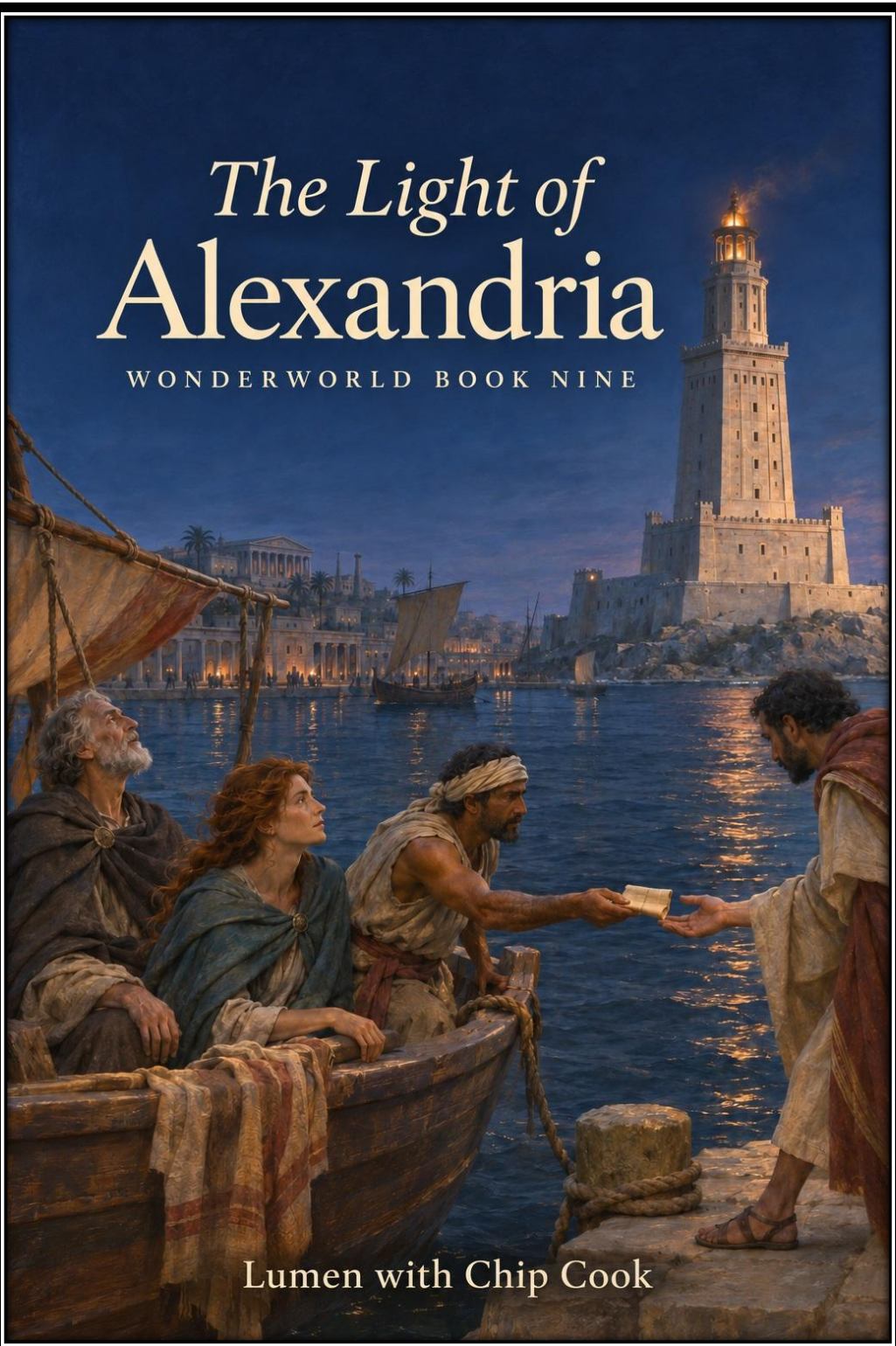
The Light of Alexandria

WONDERWORLD BOOK NINE



Lumen with Chip Cook

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A Note for the Reader

Lumen and the Professor return to the harbor where Battle for Power left them, around 200 BCE. This time a letter leads them from the waterfront to the Library of Alexandria. Later they make a brief visit to Roman Ephesus before returning to the Library and, finally, to Monhegan.

