is the “where” and “when” of the story. One of the most important details of a setting is its atmosphere—the tone or mood. On the day of Abdon’s crucifixion, Mala goes to Jerusalem to see her brother for the last time. As she enters the city, she “wanted to scream at them to stop their horrible talk—their raucous mockery” (p. 148). “The place of execution outside the city gates was . . . tightly packed” (p. 148). Mala sees “the three men in suspended agony on their separate crosses” (p. 149). The people’s “voices, whether angry or mocking, were calling . . . to Jesus. Intense hatred moved toward the central cross in waves of sound. The ragged voices issued from faces that were animal-like in their savagery” (p. 149). After reading these segments from the book, how would you describe the atmosphere of the crucifixion setting?
12. Why did the Jews want Jesus crucified (pp. 146–47)?
13. After reading the introduction, explain who Messiah was and why He would be sent. According to the Bible, discuss whether or not Jesus fulfilled the Messianic requirements.
14. Several issues of first-century Palestine addressed in *A Sparrow Alone* are still prevalent today. Three are listed below. For each one, provide examples of it found in the book and explain how each remains relevant today.
- a. God’s fairness in letting bad circumstances happen to seemingly good people
 - b. Importance of applying God’s Word to everyday life
 - c. Wrongness of retaliating against authority even when that authority is oppressive

Concerning tone and theme

15. Jesus and Abdon are both crucified; Abdon stole from people, and Jesus healed people and gave to them. Did they both deserve to die? Why or why not?
16. Mala's mother once told her, "Some things lie within our reach as human beings; others lie only within God's" (p. 49). Do you agree? Discuss some situations from the book that were either within Mala's "reach" to control or only within God's control. For example:

Mala could not control Abdon's behavior or attitude; only God could change Abdon (p. 49). But Mala *could* control how she reacted to Abdon's abandoning her and shaming her family by turning to thievery (pp. 143–44). Instead of getting bitter and angry, she trusted that Jehovah would help Abdon when she could not.

In your own life, what are some things that are "within your reach" to control and some that only God can control?

17. On page 78, two Roman guards come looking for Hodesh after she ran away. Even though she is hiding Hodesh, Mala lies and tells the guards she has had "no word of the slave Lady Terentia seeks." Was it right for Mala to lie, even to save Hodesh's life from her cruel mistress?
18. On page 94, Huldah says, "What of the suffering we see on every side? If gods there be—or fates—or any creatures in a higher realm than ours, what malignity fuels their treatment of our helpless selves?" Why do you think bad things happen to good people? Is it as Huldah believes that God or fate, intending only ill will toward us, wants to destroy our lives (Job 1:21; Ps. 139: 1–10; 1 Cor. 10:13; James 1:2–5)?
19. A theme is an idea, concept, or message that is reinforced through the overall work. After studying pages 4, 94, 128, and 150, what do you think is the main theme of the book?