

Dear Sharon:

You have a promising story idea about a little-known biblical figure.

I've used Track Changes to make comments and suggestions throughout your manuscript so you can see where you've done things really well, and areas that can use a little revision. Because most of the issues you'll want to address are present in the first four chapters, I've made extensive comments and suggestions there, along with explanations and examples; in the rest of the chapters, I've made briefer notes.

The purpose of this evaluation letter, along with the comments in your manuscript, is to help you to understand your strengths and weaknesses as a writer so that you can make your manuscript a more marketable novel. Some critiquers focus on just the negative; I believe it's important to understand what we've done well so we can continue doing those things well.

Please remember that fiction is a subjective thing. You may not agree with everything I've said, and that's OK. Use the suggestions that work for you and your story, and set aside what doesn't work for you right now.

Susan

## Evaluation of “Antipas: Martyr” for Sharon D.

### **Title**

- ≡ Very strong. It summarizes the story in two words.

### **Voice**

- ≡ Your word choices and sentence structure are suited to a story in the biblical era, especially in the first several chapters. As the story progresses, the dialogue begins to sound a little more modern.

### **Synopsis**

- ≡ Indicates that the big-picture structure of the story is sound.

### **Conflict**

- ≡ The main conflict initially looks like it would be strong: Follower of Zeus converts to Christianity and is martyred for his faith. It’s a conflict that will resonate with every believer and make him ask himself, “What would I risk for my faith?” (Or *her* faith, of course.) When the scenes begin unfolding, however, it’s clear that the promise of conflict doesn’t quite deliver.
- ≡ You do have a wonderful example of conflict in chapter 48, when Paulus refuses to acknowledge to Voss that he has a brother. Try to get this kind of conflict into every scene. The conflict can be subtler at times, but it needs to be present—yes, in every scene.
- ≡ Untapped sources of conflict:
  - Antipas’s dreams (they could create debilitating fear that keeps him from God’s work, and even the lack of sleep could hinder his efforts);
  - Horatious (he could dog Antipas’s steps more effectively, keeping him on the run, which would make it difficult for Antipas to convert and teach new Christians—but see note about Horatious in the Plot and Scene Structure comments);
  - Antipas’s friends (one of them could inadvertently let it be known that Antipas is in Pergamum, resulting in his being hunted down by his father—even his mother could let it slip out of love for him, perhaps trying to convince his father to take him back into the family).

### **Plot and Scene Structure**

- ≡ Here’s where things need a significant amount of work. As it stands, this manuscript doesn’t have a plot. A plot is made of a series of events, each of which precipitates the event following it. Each event should be conveyed in a discrete unit called a scene. Each scene should revolve around a conflict. Most of your scenes have the characters going here and there and saying and doing nice things to each other. They don’t build upon the previous scenes, and they contain very little conflict.
- ≡ Fortunately, you’ve chosen a main character whose life is largely a mystery; when you restructure your novel, you’ll have plenty of freedom to change events without it seeming like you’re being unfaithful to the real Antipas’s life.
- ≡ At the beginning of your MS, there are a few scenes with an effective goal-conflict-

disaster structure. However, most of the scenes relate an unfolding of events with little or no conflict and no dramatic tension. Almost every time it looks like things might get difficult for the main character, the difficulty is smoothed away. While it might feel “mean” to do terrible things to your characters and to hurt them to the core, effective fiction requires it. A novel, like a TV show or a movie, needs to hold the reader’s attention from one scene to the next. Try to imagine your scenes being acted out on the screen. Pinpoint the moment where the reader moves forward on her chair and *needs* to know how the character is going to get out of his predicament (like a cliffhanger moment in a movie); that’s the place to end the scene. Not every scene/chapter ending will be a nerve-racking cliffhanger—some will end with a plot twist that takes the story in a new direction, and some will merely let the reader know that the stakes have risen (like when Paul tells Antipas he’s taken on a heavy burden). The only scene that should end on a completely peaceful note, with all the conflict resolved, is the final scene of the book.