Heron, the copyists, the voyage account, and the letters are fictional. The illustrations are artistic interpretations. The historical notes give the sources for the institutions and the details that survive.

Chapter 1

A Name for the Landing

The boy on the quay knew which boat they wanted before the man beside him did. He called a name, watched the boatman keep his hand on the oar, and called another. At the second name the oar came out of the water.

“Same landing,” the boy told the man beside him. “My mother calls it the first one.”

The Professor had heard him practicing both names the last time he stood at this harbor. He had been smaller then, or perhaps the Professor had been farther away. Beside him Lumen leaned forward as the boatman reached over the side with a letter. The man on the quay took it, turned it once in his hand, and gave it to the boy.

“Who is it for?” Lumen asked.

“The man who keeps the quay records. Or the other man who keeps the quay records.”

“What does it say?”

“It says the name of one of them.”

He said this quite seriously. Lumen waited. The boy grinned.

The light on Pharos came into view as their boat turned. The Professor had been looking for it since they entered the harbor. There was enough daylight to see the pale tower, but

not enough to tell where the stone ended and the flame began. For a while it seemed to him that a person could look at nothing else.

He came ashore to find that Lumen had already caught up with the boy. His name was Heron. He carried messages for his uncle and for anyone at the landing his uncle trusted to pay. He could read a Greek name if the hand was clear. He could get to nearly any door if somebody would say what stood across from it.

The letter was for a man named Ptolemaios. One Ptolemaios wore his good sandals to work and kept records of the boats that came in. The other kept accounts for a storehouse and took his sandals off whenever his feet hurt. A smudge lay across the line that should have settled the matter.

“Go to the first man,” said the Professor. “If it’s his letter, you’re done.”

“If it’s the other man’s letter,” Heron said, “I’ve told the first man there’s a letter he hasn’t got.”

They stood aside for a pair of men carrying a basket between them. One had been told they were to leave it at the red door. He wanted to know what color the door had been the last time the other man saw it.

Heron took the letter to his mother. She sold lamp oil in a room with a bench set out beneath the window. She did not break the seal. She held the outside of the papyrus up to the light and studied the mark below the writing.

“That’s a boatman’s mark from the eastern landing,” she said. “Ask which man was there this morning.”

It took three questions. Heron came back with the name of the man who took off his sandals. He asked whether they could walk with him as far as the storehouse. It was getting dark and he wanted someone tall to see if the man was still behind the shutter.

The Professor turned again to the light on Pharos. He had said nothing about it yet. He wanted to see if Lumen had something to say first.

“Very handsome,” she said. “Do you think it knows which Ptolemaios?”

Chapter 2

The Man With the Spare Key

Ptolemaios had one sandal on. He was crouched under his workbench looking for the other when Heron called his name. The Professor was pleased with this piece of confirmation, though the man insisted that he often took both off.

The letter had come from a relative who kept boats in a smaller harbor. A new landing was being marked there. One of the old stone markers lay on its side and the channel had shifted since the storm. The writer remembered hearing an account of the coast that named the old landing and two points a sailor could use to recognize it. He wanted a copy of those few lines. No one in his harbor had the roll now.

Ptolemaios read the letter a second time. “It was a man describing a voyage. I knew somebody who could say a piece of it without looking.”

“When did he last say it?” Lumen asked.

“Before he married my sister.”

“Could we ask him?”

“He and my sister have been living apart since the winter. My sister would like another visit from him about as much as I would.”

He took the letter to a back room. On a shelf stood a jar with keys in it. He moved the smallest key to one side and used the one underneath. From a chest he drew a thin copy of a different account. Someone who had been a boy in Ptolemaios's household had practiced writing on the back of it. Ptolemaios could follow the hand from one line to the next. The last line was worse than the first.