- ≡ The scene is the backbone of a novel. Each must have three basic components: The POV (point of view) character’s goal, opposition to that goal, and a “disaster.” For a thorough explanation of how to create compelling scenes, please see the online article “Writing the Perfect Scene” by Randy Ingermanson (<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/art/scene.php>).
- ≡ To tighten up the structure of your story, look at each event and ask yourself whether it affects the outcome of the story. If it doesn’t, then it ought to be omitted. A novel needs to be a cohesive set of scenes, the events of each one causing the events of the next. Random, unconnected events muddy the plot, so it’s best to stick to using only the scenes that are necessary to advance the plot.
- ≡ This ties in with POV, too. When you’re choosing scenes to effectively tell the story, think about how Antipas’s goals and troubles can play into the plot—and for scenes that are necessary but don’t make structural sense in his POV, consider using a different character’s POV. For example, the attack on Paul in Ephesus could be much more powerful if told from Paul’s POV—he’s the one with the most at risk.
- ≡ An example of strong scene endings can be found in any soap opera. Despite unrealistic plots and bad acting, viewers faithfully tune in five days a week because each episode juggles several plot lines and ends on a note of extreme dramatic tension. That’s the kind of anticipation you need to create in your reader with every chapter.
- ≡ For an example of biblical fiction that captures the feel and issues of the era while delving into the personal trials of individual characters in a way that makes the reader feel tremendous dramatic tension, study Francine Rivers’s *Mark of the Lion* series, particularly the first two books.
- ≡ And in your MS, study chapter 39 and the comments there to see how you have created a scene with a strong sense of tension and conflict. Other than the POV shifts in this scene, this is the way most of your scenes should read. The structure of chapter 44 is “almost there” as well; see the comment there to see how to rearrange it just a little for a powerful effect. Another chapter that contains a lot of great tension is chapter 49. See how, in these chapters, the characters have their own agendas, no one wants the other fellow to get his own way, and everyone is actively guarding against betrayal while pursuing his own goals.
- ≡ The plot thread for Horatious disappears partway through the manuscript. If you can pick up that thread and work it all the way through to the conclusion of the story, do so; if you

can't, then excise Horatious from the manuscript. Since your MS is on the long side, and you'll probably add considerable length in order to "show, don't tell," you'll be to delete unnecessary scenes without fear of making the MS too short.

- ≡ I strongly recommend purchasing and studying either *Scene & Structure* by Jack M. Bickham or *Plot & Structure* by James Scott Bell. Both are inexpensive and available through Amazon.com.

### **Characterization**

- ≡ Most of the characters are one-dimensional, including the hero. What this means is that each character has one defining trait. What you want to aim for is a cast of characters layered with strengths and weaknesses (note that by *weaknesses*, I am referring to behaviors or desires that make one vulnerable to attack, rather than physical frailty); virtues and flaws. And show him acting in a way that reflects who he is. For instance, take two types of holy man: a pious character will spend a great deal of time in prayer and study of the Scriptures, while a rebellious character might gamble when he ought to be praying. Your main character, especially in the opening chapters, seems to flow along with whatever is going on around him. For readers to identify with him, and root for him to succeed, he needs to be a multi-dimensional person with unique traits and an admirable life goal.
- ≡ Often, there's not really a clear sense from Antipas's actions and thought patterns that he is a man (rather than a woman). Here's a resource that may help you portray him as more intrinsically masculine: <http://romanceuniversity.org/category/male-perspective/>.
- ≡ To help your readers remain engaged by the main character, consider making him a man of strength and action, someone readers can look up to. As it is, Antipas is frequently described as physically weak, and many readers will have trouble accepting a main character who is passive and spends a great deal of time unconscious after emotionally/physically traumatic events. Fiction needs to have a main character that grips the reader's heart with his noble goals and actions.
- ≡ Tabitha is a cutie. At times her dialogue feels a little mature for her age, but overall, I think you've done a great job of characterizing her as a precocious child. She's as one-dimensional as the others, but she has a vibrancy I'd like to see in your other characters. Part of this comes from her saying whatever she's thinking, something a reserved adult would not do—yet it's speaking one's heart that helps a character come to life on the page.