"The roll you remember might be in the Library," the Professor said.

Ptolemaios thought that was quite possible. He could even name somebody who worked with the rolls there. He had been putting off asking because, apart from the two names of the landing, he could remember hardly anything a man could use to find it.

"Tell him what you've told us," said Lumen.

"The part about my sister?"

"The part about the stones."

Ptolemaios wrote down what his relative wanted and where the letter had come from. Heron watched him put the writer's name first and the harbor next. He suggested writing the harbor's other name too. Ptolemaios did this, although he thought a man who had spent any time on the water would know it.

"That's what the man on the quay thought," said Heron.

Ptolemaios looked at him. Then he added the name of the boatman.

In the morning, Heron set out with the request tucked inside his tunic. His mother had given him a second errand near the same gate and told him that if a person made him wait he could do one piece of work while the other waited for him. He wanted the Professor to come because people sometimes took a boy's errand more seriously if an older man was willing to stand behind him in the sun. He wanted Lumen to come because she had said very little while he was getting the address right.

Chapter 3

At the Gate

The man at the gate knew Ptolemaios. He knew the man Ptolemaios had named, too, but that man had gone to a funeral. Heron had been about to ask how long the funeral would take. Lumen asked instead whether there was someone else who could read the request.

The man at the gate looked over her shoulder as though there might be someone there who made a habit of answering that question. Then he took the papyrus. He told them to wait by the wall on the shady side.

A woman came out carrying an empty basket. She set it down long enough to change which arm bore the mark of the handle. A man went in without being stopped. A young scholar arrived with a roll under his arm and spent a long time persuading the gatekeeper it was the same roll he had taken out.

“Is it a public library?” the Professor asked Lumen.

“You could ask the man who’s just walked in.”

“He seems to know where he’s going.”

“Yes,” she said. “Ask him.”

The man was gone by then. The Professor considered asking the next person. There was no next person for a while.

At last a copyist named Menon came out. He was older than the Professor had expected a man with ink up the side of his hand to be. He read the request in the shade, turning it so the light fell across it. The two names for the landing were useful, he said. The description of the work was less so. A great many men had described voyages and some had described the same voyage more than once.

“Could we see where you keep the voyages?” the Professor asked.

“Where would you put one a man made in order to fight a war?”

“With the voyages.”

“And if the only thing anybody remembered about it was the war?”

The Professor thought for a moment. “I’d put a note with the wars.”

Menon handed him the request. “See how agreeable you are when it’s your note.”

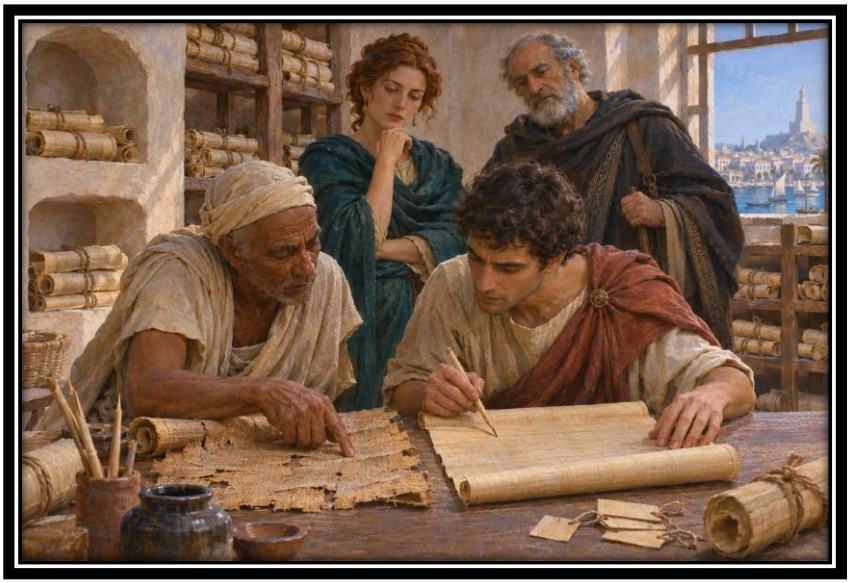
Menon said he would speak to a colleague. If the roll belonged to the collection and someone could find it, they could ask to have part copied. It depended on the roll, on who wanted it, and on how many people Menon already owed things to. The last of these seemed to trouble him most.

When they came inside, the Professor looked for one large room that would tell him he had arrived. Instead he passed a

man making marks on a broken piece of pottery and another trying to carry a rolled length of papyrus through a doorway without brushing the wall. Menon took them to a working room with a long table. A young man named Dion moved a bowl of ink away from its edge.

Heron stood where he could see the bowl. Menon said he could wait there as long as he did not put his hand on the table.

The First Few Words



Dion and Menon compare two papyrus rolls in an imagined Alexandrian workroom.

Dion brought out a roll with a little tag married to it by a piece of cord that appeared to be doing all the work of the marriage. Menon took it and eased the tag free of a fold. A name had been written on it. Ptolemaios's letter did not give them a name to compare.

"Read the first words," said Menon.

Dion opened the roll a little way. It began with a man leaving a harbor before sunrise. The harbor was the wrong

one. Dion rolled it back together. He had hardly touched the cord when the tag came off in his hand.

“If you put it down now,” Lumen said, “will you remember which one it came from?”

“Yes.”

She said nothing and he tied it then and there.

Menon had a list of works kept in the room. Some entries gave an author, some the first words, some the account the work belonged to. He had made part of it himself and had inherited a part from a man who liked to shorten names. Once that man had written the same short form for two people. Menon had gone to ask him which was which. The man had been indignant that anyone could forget.

The Professor asked him about Callimachus. He had come wanting to see how someone had gone about describing so much writing. Menon set a bundle aside and spoke of the poet’s Tables, of authors gathered by kinds of writing and of the particulars that could help a reader tell one work from another. He separated that enterprise from the list lying under his hand. The list could direct Dion to a bundle. There were days on which that was quite enough.

“Strabo says the kings of Egypt learned how to arrange a library from Aristotle,” the Professor said quietly to Lumen. “Aristotle kept a collection at his school in Athens and left it to Theophrastus.”

“Did the rolls come here?”

“Strabo says those went another way. He doesn’t say how the kings learned from him.”

Lumen looked at the list under Menon’s hand. “Where would Aristotle put the roll we’re looking for?”

The Professor had been thinking about how much the kings might have learned from the man. Now he tried to imagine coming to the school in Athens with Heron’s request and getting as far as the first question. He knew the name of the landing. He did not know the name of the man who wrote about it.

Menon pushed two entries across the table. One was for a description of the coast attributed to a man named Sostratos. The other began with a different name. Both had the same first words, as far as the men who made the entries had chosen to record them.

“They could be the same work,” said the Professor.

“They could be two men leaving the same harbor,” said Menon.

Heron had been trying to read the first words upside down. Menon turned the scrap so he could see it. The boy knew the harbor named there. His uncle had once brought back a dog from it that declined to go home with anybody in Alexandria.

The two rolls were kept in different places. Dion went for one. Menon thought the other had been sent to be copied. The Professor imagined people in future ages congratulating one another on the care with which the rolls were put in

order. He could see Dion on his way to look for one and Menon trying to remember who had carried the other out.

Chapter 5

A Name in Two Languages



A grandfather listens as the boy tries the sentence in his own words.

Dion had promised to share a meal with his neighbors. When he asked Lumen and the Professor to come, Heron went on ahead to do his second errand, which had begun to seem longer than the first.

After the meal, a boy sat down with his grandfather for a lesson. He was to read Greek aloud and learn enough Hebrew to recognize a line his grandfather had taught him. His mother knew a version of the old words in Greek and wanted him to hear them there too.

The Professor was thinking of the Greek Torah. Here was a Jewish family in Alexandria whose child would have an ordinary reason to want the words in a language he used every day. He had known the translation as a work with a name. Lumen had got herself invited to sit beside the boy before the Professor could decide which question to ask.