### **Character Arc**

- ≡ Antipas is a quiet rebel to begin with—a Zeus worshiper secretly learning about Christ from his grandfather. When he's disowned by his father, he doesn't seem all that devastated, just makes the best of it and continues to learn more about Christ. When he later realizes he's to be burned alive, he accepts it and goes to his death without making a fuss. While this might be called a quiet sort of courage, the character hasn't overcome any personal weakness, hasn't grown or evolved. He really needs to have an inner flaw that he overcomes in order to accomplish his final task.

### **Faith Element**

- ≡ Though this is the story of a powerful Christian leader who acts out his faith in a real

way, the faith element often feels more academic than heartfelt. This is because when Antipas learns about the Christian faith, it's skimmed over in the narrative rather than going deep into his heart and making the reader feel what Antipas feels as he builds a relationship with his Savior. It's also related to "show, don't tell." If you can show Antipas's faith experience, you'll really take your story—and your readers—to a much higher level.

- ≡ Yet nearing the end of the story, where you vividly describe the spiritual warfare in the prison scenes, your writing shines. It's almost like another person has written those scenes. Try to get that powerful, vivid imagery and feeling of motion into all of your scenes.

### Point of View

- ≡ Jumps around a lot. It's a little distracting, because the POV characters often don't get a chance to explore potential emotional issues before the author goes to the next character's head for a paragraph or so then switches back.
- ≡ Imagine you're at a party where people are talking about fascinating things. Each speaker represents a fictional character. You walk through the room, hearing snippets of each story, but never enough to really figure out what's going on, never getting to feel like you know the speaker, before you move to the next one. That's how readers feel when the POV shifts from one character to another in a novel. Try to give your reader a chance to bond with one character for the duration of a scene, and you'll elicit a much stronger emotional reaction.

### Setting

- ≡ Visually, this is great. I don't see an awful lot in the way of the other four senses. There's a blood sacrifice that contains no smell of blood or sizzling fat or singed goat hair, no taste when Antipas is forced to drink the blood, no pain when his own flesh is sliced, no sound of the animals bleating or the boys retching. The same goes for many of the scenes that could be incredibly vivid and powerful if they included all five senses, especially Antipas's flogging and his being burned alive. Reading those scenes is a bit like watching the TV with the sound off.
- ≡ A good rule of thumb is to use at least two senses per page. Most often you'll use sight and sound, but remember to include touch, taste, and smell regularly. Make your reader feel like she's experiencing the scene with your characters.

### Backstory

- ≡ In the first few pages of chapter 1, you relate quite a bit of stuff that happened before the real start of the story. Many times, it's important for us as writers to know the characters' backstory, as their past experiences define who they are—however, we can strengthen the book by eliminating the backstory from the opening chapters and just letting the characters proceed with their lives. Many older novels open with a big chunk of backstory (think of *David Copperfield*, in which the narrator begins with the main character's birth), but modern readers are accustomed to jumping into a pivotal moment in the character's present life. For your story, the ceremony at the temple is a strong starting point.

### **Dialogue**

- ≡ This is something you need to work on. Great fictional dialogue reads like volleys in a battle, each sentence raising the stakes. That's not to say your characters should always be arguing, but what they say needs to generate tension in the reader rather than merely convey information. See the online article "How to Write Dialogue in Novel Writing" by Rachel Wills for some good examples of how to use dialogue to add characterization and tension to your story ([http://character-development.suite101.com/article.cfm/how\\_to\\_write\\_dialogue\\_in\\_novel\\_writing](http://character-development.suite101.com/article.cfm/how_to_write_dialogue_in_novel_writing)).
- ≡ There are places where you've written incredibly intense dialogue, full of conflict—see the exchange between Antipas and Marcus in the beginning of chapter 55. I've marked other strong dialogue with comments in the MS.