The grandfather let the boy finish a sentence. Then he asked him to say what he thought it meant. The boy gave him an answer that seemed to the Professor close enough for a first attempt. His grandfather asked him to go through it again. There was a word the boy had used the way one of his friends used it, to settle a quarrel over whose turn it was. The grandfather offered him another word. The mother asked what any child at the bread stall would think that word meant.

For a little while they had three possible words and three different listeners in mind. The boy looked from his mother to his grandfather. He asked whether he might say it in a whole sentence, the way he would tell his sister. They waited to hear him.

Coming away, the Professor said he would have liked to hear how the men who made the translation settled such things.

“You heard how they settled it in that room,” said Lumen.

“Did they settle it?”

“The bread was gone and the boy was still there.”

They met Heron near the gate. He had been told that the approach to the old landing in the smaller harbor was sometimes called by the name of a shrine and sometimes by the name of a woman who had run a ferry. He was going to ask Ptolemaios if the man who wanted the lines knew both names. The Professor proposed asking one of the sailors. Heron said that was what he meant to do once he had found out which question he needed to ask.

Chapter 6

A Place on the Page

The second roll had come back from the man who was making a copy. He had put a scrap inside to mark his place and apologized for leaving it there. Menon wanted to know whose scrap it was before he threw it away. It turned out to be a receipt for a lamp.

They opened both rolls together. The openings matched well into the first account of a landing. One version had an extra line about a storm. The other had one more place name. There was a tear in the older roll at just the point where the shore began to sound familiar.

Dion wanted to copy the missing words from the other. Menon asked him to show where he was sure the sentence began again. They moved both rolls farther into the light.

Lumen could see one of the openings clear enough to read a few words. She had been at the shoreline with Heron that morning and knew the shape he made with his hands when he tried to remember which headland came first. It was possible, she said, that they were reading the order correctly and imagining themselves facing the wrong way.

Dion turned the scrap on which he had drawn the harbor. The first point they had been looking for came into an intelligible relation with the second. Menon said it was fortunate no one had asked Dion to steer a boat that

morning. Dion said he would have got them to land. Menon agreed.

Heron had found a sailor who knew the name of the shrine. The sailor had never heard of the woman. Heron's mother remembered her. Her sister had once ridden over in her boat with six baskets and a live chicken. What the old text called the approach to the shrine, she called the ferry landing. It had been named for a woman who was long dead before Heron was born.

Menon listened to Heron repeat this. "Which part do you want us to write down?"

"The name my mother knows," he said. "Someone might come looking for it that way."

Dion copied the lines Ptolemaios had asked for. At the damaged place he marked the gap and wrote separately what the other version supplied. Menon made a new record using both openings and both names under which they had found the work. He gave the place names a line of their own on the note kept with it. He had to start the note over because he had left less room than he needed.

"Which man wrote it?" asked the Professor.

"I can tell you which name is on either roll."

"Will you pick one?"

"Will you bring me a reason?"

The Professor looked over what they had. He could have made a choice by preferring the older roll. A man who intended to use the words later would have no way of knowing he had done so. He handed back the roll with the tear.

Heron read both names for the landing before he left. He pronounced the first the way his uncle did. He gave the second the way he had heard his mother say it. Dion asked him to slow down and say it again.

Chapter 7

The Copy That Goes Out

Ptolemaios used a clear table, two small stones to hold down the papyrus, and a bad temper that improved as the letter took shape. The copy from the Library told him where the landing had been when somebody wrote the account. His relative had asked about the channel now. He would send the old lines with a note about the difference.

The boy asked whether he might go along with the boatman. Ptolemaios asked him what his mother thought. Heron said he had taken care to ask her before asking anyone who might say yes. She had said he could go if the weather held and if he was back before her next delivery of oil.

They went down together early in the morning. The light on Pharos was hard to see as the sun came up. It was easier to make out what people were doing on the quay. A man was spreading a wet cloth to dry. Two others stood over a bundle that neither meant to carry until someone had told them where it belonged.

Heron put the letter where it would stay dry. Before he went aboard he asked the Professor if they would still be there when he got back. The Professor said he would like to know what the old description had been good for.

“Then you might tell me where to find you.”

The Professor could think of several places where he would be glad to be found. He gave the boy the name of the oil stall and said he would leave word there. It was the first address he had given all week that he knew the boy could use.

Heron came back that evening with a wet hem and a piece of string he had been given by a fisherman. The two points in the account still helped make sense of the shore. Between them, the recent storm had moved a bank of sand. One of the stones was down. The man who wanted the lines had gone out with the boatman and shown Heron where boats could come in now. Heron showed him the old name in the copy. The man knew it from a song his father used to sing.

“Did he go the way it said?” the Professor asked.

“He looked where it said,” Heron replied. “Then he went where the water was.”

There was a new sketch of the approach on the back of the reply. Heron had watched it being made and added a mark where he had gone ashore. He wanted Dion to see it. Dion said it could be kept with the other records if it carried a date and if they wrote down who had actually seen the bank. He gave Heron a scrap and asked him to try the first line.

Heron wrote his own name as small as he could. Dion gave him another scrap.

“Somebody has to be able to read it,” he said.

The Street at Ephesus



An imagined street scene outside the Library of Celsus in Roman Ephesus.

More than three centuries later, Lumen and the Professor stood in a street in Roman Ephesus. The Library of Celsus was in use. The Professor looked up at the people carved in niches and then down to the lowest step, where a man had stopped to retie a sandal.

The building honored Celsus, whose burial chamber lay beneath it. The Professor was trying to fit that idea to the working room they had seen at Alexandria. He had nearly worked out what he wanted to say when the man on the step rose and crossed the street.

“What do you suppose he came to read?” Lumen asked.

“He may have been going to,” the Professor said.

They crossed after him. There were baths nearby and a public latrine. The Professor was taken by the channels and the care with which the builders had found a place for the water to go. Lumen could hear it.

“They had running water,” he said.

“I heard you,” said Lumen. “I’m still thinking about the sponge.”

He had told her about Seneca’s sponge on a stick. She wanted to know who kept it clean. Seneca had given him very little help with that.

A tune drifted down the street. The Professor wondered aloud if they hired musicians for the latrine.

“Can you see where the musician is?” Lumen asked. He couldn’t.

Back on the library steps, he told her the story he had heard in their own time about a tunnel to a brothel across the street. The man who told it sounded as though he’d walked the whole way.

“Have you seen the tunnel?” she asked.

“No.”

“Have you seen the brothel?”

“I’ve seen a building.”

He remembered how tempting it had been to fill the gap in the old voyage account. Here he had been told where the tunnel began, where it ended, and why it was built. Until Lumen asked, he had never thought to ask what anyone had seen. A man in the street held up a papyrus roll when he saw a younger man come down from the library. “Did you find the line?” the younger man asked. They bent their heads to the roll. A passing woman asked them to move. They took two steps sideways without looking up.

The Professor thought about Aquila, who had given his father’s name a place in the city, and the people on the step, who had come there because somebody could help them read a line. He wondered if Aquila had imagined anything that small when he settled on what he was going to build.

Chapter 9

Where They Put It

When they went back to Alexandria, Dion had found a way to fasten the new note to a bundle without tying it across the words. He sounded as if he would have liked them to notice this before asking him what he was doing.

There had been another request for the account. The man who asked had given a different name for the author and no name at all for the landing. He had supplied the opening words because somebody had read the work aloud when he was young. The two rolls had been put away together. Dion knew where to look.

The reader was a man with a bad knee. Once he got seated it took him a long time to open the roll, though he would accept help from no one. Lumen pulled a stool out of the way so he could stretch his leg. When he reached the part about the shore he called Dion over. It was the other name he remembered. The description of the rocks was as he had heard it. He had once thought he would go there himself.