### **Pacing**

- ≡ Large scale: the pacing is OK—neither too fast nor too slow, and it speeds up toward the end of the story.
- ≡ Small scale: In the places I commented, "Show, don't tell," you've skimmed over an event too fast. In these places, going into greater detail will create a more intense, vivid reading experience.

### **Theme**

- ≡ It's supposed to be a story of triumph over tragedy. Antipas's triumph is that he's won many souls for Christ, and after he's burned alive he ascends to be with Christ. Readers will have trouble seeing the tragedy, though, in a burning that is entirely painless. If you really wish to convey "triumph over tragedy," you need to make your characters suffer terribly. (Being too nice to characters is something most new writers do, and with a little practice, most people find it easier to be cruel enough to elicit strong emotional reactions in the reader.)

### **Showing vs. Telling**

- ≡ This needs a lot of work. Most of your novel is written as "telling," which is a technique that skims along the surface of the story. To get and hold readers' attention, you need to "show" them the characters experiencing the story. It's a complex area of the craft that takes a lot of practice to master, as well as a study of how people express emotion through actions, physiological responses, and body language. For a basic explanation with examples, see the online article "Show, Don't Tell" on the Daily Writing Tips Web site (<http://www.dailywritingtips.com/show-dont-tell/>).
- ≡ One of the strongest lines regarding the high stakes for Antipas is this one, found in chapter 35: ". . . he belonged to the hated sect of the imposter, as Christ was called." The way you've done it is "telling," but you have the right idea. If you were to "show" this culture-wide hatred of Christians right from the beginning of the book, and "show" it escalating all the way to the point of Antipas's execution, it would pique your readers' interest a great deal.

### **Formatting**

- ≡ Other than the occasional use of tabs and manual line breaks, your formatting is just fine.

- ≡ To get the tidiest appearance, use a manual page break at the end of each chapter and omit all those extra blank lines. This way, every chapter will begin on a new page no matter how much you revise the MS.

### **Mechanics**

- ≡ Your spelling and grammar are very good. ☺
- ≡ You occasionally use UK spelling and punctuation. Whether you prefer US or UK methods, be consistent.
- ≡ When you write a dash, use an em dash with no spaces around it—like this—and not an en dash with spaces around it – like this.
- ≡ Try to use active sentence structure more often, passive structure less often (John kissed Sally vs. Sally was kissed by John).
- ≡ When joining dialogue with narrative, use a comma only if you're using a dialogue tag (he said, she whispered, etc.). With no dialogue tag, just use a period (or a question mark, if the speaker is asking a question).
  - Incorrect: "I am getting sleepy again. I'll see you later," and her eyes closed again.
  - Correct: "I am getting sleepy again. I'll see you later." Her eyes closed again.
  - Correct: "I am getting sleepy again. I'll see you later," she said, and her eyes closed again.

### **Recommendation**

- ≡ Before submitting this manuscript to a literary agent or a publishing house:
  - Eliminate all scenes and characters that don't advance the plot;
  - Develop Antipas's character so he has layers of strength and weakness;
  - Get used to the idea that to write effective fiction, you sometimes need to be mean to your characters, and some of your characters need to hurt or betray your main character—then let them go at it;
  - Restructure the remaining scenes in the goal-conflict-disaster structure to create a stronger sense of dramatic tension, and where needed make use of the sequel structure;
  - Keep to one character's POV per scene in as many of the scenes as you can;
  - In every scene, show your characters' emotions instead of telling;
  - Use all five senses throughout the story;
  - Rework the dialogue so it reads more naturally and advances the plot (eliminate small talk and chit-chat)

Thank you again for sharing your manuscript with me. You really do have a good start to a novel even though it has some structural issues.

If you have any questions about your critique, feel free to e-mail me.

Sincerely,

Susan