“Would you like me to read the next part?” Dion said.

The man held the roll flat and Dion began. Heron had brought an errand in and stopped at the doorway to hear. The man who had asked for the work had never met Ptolemaios or the man in the smaller harbor. He did not know about Heron writing his name too small. When Dion

came to the gap in the old account, he paused. The reader waited to see what he would do.

“There’s another copy,” Dion said. “Would you like to hear what it says there?”

The man pulled his stool nearer.

Back at the cottage on Monhegan, Hakan wanted to know if the lighthouse had been as tall as the pictures made it.

“I was in a boat,” the Professor said. “Everything seemed tall.”

“Did you bring anything back?”

The Professor set two sketches on the table. One was of the tower, with a great deal of the page given to the height of it. On the other he had drawn two papyrus rolls and a hand holding the end of each so they could be read together. He had not drawn the rest of the person. He remembered the light on the table better than he remembered the room.

Hakan asked if the sketches ought to go in the same folder.

“Yes,” said the Professor.

Hakan found a pencil. “What shall I put on it?”

The Professor looked at the tower. He knew what to call that one. He turned the other sketch to face Lumen.

“Put both names on it,” she said.

Hakan wrote the first name. The Professor slid the second sketch closer, so there would be room for both.

Historical Notes

The Library and its readers

The Ptolemies established the Library of Alexandria in the third century BCE. We have later descriptions of the associated Mouseion and pieces of the scholarly tradition, but no securely identified plan of the Library. Callimachus's Pinakes collected information about authors and works. Its precise relationship to the holdings remains debated. The gate, the workroom, the local lists, and the copying arrangements in this story are imagined.

Writing centuries after Aristotle, Strabo (Geography 13.1.54) says Aristotle left his books and school to Theophrastus and credits him with teaching the kings of Egypt how to arrange a library. Strabo traces the books themselves through Theophrastus to Neleus. His account gives an ancient claim of influence. How any method reached Egypt remains uncertain.

Strabo. Geography 13.1.54. Edited by August Meineke. Leipzig: Teubner, 1877. Perseus Digital Library.

Monica Berti. "Traces of Lost Libraries in the Works of Alexandrian and Byzantine Scholars." In Open Data in Ancient and Byzantine Studies, edited by Valeria Vitale and Gabriel Bodard, chap. 8. University of London Press, 2026.

Thomas Gerald Hendrickson. Life and Libraries in the Roman World, pp. 39–40. PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2013.

The Greek Torah

The translation of the Torah into Greek is associated with the Jewish community of Alexandria and the third century BCE. The Greek Torah was the beginning of a longer history of Greek translations of Jewish scriptures. The family and the lesson in the story are fictional.

Harry M. Orlinsky. “The Septuagint and Its Hebrew Text.” In The Cambridge History of Judaism, edited by W. D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein, pp. 534–562. Cambridge University Press, 1990.

The library at Ephesus

The Library of Celsus was built in the second century CE. Gaius Iulius Aquila built it in honor of his father, whose burial chamber lay beneath it. The Austrian excavation team reconstructed its façade in the 1970s using surviving original elements and new material. Its appearance in this story is a comparison across time. The sources consulted establish no direct institutional link to Alexandria.

Austrian Academy of Sciences. “Austrian Researchers Start Conservation of the Celsus Library in Ephesos.” December 2, 2024.

Across the street

The public latrine and baths at Ephesus are documented. The identification of the neighboring building as a brothel is disputed, and a secret passage to it from the Library remains unverified. The claim that hired musicians masked sounds in the latrine is likewise unverified. Seneca mentions a sponge on a stick in Moral Letters 70.20. It tells us little about its ordinary use, or whether a sponge was shared at Ephesus.

Anise K. Strong. “Prostitutes and Matrons in the Urban Landscape.” In Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World, pp. 142–170. Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Estera Maria Golian. Hygiene and Sanitation in Late Antique Egypt: Investigations of Latrines from the 4th to 7th Century AD, pp. 130–131. MA thesis, University of Vienna, 2022.